“GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION AND INTRODUCTORY CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOMS

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................... ii  
Abstract ......................................................................................................................... vi  
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... vii  
Chapter 1: Introduction  
  * Fear and Loathing .................................................................................................. 1  
  * Background of the Problem ................................................................................. 6  
  * The Narrative of Composition and Creative Writing ........................................... 11  
  * The Gap between Composition and Creative Writing ......................................... 18  
  * Narrowing the Gap: A Discussion on Pedagogy ................................................... 22  
  * Statement of the Problem ..................................................................................... 25  
  * Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................. 26  
  * Research Question(s) .......................................................................................... 27  
  * Importance of the Study ...................................................................................... 28  
  * Scope of the Study ............................................................................................... 29  
  * Delimitations and Limitations ............................................................................. 30  
Chapter 2: Literature Review  
  * Introduction ......................................................................................................... 31  
  * Activity Theory ................................................................................................... 33
Activity Theory in Composition and Creative Writing ........................................ 37
Studies of Influence ......................................................................................... 40
Creative Writing, Composition, and Pedagogy ............................................... 46
Creative Writing, Composition, and Technology ............................................. 59
Creative Writing, Composition, Authority, and Products ............................... 66
Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 73

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction ...................................................................................................... 74
Research Site .................................................................................................... 79
Study Participants ......................................................................................... 80
Data Collection and Analysis ........................................................................ 85
  NMU Writing Program Handbook ............................................................ 89
  Instructor’s Course Packet .......................................................................... 89
  Student Writing ........................................................................................... 90
  Philosophical Assumptions and Strategies of Inquiry ............................. 95
  Delineation of Ethical Methods .................................................................. 98
  Validity, Reliability, and Limitations .......................................................... 100

Chapter 4: English 103 (Rhetoric and Writing)

Introduction ...................................................................................................... 104
Rhetoric and Writing at NMU ......................................................................... 105
Kari .................................................................................................................. 113
Brad ............................................................................................................... 117
Derrick .......................................................................................................... 119
Angela .......................................................................................................... 122
Elizabeth ..................................................................................................... 124
Prof. Beckett ............................................................................................... 127
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Setting</strong></td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Packet</strong></td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignments</strong></td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Day in the Life of ENG 103</strong></td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity Theory Analysis of Rhetoric and Writing</strong></td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5: English 285 (Introduction to Creative Writing)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction to Creative Writing at NMU</strong></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>James</strong></td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ian</strong></td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wes</strong></td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Samantha</strong></td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prof. Joyce</strong></td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Setting</strong></td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Day in the Life of ENG 285</strong></td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conferences</strong></td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignments</strong></td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ENG 285 as an Activity System</strong></td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 6: Conclusion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogy</strong></td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Digital Technology (Use and Non-Use)</strong></td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authority</strong></td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignments and Products</strong></td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implications for Future Study ................................................................. 267
Student Expectations ............................................................................. 270
Instructors’ Expectations ....................................................................... 272
Conclusion (Final Reflections) .............................................................. 274

Appendix

Informed Consent Form ......................................................................... 279

Works Cited

Works Cited .......................................................................................... 281
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Introduction

Fear and Loathing: One Writer’s Savage Journey into the Heart of the Academy

There was a time when I considered my journey unique, when I thought I was one of only a handful of individuals who came to the field of rhetoric and composition by way of creative writing. But as Wendy Bishop and David Starkey remark, “an increasing number of MA and MFA–holding creative writing graduates are now continuing on for a PhD in composition because that field is offering interesting avenues for enhancing a creative writer’s understanding of his or her own writing practices and supporting his or her work as a writing teacher” (39–40). I’d like to say my initial motivations for pursuing an advanced degree in creative writing, and eventually composition, were so clear-cut. Instead, I came to graduate school from corporate America, disinterested and disenfranchised, having little aptitude, talent, or interest in anything other than scribbling poems and stories in those antiquated black and white composition notebooks. I was a college graduate, the product of a BFA program in creative writing, a program of which I (admittedly) did not take full advantage in light of all the distractions that come to a young man in a new place interacting with new people. Frankly, graduate school seemed like an opportunity to really get serious about my writing and to make a hasty exit from the world of business. With my acceptance into an MA program in creative writing came a modest stipend and the promise of a graduate teaching
assistantship in the composition program, an appointment that would set me on a wildly
different course than I had ever imagined.

Of course, graduate school and my teaching assistantship were not my first forays
into the field of composition. Like many students, I had undergone the sequence of first-
year writing courses often required by degree-granting institutions. However, as a
graduate student, I was simultaneously enrolled in creative writing workshops and
classes on the teaching of writing. I was reading about composition theories and
pedagogies while delving into unresolved issues surrounding my own writing processes
for poetry or short stories. I was shadowing a west-coast implant, a middle-age soccer
hooligan with a PhD in rhetoric and composition who utilized creative writing
assignments in his composition classes. And, after one semester, I was handed a
textbook and given my own class to teach. There is something to be said for this kind of
simultaneity. In my case, I began to notice striking similarities, but also perplexing
differences between the entities known as composition and creative writing – the most
notable of which was that composition, with its courses in pedagogy and discussions of
theory, seemed to work under the assumption that writing can be taught, that students
could progress or improve upon their writing through a series of guided activities or
assignments; creative writing, on the other hand, with an absence of such courses or
discussions, seemed to follow the adage that writing cannot be taught, but talent can be
nurtured. I found this odd considering that many of the classroom methods, such as
conferencing, peer review, multiple drafts, and in some cases assignments, were the
same.

Observations such as these only continued and, as graduation loomed, I was
faced with an interesting dilemma: should I continue my studies in a PhD program for
rhetoric and composition, or creative writing? By this point, I had been bit by the teaching bug and perhaps had started to see the possibility of those “interesting avenues” for understanding my writing practices and the greater opportunities to teach that Bishop and Starkey had mentioned. I had also developed a nagging feeling, rooted in my previous experiences in undergraduate creative writing workshops, shadowing my mentor and other influential faculty, and teaching my own composition classes, that the workshop model was somehow inadequate or ineffective for teaching undergraduates. It seemed that the adage of “writing cannot be taught” was detrimental since it implied “average” students could not learn to write creatively within the university, that places such as the famous Iowa Writers’ Workshop were talent agencies instead of programs for teaching the subject of creative writing. As Louis Menand notes in his article for The New Yorker entitled “Show or Tell: Should Creative Writing Be Taught?”:

Sixteen Pulitzer Prize winners and three recent Poet Laureates are graduates of the [Iowa Writers’ Workshop]. But the school’s official position is that the school had nothing to do with it. “The fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us,” the Iowa Web site explains....“We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country...in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged” (par. 2).

Indeed, the notion that “writing cannot be taught” was perpetuated by some of the most notable alumni of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, including Flannery O’Connor who “wrote that ‘the ability to create life with words is essentially a gift’” (qtd. in Beck par. 10) and also “believed that teaching was a negative exercise: ‘We learn how not to write’” (qtd. in
Beck par. 4). Still others, such as Philip Roth, who also “taught at Iowa in the 60s, believed that one of the creative writing instructor’s responsibilities [was] to ‘discourage those without talent’” (qtd. in Beck par. 10), and with these assertions mulling around the consciousness of creative writing programs, programs often staffed disciples of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, I came to believe that creative writing was somehow deficient in terms of its pedagogical views on the act of the writing. I resolved to find out how composition could inform the practices of creative writing. Through research, I quickly learned I was not the only one investigating this issue, and before leaving my master’s program to study rhetoric and composition I gave a lengthy symposium presentation on how similar the two fields really were. I juxtaposed the rise of expository writing at Harvard and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop model, the marginalization of both fields, and how practices like free-writing and portfolios were commonplace in both classrooms. Consequently, there are faint echoes of that earlier presentation throughout this dissertation, with one major difference. You see, when I entered my doctoral program I remained steadfast in my assertion that composition could “fix” the supposed ills of creative writing, going so far as to claim that creative writers needed to develop, design, and implement some alternative to the workshop with the pedagogies of composition studies, or simply to do away with undergraduate creative writing all together. However, with the passing years and passing conversations, with each composition class that I taught or course that I took, I slowly realized that my experiences, the experiences of mentors, and the assertions of others in the growing canon of “creative writing studies” were not necessarily based upon empirical data, but lore. Lore, as defined by Stephen North, is “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs...that influence how writing is done, learned and taught” (22), and although valuable in the sense that such work provides “a wealth of unsubstantiated yet intuitively accurate knowledge” (Bishop
I had to come to grips with the fact that it simply wasn’t enough. I had to find out what was really going on in some of these classes.

While this dissertation could be construed as many things, fundamentally it is a work that attempts to substantiate or refute previous lore-based scholarship dealing with the apparent similarities and differences between undergraduate composition and creative writing classrooms, but from the perspective of the students and instructors that participate in these classes and programs on a daily basis. In other words, this dissertation does not so much contrast or compare the two fields or classrooms, but simply asks: what is happening here? What activities transpire in these classrooms? What do students and instructors have to say about the work that is done there? Consequently, this dissertation is also a redemptive work in the sense that my early privileging of composition over creative writing, of essentially allowing composition to have dominance over another field, went against what many of the scholars I admire have tried to do. Indeed, this is but my humble attempt to carry on work begun by the likes of Wendy Bishop, an individual who did not so much reject the many binaries brought to bear on English studies, but who demonstrated the interconnectedness of it all. As her former collaborator, Dr. Hans Ostrom, remarked to me in an e-mail back in March of 2007, “I think Wendy developed a panoramic, synthesizing view of English Studies and the profession, one that distinctively wove together the interests, theory, and pedagogy of composition, rhetoric, creative writing, feminist criticism, ethnography, Writing Centers, process-pedagogy, and social-constructivist pedagogy….Wendy also literally embodied synthesis: she was a scholar, a teacher...a poet, a theorist, a woman in the academy, an administrator, a leader in the field.” Indeed, I am indebted to Bishop because her work has made this work possible and part of my aim is to demonstrate that sense of synthesis she brought to English studies; specifically, to weave together the
interests, theories, pedagogies, philosophies, and missions of composition and creative writing into a meaningful dialogue.

What follows in the remainder of this chapter is a context for some of the problems that have plagued the relationship between composition and creative writing, as well as provide the reader with an overview of what this particular study sets out to do and what might be gleaned from such research.

Background of the Problem

Within the past twenty years, there have been numerous scholarly articles, conference presentations, and discussions amongst colleagues that have described the tendency to erect various binaries between the fields of composition and creative writing. Many of these binaries, which I will contend with in greater detail throughout the next chapter, have continued to compartmentalize composition and creative writing as unique historical, institutional, philosophical, theoretical, and pedagogical enterprises, seldom influencing one another, with adherents who often deny or buck at the possibility, need, or want for trans-disciplinary work. Out of this environment, several problematic trends have emerged. For one, the often muddied historical narrative of composition and creative writing in the university, wrought with competing origins, places, and key figures, has overwhelmingly cast the roles of the two fields as clear and the differences obvious: composition was about criticism and creative writing pertained to creation. However, these roles have shifted within recent decades as both composition and creative writing deal with the criticism of popular, canonized, and student work, as well as the creation of various texts. In addition, research into the writing and lectures of individuals such as 18th century rhetorician Hugh Blair have illuminated a long history of
terms such as taste, genius, poetics, invention, and imagination and, if one considers
how these terms have come to be understood and defined through the
institutionalization of composition and creative writing, it becomes obvious that the roles
of these two fields are neither as clear nor the differences as obvious as the literature
would imply.

Interestingly, despite the evolution of similar critical and creational roles, the
push toward professionalism, a push that has often been equated to little more than
being held with the same esteem as literature within English departments, has created
an ever-widening chasm between composition and creative writing, particularly with
regard to theoretical and empirical research, as well as teaching. Many, such as Anna
Leahy, have argued that “While compositionists...have mapped out classical, current-
traditional, expressivist, social constructionist, and radical theories for course and
assignment design, creative writers have largely failed to document the theoretical
underpinnings of the workshop-style classroom; the assumed relationship between the
writing process and the written poem, story, essay, or play; and the crucial roles of
authority in the field” (xiii). Though recent scholarship in creative writing has begun to
examine the deficiencies Leahy points out, there are still lingering questions among
faculty, administrators, and students outside (and, in some cases, within) composition
and creative writing as to what these fields are, what such programs purport to do (at
both the undergraduate and graduate level), and what place these fields actually have
within the academy.

Consequently, the charge to answer these questions and attempt to close the gap
between composition and creative writing is frequently manifested in the discussion of
pedagogy, or in some cases an absence of pedagogy. Historically, at least beginning in
the 1970s with the evolution of the process movement, composition has worked under the assumption that writing *can* be taught, while the field of creative writing (again, acting under the influence of graduates from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop) often followed the adage that writing *cannot* be taught, but talent can be nurtured. However, as James Berlin notes in his seminal work *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900 – 1985*, expressionistic rhetoric (which predates the expressivist movement of the 1960s by nearly 30 to 40 years) was a period of writing instruction that witnessed “an unlikely union of patrician romanticism, aesthetic expressionism, and a domesticated Freudianism brought about in American schools and colleges a view of writing as art” (74), which subsequently created an “emphasis on the value of creativity in the writing classroom” (74). Under this model, all writing was considered to be art and the belief was that students needed to write to please themselves rather than the instructor because “only what springs from within them counts in making good writing” (Gilbert qtd in Berlin 76). As Berlin makes clear, for expressionistic rhetoric “writing can be learned but not taught” (74) since so much importance is placed on the individual and the development of their personal voice; but this assertion created a fundamental problem for later writing instructors: if all writing is inherently creative, artistic, and thus cannot be taught, then what do teachers teach? As Joseph Harris writes, when expressionistic rhetoric slowly churned toward the expressivist movement (which placed greater emphasis on developing students as both writers and people, writing for social change, and writing as a form of therapy), it became apparent that work exploring how a student felt about a text, rather than what could make a text more persuasive to an audience, created an environment where what the writer had to say was less important than the sincerity in which they said it” (31 – 32). The process movement, in turn, seemed to remedy some of these apparent deficiencies through researching and teaching
cognitive, social, rhetorical, as well as expressive approaches and processes to writing. According to Harris, from a teaching standpoint this created a clear message that the process you teach is based upon the product you want (67), and with creative writing’s continued focus on personal voice and individual expression, the expressionistic tag of writing as a un-teachable subject remained for many years.

Still, even as composition has grown apart from creative writing, several prominent and contemporary individuals such as Wendy Bishop, Marie Ponsot, and Rosemary Deen have rekindled the argument that all writing is essentially creative, that the processes, pitfalls, goals, and even assignments of creative and expository writing are similar. Indeed, it has become more commonplace to see methods such as conferencing, peer review, multiple drafts, etc. in both classrooms, and with theorists such as Joseph Moxley and Teresa Amabile contesting the very definition and components of creativity, there seems to be a growing contingency of individuals who refuse to teach composition or creative writing as a series of functionalist or artistic acts. What often impedes the efforts of these individuals, however, is the construction of genre, coupled with some of the historical and popular myths surrounding notions of creativity, authorship, talent, etc., myths which have continued to dog the efforts of bringing composition and creative writing into a sustained, meaningful dialogue.

Though clearly pedagogical in-roads have been made to facilitate such a dialogue, few empirical studies have been done when investigating issues surrounding the juxtaposition of composition and creative writing classrooms. Instead, many composition researchers (in particular, teacher-researchers) have simply experimented with infusing assignments often associated with creative writing – i.e. short stories, literary nonfiction, and poetry – into their own classrooms and reported on it. On the
flipside, some creative writing instructors have tried to revise the workshop model of creative writing with certain aspects of various composition pedagogies, including freewriting and rhetorical analysis, but this too has had few implications beyond their own classrooms. In other words, though research presented by these individuals is based upon observation, the success or value of these practices is grounded more in lore and reflection rather than stringent empirical data. Indeed, perhaps because of such lore-based scholarship, discussions surrounding the activities of the classroom are often one-dimensional in the sense that they focus almost entirely on how to facilitate a certain type of product (for example, how the use of rhetorical analysis in a creative writing class – an activity – might help students create better stories – a specific product). Graeme Harper explains this occurrence as it pertains to creative writing, although some of her words are certainly applicable to composition as well:

...most of these [discussions] have considered Creative Writing entirely in relation to its products, not to its actions. Where it has been considered in terms of its actions, not its end results, the analysis has located itself in a notion of difference or strangeness – but not in the ideas of Creative Writing actions as part of our wider human landscape, where we might engage with it not as strange or because we are different but, indeed, because we are human (ix).

While focusing on how specific activities can help to manufacture a particular product is important, such an emphasis underscores other non-product oriented pedagogical activities, or even how the compounding experiences of human life that Harper speaks of might impact the classroom – how actions dubbed as “different” or “strange” might actually be accounted for in the larger scheme of the tools, rules, divisions, communities, etc. that we encounter every day.
As I will explain in greater detail at the conclusion of this chapter, this study aims to use empirically-based methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis to uncover and explore the interplay of activities that occur not in my own classroom, but through the classrooms, words, and experiences of others. Of particular interest to me is to observe how instructors and students negotiate between those activities or actions associated with pedagogy, the use of technology, the amount of authority delegated between parties, and yes, the assignments and products created within the classroom. In order to help contextualize the specific problem and research questions that my dissertation will attempt to answer, what follows is a brief (but slightly more detailed) examination of the problematic trends that arise through the binary opposition of composition and creative writing.

*The Narrative of Composition and Creative Writing*

Depending upon the historical compass, there are numerous points where the story of rhetoric, composition, creative writing, and their roles in education began. Antiquity established an early connection between education and the use of literature, most notably in the grammar schools that preceded the more rigorous study of rhetoric that would prepare students for careers in law or the senate. As James J. Murphy notes, “there is widespread evidence that poetry formed the heart of the grammar curriculum. Students certainly had to learn how to scan and read the various meters of quantitative verse correctly, and their composition exercises likely include verse paraphrases of poetry” (98). The ebb and flow of a rhetorical education in the centuries to come, however, saw the intersection of poetry and rhetoric dwindle, often regulated to issues concerning style. This emphasis on style, however, had a distinct place and purpose,
often linking the study of verse, form, and ornate style to growing literacy, communication between the social classes through letter writing, and the establishment of national literatures. Indeed, the bellettristic and elocutionary movements of the later 18th and early 19th centuries advocated that attention to style could aid in cultivating taste, thus creating opportunity for social advancement and possible economic gain.

Consequently, it is here near the turn of the 19th century where a strong argument can be made for contextualizing some of the contemporary juxtapositions between composition and creative writing, specifically in terms of the relationship between education, human experience, genius, and taste. As Lois Agnew argues, for 18th century rhetorician Hugh Blair “taste is an essential element of human experience, [and] it is also a quality that people possess in different degrees based on their distinct individual dispositions and cultural training” (29). In the case of Blair, the cultivation of taste involved the appropriation of literature to rhetorical and educational ends, to develop within individuals their “innate sensibilities that fall beyond the scope of reason...enhanced through education, which guides reason toward sharper critical judgment” (Agnew 29 – 30). This development of an individual’s intuition into more refined critical judgment served a civic function in that “For Blair, language not only represents the immediate thought that is being expressed, but conveys ‘the national character of the people who speak it.’ Rhetorical form enlightened by taste is not only the tool through which specific thoughts are communicated, but more significantly embodies the community’s very identity and defines its course for the future” (Agnew 30). In this light, the development of literary taste, which in the years to come would evolve into literary criticism, became a teachable (and extremely necessary) subject for social and economic advancement. And yet there was still a distinction between the notions of taste, which could be taught, and genius, which occurred naturally without the
intervention of education. As Blair himself remarked in his seminal work Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, “A masterly genius, it is true, will of himself, untaught, compose in such a manner as shall be agreeable to the most materials rules of criticism, for as these rules are founded in nature, nature will often suggest them in practice” (47), and he continues by distinguishing between the subjects of taste and genius:

Taste consists in the power of judging; genius, in the power of executing. One may have a considerable degree of taste in poetry, eloquence, or any of the fine arts, who has little or hardly any genius for composition or execution in any of these arts...Genius always imports something inventive or creative; which does not rest in mere sensibility to beauty where it is perceived, but which can, moreover, produce new beauties, and exhibit them in such a manner as strongly to impress the minds of others (49).

For Blair, then, there is a clear demarcation between criticism and creation, between acknowledging a context that we can all share, hone, and develop (“taste”) and the inherent ability of some gifted individuals to produce and display new contexts for public consumption (“genius”); in other words, between that which is teachable and that which is not. Consequently, embedded within Blair’s assertions are the early rumblings of our contemporary perception of composition as criticism and creative writing as creation, as well as another possible link to the belief that writing deemed as creative, as involving the production of literature, cannot be taught.

Incidentally, Blair’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres was utilized throughout universities and colleges in Britain, Scotland, and the United States well in to the 19th century, a time when institutions of higher education were also expanding beyond the traditional liberal arts curriculum to include specialization and research.
With this transformation the nature of “the poetic” began to change as education began to mirror the model of big business and the study of literature (not rhetoric) transformed into a way of developing taste, of establishing a bourgeois class or culture that, often times, was used to legitimize social and economic differences (Berlin xvi). In this environment, literary texts and the act of interpretation (i.e. criticism) were being favored over other production-oriented subdivisions, subdivisions that would later encompass much of what we associate as being the territory of composition and creative writing. Though an extensive historical examination pertaining to the development of composition and creative writing as fields within the academy is beyond the scope of this dissertation, examining the period soon after this turn toward literature began in American colleges and universities, when composition and creative writing formed out of a certain degree of necessity, offers a strong starting point with regard to contextualizing more recent binaries, perceptions, and constructions surrounding the two fields.

Numerous scholars such as D.G. Myers, Timothy Mayers, Sharon Crowley, and James Berlin have alluded that the contemporary tale of composition and creative writing began at Harvard in the latter decades of the 19th century, particularly within the freshmen composition classrooms of individuals such as Barrett Wendell. Specifically, in 1890, Wendell penned what many scholars in the field of English studies have considered to be his most influential work, a text known as *English Composition*, a text which has often been misunderstood as strictly emphasizing the correction of common grammatical errors, the writing of daily themes, and producing texts. But as Sue Carter Simmons notes “Wendell’s relationship to current-traditional rhetoric is not so clear cut...[as] many pedagogical techniques associated with modern writing pedagogy are ones Wendell used...one hundred years ago...[including]...peer editing and conferencing” (327). Speculation behind the impetus for Wendell’s use of such contemporary
pedagogical approaches has been widespread and varied, but one of the most intriguing theories is that Wendell’s own aspirations toward becoming a literary author may have impacted his methodology in the teaching of freshmen composition. As D.G. Myers explains, “(Wendell) taught students how to write on the basis of his own ambition to write. He came to the subject with the habits and concerns of a working, published writer” (48). Subsequently, Wendell’s tactics stressed the important function of self-cultivation when a student composed in any given genre (expository, creative, or otherwise), and late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century educators such as Katharine Lee Bates, Brander Matthews, and Gertrude Buck began adapting the principles outlined by Wendell to include the composition of stories and poems in their freshmen writing courses. As a result of this additional course requirement, “...curiosity to see whether fiction and poetry writing could be taught by themselves” (Myers 66) began to emerge, and by 1897 the first creative writing classes were offered at institutions like the University of Iowa, an institution which would consequently become a strong proponent for creative writing in higher learning and, in their own words, “act as a model for the academic study of the arts” (“Writer’s Workshop” par. 4) throughout the twentieth-century.

Similar to the relationship shared between rhetoric and poetics prior to the 19th century, composition and creative writing, from an institutional standpoint, did not differ much at all. As D.G. Myers notes, “Until about the 1920s...there was small need for creative writing per se, because English composition and creative writing were one and the same thing. Creative writing only arose as a distinct subject when, under attack, English composition was redeployed to other than literary ends” (37). Consequently, the “redeployment” for composition began with Harvard’s turn to business men in the mid-1890s to assess freshmen entrance essays and culminated with the rise of New Criticism...
in the 1920s, a literary movement and a form of analysis that helped to cement the emerging dominance of literature within English departments. New Criticism, as a literary movement, argued that literature was to be studied in a vacuum devoid of influence from historical, social, and other extra-textual sources and that “good literature is not bound by time and place...It transcends the limitations of its place of origin (including the author) and addresses the complexities of an essentially unchanging human condition” (Bertens 24). By the time New Criticism reached its peak in the 1940s and 1950s, this schematic for examining texts had trickled down to students in freshman composition courses that were often staffed by disciples of the movement. In many instances, these composition instructors had abandoned many assignments concerned with the production of literature (which in the late 19th and early 20th century included the creation of persuasive, expository, and “creative” genres) and implemented criticism in its place, assigning students to write analytical or critical essays relating to a particular piece of literature. The general consensus was that students, and particularly first-year students, could not compose meaningful works of literature since it would be too difficult to separate those extra-textual factors surrounding them. Regardless, it could be argued that this particular movement bolstered the perception that “the consumption of texts (interpretation and reading) [is valued] over the production of texts (all writing)” (Bishop 121). In this environment, with composition realigned to emphasize criticism and correctness, creative writing as a field had no choice but to find its own unique place in the academy and it struggled throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. Programs floundered, enrollments were perpetually low, and it was not until well after the Second World War and the G.I. Bill that a significant population and a demand for creative writing in academia re-emerged.
By the 1960s and the 1970s, however, composition and creative writing were emerging as distinct areas of study within the academy and it was during this time that early collaborations between these burgeoning fields began to take shape. As Wendy Bishop and David Starkey remark, this was a time period when composition began to resemble creative writing in the sense that students were viewed as writers, capable of creative expression, and the vision of the individual (what became known as expressivism) was privileged. Specifically, and from a pedagogical standpoint, “At this time, composition classrooms came to more closely resemble the graduate creative writing workshop course, while the graduate creative writing workshop became a model for undergraduate creative writing courses, which, in turn, began to be informed, in some cases, by composition theory, research, and practice” (Bishop and Starkey 38).

Still, composition and creative writing had to contend with larger departmental and institutional perceptions of the two fields, perceptions which often cast them both in an unflattering light and still exist in varying degrees today. As Timothy Mayers explains, “In the case of composition studies, the prevailing view is that the discipline functions in service to a university’s first-year writing requirement, while creative writing is seen as having a ‘privileged marginality’ that fosters anti-intellectualism” (20). Consequently, these viewpoints created a need to legitimize the work of both fields. In the case of composition, there was a push to adopt the empirical methods of research touted by the social sciences in order to begin theorizing what occurs during the act of writing. For creative writing, New Criticism was molded to provide a framework not only for students to critique the work of literary greats, but also their own work and the work of peers in what has become known as “the workshop model.” All the while, however, both composition and creative writing have still been situated in “positions below literature and criticism” (Miller 40), with “neither want[ing] to be the ‘lowliest,’ [and fighting] to
distinguish themselves as different types of writing, thus discouraging the transfer of
skills from one to the other” (Miller 40).

The Gap between Composition and Creative Writing

Though the push toward professionalization created certain markers
differentiating the fields of composition and creative writing, the easiest and most
recognizable divide has been the discussion surrounding genre. As Wendy Bishop has
described, creative writing is often categorized as the production of poetry, stories, plays,
and literary nonfiction, while composition has been identified simply as the production
of essays or expository non-fiction. Bishop contends that this leads students in
particular to view creative writing as expressive, fun, deeply personal, and student-
centered, while composition is formulaic drudgery, based upon the themes or topics set
forth by the instructor (117 – 118). Consequently, others such as George Kalmaras have
noted similar feelings amongst others in the university, stating that “many
administrators [and] faculty (mostly those who do not teach writing, but also some who
do)...cased composition in largely functionalist terms, and they see ‘creative writing’ as
just that – special ‘creative’ activity quite different from the business of the academy
(78). While Bishop contends that certain distinctions or categorizations are beneficial
“to maintain order within our communities” (qtd. in Miller 41) and establish a cohort of
likeminded peers, the specialties that emerge can also create a cycle of marginalization,
distrust of colleagues, and seemingly insurmountable barriers within our departments
making the possibility of trans-disciplinary work difficult. She reminds us that all
categories, including those surrounding specialization and genre, are constructed (123)
and that it is important to keep in mind we do not necessarily have to be defined solely by such constructions.

Compounding the separation of composition and creative writing are the realities surrounding the big business model of education that currently saturate colleges and universities. More specifically, the efforts of composition and creative writing to distinguish themselves, to professionalize and claim rightful places within the academy through the establishment of undergraduate and graduate classes and majors, has created a unique set of circumstances inadvertently leading to the exploitation or marginalization of both fields. Indeed, composition has often been dubbed as the workhorse (or some would argue “cash cow”) of English departments in light of the number of students coming to the university who are required to complete first-year writing requirements. Because of the sheer volume of students, classes need to be staffed with contract faculty, graduate students, and other English department faculty not necessarily trained in composition studies. Issues regarding pay, benefits, and promotion abound for part-time or adjunct composition faculty, and in some cases, graduate students are simply given a textbook and told to go teach (some more fortunate ones like myself are able to shadow a mentor and given classes in composition pedagogy and theory). Working with such pressures and charged with the enormous task of teaching students about their writing, university research, and critical thinking, sometimes in no more than a 15 or 30 week time period, complaints or cries from colleagues in other departments still demand to know “Why can’t these kids write?”

While composition might be a tale of exploitation, creative writing has undoubtedly suffered from marginalization, often being viewed as anti-intellectual, anti-theoretical, and anti-pedagogical, despite a huge influx of programs. Perhaps most
disheartening is that although pedagogical issues are receiving greater treatment from creative writing practitioners than ever before, there are still specific patterns and practices in creative writing programs that give the appearance of creative writers having very little interest in teaching (Ritter and Vanderslice xvii). Consequently, some of this apparent disinterestedness is partly the byproduct of the unique hiring and tenure process put upon creative writing instructors. As Wendy Bishop and David Starkey elaborate in their reference text *Keywords in Creative Writing*, “faculty members at prestigious institutions are there because their writing has been showered with honors; venerated presses have published their books. Candidates for college creative writing positions don’t get the ‘best’ jobs for designing innovative classroom assignments: they are hired because they have entered a book contests and won first prize” (120). In many fields, including creative writing’s bedfellows for this study—composition—hiring is often based upon evidence of scholarly presentation and publication potential, but with the ever-shrinking job market and the saturation of degree-conferring programs in creative writing (808 as of 2009; 332 at the master’s or PhD level) that potential actually involves proven (and then continued) production. Indeed, “Unless one has the fortune of having a very well-received, popular, or prize-winning title for one’s first book publication, many MFA graduates must publish two or three books before they can secure their first tenure-track job” (Quarracino par. 11), and the selective nature of the hiring situation in relation to the number of degrees conferred can also be quite dire for many creative writing graduates. Andrea Quarracino comments in her text “Career Article: Annual Report on the Academic Job Market” for the Association of Writers’ and Writing Programs (AWP) that “creative writing as an academic discipline is in an odd situation. Creative writing is a popular specialty in a department of diminished appeal and clout” (par. 4) and further elaborates that as of the 2004 – 2005 academic year, 24%
of the AWP’s member schools (approximately 400 institutions) “reported a total of 2,482 students enrolled at the graduate level, 61% in MFA programs, 32% in MA programs, and 7% in PhD programs...[the] total graduate enrollments in creative writing stand at roughly 6,000 students, and approximately 2,500 of them earn their degrees each year. Only 111 tenure-track job in creative writing were advertised in [the 2004 – 2005] AWP Job List” (par. 6). Teaching and developing coherent theories of creative writing pedagogy are often pushed aside out of necessity to tend to the business of securing a strong publication record, not necessarily, as some have suggested, because such acts are held with contempt.

The paradox of the situation is that many search committees are increasing their emphasis on a candidate’s teaching experience. As Philip Gerard of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington has remarked, “The standard of teaching has gone up in writing programs....Teaching is hard and you have to learn how to do it....Not every teacher is a writer, and not every writer is a teacher. It is good to have professional guidance” (qtd. in Quarracino par. 9). Consequently, Gerard’s assertions dispel the notion that an ethos-based pedagogy is best for creative writing, a pedagogy that, as Kelly Ritter has noted, perpetuates the myth that successful teaching in creative writing equates to a successful publication record or significant fan base outside of the university (i.e. the epistemic court of publishers, contest judges, and fellow writers) (287), but a double-standard exists. As Ritter makes clear, creative writing teachers “who spend countless hours grading and commenting on student work, engaging in myriad committees, and occupying institutional positions that advance the intellectual missions of their fields, often without compensation...are viewed as less ‘serious’ about their craft, as if one professional role inhibited, or even visibly damaged, the other (287). While many search committees claim that there is a growing emphasis on teaching experience,
the institutions that train future creative writers often offer little in the way of pedagogy courses, and often suggest to those students without graduate teaching assistantships to seek out opportunities outside of the university such as internships, volunteer positions, and openings through various organizations such as AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps, such as at the University of Nevada – Las Vegas (Quarracino par. 10). In short, the popularity of creative writing programs and pressure to bring revenue into the university has created a difficult situation for current and future creative writers who wish to devote their energies to research and teaching, to perhaps break the perception of creative writing as an anti-intellectual endeavor.

*Narrowing the Gap: A Discussion on Pedagogy*

Despite the struggles of both fields, numerous scholars have attempted to close the gap between composition and creative writing through discussion of pedagogy and translating theories associated with composition into the creative writing classroom, recognizing that the two share similar institutional issues and are both concerned with the act of writing (regardless of the construction of genre). Mary Ann Cain, for example, has discussed how certain aspects of expressivism are embodied in creative writing, particularly the emphasis on personal expression, “authenticity, [and] originality of voice” (70). In addition, mimeticism, with its emphasis on “factual correctness” (71), can be observed in the construction of creative non-fiction courses. And functionalism, focused primarily on form and correctness, coincides with creative writing’s “ongoing concern with form, technique, genre, and what has become known as ‘craft’” (71). Interestingly, the notion of craft could easily be considered the equivalent of process pedagogy, whereby there is less of a concern with the final product and greater emphasis
on prewriting, drafting, and revising creative works. In many respects, such adaptations should not be surprising since, as Bishop observed, “compositionists have borrowed effective teaching methods from the creative writing workshop – particularly group-response sessions and portfolio evaluation – improved on those borrowings and gone beyond them” (125), and George Garrett has noted that the impetus and eventual expansion of creative writing as a field in the 20th century is really “a renewal, a revival...of an old fashioned, centuries-old form of teaching and learning rhetoric” (48). Even the Association of Writers’ and Writing Programs, the flagship organization for many academic creative writing programs, has (perhaps inadvertently) acknowledged how composition and creative writing have influenced each other, particularly in the teaching of undergraduates. More specifically, director of the AWP D.W. Fenza contended that while graduate study involves developing students into “...accomplished writer[s] who make significant contributions to contemporary literature” (qtd. in Mayers 19), the primary goal of undergraduate work is “...not to educate artists but to teach students critical reading skills, the elements of fiction and verse, general persuasive writing skills, and an appreciation of literary works of the present and past (qtd. in Mayers 19 – 20). With perhaps the exception of teaching the various elements of fiction and poetry, much of what Fenza delineates to undergraduate creative writing could easily be labeled as the territory of composition studies, in particular the emphasis on teaching critical reading and persuasive writing skills. These skills of course, coincide with other similarities, such as students mining their personal experiences for subject matter and packaging that material into various forms or genres of writing, including the cornerstones of many first-year writing classes (the narrative, analytical, and persuasive essay), or the “big three” of introductory creative writing (fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction).
Consequently, some have argued that much of these adaptations of composition theory and practice are another example of rhetoric and composition claiming intellectual territory that is not its own. Peter Vandenberg has noted that rhetoric and composition has two competing impulses: 1) claiming intellectual territory and placing the subordinate domains under a larger umbrella of discourse, and 2) creating smaller, specialized camps (1). According to Vandenberg, in rhetoric and composition’s efforts to expand and legitimize itself, it has often viewed creative writing as a “ripe territory for annexation” (2). Regardless, it is my assertion that this interest in the convergences between these two fields, particularly in relation to pedagogy, signals that we are entering a place in the institutional history of writing studies where composition and creative writing might fruitfully cross-pollinate once again. In other words, “At least in some cases, compositionists and creative writers might productively work together and masking the fact that there have been moments in history of English studies where...collaborations could have taken place....Perhaps we are now in the midst of, or at least at the beginning of, another historical moment in which composition and creative writing are passing through each other’s orbits yet again (Mayers 103). Indeed, many researchers have tried to dispel the binary between writing that is labeled as “creative” and writing that is viewed as “functional.” Case in point, Joseph Moxley has attempted to redefine creativity as “the natural consequence of learning, involvement, and commitment” (28), which certainly is not indicative to one “type” of writing. Perhaps most telling are the sentiments of Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen, who boldly claim that “Student writing is literature, that is, free and disinterested, a product of imagination and thought. In our experience and the experience of those we know, there is no essential difference between writing a poem and writing an essay, except, as we must often say, that writing a poem is easier, its conventions being so much clearer and
more plentiful” (65). I would quibble with Ponsot and Deen slightly in the sense that the conventions of poetry are not always so clear, particularly in the age of free verse, but agree that student writing can and should be regarded as a form of literature—particularly considering that much of composition studies relies on this premise for its research, and creative writing, with droves of students flocking to undergraduate and graduate programs hoping to develop and hone their craft, clearly have aspirations of eventually cementing their work as literature with a capital “L.” In addition, the cross-pollination between “creative” and “expository” genres can be seen through the tremendous surge of creative non-fiction tracks in creative writing programs, a genre which adheres to several journalistic, narrative, and reflective characteristics (Gerard 8–10), as well as the rise of multi-genre texts in composition classrooms. As Tom Romano notes in his text *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers,* “A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monolog nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images and content” (x–xi). Here, creative writing and composition are brought in a dialogic relationship as students are encouraged to choose a topic and use a variety of genres (such as print media, visuals, informational pieces, creative writing, and expository prose) to synthesize and present information in a multitude of ways and for an array of audiences.

*Statement of the Problem*
In one regard, my examination of both undergraduate composition and creative writing classrooms is my own attempt to make a small contribution to the meaningful dialogue beginning to transpire between the two fields once again, but (more importantly) to also fill-in the blanks left by other research. Though there have clearly been significant strides in terms of establishing a canon of texts dealing with creative writing pedagogy, as well as postulating how the fields of composition and creative writing might inform the practices of one another, it is also clear that few empirical, observation-based studies have been done that examine the more basic question of what is really going on in composition and creative writing classrooms at both the macro and micro level. More specifically, though there have been discussions about what these two fields teach, how they can be taught, and their application in further academic and occupational endeavors, there has been little emphasis on observing and understanding what activities occur in these classrooms beyond the products that are created in these environments (ex. expository essay, poem, etc.).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study, then, is to observe, record, and report on the activities that occur in one first-year composition and one introductory creative writing classroom, focusing primarily on how instructors and students negotiate between the complex interplay of activities surrounding pedagogy, the use of technology, the amount of authority delegated between parties, and the assignments/products created within the classroom. Though one specific outcome is the substantiation or refutation of previous non-empirical, lore-based scholarship that has juxtaposed the fields of composition and creative writing and asserted that, despite differences in genre, the two have similar
goals and approaches to teaching the act of writing, I also observe the structure of activities that occur. In brief, I rely upon the Engestrom model of activity systems in order to help understand how several factors, such as mediated artifacts (ex. computers, textbooks, etc.), rules (ex. student not being allowed to speak during a workshop), and division of labor (ex. roles assigned to students during group work) affect participants, the object under examination (ex. working on a draft of a poem), and the eventual outcome (ex. a well-crafted, polished poem). Consequently, it is the latter component that has garnered much of the attention from researchers, often times in conjunction with other components, but seldom through the descriptive framework of activity theory and never with a comprehensive view encompassing the entire structure and interplay of writing activities. In focusing on how instructors and students negotiate these activities, I utilize ethnographic methods for data collection, attributes of grounded theory as a tool for coding and comparison of data, and “techniques of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation...to produce credible analyses” (Evans 399) in order ultimately to provide an understanding of what goes on in two specific classrooms and point toward how those findings might lead to implications for future study.

Research Question(s)

This study will primarily focus on the following research question:

- What are the activities that occur in one first-year composition and one introductory creative writing class at a public Midwestern university, particularly in terms of the pedagogy/pedagogies utilized, the use of technology within the classroom, the amount of authority shared between
students and the instructors, and the assignments/products created, and how similar or different are these activities?

Of course, since this study is an example of naturalistic inquiry, data is emergent, rather than prefigured, and thus secondary research questions include:

- How do students and instructors in first-year composition and introductory creative writing classes describe the role of both fields within the university, as well as what is taught and what is produced in both environments?
- How do students and instructors in first-year composition and introductory creative writing classes describe their experiences with digital technology in the classroom?
- How do students and instructors in first-year composition and introductory creative writing classes describe their authority in the classroom?

Importance of the Study

As already stated, my study will help to substantiate or refute previous lore-based scholarship that claims there is a need for creative writing to adopt the pedagogies of composition, or composition to incorporate the genres of creative writing. Indeed, by interviewing and observing instructors and students at work, by having the participants articulate what they feel are the goals of these two fields, this study uncovers that a separatist mentality still exists between composition and creative writing at this particular institution – that just because trans-disciplinary work can be done does not necessarily mean that it should. In addition, this study yields significant insight into the use of technology in the classroom as another supposed binary between composition and
creative writing. As Christina Olson has remarked, “Traditionally, creative writing has been a field that is not technologically friendly” (2007), while it has been argued that many compositionists have embraced this new frontier, particularly in order to facilitate a more equalitarian relationship between teachers and students in the classroom. Authority, then, both in digital and non-digital contexts within the classroom, is another important area of exploration in this study. As Anna Leahy notes “Authority is an often little-discussed concept central both to pedagogy in general and to the writing process” (ix), and few theorists have expanded notions of authority to digital technologies in various writing classrooms, more often focusing on how technology remediates traditional classroom practices and the texts that students produce.

Beyond just contributing to the field at large, the study also has benefits and levels of importance for participants. Though in varying degrees, several students expressed an increasing awareness of their own writing process and how much of an influence the interplay of teaching, authority, technology, and assignments had on their process. Certainly, this heightened awareness could translate to other writing situations, both inside and outside the university. For instructors, the ability to discuss and rationalize their teaching with a third-party and to (at times) have a collaborator in the classroom provided them with a descriptive tool for reflection on their practices inside the classroom. Perhaps most significant, however, was that this study reveals how the individual instructor-participants negotiated their departmental responsibilities with what they feel are their personal or collective ethical responsibilities to students, something which I discuss at great length in chapters 4 and 5.

*Scope of the Study*
Participants were observed during class sessions, interviewed in one-to-one sessions with the principal investigator, and documents were collected and analyzed in order to establish categories of data, which were then be compared between the two classrooms for the concluding chapter. Let me reiterate, however, that my purpose through this constant comparison is not to create some generalized theory of what constitutes composition or creative writing, but merely to observe what transpires in two specific classrooms, to essentially answer the question of “what is going on here,” in order to see if the claims of previous lore-based scholarship are justified and point to implications or avenues for future research. With this methodological design, the hypothesis is emergent rather than prefigured. However, I am interested in the perspective of the students and instructors that participate in these classes and programs on a daily basis and, by utilizing the words and experiences of these students and instructors, it is my hope to demonstrate what these classrooms are by perhaps illuminating what they are not.

Delimitations and Limitations

The greatest drawback of this study is that, of course, only two classrooms were observed and a small number of participants agreed to partake in the study. In addition, the artifacts collected for the study were only over the course of single semester. Consequently, the limited number of participants and the duration of the study made generating a theory of “what is composition” and “what is creative writing” impossible. This study does, however, make connections between these specific classrooms as they were revealed through the select students and instructors and these connections can certainly point toward possibilities for further study.
Literature Review

Introduction

For my particular research study, one that relies so heavily on ethnographic (i.e. naturalistic) inquiry and utilizes various components of activity theory for analysis, constructing a literature review is an intriguing undertaking. As Odis E. Simmons remarks, naturalistic inquiry can often equate to minimizing preconceptions about what the investigator will find, to essentially eliminate (as much as possible) a predetermined research problem through the absence of a preliminary literature review (qtd. in Rhine par. 6). Though there certainly is value in this practice, in seeing everything that unfolds throughout a study from a raw and deceptively untainted perspective, there is equal merit in compiling a literature review to provide a framework for what one needs to look for in a study. As I have already noted in the introduction, I have had to articulate certain problems that have plagued the juxtaposition of composition and creative writing, as well as create tangible research questions that are based (at least in part) on my own preconceptions and experiences as a student and instructor of both composition and creative writing. Fortunately, my preconceptions have changed over time, in large part from reading the growing canon of literature that examines the work of composition and creative writing as academic disciplines. In this regard, the literature review not only provides me with an opportunity to widen my exposure to a growing conversation,
one that has picked up considerable momentum within the past few decades, but also a
structure or mechanism for examining those possible intersections of activity, pedagogy,
technology, authority, and products in composition and creative writing classrooms.

Though such a discussion is a daunting prospect, the interconnectedness of these
particular interests is almost unavoidable. As Stuart Selber remarks in his text
*Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, “pedagogies, facilities, and resources have become
increasingly intertwined” (207); consequently, it is my assertion that the concept of
activity can provide a lens to untangle some of this interconnectedness and, as a result, I
begin this chapter with a brief discussion of the critical features surrounding activity
theory. Accordingly, many of the selected readings for this chapter often provide insight
in to a few key activities that occur during the act of writing or within composition and
creative writing classrooms; however, the researchers themselves seldom frame their
work as dealing with activity or the interconnectedness of pedagogy, technology,
authority, and products – I often have to make that leap for them. I do this, again, to
provide me with a framework for my study, but also to uncover the gaps left by others.
Next, I discuss a small selection of studies that have inspired my own, the few and far
between empirical studies that illuminate and attempt to bridge the various binaries
erected between composition and creative writing, and I also describe the nature of these
studies, their findings, and how my study contributes to this growing canon of work. In
most cases, these works are the culminating projects of other graduate students,
individuals whose dissertations or theses have attempted to cross the divide and barriers
that have separated poetics from rhetorical discourse. Lastly, I delve into those areas of
particular interest such as pedagogy, technology, authority, and products, focusing
primarily on polemic and theoretical arguments – in many cases providing the reader
with definitions for terms or concepts relevant to this study, terms that are frequently
contested between the fields of composition and creative writing. Let me preface, however, that the act of defining is not meant to imply that these terms are fixed. On the contrary, these “definitions” are meant to demonstrate the range of possibilities and interpretations of certain terms, particularly as they are used or constructed along disciplinary lines.

*Activity Theory*

Though often associated with (or applied to) human-computer interaction (HCI), activity theory has also been described by theorists such as Bonnie A. Nardi as multifaceted, capable of being utilized in a variety of disciplines in order to understand and analyze human behavior (par. 1). This framework for examining social interaction originates in the theories of Lev Vygotsky; specifically, that certain psychological phenomena and their physical manifestation (particularly in the realms of education and labor) are culturally, historically, and socially situated. These notions, especially as they pertained to the development and design of certain tools or environments for working – and subsequently how workers interacted within these environments (ergonomics) – were furthered by the likes of psychologists Alexei N. Leont’ev and Sergei Rubinshtein, individuals who “For reasons that are not quite clear (possibly Russian history and Marxist ideology)...[were] influenced by cognitive psychology, philosophy, physiology, and cybernetics” (Bedny and Meister xviii). Consequently, Leont’ev, Rubinshtein, and other individuals often associated with the Kharkov school of psychology sought to explain human behavior as a series of multi-phased processes (both physical and mental) to satisfy certain needs or achieve various goals. More specifically, human “Activity in its most general sense can be defined as a coherent system of internal mental processes,
external behavior, and motivational processes that are combined and directed to achieve conscious goals” (Bedny and Meister 3). Indeed, the interrelationship between needs, motives, and goals is imperative in activity theory, though each is differentiated from each other. Bedny and Meister comment on this matter are worth quoting at length:

The distinction among goals, needs, and motives is very important in the theory of activity. Needs may be transformed into motives only in those cases in which they acquire the capacity to induce an activity of a person to achieve a particular goal. Motives may derive not only from needs, but from desire, intention, aspiration, strivings, when these induce our behavior toward particular goal achievement. The more important the goal, the more motivated the worker will be to attain it, and the more she will expend physical and psychological energy toward achieving the goal (3 – 4).

Of course, it is worth noting that “activity” is defined differently from “actions,” the latter being the presence of motor and mental components, such as muscle movement and sensory perceptions, that make up certain activities (Bedny and Meister 2). Regardless, activity theory, when applied to learning, takes on some remarkable characteristics; specifically, that “the major aspect of learning is a stimulus-response relationship” (Bedny and Meister xx), often inextricably linked to theories on human information processing in cognitive psychology and concepts such as self-regulation, consciousness, and the unconscious. As Bedny and Meister state:

....learning can be performed based on conscious or unconscious levels of self-regulation and the complex relationship between them. The unconscious level of self-regulation is connected with blind trails and errors and corrections of behavior according to them. Conscious level learning is connected with the
formation of voluntary actions based on the conscious level of self-regulation and acquiring complicated rules or algorithms of behavior” (xx).

Consequently, my study does not attempt to map out these conscious or unconscious levels of self-regulation, as perhaps prior studies (such as the influential work of Linda Flower and John Hayes) have done. Rather, because of the ethnographic nature of my study, activity theory has become a framing device, a way to help analyze (and, at times, categorize) what transpired in the classrooms I observe. Specifically, my observations and interviews provide some insight into the needs, motives, and goals of instructors and students in these classrooms, as well as how the structure of certain activities can influence these needs, motives, and goals.

As Simon Tan illuminates, the structure of an activity is comprised of seven major components: subject, object, community, outcome, tools, rules, and division of labor:
Tan’s schematic clearly provides me with certain categories and a way of compartmentalizing what I might encounter. For example, in chapter 5 I discuss the structure of an activity, where a student in an introductory creative writing classroom (subject) is working on a “quick-write” exercise (object) under the auspices of the university, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of English, the Creative Writing program, and the ENG 285 course (community) in order to produce a poem (outcome). This particular student utilized a computer for composing and screen-capture software to record his composition (tools) and I told the student that he only had 5 minutes to write (rules), upon which I would return to the room and pose questions about his writing, process, etc. (division of labor).

In addition, and of particular interest to me, is how certain pedagogical techniques, the use (or non-use) of technology, delegation of authority, and the physical and non-physical products of these composition and creative writing classrooms might mediate or influence the interconnectedness of this structure. As Cheryl Geisler and Shaun Slattery explain, “Human behavior is always mediated. Tool – both physical and symbolic, both internalized and in the world – become incorporated in to the way we do things in a way that inextricably knits us together with the environments in which we act” (189). In other words, the way in which a classroom environment operates is correlated to the various “tools” that are utilized, whether that be a symbolic or non-physical adherence to a particular type of pedagogy (such my ENG 103 instructor-participant’s emphasis on first-person research and journalistic principles to writing), or how instructors and students navigate through physical manifestations of pedagogy (for
example, how the use of a course management platform in the ENG 103 course I observed was utilized for disseminating course information, documents, and class discussion; or how both the ENG 103 and ENG 285 instructor-participants attempted to de-center their authority by completing certain assignments with students and privileging students personal experiences during class discussions or in assignments. Though my work is not intended to be a comparison study, implications for further studies looking to juxtapose certain disciplinary practices in composition and creative writing might be able to use the data gathered here and establish possible relationships between the mediations I outline in order interrogate the similarities or differences among activities that occur in both classrooms. Consequently, I begin this process on a limited scale in my concluding chapter.

**Activity Theory in Composition and Creative Writing**

As previously stated, there is a significant connection between cognitive psychology and activity theory. Accordingly, perhaps the greatest instance of cognitive psychology’s influence in the study of composition is Linda Flower and John R. Hayes’s “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” a study that attempted to explain the writing process as a series of problem-solving steps and hierarchal stages in the mind of the writer – to, in a sense, map-out the activity of writing. The cognitive model developed by Flower and Hayes is based upon several key points, each of which clearly references notions present in the concept of activity. For example, the contention that “The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing” (274), emphasizes the analysis of distinct, internal mental processes, such as idea generation or planning, based upon a
hierarchical (yet recursive) structure. Conversely, the assertion that “The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer’s own growing network of goals” (274) alludes to the development of goals through the fulfillment of specific needs or grounded within certain motives (such as completing a writing assignment for a class or a grade or to communicate to a specific audience). More specifically, Flower and Hayes assert that “Writers create their own goals...by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer’s developing sense of purpose, and then...by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing (274 – 275). Indeed, as Flower and Hayes make clear, “In the act of writing, people regenerate or recreate their own goals in the light of what they learn” (290), and it is the interplay of goal formation, learning, and the activity of writing which creates the strongest link between activity theory, cognitive psychology, and composition – the notion that writers can come to understand (or perhaps change) their internal, mental processes through continued engagement in the activity of writing. Consequently, this was seen in some of my student-participants, particularly for the ENG 103 class and in one student in particular, Brad, who sought to identify some of his common grammatical errors (a goal) and once he became aware of these errors, and thus could correct them before they were manifested in his writing, he was able to formulate new goals for his writing.

Similar to the heyday of cognitive research in composition during the 1970s and 80s, there has recently been the call to theorize and research the discipline of creative writing, which has led to an interest in the activities creative writers engage in while crafting a creative work. The Pulitzer Prize winning fiction writer Robert Olen Butler, for example, wrote his short story “This is Earl Sandt” in view of a live audience via the Internet, utilizing screen-capture software and a webcam in order for spectators to “see
every creative decision, down to the most delicate comma, as it is made on the page. Every misbegotten, awkward sentence, every bad word choice, every conceptual dead end will be shared and worked over and revised and rewritten before your eyes” (Butler par. 3). Much like the think-aloud protocols of Flower and Hayes’s cognitive process model, where participants would attempt to verbalize their thoughts as they were composing, Butler occasionally speaks as he writes in order, as he notes, “offer some running, oral commentary on my process and my choices as I work” (par. 3). However, much of Butler’s oral commentary is reserved for after each writing session concludes and even he admits that “The creative process is dependent on maintaining a kind of trance-like-state...in order to stay deeply in touch with the unconscious self, where all art comes from” (par 3). Though interesting in the sense of literally watching the process of a story being made, Butler’s experiment, much like the cognitive process model of Flower and Hayes, only offers a small window into the activity of writing as initiated by a single author. The limited scope should come as no surprise, however, as recent creative writing theorists such as Graeme Harper have asserted that:

...human activity almost never can be reduced to a single plain of understanding. So we cannot simply go through the pronouncements of creative writers and reconstruct the nature of Creative Writing from their outpourings, even those outpourings that relate to their creative practices. Similarly we cannot, simply, discover the nature of Creative Writing in the scrawls on the margins of their manuscripts or in the letters or emails they send to friends, or in the painting, films, plays, sports...in their choice of desk, or in the instrument or technology they use to write. We cannot, simply, take biographical fact and, on the basis that the subject is a creative writer, make from these the very fact of Creative Writing. And yet, we cannot do without these either (xiv).
Indeed, Harper illuminates a bit of a conundrum in that we cannot fully comprehend what goes on, whether consciously or not, in the mind of a writer, yet the artifacts produced and inclinations or behaviors of writers while producing (i.e. the things that we can observe) can provide a context for multiple plains of understanding, including how the tools, rules, division of labor, and community might have an effect on the subject (i.e. the participants) and the outcome or product.

Studies of Influence

As I mentioned in the context of chapter 1, few empirical studies have been done when investigating issues surrounding the juxtaposition of composition and creative writing classrooms, and obtaining some of these studies, many of which are graduate theses and dissertations that come with a price-tag from the ProQuest online database, has been daunting at times. Still, in addition to those fellow graduate students (often in the field of rhetoric and composition) who have sought to either tackle the complex issues surrounding the relationship of composition and creative writing in the academy, or who have chronicled the work that takes place in these classrooms, several other studies have influenced me in terms of subject matter and methodological design. What follows is a brief look at some empirical, naturalistic studies that have influenced my own, as well as a discussion on the framework or nature of these studies, their findings, and how my study can contribute to the conversation begun by these individuals.

I begin with Leslie Seawright’s Defining the Relationship: A Study of Students Writing Poetry in a Composition Classroom, a theses that actually examined the work of students who composed poetry as part of a first-year writing course. Examining the “writings from forty-four students and a case study of four individual students” (6 – 7)
from her own classroom, Seawright describes how “Students were assigned to write three poems while studying and analyzing poetry” (3) and further asked to write “an academic essay that included a poet’s biography, an explication of one of the poet’s poems, and the student’s own original poem” (3). As Seawright described, her research sought “to blur the line between Composition and Creative Writing and wondering what might be learned by combining the two emphases” (2 – 3) and she attempted to “create an experience for students that helped them not only write better papers but also enjoy the path along that route” (3). In reading Seawright’s study, it appeared to me as though she was really attempting to solidify a belief touted by many early proponents of the creative writing workshop, that in order to better understand works of literature and the perspectives of the author, that it was also necessary to write in creative genres, to (in essence) see the work and the process “from the inside.” Indeed, Seawright triangulated her interviews with students, their papers, and their poems to deduce that “It appears that all of the case study students felt they could successfully analyze a poem because they were assigned poetry writing exercises” (75). Seawright also concluded that the blurring of composition and creative writing, that the writing of poetry as part of her class, had numerous benefits for students, stating that she observed “an increased sense of authority, a better or new understanding of originality, and a greater knowledge of audience” (3). Of particular interest to me were her discoveries on students’ authority; specifically, how “students were allowed to select their own subject matter” (77) and how the use of “personal knowledge or personal experience automatically [granted] students authority over the work they produced” (77). In both the ENG 103 and ENG 285 classes I observed, students were able to draw heavily on their own personal experience, to circumnavigate some of the problems that develop when students “lack authority over the subjects in their texts and lack the resources to gain such authorial control”
DiSarro 42

(Berkenkotter qtd. in Seawright 77). Indeed, both the instructor-participants I observed attempted to dispel some of the binaries between “personal” and “academic” writing, contending (as Bruce Horner noted in his article “Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition”) that such distinctions “[deny]...the possibilities both that ‘personal’ writing is socially inscribed and that individual students may well have ‘personal’ interests articulated in more ‘academic’ writing” (511).

Consequently, Seawright’s work was also useful to me in providing a framework for how to interview and report on student writing; however, I did question how useful the meta-cognitive assignments she assigned really were, as well as having students reflect upon their experiences after the composing process was complete. Indeed, as Hart-Davidson makes clear, these type of methods and protocols, while providing strong accounts pertaining to specific moments of composing, are flawed in the sense that participants “tend to include only those events that stand out as significant...after some time has elapsed” (159) and not the entirety of the composing process. Obviously, however, these deficiencies are difficult to overcome considering the nature of case study or ethnographic inquiry and I too relied upon the meta-cognitive assignments of students in ENG 103 to at least get a glimpse of what they believed their writing process entailed. Still, whereas Seawright had to contend with some of the inherent biases and risks of examining her own classroom and her own students, my study examines the classrooms of others and offers a comprehensive view of the structure and interplay of various activities and assignments, not just a single pairing of creative work and academic writing.

Another study of influence was Donald K. Pardlow’s dissertation entitled Flight to Flatland: A Descriptive Study of Using Creative-Writing Pedagogy to Improve the
Teaching of First-Year English Composition. He begins with an overview of the impetus behind his study, essentially remarking that his marginalization as an African-American student in a “traditional literary studies English program, in a mainstream (white) university” (4) had forced him to take his yearnings of becoming a creative writer (and certain aspects of his creative “voice”) underground. In several places, Pardlow further laments on how this subversion of creative voice has continued throughout his educational career, including in his new role as an educator while pursuing his doctoral degree: “I think...my need to express my true self in writing will forever serve as a stepchild to the need to earn a living” (4). In trying to reconcile “the current traditional approaches to teaching composition” (1) with emerging pedagogies seeking to validate the self-expression of students and his own marginalization within the academy, Pardlow “...decided to incorporate creative-writing assignments (within his) regular composition curriculum. These new creative-writing assignments turned out to be well-received...(and constituted) a range of assignments, assignments which covered a culturally-diverse variety of discourse modes to also enhance the multicultural dimensions of the composition course” (6). When discussing his choice of assignments (which were essentially narrative in nature), Pardlow faced vehement opposition from many of his colleagues and sought refuge and legitimization in the work of scholars such as Wendy Bishop, Hans Ostrom, Patrick Bizzarro, and James Britton (individuals that I will discuss at length later in this chapter) who advocated the use and teaching of both creative writing and composition in the same classroom (6). As Pardlow notes:

My personal story, my poetry writing, and my developing review of contemporary scholarship have thus led me to address the following research questions in my study: 1). What are the results, as manifested in students’ writing and reflections, of a composition teacher using creative-writing pedagogy in a composition
classroom? 2). What is the impact—political, social, and/or cultural—of creative-writing pedagogy on the teacher who uses that pedagogy in a composition classroom? 3). How is student silence impacted by using creative-writing pedagogy in a composition classroom? (9)

In many ways, Donald K. Pardlow's study *Flight to Flatland: A Descriptive Study of Using Creative Writing Pedagogy to Improve the Teaching of First-Year Composition* is similar to Seawright's: both primarily rely upon a case study methodology, both observe and interview students within their own classrooms, and both focus on the apparent benefits of utilizing creative writing in the context of a composition classroom. However, though Pardlow used a wide-variety of research methods, his results were somewhat inconclusive or grounded in common knowledge. The greatest realization emanating from the research seemed to be that “...most students can apply the writing techniques that they learn from the creative-writing exercises to their story-writing skills, but many of the students need additional help in transferring those creative skills to the genres of expository, argumentative, and research writing” (155). Because of this, Pardlow contends that “the instructor should take a multifaced and variable role in teaching the class” (157) that includes pedagogical attention to traditional academic discourse such as persuasion and argumentation, but also “...encourage students to write very creatively...and compose works in a variety of genres” (159). In the end, Pardlow cannot seem to explain the responsiveness of some students to creative-writing techniques and the disinterestedness of others, but mostly attributes such variation to historical, societal, and cultural factors. Consequently, Seawright and Pardlow's studies made me see the difficulty of trying to juggle teaching responsibilities with being able to maintain an objective stance when researching one's own students.
Certainly, the nature of Seawright and Pardlow’s studies (as well as my own) makes it impossible to create generalizations about a particular group or the greater institutional identities of composition and creative writing. What I did admire about their work, however, was the personal tone in the writing. In the case of Pardlow, his dissertation is essentially narrative-based whereby “the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology. In the end, the narrative combines views from the participant’s life with those of the researcher’s life in a collaborative narrative” (Creswell 15). Throughout the dissertation, Pardlow often remarks about how he shared his stories of marginalization with his students (and we the reader also hear about Pardlow’s plights from the very beginning of the work); coupled with the stories provide by the students (as retold by Pardlow), there is certainly a collaborative narrative transpiring. Other studies, such as Sandra Gail Teichmann’s dissertation *This is Not a Teacher* had similar qualities. As Teichmann herself notes, “At times, the [study] is theoretical as the author presents a personal philosophy of writing and teaching of writing, interlaced with quotes and comments from other authors and theorists, ancient and contemporary. At other times, the response is creative and autobiographical” (ix). Indeed, at times in my reporting and analysis of data, I have intentionally contested the typical, specialized genre known as the dissertation; in particular, to make myself visible to the reader. As Lynn Z. Bloom remarked in her collection of essays *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*, “Like all rule-bound enterprises...the effacement of the author dehumanize[s] a messy process and [makes] it too tidy” (9), but “Make no mistake. Just because the writing throughout...sounds personal does not mean that it is therefore by definition sloppy, 
sentimental, self-indulgent, or stupid – objections too often fired broadside against the living body of such work” (10).

I would now like to turn to those areas of particular interest in my study, areas that are sometimes implicitly examined in the works of individuals such as Seawright and Pardlow, though not explored fully – pedagogy, technology, authority, and products. I frame these areas of interest through polemic and theoretical arguments in order to contextualize the current state of juxtaposition between composition and creative writing in the academy.

*Creative Writing, Composition, and Pedagogy*

The etymology of the term “creative writing” has been a hotly (and often tenuously) debated issue. Some, such as D.G. Myers, trace our contemporary use of the term to Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address on “The American Scholar” (31 – 33), while others, including Paul Dawson, have contended that the term originated some time earlier in the work of William Wordsworth, who mentioned a type of “Creative Art” or creative power in an 1815 sonnet, as well as his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Indeed, a central belief expressed in Wordsworth’s *Preface* is the idea that the ability to create art or “sublime” writing, writing that has the innate ability to elevate the mind of the reader, does not necessarily exist outside of the author waiting to be discovered in the form of some muse or ethereal force, but instead lies within the individual, their everyday life, and their surroundings. Part of this belief extends to Wordsworth’s notion that poetry should reflect “a man speaking to men,” of individuals being able to pick up a text and know what the author is describing and the significance of the work. Wordsworth, in essence, articulates his desire to write for the common
person while also forwarding the position that the most sublime of things can be found in nature and in the lives of everyday individuals, not through acquiring or cultivating a sense of taste (as expressed by the elocutionists of the late 18th and early 19th century) whereby one has to change the way they speak in order to gain wealth, status, or social mobility. While Wordsworth’s assertions about “a man speaking to men” set the foundation for romantic rhetoric, as well as the notion that the most effective oratory is that which is clear and easily relatable, it is clear that the ideas he expressed in the Preface began a modern exploration of the creative act itself, acknowledging that it was not necessarily a dizzying flurry of inspiration, madness, or even genius that produced prose or poetry, but meticulous thought, skilled perception, and an understanding that individuals shape reality and notions of taste. Nevertheless, and as I discussed in the preceding chapter with Hugh Blair’s notions on cultivating taste, there were still prevailing notions within universities that only genius or extreme talent could enact the thought necessary for producing “high literature,” making the prospect of teaching the creation of literary works seem like a virtual impossibility. This is not to say, however, that numerous individuals did not try, though not necessarily for the purpose of producing the next Milton or Shelley.

As I already discussed in the introduction, the entanglement of creative writing within higher education began with the bellettristic movement of the late 18th century and continued throughout the latter half of the 19th century, primarily through the use of prose or poetry in expository writing classrooms. More specifically, “English composition established an alternative method for the higher study of literature. The exact nature of this method was steady (daily) writing in which flexibility of judgment, the capacity to devise an ad hoc solution to a unique problem of literary form, was emphasized over correctness as a means of giving order to descriptive perception and
first-hand experience” (Myers 55). This early form of writing pedagogy, then, could be seen as what Dawson describes as the literacy trajectory of creative writing’s institutional history, a trajectory that “situates ‘creative’ writing within a general writing instruction which trains students in compositional modes for the purposes of accurate expression and professional communication” (49). This push toward accurate expression and professional communication was indicative of education in the last 25 years of the 19th century, where (as James Berlin remarks) college was no longer merely a place to prepare students to for careers as lawyers, pulpit orators, or politicians, but a place that educated the emerging middle or managerial class needed for rising industries (18 - 19).

The growth of industry in the United States and the encroachment of business models and specialization into colleges and universities, such as the Germanic model of education popularized by John Hopkins University in the late 19th century, were only a few factors in the development of an institutionalized version of creative writing. Consequently, the development of what has become known as creative writing in higher education occurred, like most moments in history, through a multitude of complex events where social, educational, and professional conditions aligned or repelled. Numerous scholars have attempted to trace and account for these conditions, focusing primarily on a few key figures, institutions, or models. Chris Green, for example, offers a succinct telling of creative writing’s relationship with higher education, specifically highlighting moments where certain markers of professionalization (such as classroom practices, program design, and the inception of specialized organizations) came into being. In particular, Green highlights Barrett Wendell’s use of prose and poetry in his expository writing classes at Harvard, William Hughes Mearns infusing of creative work into the Lincoln School in 1920, the beginning of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1936 (though classes in “verse writing” began at Iowa as early as 1897), and the formation of
the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) in 1967 (157). Still others, like Paul Dawson, focus on the occasionally overlapping “theories of literature, authorship and pedagogy” (49) that have carted the course of creative writing in higher education.

In addition to the “literacy model” mentioned in brief above, Dawson describes three other “institutional trajectories,” including creative self-expression, “reading from the inside,” and craft. Creative self-expression, according to Dawson, “is a technology of the self whereby language (especially through the medium of poetry) is a device for discovering and developing the expressive potential of one's own human character” (49); consequently, this notion of discovering and developing self-expression in learning originated in part with the early 20th century reforms of educational philosopher John Dewey, an individual who “emphasized the crucial role of self-expression and active experiential learning in education” (Adams 73), and perhaps reached its zenith with the expressivist movement in composition during the 1960s and 1970s. As Laura Salinas summarizes, expressivism constituted “a theory for teaching writing that teaches students...to focus on the writer as one who has personal and sole access to his/her own truth and encourages writing that expresses the writer’s individuality and thinking.” While expressivism has fallen out of favor in composition studies because, as rhetoricians such as Mary Ann Cain have noted, the personal intuitions and creative powers advocated through expressivism ignore social and cultural factors that shape the writer and the act of writing, many creative writing pedagogues still strongly advocate for creative self-expression (70 – 71). Scholars such as Ann Turkle, Julene Bair, Ruth Barnett, Todd Pierce, and Rex West, for example, have implied that “creative writing pedagogy is the teaching of writing as a process of self-discovery and self expression, a process which explores and expresses the writer’s self more than other modes of writing (i.e. description, exposition, argumentation) may explore or express that self” (qtd. in
Consequently, the notion of teaching self-expression has also been dubbed as therapeutic or holistic by writers such as Michelle Cross, a type of pedagogy that “focuses on engendering a writing experience that contributes to the discovery, development, and healing of the writer’s spiritual and emotional self, first and foremost” (70). However, according to Cross, holistic pedagogy is often at odds with the nature of creative writing programs and their dominant pedagogical apparatus known as the workshop. Specifically, holistic or expressive pedagogy, in addition to privileging individual over social concerns, often de-emphasizes the importance of craft or the study of famous literary works (70). In light of some of these deficiencies, recent pedagogical discussions focused on creative writing have widened to include more than self-discovery and self-expressive elements.

Indeed, as Dawson’s final two trajectories demonstrate, a great deal of contemporary creative writing pedagogy focuses attention on two distinct concepts: reading from the inside and craft. “Reading from the inside,” as Dawson remarks, “is founded on the belief that practical experience in writing literature leads to greater knowledge and appreciation of it” (49), the assumption being that the exposure, study, analysis, and (at times) imitation of certain literary works will aid students in understanding how a creative text is composed. This idea has resonated with many creative writing instructors. Jerri Kroll, for example, has advocated for an exegesis for creative writing students, a self-reflexive, analytical, theoretical, and “polyphonic discourse of connecting voices” (95). More specifically, “The creative writing student studies the canon, the masters, absorbs past orthodoxies, but then through practices produces a unique product” (95). Others like Wallace Stegner in his treatise On the Teaching of Creative Writing have asserted that the writing apprenticeship does not always occur in the classroom, but through journals, letters, and especially extensive
reading in order to learn the tradition(s) of other writers and to study their techniques (20 – 21). While the practice of “reading from the inside” is often equated with learning the ins and outs of various literary devices, it can be argued that such a practice has morphed into what Cross calls a type of iconic pedagogy, whereby the “elements of the author as writer – lifestyle, habits, personality, publishing history, and so on – elements that are not essential or even intrinsically connected to the text in any demonstrable way” (73) have come to dominate thoughts, ideas, and lessons surrounding how creative writing is taught; in other words, “any portrayal of an author, first- or second-hand... delivers ideas about creative writing or its pedagogy” (72). Many prominent voices in the field of creative writing pedagogy, however, have often denounced this type of pedagogy as having little practical or theoretical foundation, particularly when the “icon” under examination is the instructor. As Kelly Ritter makes clear in her editorial “Ethos Interrupted: Diffusing ‘Star’ Pedagogy in Creative Writing Programs,” many programs in creative writing are associated with the fame and authorship of its faculty and this faculty often perpetuates the belief that teaching is instinctive, hinging upon the experiences, biases, background, etc. of the faculty member (283 – 284).

Though reading from the inside and iconic pedagogy certainly have some drawbacks, both are contemporary phenomenon made possible by a disciplinary shift “from [the] reception to the production” (Myers par. 9) of texts, of finding ways to turn the lens of criticism inward and onto one’s own writing. This type of “intrinsic criticism,” as D.G. Myers refers to it in text The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880, has invariably led to creative writing instructors concern with the notion of “craft,” or a “conjunction of formalist criticism with the concept of artistic training associated with the fine arts” (Dawson 49). Craft is often the centerpiece of many creative writing classrooms and pedagogues, packaged within the academic environment of the
workshop, and focused on particular genres. For example, Cross notes that “In fiction, the canonical elements of study usually consist of plot, character, setting, conflict, dialogue, point-of-view, and occasionally the more vague and esoteric categories of ‘voice’ and ‘theme’...For poetry, literary [or craft-based] pedagogy might cite the traditional ‘devices’ analyzed in the literary study of poetry, such as metaphor and simile” (68). Consequently, many creative writing pedagogues have expressed the belief that craft is the only real teachable element to the study of creative writing. Ron McFarland, for example, outlines what he believes to be the five essentials of a serious writer: desire (“will”), drive (“energy”), vision (“experience”), talent, and craft (34). Indeed, aside from the elements of craft chronicled above, the essentials McFarland describes seem to be at the mercy of the individual student – an instructor cannot necessarily create the desire or drive to write, nor can they really provide experiences outside of the classroom; however, it could be argued that the experiences instructors create within the classroom, experiences that can expose students to influences, like certain authors or fellow classmates, might ignite personal desire and drive. At best, McFarland is using rather contested terms that are often difficult to define and, particularly in the case of terms like “talent,” might hinge more on personal taste than anything else.

If “craft” has been designated as one of the few teachable aspects of creative writing, then the primary pedagogical vehicle to teach it has been the workshop model. Perhaps more than any other term, “the workshop” is difficult to define because the characteristics, qualities, and purpose to such a pedagogical model differ depending on whom is using it and the institutional environment in which the workshop is housed, such as an elementary or secondary school, a composition classroom in the core curriculum, or a graduate MFA classroom. Since the focus of my study is undergraduate
composition and creative writing classrooms, I will briefly discuss the workshop as it is applied to these two environments, while also discussing some of the criticism that has been raised about the model in relation to undergraduates.

Of course, the day-to-day activities in a workshop-oriented classroom vary by instructor, but Chris Green provides a general overview of the prevailing practices and format indicative to the workshop, though decidedly in the context of a creative writing class. He explains that, in many workshops, copies of student work are usually distributed at the culmination of each class period for the students to read and comment on for the next class period and that equal time (in terms of written and verbal commentary) will be given to each poem, short story, creative essay, etc. (157). Green also notes how workshop instructors favor one-to-one conferences in which the instructor and the student (often referred to as the “master” and “apprentice”) discuss certain aspects of invention, craft, and revision; subsequently, the work of published authors (including, at times, the instructor) often constitute the assigned readings in the workshop, which the students are then expected to model and emulate (158). Green’s contention is that “the end goal of the workshop, of course, is to allow writers opportunities to teach each other how good poems (short stories, creative essays, etc.) are written” (158). Interestingly, much of the criticism surrounding the workshop has pertained to how this basic format is utilized in both undergraduate and graduate creative writing programs when, as Stephanie Vanderslice made clear in The Chronicle of Higher Education, the workshop was originally intended for older graduate students returning to academia for advanced degrees (particularly after the inception of the G.I. Bill) and not newly matriculated undergraduates (par. 4).
To complicate matters further, the purpose of the workshop in undergraduate creative writing classrooms and program is often muddied. To illustrate this point, Dianne Donnelly administered a survey where 167 respondents from 174 different undergraduate creative writing programs were asked to give their definitions of the workshop. The range of responses was intriguing, varying from Toni Graham’s assertion that the workshop was an environment to “teach craft and discourage self-indulgent junk” (qtd. in Donnelly 5), to Linda Russ Spaar’s contention that the workshop could help in creating “deeper, closer, more responsible and creative thinkers, readers, and writers” (qtd. in Donnelly 5). Others categorized the workshop as a place “to give young writers an audience [and] a sense of community” (Grimes 4 – 5), while others like Peter Harris view the workshop as “a wonderful place where people’s lives open up [and students] begin to own their own voices” (qtd. in Donnelly 5). Contrarily, in the context of graduate level creative writing programs, the purpose of the workshop has been described as “an opportunity for the talented writer to work and learn with established poets and prose writers” (“Writers’ Workshop” par. 4).

While all pedagogical models must undergo scrutiny to evolve, some such as Patrick Bizarro have contended that the workshop is a century-old method that has remained largely unrevised (296). Again, in the context of graduate-level creative writing programs this may be less of an issue since there is an assumption that these students have attained a certain level of critical and analytical skills, as well as some understanding of the devices required in crafting a creative work. However, for several other researchers, the relatively fixed nature of the workshop is problematic, and trying to account for the ineffectiveness of the workshop with undergraduates has been a particularly strong focus. Alexander Neubauer, for example, has asserted that undergraduates lack a certain amount of life-experience and that in light of this
inexperience the workshop model “tend[s] to have too high a tolerance for weak writers, tend[s] to teach writing too much ‘by-the-numbers, [and] tends to relax the rigors expected in a college writing program” (qtd. in Pardlow 15). Mary Ann Cain and Ted Lardner, on the other hand, have contended that the workshop privileges personal intuition over other forms of making knowledge, providing students with a limited view of the writing process (70 – 77). Donald Morton and Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s take the criticism one step further, saying that the workshop is dangerous (regardless of the population it serves) since it has not moved beyond the humanist approach of interpreting meaning in a given text devoid of the various societal factors (such as race, gender, social class, etc.) that surround students and the creative artists they examine (157).

Considering these criticisms, there has been a call for either drastic revision or complete abolition of the workshop and creative writing programs at the undergraduate level. The latter option seems unlikely, particularly considering the lucrative nature of creative writing programs in academia, but more importantly such an act would eliminate certain avenues of appreciation, training, and exposure to the fundamentals of creative writing (McFarland 32). Indeed, in the Introduction to Creative Writing class that I observed, the instructor did not have students participate in a traditional workshop described by Green above, and instead utilized the class as a place to expose students to a variety of authors, genres, and occasionally techniques through various imitation or “quick-writing” exercises – there was no critiquing of student work at all. The option for revising the workshop and the pedagogical tools surrounding it, then, seems much more likely and numerous individuals have focused a great deal of attention on this issue. However, conflict and hostilities have surfaced with regard to who makes these revisions and to what end. It has been well-documented by several “border-
“dwellers” (those with backgrounds or institutional training in both creative writing and composition) that creative writing as a field has often denied the epistemological underpinnings surrounding the workshop model and fostered a general lack of interest (or even distrust) in scholarship focusing on or questioning teaching practices (Lardner 72 - 77). In spite of this, prominent pedagogues such as Wendy Bishop have pointed out composition’s “cross-the-line pedagogical raiding” (125) of creative writing in the use of the workshop and teaching methods such as peer review and portfolios. Some, such as William Zeiger, have even promoted the use of a “critical writing workshop” in composition classrooms, a place where students are encouraged not to conceptualize the world as a series of dualistic “right” and “wrong” answers, but to adopt a pluralistic view “composed of many potentials” (qtd. in Capossela 35) in order to “liberate thinking to discover and explore different paths” (qtd. in Capossela 36). A critical writing workshop, then, offers composition students a place to interact with and be critiqued by others, to consider a range of possibilities for their writing, as one might experience in a creative writing workshop. However, whereas the critical workshop in composition aims to shape, broaden, and perhaps redefine students’ perceptions and interpretations of the world, which arguably has a positive effect on their writing by considering a multitude of voices, the traditional creative writing workshop, as I pointed out with Morton and Zavarzadeh above, often de-emphasizes social influence and thus limits criticism of student writing to issues concerning craft.

For some, such as Colin Irvine, the assumption that, in the words of Wendy Bishop, “compositionists have borrowed effective teaching methods from the creative writing workshop, improved on those borrowings and gone beyond them” (125) is grossly unfair. With regard to peer review, for example, Irvine asserts that “when participants in the peer-review activity are essentially unwilling and/or unable to take
part productively in this shared undertaking, the workshop approach to composition instruction becomes fruitless and futile” (131). Irvine goes on to list the various gestures students give instructors to demonstrate that the peer-review process is not working, such as coming to class with an incomplete draft, empty feedback (ex. “it was good”), and focus on low-order concerns such as grammar. Rather than arguing over who has greater authority to theorize or implement changes to the workshop, Irvine believes researchers and pedagogues concerned with writing, whether it is classified as expository or creative, need focus on what actually happens when students sit down to the activity of reading each others’ unfinished essays – that we must consider what happens cognitively and creatively when students read. Irvine is quick to point out, however, that such an undertaking is not easy considering “reading and writing…are highly rhetorical, nonsystematic, intuitive activities that involve in-the-moment, on-the-fly speculation” (138). Consequently, Irvine’s assertions, in addition calling compositionists out on some of their criticisms, illuminate an interest in exploring the activities that occur in the workshop (such as peer review), both in a composition and creative writing setting, more closely.

Though I have given considerable attention in this section to creative writing and issues surrounding prevailing pedagogies in the field, it is worthy to note that many of the discussions and concerns of creative writing are common to the field of composition studies as well. Indeed, I have come to understand our contemporary notions of composition from a definitively historical perspective that outlines a multitude of institutional trajectories, with certain theories rising, falling, and then fading (but never completely dissolving) from the teaching of writing. The 1950s and 1960s, for example, when “the first-year writing course...was modally organized [into the] prescribed forms...[of] description, narration, exposition, and persuasion” (Bishop and Starkey 37),
has lingering remnants today in the form of narrative or argumentative essays, though certainly there is less emphasis on a predetermined form. “The Rhetorical Stance” of Wayne Booth in 1963, of course, reignited an interest in teaching rhetoric as applied to written (and, nowadays, multimodal) compositions, to achieve a balance in considering the available arguments on a subject, the needs of the audience, and the character of the composer – a practice that, if current trends in composition textbooks are any indicator, many composition pedagogues are encouraged to follow. As already noted, expressivism created a natural link between composition and creative writing, placing the writer at the center of activity, which invariably paved the way for theorists such as Donald Murray and the process movement, of writing as an exploratory tool to see “what we know and what we feel about what we know through language” (Murray 4). And then, of course, there is the myriad of reactionary movements which proclaimed the need to consider writing not as a series of hierarchical or recursive steps, but as a place to interrogate and critically think about the social constructions that envelope students and their writing. Indeed, the social aspects of writing became fodder for post-process theorists, and now with the tremendous influence of technology and fragmentation of our society, post-modern, new media, and technological theories provide even more influence on the field.

I say all this because, as with the institutional trajectories of creative writing outlined by Dawson, these trends in composition ultimately lead to a series of pedagogical questions, discussions, or perhaps applications pertaining to how practitioners go about teaching writing to students, as well as defining the field as a whole. Considering the methodological and pedagogical pluralism of composition and the dominance of lore surrounding teaching practices, defining what constitutes composition or its pedagogy seems like a futile task. As Lynn Z. Bloom writes, “Talking about composition studies is like talking about love; everybody knows what they mean by
the term, few can define it to anyone else’s satisfaction, [and] everyone has their own way of doing it” (3). Bloom’s delightful comparison rings true in many regards, but I appreciate Wendy Bishop and David Starkey’s simple definition: “Composition is an activity (what we do when we write)” (36). Consequently, whether it pertains to composition or creative writing, figuring out the “what” and “how” of both fields is difficult. What activities or actions surround the composing process? What are the different ways of composing? What are the different mediums or delivery systems suitable for composition or creative writing? What concepts do we emphasize, and what ones do we ignore? What theories of teaching writing do we identify with and how is that manifested in the classroom? When practitioners have answered these (and other) questions, at least for themselves, then it becomes possible to interrogate how to go about teaching the act of writing. It is my hope that this work can answer some of the “what” questions I have posed (at least as such they might pertain to select participants) with the hope of someday contributing to larger disciplinary discussions on “how.”

Creative Writing, Composition, and Technology

In 1992, Lester Faigley remarked that “In spite of many grandiose predictions concerning the effects of computers on the future of education, computers have come quietly to the teaching of writing” (166). This comment illuminates the early, functional relationship between computers, technology, and writing – that is, computers seemed to offer little more than a way of making “the physical act of writing a great deal easier” (Faigley 166) because text could be manipulated effortlessly. Now, nearly two decades later, it is undeniable that computers and various technologies have begun to shape the way we understand, research, and teach how to write. Interestingly, however, while
composition has expanded its work to include computer-assisted pedagogy, digital compositions, new media, social media, and multimodality, some have argued that creative writing as a field is generally disinterested with regard to technology. Recent creative writing scholars such as Christina Olson, for example, have noted that “Traditionally, creative writing has been a field that is not technologically friendly.” While on the surface this may appear to be true, I believe that Olson’s assertion is a bit of a misnomer. Like many other areas of study, creative writing has had to adapt and account for the social, cultural, and artistic shifts that have resulted from the proliferation of computers and technology inside and outside of academia; however, many issues concerning technology and creative writing pertain to the reception or criticism of digital texts, with less precedence being given to the production – and, therefore, teaching – of such work.

As J. Yellowlees Douglas states, debate rages over the value of computers and literature; some critics are excited about the possibilities of the computer, particularly in de-centering the author and creating reader-center text, while others call the marriage sacrilege, “yoking the art of fiction once practiced by the cast of authors straight out of F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* to an apparatus in which Bill Gates is a stakeholder” (2). Individuals such as James Berlin have further contended that the rise of technology reflects stronger economic and culture shifts, changes which are not always reflected in our college curriculums as a whole, let alone the creative writing classroom. One of the most disconcerting shifts, one which threatens to question the training that many composition and creative writing pedagogues have undergone for nearly three-quarters of a century, is devaluing the autonomous self. As Berlin elaborates, “The speaking, acting subject is no longer considered unified, rational, autonomous, or self-present. Instead, each person is regarded as the construction of the various signifying practices,
the uses of language and cultural codes, of a given historical moment. In other words, the subject is not the source and origin of these practices but is finally their product” (65–66).

Michel Foucault expresses a similar sentiment pertaining to notions surrounding “the author” and “authorship” in his essay “What is an Author?” As Foucault points out, it used to be that one did not assign an author or creator to texts such as stories, epics, lyrics, poems, etc. because they were embedded within a culture. However, once they became commodified, circulated, and copyrighted, the need for “the author” came about. For Foucault, then, the notion of the “author” is a “privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (101) and an interesting conundrum has ensued; namely, critical emphasis is often placed upon the structure, architecture, form, or relationship of the work, which subsequently replaces the author. What occurs, then, is the writing subject cancelling out the individuality or identity of the author — in other words, a metaphorical “death of the author.” If the author is in fact “dead” and we acknowledge a more postmodern approach to literature — whereby the “author” does not so much write a text as the social, historical, and cultural surroundings that have shaped the author and their work — then invariably greater agency is given those that make-up those surroundings (i.e. the audience).

Accordingly, technology and electronic genres such as digital poetry and hypertext fiction are perfect representations for this kind of dynamic. As Wendy Bishop and David Starkey state, “The interactive nature of [electronic literature] means readers play a far more significant role in the construction of the story than they would in traditional fiction. Because of its open-endedness, its ceding of a large measure of
authorial control, its resistance to making conventional narrative sense, the hypertext has been touted as the postmodern fiction par excellence” (85 – 86). In addition to negating the belief that discovery and creation lie within the individual, much of what Berlin, Foucault, Bishop, and Starkey describe also raises questions around pedagogical practices for composition and creative writing, particularly when applied to postmodern concepts such as fragmentation or non-linearity. For many composition and creative writing instructors, the fragmentary nature of hypertext fiction and digital poetry seems counterintuitive (or even counterproductive) in terms of how we communicate. As Johndan Johnson-Eilola states, “Most of us are used to seeing fragmentation, in general, as a bad thing. Breakdowns are negative; entropy, although unavoidable, must be resisted. We build, we structure, we connect, we synthesize. We avoid breaking things” (24). Indeed, the danger of “breaking things” is of particular concern for creative writer Robert Coover, who asserts that “No fixed center [equals] no edges either, no ends or no boundaries. The traditional narrative time line vanishes into a geographical landscape or exitless maze, with beginning, middles, and ends being no longer part of the immediate display” (259). Consequently, Coover also frames his apprehension in terms of classroom pedagogy and the teachable subjects of creative writing, noting that “Venerable novelistic values like unity, integrity, coherence, vision, voice seem to be in danger. Eloquence is being redefined. ‘Text’ has lost its canonical certainty. How does one judge, analyze, write about a work that never reads the same way twice? And what of narrative flow” (262)? Though Coover does note that technologically-oriented products in creative writing provide the opportunity for the “reader and writer...to become co-learners or co-writers...fellow-travelers in the mapping and remapping of textual (and visual, kinetic, and aura) components” (258), writing students themselves are “notoriously conservative” (260) and it becomes difficult to get them to try “alternative
or innovative forms” (260). The writing and creativity in hypertext fiction, Coover argues, becomes devoted to “linkage, routing, and mapping” (260) rather than crafting traditional narratives.

Still, others like compositionist Bronwyn Williams have argued that whatever profession students hope to enter, they can expect to read and be asked to help compose a variety of texts that rely on a multitude of modes (i.e. audio, video, text, images, etc), texts designed to communicate on multiple semiotic channels and utilize all the available means of creating and conveying meaning (ix – xiii). In this regard, Williams argues that teachers of composition need to go beyond teaching mere consumption of text and teach them how to compose multimodal texts, often made possible through technological mediums, for a variety of audiences. Similarly, Michael Joyce, an early proponent of hypertext fiction, has embraced the idea of an audience-centered text, stating “I wanted, quite simply, to write a novel that would change in successive readings and to make those changing versions according to the connections that I had for sometime naturally discovered in the process of writing and that I wanted my reader to share” (31).

Likewise, Jeffrey Rice has advocated for the use of “cut-ups,” more aptly defined as the construction of alphabetic or multimodal texts that combine a multitude of components and subjects in a disjointed order, to create new levels of meaning for the reader or viewer.

While the practices or theories of Williams, Joyce, and Rice may seem extreme to some and difficult to translate into pedagogical practice or assessment, many individuals are making strides, particularly with regard to the remediation of more established teaching methods. “Remediation,” a concept forwarded by Jay David Bolter in his landmark book Writing Space, occurs when a “newer medium takes the place of an older
one, borrowing and reorganizing the characteristics of writing in the older medium and reforming its cultural space” (23). A recent example of this in creative writing comes from Jake Adam York in his text “Let Stones Speak: New Media Remediation in the Poetry Writing Classroom” where York takes utilises audio software to help students understand poetics and the use of language. He states that “students are less familiar with language, *per se*, and increasingly ill-equipped to enter a discussion of poetics, a consideration of the material and the arrangements of language that create, enforce, undermine, or interact with meaning. And insofar as our disciplines require of our students some knowledge of poetics, we must adjust our teaching practices accordingly” (22). York asked students to complete a series of short assignments, basically phonetexts to demonstrate how one word or sound flows into another, to essentially “read into and across those spaces if they are to think more directly and particularly about the patterns of rhythm, of sound, of syntax and the like that connect discrete words into something larger that has a definite shape not limited to a semantic order, namely a poem” (24). He then asked students to return to the traditional classroom and work on their own poems, to listen to the gaps in their own poems. Others, such as Tom C. Hunley have moved the workshop in creative writing into digital writing environments, thereby remediating the traditional practice of face-to-face critique with peers and the instructor. Consequently, Hunley’s use of technology in this instance, where “students critique each others’ drafts via online discussion thread using listservs or course management systems” (10) frees up class time to apply the classical, five-canon approach of rhetoric to poetry writing. In a charming parody of Wallace Stevens poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” one of Hunley’s concluding chapters (“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard Page”) describes several benefits of using course management platforms such as Blackboard for a creative writing workshop. These benefits range from
the practical, such saving paper and allowing the instructor more time to prepare in-class writing activities for students, to accountability since students cannot delete their postings, which means greater participation, motivation, community-building, and attention to thoughtful responses.

Of course, there is still a fair amount of hesitancy, or (in some cases) overt resistance, to technology and its influence in both creative writing and composition classrooms. This should not necessarily seem surprising, especially considering that, for professionals in both fields, the primary method of scholarly or literary currency resides in print-based journals, though the quality of work published in certain online periodicals such as Kairos, Computers and Computers, and Agni Online is gradually changing this perception. In many cases, however, the privileging of print-based media creates a disconnect between teaching and professional practices – practitioners recognize the value of computers and understand that the learning of students, particularly millennial students, has been saturated by technology, but the epistemic courts of composition and creative writing have dictated linear, alphabetic texts to be of greater scholarly or artistic value, which translates into teaching students the same. As Anne Frances Wysocki remarks, this can be a disservice to students, particularly considering the variety of compositions they will have to do once they leave the university, and that “we ought to use the range of choices digital technologies seem to give us to consider the range of choices that printing-press technologies (apparently) haven’t” (10). Of course, I point out this not to besmirch these fields or their practitioners – change can be a slow, laborious process and professionals in these fields are working in the shadow of over five-hundred years where the printed word was the primary means of disseminating massive amounts of knowledge to others. Still, in addition to the compositional choices technology affords us, a certain consciousness
raising occurs when we take traditional forms of discourse and put them into more artificial contexts. We often forget that writing itself is a somewhat artificial construct from orality. As Walter J. Ong explains, “To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, it is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials. Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting” (81). In this light, technology is not something that should be shunned in the crafting of various works, but something that can actually facilitate a greater awareness of one’s own creative process and illuminate a number of new and exciting avenues of composition.

Creative Writing, Composition, Authority, and Products

In his text Community Action and Organizational Change: Image, Narrative, and Identity, Brenton D. Faber describes how power and authority are oftencased in negative terms, frequently being linked to instances of oppression or domination of one group over another. Drawing upon the work of Foucault, however, Faber argues for the perception of power and authority as “simultaneously limiting and producing” (114) where “Power establishes the limits through which we can know ourselves while at the same time delineating the self we can come to know” (114). As Faber clarifies, “without power, there are no guidelines or devices to aid in the structuring of everyday life – without power there is only randomness. However, as power structures randomness, it also limits and constrains, dictating ahead of time what is appropriate, correct, or best” (114). Ever since Peter Elbow declared in his monumental book Writing without
Teaching that “students can learn without teachers even though teachers cannot teach without students” (xviii), there have been numerous questions surrounding just how much dictating of what is appropriate or correct writing teachers give to their students, and invariably, what effect this power relationship has on the products students create. Although Elbow spurred early discussions surrounding the empowerment of students, the process movement, which began to take root in the late 1960s and early 1970s, had many prominent theorists and pedagogues who believed that students could only progress in their writing if the instructor took a secondary role. Donald Murray, for example, talks extensively about how students will be motivated by the instructor “shutting up...by placing the opportunity for discovery in [the] student’s hands....[and respecting] the student, not for his product, not for the paper we call literature by giving it a grade, but for the search for truth in which he is engaged” (5). In this paradigm, a devotion to process can yield the instructor relinquishing a certain degree of authority and adopting the role of a “coach” who is there “to be quiet, to listen, [and] to respond” (Murray 5). This minimalized authority provides students with a space to discover their own authentic voice, though it is worth noting that this space is created from the top-down (i.e. though the student decides what form the writing will take, the topic or what the student writes about is often decided upon by the instructor).

Of course, though students need to be concerned with their process, they are also required to create some type of product for the class and, as the product changes, so too can the role or authority of the instructor. In addition to the coaching role Murray and others have described, McLeod chronicles how instructors can often adopt the mannerisms of an “analyst,” someone acting as a professional who teaches apprentices in the discourse of a particular discipline. Through this paradigm, the writing of students is focused toward a particular audience and students are often placed into certain
rhetorical situations in order to gauge the discourses and genres of certain disciplines. Here, composition instructors are more aligned with discourse analysts, guiding students through several drafts toward a more crafted, polished piece of prose. Interestingly, this notion of the instructor as analyst aligns in some ways with the “master” versus “apprentice” paradigm found in many creative writing classrooms, whereby students look to the instructor as a model or member of a particular discourse community (such as fiction writers, poets, playwrights, media artists, etc.) and often strive to write for and gain entrance into that community. In this light, the more focused the product and the more “high-stakes” the writing, to use an Elbowian term, and the greater the necessity for more authority on the part of the instructor. In terms of my study, there was the sense of a high stakes/high authority binary existing in both classrooms.

As the process movement pushed on, several other individuals emerged who, in light of the open admissions policies of the 1970s and cultural movement of the 1980s (which, in many cases, were a reaction to overly positivist or cognitivist approaches to writing), began to interrogate difficult questions involving how much control students had over their own writing, learning, and use of language in the classroom and in their academic prose. Patricia Bizzell, for example, stated that writing cannot be boiled down merely to problem-solving or hierarchal (yet recursive) steps, as was touted in the work of Linda Flower and John Hayes (394 – 395). Instead, Bizzell argued that it is important to never lose sight of the fact that students were coming from a multitude of discourse communities or social contexts, each with their own conventions, beliefs, and accepted uses of language (397 – 398). According to Bizzell, any supposed difficulties or deficiencies in writing could be explained by not initially being part of the college educational community. Ann Berthoff also acknowledged this social bent, noting that “...our social life [is] the essential context for the making of meaning” (339), in terms of
both education and our understanding of language. With regard to helping students make this transition from their own discourse community to another, Berthoff advocates for a pedagogy of knowing whereby students are guided through a sequence of assignments targeted to facilitate a greater awareness of their thought processes, interpret those processes and the meaning created, and then be able to communicate to others. This pedagogy of knowing, according to Berthoff, operates best when observation and dialogue (i.e. the transformation of observations into questions) are at the forefront of assignments and classroom practices.

Indeed, though the instructor might delineate the type of assignments that students produce, there is clearly an attempt to equalize some level of power or authority in the classroom, particularly through a dialogic relationship. As Paulo Freire elaborates in his canonical work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (61). The underlying premise behind such dialogue is for students to not become mere receptacles of knowledge, but producers and interrogators of knowledge. Specifically, students and instructors mutually rely upon their own experiences to analyze unequal power relations that can be produced by cultural practices and institutions, including the institution of higher education. Indeed, bell hooks has expanded upon the premises of Freire to focus on the university as a place where students are often squished under the hierarchal weight of instructors, chairs, deans, provosts, presidents, and others who enact change above them. For hooks, this oppressive paradigm is based upon the “authority of experience” touted by the university, which often reflects the archetypes
produced by white, middle-aged, upper/middle class males (27 – 29). To combat such a structure, hooks asserts that each student has their own authority of experience, a place from which each student can speak and confront conflicts that arise out of opposing experiences (84 – 89). Here, certain classroom activities occur through an intentional de-centering of authority, which enables a transforming of consciousness product to occur – i.e. students discover for themselves their own situatedness within the classroom, the academy, and society in general; something which, consequently, occurred to some degree in both of the classrooms I observed.

To be sure, the concept of students drawing upon their own authority of experience is not alien to creative writing classrooms. Similar to hooks, Chris Green proposes that students learn to write in the vernacular of different communities, including their own, as a means of “negotiating the vast, complex, nebulous, tyrannical, ever-present, varied structures and institutions of publication, education, readings, employment, community, politics, and family” (155). Green also argues that instead of asking students to write “good” poems, we should try to have them write “useful” poems. In order to do that, students need to be taught to not write for the sublime reader, “generally a white, educated, middle-class reader” (162), but for the community outside of the workshop (indeed, too often the members of students’ original communities are looked at as material, not as an audience). Consequently, Green also notes the equalitarian nature of the workshop in creative writing, asserting that “the end goal of the workshop, of course, is to allow writers opportunities to teach each other how good poems (short stories, creative essays, etc.) are written” (158, emphasis added). However, there has also been a great deal of criticism regarding the unwillingness of many creative writing pedagogues to de-center their authority more. As Wendy Bishop remarks, “the traditional creative writing workshop has...become unimodal. That is, students are
DiSarro 71

couraged to rely too heavily on the mediation of the teacher” (142), and Anna Leahy
notes that “If the teacher has more experience, techniques, and insights and is in the
position to impart, then students are not really her peers even though the workshop style
fosters a sense of equality among all participants” (14). Still others, such as Patrick
Bizzaro, have stated that the workshop perpetuates a master/apprentice paradigm of
instruction that does not lead to consciousness-raising products. Instead, Bizzaro argues
that such an “environment often facilitates the instructor having the final verdict over
the value or merit of students’ creations” (303), thus devaluing the criticisms or
interpretations of others in favor of the instructor.

Much like Bizzell and Berthoff, David Bartholomae recognizes the difficulty
students often face coming to the academy because of being entrenched in previous
discourse communities. However, he believes the dialogic relationship between students
and instructors to be difficult to achieve, particular as students try to find a way to
establish their authority to an audience in writing, since the political and social dynamic
between students and teachers put students at a disadvantage – i.e. students are not in a
position of privilege. For Bartholomae, if students are to enter into the discourse of the
academy, then students need to learn the styles, conventions (such as placing oneself in
the context of what has already been said about a subject), and adequate ways to
appropriate language (i.e. more specialized language). Bartholomae argues, in effect,
that the field needs to turn some of its attention back to the products of our classrooms,
rather than placing so much emphasis on the process and, in order to gain authority,
students need to first “simply [state their] own presence within the field of a subject”
(94), then mimic “the rhythm and texture, the ‘sound’ of academic prose” (94), and lastly
claim their authority as writers (94).
Of course, there are several ancillary issues that arise when discussing notions of power and authority in the classroom. As I already discussed in the previous section, various technologies can de-center authority and test our assumptions about what constitutes an “author;” however, the use of technology can also provide an avenue for mutual learning between teachers and students in a classroom environment. Though he does not address the issue extensively, for Selber the destabilization of instructor authority via technology can certainly constitute a “specific instructional circumstance” considering that, in many classrooms, instructors often wrestle with technological questions or issues that students are far more experienced or qualified to answer. As he asserts, “teachers should be able to alleviate their anxieties [with technology] on some level with scaffolded instruction that leverages well-known context and gradually releases certain responsibilities to technologically competent students” (210). As I describe in chapter 4, this relinquishing of technological responsibility occurred in several instances as the ENG 103 instructor-participant, a 69 year old man, felt that while it was his responsibility to teach students technological literacy, he felt himself ill-equipped to do so.

Still others, like Brian Huot, have put assessment partially into the hands of students. More specifically, Huot contrasts current-traditional assessment with contemporary writing classroom, stating that in the current-traditional paradigm, assessment is completely the responsibility of the instructor and the final written product reflects the ability of the student (168 - 169). Graded or marked papers, therefore, take away the student’s ability to revise. The focus, according to Huot, should shift to posing questions toward revision and contemporary classrooms attempt to do this by de-centering the authority of the instructor through peer review, conferences, portfolios, etc.; the problem is that these methods are put in the hands of ill-equipped
students who have not been taught how to assess their own work or the work of others. Huot’s solution is called “instructive evaluation,” where students are involved in each step of the assessment process and are made aware of what they are trying to create and how draft match linguistic/rhetorical targets (i.e. understanding context, audience, purpose, etc.) (170 - 171). In practice, this means continually revising statements about what makes good writing with students as they learn, reducing the instances or frequency of evaluation decisions (i.e. grading the entirety of a portfolio rather than each individual piece of writing), and teachers coming up with a criteria for grading with students.

Conclusion

Though I consider many of the studies I have chronicled here to either be methodological kin to my own study, or dealing with similar issues between composition and creative writing, there are still several differences – particularly in relation to my methods for coding and activity theory to analyze various data points. In the following chapter, then, details my methods of data collection, analysis, and reporting, as well as the philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and issues surrounding validity, reliability, and ethical considerations.
Research Methodology

Introduction

At the inception of this study, I struggled with locating a specific research methodology that would allow me to answer the questions I had about the intersections of composition and creative writing within academia. I began by thinking I would do some sort of basic, library-based research, a thorough analysis of the studies, editorials, and literature that brought these two fields into institutional alignment in order to perhaps answer, once and for all, the burning questions I had: should creative writing adopt the pedagogical practices of composition? What had composition borrowed from creative writing? Had creative writing really become a bloated, anti-theoretical haven for artists looking for steady income while they went about the real work of writing? Did these two fields really need to play nice and collaborate within English departments? Of course, I quickly learned through my explorations of the literature that these questions were too big, too dynamic for me to possibly make any real assertions or a significant contribution to either field. I tried different angles, topics, focuses, approaches – all of which seemed to fizzle out in a matter of weeks. Frustrated, I returned to my original interest in the subject, how much of my curiosity stemmed from my personal experiences as a student – first in various creative writing programs, and then as a doctoral student in rhetoric and composition, but this only seemed to complicate matters, especially when
my teaching experience came into the fray. I had been teaching composition for six years, including while working on my MA in creative writing, and had developed my own prejudices and theories about the juxtaposition of creative writing and composition, how much credence was given to the act of teaching in both fields, how each field approached the act of writing. While my experiences certainly were not universal or representational, these struggles and the questions they raised instilled in me a yearning to explore the experiences of others. Moreover, I wanted to utilize a methodology that would provide me with a vehicle for students and instructors to share their stories, to have their own words and voices present. This, of course, led me to investigate forms of naturalistic inquiry such as teacher-research, case study, and ethnography.

Because of my prior experiences and predilections, I ruled out the possibility of conducting “teacher-research,” or the “systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom settings” (qtd. in Pardlow 45). While a number of scholars such as Marilyn Sternglass, Cadence Spiegelman, and Doug Hunt have done phenomenal work in this area, I felt that it would have been too risky in terms of the population under examination – i.e. my own students. As Paul Andersen notes, our own students constitute a particularly unique population that could be considered “high-risk” in that they might fear retribution should they not agree to participate (64). Andersen’s recommendation is to avoid such “backyard research” by collaborating with colleagues and using their students instead of our own. Consequently, and as I will explain in greater detail later in this chapter, this observation of colleagues’ classrooms was the route I eventually took.
With case study and ethnography as the remaining two options, I invariably had to ask myself what it was I wanted to know, what question or questions did I want my study to answer? This too proved difficult in that I felt compelled to examine one aspect of composition and creative writing classrooms. An early idea for a dissertation topic was how technology was used in both classrooms, but the nagging question of what I was trying to prove with this (and other) possible topics kept dogging me. Indeed, the more I tried to narrow, the more I read, the more areas of exploration I seemed to stumble across, such as the amount of authority delegated between students and instructors, the correlation between genre and the assignments produced in both classrooms, and so forth. Slowly I began to realize the interconnectedness of these various interests and, with a gentle nudge from my dissertation chair, got wise to the fact that, quite simply, all I really wanted to know was what really happens in composition and creative writing classrooms and perhaps what implications those observations had for future interdisciplinary work between the two fields. Of course teaching (pedagogy) occurs, assignments would be produced, technology would be used (or not), and negotiations of authority would transpire. The question became how these things transpire, how they are connected, what activities facilitate or impede their interconnectedness, how all of this affected the overall culture that was created in the classroom, and what themes emerged. My job, then, as a naturalistic researcher was to, as Wendy Bishop put it, document and create “a representation of the lived experience of a convened culture” (3), in my case, the culture of two specific composition and creative writing classrooms. I wanted to observe how things organically evolved or manifested themselves at the macro-level, to see if (at least in the context of the two classrooms I observed) the literature about the crossing orbits of composition and creative writing held true, to understand what we as scholars and practitioners of English Studies make of what is
coming out of these introductory writing courses and ask ourselves if there are substantial differences. In addition, I also wanted to have a more detailed examination of individual students in the classroom, as well as the instructors – to essentially accent the larger picture with a micro-level data of student and instructor experiences, interactions, and discussions about the work produced. In this regard, it is accurate to say that I am adopting an ethnographic approach, which, in reference to writing classrooms, is a deliberate inquiry examining the insights of individual student-writers and instructors in order to understand how those individuals operate within and respond to a particular environment (Bridwell-Bowles 107 – 108).

This struggle to find a particular methodology should come as no surprise, especially considering how common methodological pluralism has become in many composition studies. Methodological pluralism, though it can sometimes cloud classification of certain scholarly works, is extremely valuable in terms of not only allowing for multiple perspectives to answer research questions, but also providing researchers with an avenue for greater self-awareness and reflection while interrogating their own biases, something that was clearly a concern of mine. There are, of course, some drawbacks to a pluralistic approach, most notably, and as Janice Lauer points out, that the use of multiple methodologies or modes of inquiry requires a certain level of expertise in those methodologies, as well as having a working knowledge of the historical, philosophical, and epistemological underpinnings of those methods (26). For me this was particularly true as my methodological pluralism extended beyond mere methodological design and into the realm of coding, and analysis/interpretation of data. While my methodology relies heavily upon the epistemological underpinnings of ethnographic research, grounded theory, at least initially, informed my coding process. Grounded theory seemed like an ideal method for coding since it provided me with a
framework to identify, categorize, and compare several data points; however, unlike
grounded theory, where the overarching objective is to utilize the data collected to
inductively develop a theory about particular phenomenon that occur during the course
of observation, I had no intention (indeed, no plausible way) to develop a theory about
what transpired in these classrooms or how what emerged could be generalized into the
fields of composition and creative writing. The classrooms are too situated, the students
and their activities too historically conditioned, and the study was too short. In addition,
the premise of “open-coding” in grounded theory is that the researcher has no
predetermined categories, but instead relies upon categories that emerge from what
transpires through the process of observation. In the case of my study, however, I began
with the predetermined categories of “pedagogy,” “technology,” “authority,” and
“assignments” or “products.” In this regard, I had already “[broken] down the data into
separate units of meaning” (Moghaddam par. 21) where I could then “[categorize]
individual phenomena” (Moghaddam par. 21) associated with these predetermined
categories and eventually cluster the data for analysis. Consequently, many of these
clusters centered around the basic units of analysis in activity theory, a form of study
that has influenced work in the fields of “education, language socialization, computer
interface design, and expert work” (Russell 266), and this lens helped me to classify what
naturally transpired in the classroom in terms of tools, rules, community, subjects,
objects, motives, outcomes, etc. Admittedly, prior this study I had little experience with
activity theory for analysis and found myself not only researching the classroom
environment and those who occupied it, but also some of the tools I would need to make
sense of it all. Though this undertaking seemed daunting at first, the use of activity
theory has gradually become part of the canon of composition research, so I met with
little difficulty finding exemplars as guides for my study.
The purpose of this chapter, then, is not only to discuss the design and specifications of my research study, but also to contextualize studies that have utilized similar multi-faceted methodologies in order to answer various research questions.

Research Site

There were numerous sites where research took place for this qualitative, ethnographic study, such as the classrooms under observation, the local campus coffee shop and the principal investigator’s office for interviews, digital course management sites like Blackboard, and even the instructors’ homes. However, the majority of research took place in one first-year composition and one introductory creative writing class at Northeast Midwestern University (pseudonym hereafter referred to as NMU), an undergraduate and graduate degree-granting institution described as a fully accredited, doctoral/research intensive school. The selection of this institution was primarily a matter of convenience sampling whereby I could draw upon faculty and students that were readily available because of where I was pursing my doctoral degree. The data collection and research itself transpired during the Fall Semester of 2010 in two separate classrooms and in two separate buildings on campus. The layout of the classrooms, which I discuss in even greater detail in chapters 4 and 5, were quite different – in the case of the first-year composition class, the classroom was a computer classroom located in the basement of one of the residence halls, with chairs and workstations lining two walls of the classroom and an island of computer stations in the center of the room. The instructor’s station was located at the front of the room next to a whiteboard and movable projection screen. I would often sit in the front left-corner of the room, horizontal to the instructor’s station, which gave me a limited view of the classroom
(students in the back corner were often hidden by computer monitors). To combat this, during class activities or in-class writings I would often get-up periodically and make a few laps around the classroom to ensure I observed everyone to some degree.

Contrarily, the creative writing classroom was housed in the same building as the English department in a traditional classroom with moveable desks. Each class period the instructor would have students rearrange the desks to form a circle, in which I was included. I had complete visibility of the entire classroom and the instructor, often sitting directly to the right of the instructor, though I was the only one who was allowed to use a laptop computer open during class time. Both courses, ENG 103 (Rhetoric and Writing) and ENG 285 (Introduction to Creative Writing) are taught frequently, with multiple sections in the fall and spring semesters, and limited sections during the summer; however, there is a greater quantity of ENG 103 courses offered because of its status as a required course for most students (I say “most students” because incoming students can test out of several courses in the composition sequence, including ENG 103). The ENG 285 course, though a requirement for some majors in English Studies, English Education, and Telecommunications, is generally regarded as an elective course.

Study Participants

Participants for the study consisted of NMU students and instructors from the two separate classrooms – one first-year composition (ENG 103) and one introductory creative writing classroom (ENG 285). The selection of these two types of classrooms was primarily because of their preparatory nature in that the courses introduced students to these respective fields and were meant to prepare them for other types of writing within the university. More specifically, the ENG 103 class “Introduces and
develops [students’] understanding of principles of rhetoric; basic research methods; elements, strategies, and conventions of persuasion used in constructing written and multi-modal texts” (par. 1), while the ENG 285 course provides students with an “Introduction to the craft, terminology, and techniques of multiple genres including fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction.” Prior to my selection of student participants, I had to ascertain what specific ENG 103 and ENG 285 classes I would observe, which entailed recruiting instructors of these courses. I began my recruitment by establishing certain markers of professionalization for instructors, markers that would be comparable in both the fields of composition and creative writing. The criteria I devised were to ensure that, as much as possible, I had professionals that would be seen in a similar light in the epistemic court of their respective fields; however, certain criteria are not exactly equivalent. The terminal degree in creative writing, for example, is considered to be the MFA, while in rhetoric and composition it is the PhD, and clearly duration of education, training, and culminating work vary considerably among these degrees. In spite of this discrepancy, I sought out individuals at NMU who had been recognized among their peers as exemplary instructors in their respective fields and were up-to-date on current pedagogical issues and practices. In this light, teaching ability took precedence over other factors.

The criteria I set forth are as follows. The recruited creative writing instructor must hold a terminal degree in the field, which according to the governing body of the Association of Writers’ and Writing Programs is a Master of Fine Arts degree. Similarly, the recruited composition instructor should also hold a terminal degree, preferably in rhetoric and composition, which generally means a PhD. In addition, both instructors should be active in their respective fields with regard to scholarly pursuits, including (but not limited to) recent national conferences such as the Conference on College
Composition and Communication, the National Council of Teachers of English annual conference, and the Associated Writing Programs annual conference. Also, those instructors recruited should have a strong record of publication, such as a book-length work through an academic press, or articles, short stories, poems, essays, etc. through scholarly peer-reviewed journals or literary magazines. With regard to teaching, I sought instructors that have a minimum of three years experience beyond earning their graduate degree, with the majority of that experience coming at the undergraduate level, and who also received favorable departmental evaluations. In terms of professional rank within the institution, I am seeking those with the title of “Assistant Professor” or higher, either in a tenure-line or long-term contract position. While most of this criteria was met, specifically the holding of a terminal degree, active in conferences presentations or readings, teaching experience, and favorable reviews, the composition faculty member I eventually selected did not have a significant record of publication in the field; consequently, those rhetoric and composition faculty members that did and also held a Ph.D. were serving on my dissertation committee, which would have created a conflict of interest. After consulting with my dissertation chair and the Director of the Writing Program, we modified the criteria to list academic or creative publications as desired, but not a requirement. This change, of course, raises some greater questions about what is valued at NMU and the academy at large, particularly in terms of scholarship, teaching, and (potentially) hiring practices. The composition faculty member who was selected, for example, had obtained a PhD in rhetoric and composition from NMU, which of course also inhibited his chances for a tenure-track position within the institution since search committees notoriously (though understandably) seek out graduates from other programs; but his disinterest in scholarship and passion for teaching seems to have consigned him to a contract faculty position. Indeed, in our first interview, the faculty
member expressed that he had been offered a tenure-line position in the School of Journalism after completing his PhD, but declined because such a position would require less teaching and more research. On the contrary, the creative writing faculty member selected has edited volumes of poetry and published numerous chapbooks from reputable presses, yet the saturation of MFA graduates into the academic market, something which I discussed in chapter 1, has prevented him from attaining a tenure-line position.

Once I had contacted the instructors of ENG 103 and ENG 285 that met the recruitment criteria, discussed with them the specifics of my study, and secured their approval to let me observe their classrooms, I was able to begin my recruitment of student-participants. The enrollment for the composition class was 25 students comprised of all freshmen, while the creative writing class had 20 students ranging from sophomores to seniors. With the addition of the instructors, I observed 47 individuals in the classroom. Out of these participants, 11 individuals (9 students and the 2 instructors) voluntarily agreed to interviews and allowed me to examine the documents produced for their respective classes. All participants were 18 years of age or older. In the proposal phase of my study, I initially specified that I wanted to observe and interview students between the ages of 18 and 23 years old; in other words, not focusing on non-traditional or returning students, who generally are older than 23 years of age. However, the descriptive (as opposed to, say, a positivistic) nature of the study made age less of an issue. One participant, for example, was a 26 year old student who had previously attended another institution. Students did, however, have to meet other criteria; specifically that student participants in both classrooms needed to have not taken similar courses during their college career at NMU. In other words, those enrolled in the first-year composition course cannot have taken another writing course in college
before that semester, and those enrolled in the creative writing course could not have
taken a previous creative writing course at NMU, though I did not specify about taking
creative writing courses at other institutions or through other programs of study.
Indeed, all four of my student participants had taken some form of creative writing
course, though this posed little problem for my study. For example, Samantha, my 26
year old student-participant, had taken an introductory creative writing course at the
University of Akron; however, as I detail in chapter 5, Samantha contended that this
course was more of a course in literary criticism than creative writing, and thus her
experiences between the two courses were not similar and had a minimal influence upon
her impressions of ENG 285. In addition, my other three student-participants had
noted taking a screenwriting course through the telecommunications program at NMU,
but since ENG 285 focused primarily on poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction, this too
had little influence on their impressions of the course. Indeed, student participants in
the creative writing course posed several other unique situations for my study, at least
more so than the composition course; namely, many of them had already taken or tested-
out of the English composition requirement, suggesting they already had some
proficiency in writing (though not necessarily “creative” genres), or were taking the
creative writing course as either an elective or a requirement for their major.
Consequently, these have been accounted for in the reporting of data in subsequent
chapters.

Though sex, race, ethnicity, and religion were not part of my criteria for selection,
the breakdown of the participants who volunteered for interviews and close observation
consisted of seven males (two in the composition class, three in the creative writing class,
and the two instructors) and four females (three in the composition class and one in the
creative writing class). Both instructors were Caucasian, but varied in age considerably –
the creative writing instructor was in his mid-30s while the composition instructor was in his late 60s. The classes under observation, as well as those who volunteered to be interviewed, were primarily comprised of Caucasian students; however, two participants who interviewed with me were non-Caucasian – one student was African-American, the other was born in the Dominican Republic, but moved to the United States at a young age. All participants were notified that they could terminate their involvement in the study at any point if they were uncomfortable with the interview or observation process, or for any other reason. Aside from withdrawal from either course, there were no other foreseeable reasons for exclusion once the study began. As the semester and the study transpired, however, two students (one in the composition class and one in the creative writing class) failed to contact me for final interviews. In addition, 7 out of the 9 student participants failed to provide me with at least one component of a major assignment at some point during the duration of the study. In most cases, this was a single draft of a major assignment or a supplemental document, such as the meta-cognitive cover sheets in the ENG 103 course or an in-class writing exercise, and though I asked students during the course of interviews to elaborate, discuss, or describe these missing assignments or documents, in these instances I did not have the benefit of personal copy for analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

My study relied mainly on three forms of gathering information: observations, interviews, and artifact collection. As Bob Dick notes, “There is a lot to be learned just by observing, some of it evident within minutes of entering a situation” (par. 30), and I utilized two forms of observation throughout the study to ensure that I captured both the
broad and localized events that occurred within the composition and creative writing classrooms. Specifically, the first phase of observation placed me in the observer as participant role, whereby my position as a researcher was known to the instructors and the students I examined. As an observer-participant, I examined the entirety of the class and, as Creswell notes, the advantage to this type of data collection is that information can be recorded as it is revealed in the classroom (186); however, this form of observation is also fairly limited in scope (186). Consequently, during this first phase of observation I would simply sit in the classroom and take field-notes on whatever transpired around me. Announcements of the professor, conversations amongst students, discussions of readings and writing assignments, body language, etc. were all entered in one column, followed by my reflections, connections, and questions soon after in an adjacent second column. In many instances, these initial macro-level observations helped me to generate questions for instructors and student participants during the interview process, to (in essence) understand and discover how these individuals perceived and interpreted what occurred in the classroom, how those occurrences aligned or diverged from their previous experiences, and what effect they believed these classroom activities had upon their writing.

As I mentioned, this first phase of observation is limited in that I could not inject myself into the discussions taking place or interrupt the ebb and flow of the class to ask, for example, what somebody meant by a particular utterance or statement – I simply had to record what naturally evolved over the course of a class period. To combat this restriction, I incorporated a second phase of observation that more closely aligned with participant-observation, which Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte define as a “data collection technique that requires the researcher to be present at, involved in, and recording the routine daily activities with people in the field setting” (91). In order to
facilitate this type of observation, I asked the instructors at the beginning of the semester if they would periodically allow me to participate in certain group discussion or in-class activities. They both agreed and often included me in-class writing exercises, as well as sharing some of my creative and expository writing in the classroom. Though these activities were beneficial in allowing me to gain greater entrance in the classroom environment and interact with students to discuss their writing, in many instances my observations became secondary to my participation, so some information obviously could not be recorded. Regardless, I observed a total of 28 class periods – 15 composition class sessions and 13 creative writing class sessions, the discrepancy between the two was the result of the ENG 285 instructor cancelling one class period, as well as the Thanksgiving holiday. Because of other time constraints, such as my own teaching load of two classes, interviewing participants, etc., I also decided against observing every single class session, but instead observed each class once a week (both classes met on a Tuesday / Thursday schedule).

My second form of data collection, interviews, actually blended what D. Soyini Madison refers to as “The Patton Model,” named for Michael Patton’s work in *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, and “The Spradley Model” for James P. Spradley’s 1979 work *The Ethnographic Interview*. From the Patton model, I asked students and instructors a series of behavior or experience questions, opinion or value questions, feeling questions, and knowledge questions. More specifically, “behavior or experience questions address concrete human action, conduct, or ways of ‘doing’” (Madison 27), and an example of this type of question included asking students about their past experiences with using technology in an English class or in their writing process. In contrast, “opinion or value questions address a conviction, judgment, belief, or particular persuasion towards a phenomenon” (Madison 27), such as “What do you
believe is the value of a course packet instead of textbook for the class?” Of course, as reflected in my research questions, I was also interested in how instructors and students described the various activities and mediations that can occurred in their composition and creative writing classrooms, including the interplay of pedagogy, authority, technology, and products. As a result, feeling questions, which “address emotions, sentiments, and passions” (Madison 27), and knowledge questions, which “address the range of information and learning a participant holds about a phenomenon” (Madison 28), proved particularly valuable. For example, creative writing and composition instructors were asked to articulate what they felt the role of both these fields was or is within the university (a feeling question), or how they had been trained in terms of teaching the act of writing (a knowledge question).

Consequently, Spradley provided me with a model that moved away from “ideas, abstraction, and emotion” (Madison 28) and toward questions where participants could “recount or depict...a concrete phenomenon” (Madison 28). As Madison makes clear, Spradley’s model privileges three types of questions: descriptive questions, explanation questions, and contrast questions. With regard to descriptive questions, I adhered to Spradley’s subcategories of example and experience questions, which essentially ask participants to provide examples or describe how they experienced a certain event (Madison 29), such as asking students how they experienced writing a particular assignment or what occurred during an in-class peer review. What made Spradley’s model so useful was that questions were geared to actual events that occurred in the classroom throughout the course of my observations. Consequently, explanation questions were merely a supplementary component to descriptive questions. In other words, the questions assist “in recall and will avoid the problem of making an informant feel he is being tested with a series of short questions” (Spradley 125), such as “Tell me
more about what aspects of peer review you found useful?” Finally, contrast questions also served a complementary function to descriptive questions; however, they offered “implicit or suggested contrasts to obvious and culturally understood contrasts” (Madison 30). In terms of the frequency of interviews, I met with student-participants approximately 3 times (again, some student-participants did not complete a final interview with me) and instructors 4 times during the course of the 15 week semester, which provide me with 32 interviews in all. In many cases, these interviews came after specific units or assignments.

Lastly, my study relied upon a significant amount of artifact collection, primarily in the form of documents, which Erlandson et al. define as “a broad range of written and symbolic records generated by research” (99). Some of the major documents under examination included the following:

**NMU Writing Program Handbook.** As noted in the handbook, it “contains a detailed explanation of the Writing Program’s Philosophy and important information about Writing Program policies along with many writing-related resources” (4). Among other things, the handbook discussed issues such as the writing process, research, documenting sources, parts of an essay, a rhetoric of style, rhetorical approaches to common errors, parts of speech, punctuation and mechanics, timed writing tips, and sample student essays.

**Instructor’s Course Packet.** The composition instructor under examination utilized a course packet instead of a textbook for the class. When asked why he used a course packet and what value it had, the instructor stated that he can “go through and edit all the verb-age, making sure that it’s very clear and said as concisely as possible, just what I’m asking my students to do. I understand who
my audience is, I understand the purpose of it, and I’m constantly revisiting how well I’m doing with the packet. I can’t do that with a textbook” (22 August 2010). The instructor also expressed that the amount of cost incurred by students was significantly less than a textbook. His packet included the course syllabus, schedule, assignment sheets for each assignment, and readings for the course.

**Student Writing.** The majority of my document analysis came in the form of student writing in both classes. For the composition class major assignments consisted of an interview assignment, narrative essay, analysis essay on a short story, persuasive essay, and a collaborative proposal. Assignments for the creative writing class consisted of poems, short stories, works of creative nonfiction/memoir, dialogue, and “quick-write” exercises. I asked students to provide me with at least a working draft, in addition to the final draft they turned-in for a grade. At no point in the study was I made aware of the grades students received on these writing assignments.

Though not a form of artifact collection, several of the documents analyzed for the study were also my own writings, mostly in the form of transcripts, field-notes and memos, documents which not only provided me with the space to record what I observed during the course of classroom observations and interviews, but also a forum for reflection and coding in order to help establish patterns, connections, and ultimately themes. Though there is some debate over how to take notes while engaged in fieldwork (some, like Barney G. Glaser, have actually recommended not recording or taking notes during interviews or observations since it can interferewith building a rapport among participants), I began with the suggestion of Bob Dick to “take key-word notes during the interviews [and observations] and check [those] notes against tape recordings” (par. 34).
The benefit of this approach, according to Dick, is that the process “won’t be as time
consuming (or alternatively as costly) as full transcripts” (par. 35). While I utilized this
approach during observations, I found full-transcripts of interviews to be necessary to
ensure that I accurately quoted and represented students and instructors throughout the
study.

Though only a small component of my study, I also utilized screen-capture
freeware called Jing when replicating a particular in-class writing activity so as to
capture and discuss with students their writing and thought processes after they
completed the activity. Indeed, Cheryl Geisler and Shaun Slattery have suggested that
the use of screen-capture software can record the work that writers do in various
environments and also help eliminate some of the problems associated with other
“capturing methods” such as talk or think-aloud protocols. Video screen capture,
according to Geisler and Slattery, can record the “on-screen activity” of users through
either still images or digital videos while various programs run concurrently (186). This
makes the method of data collection less obtrusive, while also recording the entirety of
the writing process, including the use of other programs such as web browsers for
researching, communicating, or seemingly non-writing related activities (ex. listening to
music). In addition, the use of screen-capture seems to increase the possibility for more
accurate data collection and the ability to locate certain trends in the data. As Geisler
and Slattery note, “Problems with think-aloud protocols may involve both
incompleteness and distortion. If consciousness during a given activity in not normally
verbal, the think-aloud record may be incomplete; if participants turn their attention
toward communicating with the researcher and away from the activity at hand, their
activity may be distorted” (187). Video capture, then, becomes “an important process-
tracing tool” (188) that can document how individuals interact with technology. It is
worth noting, however, that the work of Geisler and Slattery focuses on the workplace setting rather than the classroom, although they reference Jason Swarts article from 2004 that “used video screen capture to provide writers with a window of their own writing activities. Using video screen capture, apprentice writers recorded their writing activities and used them as a starting point for discussion of rhetorical choice...extending the concept of ‘instant replay’ to become textual replay, a foundation for writerly reflection-in-action” (187). It is this concept of textual replay that I utilized in my study as screen capture provided students with a tool to reflect on their own process.

In addition to these types of data collection, coding occurred adjacent to the interview and observation notes as note-taking, coding, and also “memoing” are parallel processes, occurring in unison throughout the data collection process.


As previously mentioned, I began the first phase of my coding with a set of predetermined categories consisting of pedagogy, technology, authority, and assignments/products in order to label what I saw throughout the course of classroom observations and interviews, categories which I chose because these have often been areas utilized in recent literature to either align composition and creative writing as allies
within academia, or illuminate some contested spaces between the two fields. At the completion of a certain instance of data collection, for example, a classroom observation, I would implement the second phase of my coding by reading through my initial observations in the left-hand column of my fieldnotes, labeling instances of pedagogical practice, use of technology, delegation of authority, or discussion of the assignments/products of the classroom. For example, an observation from the ENG 103 class on September 21st read,

[The instructor] wants students to not only address [his] concerns on their papers, but also wants them to upgrade the paper as a whole – find more sources, do more interviews (but notes that most students did a good job with the interviews and parceling out what is useful from the web for sources and incorporating it into the paper.

I labeled the first phrase of this entry, “[The instructor] wants students to not only address [his] concerns on their papers,” as “Authority” since assessment invariably implies authority. More specifically, the instructor is making some evaluative judgments about students’ writing based upon the criteria he set forth for the assignment or through his lived experiences as an instructor commenting on other student work – experience which undoubtedly trumped the experiences of students since they had no real familiarity with assignment construction and only minimal experience in critiquing the work of peers within the framework of secondary education. Consequently, the next phrase, “upgrade the paper as a whole – find more sources, do more interviews,” was labeled as “Assignments” since the activities of locating more sources or conducting more interviews was in reference to particular assignment (in this case, Writing Project 1). The final phrase, “(but notes that most students did a good job with the interviews
and parceling out what is useful from the web for sources and incorporating it into the paper),” was tentatively labeled as “Pedagogy” since the instructor was providing students with positive reinforcement, with praise for having successfully completed a particular aspect of the assignment. I say “tentatively labeled” because (as was the case throughout the coding process) these categories were not mutually exclusive. I could have just as easily categorized the latter phrase as “Authority,” since the instructor was in the position to provide students with praise, or “Assignments,” since the phrase was again referring to Writing Project 1. Ultimately, I had to rely upon a certain degree of intuition when placing particular observations or utterances into certain categories, something which Charles Dennis Hale has noted as being endemic to numerous qualitative research designs and the coding process (206).

Once this second phase of coding was complete, I then went back through the data and narrowed the categories even further, utilizing the various components associated with activity theory (subject, objective, outcome, community, tools, rules, and division of labor) to help contextualize what I observed. For instance, the example provided above looked similar to this:

[The instructor] wants students to not only address [his] concerns on their papers (Authority: “instructor” = Subject; “students” = Subject), but also wants them to upgrade the paper as a whole – find more sources, do more interviews (Assignments: “upgrade the paper (WP1) as whole” = Objective; “more sources” = Tools; “more interviews” = Tools) (but notes that most students did a good job with the interviews and parceling out what is useful from the web for sources and incorporating it into the paper
(Pedagogy: “students” = Subject; “parcelling out what is useful from the web for sources and incorporating it into the paper” = Outcome).

Through this process of coding I began to see certain trends emerge with a fair degree of clarity; in this case, that the incorporation of more sources and interviews for Writing Project 1 was meant to help fulfill the objective of improving the overall quality of the paper, as well as how the use of these tools could ultimately lead to the larger outcome of students being able to discern valid online sources. Consequently, this coding process was repeated in the right-hand column of my fieldnotes, which housed my reflections, as well as with other data points such as memoing and interviews.

**Philosophical Assumptions and Strategies of Inquiry**

As previously mentioned in the literature review and the introduction to this chapter, my study follows a pluralistic methodological design closely aligned to ethnographic work, specifically focusing on the activities that take place within one first-year composition and one introductory creative writing classroom. Though I discussed the underlying assumptions, tenets, and components surrounding activity theory in the preceding chapter in order to contextualize its growing use and focus in the fields of composition and creative writing, I will also discuss (in brief) the widening influence of activity theory in naturalistic inquiry, as well as the philosophical assumptions surrounding such inquiry.

To begin, the philosophical assumptions or underpinnings of naturalistic inquiry, such as ethnography and activity theory, rely upon a constructivist epistemology where the goal is to understand the multiple participant meanings and possibly how those
meanings are historically and socially constructed. As Creswell notes, constructionist research believes that knowledge resides in the interactions of people within a variety of social contexts and research takes place within the natural setting of the group being observed (8); in the case of my study, this natural setting was the first-year composition and introductory creative writing classroom and the people being observed were students and instructors. Also, because constructionist research relies so heavily on the interactions of participants and their interpretations, it is a distinctly qualitative, “emergent rather than tightly prefigured...[and] fundamentally interpretative” (Creswell 181) type of research. By targeting the localized accounts and experiences of instructors and students in first-year composition and introductory creative writing classrooms, my study clearly can be categorized as ethnographic work; however, it should be noted that what exactly constitutes ethnography in composition studies is not always clear cut. Some, such as Steven Athanses and Shirley Brice Heath, have taken a cultural anthropological approach to ethnography and remarked that it generally provides long-term accounts of a year or more in order to “enhance the comparative study of historical...and contemporary cultures and to develop or test theories related to areas of universal concern in the study of human life, including human adaptation, persistence, innovation, and extinction (264 – 265). However, recent textbooks such as Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater’s Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research have advocated for “mini-ethnographies,” studies which still promote the examination of subjects within the context of their entire environment in order to generate certain hypotheses about human interaction, but within an abbreviated period of time (1 – 2). Regardless, as Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher note, ethnographers in English studies often “observe many facets of writers in their writing environments...in order to identify, operationally define, and interrelate variables of the writing act in its context”
For me, it is this last classification that acts as the crux between ethnography and activity theory. In the case of my study, the writing environment most frequently observed is the classroom and, as Angel Lin notes, one form of classroom research “generally has the aim to describe classroom interactions and practices to uncover the ‘good sense’ or local rationality of these practices. Its aim, however, is not an apologetic one (i.e. to defend existing practices) but to find out first and foremost how classroom participants are doing what they are doing, with the implied aim to uncover why they are doing it” (70). Consequently, Lin believes that ethnography can fill the gaps left by other types of discourse approaches, noting that “we also need to use ethnography to look at the overall ‘activity system’ (the layers of ethnographic contexts) in which the teachers, students and their classroom practices are situated, to understand why teachers are doing what they are doing” (75). While my study does not solely focus on the teaching practices of instructors, it is a component, and Lin’s research on a secondary Chinese language class in Hong Kong demonstrated how activity theory in naturalistic inquiry could be used “not as an ultimate piece of truth about human activities, but as a heuristic tool, a working model that we might draw upon to add to our repertoire of analytical tools to conduct a more holistic, contextualized, ethnographic analysis of pedagogical practices” (76). In her case, Lin observed the interactions of the instructor with students, as well as the symbolic and discursive tools used by the instructor, in order to uncover the point or purpose of the lesson for that day, “not as self-reported by the teacher or students themselves but as manifested in what they actually do in the lesson” (70). Activity theory, then, becomes another way to analyze what unfolds in ethnographic inquiry and observation.

In addition to recording and reporting on the observations and interactions I have with the participants of the study, ethnographic research, more specifically a form
of ethnographic research dubbed by John Van Maanen as “confessional ethnography,” also creates a venue to describe my unique perspective as a researcher. As Van Maanen and others such as Michael Kleine, Carl Herndl, and Wendy Bishop have noted, it has become more and more apparent “that subjects do not give unbiased accountings of their experience, that the environment under examination overtly changes when the researcher appears, [and] that the researcher has self-consciously become emotionally involved or otherwise ‘contaminated’ by the research” (Faber 9). Because of these revelations, and my background in creative non-fiction, my reportage also consists of brief reflections and personalized accounts about my own experiences, biases, fixed and subjective positions, interpretations about the participants, the subject under investigation, and the research process; in essence, “to ‘confess’ and reveal [myself] as an active participant in the process of discovery, interpretation, and reporting” (Faber 9). This decision of incorporating my own experiences with the research process into the dissertation is also due in part to Wendy Bishop’s suggestion in “I-Witnessing in Composition: Turning Ethnographic Data into Narratives” that meta-narratives or meta-discourse can help us to reflect on our process and aid in uncovering the subjective nature of our experience while avoiding “positivistic and subjective mis-mixing and matching” (155).

Delineation of Ethical Methods

I submitted an application to the Ball State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) detailing my proposed study and the involvement of human participants during the summer of 2010 before any data collection occurred. In conjunction with the Belmont Report, my study strictly adheres to the codes of informed consent, beneficence,
and justice. Specifically, participants who agreed to be a part of my study were asked to fill out an informed consent form (see appendix) that detailed the purpose of the research project, possible implications or consequences of the study, and also notified participants that they were free to leave at any time during the investigation and that their identity would be kept confidential. Confidentiality was achieved by using pseudonyms throughout the course of data collection, including when receiving excerpts of participants' written work and while conducting interviews. In addition, after completing transcriptions of interviews, all recordings were destroyed. Furthermore, I did nothing to intentionally harm participants and did everything to minimize harm. As part of the informed consent form, participants were notified that although the foreseeable risks of the study were minimal, there was a small possibility that answering some of the questions during the interview process could cause some feelings of anxiety. If participants had any such ill effects, they were directed to the counseling services available through the Northeast Midwestern University Counseling Center. Last, participants who are particularly vulnerable were not recruited for this study. In addition, I will extend all federal, institutional, and disciplinary regulations to any future publications, conferences, presentations, etc. that incorporates the testimony or unpublished writing of students and instructors from this study.

Besides the usual ethical concerns that coincide with research involving human subjects, I also had to contend with the ethical considerations posed by digital writing research. According to Heidi McKee and James E. Porter, digital writing research can be defined in three ways: 1) research that is computer generated or based, 2) research involving delivered documents and computer-based text production, and 3) research involving the interactions of people who use computerized technologies (712). Consequently, my research most closely aligns the second and third principles outlined
by McKee and Porter, since part of my research involved examining the documents produced and delivered via digital means, as well as the various activities that can take place through various technological mediums. More importantly, however, digital writing research is often problematic in the sense that the “yes/no” heuristic of IRB protocols do not fully account for dealing with human subjects in digital environments and often cause researchers to think that they are strictly dealing with texts and not persons. To combat this, I adopted the rhetorical, case-based approach to ethical decision making outlined by McKee and Porter, which is grounded in casuistry or moral rationalizing. As McKee and Porter note, “ethical decision making requires attentiveness to ‘people’s lives’ – and to the complexities, differences, and nuances of human experience, including the researcher’s own experiences...One cannot conduct research based only on ethical rules; one must apply a kind of wisdom that recognizes how ‘the rules work out in the course of people’s lives’ and be willing to ‘weigh moral consideration’ based on that factor: the effects on real people” (724). This principle of casuistry was of particular importance for those that I observed in the classroom that did not agree to be interviewed, but who share their writing in online forums. Ultimately, these case-by-case ethical considerations were used to consider issues regarding privacy, participants’ relationships with others, and possible academic or professional reprisal. I also consulted with the people being examined throughout the study and people inside and outside the field when making ethical decisions.

Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

Though I have addressed certain issues pertaining to validity, reliability, and the limitations of naturalistic inquiry at various points throughout this chapter, I will
reiterate a few key points here. Certainly, issues regarding validity and reliability are of a particular concern for researchers attempting to do naturalistic inquiry in composition studies. As Wendy Bishop articulated in “I-Witnessing in Composition: Turning Ethnographic Data into Narratives,” she became keenly aware of her own subjectivity in collecting and interpreting data and crafting a descriptive narrative of her findings. In other words, she questioned how anything that she wrote could be viewed as significant since what might have seemed important to her may not be so important to someone else. In addition, what she chose to write down, leave out, report, not report, etc. were completely based on her own interpretations. In this light, there are just as many issues of reliability and validity with “writing it down” as there are with “writing it up.” However, there are certain approaches to help ensure validity and reliability. The best approaches that I employed were the use of triangulation, articulating my own situatedness within the research, “member-checking” whereby the participants in my study can scrutinize my interpretations, the use of an external auditor for my interview questions, and the use of thick description.

Essentially, I triangulated a multitude of data points, such as an interview with a particular student, documents that student produced, and my observations during class discussions, primarily to help locate significant trends and prove or disprove certain hypothesis that emerged over the course of the study. As mentioned above, my study also contains my personal experiences aimed at tackling issues with the research process and my own personal biases, assumptions, fixed and subjective positions, etc. as I became entrenched in the multiple roles of participant, observer, and researcher. Member-checking was perhaps the greatest marker for the internal validity as I had the opportunity to share my work with the students and instructors under examination, either at the conclusion of interview session or periodically as I completed drafts, in
order to verify that my interpretations were accurate and fair. Consequently, reliability is another difficult concept in many respects for naturalistic inquiry, primarily because claims about patterns and structures of experience can only be made within a particular discourse community, which expects multiple observations and points of view in analysis. However, through the meticulous note-taking and coding I have outlined above, as well as identifying the population, a researcher can increase the reliability of the study and the likelihood that what was observed can be viewed similarly by others in the future. Certainly, as with any methodology, there are certain concerns or limitations, mainly with naturalistic inquiry’s lack of generalizations about a given population (Newkirk 132–133) and such logistical concerns such as securing permission from participants, maintaining flexibility in data collections, and establishing rigor; however, as Creswell points out much of naturalistic inquiry is valuable in the sense of understanding of the values, opinions, feelings, and experiences of one or more individuals over a designated period of time with regard to a particular program, event, activity, process, etc. (15).

Still, my biggest difficulty and limitation was the sheer volume of material I had to sort through, the dreaded (but entirely unexpected) data overload. But, as Wendy Bishop once remarked, for those of us conducting ethnographic research “Our mantra here is data reduction, data reduction. But data reduction is for a purpose” (113). That purpose is essentially “to learn what we know before we show what we know” (113), to reduce the amount of data through coding (and sometimes good old fashion intuition) in order to formulate a representation, a story, of a particular group, their activities, their values, to a reader. In other words, or more accurately in the words of Thomas Newkirk:
Even those researchers who claim to account for the context must disregard or decline to report most of what they record. So the issue is not who strips and who doesn’t strip but how each strips to create accounts, narratives that gain the assent of reader. The issue is not which is more Real, but how each creates, through selection and order of detail, an illusion or version of Reality. The issue is not one primarily of methodology and objectivity, but of authoring and the cultural values embedded in various narrative plots (133).

What follows in the next two chapters, then, are my selections and orders of detail, my versions of reality as they pertain to two distinct classrooms at NMU in the fall of 2010, in the hope that my reader will recognize those cultural values in the narratives I have constructed, as well as the importance of what has been reported with regard to the students, instructors, activities, and significant trends that evolved in relation to pedagogy, authority, technology, and the products or assignments of these environments.
I sat at a table near the piano in the student center, trying to tap my foot to the syncopated whir of an aging floor buffer, waiting for my first student participant to arrive. Dusk had already enveloped the campus, but through the enormous windows that lined the entire building I could make out shadowy figures, whooping and hollering and sprinkling the autumn night with the joyous profanity only 18 year olds let off the leash dared to speak. It was a marvelous chorus, one that transported me to a decade earlier, to a small college town in Maine where I too had wailed into the chilly darkness, convinced of my invincibility. I smiled and slinked over to the piano, trying to remember the few chords I had learned during those years, hoping to add my own colorful tinge to the revelry outside. I pushed the pedal, placed my fingers on the keys, and pressed down. The piano was out of tune and my dissonant chord hung in the air like some unfamiliar stench. The sound from outside slowly dissipated until it disappeared down the street, leaving me with nothing but white noise and something that Prof. Beckett had said in one of our earliest interviews. When I asked him about students making the transition from high school to college, about getting students to focus on what it means to write within the academy, he stated (in his typical, endearing, point-blank honesty), “[It] comes down to 100% of them start and 50% of them finish. So, you know...yeah they may get through their freshman year, but only half of them are going to finish up
their senior year….And of course, you’re trying to figure out how many of these turkeys that are in that lower 50 can you help [and] hold on to” (22 August 2010).

I glanced up from the piano and saw someone sitting at one of the tables in the food court across the room, shoulders hunched over a touch phone. “One of the turkeys?” I muttered. I hoped not. I made my way over, tattered laptop case and tape recorder in hand. She looked up and I introduced myself.

Rhetoric and Writing at NMU

While this study focuses on the experiences, perspectives, and ideas of instructors and students in two distinct writing classrooms, it is undeniable that both the participants and the courses were operating within larger organizational structures associated with higher education, and that some of the views expressed by those individuals were shaped by where they were situated within these structures. Some educational theorists, such as Paul Willis and Henry Giroux, have attempted to interrogate this relationship, particularly the “battle between the structures of education on the one side and students’ desire to express their agency as distinct individuals from distinct cultures on the other” (Faber 76), focusing a great deal on “students’ activities, behaviors, and values and how these behaviors point to the ways students resist and act against institutional dominance” (76). Throughout the course of data collection, I did indeed observe some “acts of symbolic resistance,” to borrow a term from Giroux, where students would show visible signs of opposition by sleeping in class, not turning-in assignments, or not participating in group work or activities when asked to do so by the instructor; however, as Giroux warns, these types of behaviors do not necessarily indicate resistance, but “must be held up against [the student’s] ‘lived experience’ within
the organization” (75). Consequently, the beginning of this chapter examines some of that “lived experience” as I describe how participants first came to study or teach NMU, their previous training in the field of English, as well as defining qualities or characteristics about their work in the course. However, because of the “situated-ness” of my participants and the constructionist nature of my study, because the experiences and ideas of instructors and students have been shaped by greater institutional forces, I feel it is both necessary and beneficial to begin with a look at some of those structures.

Though an extensive analysis pertaining to the overarching mission and goals of entities such as NMU, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of English, the Writing Program, and the University Core Curriculum is beyond the scope of this chapter, I contextualize one particular relationship between NMU’s Writing Program, which houses the first-year composition sequence and the University’s Core Curriculum. Specifically, I focus on how, during the 2005 – 2006 academic year, there was an instance of institutional and structural change whereby the two first-year composition courses were restructured to more closely align with the goals of the University Core Curriculum, a change which, as I would observe, still had resonating effects as to how both the composition and creative writing instructors taught their courses, invariably shaping the culture that emerged in both classrooms. Interestingly, and as I will discuss later in this chapter, I encountered some more of those “acts of symbolic resistance,” but on the part of the instructors directed toward the Writing Program. In addition to the words of the instructors, I draw upon several key passages from past and present NMU Writing Program Handbooks and quote certain passages at length in an attempt to ensure the preservation for the original context.

To begin with the present configuration, the courses in NMU’s Writing Program serve “as a central element of the Core Curriculum” (Papper et al 5) by teaching “vital
reading, thinking, and writing processes needed both in the University and in life after higher education” (5) and are grounded in NMU’s commitment to a liberal arts education whereby “students may develop their powers of observation, calculation, imagination, logic, communication, and more” (5). More specifically, the courses in the Writing Program are designed to provide students “with the learning necessary...to succeed in [their] chosen career, involve [themselves] in the civic sphere, assess and evaluate cultural pressures and products, and deepen [students] sense of self and [their] connection to the physical and social world” (5). Most intriguing and pertinent to this study, however, are the “two central assumptions” (5) governing various practices of the first-year composition sequence, assumptions that (presumably) inform students and their writing in other core curriculum courses and beyond – namely, “that writing and reading are tightly integrated, so the best way to teach one is to foster excellence in the other” (5), and “that both [writing and reading] are rhetorical, by which we mean that writing and reading are conscious attempts to use language to change the attitudes or actions of those being addressed” (5). Prior to the 2005 – 2006 academic year, however, these assumptions were absent from Writing Program Handbooks, and although certain gestures were made toward NMU’s commitment to a liberal arts education, there was little connection made with the University Core Curriculum (also referred to as “General Studies Program” in earlier handbooks) and not much was done with regard to articulating a program philosophy.

Perhaps more telling, however, is the change in course description for the English 103 and 104 courses. As noted in the NMU Writing Program Handbook for the 1996 – 1997 academic year, “The Master Syllabi for ENG 103 and 104 were revised in 1993 – 1994 and the new syllabi adopted by the NMU Department of English on April 28, 1994” (Papper et al 105), and although the authors noted that attempts were made to better
describe “the general goals and activities...as well as the courses’ relationship to the
General Studies Program” (105), there “were no changes in the basic requirements for
either class” (105). Consequently, the course descriptions for ENG 103 and 104 in both
the 1996-1997 and 1999–2000 handbooks were identical, stating in the case of the
ENG 103 course that it was an “Introduction to composition focusing on composing,
revising, and editing a variety of writings. Includes readings and introductions to basic
research methods” (Papper et al, 1996, 105 & Papper et al, 1999, 79), while the ENG 104
course purported to teach students “Higher-level instruction in composition with
emphasis on critical thinking and writing in response to literary texts. Instruction and
practice in research methods and presentation of formal research paper” (1996, 100 &
1999, 82). The most recent addition of the handbook, however, reflects the changes
made after 2005; specifically that the English 103 course reflects the second assumption
noted above, the rhetorical nature of reading, writing, and language where “In English
103, that use of language is presented as persuasion. [Students] will have opportunities
through writing and through reading to experience the way writers can and do use
language to persuade an audience” (Papper et al. 5). Consequently, this rhetorical
approach is the greatest distinction between pre- and post-2005 ENG 103 as the course
“introduces students to the fundamentals of rhetoric, and English 104 applies those
fundamentals to the research process” (17).

Interestingly, the change in ENG 104 from a class emphasizing “writing in
response to literary texts” to an inquiry-based course that utilizes rhetoric in the research
process has had an enormous impact both of the ENG 103 (Composition) and ENG 285
(Introduction to Creative Writing) courses I observed throughout the semester.
Specifically, and as my ENG 103 instructor-participant pointed out to me and colleagues
when the change occurred, it seemed as though the major distinction between ENG 103
and ENG 104 was removed, which made it difficult for faculty to distinguish between the purpose, form, or content of the two classes. In other words, whereas before it could easily be argued that one was definitively a composition class and the other was a course in writing about literature, the change to a rhetorical emphasis in both courses created confusion while simultaneously asking instructors to alter various aspects of their teaching, and ultimately some resistance occurred on the part of faculty.

As I would learn from Prof. Joyce, the creative writing instructor I observed (an individual who also taught composition frequently in the Writing Program), the change in the first-year composition course was predicated on the fact that various “curriculum changes...were coming university-wide and [the writing program administrator was] worried that [the Writing Program was] going to lose either 103 or 104” (18 November 2010). In order to avoid this fate, the writing program administrator at the time, who placed a considerable amount of value on the study of visual rhetoric, “wanted to revamp those courses to make them more updated to what students need now and make it less likely that the core curriculum would drop either 103 or 104” (18 November 2010). This idea of providing students with “what they need” translated into a sequence of courses that would emphasize a rhetorical understanding and reading of various texts, including visual and multimodal compositions, as well as the rhetorical approach to the research process. It was becoming apparent during this time (where the Internet, social media, and new media dictated much our interactions with and consumptions of text) that students were going to have to read, compose, and disseminate compositions that were not strictly regulated to alphabetic text on a page. As noted in the Writing Program Handbook, “much of the increased influence of visual arises from what the technology makes possible. Things that can be done with technology eventually become expected as that which should be done” (Papper et al 20). This realization, coupled with the threat of
losing one of the writing courses (which, of course, would have a rippling effect on budgetary issues, funding, employment of contract faculty, etc.), created the need for change. Indeed, as Faber notes, “Change...is the process that restores stability to the distressed organization” (40) and “that change is perhaps most importantly an act of persuasion” (40); however, not everyone was convinced that the change better served the faculty or the students. Though the current Writing Program Handbook notes that “Each instructor configures his or her class according to individual strengths, and each section of English 103 consists of a different array of students” (Papper et al 17), making for a unique experience while “[adhering] to a common set of core experiences based on a shared master syllabus” (17), the instructors under examination did not see it this way. Prof. Joyce’s remarks on this matter are worth quoting at length:

  To me, personally, as a creative writer, I was just like “I’m supposed to teach kids that they can analyze anything, but I can’t use literature?” And it’s the only thing that I know anything about – it’s what I got my degree in. I’m supposed to look at advertisements, I’m supposed to look at cartoons, which is all great, but it’s like the only thing that I can’t use is the one thing that I know. And if the point is that we can do this to anything, why can’t we just do it to what we know? I mean, I’ve personally never really gotten over that – because also too, you can come get a liberal arts education and never have to read one creative piece? Never have to read Shakespeare? Never have to read anything? I mean, I don’t think it’s necessary that everyone be the most well-educated literature person in the world, but c’mon man. A little college level literary analysis would be good for people (18 November 2010).
Indeed, Prof. Joyce’s comments seemed to point to an implicit assumption that literature could not be looked at or analyzed rhetorically, or that the study of literature was not what students “needed” to succeed within or beyond the walls of university. Consequently, and as I will chronicle in greater detail in the following chapter, the change to the ENG 103 and ENG 104 sequence was part of the reason Prof. Joyce chose to construct his ENG 285 (Introduction to Creative Writing) course as a place where students read and talked about literature, in addition to using literature as modeling tool for students’ writing.

In the case of Prof. Beckett, who I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, the change in the composition sequence was less jarring as he was able to draw upon his background in journalism and creative non-fiction to forward the Writing Program’s governing assumptions mentioned earlier – i.e. the interconnectedness of reading and writing and the rhetorical nature of both activities. This is not to say, however, that his pedagogy was unaffected by the change to the courses. As already noted, Prof. Beckett saw the elimination of literature from ENG 104 as removing a significant distinction between the two courses, and because he (like Prof. Joyce) valued students reading, analyzing, and writing about works of literature, he incorporated an analysis piece of a contemporary work of fiction as part of his ENG 103 course. For Prof. Beckett, short story analysis complimented work done earlier in the class where students had “been talking about...how they see the world, and now they’re going to look at fiction writers’ perspectives on one element of the world and what they say about it” (16 November 2010), and he asks students to look “at the narrative voices of authors and the implied author – you know, is what the fiction writer giving us with these characters and these scenes what this writer believes, or is it just this implied author showing us one aspect of the world that maybe he doesn’t agree with, but needs to be brought out” (16 November
In this light, literature clearly can have a rhetorical focus, as the credibility (ethos) of the author and the characters within a short story is examined in relation to how the theme or subject matter being portrayed (logos) and how that portrayal affects the perceptions of the reader (pathos). However, despite reconciling the use of literature with the rhetorical bent of ENG 103, Prof. Beckett did express some hesitancy or difficulty with incorporating visual rhetoric, particularly in terms of its relationship to technology, into the classroom. He described for me a recent meeting he had with colleagues discussing the use of multimodal or multimedia in the writing classroom and remarked that, “You know, I’m old-school enough to say ‘Gee, I’m not sure that my students, when they’re all done with 103 and 104, can just take the text part of it and put it together into a good argument with a purpose and knowing the exact audience and what that audience needs’” (22 August 2010). In Prof. Beckett’s view, students had enough difficulty composing alphabetic texts and mastering tasks like formulating arguments, supporting their ideas, and fashioning a piece of writing to fit the needs of an audience – therefore, the incorporation of something visual or multimodal, without having adequately learned the conventions of the alphabetic academic essay, seemed to be a futile undertaking. And yet, Prof. Beckett did acknowledge that “It’s part of our responsibility in the [composition] area to make [students] more computer literate, so I take that as something that needs to be done in the classroom” (22 August 2010). Of course, there are many forms of computer, technological, and digital literacy, ranging from the functionality of various hardware, software, and networks being used, to understanding what one can do in order to make certain technologies work toward rhetorical ends. Throughout the course of my meetings, interviews, and observations, I discerned that Prof. Beckett saw students use of technology and the learning of technology in the classroom as primarily functional – for example, how students could
use course management platforms like Blackboard as a tool for the course. It should not be surprising, then, that aside from students incorporating images into their individual alphabetic texts and creating a group PowerPoint presentation for the final writing project (which, more often than not, was the responsibility of one student in the group) that the visual aspects of writing and rhetoric were not emphasized.

In light of these observations, it becomes clear that both instructor-participants were unconvinced about the necessity for change in the context of ENG 103 and ENG 104, and as Faber makes clear, “Unless advocates of change can convince others that the organization is actually distressed, there will be no need to reach a new state of equilibrium. Similarly, if a distressed community, organization, or person is unwilling to take on a new identity, change cannot happen” (40). While neither instructor was willing to “take on the new identities” of visual rhetorician or digital compositionist, there was obviously some change to their pedagogical practices and an attempt to incorporate some of the goals, assumptions, and philosophies of the Writing Program into their classrooms, although this came more from institutional pressure rather than individual choice. Invariably, this had an effect on the culture that emerged from within each course, as the instructors not only brought their individual talents and philosophies to the classroom, but also the history of institutional and curricular change. The instructors, however, were not the only ones wrestling with change.

_Kari_

Kari, the first student I interviewed for this project, the student who was slumped over her cell phone in the student center of NMU, had a warm and inviting demeanor about her, often greeting me with a wry grin and conversing as if we were long lost
friends catching up on old times. Still, she had moments of meekness, of quiet-reserve and contemplation that made her presence seem “artsy” and contemplative, especially with her thick-rimmed glasses, dark eyes occasionally peering out from the long auburn hair that would sometimes cover her eyes. Like several students, Kari had seen the appeal and convenience of going to an in-state school such as NMU, but had not originally intended to enroll there. She remarked to me that her dream was to be a record producer and she had hoped to major in music business at another university, but her parents had pulled the plug on the idea midway through her senior year, citing the other school as being too expensive and her choice of career as somewhat impractical. She applied to NMU in March of 2010 and was accepted in May, something which Kari had fully expected: “I got in because I’m a great student, on the Honor Roll. I graduated on the National Honor Society with an honors diploma” (3 September 2010). Kari did exude a quiet confidence, a real sense that she belonged in college and would thrive, though she admittedly was unsure of what course of study to follow. With her hopes of being a record producer apparently squashed, Kari was content for the moment taking her general education courses as an undecided major, but talked of possibly becoming a business major, probably focusing her attention on the marketing track. I asked her why marketing and not something like sound or audio production, something for which NMU had a national reputation. She paused a moment and then went on to explain that in a conversation with her father, in explaining to him her creative ambitions and finding work where she could appeal to what people liked, marketing seemed like a viable choice of major. At first, the amount of influence Kari’s family apparently had over her choice of school and potential career seemed stifling or overbearing to me, though I would later learn just how significant a role Kari’s mother and father had in her life. For instance, the second essay for the composition course was a narrative piece, chronicling a
significant moment in the life of the student. Kari wrote about a traumatic experience, a sexual assault, which her father had helped her to overcome. The third essay, a paper which students were told to examine a specific spiritual, philosophical, or moral underpinning in their lives, chronicled Kari witnessing the effects of her mother being abused by her stepfather and talking about the pervasiveness of domestic violence. Though I never asked Kari about these deeply personal experiences, merely how she wrote about them, I got the sense that her choice of university and major were grounded (at least partially) in wanting to remain close to home, to listen to and be around those that cared for her, as well as those she cared about.

Kari went on to describe for me some of her previous experiences with English studies before coming to college, noting that she took Advanced Placement (AP) courses in both language and literature throughout high school and had to write, by her account, over 400 essays throughout her career in secondary education. Despite these experiences, Kari expressed some apprehension about her writing abilities. When asked what she expected to get out of the course throughout the semester, Kari remarked that “I think that I’m supposed to not be confused anymore about my writing. Because, I’ll admit it, I’m a very confused writer – not that I don’t know what to write – but I’m not very good at writing” (3 September 2010). More specifically, Kari showed concern over certain portions of her writing, stating that “I’m pretty good at getting the body of anything. I’m really good at the information and the juicy part; it’s getting people to want to read my writing, leaving people feeling good that I’m not good [at]. I’m pretty lame when it comes to intros and conclusions basically” (3 September 2010). As both an instructor of composition and a researcher, I was somewhat surprised at Kari’s answer, not so much her concerns with how to begin and end a piece of writing, but how these two entities were influenced by her apparent awareness of audience. As Prof. Beckett
expressed to me several times throughout the semester, one of the greatest challenges he has faced throughout his career was getting students to view their own writing from the perspective of a reader, to move students away from an egocentric point of view. As I would observe during the course of the semester, Kari had already come to terms with writing for an audience other than herself, even asking fellow classmates to read sections of her work and offer their opinions during designated in-class writing periods, as well as in required peer review sessions. Indeed, when asked what she felt she needed to work through her introductions and conclusions, she stated that “I’m hoping that, you know, I’ll be able to talk to somebody or somebody else that has the same problem as me and we can relate and work together to be able to work on it” (3 September 2010). In later interviews Kari also expressed envisioning a particular reader while writing certain assignments, particularly in the second and third essay mentioned above, pieces where she wanted “people to feel bad and sorry and want to cry...because I want them to be that emotionally attached and involved. I want the emotional reader, I don’t want the reader that is going to read this and then toss it to the side, I want the reader that’s going to think about it and say ‘If this happened to me, what would I be feeling’” (8 November 2010)?

While consideration of audience certainly seemed to be an integral part of Kari’s writing, I also asked her about the specifics of her writing process, what she actually did when she received an assignment and would sit down to write. For her, the process began almost immediately through brainstorming an idea or topic that she wanted to focus on, followed by a period of procrastination (usually lasting a few days), and then moving on to research. In terms of the physical act of writing, Kari described a system of rewards and incentives while working. As she explained it, her writing process consisted of “[making] goals for myself, you know, like ‘If I write this paragraph, then I can check
my Facebook. If I write this paragraph, then I can do this” (3 September 2010). Kari’s process was also relatively linear in that, despite her difficulties with introductions, she would begin by trying to construct an introductory paragraph and gradually move on to body paragraphs and the conclusion.

Overall, Kari’s initial impressions of the course at the beginning of the semester were positive, even expressing that she thought the class would be more difficult, that she was “going to have to make every other word [in her papers] a word you have to look up in the dictionary” (3 September 2010); however, Kari did note that the class was something to prepare her for harder courses where, she believed, she would “... have to use huge words all the time” (3 September 2010).

Brad

Though Kari was an in-state student and had not seen the NMU campus until a few months before enrolling, Brad could very easily be considered a local, living in a town some ten minutes from the center of campus. He had looked at other in-state schools, as well as one roughly 600 miles away, a university where his mother and other family members had attended years prior, but ultimately Brad decided on NMU to remain close to home. A short, but muscular and athletic individual, Brad sometimes had difficulty articulating his thoughts to me, pausing or trying to think through what he wanted to say with a series of “um’s,” “ah’s,” and “like’s” littering our discussions. He sometimes slouched in his chair, or leaned heavily to one side, resting his head in his palm during lengthy early morning class periods, trying not to doze-off after pulling an all-nighter (often the result of studying for exams in his chemistry class). Despite his sometimes tired or lackluster demeanor, Brad was a reliable participant (both in the
context of the classroom and in course of my study) as he was always punctual and sought to do everything he could to achieve in the class, often completing extra credit assignments or optional revisions for a higher grade. A pharmaceutical major, Brad described to me some of his previous experiences with English, outlining an education in language and literature that he felt did little to ready him for college. “To be honest with you,” he said, “in high school we didn’t write that much. I mean, it kind of disappointed me because...I feel it didn’t prepare me as good as it could have for college. It seemed like we did a lot more, like, vocabulary and stories...read a story and have questions over it. We didn’t really do much writing at all” (3 September 2010). Part of Brad’s frustration was with the instructors he encountered, noting that one English teacher had “just got out of college” and would assign a series of in-class assignments while spending a majority of that time “just playing on her laptop” (3 September 2010). In our first interview, Brad expressed some of the differences he saw with his experiences in high school as compared to what he had already encountered in the composition course; specifically, he noted that the class had already done more writing than he was use to, which he felt put him at a significant disadvantage compared with others in the class. However, Brad was still enthused about the course, remarking that “I already feel like I’ve gotten more out of two weeks in Prof. Beckett’s class than I have in high school....He’s already told, like, in the introductory paragraph, how he wants it and what he doesn’t want” (3 September 2010). As I would learn throughout the semester, Brad’s writing would often revolve around the needs and wants of the instructor, of trying to make sure that he was giving the instructor what he wanted, both in terms of content and eliminating certain quantifiable errors in grammar and punctuation. Indeed, when asked what he hoped to gain from the course, Brad expressed that he wanted to acquire a greater understanding of various forms of punctuation (ex. semi-colons), reduce the
amount of clichés and repetition in his writing (ex. restatements of ideas in different ways that added little to the overall content of the piece), as well as develop the ability recognize these errors on his own. This recognition, however, was seldom developed through collaborative activities with classmates such as peer review, but through the commentary and feedback of the instructor on drafts of assignments, or through questions Brad would ask the instructor during designated in-class writing periods. It is no small leap to say that because of his of writing instruction in secondary education, something which he perceived to be a handicap, Brad lacked some confidence in his abilities as a writer, concerning himself primarily with lower-order concerns and valuing the opinion of the instructor, the one assigned to actually teach him the subject, more so than himself or his peers.

In terms of his writing process, Brad conveyed to me that he tries to establish what key points he wants to focus on in the body paragraphs of his essay and then develops those points through “webbing.” This prewriting activity, whereby Brad would create multiple webs, each with a main point in the center of the web and branching ideas across the page, allowed him to visualize what he wanted to write about. As he put it, “When I [get] into the paragraph, like, in my main point, I can just look at my web and see what ideas I [have] off of it and just...like, freewrite...I just look at my web and write and write and write as much as I can about it and then go over it” (3 September 2010). Writing for Brad was also a solitary activity, one that had to take place in “total silence” in order to avoid distraction, particularly in the pre-draft phase when he was “trying to think of ideas” (3 September 2010).

_Derrick_
Upon our first meeting, I had Derrick pegged for the prototypical college fraternity pledge, someone who was perhaps more interested in the social aspect of college than in his growth and development as a student or as a writer. He was a good-looking kid – tall, muscular, cocky, with a confidence and swagger about him that made him popular with several of the female students in the class. Derrick had lettered in three sports in high school and hoped to one day work for a sports franchise in the National Football League or the National Basketball Association. Indeed, sports became a bit of a buffer for Derrick and me as we would sometimes discuss our fantasy football leagues before getting down to the business of discussing his writing for the course, the overall quality of which helped to considerably soften my initial impression of him as some “dumb jock” or “frat guy.” His interest in NMU came from family members who had attended, as well as some friends who “[had] been here before and told me it was fun and stuff” (11 September 2010). Similar to Brad, Derrick expressed some apprehension over the prospect of writing papers at “the college level,” but also professed a certain degree of optimism about what he might gain from the experience. Case in point, when I asked him to describe some of his previous experiences with writing and English in education, he remarked “I, myself, per se, did not like writing papers. So, I mean, you know, hopefully these classes will make me want to write more and help my writing” (11 September 2010). Also like Brad, Derrick felt that he had written little in high school, stating that “I think in my senior year I might have written 4 or 5 [papers] all year” (11 September 2010), and he commented that the frequency of writing in Prof. Beckett’s class was the biggest difference for him in making the transition from high school to college English.

Derrick’s writing process, at least earlier on in the class, could easily be juxtaposed with the “bricklaying” metaphor described by William Zinsser, whereby the
author must “get every paragraph as nearly right as possible before [going] onto the next paragraph” (97). Like a bricklayer, the author constructs the piece of the writing word by word, line by line, and paragraph by paragraph in a linear fashion, “not adding a new row until...the foundation is solid enough to hold up the house” (Zinsser 97). Derrick had described how writing the first draft of any assignment was daunting and labor intensive, noting that “I just have to think about what I want to write. Like, I want it to be perfect, so it takes me awhile to write papers. It’s just a mental thing, like if it’s not good then I’m not going to type it. I sit there in front of the computer and think about the next sentence I’m going to write for, like, 5 minutes” (11 September 2010). Part and parcel of his writing process was Derrick’s need for a writing environment free from distraction, something he found difficult while living in the dorms, co-habiting with a roommate and, often times, his roommate’s girlfriend. In later interviews, Derrick stated how he eventually had to move his composing activities to the quiet floor in the campus library in order to concentrate on his work.

For Derrick, after the initial bricklaying was done, he felt that revising and editing essays was much easier, though his mindset about writing still made the writing process difficult. As he explained, “I hope the class will encourage me to want to write more, because I don’t want to write papers. I mean, I don’t know who wants to other than English majors....I know we’re going to write quite a few papers in the class, so it forces me to write papers and hopefully I’ll get better at it” (11 September 2010). Derrick’s primary concern, then, was for the class to provide him with an opportunity to practice the act of writing, though he did express specific areas he hope to hone and develop in terms of making his writing “better.” Much like Kari, Derrick noted that introductions and conclusions were particularly difficult, stating “I never know how to start a paper—like, do I start it with a question? Do I start is with a comment? Do I start with
statistics‖ (11 September 2010). Derrick’s had similar sentiments regarding conclusions: “I never know how to wrap [an essay]. Like, what’s a good way to finish a paper? Does anybody really know? When’s a good time to end it” (11 September 2010)?

Angela

Another student who came to NMU because of familial ties was Angela. A slender, bubbly, and fast-talking 18 year old telecommunications student, Angela had an infectious laugh and described for me how grandfather and father had both graduated from the university. Coupled with the reputation of the telecommunications program and the lure of in-state scholarships, Angela confided in me that “I pretty much always knew I wanted to come here [to NMU]” (7 September 2010). The product of an accelerated high school and college prep courses, Angela had originally intended to major in journalism at NMU, but switched to pursue a video production option in the telecommunications program upon meeting with her advisor early in the semester.

As compared to some of the other participants, Angela had considerable experience in writing prior to coming to NMU, most often in the form of crafting answers for Advanced Placement (AP) exams and analytical writings over particular pieces of literature. Angela described receiving average to above average grades on these assignments, ranging from a C+ to an A, but also noted that she was given little time to complete this work. More specifically, she remarked that “a lot of the writing that I had in high school, we probably only spent one week on them” (7 September 2010), and the opportunity to produce multiple drafts and develop her writing over a longer period of time in the composition class seemed to be of great importance to Angela. In asking her about the first essay of the semester, an interview assignment where students had to
formulate and ask classmates a series of questions about a social issue that was relevant to them, Angela stated that “We've spent, probably, like, two and a half weeks on this paper so far. And I like that a lot better. I feel like there's really no way of getting around, like, not doing a correct essay” (7 September 2010). Consequently, the issue of time kept reappearing as I talked with Angela. I would learn later in our first interview that her preparation for AP exams required a great deal of timed writing, something which she found counterproductive to good writing: “I think that, right now, my essay skills aren't as good as they could be, and I think that it takes me a lot longer, umm, because – well, back when I was doing in-class essays that were timed, I really couldn’t get my point across. So, I really want to be able to make an effective, timely point” (7 September 2010). Here, I noticed a bit of a contradiction in that Angela appreciated more time to write, but still hoped to learn to write more quickly and efficiently, even commenting to me that “I hope that I will be able to write a really good essay...in a really short amount of time” (7 September 2010). For Angela, comprehension was perhaps the greatest determiner of good writing; specifically that the reader needed “to be able to know what the essay proved” (7 September 2010). Accordingly, Angela articulated that this was achieved through “really good organization and a good structure...that there should be some real life application in there somewhere so that the audience will be able to identify with [the] topic” (7 September 2010), but what constituted “good” organization and structure was difficult for her to articulate.

Similar to other participants, Angela described how her writing process was governed by battling distractions and how there was a need for complete silence while she wrote. In addition, technology, while a useful tool in terms of helping her to research and compose assignments, was also responsible for some of her procrastination and diversions while writing, particularly text messaging, Facebook, and music. Angela also
expressed how environment played a significant role in her composing, how the campus computer labs were “really silent and so I was able to think more and be more productive...but [when] I was in the library and I saw people that I knew I got a little more distracted....I wasn’t able to do my complete best” (7 September 2010).

Unfortunately, my interactions with Angela were somewhat limited as her participation in the study waned over the course of the semester. I received only three (out of five) of her major writing projects, many of which were either a rough draft or a final draft, but seldom both, and she did not schedule a final interview with me at the conclusion of data collection. Therefore, much of what I have been able to draw from Angela’s perspective has been in the form of in-class observations, limited writings, and two interviews – one conducted at the beginning of the semester and the other around midterms in mid-October.

Elizabeth

Unlike the other participants, Elizabeth was not a native-born citizen. Born in the Dominican Republic, she immigrated to the United States with her parents and her little brother when she was 3 years old, originally settling in Texas while her parents pursued degrees in higher education, then moving around various parts of Indiana until she came to NMU. A business major with a focus on entrepreneurship, Elizabeth hoped to one day work in the entertainment or hospitality management industry and was drawn to NMU because “the campus is so great and [the faculty] care about their students. There’s so many freshmen programs that you can do and so many alternatives to partying – I’m not really a big partier. It just worked out for me” (7 September 2010). Elizabeth also expressed her interest in athletics at NMU, particularly track and field.
Indeed, many mornings she would enter Prof. Beckett’s class in a running suit that seemed a size too big for her, especially considering her short and slender frame, bits of perspiration glistening on her forehead after a morning run.

Elizabeth entered the first-year composition class at NMU with a background in Honors English classes, an experience governed by learning vocabulary words, oral presentations, reading and reporting on various works of literature, and collaborative service learning. The latter component of her education seemed particularly interesting to me. As she described it, her senior project consisted of writing with a classmate about the advantages and disadvantages of recycling and its effects on the environment, coupled with cleaning up a community pond area that had been neglected, overgrown, and used for discarding trash by local residents. Despite these varying types of assignments and the senior project being “the longest assignment I’ve ever done,” Elizabeth remarked to me that “I never actually had [any assignment] that was hard...as sad as that sounds, I just felt like it took a lot of time” (7 September 2010). As Elizabeth made clear throughout my early interviews with her, she knew that her relative ease with various writing tasks in previous years would be challenged throughout her enrollment in English 103, and this was somewhat of a disconcerting prospect for her. She recalled for me the first day of class, “when Prof. Beckett said there were students that thought they were good writers and they would be really hard to change, and then there were students did not know anything about writing and those his favorites” (7 September 2010); Elizabeth felt like she was the former type of student, noting that she felt both her diagnostic essay and the first writing project for the class “were really well-written pieces of work” (7 September 2010), only to find that instructor thought she lacked clarity and organization in her writing.
One attribute that I appreciated with Elizabeth was her frankness, her ability to articulate what she saw as being the positives and the negatives of the class, as well as what she hoped to gained by the end of the semester, which honestly wasn’t much other than a grade. Though she realized she would have to actually work in the class, Elizabeth was adamant in her views that “I don’t care about English. I’m taking it because it’s a required class and because I know I’m going to be in business and I have to know how to write correctly and properly. [I know] I have to convince people and get across my message without being long or too rude...about it” (7 September 2010). Elizabeth’s response is telling in many regards. For one, her answer is indicative to the experience of many first-year students, students who are required to take certain courses that they see as having some (or, in some cases, little) relevance, a small component to the “real business” of their education, which is preparing and training them for their future careers. Here, Elizabeth sees the course as a means of developing her “correctness” with writing, but also she notes the development of some rhetorical skills, such as having an awareness of audience and cultivating the ability to convince or persuade them.

However, she confided in me that “there’s not something that I want to focus on [in the class] necessarily, there’s nothing I want, other than to learn. Like, I just want to know the basic that I need to learn so I can get an A. That’s my number one thing, I just want an A” (7 September 2010). I pressed further and Elizabeth expressed that one of the basics she hoped to learn was the idea of “flow” in writing; more specifically, Elizabeth felt that in order to sound more “professional” and “adult” to an audience her ideas needed to be more clearly defined and the sentences, paragraphs, and sections she constructed needed to have a more clear connection with her ideas. As she playfully quipped, her writing was like her personality, “all over the place,” and she also noted how
her sense of “flow” was also based upon word choice, of eliminating overused words like “many” and “much” that added little to conveying her ideas.

Elizabeth, more so than any of my other participants, seemed to gravitate toward Prof. Beckett’s overarching objective for the course as being a class in critical reading and thinking. She had remarked to me on several occasions that enjoyed reading various texts and also enjoyed reading the work of others in the class, particularly in the context of peer evaluations. As she would tell me in our 2nd interview, “I love peer evaluations. I love it. I’m not saying that my whole class is smarter than I am, but I do like knowing how others write and then I like reading what they write, because then I feel like I understand the assignment better” (2 November 2010). Unlike Kari, who viewed peer evaluations as an opportunity to ask classmates their opinions or impressions of her work and offer possible suggestions for improvement, Elizabeth saw the activity as a way of clarifying the parameters of the assignment and seeing possibilities others had envisioned. Still, as she would reflect in one of her meta-cognitive cover sheets, Elizabeth would then apply what she had observed from her peers to her own writing, remarking that “After revising my peers’ papers, I thought about my own. Going back to my paper was easier because I could then think like a reader instead of a writer.” These last words echoed what I had heard Prof. Beckett convey to students several times throughout the semester, as well as in the context of my interviews with him – coupled with my knowledge of Elizabeth’s frequent visits to Prof. Beckett’s office for conferences, I could never be completely sure if she genuinely progressed to this point in her writing or if she was merely attune to perhaps what she wanted her professor to hear.

Prof. Beckett
“You must be David,” Prof. Beckett said as he grinned at me from under a baseball cap, sitting somewhat reclined in his office chair. “I only got one question for you – you’re not a pain in the ass, are you?” I let a slight smirk sweep across my face. I had heard that faint, deceptively taciturn tone before. It had the same rhythms and cadences of home, that wonderful New England drawl that I would still hear occasionally through random long-distance phone calls. “I try not to be,” I said, “I guess you’ll find out.” Prof. Beckett laughed. “Well,” he said, “what the hell are we waiting for? Come on in, have a seat.”

Despite having grown-up and working for a time in Massachusetts, Prof. Beckett had strong ties to the Midwest, NMU, and the local community. He had received his undergraduate degree in English and Journalism Education from NMU in the 1960s as a returning student, having previously done a 4-year stint in the military after flunking out of another university. As I would later learn, his early experiences as a student would have a profound impact on his teaching; specifically, he felt he had the ability to relate with and respond to students, their personal and academic struggles, as well as their various learning styles – areas he felt weren’t completely understood, practiced, or even cared about when he entered college for the first time. His Master’s degree came in 1972 while working at a public school near NMU, teaching classes in literature, composition, and reading, followed by a move to eastern Massachusetts. There, Prof. Beckett taught public high school for 19 years, teaching journalism, an occasional creative writing course, and advising the school newspaper. This was a time of profound introspection for Prof. Beckett. As he described it, “I was very intrigued with what it was that made my teaching good. I had the practice, but I didn’t have the theory” (22 August 2010). The drive to understand his own teaching, coupled with a growing dissatisfaction in various administrative roles in the public school system, lead Prof. Beckett back to NMU in 1990
to pursue a doctoral degree in rhetoric and composition. While earning his degree, which included having to redo his master’s coursework, he was employed as an adjunct faculty member in both the English and Journalism departments, culminating with a tenure-line position as the Director of Journalism Education at the completion of his degree. This foray back into the world of administrative was short-lived, however, and Prof. Beckett resigned from the position because it was “overwhelmingly time-consuming.” He returned to the English department as a full-time contract faculty member, “teaching mostly freshmen-level writing classes with a little bit of English methods thrown-in” (22 August 2010).

During our intake interview, Prof. Beckett remarked to me how “The theories that I picked up over the course of my doctoral studies redefined how I saw writing and its pedagogy” (22 August 2010), and I asked him to share with me his views on teaching first-year composition, as well as some defining points pertaining to his teaching philosophy. According to Prof. Beckett, his role as a first-year writing instructor was comparable to that of a minister’s role with their flock, noting:

As a minister, you know that your flock has a variety of ways of coming to what that idea of God is. So, as you’re ministering to your parishioners, you’re finding individual ways [for them] to better understand their God – for lack of a better metaphor. And it’s the same I think in writing. You’ve got to develop a trust just as a minister does with his parishioners, so that they can appreciate the things that you’re teaching, as well as the fact that they come to their composing in a variety of ways (22 August 2010).

This metaphor of the minister would arise in a few other instances, including one where Prof. Beckett expanded upon the idea of building trust with his students by saying, “you
hope that they'll trust you, you hope that they'll buy into your pedagogy – and you’re really pushing the envelope with some of them and pressing buttons they don’t like being pressed” (30 September 2010). Those “buttons,” as it were, often pertained to students trying to understand and “see their individualized approach [to writing] and better understand what it is” (22 August 2010), which meant being critical of assignments that often dealt with highly personalized topics and experiences. To help in building this trust, of being the figurative minister to his flock and enhancing his ethos with students, Prof. Beckett shared many of his personal experiences with the class, including his previous difficulties as an undergraduate in higher education. In his words, Prof. Beckett did this to let students know that he “doesn’t put his trousers on differently” than them, that he considers himself to be “in the category of ‘a regular person,’ certainly not an academic,” and also to have students “understand that if they develop the same habits I developed when I was an undergraduate the first time they will flunk out too” (16 November 2010). Perhaps most telling in terms of establishing a trusting relationship with students, however, was Prof. Beckett sharing his writing as part of the reading for the course. As he explained to me during one of our interviews:

...[students] write about themselves. And so if I don’t share some of my writing about myself and I don’t give narratives of the things that pertain to what we’re doing and what we’re writing, [then] I think that’s an unfairness to them, that they’re exposing themselves while you remain a little guarded. That just flies in the face of good communication efforts. They got to know who you are and why you are, just as what you’re asking of them with their writing – to gain the same perspective on themselves (16 November 2010).
In this light, and as Prof. Beckett would express in subsequent interviews, he really viewed himself as a “facilitator,” as being “in that classroom and in that learning process together” (22 August 2010) with students, and advocated for an environment where students could feel comfortable sharing deeply personal experiences.

Indeed, a self-proclaimed “Moffett man,” an a composition pedagogue and scholar who sought to bridge personal writing and formal essay writing, Prof. Beckett was a strong proponent of assignments where students could write from a place based within their own observations and experiences, gradually moving toward work that incorporated the thoughts, perspectives, and words of other individuals the students might know, and eventually having students interrogate and incorporate secondary research to supplement their own ideas, observations, and claims. Despite this gradual progression toward scrutinizing and utilizing the work of others, and partially based in his experiences as a journalism instructor, Prof. Beckett placed a great deal of emphasis on primary research throughout the course, of interviewing and surveying people in the communities or families to which students belonged. This practice, which he argued could lead students to look at a given topic from a multitude of perspectives, was not limited to the various topics under investigation, but also could be applied to his overarching goal of having students examine the way their individualized writing process operates. As Prof. Beckett explained, one component of students being immersed in the college or university community was the fact that they would receive a variety of perspectives about writing from other professors in other disciplines, and he elaborated by stating that “I am never alarmed when one of my students says, ‘Dr. Smith say that this is the way it should be done.’ The wonderful thing is that the more perspectives our students get from Jones and Smith and Prof. Beckett the better they can make decisions as to what works for them in the composing process” (22 August 2010). Prof. Beckett did
express this sentiment to his students the first day of class as well, explaining the concept of different styles, forms of citation, etc. based upon academic discipline and openly admitted that while this could be a “pain in the ass” for students, their ability to consistently use whatever style required of them, and apply the critical thinking skills they would develop in his class, was of the utmost importance.

One of the things that intrigued me, at least initially, throughout the course of my data collection, was how Prof. Beckett did not necessarily view his first-year composition course as a place where students made tremendous leaps in terms of their writing abilities, but as a place to hone critical thinking and reading skills. Though I would not go so far as to contend that student writing was cast in a secondary role in the course, it was apparent that, according to Prof. Beckett, improved student writing was often a byproduct of being able to think about how one writes and how others write, who they are writing to, what the purpose of their communication might be, etc. As he explains, “I tell my students that I’m not teaching writing, because most of them can compose, [they can] put words on a page or into a computer and it makes relative sense. But the step that they don’t have is becoming readers. And so I tell them that the class is really a class in reading and critical thinking” (22 August 2010). Consequently, while students are writing and reading the texts of others, Prof. Beckett believes that the “critical thought [students employ]...will superimpose itself upon later ventures where there’s some sort of intellectual need” (22 August 2010), and contends that the development of these “ideas and practices” indicative of critical thinking, through tools such as writing and reading, is imperative “so that when students are alone in their composing and they don’t have me or some other writing teacher or a tutor helping them...[they can] put together a real clear and focused essay that has a solid argument, singular claim, solid details, and analysis” (22 August 2010). For Prof. Beckett, then, greater thought about
one’s writing and process equated to greater agency and, in this light, his classroom became a venue for learning the appropriate tools to gain that agency, as opposed to being a place where students labored to churn out polished drafts.

The Setting

The ENG 103 class met twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:00 a.m. to 9:15 a.m., though I only observed the Tuesday sessions, in the largest residential complex on NMU’s campus. The building was home to 1,900 students, a dining hall, food court, and housed several computer-assisted classrooms in the basement. Some of these rooms were designated as “laptop classrooms” where students brought their own portable computers and worked from a series of tables where they could hard-wire their machine into ports to access the internet. The other classrooms were slightly larger with approximately 25 desktop computer stations arranged either in a center-island or along the outer parameters of the room. A teacher’s station, equipped with a computer, projector, and ELMO, was situated in the front, right-hand corner of the room adjacent to an erasable white board. The ENG 103 course I observed was in the latter of these two rooms. While on the surface the availability of computers was ideal, in that students could easily access their work during designated writing periods, much of the technology was aging and would often freeze, fail to connect to the Internet, run extremely slow, or simply did not boot-up. Early in the semester the instructor advised students to bring laptops if possible, relying on the campus-wide wireless Internet connection during research periods; however, this too occasionally became problematic as the classroom’s position in the basement of the complex often yielded low wireless signals.
The arrangement of the classroom had a considerable affect on the day-to-day operations and interactions of the class. For example, throughout my observations I noticed that several students would be using the computers for non-classroom activities like checking various social networking sites, e-mail, or even (as was the case with my participant Elizabeth) shopping online. This occurred, most notably, when the instructor was working at the board or when he physically could not see what was on the computer screens of certain students because of his vantage point in the room. After noticing these trends, I inquired to Prof. Beckett about whether or not he felt the physical layout of the classroom enhanced or inhibited his pedagogy, and he noted that “[The layout] sucks, it’s awful....I think as a writing teacher you’re trying to build a better dynamic and trying to break down the barriers of a room that has computers [where] you can’t even see heads on the other side” (30 September 2010). As Claire Lutkewitte mentions in her text “In Pursuit of the Perfect Classroom,” classrooms such as the one I observed “[do] not allow for much movement, much action, by teachers or by students” (par. 9), and it becomes clear that classroom design influences pedagogical practice. In the case of Prof. Beckett, though the layout of classroom was difficult to negotiate at times, he “got [students] moving around a lot” in an effort “to get them face-to-face and collaborating and talking” (30 September 2010). In my interviews with several student-participants, however, the grouping of individuals into peer review teams or occasionally collaborating on an in-class activity did little for building a sense of community in the classroom. This became particularly apparent when students were assigned groups for the final writing project, a collaborative piece where students submitted proposals for a story idea to a campus film festival. In many instances, students were meeting group members for the first time. As Elizabeth expressed to me, “The way the room was set-up...I could never see people on the other side – like, I don’t even know people on the
other side because computers were in the way, so I couldn’t see their face….so, it would have been nice if, maybe after [the first writing project], maybe we had a group project or activity” (13 December 2010). My student-participant Brad also commented on how the layout of the room created division among students, noting that “Everyone just sits in the same seat and talked to the same people. Like, there’s probably four different sections in class – there’s six [students] where I sit, six [students] in the back corner, six [students] in the other corner. So, I mean, I got to know six people pretty well, but the other five people [in my group for the final project] just so happened to be in other areas of the room that I never really knew” (7 December 2010).

Aside from the layout of the room being problematic, the meeting time for the class also created certain difficulties in terms of discussion, attendance, and community building. In the context of several interviews, Prof. Beckett conveyed to me how (in his range of experience) 8 o’clock classes often had students that were either incredibly focused and dedicated, or students who “don’t want to talk to anybody,” often missing class on a consistent basis. The course I observed had the latter issues and as Prof. Beckett elaborated in our final interview, “The 8 o’clock class [was] difficult in that there was a stretch where we were averaging just 16 students [out of 25] in the class for about 2 ½ weeks. Then there were the 2 that were never showing up, but there were 7 that were missing regularly” (13 December 2010). Several of my student-participants expressed similar sentiments – Elizabeth noted that “It’s 8 in the morning, so I don’t know if there much talking going on” and that “being an 8 a.m. class, you don’t feel like talking to people much because you’re so tired” (13 December 2010). Another student, Derrick, stated that he “[couldn’t] focus at 8 in the morning, but...definitely [tried] to” (13 December 2010). Despite these issues, Prof. Beckett noted that the members of the class, both those who attended regularly and those who did not, “rallied at the end and
that was kind of a hallmark of this group, they would rally and understood [the material] – so, I can’t really complain” (13 December 2010). Though the assertions of Prof. Beckett and students portray a classroom of deafening silence, a place where Prof. Beckett was the only resource and valuable pedagogical tool to “rally” droopy-eyed students throughout the course, this certainly was not always the case. For example, when I asked my participant Elizabeth around midterms (some 7 weeks into the course) about her impressions of the class and her classmates thus far, she remarked that “I think the class, for being 8 in the morning...we get along pretty well and we try our best, especially with the peer review, I feel like we try really hard to help each other understand [the material and assignments] better” (19 October 2010). As I already noted in the student profiles above, several participants sought collaboration and guidance from their fellow classmates with regard to their writing, but Elizabeth’s comments also point to students looking to their peers for basic comprehension of various elements course. She elaborated, “I feel like everyone is kind of on the same boat as far as understanding sometimes. Like, sometimes you don’t know what’s going on. We’re like, ‘What’s this assignment about? What’s going on?’...I feel like classmates are really helpful, like everyone is really willing to motivate each other” (19 October 2010).

Indeed, the understanding of assignments was an issue for several of my participants as students often grappled with trying to give the instructor what they thought he wanted in a given piece. Consequently, much of “what the instructor wanted” could be found in the course packet authored by Prof. Beckett and purchased by students at the beginning of the semester.

Packet
The use of a course packet for an ENG 103 is somewhat of an oddity at NMU considering that the Writing Program and the textbook selection committee provide instructors with a list of approximately six approved texts to choose from when planning and teaching their classes. However, there are protocols in place for instructors who want to circumnavigate the approved texts and create their own course packet; specifically, writing a statement of rationale that chronicles what the instructor will be incorporating into their packet and how that material addresses the goals of the course. Interestingly, Prof. Beckett seemed to have been given special consideration in that he has never been asked to justify his use of a packet to the various Writing Program Administrators that have come and gone during his tenure. As he explained to me, “I've been able to go through 7 different writing program directors and always been able to use my packet and not say, ‘Oh, yeah, I’m using one of the other required texts.’ So, someone else must understand (besides myself) that my packet and what I’m doing with it is valued” (22 August 2010). I asked Prof. Beckett if he could provide me with his reason for utilizing a packet and what value he saw in such a document as opposed to using a textbook. First and foremost, he noted that that he could edit the packet more regularly, eliminating items that he felt were becoming out-of-date, as well as providing students with a greater variety of authors to read. The bulk of Prof. Beckett’s editing of the course packet occurred during the summer before each academic year began, which of course was a tremendous benefit as compared to waiting for a new edition of a textbook to be published every few years. Furthermore, Prof. Beckett stated that the use of a packet enabled him to “go through and edit all the verb-age, making sure that it’s very clear and said as concisely as possible, just what I’m asking my students to do” (22 August 2010). Indeed, though Prof. Beckett included several of his own works of creative nonfiction and fiction in the packet, his comments illuminate the notion that the entire packet could be
viewed a model for students and their writing, as he emphasized to me his understanding of the audience (students), the purpose (to inform students about assignments, writing practices, models, etc.), and his continuous assessment of the document’s overall effectiveness – all things students are required to do with their own writing in his course.

In terms of the content of the packet, I would place the various entries in basic categories such as informational, explanatory, instructional, and models. For instance, the packet contained several documents that would provide students with information on various aspects of the course and assignments – these included the syllabus for the course, assignment sheets, and course/project calendars. Explanatory documents, such as Prof. Beckett’s personal essays on organization, structure, the writing process, and what constitutes good writing, provided students with greater detail about topics relevant to the subject of writing, including audience and purpose, correctness, self-assessment, revision, objectivity, and focus. The last two categories, instructional documents and models, comprised the greatest amount of material in the packet; specifically, there was sample student writing and models from professional writers for each designated writing assignments, as well as documents that would aid students in completing certain tasks during in-class activities, such as reader response sheets, guide questions for interviews, and evaluation forms for locating valid websites. It is worth noting that these categories are not mutually exclusive – certainly, a document that is used for modeling purposes (i.e. to demonstrate to students’ effective communication in one particular genre or mode of discourse) also has an instructional value. Likewise, Prof. Beckett’s numerous essays could be both explanatory to students (ex. “you need to consider x, y, and z when writing for a particular audience”) as well as acting as a model of how to write to a specific person, group, discourse community, etc.
Assignments

According to the course packet, “The assignments use rhetorical strategies to convince readers that our analysis, evaluation, interpretation, strategy, and claims are reasonable, logical, and honest” (7), and that students are to involve themselves in the “discourse acts of analysis, interpretation, evaluation, argument, and persuasion. Also discourse acts of description, narrative, classification, summary, synthesis, compare and contrast, inquire, and define should be considered” (7). To address these various discursive acts, students were asked to complete five major writing projects, each linked by various themes of family and community, and students were also required to submit a meta-cognitive cover sheet with each assignment that chronicled the “details [of] the entire process [students] engaged in when writing” (8). Consequently, these meta-cognitive cover sheets became an invaluable resource for me while examining the writing of students, as well as when triangulating my observations of in-class writing sessions with participant interviews, primarily because they provided me with a brief 500 – 600 word window into each student’s composing process. Specifically, each cover sheet asked students to describe, in a narrative form, when they began each piece of writing, when they encountered difficulties, when they felt were the best and worst times to compose, their environment when writing, what distractions plagued students while writing, where they attained help, what additional research (if any) students conducted, and how they addressed the comments made by Prof. Beckett on previous drafts (9).

In terms of the value this assignment, Prof. Beckett remarked that the meta-cognitive cover sheet gave students the opportunity to “see their individualized approach [to writing] and better understand what it is” (22 August 2010). Yet the cover sheet,
perhaps more than any of the other assignments, was confusing and a completely new genre for students to grapple with. As my participant Derrick noted, “When [Prof. Beckett] first gave us a cover sheet, I had no idea how to do [it]...never done one before in my life” (27 October 2010), but Derrick also asserted that as the semester progressed completing the cover sheet was “definitely getting easier” and that he “became more comfortable” discussing various aspects of his writing process. Interestingly, Derrick went on to say that despite the guiding questions provided in the packet for the cover sheets, he “[didn’t] really try to answer those, but...use them as a guideline” (27 October 2010). Though Derrick felt that he could write the cover sheets with greater ease at the completion of each major writing project, his occasional lack of following the prompts set forth by Prof. Beckett translated into an overall deprecation in the quality of the work. This seemed a common problem for others in the class as during the course of my observations Prof. Beckett mention to the students that the cover sheets were “less than stellar.” I asked him whether or not he believed that students were having a difficult time having to think about their writing process, or if he thought the lackluster work was simple procrastination. He stated:

It is both – procrastination because you can’t write a good meta-cognitive [cover sheet] at the last minute. I would say at least 20 percent of the students or more do the “I’ve got the paper all done, I’m happy. Oh, gee wiz, I gotta do the meta-cognitive.” And you know they’ve done that because it’s only ¼ of a full page. Those who do a really cool meta-cognitive fill the page with all the issues – the things that have gone on in class, the searching of an image, the peer editing, talking about when and where they’ve done the work, talking about being blocked, talking about episodes of the drafting process. I mean, if you do all of those things, you easily fill a page, but they just don’t. And so I’ve got all these
little hash-marks on the bottom saying “These are things that should be done more or are completely missing” (30 September 2010).

Indeed, procrastination with regard to the meta-cognitive cover sheet seemed to be an issue with some of my participants. Elizabeth in particular noted how “I’m still not use to them....I still wait until the last minute...I don’t think I’m growing from it as much as I should be. But I try, I do try whenever I do them...to find things that I feel I may have improved in, or maybe I haven’t improved in” (19 October 2010). Still, despite the procrastination on the part of some students, Prof. Beckett viewed the assignment as having tremendous benefits since it is a forum for students to “understand what pieces of learning they are missing and how to pick up on those pieces” (16 November 2010).

The 1st writing project consisted of classmate interviews where students would formulate open-ended question(s) “concerning an important current issue” to ask their peers. I asked Prof. Beckett about the rationale for this assignment, which I would learn had been a holdover from his days teaching journalism in secondary school. He stated that “It’s an icebreaker and it doesn’t necessarily fit with the rest of the flow of the community/family theme that I have with the other pieces....But, it does allow the students to have some comfort or gain a comfort level with everybody in the class because they go around and talk individually with everybody” (22 August 2010). Prof. Beckett also noted that the assignment provides students with the opportunity to think about how good questioning will inevitably result in varied responses and to introduce students the value of primary research early on in the semester. In essence, the final draft of the 1st writing project took the form of journalistic essay or straight reportage.

For some of my student-participants, the need for good questioning became apparent early on. One such participant, Brad, began with the simple question “What
are your views on abortion?” and he received similar responses (“I’m against it” or “I’m for it) from his classmates. Brad describes this occurrence in his final draft for the assignment, noting “When asking people their views on abortion, most responses where very quickly, their mind already made up. Portland freshmen ‘Craig,’ an Elementary Education major, said, ‘Abortion should be banded completely, it is not right.’ Indy freshman ‘Kelly,’ Architecture major, said however; ‘Abortion is necessary.’ Both people had very strong opinion responses but completely different answers.” To combat these one-dimensional answers, Brad “started asking a lot of scenarios and a lot of branch-off questions” (3 September 2010) depending on how his interviewee responded. For example, for someone that was opposed to abortion, Brad would ask questions such as “Well, what if they got raped? What if they wouldn’t be able to financially support [a child]? What if they didn’t want to go through the emotional stress of [adoption]” (3 September 2010)? Similarly, for those that support abortion, Brad asked questions like “What if their religion was against it and they had to have it” (3 September 2010)? According to Brad, the layering of scenarios in his questioning allowed him to “[get] different responses” and that “each question led to each student [having] different feelings on it” (3 September 2010). In reading Brad’s essay it is apparent that although the students he interviewed remained steadfast in their beliefs about abortion, Brad was successful in getting his classmates to at least see or think about the various sides of the issues. Though the assignment was meant to be straight reportage, Brad crafted a piece that revealed how “Sticking with your opinion based on varying facts is...[hard] to do” (1) and he concluded the essay with the assertion that “There are many different opinions and views on abortion; there is no right or wrong opinion for any abortion situation” (2) encouraging his reader to “[get] all the facts straight” in order to formulate “an informed opinion” (2).
Still others participants, like Elizabeth, thought the interview assignment “was kind of weird” (7 September 2010) and “didn’t like it at all” (7 September 2010) because she felt the project was not explained thoroughly by Prof. Beckett. She confided in me during one of our interviews that she “wasn’t the only one” who felt this way and that she “didn’t realize that [the] whole paper was going to be about one that I asked the question on” (7 September 2010). In examining Elizabeth’s final draft it was difficult to determine what question she proposed to her classmates; indeed, considering the responses she received, such as “I was raised Catholic so [God’s] always just been there” and “I think you kind of need something to believe in,” the overarching question guiding Elizabeth’s writing seemed to simply be “Do you believe in God and why?” What contributed to Elizabeth’s confusion is difficult to say as she would often ask Prof. Beckett questions during designated work periods in class. However, I suspect that either the absence of a model for the first writing project in the packet, or failure among students to read the packet all, may have been a factor. As Prof. Beckett expressed to me, “Getting [students] to read a packet even once is a struggle at first, and then of course you want them to read [2 or 3 times] because it’s only 10 or 12 pages in the packet for each writing unit….My models are pretty short, my explanations are pretty short, we go over them in class, [and] none of them take notes” (30 September 2010).

For the 2nd writing project, students were asked to compose a reflective piece where they were asked to “examine issues and values that have been or are” own their minds. Though the project clearly had a narrative feel, emphasizing each individual student’s perspective on a particular issue or topic relevant in their lives, the assignment was also meant to “persuade others” as to the topic’s value. In interviewing students and reading their pieces, it seemed that the persuasive element often got lost in the telling of their personal experiences. Indeed, many of my student-participants wrote about
profound and tragic events in their lives, often centering on death and thoughts of mortality. Derrick wrote about the death of a teammate from high school, Angel described the death of a close uncle, Brad told the story of his best friend’s death, and Elizabeth detailed the passing of her classmate’s brother. Only Kari, whose topic I noted in her profile above, deviated somewhat from the theme of death, loss, and reassessing/valuing life.

Just as each student-participant wrote about a similar topic, they each experienced similar difficulties with the assignment; namely, there were problems with *telling* the reader too much and not *showing* them how things transpired through descriptive language. This habit of “telling” would frequently lead to repetitious words or images, which did little for the content of the piece. As my participant Brad noted, “I would say, ‘I’m sad,’ and then I’d say ‘I’m crying.’ I’d say stuff that wasn’t really necessary [and] that was pretty obvious, like if I’m crying I’m obviously sad” (27 October 2010). This repetitious use of non-descriptive words or images can particularly be seen in his rough draft; specifically, the opening line states “Loud and noisy, all the different posies gathered together, yelling and bickering about the daily drama at school” (1). Obviously the opening is problematic from a descriptive standpoint as loud and noisy are similar in meaning, as well as the absence of accounting for the frequency, volume, or duration of the “loudness” or “noise.” As a reader, one could also question how the individuals discussed were “gathered.” Still, this remained unchanged in Brad’s final draft. Since I did not ask Prof. Beckett to see the comments he left on students’ papers, I could not ascertain if Brad simply ignored Prof. Beckett’s suggestions to “show” and not “tell,” or if Brad did not receive these comments until after his final draft was completed. Brad also stated that he “didn’t use a lot of mental images” (27 October 2010) in his writing, which amounted to “brief and un-detailed” prose (27 October 2010). Non-
descriptive words like “things” or “it” were also rampant in Brad’s text. For example, “The way Mitch passed and the mental image it left was horrid” (1–2). Derrick, too, mentioned that in the 2nd writing project he had “too much telling throughout the whole paper” (27 October 2010), and that he planned on “trying to cut out the words [Prof. Beckett] tells us not to use” (27 October 2010). Indeed, part of the course packet included a section entitled “Writing Style: 101 Tips,” which detailed (among other things) grammar, part of speech, and vocabulary for students to avoid in certain writing situations. Prof. Beckett elaborated on some of the difficulties students faced:

[Students] need to better understand that the details and what we make of the details is an incredibly integral part of all of our realities. So, to be able to shift their perspective from looking at all of the details into putting the detail into their writing is crucial. It really is the difference in a piece of writing between something that’s “Blah blah blah, opinion point, opinion point,” and focusing on one major piece where I’m trying to get a point across in a narrowly focused essay and how it makes it unique and individualized in doing so (16 November 2010).

Prof. Beckett also contended that some of the issues students were having stemmed from writing a “stream of consciousness” in early drafts, aware of the fact that the instructor would help them later on. To combat this, Prof. Beckett had students spend nearly an entire class period creating a descriptive word list; more specifically, he discussed how there is a distinction between “heartfelt” or “mindful” words (such as beautiful, disgusting, etc.) that can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, and “concrete” words (such as sharp, straight, etc.) that have a one-to-one correlation with reality. As a class, students brainstormed as many concrete words as possible, words that could be utilized by students in the 2nd writing project to describe and provide significant visual details for
their readers. Consequently, Prof. Beckett then asked students to write a descriptive paragraph of approximately 100 words using concrete words, allowing students to possibility incorporate the paragraph into their reflective essays if they chose to do so. Many did, but others in the class did not, and when Prof. Beckett handed back the papers several weeks later he conveyed to the class that those wanting to revise the essay for a higher grade needed to include the descriptive paragraph. He also noted that students needed to not explain the entire set of circumstances surrounding the event from beginning to end, but delve into the uniqueness of each individual and circumstance by avoiding the unnecessary, obvious, and cliché.

The 3rd writing project had perhaps the greatest correlation to the family and community theme set-forth by Prof. Beckett; more specifically, the assignment required students to interview those “who have had an impact on [the student’s] philosophic underpinnings.” According to Prof. Beckett, this paper “is taking a series of defining moments in one area, whether...morals, or ethics, or social morays, or spiritual/religious morays, and having [students] make heads or tails out of that” (16 November 2010). Again, like many of the other assignments, the 3rd writing project required students to engage in some form of primary research, “[taking] input from community members, family members, [and] whoever [students] look at as mentors” (16 November 2010), interviewing those individuals in order to help students understand where some of their own social, moral, or ethical dispositions originated, and possibly examine greater issues of socialization and human nature. The early stages of this assignment occurred as students left campus for fall break and many students took advantage of this opportunity by having discussions with friends and family back home, as well as distributing surveys to classmates through the course Blackboard site. As Elizabeth noted in her metacognitive cover sheet, “Prof. Joyce had us interview people. The questions were made up
during class...[and I made] phone calls home...I did not really understand what the point of the survey was, but I did as I was told. I figured the survey was a good way to get ideas for the next paper” (1). Upon their return, Prof. Beckett asked the class what questions students had prepared and he received a myriad of responses, ranging from one student asking her grandmother if she believed in lying (or a circumstance in which lying was okay), to another student asking relatives that if there is no higher being, then what prevents us from doing bad things? Fundamentally, the assignment asked students to examine the question of what governs our behavior and where does that behavior come from – is it the various discourse communities we associate with? Is it our social and religious upbringing? Is it related to larger issues surrounding socioeconomic status, race, gender, geographic location, etc?

While all of the assignments required students to engage in careful thought and reflection, Prof. Beckett noted that the “deepness” of thought needed for this project was often too much for students, resulting in some lackluster topics like “paying speeding tickets.” As Prof. Beckett elaborated, “You know, some of them really can’t handle it and don’t want to handle it. It’s just too much. In order to do a good job it takes too long, it’s too hard...They don’t like it because I want them to think deeper. Some of them, you know, they’ve got other things to do in college besides think deeply and write a cool paper about it” (16 November 2010). Indeed, the assignment seemed exceedingly difficult for students because they had to grapple with belief systems that surrounded them since childhood and many of my student-participants resorted to simply chronicling how they were shaped by those systems and continued to function within them. For example, Angel, a pastor’s daughter, described how her behavior was scrutinized more harshly than others, how she was held to a higher standard because of her father’s position in the church, and subsequently was expected to be an “inspiration”
to younger members of the congregation. While she did not question this practice, she expressed the hypocritical nature of it considering “The same adults that are in my face telling me how to live my life had their fun as a child and made all their mistakes. Now, as an adult they proclaim they are changed and saved” (2). Angel expressed in her essay a hope for greater tolerance among church-goers toward what she viewed as typical teenage exploration, but interrogating her spiritual compass seemed to be of little concern since she had, quite literally, been raised in the church.

Other students had similar difficulties with the assignment. Brad, for example, described how “while growing up my mother Lisa, didn’t have a religious path. Her parents chose not to bring any organized religion into their family, only a generalized belief in God” (1), and went on to note how his mother became a confirmed Catholic upon meeting and marrying his father. Brad would go on to describe in his paper several of the religious rites and rituals associated with Catholicism, such as baptism, first communion, and confession, noting how (with the exception of his baptism) each event made him feel and concluded that his religious path was “a way to resolve or help with life’s insecurities...because, [by bringing] God into your life, He is always there to listen to prayers” (2). As with Angel, there was no questioning of morals or spirituality for Brad – why we behave the way we behave, or as Brad remarked “What often determines the path a person chooses” (2), was governed primarily by familial influence. In the case of Derrick, there was also a focus on how parental influence shaped his religious path, describing how he “attended preschool in the same church that I attend today every Sunday with my mother” (1), but he also described how he contributed to the guidance of others through his involvement in church camps and youth groups. Similarly, though not religiously or spiritually focused, Elizabeth’s paper described giving back to her community through volunteering. Indeed, description, more so than inquiry,
dominated the 3rd writing project, which signified to me some of the “deepness of thought” Prof. Beckett wanted from students may have been absent as they planned and composed their essays.

In terms of the final two assignments (the 4th and 5th writing projects), the pool of work from student-participants became much more difficult to examine. In the case of the 4th writing project, 2 of my 5 participants (Angel and Elizabeth) did not provide me with drafts of the assignment. Despite this, I was able to discuss the project with Elizabeth during the course of our interviews, but (unfortunately) Angel did not schedule a final interview with me, thus her work and perspective are not included here. With regard to the parameters of the assignment, students were asked read and analyze various stories about family and communities and selected one short story to write about. As part of the assignment, students were required to provide a brief synopsis or summary of the story, incorporate their opinion of the piece, and “analyze how the story is relevant” to the life of the student and the lives of others. As Prof. Beckett detailed for me, “[Students are] looking at a community that’s writing fiction now, as opposed to creative non-fiction....but a lot of the stories are similar – there’s intrigue and conflict and nastiness. And then how do you write about it? Well, you match it up to what you see as important in your life, you try to interpret what you see the author saying, the perspective the author might be bringing” (16 November 2010). For many students, this type of analytical writing was similar to some of their experiences in secondary education. Kari remarked that, “It is a lot of what we had to do in high school, except that in high school, when we read something, there was a specific part we were going to have to write about” (3 December 2010). By “specific” Kari explained that there would often be a theme or motif that students would often have to elaborate on, whereas in the context of Prof. Beckett’s assignment she felt she was given more freedom and allowed to
make the piece more relevant to her own experiences. Brad expressed similar sentiments, stating that “in high school, we’d talk about stories...and we would...[look for] what the story was trying to portray – like symbols or messages” (7 December 2010). The big difference for Brad, however, was that these literary discussions would often take place in the form of answering questions on a test and not in the form of an essay. Derrick also noted that certain high school assignments had given him “ideas and knowledge on how to analyze [works of literature]” (3 December 2010), and he felt prepared to analyze John Updike’s well-anthologized short story “A&P.” Only Elizabeth saw little correlation between her secondary education assignments in literary interpretation and analysis, primarily because (in her previous experiences) she was required to examine “books, not short stories, and they were a lot longer” (13 December 2010).

By the time students began working on the 4th writing project, Thanksgiving break was approaching and a mere 4 weeks remained in the semester. Consequently, Prof. Beckett was faced with enormous constraints as students still had to complete another writing project in a short amount of time. Around this time, as I was finishing up my observations of one particular class period, Prof. Beckett candidly remarked to me that there would be a significant decrease in the amount in-class time devoted to the final two writing projects. Indeed, I recalled a few weeks earlier when Prof. Beckett first introduced the 4th writing project – his introduction had the feel of a lecture as he read from the assignment sheet and a supplementary handout entitled “Views from the Author,” a document where the authors to some of the short stories up for analysis gave their views (based upon questions from students in previous semesters) on what they were trying to accomplish in their stories. Many of these responses focused on the inspiration for the story or what the authors were trying to accomplish with a specific
character. Barbara Zimmerman, for example, discussed the background to her short story, responding to a student question about how much of her story and the characters were based upon real events and how much was fictionalized. She stated:

   My ex-husband served in the Vietnam War and he killed – sometimes children (10 or so) after his platoon was ambushed and during the body count they discovered the age of the enemy. My nephew served as a Marine in Iraq....But he is NOT Catholic and the story is totally fictional. My curiosity and imagination put the two together – a Vietnam War veteran and a very young Marine being shipped to Iraq (par. 5).

Though the reading of the supplemental handout was valuable in the sense of deconstructing students perceptions about authors and how they craft their work (something that would show up again in the context of the ENG 285 class discussed in the following chapter), the pedagogical practice of dictating from an assignment sheet was considerably different from previous introductions to major writing assignments where students would often begin brainstorming through various in-class writing exercises. I asked Prof. Beckett about this change, specifically if the change to a “lecture” format was because of the type of assignment, or simply because students had (at that time) not yet read the stories. He noted, “I think it’s because of the writing assignment. I mean, you’re asking them to do something that’s quite English-like. Some of [the students] really frowned on such things in high school – at least I did when I was a senior in high school” (16 November 2010). While students made it clear throughout the course of interviews that they had a certain degree of familiarity with the genre of literary analysis prior to coming to the university, this familiarity was often regulated to the recognition of major themes, connecting certain texts, and possible retention of said
themes and texts for examinations – not making connections to their own lives. Two students in particular, Elizabeth and Kari, had difficulty connecting their chosen stories to their own lives. In Elizabeth’s case, she circumnavigated her own life completely and tried to draw a comparison between the protagonist of one story to popular culture icon and athlete Tiger Woods. Kari, although feeling confident about the paper, did not so much connect the reading to her own life as she gave her personal opinion on the piece, peppered with bits of literary interpretation and analysis. For example, she focuses on the symbolism of the mirrors in Carol Shields aptly titled story “Mirrors,” discussing how

   The mirrors have their own representation. They symbolize the outside world. They are not in the story except for the scenes of the daughter in the bathing suit and the wife in the restaurant. The importance of them is represented in the absence of them. With the absence of mirrors it shows that the family is hiding from the outside world. They have no one to judge them and at the same time they are not judging themselves. The absences of the mirrors create simplicity and a carefree life. Shields makes the audience think about what life would be like if there were no mirrors. Would we all still be as judgmental? I think that we would all get along better.

Though Kari clearly does make a connection between the imagery, symbolism, and characters in the story and society, i.e. the presence of mirrors as a reflection of a judgmental world, she does not create a correlation to her own life or experiences in the essay. The completing of certain aspects of the assignment and not others reflects some of the students’ confusion, as well as the environment surrounding the 4th writing project where Prof. Beckett invariably had to change is overarching pedagogy (use of in-class writing exercises, dialogue instead of lecture, etc.) because of time constraints, his desire
to incorporate some form of literature into the composition class, and his assumptions about the student’s prior experience with genres such as literary analysis.

In the case of the final writing project, students wrote collaboratively with a group and were asked to turn-in a single, final draft to the instructor. Because I did not secure permission to examine the writings of the other group members my student-participants worked with, I felt it would have been unethical to include those writings here. However, each student was required to submit their own individual meta-cognitive cover sheet, which I was able to acquire from 3 of 5 participants. Still, because there was significantly less material, I feel that a lengthy discussion of the 5th writing project is not particularly necessary for this study.

A Day in the Life of ENG 103

Aside from the last 4 weeks of the semester, where Prof. Beckett felt compelled to devote less time to in-class writing and to get students working as much as possible in their groups for the 5th writing project, the day-to-day operations of the class periods I observed remained essentially the same, i.e. they were mainly work periods for students. In fact, there were certain points as a researcher where I grew frustrated because I felt as though I was observing the same class period over and over again and, from a pedagogical standpoint, began to question the value and frequency of Prof. Beckett allowing students to work on their writing during class. As I remarked in my reflections on October 19, 2010:

I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’m getting tired of observing nearly the same thing in every class, but it is getting to be a little irritating. Again, I appreciate that the
instructor gives students so much in-class time to work on their drafts, ask questions, etc., but, in some instances, whether students have a lot to work on or not, they don’t use the time or stay on task.

Despite my feelings and despite the fact that some students (including some of my student-participants) were not taking advantage of the time, I understood why Prof. Beckett felt compelled to give students time (or at least the opportunity) to write in class. As he remarked to me in an earlier interview, “I think I’ve consciously...made available time that [students] could work. And if they had questions about, not only what we were trying to do in that class lab, but also the other issues of the meta-cognitive cover sheet or [other assignments] and its issues, so that not only do you have time to work with a quasi-conference with them, but you also have time to start reading pieces of drafts” (30 September 2010). Indeed, Prof. Beckett faced enormous constraints since, in addition to the section I observed, he also taught 3 other sections of ENG 103, which meant commenting on and grading 100 student papers and meta-cognitive cover sheets five times throughout the semester. While these in-class work periods were intended to be a benefit for the students, allowing them the opportunity to clarify points with Prof. Beckett, ask questions, draft, revise, and, according to Prof. Beckett, “gain confidence” (30 September 2010) in their writing through continual practice, it was also an opportunity for Prof. Beckett to get a sense of the problems or difficulties specific students might be facing, as well as what he could expect when the final drafts were handed-in.

These typical work periods began with Prof. Beckett reminding students about upcoming due dates, opportunities for extra credit, and other logistical or compositional concerns pertaining to a given assignment, such as incorporating an image into their
work. At first, Prof. Beckett would simply make these announcements to students, but, after an influx of individuals failed to turn in their assignments on time or address specific criteria for the assignment, Prof began asking students to take notes on his various talking points. During the designated work periods, students would often be given a multitude of work options for that particular day, options that were frequently described in an MS Word document projected onto the screen at the front of the room. For example, on October 19th, right around the time students were working on the 3rd writing project, Prof. Beckett had students choose from the following tasks:

- During class today, you should take the opportunity to work on your cover sheets being sure that to discuss how you addressed Writing Project 1 (WP1) and Writing Project 2 (WP2) issues in this Writing Project 3 (WP3) essay, as well as ALL the mental and physical steps including the classroom, research, interviews, and surveys completed.

- Continue with the next draft of WP3 and consider how a descriptive narrative might be a way of opening or closing this particular essay. Since this segment was not well accomplished in WP2 and the majority are revising WP2 it would be a good idea to complete the assignment to Prof. Beckett’s satisfaction.

- You also need to search of one or more images for this essay—work on that in class

- Finally you need to continue with possible research on line -- and outside of class with possible interviews with folks from the community and family. It will a responsibility to have available such information for Thursday's class.

Prof. Beckett also noted that students could be working on revisions to their 2nd writing project, giving them the opportunity to turn these revisions in for a higher grade in the
coming weeks. What is interesting about the series of tasks Prof. Beckett posed to students, however, is that although they all pertain to the 3rd writing project, there is an attempt to scaffold knowledge, to build upon the previous assignments students have completed in order to better inform future compositions. Indeed, in this particular instance, Prof. Beckett also pointed students in the direction of a series of prompts he had prepared entitled “Characters & Narrative: Revisiting WP2 Considerations,” prompts such as “Write a short WP3 element creating a possible detailed opening or closing. Construct dialogue, place, character descriptions, and narrative action.” By doing this, Prof. Beckett was attempting to show students the interconnectivity of various discursive acts or genres, though he did not actually require students to complete this or other prompts, merely offer them as an exercise or option to begin the process for the 3rd writing project. Perhaps not surprisingly, especially if one also considers the difficulty students faced with the concept of descriptive language and “showing” rather than “telling” in the 2nd writing project, none of my student-participants created a descriptive introduction or conclusion. Instead, there were the same problems with using non-descriptive and generalizing words. For example, in Elizabeth’s introduction, the use of vague words such as sincere, warm, and innocent:

There are no words to describe the happiness a child’s face can bring. The smile is sincere, warm, and innocent. Knowing I caused the smile makes the moment even better. Back in high school, I used to teach Sunday School so I was used to children’s smile, but my senior year, there was a change. No child’s smile will ever compare to the smile of the particular child.

Derrick avoided description altogether, offering the reader some generalized statements about religion and a somewhat unsupported thesis statement:
All through life, people grow up differently in terms of religious background. Some maybe Christian’s while others may choose to be Roman Catholic. It all depends on the choices made while growing up. Between parents and friends, your religious choices are made early in life. I’m not saying that people don’t change they’re religious views when there older, but mostly what people learn at an early age is generally what they stick with their whole lives.

The difficulties of Elizabeth, Derrick, and other student-participants faced should not be surprising since, as I will discuss in greater detail in my analysis of the ENG 103 class as an activity system, trying to learn the written conventions of a particular genre, a system that is very heavily situated historically in its rules, norms, and conventions, cannot be done in a relatively short amount of time. Prof. Beckett, considering his attempt to get students to continue working in the narrative genre, seemed to have accounted for this; though, without specifically requiring some form of narration in the 3rd writing project, a project with its own set of journalistic or editorial conventions, students chose not to include much narration or description.

After giving students for the class period, Prof. Beckett would set students to work. Prof. Beckett would proceed to walk around the room, stopping at each student’s station and telling them to ask him a question. Some students would decline, but Prof. Beckett would be persistent and eventually those declining students would generally ask a question about some lower-order concern, such as were to put punctuation in a given sentence. Still other students did ask questions regarding the parameters of the assignment or content, often asking Prof. Beckett to read certain paragraphs or passages of their work and ask for feedback. As I mentioned earlier, however, a great deal of this writing time in class was spent not writing. On any given work day, Elizabeth and Angela
could be observed working on their meta-cognitive cover sheets or drafts, but also shopping for clothing, checking grades or assignments for other classes, answering e-mailing, or adding content to their Facebook page. Brad, though less prone to distraction than some other student participants, was occasionally observed updating his fantasy football team on the computer or studying for an exam in another class. Derrick would have his draft open on his computer, but found it difficult to do much else. As he commented to me in one of our interviews, “The thing is it’s so early in the morning, it’s tough for me to think about writing. Honestly. But Prof. Beckett’s always on me, like, ‘Get writing and stuff.’ I can’t focus at 8 in the morning, but I definitely try to” (27 October 2010). Consequently, Derrick would often talk (or, more accurately, flirt) with his neighbor and play solitaire on his computer when he had difficulty writing. Kari seemed to be the most focused of my student-participants during in-class work periods, often asking neighbors to read certain passages, posing questions to Prof. Beckett, and adding content to her assignments.

Although there was a degree of predictability to in-class work periods, there was some variance in the class as well. Specifically, during class periods where Prof. Beckett introduced a new writing project, students often were required to complete an in-class writing assignment intended to help students formulate a topic, idea, or sense of direction for the piece. In the case of the 3rd writing project, which has been discussed at length, Prof. Beckett asked students to get out a piece of paper and write on the following prompt:

✓ On a laptop or new sheet of paper: Write down one incident which heavily affected your spiritual or philosophic views on a greater being or lack of such a being – tell your feelings at the time. (ex. a friend gets into a car accident and is
hurt badly – we pray to God for the friend to be okay, but the friend dies. Where are we in terms our feelings toward that spiritual entity

✓ Write down a recent act of human kindness – tell your feelings at the time.
✓ Write down a recent act of blatant disregard for your feelings and/or situation—tell your feelings
✓ Write down a time when you violated personal family or societal codes, laws, rules – tell why
✓ Write down a time when you tried to stop another from violating such codes – tell feelings
✓ Write down what is your personal responsibility for others’ welfare – explain
✓ Begin to construct survey questions

Consequently, a writing activity such as this would take up the entire class period, though occasionally there would be enough time left for students to volunteer or share some of their responses. Prof. Beckett, though he did not necessarily write with students during this type of activity, would often discuss his personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences pertaining to certain questions in a given prompt. In relation to the questions above and his own spirituality, he conveyed to students how, as an avid hiker, he had been able to see some of the most majestic spaces in the United States, completely isolated from human civilization, and in the presence of such natural beauty could not help but believe in some sense of a creator.

Interestingly, it was while observing this particular activity that I began to think about how activity theory, as a lens for analysis, can be helpful in terms of understanding the nature of an activity, who it affects, how different motivations change the nature or perception of the activity, but also what questions are left by an activity. For example, in
the activity above basic questions like what is the subject, the object, the outcome, the community, are all fairly easy to answer (though two members of the class were literally asleep during the activity, perhaps nullifying their placement in the community), but the outcome become a little fuzzy as there are possible micro and macro-level outcomes. Is this in-class activity to lead students toward survey questions (so, is research and research skills an outcome)? Is the outcome to help students invent a possible topic for the overall paper? Is it both? Is this complicated by the fact that Prof. Beckett admittedly stated that students might have some false starts and can change topics for the 3rd writing project? Does this make the in-class writing a brainstorming activity? Indeed, outcome is complicated by the fact that this is not a longitudinal study, so some overarching curriculum, program, or course outcome, such as students gaining more authority over their writing is impossible, to determine in the span of 15 weeks. However, it is possible to examine and discuss some of the questions I have detailed above (among others) in relation to investigating this one particular class as an activity system.

*Activity Theory Analysis of Rhetoric and Writing*

As I mentioned in the context of Chapter 2, I utilize activity theory as a framing device, as a way of helping to categorize what has transpired in the classrooms I observed. While the pairing of ethnography and activity theory might seem odd, especially when one considers the origins of activity theory in the field of cognitive science, as well as ethnography’s emergent, anthropological bent, these two discourses share many complimentary features when applied to the study of writing and writing classrooms. In their conference paper “Activity Theory: An Introduction for the Writing
Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle assert that activity theory “helps us see more fully all the aspects of a situation and community that influence how people use the tools of language and genre” (1), as well as to help provide a context for the factors that can influence the act of writing (1). Certainly the same could be said for ethnography, particularly teacher research and writing classroom ethnographies, where researchers often “aim to describe classroom interactions and practices….to find out first and foremost how classroom participants are doing what they are doing, with the implied aim to uncover why they are doing it” (Lin 70). Furthermore, if one is to examine a culture and try to capture how that culture functions, including its rituals, rules, traditions, behaviors, etc., one cannot ignore the various activities or activity systems that occur within that culture. Indeed, it could be argued that so much of a culture is comprised of the activities that transpire between members (and non-members).

Regardless, and as Angel Lin makes clear, in utilizing activity theory alongside ethnography, “It is important for us to understand activity theory [AT] not as an ultimate piece of truth about human activities, but as a heuristic tool, a working model that we might draw upon to add to our repertoire of analytical tools to conduct a more holistic, contextualized, ethnographic analysis of pedagogical practices” (76). It is with this basic premise that I proceeded analyzing the culture of Prof. Beckett’s first-year composition classroom.

I began with the primary unit of analysis: the activity system. As David Russell describes it, an activity system is “any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction” (510). Kain and Wardle elaborate on Russell’s definition, stating that “the study of activity systems is concerned with looking at how systems function over time” (2). In the context of my study, "ongoing" can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. Certainly, on the macro-level, the
Writing Program and the ENG 103 course have existed for quite some time and, barring some sort of restructuring on the part of the university, these entities will proceed for some time into the future. In addition, and as I did in brief at the beginning of the chapter, it is possible to trace the ongoing activity of the Writing Program and the ENG 103 course over a period of time and contemplate where they might end up in the future. On the micro-level, i.e. in the context of the specific ENG 103 class I have observed, “ongoing” certainly pertains to specific activities that occur in the classroom. For example, the progress of writing over the duration of the semester, where an investigator can measure or assess where students began in terms of their writing abilities at the beginning of the course and where they ended time upon its conclusion. In addition, what students learn about their own writing, their process, and how to adapt that process to different contexts and assignments is something that (we hope) will carry on in to the future.

The “object-directed” component to of activity system pertains to how various activities “are directed toward specific goals” (Kain and Wardle 2). Again, as noted above, the goal of ENG 103 as a course is to teach students persuasive uses of language and to apply that understanding to various readings and assignments. Of course, Prof. Beckett and my student-participants had their own specific goals. For example, one of the most prevalent for Prof. Beckett was to get students to write as though they were readers of a text, which often entailed scaffolding assignments such as in-class writing, peer reviews, etc., while students often discussed lower-order concerns such as improving grammatical skills or writing more concise introductions and goals. For many students, certain assignments also housed specific goals. For instance, in the 2nd writing project Brad set a goal (upon the prompting and commentary of his instructor) to
eliminate some of the repetitious elements of his narrative, while in later assignments this became less of an issue and was no longer a directed goal of his writing.

Activity systems are also historically conditioned in that they “come into being because of practices that have a history. At any point that we begin to study how a system works, we need to consider how it came to function in a particular way” (Kain and Wardle 2). Consequently, the culture of the ENG 103 classroom was affected by the historically conditioned practices surrounding the course, as well as how those practices needed to change within the university and the core curriculum. What’s more, Prof. Beckett, with over four decades of teaching experience, obviously drew upon a fair amount of historical conditioning in terms of what he believed worked and did not work in the teaching of writing. Students, too, entered Prof. Beckett’s classroom with preconceived notions about what constituted “college English” and grappled with their own historically grounded writing processes in this new environment. Nearly all of my student participants expressed that in their secondary education experiences they would often complete assignments close to the deadline instead of planning or writing over an extended period of time – a practice that was contested in ENG 103 with scaffolded assignments and multiple drafts.

The dialectical-structure of activity systems “describes a type of relationship in which aspects of a process, transaction, or system are mutually dependent” (Kain and Wardle 2), and this dependent relationship is certainly apparent in the way in which the ENG 103 course has been institutionally situated – i.e. dependent upon how it serves the University Core Curriculum and the overarching mission of the university as a liberal arts institution. Of course, a dialectal structure (or, sometimes, a lack thereof) was also apparent in the classroom as Prof. Beckett would often ask students where they currently
were with certain projects, students would respond or ask further questions, and Prof.
Beckett would offer some sort of advice, answer, or perspective. In other words, the way
in which a student might proceed with an assignment often depended on transactional
conversation with Prof. Beckett about the best course of action through face-to-face
meetings or commentary on papers.

The tools that mediated the various activities I witnessed in the classroom were
perhaps the easiest element to discern. As Kain and Wardle note, “The types of tools we
use mediate, or shape, the ways we engage in activity and the ways we think about
activity” (2). Among the physical and non-physical tools I observed were pedagogical
tools such as conferences, peer review, lectures, as well as other tools such as computers,
course management platforms, syllabi, assignment sheets, and quizzes; consequently,
each of these tools can “affect how we participate in learning activities” (2). Indeed, the
lack of working (or intermittent working) technologies in the classroom, whether it was
certain computer terminals or the overhead projector, had an effect on learning in the
classroom. Those students who brought in their own laptops for designated in-class
work periods were often more easily distracted than those using the computer terminals
as they would occasionally open-up work for other classes (Brad), check, update, or
upload content to social networking profiles (Angel and Elizabeth), play computer games
(Derrick), or even shop online (Elizabeth). While these practices certainly created
distractions to the learning environment, tools such as the course packet and course
management platforms like Blackboard allowed students to have easier access to
information and supplementary materials for the class, and tools such as conferencing
and e-mail allowed students to have greater access to the instructor in order to receive
assistance on the assignments.
Lastly, activity systems rely upon human interaction. In other words, though individuals and their singular actions comprise part of an activity system, “activity theory is concerned with how people work together, using tools, toward outcomes” (Kain and Wardle 2). Early on in this project, I had thought I would examine one specific in-class activity, something that I felt embodied some of the overarching goals of the course, and my attention shifted to what that activity might be. This proved to be problematic in numerous regards. For one, let us say I was to examine a specific in-class activity such as peer review – some aspects or nodes of activity theory (ex. subject, object, community, outcome, tools, rules, division of labor, outcome, etc.) in relation to this activity would be obvious. Specifically, the students and the instructor would constitute the subjects, peer review groups would comprise part of the community, tools would be made up of peer review sheets, writing utensils, and reading aloud protocols, and the rules or division of labor would be contingent upon the stipulations laid-out by the instructor at the beginning of the activity (ex. reading aloud the introduction of one’s own paper, then having different group members reading other sections silently) – but other nodes become difficult to define. In particular, the motives, object and outcomes of peer review vary depending on the subject (i.e. individual student-participant or instructor). Indeed, as Kain and Wardle explain, “The subject provides a point of view for studying the activity” (4), while “the motives direct the subject’s activities” (4). If I were to examine Prof. Beckett’s motives for peer review, his purposes and reasons for the activity, I would need to look no further than my second interview with him. I asked, “How do you try to drill home those notions of audience or getting students to write and read their own work as a reader? Are there certain practice or activities you do” (30 September 2010)? Prof. Beckett replied, “Peer review. To get them to start being critical of others writing so that they can be critical of their own. It’s constantly hammering at them to stop being an
egocentric writer and thinking what they’re doing is cool and being a critical reader” (30 September 2010). Consequently, Prof. Beckett’s response not only illuminates his motives for peer review (to facilitate critical reading in the work of others), but also the object and outcome – the object, or “immediate goal of the activity” (Kain and Wardle 4), being the application of a critical eye to one’s own work with possible long-term outcomes of de-centering the egocentric writer and giving the student more authority/agency over their writing, outcomes that again cannot be proven unless through a longitudinal study.

Though this type of analysis is valuable in the sense that it can allow pedagogical researchers to understand the perceptions multiple participants (i.e. instructors and students), how certain components or nodes of an activity function, and the overall effectiveness of the activity in accomplishing certain objectives or point to possible long-term outcomes, which of course can lead to possible restructuring of an activity for better results, I decided that examining the entirety of the activity system itself would be the most beneficial for this portion of my study.¹ In other words, it is not feasible to say that single activities by themselves (like peer review, or conferencing, or in-class interviews, or any number of other activities that transpired over the course of 15 weeks) are representational of what the object or objectives of the course were or what emerged from this particular class; however, when we consider the entirety of the activities that occurred in relation to the specific things Prof. Beckett wanted students to learn from his class (i.e. seeing and understanding their individualized approaches to writing,

¹ In the following chapter on the ENG 285: Introduction to Creative Writing course, I do an activity theory analysis of a single “quick-writing” poetry activity, which involved one specific student, in order to demonstrate how such a framework can be a valuable analytical to writing studies. Such an analysis proved difficult in the context of this chapter, however, because I did not have access to the in-class writing exercises students composed for Prof. Beckett, and thus could not adequately ascertain if the objective of the activity had been met or even if segments of these in-class writings had been utilized in the major writing projects of students.
understanding audience and the purpose of their writing, learning to become a better critical reader, etc.) and the culture perpetuated by class members trying to meet these objectives, then we have (as Lin contended) a “more holistic, contextualized” ethnographic study.

The examination of activity systems and first-year composition is not necessarily new, as David Russell in his 1995 seminal work “Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction” examined “two traditional formulations of the object(ive)s of the course: improving students writing in general and teaching students a general academic or public discourse” (56). With regard to the former object(ive), Russell contends that to assign first-year composition the goal of improving student writing is inaccurate (if not impractical) for several reasons. For one, students must learn to write in various genres, each with their own object(ive)s and historical conditioning, and “Some people are very adept at writing certain genres because they have participated a great deal in the activity system that uses them, whereas they may be much less adept...at writing a genre from an activity system in which they have not participated” (Russell 58). Russell uses the example of a scientist writing a Nobel Prize winning paper yet not being able to write a straight news story about his discovery because the conventions of one genre are not necessarily indicative to the other, despite the scientist having some familiarity as a reader of journalistic genres and despite the fact that both genres are a form of “writing” (58 – 59). In terms of the first-year composition class, some students may be familiar with genres such as the persuasive essay (for example, arguing for or against some public policy or legislation in an American Government class), but have never encountered a genre such as a rhetorical analysis or, in the case of the course I observed, a paper examining their moral, spiritual, or philosophical dispositions. As Russell makes clear, however, “As one becomes adept at more and more activities that require writing and
hence at writing more genres, it is more likely (but by no means certain) that one will be able to master a new genre more quickly, because it is more likely that there will be some feature of the new genre or activity that resemble features in a genre or activity one already knows” (59). Russell continues by stating that to view first-year composition courses as a place with the sole purpose of improving student writing is to perpetuate some of the problems Kitzhaber first noted with general writing instruction courses – namely, what genres (and thus familiar or unfamiliar activity systems) to chose for the content of the course, the severe time constraints placed upon teachers and students to work with a small segment of a genre, the lack of expertise on the part of some faculty with specific genres, and the difficulty of evaluating the overall effectiveness of first-year composition outside of Writing Programs (59 – 60).

In terms of the latter object(ive) for first-year composition, Russell states that there has been a long-entrenched belief that general writing instruction courses “teach students to write or to write better what is thought of as a universal educated discourse, a general kind of discourse that all educated (or truly educated) persons in a culture share” (60). Much like the assertion that first-year composition courses are meant strictly to “make students better writers,” this belief of a “universal educated discourse” is difficult to reconcile from an activity theory perspective. Specifically, the idea that a first-year composition sequence can completely instill students with ability to write for all the varied discourses of the academy (much less write well) is, quite frankly, preposterous as “there is no distinctive genre, set of genres, linguistic register, or set of conventions that is academic or public discourse per se” (Russell 60); rather, the academy is filled with a series of “specialized discourses” (and thus, activity systems) that have utilized the specific tool of writing for their own ends and, in the process, have created a plethora of genres (Russell 60). In this light,
...learning to write academic discourse means learning to write some more or less specialized genre or genres...because all writing is specialized in the sense that there is no overarching discourse of which others are merely subsets. Nor is there a generalizable skill or attainment called academic discourse of public discourse transferable to any academic writing situation or any situation calling for writing about public issues” (Russell 63).

To remedy these two traditional formulations pertaining to the object(ive)s of first-year composition, Russell suggests that higher education more readily adopt Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs in order for students to “to choose, enter, become a full participant in, and eventually change for the better one’s chosen activity system(s)” (69) since the genres associated with those systems will no longer be taught in segregation. In addition, Russell believes that in order to improve the state of writing within higher education there needs to be an effort to “raise the awareness of students, teachers, and the public about writing, its uses and its power – for good or ill – in the cultures and activity systems that employ it” (73). In short, Russell envisions a first-year composition course or sequence of courses that does not try to teach writing in isolation or as a set of skills, but as a place to “study the role of writing in human activities” (73), to make the focus of general writing instruction be about writing (73).

Though Russell’s text is some 15 years old, his assertions about some of the myths surrounding the object(ive)s of first-year composition certainly remain today. However, I am less interested in how all of first-year composition functions as an activity system within the academy and more concerned with the writing classroom as an activity system. In what follows, I reconfigure some of the various activities and observations I already chronicled above when describing the participants, the setting, and situatedness
of the ENG 103 course within the university, paying particular note to notions of pedagogy, technology, authority, and yes, the assignments or genres produced (though without a dissection of the subsequent activity systems to which those genres belong), in order to better understand what was going on in the particular classroom I observed and some of the object(ive)s Prof. Beckett laid out for the course. In doing this, I try to fulfill one of the important goals of activity theory, “Accounting for aspects of a system to better understand the nature of the activity (Kain and Wardle 6); in other words, I account for what transpired in the system of Prof. Beckett’s writing classroom to understand the nature of the culture that emerged. There are, of course, other goals associated with this type of analysis, such as “Analyzing how the parts of a system work together to better anticipate participants’ needs and goals” (Kain and Wardle 6) and “Isolating problems to develop solutions” (Kain and Wardle 6), but I discuss these in my concluding chapter under the premise that I am not trying to “fix” or solve the problems of the culture, but instead point to implications for future studies utilizing activity theory to study writing classrooms.

As previously mentioned, the subjects of Prof. Beckett’s writing class are fairly easy to decipher – a classroom of 25 students (including my five student-participants), some of which who attended class regularly and some who did not, along with Prof. Beckett (a 69 year old male instructor) comprised the subjects for examination. While this group certainly constitutes a community, Prof. Beckett’s ENG 103 class operated under the auspices of other communities such as the Writing Program, the University Core Curriculum, and the university as a whole. Consequently, each of these communities had specific objectives for the course, whether it be the university’s commitment to a liberal arts education and writing students developing the skills necessary to involved themselves in civic life, or the Writing Program’s need for students
to understanding the highly integrated, rhetorical nature of reading and writing. Again, in my conversations with Prof. Beckett and my observations of the course, I saw him lay out three primary objectives for students, to see and understanding their individualized approaches to writing, to understand audience and the purpose of their writing, and to learn to become a better critical reader. For Prof. Beckett, other objectives included a general improvement in students writing abilities through greater awareness of their process (regardless of genre) and the ability to apply the knowledge they had gained through the practice of writing and reading to other classes and eventually to the workplace. It is worth noting, however, that the objectives for students were considerably different. For many individuals in the class, the objective was simply to get a good grade to maintain a strong GPA for scholarship and financial aid purposes or simply because of familial pressures to do well in school. For others, the objective was to pass the class with a C or better with the outcome of moving on to ENG 104 and completing the required first-year writing sequence. For students, the objectives set forth by Prof. Beckett were often ancillary or implicit and was not their main motive or motivation for the course.

The tools that were used for the course were numerous and often reflected the pedagogical and technological viewpoints of the instructor. Computers and other technologies were used in the classroom, though (as I already noted) their use was complicated by the fact that they often did not work properly or by students utilizing their own machines and becoming distracted. The course packet was a primary tool for the course, housing other tools such as the syllabus, assignment sheets, sample student writing, short stories, peer review sheets, and other handouts that would often guide students during in-class writing or brainstorming exercises. Of all the tools used, Prof. Beckett felt that his peer review sheets were the most lacking in terms of effectively
getting students to reach his objectives for the course. He confided in me, “I do not like any one of my peer editing sheets from top to bottom….I’m not comfortable that I have the same logic of sequence of my assignments with what the prompt sheets are looking for within the assignment” (16 November 2010). Prof. Beckett partly attributed this deficiency to the location of the peer editing sheets being at the end of the packet, the place he is “least focused by the end of a month of revision” (16 November 2010). In addition, a combination of lecturing, primarily when introducing major assignments, one-to-one questioning with students during designated in-class writing periods, and conferencing throughout the semester were other pedagogical tools. With regard to conferencing, Prof. Beckett was able to meet with students multiple times throughout the semester and also comment on students’ drafts through e-mail (though he would request hard copies for final drafts). The course management software Blackboard was another tool, though mainly for document distribution and communication purposes (consequently, the blackboard in the classroom was also used to convey pertinent information to students about upcoming events, assignments, or agendas). Students also utilized a variety of tools in the classroom, ranging from their own laptops, to various writing utensils for scribbling notes or reminders, to computer programs such as Microsoft Word for composing assignments or Microsoft PowerPoint for presenting the final collaborative project to the class.

While some of the tools noted above tell us something about the pedagogical and technological leanings of the class (i.e. multiple drafts to emphasize process, peer review to emphasize collaboration and critical reading, and technology as course management), issues regarding authority were often linked to the rules and division of labor that occurred in the classroom. Of course, there were larger institutional rules governing the way the class was run, such as academic honesty policies and the Writing Program’s
requirement of students passing the course with a C or better, but other rules seemed to
govern students’ behavior. As Brad mentioned to me, there was no rule stating that
students had to sit in designated seats; however, as students became more comfortable
with those around them, staying with the same seat and area of the classroom became a
type of social rule. In addition, Prof. Beckett had certain rules in terms of requirements
for the class (five major writing assignments, in addition to a diagnostic essay), but most
telling was his “Do Not List:”

Source: “Prof. Beckett, NMU; The Do Not List: When Composing; English 103:

This series of rules to guide students when composing was to be utilized in all of the
assignments for the course, regardless of genre, and could only be broken when used as
part of a direct quote from an interview or survey respondent. Consequently, student-
participants like Derrick latched on to these rules because they were things he could
tangibly look for (and avoid) in the context of their writing. There were other general
rules that were imposed upon student writing, such as avoiding unnecessary repetition
or cliché, but many of these rules were brought to light in the context of individual student writing rather than to the class as a whole. Regardless, it is clear that the instructor had a certain degree of authority over the writing of students, partly because of his presence as the instructor of the class, partly because of his age and the respect assigned to him socially being older than the students, but also because of artifacts such as the one noted above. Of course, other artifacts such as the meta-cognitive sheet (another rule or requirement) were meant to give students a greater awareness of their writing process, thus giving students greater authority and agency over their writing. Lastly, division of labor in the course can be described simply as the instructor providing students with a myriad of resources, preparing documents and assignments, grading materials and offering feedback, as well as guiding many of the activities of the classroom. Students, on the other hand, were expected to participate in class, draft and revise all assignments, work in small groups on specific tasks (ex. peer review), and read the required materials for the course. During certain activities such as peer review or certain assignments like the final collaborative project, the division of labor changed for students as some, like Kari, assumed leadership roles by delegating responsibility to group members, while others completed those tasks assigned to them or did nothing.

Conclusion

As we have seen through the words of the ENG 103 students, the words of Prof. Beckett himself, and what was observed/analyzed in the classroom, many of the objectives set forth for this one particular course were realized in some way, whether explicitly or implicitly, through the specific tools that were utilized, the types of assignments students were required to do, or various other activities, although the ability
to determine long-term outcomes is hinder by the nature of this study. In the next chapter, I do much of the same work here, though in the context of one of NMU’s ENG 285: Introduction to Creative Writing courses, and in the concluding chapter, I discuss what major trends emerged from these two classrooms and point to avenues for future research and implications for further study.
**English 285 (Introduction to Creative Writing)**

*Introduction*

Much like in the preceding chapter, here I offer the reader a window into a particular writing classroom that I observed for the duration of 15 weeks, triangulating various data points such as in-class observations, student and instructor interviews, course documents and student writing, as well as a particular instance when I asked one of my student-participants to compose a piece while being recorded through a screen-capture program. I begin this chapter with a thorough discussion how the ENG 285: Introduction to Creative Writing course is situated in the context of the university, followed by profiles of the student-participants and instructor, description of the setting, and a lengthy discussion of what typically transpired in the class on a daily basis (again, focusing primarily on specific activities that occurred in relation to pedagogy, use or non-use of technology, delegation or de-centering of authority, and, perhaps most significantly, the genre-based assignments or consciousness-raising products that arose from the course). I conclude the chapter with an examination and analysis of the ENG 285 course as an activity system.

*Introduction to Creative Writing at NMU*
Around the same time as the change in the ENG 103 curriculum change at NMU, the creative writing program was undergoing similar changes. As a long-time creative writing faculty member and current Director of Creative Writing explained to me, “We use to have a 200, 300, and 400 level class in each genre. So, basically, you would take ENG 288 (Introduction to Poetry), ENG 308 (Intermediate Poetry), and 408 (Advanced Poetry)” (22 March 2011). The problem with this model was twofold: one, it created an issue in terms of staffing such a high frequency of classes; and two, creative writing students did not need to advance to the 400 level classes to fulfill the requirements of the major since they could take a combination of 200 and 300 level courses. To remedy these problems, the creative writing faculty decided to eliminate the various 200 level introductory courses and create a single introductory course: ENG 285 – Introduction to Creative Writing. As the Director explained, “If [the course] is taught the way the master syllabus says it’s supposed to be taught, [students] have to read fiction, poetry, [and] creative nonfiction at least, and write in those three genres. And some people, if they have expertise in screenwriting or drama, they put those in there as well.” In addition to the logistical benefits of eliminating the genre-based introductory courses, the Director alluded that a single introductory creative writing course created an environment where certain overlaps between the genres could be explored. As he explained, “Things you need to know...character, plot, imagery, you know all those basic things, you can kind of get those all in one place.” The hope, according to the Director, was that students received some basic preparation, particularly in terms of terminology (ex. the difference between first and third person, how metaphors function, etc.), that would serve them well in later, more workshop-based creative writing classes. This coincides with the course objectives and goals described in the master syllabus for the course, whereby students are to be “[introduced]...to the practice of reading and writing in multiple
genres of creative writing, to key issues involved in the discipline, and to basic terminology and techniques of the writer’s craft.”

In addition to the changes implemented through the English department, recent years had seen the telecommunications program partner with the creative writing program by making the ENG 285 course a requirement for certain preproduction majors. The Director expressed to me that, prior to this change, the telecommunications program “used to require ENG 306, which was creative nonfiction, and I don’t know if that really made any sense….whatever problems [we see now in ENG 285] it was worse [in ENG 306] because suddenly they’re in a class with people who have actually taken at least Introduction to Creative Writing and also maybe a fiction class.” Indeed, the Director noted that these telecommunications majors were at a significant disadvantage because they were unfamiliar with certain terminology, techniques, and conventions associated with creative nonfiction. Upon discussing this problem with the telecommunications program, the mutual decision was made to require ENG 285 instead, thereby placing the telecommunications students on a more equal plane of experience with English students who had not yet taken any creative writing courses themselves. However, this solution also created a problem in the sense that many of the telecommunications majors began filling the sections of ENG 285 before English majors could register, which produced the need for restrictions on Introduction to Creative Writing; specifically, half of the sections offered any given semester were made available only to English majors. The Director went on to note that these administrative difficulties could be tricky for instructors when crafting their syllabi or teaching, though (in any given class, ENG 285 or otherwise) it is not an easy undertaking trying to accommodate or predict the backgrounds or levels of experience of all students. The Director did point out, however, that “[the administration] encourages [faculty] to teach
[ENG 285] with [English] majors in mind first, because they are the people who we are going to see over and over again – they are the people we’re trying to prepare for the next class. But we also try to give the TCOMM students something to take away.” (22 March 2011). What the telecommunications students take away is the realization that “if you don’t have a story, if you don’t know how to tell a story, if you don’t know about character, if you don’t know about imagery, you’re just going to be lost, no matter how many expensive cameras you have” (22 March 2011) and to think about things relevant to the story or script of a movie before ancillary concerns such as the actors, special effects, and shooting location. Of perhaps equal value was a greater sense of the creative writing program’s legitimization in the eyes of other another entity at NMU. In other words, “people realize [the creative writing program is] doing important work that [telecommunications] can’t really do without some kinds of knowledge that we have” (22 March 2011).

In terms of staffing, many of the ENG 285 courses are taught by contract faculty members, nearly all of which had to have a terminal degree (MFA) in creative writing. In spite of these credentials and despite the survey nature of the course, those assigned to teach ENG 285 often had one specific area of focus such as poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, or drama. Admittedly, this makes “[ENG 285] a hard class to teach....a poet goes in there and tries to teach creative non-fiction, which has a lot of strange issues that are somewhat unrelated [to poetry]....but people do tend to have at least some knowledge of other genres. [Faculty are] definitely well ahead of most of the students in their knowledge of the genres” (22 March 2011). Still, the Director expressed how the use of contract faculty posed some difficulties in terms of assessment, as well as other logistical problems considering that contract faculty are, by sheer circumstance, less likely to stay at the university and be involved in the program as a whole.
Regardless of the state of ENG 285, business was booming with regard to the undergraduate enrollment of creative writing majors at NMU. As the table and graph below illustrate, from the fall of 2002 to the spring of 2011 (less than a 10 year period), NMU saw an increase of 108 students declaring creative writing as their major, which constitutes a growth of 85.71%.

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Source: “Director of Creative Writing,” NMU; Creative Writing Undergraduate Majors; Department of English, 2011.

Of course, because of the sheer increase of students and the demand for creative writing at NMU, there was a “bottleneck” effect (as the Director describe it) since ENG 285 was made a prerequisite for every other creative writing course. As the Director noted, “if a
student doesn’t get into that class they can’t take any other classes in the major...but I think it has to be that way” (22 March 2011). Indeed, as demonstrated in the sections below, all of my student-participants were well-aware of the prerequisite nature of the course. To reiterate, however, that though my overarching purpose for this study is not to conduct some comparative analysis between the first-year composition and introductory creative writing classrooms, it is worth noting that they are somewhat bound by their nature as prerequisite at NMU. The underlying difference, however, is that the composition sequence is required for all students from all majors in order to graduate from the university, suggesting a greater diversity among the population of students in terms of their writing abilities, while the introductory creative writing course is only a requirement for English majors on the creative writing track and telecommunications majors in preproduction, students who have (presumably) already taken the composition sequence and have acquired a certain level of writing proficiency. Of course, in order to graduate from the university with these degrees, it is necessary for these students to successfully complete the course and move onward in their program of study, but ENG 285 is not part of other institutional entities outside of the Department of English, such as the University Core Curriculum or the Writing Program, and thus operates with a greater level of autonomy. The Director did express to me, however, the possibility of ENG 285 being added as an writing-intensive course within the core curriculum in the coming year, something he believed would help the course in terms of assessment.

James
A few weeks after my initial request for volunteers in Prof. Joyce’s class, James approached me and asked if he could participate in the study. With only three student-participants thus far and hoping for even more perspectives, I happily agreed and we met for our initial interview in the NMU library. A sophomore at NMU on a partial scholarship, James had attended a small high school some 30 minutes from campus and was attracted to the university by the telecommunications program; specifically, James was most interested in the film production option of the major, but asserted that he was interested in all aspects of production, direction, and writing. To supplement his program of study in telecommunications, James was also a theatre minor and noted Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter among his favorite playwrights. Indeed, James had been active in local theatre as both a performer and a stagehand prior to coming to NMU, but expressed to me that in recent years he had become more interested in screenwriting. He even noted taking an “Introduction to Screenwriting” course in the spring of 2010, something which perplexed me considering that ENG 285 was a required prerequisite for all other creative writing courses through English, including the department’s own screenwriting course (ENG 310). I assumed, though did not confirm with James, that the screenwriting course in which he was enrolled was either through the telecommunications program or through some community organization.

In spite of his penchant for drama and film, James considered himself to be an avid reader and did not discriminate based upon genre, having also read and enjoyed a fair amount of fiction and poetry throughout his secondary education experience. In the context of Prof. Joyce’s class, James felt a welcome change from high school where he had to “write essays” and “focus on information instead of style.” Interestingly, during the course of my study, James was also simultaneously enrolled in ENG 103 (Rhetoric
and Writing) and in our first interview I recalled him staring back at me from across the table, bleary eyed, having been “up all night writing a persuasive essay for an English composition class.” I asked if this last minute flurry of writing was indicative of his process for all texts, and he remarked that whether or not he procrastinated depended on the assignment. James elaborated that he did not normally leave assignments to the last moment, but acknowledged that sometimes he worked better under pressure. Regardless, he expressed that the creative writing course was an outlet for his creativity, at least more so than the English composition course, while also handily filling a requirement to take other courses. In addition, the course was also a form of entertainment for James, particularly with Prof. Joyce as an instructor, an individual James appreciated as a teacher because of his funny anecdotes, relating of personal experiences to the material under discussion, and generally “having interesting stuff to say.”

James, too, often had interesting things to say and he was perhaps the most talkative of all my student-participants during in-class discussion, as he would often lend his insight and interpretations to whatever text was being addressed. Some of his contributions were the result of having read the material before in other classes or for pleasure, but James also remarked that he saw his role in the classroom as being a “contributor,” as an individual who, having some experience and a profound interest in creative writing, felt the need speak up when “others don’t say anything.” Toward the beginning of the semester, James tempered this need to speak up, citing that that he did not want to “be that annoying person” who would dominate classroom conversation, but between his knowledge and the light-spirited atmosphere of the classroom, he quickly became comfortable and opened up.
In terms of his writing, James was clearly influenced by background in drama, particularly with regard to the short story assignment and the crafting the characters, establishing conflict, and writing dialogue. Specifically, James noted Edward Albee's *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolfe* and explained:

…it just had an American family in it, just a lot of conversation between them and the characters were named ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’ and ‘Grandma’ and ‘Son’ and all this stuff. And just their dialogue and the way that they spoke to each other just seemed like if you had picked a particular line out then it seems really conversational and normal, but if you look at it within the context of the play it’s really not. I don’t know, that’s just really sort of inspired me lately. I think that it’s pretty interesting (26 October 2010).

Indeed, the short story James produced was about a seemingly normal (but terribly dysfunctional) American family with characters like “Ryan” and “Sarah” and “Mom.” The dynamic between the son “Ryan” and “Mom” was of particular interest to James since the son, a 23 year old man, was still being treated in an infantile manner by his mother. Locked in the clutches of his mother, the son becomes paranoid, convinced that their neighbors are trying to steal the family’s mail, with the mother blathering “I’ll tell them there’s nothing interesting in there. We don’t get anything in the mail except *Renaissance Restoration Weekly.*” This bizarre type of conflict and dialogue appealed to James, and he noted “it’s just sort of that really specific thing that she’s saying that would make sense, but it doesn’t really fit. I kind of like it” (26 October 2010). Ironically, though similar conflicts and bits of dialogue were found in other works by James, he did not provide me with the dialogue assignment required for the class and did not meet
with me for a concluding interview. His presence in this study, then, is primarily through earlier assignments, his in-class contributions, and two interviews.

\textit{Ian}  

Another student who was attracted to NMU’s well-renowned telecommunications program was Ian, a scruffy 21 year old entering his junior year of study in digital production. From our first interview I seemed to have an easy rapport with Ian, though I’m not entirely sure why. He had a nervous energy about him, often fidgeting with his hands or stumbling over words while he answered my questions. He seemed to want to give “the right answer,” frequently inquiring “is that what you’re looking for?” I assured him that whatever answer he gave me would be “the right answer,” and in many ways he reminded me of myself at that age – torn jeans and a band T-shirt, ambitious, creative, yet wanting to please (or sometimes appease) some authority figure. I asked Ian to tell me more about his planned program of study and he explained that he was “big into social media and video production...everything from editing to actual on-set stuff to preproduction” (7 September 2010); however, he remarked that one of reasons for taking the ENG 285 course was because he wanted “to get better at scriptwriting...like screenplays and that sort of deal” (7 September 2010). Indeed, Ian conveyed to me that he had begun writing screenplays and works of fiction in the 5th grade and had “pretty much [been] steadily doing stuff since then” (7 September 2010). Still, much like my other student-participants, Ian was aware that the ENG 285 course was a prerequisite, something that he had to do before taking other courses through the English department that would enhance his own program of study, the most coveted for him being the ENG 310 screenwriting course.
He had, however, taken other writing courses prior to ENG 285. In addition to the first-year composition sequence required at NMU, Ian had taken writing courses specific to the genres of telecommunications, such as copywriting, news writing, and scriptwriting. He asserted that it was in the scriptwriting class where he “started working on a couple of different things” (7 September 2010), but felt he had greater freedom to express himself and be creative in ENG 285. He elaborated in one of our early interviews, “[In copywriting and news writing] we would be assigned a story and the professor would say, ‘Well, you have to have all this information in there somewhere – go and make it fit.’ And then, with this class, it’s really been open-ended. We’ve only had one assignment [so far] and it’s just sort of ‘Write poetry,’ you know” (7 September 2010)? Ian found this apparent lack of structure and increased creative control to be appealing and he also expressed an appreciation for some other aspects of the class, such as becoming more comfortable with sharing his work in a large group setting. As he elaborated, “when I first showed up on the first day [and we] were talking about sharing stuff, I was like ‘Well, I’m not going to do that. I don’t want to go through and read my stuff to these people that I don’t know’” (7 September 2010). As the semester continued, however, Ian gravitated toward the in-class discussions about what it means to be an artist, particularly how “as an artist you have to be able to show your stuff to people and not necessarily worry about what they’re going to say….some people are going to hate it, some people are going to like it, and some people aren’t going to care. You have to get to a point where you can share stuff without thinking about that” (7 September 2010).

Aside from sharing his own work, Ian enjoyed hearing the work of others and “being in an environment where everybody can share whatever it is that they write” (7 September 2010). He particularly focused on one regular contributor who “always [has] really good stuff and every time she raises her hand to share something I’m like, ‘Oh, great. I get to
listen to her because she always has something really cool to say” (7 September 2010). Interestingly, by the end of the semester, Ian, the aforementioned contributor, and the class as a whole contributed less and less, both in terms of sharing their creative work and discussing specific readings. As Ian explained, by the end of the semester “sometimes people [would] talk and [we would] have a discussion, but a lot of times Prof. Joyce [would] ask ‘Anybody have any thoughts or question?’ And nobody really [said] anything” (5 December 2010). Ian believed that this drop in classroom productivity was the result of fatigue brought about by the end of the semester, but as I would learn from Prof. Joyce there seemed to be a decline in students reading the material for class discussion (which subsequently also acted as models for students to utilize in their own writing). Inevitably, discussion fell-off and reading quizzes ensued.

Wes

Similar to Ian, Wes was a junior at NMU in the telecommunications program with a focus on production. In particular, Wes had selected the audio track of the major, learning about “how to make commercials for radio, how to add sound effects to film, [and] what to do to make a film sound good” (8 September 2010). Not surprisingly the theme of “sound” came up in Wes’s work; specifically, Wes was concerned with making his writing “sound good” and often geared his revisions toward the sonorous qualities of language, most notably when working on his poetry. He noted one instance where the instructor provided feedback on a particular poem, an instance when Prof. Joyce took “out words here and there and [then when I] reread it I thought, ‘Oh, well, that does sound much better’” (8 September 2010). In a later assignment, students were asked to complete an essay inspired by the short story “The Knife” where a surgeon, among other
things, chronicled the feel and sensation of cutting into human flesh. As Wes noted, he had some difficulty with this particular assignment “because I don’t really consider myself an expert in a lot” (19 October 2010); except, that is, his experience in audio production. As he remarked, “audio is one of those things that people kind of take for granted and they don’t really understand that there’s a lot of work that goes into making a song not sound like shit. And that’s basically what I was trying to get across: a) there are a lot of steps to it and it is a very big process, but b) the feeling you get when you’re in the middle of shaping and forming this song and making it sound good” (8 September 2010). In this light it becomes easy to see the correlation between Wes’s interest in audio production and creative writing: both involve a great number of steps, whether it is the cyclical process of reading, writing, revising, and publishing texts as compared to compiling, recording, mixing, and disseminating songs, or the emotional push and pull that is often described when referencing the process of engaging in creative endeavors. I would learn, however, that Wes’s growing interest in creative writing was only a recent phenomenon.

As he remarked to me in an early interview, Wes felt that his creative writing experience was rather limited, and he noted that the last time he was required to write a story was in the 2nd grade. However, he had recently taken a 9 week screenwriting course as a prerequisite for his telecommunications degree, which he asserted “got me re-interested in writing” (8 September 2010). Though his interest in writing had been rekindled, Wes did state that was not particularly fond of reading, telling me flatly “I don’t read [and] I very rarely ever read for enjoyment” (8 September 2010). The few instances where Wes had read prior to ENG 285 consisted of “literary classics or whatever the professor thinks is amazing” (8 September 2010), and he went on to remark that “most of the time I’ve found out [these books] suck” (8 September 2010).
Wes appeared, however, to have a recent change of heart with regard to some reading, stating that “over the summer I read the first book that I’ve pick up for no particular reason in years. It was called *Ten Story Love Song*” (8 September 2010), a text apparently consisting of “one continuous paragraph for 200 pages” (8 September 2010). Wes found this type of experimental form to be intriguing since “you forget paragraphs exist when you’re reading it because you’re so into the book” (8 September 2010) and he also confided in me his new found enjoyment of J.D. Salinger’s *Nine Stories*, particularly “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” Still, Wes believed that his lack of reading experience to be put him at a disadvantage and felt that the class would be a good opportunity to “expand my mind” (8 September 2010) in terms his literary horizons.

Though Wes was certainly honest and forthright with me in our interviews, he never contributed to in-class discussions, though he would often make little asides to my other participant Ian during class – the two sat next to each other and, considering both were juniors and in the same major, had known each other for quite some time.

*Samantha*

While my other three student-participants seemed united with regard to major (telecommunications) and their interest in screen or scriptwriting, my fourth participant, Samantha, came from a significantly different background – particularly in terms of her course of study, perspective on education, and general outlook on life. Samantha was a 26 year old returning student who had grown up in and around the local community which housed NMU. As she explained in our first interview, she learned to read when she was 3 years old and had been “reading constantly, voraciously” (7 September 2010) since she was a small child. She attributed this love of reading mostly to her family,
stating that both her parents read a lot and that her father would sit and read to her as a small child until she learned to read herself. Her love of reading was compounded, however, by the fact that she had to remain on bed-rest until about the age of 14 because of a heart condition (something that was still dealing with now at 26) and she was not allowed to watch television. She elaborated, “I would have stacks of whatever I wanted to read through all the time. Magazines, books, historical stuff, whatever I really wanted to read it was fine, [my parents] didn’t care as long as I was reading or doing something I guess” (7 September 2010). Getting the opportunity to attend the local high school was an exciting prospect, but because of her extensive reading Samantha felt that “none of those classes were ever really hard” (7 September 2010), and she even detailed one story where she was asked by her senior English instructor to “teach the Shakespeare portion [of the course] because I was the only person who understood what was said...what it meant and all the analogies and alliteration. [The instructor] always made me get up and explain...because he figured they were going to be cheating off of me anyway, so I might as well tell them” (7 September 2010).

After graduating from high school, Samantha left for Japan to work and study, and then later came back to the United States to attend the University of Akron where she completed many of her core classes and took approximately 12 – 16 credit hours in English. A major in creative writing, Samantha explained to me why she transferred to NMU from Akron: “[Akron] only had an English major – it was just English. They didn’t have any sub-majors like creative writing or rhetoric or whatever. And then, um, my best friend that lives here got cancer and, ah, I decided I would transfer back so that I could be here when she needed me. And now I’m here” (7 September 2010). With her previous experiences in English at another university, I was curious as to why she might have been taking the ENG 285 course at NMU, but as she elaborated “apparently none of
the classes I took at Akron count as creative writing classes, and so they told me I need to take the intro class [here]” (7 September 2010). Samantha elaborated that “the creative writing classes at Akron weren’t really creative writing classes. They were structure classes where you learned how other people wrote and didn’t really write yourself” (7 September 2010). Though she saw the value in learning, for example, “how T.S. Eliot wrote a poem” (7 September 2010), Samantha felt that such an understanding did not necessarily help her when she wanted “to write a work of fiction” (7 September 2010), her primary area of interest. This type of course, which emphasized an understanding of the various structures, devices, and terminology associated with specific genres of writing, as well as exposure to certain canonized literary works, was viewed as being “weird” and “aggravating” to Samantha because she felt she “signed-up for a writing class and [we’re] not doing any writing” (7 September 2010). Samantha hoped that ENG 285 would be different and I asked her what she expected to get out of the class by the end of the semester. She noted, “It seems like [Prof. Joyce] is going to make us write a lot, and I like that because most writing classes you learn how other people write and you don’t write yourself….I feel like, to be a good writer, you have to actually write. So, I guess I just hope I get a lot of writing experience out of the class” (7 September 2010).

As a former undergraduate creative writing graduate myself, I concluded our first interview with a question I had received time and time again from relatives, friends, and even colleagues: What are you hoping to do with a creative writing degree once you graduate? Samantha smirked and said, “To be brutally honest, I honestly don’t care. With the heart condition I have, I have to have some sort of degree to get a job with insurance, otherwise I’m basically fucked. I’ll work 40 hours a weeks as a desk jockey, take my insurance, and write whatever the hell I want on the weekends” (7 September 2010). Samantha went on to assert that she was studying creative writing because she
enjoyed it, “not because I’m hoping to get a job out of it” (7 September 2010), and showed contempt for those who “only view college as a means to an end and not the end itself” (7 September 2010). For Samantha, it seemed as though, regardless of the outcome of the class, the enjoyment she got from learning was enough.

Prof. Joyce

I had known Prof. Joyce since the spring of 2008 when I enlisted his help on another research project examining the perceptions of creative faculty in reference to the use, value, purpose, and mission of writing centers. Prof. Joyce had been a particularly insightful and charismatic interview and, barring any scheduling conflicts, I was hopeful that he would agree to participate in my new undertaking. After a few e-mails back and forth throughout the course of the summer, Prof. Joyce and I agreed to meet in a local watering hole to discuss the specifics of my study and, after a few rounds and some “off-the-record” conversation, he agreed to let me observe his class once a week and meet with him periodically (sans pint glasses) to discuss his pedagogy, the course, etc.

Our first official interview came the first week of the semester and he discussed how he first came to be a creative writing instructor. Specifically, Prof. Joyce had majored in English at NMU as an undergraduate and went on to pursue a master’s degree in English, in his words, “for lack of anything better to do” (22 August 2010). Upon graduating, he remarked how he “needed to have a job” (22 August 2010) and attained his first teaching job as a contract faculty member in composition at another in-state university. Soon after, Prof. Joyce’s spouse was accepted for graduate study at NMU, an event that provided him with additional opportunities since he “knew people in the creative writing program, and they knew me, and they let me teach a couple of
creative writing classes” (22 August 2010). He quickly realized, however, that advancement as a creative writer in academia required a terminal degree in the field, so he then went on to earn his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) from Bennington College’s low-residency program in creative writing. Somewhat sarcastically, Prof. Joyce remarked that the degree “officially qualified me to teach creative writing” (22 August 2010), but went on to assert that “you know, nothing really qualifies you” (22 August 2010). Indeed, pomp and circumstance was of little consequence or importance to Prof. Joyce when it came to artistic production or the teaching of creative writing. Like a guitarist picking up the instrument for first time, the practice or the act of simply sitting down and doing it, of gaining experience, was one of the most important things for the aspiring writer in his view. This approach seemed to serve Prof. Joyce well as he “wrote lots of songs [and] wrote lots of poetry” (22 August 2010) throughout his undergraduate and graduate studies and he elaborated that “in the past...ten years of so I’ve published lots of poems – published two full length collections of poetry and edited two books” (22 August 2010).

I continued by asking Prof. Joyce to articulate or describe his teaching philosophy as it pertained to creative writing, paying particular attention to some of the things that he valued as an instructor and what he hoped students would learn in his classroom. He expressed two central tenets to his pedagogy; first, he hoped to perpetuate an egalitarian environment where “students [can] realize that we are all in the same boat. There in the context of a creative writing class, as far as I’m concerned, they’re artists and I’m an artist and, in that way, I’m not better or worse than them” (22 August 2010). The second tenet pertained to dispelling some of the myths surrounding creativity and the creative process. More specifically, Prof. Joyce noted that “what I’m doing in the introductory class is breaking down some of [students’] misconceptions about what art is, about what
the creative process is truly like. Because a lot of them, you know, have really misguided notions, either about inspiration, the muse, or something” (22 August 2010). Of great importance to Prof. Joyce was to trying to get students “to see writing and creating artistic work as fun first” (22 August 2010), that students don’t need “to sit down and slave over a poem” (22 August 2010) because, more often than not, “things created in fun are just as good as thing created [through] hard work” (22 August 2010). Ultimately, Prof. Joyce hoped for students not to be intimated by the process of artistic production, but his comments on being creative and creativity triggered larger questions for me, such what constituted his definition of creativity. He responded, “First and foremost, it’s to do something interesting. I think too often...people are focused on doing something important or doing something worthwhile or lasting. Again, a lot of people involved in the arts are doing so with this idea that it’s for the ages....but I think the most important thing for artistic work is to be interesting” (22 August 2010). Prof. Joyce went on to elaborate that artists often worry “making things that are good” (22 August 2010), but they are frequently not “in the position to judge that anyway...they might think they are, but who cares what they think of their own work, right” (22 August 2010)? For Prof. Joyce, interesting often equated to trying to make something “new and original,” which he admitted was “really hard to do” (22 August 2010). In order to get to that point, however, that place where artists or student-artists might create something new and original, first they had to sit down and do it. As Prof. Joyce explained, “Creativity to me, a lot of it is just doing it. Everyone always says, ‘I could’ve done that. That looks so easy.’ And it’s like, ‘Yeah, well, you didn’t. Someone else did’” (22 August 2010).

Despite Prof. Joyce’s assertions about creativity, there was a clear distinction for him in terms of teaching undergraduate introductory creative writing students versus, say, upper-level undergraduates. He elaborated that “I’m not so much teaching students
to be creative writers or great creative writers, whatever that means, but really what I’m doing is, hopefully, making an audience for people who are going to be good creative writers— and part of that just means making these students not scared of literature, not scared of creative things in general” (22 August 2010).

The Setting

Much like the ENG 103 course, the ENG 285 class met twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays; however, ENG 285 met in the mid-afternoon from 3:30 – 4:45 p.m. and I only observed the Thursday sessions. In addition, the class gathered in the same building as the English department and faculty offices, a convenience that would sometimes permit a winded Prof. Joyce to rush into the classroom some 3 – 5 minutes late, tossing numerous apologies to the students as he took his place at the head of the room. The classroom was what I would consider a “traditional” (or perhaps a more accurate term might be “analog”) classroom in the sense that there were no computer terminals present. This is not to say that there were not some forms of technology loitering about the room— hanging from a dark corner, the result of a burnt out fluorescent fixture, was an antiquated television entombed in a metal and glass case to prevent theft, an overhead projector covered in chalk dust resting on the floor directly beneath it. Indeed, modern technology of any kind was a rarity in Prof. Joyce’s classroom, which he attributed partly to the facilities and partly in the possibility of students becoming distracted during class. Specifically, he noted that “it’s hard when you go into different classrooms and you can’t always depend on the technology...it’s easier sometimes to just work around that than to try work through it” (22 August 2010) and Prof. Joyce elaborated that his technology-use in the classroom was “limited to
audio and occasionally video” (22 August 2010) where students could listen to or observe poets and writers reading in order to hear the rhythms and cadences of their work. In terms of students bringing their own laptops or other portable devices to class, Prof. Joyce thought that “they’re a distraction” (18 November 2010) and such tools did not make an appearance during the semester. Interestingly, several weeks into the semester, while Prof. Joyce was out on a two-week book tour to read and promote his latest collection of poetry, a guest instructor and fiction writer, who I will call “Prof. Henry,” told a story to the class about a friend who would constantly surround himself with technology, creating what Prof. Henry viewed as a disconnect from real life and real world experience. When I asked Prof. Joyce to respond to this assessment of technology, this idea that various forms of technology created some artificial experience that was less revered or valuable, there was a clear separation between Prof. Joyce’s views on technology in the classroom versus as an aid for writers and artistic production. As he remarked:

I get the idea that maybe [technology] distracts you – like, something like an iPod, or I suppose if you’re online, so...you’re trying to write and the Internet gets in the way. But, to me, that just sounds like an excuse more than a legitimate reason....I don’t think technology is any more distracting than sex, or alcohol, or all the other things in the world that can be distractions. Actually, I think that technology on the whole, at least for myself, has been really beneficial as a writer – the Internet essentially. I mean, just being able to connect to other writers and read other writers and be introduced to other writers. You used to have to go to the library to learn all that stuff and now you can just do it from your basement (18 November 2010).
Though Prof. Joyce clearly saw the value of technology for research or networking purposes in the life of the writer, the absence of technology in the classroom proved to problematic for some students; in particular, Samantha noted that with her heart condition she needed to be very aware of “how much weight I’m hefting around, or else I’ll make myself sick,” and carrying around a small laptop as opposed to “18 books and 3 notepads” was ideal for her. Fortunately, Prof. Joyce only required a single textbook and several small handouts, so Samantha had no physical limitations to contend with in the course.

Though the room had originally been arranged with students seated in rows and the instructor behind a large desk at the front of the room, Prof. Joyce quickly told students to rearrange their desks into a full circle to, as he stated, “facilitate more discussion than [in] traditional classrooms” (13 September 2010). More importantly, however, was the ability “to see everyone in class – to be able to look them in the eye” (13 September 2010). This arrangement also allowed Prof. Joyce to facilitate “a more conversational atmosphere” (13 September 2010) where he could be perceived as “just part of the group, instead of ‘big important guy.’” (13 September 2010). I, too, was seated within the circle, though I seldom felt as if I was a part of the group. For one, I was the only person permitted to use a laptop in order to take notes during class sessions. Though it could have just been my intuitive sense, this slight bit of difference seemed to create a divide between myself and other members of the class as I would sometimes glance up from the clacking of my keyboard to see students give a quick look, or occasional eye-roll, in my direction. For those that weren’t my student-participants, it seemed as though I was some sort of invader, a trespasser, someone who was first looked at with puzzlement, then as a slight nuisance, and lastly as someone to be ignored. Mind you, I never got a feeling of outward hostility from the group, but there was that
intuition, or maybe insecurity on my part, that I was some academic imposing my presence in a creative realm, a deeply rooted inability to fully reconcile my various identities and backgrounds in writing. Regardless, as the weeks went by, as I became just another body in the classroom, my observations became a little easier.

**A Day in the Life of ENG 285**

On the surface, the ENG 285 course varied considerably from week-to-week, especially since students were asked to read and write in four different genres (poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and drama) and attempted to understand and experiment with the various conventions of those genres through different readings and writing prompts. In addition, and as I mentioned briefly above, Prof. Joyce left for two weeks on a seven city book tour beginning the middle of September and, in his absence, other creative writing faculty from the NMU English department took over the class. This revolving door of instructors, of “visiting writers” as it were, did not seem to disrupt the flow of the class; quite the contrary, these guest faculty members set a precedent for what would occur throughout the semester as a series of campus readings and book festivals brought several poets and writers to NMU and into Prof. Joyce’s classroom. When this occurred, students were often given a packet of the visiting writer’s work (which included the aforementioned instructors) and students would converse with these authors about their writing and the writing life. Curious, I asked Prof. Joyce the value of having visiting writers come to his class and he noted, “I think that the students enjoy talking to authors. You know, when you read a book there’s always that mysterious thing ‘What did they mean?’ So, it’s interesting when you can first speculate your own ideas and then the person can get there and, if you want, you can ask them what they meant” (13
In addition to de-mystifying the writing and writing process of contemporary writers, Prof. Joyce noted that the presence of visiting writers in the class was “good for the writers too – meaning it’s good for their work, good exposure for their work. I think I’ve said this before, but one of the things that I feel like I’m doing is not so much making great writers as much as creating an audience for writers” (13 September 2010). Finally, Prof. Joyce was hoping to show students “perspectives other than just mine. I mean, I got all my ideas and views, but that’s not the only way to go about it and other people can demonstrate that better than I can. It breaks up the monotony of class” (13 September 2010).

Despite the frequency of visiting writers to the class, I was actually only able to observe one such occurrence. The Thursday before leaving on his book tour, Prof. Joyce had cancelled class, allowing students the opportunity to work on their short stories. The following Thursday, NMU faculty member and fiction writer Prof. Henry came to speak and talk with the students about his work. Students had read one of his short stories prior to class, but unfortunately the copies were cut-off from page 10 to page 17. Upon learning of this, Prof. Henry shrugged it off, chuckled, and proceed to give students a thorough synopsis of his story, the first-person research required for the story, and some of his general impressions about the act of writing. In brief, Prof. Henry’s story was about gulf coast fisherman and his wife living in Louisiana not long after the BP oil spill along the gulf coast. In addition to this man-made disaster, the main character learns that his wife has been cheating on him and he confides in his pot-smoking, government-hating neighbor about the infidelity. One evening, the main character ventures to the French Quarter, observing tourists swilling drinks called “Katrina,” “Oil Spill,” and “Hurricane.” He becomes enraged and, lacking control in any other avenue of his life, proceeds to beat one of the tourists to a pulp.
For Prof. Henry, this was a story built upon personal experience and juxtaposition. After seeing the devastation of the oil spill, he felt powerless and compelled to do something, to write something that might provide some perspective on the lives of the people in that region. As Prof. Henry told the class, “It’s important for a writer to have empathy, to place oneself in the shoes of another and to be able to identify with their circumstances” (23 September 2010). He confided in students that he went down to New Orleans and visited the poor neighborhoods that still had not been able to rebuild from Katrina, as well as the tourist areas where, as he noted, it was a constant party from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. He talked with fishermen whose livelihoods had been destroyed by the negligence of BP, chronicling his interactions with them and filing them away in what he describe as a “file folder in my head” (23 September 2010). He noted that there were other “files” in this folder that had been there for quite some time and he drew upon them to shape certain characters or themes. In the case of the Louisiana fisherman story, the cheating wife was a composite of a woman one of his friends had dated several years before, a woman who was dating six other people without his friend’s knowledge. The pot-smoking neighbor was a combination of government conspiracy theorist/extremist Alex Jones and Prof. Henry’s own neighbor. By discussing the original seed for his story and how he formulated some of his characters, Prof. Henry sought to dispel some of the myths surrounding how writers go about writing stories, reaffirming that “writers don’t’ slave in the garret or are inspired by some divine force” (23 September 2010) and he brilliantly quipped that this type of thinking was “nutter-shit.” Indeed, Prof. Henry told students that writing fiction was not about sitting down and inventing the world’s greatest story, but often shaping and molding “30 to 40 percent of things that are real” (23 September 2010) and that students needed to “be a sponge” in order to fill-in the rest. He encouraged students to rely upon primary
research and observation, to take notes and not necessarily to just write down great lines or phrases, but quotations from others, overheard conversations, etc. Interestingly, two weeks after Prof. Henry’s visit, Prof. Joyce gave students a short story exercise where they were required to find a spot somewhere outside the classroom and observe what they saw in order to get students to focus on the interactions of other people and the surrounding environment. Prof. Joyce also noted that, at some point in the course of their observation, students need to pick a person who walked by, someone who caught their eye for some reason, and develop a character by answering who is that person? Where are they going? Where are they coming from? How are they doing? Etc. In asking Prof. Joyce about this activity, he noted that it was really an exercise to “get [students] to not write about themselves, which, no matter what you tend to ask them to do, they don’t know how to approach it other than to write about themselves. So, the observational thing is just a matter of, you know, write what you see – just try that for a change” (18 November 2010). In terms of Prof. Henry’s advice for students to be a sponge and observe their surroundings, Prof. Joyce remarked “What [Prof. Henry] says I think is good advice… I don’t know to what degree a person can learn to be a sponge [though]. I mean, I think certain people are more spongy than others, you know? Certain people really pay attention to things and I do think that writers tend to be like that, like kind of nosy.” One of my student-participants, Samantha, agreed with this assessment, noting that “Everyone I’ve ever talked to when I told them I wanted to be a writer, they were like, ‘That [observation] is what you need to do,’ (22 October 2010) and the other student-participants also found the exercise to be useful, as well as entertaining. Interestingly, however, the only student-participant who utilized the observation assignment as a component for their short story was Wes, who observed an individual wearing a fraternity T-shirt and wrote about “this guy…and [I] very, very
stereotypically described him as just a guy that likes to get drunk and party with his friends” (19 October 2010), a character that was also partly a composite of some of Wes’s fraternity friends at NMU. While Wes clearly utilized some of the techniques Prof. Henry described in his visit to the class, the other student-participants opted instead to draw almost exclusively upon some of the knowledge and experience they already had, rather than conducting observations or primary research.

A final word on Prof. Henry and the visiting writer phenomenon in Prof. Joyce’s class; as the Director of the Creative Writing program described, the ENG 285 course was problematic in that the instructors often have specializations in specific genres, and although there is certainly some overlap in terms of the techniques, vocabulary, and conventions associated with these genres, it can be difficult for an instructor specializing in, say, poetry to convey or articulate what might be required for constructing a short story. The presence of a visiting writer, however, can eliminate some of that deficiency. Case in point, during his time with the students, Prof. Henry drew a heuristic on the chalk board detailing how he builds or constructs a story, something that I have crudely replicated here:

![Diagram]

Fig. 1. “Prof. Henry’s” Construction of a Story.
As Prof. Henry describes, at the bottom of the triangle, at the most fundamental level, people need to be able to read and understand the story on the level of language. Characters, as already noted, can often be composites of individuals the author has come across in their observations or their own lives. Plot, according to Prof. Henry, requires that there be something happening, not ten pages of nothing or just characters talking. Metaphor constitutes some sort of image, the prevailing thing that gets the author’s point across to a reader. And lastly, theme dictates that all of these elements have a point to them. While Prof. Joyce certainly could have conveyed some of these tenets to students, his expertise in poetry creates a different perspective and treatment of something like metaphor or character (i.e. the speaker, in the case of a poem). Prof. Henry’s presence, then, creates a more accurate frame of reference for students in relation to the specific genre of fiction. Still, while students found Prof. Henry (and other writers and poets) visits interesting and entertaining, their advice did not show up in student writing. When I asked my student-participant Samantha, for example, if she saw herself doing some of the same things Prof. Henry described for developing characters or constructing stories, she said “I find it’s interesting, but I don’t know if I could actually do it. I usually start out with an emotion and try to portray that through a character. I don’t know. I’m a very angry person. Usually, when I’m in a bad mood or upset or something, that’s how I calm myself down – by putting it on paper” (22 October 2010). Ian also commented that it was “cool” to get “to read something [and] see [Prof. Henry’s] process for writing....[to] figure out how [he] did it,” (21 October 2010), but Ian and the other student-participant seemed steadfast in their process when writing the short story assignment. With Samantha it was a form of therapy as she based her story partly on a previous relationship, for Ian it was “[coming] up with an idea, [sitting] down and [trying] to write about it, and [letting] it evolve from there” (21 October 2010), for
James it was having “the idea of where I wanted to start and where I wanted to end up” (26 October 2010) and then relying upon his background in theater to create a story grounded in dialogue, and with Wes, who turned in another short story in addition to the fraternity brother tale, he adapted a script he had written the previous summer to fulfill the assignment.

Similar sentiments were expressed in relation to whether or not the short stories students had read influenced the writing of their own stories. When asked if he modeled his story on any of the work read during the semester, James replied, “No, I didn’t I don’t know that I did have a model for this story….as far as a model for the structure, there wasn’t anybody I modeled” (26 October 2010) and Ian noted “Not really. It was really just sort of me trying to figure out what I thought would be a good story, which was kind of hard because it kept trying to turn into a screenplay format” (21 October 2010). While students did not necessarily adopt Prof. Henry’s model for constructing stories, it is evident that they relied heavily on their prior experiences, whether personally to mold certain plot or characters, or wrestling with the conventions screen and play-writing. Regardless, Prof. Henry and the presence of other visiting faculty and writers in Prof. Joyce’s classroom seemed to reaffirm one of the biggest arguments for creative writing in higher education, that it builds a community for writers that otherwise would not have one.

Though the various genres and phenomenon of visiting writers created a sense of variety within the ENG 285 class, there was a certain degree of repetition, a general sense of how each class period would proceed. What I have created here is a composite of several class observations where Prof. Joyce was present in order to provide the reader with an impression of a typical class session, which often included the sharing of
personal stories and anecdotes between the instructor and students, discussion of various readings and their relationship to a particular time period, discussions about the role of art in society, in-class writing exercises, methods of assessment such as quizzes and midterms, and students sharing their writing.

The class would often begin with the instructor simply asking students what was going on, or sometimes he would even discuss some current event and ask students for their opinion on the matter. When asked, Prof. Joyce explained that “part of it is just to create a sense of community and a sense that I care – that I care what they do on their weekend and I'm interested in their lives to some degree. You know, I'm not really interested, but you know I care what's going on and it seems like a polite thing to do” (13 September 2010). More importantly, however, the occasional discussion of current events was an activity that Prof. Joyce thought was appropriate because “[Students] should be thinking about these things and recognize that there's a big, scary world out there and that that can be a part of creative writing....all these things are potential for creative writing” (13 September 2010). One particular early class discussion focused on the debate of a mosque being built near ground zero in New York City and how a particular Florida pastor was threatening to burn copies of the Koran on 9/11 in protest. Prof. Joyce began the discussion, noting that he thought protesting a mosque being built in New York City was absurd considering that the proposed site was some 10 blocks away from where the World Trade Center collapsed, as well as the fact that the proposed building was more of a recreation center than a place of worship. Students had several other interesting observations, including that the media had hyped-up the issues, and thus made things worse, as well as how the pastor’s act of protest could put American troops in danger overseas. This type of discussion reminded me of Chris Green’s article arguing for cultural studies and community service in the creative writing classroom;
specifically, Green’s awareness of the fact that students need to be prepared for the writing that will take place after college and that there are a multitude of rhetorical circumstances surrounding various communities outside of the university. He notes that students need to be able to “[negotiate] the vast, complex, nebulous, tyrannical, ever-present, varied structures and institutions of publication, education, readings, employment, community, politics, and family” (155), and he further argues that instead of asking students to write “good” poems, instructors should try to have them write “useful” poems. In other words, students should not look at the various discourse communities to which they belong as mere fodder for material, but instead write back to those communities and to envision said communities as an audience for their creative work. Though perhaps not conscious on his part, some of the discussion that I observed and the comments Prof. Joyce made seemed to point students in this direction, to get students to “[engage] in the world and [care] about issues going on other than just what makes a good poem – though that should be part of it too” (13 September 2010).

Sometime after the brief discussion to begin class, Prof. Joyce would often make various announcements, ranging from reminders about upcoming due dates to specific creative writing events on campus or in the surrounding community. Afterwards, class discussion pertaining to a particular class reading would often occur, though the manner in which these discussions transpired varied depending on the genre or work being addressed. In the case of poetry, Prof. Joyce would frequently read through the poem once, uninterrupted, and then read the poem a second time making little asides, quips about his personal experiences, or simply clarifications pertaining to certain references, images, or uses of language in the poem; for example, the how the use of enjambment versus punctuation can emphasis different rhythmic qualities to a poem, particularly when used in conjunction with certain rhyme schemes. In terms of his interjections
while reading, I asked Prof. Joyce why he did this and what pedagogical purpose this served. He stated:

Obviously I think it’s important to experience the thing at least one time just as a work of art. So, read the thing through once without any interruptions and just get to hear what it sounds like and how it flows. Then, of course, obviously with poetry students [they] can get confused, etc. And so, you know, I try to go back through and relate. I want them to feel that literature is about them and their lives, so I often relate things to my own life in an effort to get them to see that just because it was written a 100 years ago doesn’t mean we can’t apply it now (13 September 2010).

In addition to the ability of students to relate to the piece, Prof. Joyce confided that the sharing of so many of his personal experiences was a way to get students attention. Specifically, he remarked that “I learned a long time ago that if you bring up something from your personal life, people turn their heads and they pay attention. I just think that when you’re listening to a speaker and they’re giving you examples from their personal life, it makes you more interested because we’re more interested in people than ideas and other things” (13 September 2010). Though he admitted that perhaps “not all of the stories are useful” (13 September 2010), he felt that they could be “beneficial at illustrating a point or making something more clear” (13 September 2010).

In terms of discussing and reading fiction (short stories), because the pieces were significantly longer than the selected poems for the course there was little (if any) reading from Prof. Joyce to the class. Instead, he’d frequently lob the students a question such as “What do you think?” and would wait for a response. Early in the semester, such a question would garner several responses from various students in the
class, but as the semester progressed, this reaction dwindled. Prof. Joyce attributed the silence in the classroom to students not reading the material for class, something which irked him immensely and prompted him to administer reading quizzes. Personally, I had never encountered this type of assessment in a creative writing course before, and I asked Prof. Joyce to discuss his reasons for the quizzes. He noted, “I mean, the main thing is that it makes [students] read. I mean, that’s the problem. If you notice I didn’t do any quizzes at the beginning of the semester, but then I felt like people were too quiet, which to me meant people weren’t reading....[students will] read the assignment if they think they’re going to be quizzed on it, or most of them will” (18 November 2010). In addition, Prof. Joyce also assigned students a midterm and a final. In the case of the midterm, the exam was comprised of 14 questions ranging in point value from 1 to 9 for a total point value of 50 points, or 20% of the final grade in the course, and contained a series of questions pulled from the assigned texts and the work of the visiting writers. In examining the midterm, the questions could be classified into four basic categories: interpretation, retention, definition, and comparison/contrast. Interpretative questions asked students to provide their opinion or justify a point of significance in a particular text or theme derived from the text. For example, “In the context of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ how do you interpret the line, ‘I have measured my life out with coffee spoon?’” or “What are some of the big ideas that you think Jennifer Knox is communicating with her poems?” Retention questions asked students merely to recall some specific information from a reading, such as “Name one biblical or literary figure that J. Alfred compares himself to” or “Hemingway’s ‘A Very Short Story’ roughly tells the story of what?” Definition questions, quite simply, required students to identify and differentiate between terms, such as “As explained in our book, what is the difference between “plot” and “story?” Finally, comparison and contrast questions often asked
students to either compare the works of two or more authors, or describe the different treatments of certain themes prevalent in the readings. For example, “Compare Shanna Compton’s poems to Emily Dickinson’s?” or “Compare the idea of family in ‘The Metamorphosis’ with the idea of family in ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ and the idea of family portrayed in ‘Cathedral.’” There were some questions that could be assigned to multiple categories, such as “How would you describe Kafka’s writing style in ‘The Metamorphosis?’” This question could certainly be regarded as interpretive in the sense that a student might have formulated an opinion about Kafka’s stylistics, but it could also be taken as a comparison and contrast question if students chose to situate and differentiate Kafka’s style from other writers.

Again, this type of assessment was somewhat foreign to me and my background as a creative writing student, so I asked Prof. Joyce to elaborate on the use of midterms and finals in his classroom. According to Prof. Joyce, their purpose was twofold: one, to reiterate to students the role of reading and literature in creative writing (i.e. that creative writing was not solely about the act of writing in various genres or expression, but also about having an understanding of literature, terminology, and conventions); and two, the use of a midterm and final was more a objective way of assessing students’ progress in the course. As he noted, “We’re not wasting our time talking about this stuff, these poems or these stories or whatever. [Students] should be learning about them....You know, they’re going to hopefully have made some improvement on their writing, but it’s not as if we’re just making great writers. But they can at least be learning something about literature” (18 November 2010). Prof. Joyce also described how the use of midterms and finals gave him “a more objective way to assess their learning – at least assess to what degree they pay attention in class, or to what degree they’re reading” (18
November 2010). This more objective means of assessment stemmed from Prof. Joyce’s beliefs on grading creative works. Specifically, he stated that

I don’t grade people’s creative works on a grading scale. I grade them as to whether they did them, whether they turned them in, whether they did the assignment, and whether it looks as if they put some effort in to it. But you know, I don’t think it’s fair to grade people’s poems A, B, C, D and since at the end of the semester I still have to assign them a grade, tests and quizzes are a concrete way of some clear assessment tools that the students understand too (18 November 2010).

From the perspective of my student-participants, the inclusion of something like the midterm in the class was received with mixed feelings. Ian remarked that such exams were just “one of those things” (5 December 2010) and that he understood “midterms [were] an easy way to get a feeling for how you’re doing in the class” (5 December 2010), but he also remarked that “I don’t think this class really needed it because it...didn’t really fit with anything else we had done” (5 December 2010). Wes also noted that the midterm was “a little surprising” (1 December 2010), but went on to assert that “for the most part it was really what I expected it to be.” (1 December 2010). Samantha, however, had the greatest issue with the exams, stating that “I think [Prof. Joyce] should focus more on the mechanics of writing because this is supposed to be an intro class for all the other writing classes, and I’m in fiction writing right now and I feel like I haven’t learned anything in this class that I can apply to that” (6 December 2010). When Samantha mentioned her enrollment in the fiction writing class, I was admittedly a bit perplexed considering the Director’s assertion that ENG 285 was a prerequisite for all other courses. Still, considering the fact that she did take some English and creative
writing courses at another institution, I assumed (though I did not confirm) that she was granted permission to enroll in both classes simultaneously. Regardless, for Samantha responding to questions about literature seemed out of place as it was her belief that students needed to focus on elements of craft, rather than literary criticism, in a creative writing class. She elaborated, “I mean, I think everyone that wants to write needs to read a lot and constantly, but I would much rather have more exercises on how to show and not tell and how to establish a set of cohesive laws within whatever you’re trying write, like a longer fiction piece” (6 December 2010). Considering Samantha’s extensive background in reading, something which many of the other students seemed to lack, and her previous experiences in literature and creative writing classes at another institution, her frustration was certainly understandable. However, Samantha’s experiences were the exception and not the norm for the class.

Indeed, as Prof. Joyce emphasized to me throughout the semester, “Within the context of our university, most of those students, they have never taken one literature class and they will not take one literature class the entire time they’re in college. So, if we assume that they know how to read a creative work and assess it on any level, we’re making an assumption that’s not necessarily true” (18 November 2010). As noted earlier, because of institutional changes to the composition sequence, students who were non-English related majors were not required to take any literature course, and, coupled with the partnering between telecommunications and creative writing, Prof. Joyce felt compelled from both an institutional and pedagogical standpoint to privilege reading and assessing literature over crafting and critiquing. He went on to say “I mean, I’ve had people (students) tell me before that ‘Oh, you know, we do too much reading.’ But like, I don’t know what they want to be doing. Getting to be a good reader is important….I kind of feel like that creative writing is an area where teaching literature is still pretty
important” (18 November 2010). Prof. Joyce was not alone in his assessment. As Katharine Haake notes in her article “Against Reading,” “Reading is the one certain thing that we do and it lies not just at the heart of the discipline, but in its earliest origins as an educational experiment to revitalize the study of literature – reading – from the inside, or the writer’s perspective. Reading is our sacred, privileged link to the rest of English studies” (17), and she goes on to assert that “If writing is itself a form of conversation with all prior writing, if it can’t even be said to reflect anything other than writing, we must be largely in agreement that students who come to us ill-prepared in their reading need to be whipped into shape” (17). Haake warns, however, that students need to develop a critical awareness of the literature that they read and understand that the texts selected by the instructor are just that, selections, and do not necessarily constitute some idealized form of literature or what constitutes “good writing.” More specifically, she notes “we should encourage students not just to read, but to look beyond the lure of the idealized text, of any one form of reading/writing as privileged over another….We should demand that they question, always, what they have assumed to be true and enduring about reading/writing, and that they understand the principles of selection” (22). It should be noted that Haake’s assertions, though applicable to Prof. Joyce’s introductory class in several ways, particularly in relation to an emphasis on reading and questioning what constitutes good writing or art, are more aligned with advanced undergraduate or graduate courses/programs in creative writing. As such, students seldom (if ever) questioned Prof. Joyce’s reading selections for the course.

In terms of the other genres that were read and discussed in the class, creative non-fiction and drama, the ebb and flow of the classroom discussions were very similar to the short stories – Prof. Joyce would ask some general questions and students would provide their responses, with Prof. Joyce occasionally making some interjections or
reading a particularly interesting paragraph, passage, or exchange between characters in order to focus students attention on a certain concept or talking point. Aside from discussing various literary terms, conventions, and devices, the conversation would often steer toward larger social or cultural issues, how the assigned reading was situated within or explored those issues, and how some these problems might still be present today. One notable example was when the class was discussing the first act of Arthur Miller’s play *The Death of a Salesman*. After some initial comments from the class about the significance of the names in the play and some confusion over the use of flashbacks, Prof. Joyce remarked that this was the “quintessential American play” because it’s about a character chasing the concept of the American Dream and failing time and time again in multiple facets of his life. This observation on the part of Prof. Joyce spawned a discussion on the validity of the American Dream and how it is often unattainable, yet still perpetuated, in our society. Specifically, Prof. Joyce and the students detailed the “money grubbing” that happens in America – the cycle how everything one works for goes to someone else. As Prof. Joyce put it, “By the time you pay off the house, you die. By the time you pay off the car, it’s already broken. Loman represents 85% of us all the time” (2 December 2010). The class also noted the overdeveloped sense of competition in America, how 2nd place is just a nice way of saying someone is the first loser. As a culture, we look down on people that lose, even though our society creates a system of winners and losers, and someone has to lose. In the case of *The Death of a Salesman*, this loser is Willie Loman and according to Prof. Joyce it is difficult to fault a person for buying in to a system that we’ve been taught from a very early age (2 December 2010). This comment sparks a great deal of debate among the students, some of which agreed with Prof. Joyce, but others (particularly my student-participant Samantha) who felt that Willie Loman set himself up for failure through his behavior – i.e. favoritism toward one
child, cheating on his wife, and, despite having attained some aspects of the American Dream such as a family, a house, and a good job, he doesn’t recognize or appreciate it because he always wants more. To me, this particular discussion really demonstrated how students were able to connect the material under examination to greater social issues and how this particular piece of literature connected to their own personal experiences, thoughts, and lives outside of the classroom.

In addition to the discussion of readings, students would also engage in various in-class writing exercises. Aside from the observation assignment described above, one in-class writing activity that students found particularly valuable was when Prof. Joyce would have students write quickly on a particular word or a series of words. As Prof. Joyce explained,

The writing quickly in class serves a couple of purposes. One, it’s getting them to write quickly so they aren’t thinking too much. Because I truly think that thinking...is the enemy of making art. It’s not the enemy of creating good art ultimately, obviously you’ve got to be thinking about things, etc., but too often amateur writers or artists get bogged down by the process and by the heaviness that they feel – “Oh, it’s a work of art, I’ve got to sit and think and labor.” And you don’t have to. I mean, you can do it like that, but you can also do it very quickly and painlessly and easily. And so, part of that is to get them to start [writing]...hopefully that’s fun for them. Hopefully they start to see that writing can be fun, that it doesn’t have to be a labor (13 September 2010).

Prof. Joyce was quick to point out that students often come into his class with the belief that “unless we’re laboring at something really hard we’re not really doing a good job of it or we’re not really working hard” (13 September 2010), but remarked that art was an
exception to that rule to some degree. In addition, he asserted that this type of quick writing could give students “a sense of being productive and what that can mean” (13 September 2010), that students could write “as much or as little as [they] want and it’s relatively easy to do” (13 September 2010). My student-participant Ian seemed to key-in on these notions of labor and productivity, as he remarked “Whether it’s something good or not, whether it’s something you’re actually happy with or if it’s just some piece of crap you do in class for nothing, [the quick writes] really do help and it can help you grow” (21 October 2010). Of particular interest was Ian’s assertion that this activity created a space where “you just sit there and write things out [and] you can really see your thought process, because you sit there with this specific goal, ‘Write about this,’ and so you just write about it. Whatever it is, whether it’s something that you have any interest at all in or not, it’s just cool to be able to sit there and crank something out” (21 October 2010).

This idea of seeing one’s thought process, of having a specific goal in mind was echoed to some degree by another student-participant, Wes, who explained, “A favorite activity of mine is basically when [Prof. Joyce] says, ‘Okay, pick a word. Taxi. Okay, we’re going to write something about taxies. Go.’ It’s very, very cool to write on the fly and I feel that since we’ve started doing that I’ve noticed things about my style a little more and it’s helped me find who I am a writer” (19 October 2010). Wes elaborated that after these brief in-class assignments he would frequently return home and he would sit with his roommate, who I later found out was none other than my participant Ian, and they would critique each others’ work, noting that “we both found our writing style and it’s starting to come out a little more. So, I think that writing on the fly...just going and seeing what comes out is a very, very cool thing” (19 October 2010). I asked Wes to elaborate on what he meant by being able to “see” his thought process, and he expressed that when given the first word to write on, he would just “sit there for a second...and then
think ‘Okay, well, this is this,” and then just kind of start.” For Wes, he would begin with a literal interpretation of the word and then “just sort of see where things go...sometimes it goes off in a completely random direction, but sometimes it kind of evolves into something that I would never have actually thought of” (21 October 2010). The fact that Wes only had a limited amount of time to write created an environment where he did not allow himself to dwell on a single thought or image for too long, which enabled him to fashion associations between words or lines that he believed he would not have considered otherwise. Unfortunately for me, I never had the opportunity to observe this type of quick-writing, word-associated assignment in Prof. Joyce’s class. However, during the course of my interviews with student-participants, I attempted to recreate this exercise. What follows is my brief examination of one such quick-writing exercise with my student-participant Wes.

At the conclusion of our second interview on October 21, 2010, I asked Wes to sit at a computer terminal and I provided him with the two specific words, “water” and “ice.” I told him that I would leave the room and return in five minutes, and though this certainly did not replicate the classroom environment or the continuous calling-out of new words, I felt it was a good starting point to discuss his thought process (or lack thereof) when writing. When I returned after exiting the room, Wes had produced the following:

Writers block takes over.
Something about ice water kisses sound great,
but the words won’t come out.
Ideas dripping down my brain like
freshly sprayed graffiti;
Still, nothing ever comes of them.
The janitor has left for the night, locking up my mind.

Guess the ice water and drag queens will have to wait till tomorrow.

I asked Wes to elaborate on some specific points and take me through what he was thinking or experiencing when writing this poem. He noted that the first line was fairly obvious, as it reflected his inability to think about what to write pertaining to “water” and “ice.” After approximately one minute, he said he began the second line as “Something about water, ice, and kisses,” but he quickly backspaced and decided that, rather than separate these individual terms of water, ice, and kisses, he would invert two words and create the singular phrase “ice water kisses,” noting that quick revision created a more interesting image. After adding the phrase “sound great” to the second line, he again felt “stuck” and constructed the third line of “but the words won’t come out.” Wes expressed that knowing he was being timed, that I would return after 5 minutes, created a sense of urgency and he decided to quickly move on to the fourth line with the image “Ideas dripping.” He noted that he paused again, trying to conjure up some sort of comparison or complementary image, eventually settling on “Ideas dripping down my brain like / freshly sprayed graffiti.” Wes expressed that the image of “dripping down” immediately created an association with wet spray paint and these two lines were fairly easy to compose. The subsequent line, “Still, nothing ever comes of them,” was in reference to “ideas” never being realized and according to Wes the next line, “The janitor has left for the night, locking up my mind,” materialized from hearing one of the night custodians at NMU walking down the hall and hearing the jingle of her keys. The final line was completed as I entered back into the room, a quick flurry of writing where Wes said he was just trying to wrap things up.
I asked Wes what some of his favorite images were, and he noted the “ice water kisses,” “graffiti,” and “drag queens” to be the most prevalent. In addition, Wes’s emphasis on the mind of the individual, which is clear in the imagery he associates with the brain and mind in his composition, was nothing new in his writing. In our first interview, he noted how “I’ve always been obsessed with people basically losing their minds” (8 September 2010) and one of his earlier poems written for the course “was actually based off of a psychedelic drug experience I had. Basically, [the poem] was me trying to explain what it was like through poetry” (8 September 2010), an experience he viewed as a self-induced, temporary insanity. In this light, while Wes perhaps did not find an entirely new style or voice though the quick-write exercises as he claimed, adhering fairly closely with his interest in a certain subject matter, he was able to hone and explore new ways to express this subject matter.

To conclude this brief discussion on the quick writing activity, from a pedagogical standpoint Prof. Joyce felt the exercise was a great way for student “to know each other – it puts us all in the same boat. You know, none of us can write a totally great poem in 5 minutes, so we share bad poems and it reminds us ‘Oh, we’re all human here – we’re all up against the same issues.’ And, also, you get to know people’s personalities just by the things that they write about” (13 September 2010). Indeed, Samantha noted that it was “kind of interesting to see what people come up with” (22 October 2010) because she often would stay close to the literal interpretation of whatever words or series of words was given to the students.

The sharing of material occurred after writing both in-class and out-of-class assignments, though students elected to share their work on a strictly voluntary basis. Because the major out-of-class assignments were always due on Tuesday class periods,
the day I did not observe Prof. Joyce’s class, I was unable to witness this activity; however, I was able to observe and participate in what Prof. Joyce dubbed a “fun” in-class assignment where students, clearly feeling the weight and pressure of midterms in their class, were asked to write “An Ode to a Midterm.” When I asked Prof. Joyce if this assignment was to expose students to a new form of poetry, i.e. an ode, he chuckled and said, “It was really just for fun...to me that’s fun – write a little goofy ode. If they think that’s fun maybe occasionally they’ll write a little goofy ode and maybe that’s be the thing that keeps them doing something, writing something” (18 November 2010). Specifically, in late October, one week prior to the midterm in ENG 285, Prof. Joyce began the class by asking students to get out a piece of paper and a writing utensil and to write an ode, which he remarked was often a direct address to a person or thing, to their upcoming exam. He provided students with a “silly example,” hastily composing “Oh Midterm, you silly little hamster, I love you.” Prof. Joyce encouraged students to keep writing, not stopping while they composed, and I too decided to participate in this activity. After a brief span of time, approximately 2 – 3 minutes, I stared back at my computer screen to find the following:

The frayed page of blue books
skulking at me from the head of the room
a chasm of mediocrity, oh Midterm, you
would be nothing without my prose, flung
into waste baskets or left until the next
semester, the next student to finger
your pages, fill you up, and discard you. I have
too many words, oh Midterm, you.
I was surprised that I was relatively satisfied with what I had written and that much of what I had heard from my student-participants and Prof. Joyce seemed true, that the writing itself was easy (though perhaps it wasn’t “good” in any sense). Still, the activity left me with the start of something and it wasn’t lost on me that I had some thinly-veiled metaphors and innuendos working in the poem, some threads that could be spun-out later if I decided to pursue the ode further. Prof. Joyce asked for volunteers and I found myself with my hand raised, though he did not see me. Two students volunteered, reciting poems in a similar vein to the example Prof. Joyce originally gave, with other students quietly listening, smiling, and laughing during certain lines. There was, however, no criticism or input from the class or the instructor, merely a forum for people to share what they conjured-up, to let-off steam and boost morale during a stressful period of the semester.

Conferences

In addition to class sessions, Prof. Joyce met individually with students once during the semester for approximately 10 – 15 minutes; something that I would learn was a new pedagogical practice for him, at least in the context of introductory creative writing. More specifically, he noted that he had held conferences regularly with his composition students “just to go over [students’] papers,” but in the case of the creative writing course he used this forum as a way of “[getting] to know the student….Maybe help learn their name because I don’t really try learning names. And to sort of get a face to the work I’m seeing” (18 November 2010). Consequently, Prof. Joyce managed his conferences with students in a similar way to how the class operated – students would come-in, he would greet them, ask students how they were doing, and then spend a little
bit of time discussing each student’s writing, which at the time of the conference consisted of a packet of 4 poems, a short story, and the observation assignment. One benefit Prof. Joyce saw with this practice was being able to “ask [students] to bring in their previous things that I put comments on and it also gives me a chance to clarify those comments – make sure they understood what I was saying” (18 November 2010). Though I observed a series of conferences, none of the attendees were my student-participants. When I asked them about their meeting with Prof. Joyce, Ian, James, and Samantha all remarked that it was a “good” experience, but “it was really short.” Indeed, the purpose of the conferences seemed to have less to do with students’ writing and was “more [of] just a way for me (Prof. Joyce) to know [students] a little bit better, maybe learning more about their interests, things I might do in class that might be helpful” (18 November 2010). During the conferences I observed, Prof. Joyce did in fact ask students if there was anything they wanted to see more of in the course, or if there was anything he could do to improve their experience. Though this clearly was a gesture on the part of Prof. Joyce to bring students into a dialectical relationship, to effectively dismantle some of his authority in the eyes of students, no students that I observed offered suggestions for changing various components of the class.

Assignments

As noted on the ENG 285 course syllabus, “Assignments will be poems, fiction and other writings. You may be asked to write an essay….You will have reading assignments, so read them and be prepared for discussions and possible quizzes. There may also be vocabulary quizzes and/or tests.” In addition to the quizzes and examinations I have already discussed, students were required to complete major
assignments, such as a packet of four poems, a 3–4 page short story, a 3–4 creative nonfiction essay, and a 3–4 page dialogue, as well as smaller assignments including writing a sonnet and a piece entitled “I Remember” modeled after the Joe Brainard prose poem of the same name. Because an analysis of each of these assignments and the student writing produced is too expansive for this study, I have selected to focus my discussion on the packet of four poems. For one, the selection of the poetry packet is intriguing because the instructor specifically required students to construct models or imitations of work read for the class, whereas for other genres he merely implied or suggested to students to attempt this type of modeling — something my student-participants did not do. This requirement created a direct correlation in the data between outside classroom activity (reading), in-class activity (discussion and “quick-writes”), and assignments (poems). In addition, the relative brevity of the poems students produced has allowed me to provide the reader, in many instances, with the complete work of participants instead of small excerpts from a larger work. Whenever possible, I have triangulated the data points of student and instructor interviews, in-class observations, and student writing.

As stated above, the first formal assignment for students was to write four different poems, some of which were assigned with a specific prompt or purpose in mind, others were dubbed by Prof. Joyce as “freebies” where students could write whatever they wanted. The first poem was a poetic response to the T.S. Eliot poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred, Prufrock.” As Prof. Joyce explained to me, a poetic response in this case required students to imagine “if J. Alfred Prufrock just told you all this information and now you’re going to turn around and respond to him” (22 August 2010). Though a thorough literary analysis is beyond my scope here, the poem has often been regarded as the epitome of modernist literary sensibility, with its speaker (Prufrock) musing and
lamenting about his own sense of decay and mortality in the form of a monologue. Predating Eliot’s most examined work “The Wasteland,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is not peppered with the mix of scholarly language and slang present in the former poem, but like “The Wasteland” the Prufrock poem conveys a sense of disorder and bleakness by focusing on death, seduction, desolation, and loss with vague undertones of human potential, hope, and carpe diem. Written almost as a stream of consciousness and using less archaic language than its famous successor, the poem compliments Prof. Joyce’s pedagogy of quick-writing and allowing students to relate to literature quite well; specifically, the poem creates the sense of a single moment of thought, of expression, and conveys to the reader a general sense of dissatisfaction that many of us find within ourselves at various points in our lives, while also reiterating our unification through the human condition of decay and death.

Though students were required to read the poem, virtually no discussion of the text occurred in class, the only exception coming on September 2nd when students were asked to connect the T.S. Eliot poem to the 17th century Andrew Marvell poem “To His Coy Mistress.” Hesitant, students eventually answered that the concept of time was indicative to both pieces, that we do not have enough time in our lives or simply waste time and run the risk of being unfilled. Though conversation quickly moved to the other readings for that day, this one observation seemed to have resonated with students when they went to compose their poetic responses. Generally, my student-participants had little sympathy for J. Alfred Prufrock, viewing him as a neurotic individual chronically worrying about things beyond his control. James response, for example, contained the lines “Why worry about the Universe when our village is in shambles? / You can’t play Hamlet with the range of a fly. / That girl she meant to break your heart / And you just need to learn you part” (21 – 24). Here, James conveys to Prufrock that his lamentations
about time passed, about missed opportunities and his place in existence are futile because of how insignificant we all are in the enormity of the universe. Consequently, this theme was present in the writing of others as well. Ian’s poetic response began with the following:

J. Alfred thanks for your request
But I’ve got to get this off my chest
All your life you seem to seem
to long for love and dream to dream
You come to me and talk of time
As if you’ve figured its grand design
And seen the things that I have not
And right here is just a thought
Why not go and do for once
And let the talking stop (1 – 10).

Ian expressed that his response was informed partly by the contradictory nature of the speaker Prufrock, noting “He talks about how there’s going to be time, but there’s not time if you don’t do anything. Time doesn’t mean anything if you just sit there and talk about it. ‘Oh, I can just do it later.’ If you never do it, then what’s the point of saying you can do it later” (7 September 2010)? For Ian, constant talk and chatter meant inaction, of wasting time, and he went on to assert that thinking about inevitable (and sometimes superficial) issues such as aging or balding were particularly pointless:

What have you to show?
What have you in friends?
So buy a hat, wear it everyday
And under that, place a toupee
‘Cause confidence is what you lack and you need a sauna to get it back
So go and get yourself esteem (24 – 29).

As Ian explained, “It’s really just [my speaker] saying...‘Why do you sit here and worry about people seeing your bald spot? If you’re so worried, go buy a hat or a toupee, cover it up. People don’t care.’” (7 September 2011). Wes, too, had similar sentiments in his poem with the lines “A life full of regrets is Mr. Prufrock’s story / A balding man scared of taking a risk” (1 – 2), and my student-participant Wes also keyed-in on the concept of time, particularly in his final five lines:

He thought he had more time, thought it’d never end
Had time to disturb the universe, to make revisions.
Now it’s much too late for this, as he begins to grow old
He let the time pass him, but now he can admit
Time is the enemy of those who don’t use it (5 – 9).

Specifically, in describing the final line, Wes stated that “When we were reading ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ I got the impression he was one of those guys that wasted all of his time, and if you waste your time it’s the enemy of those that choose not to use it” (8 September 2010). Upon reading Wes’s 9 line poem, he seemed to be reacting more to the brief class discussion on the Prufrock piece than actually crafting a poetic response and he admitted that “for the most part I kind of slopped this one together” (8 September 2010). He attributed his difficulty to the subject matter and form of the poem, stating that “I couldn’t quite figure out how to respond to it because [Prufrock] wasn’t necessarily talking to anyone – he was just sort of rambling....I had a hard time figuring out how to make a response to something when someone wasn’t talking to anyone and just kind of rambling” (8 September 2010). Though she did not have as
much difficulty as Wes, stating that the “reply to that T.S. Eliot poem, Prufrock” was “fairly easy stuff” (7 September 2010), Samantha too focused her response on the idea of Prufrock wasting time by worrying about seemingly superficial matters:

You should dear sir presume,
To worry about everyone else is
to not worry about you.
Take neither care nor heed of what is his to hold
or what is hers and worry not about propriety,
the thinning of your hair or your cuffs oh so rolled
Just be happy. (1 – 7).

At this early point in the semester, though it was clear that students were completing the assigned readings regularly, the activity of in-class discussion pertaining to the readings had a distinct affect on the work produced by the students – most notably, the use of a similar theme.

The second poem had the most stringent guidelines in terms of modeling the work after the original author; specifically, students were asked to write a poem modeled after Emily Dickinson’s work “I heard a Fly Buzz (465),” paying particular attention to her stylistics and form (use of dashes, slant rhyme, and four-line stanzas), as well as the predominant subject matter of death. When discussing the poem in class on the 2nd of September, Prof. Joyce asked students for their thoughts on the poem or Emily Dickinson – one student remarked plainly, “She likes death a lot” and Prof. Joyce agrees, noting that she utilizes death as a metaphor quite a bit, which is not surprising considering that “death is a huge part of life” (2 September 2010). Another student notes
Dickinson’s use of dashes and Prof. Joyce takes a poll about whether students feel they should pause for a longer or shorter period of time over the dashes. While this question was being posed to the class, I personally thought dashes created a longer pause, but the class was evenly divided. For those believing in a longer pause, the consensus was that the visual aspect of the dashes, the fact that a dash physically took up more space than a comma, created cause for a moment of greater pause. Prof. Joyce and the other half of the class, however, believed that the dashes simulated an interruption, making for a shorter pause. Before reading through the poem, Prof. Joyce provides some information about Emily Dickinson’s life and the time period in which she lived, her reclusiveness and how she was underappreciated, as well as how people did not have a profound understanding of human psychology at the time. The remainder of the class period was spent talking at length about the poem, particularly the taking of an ordinary object such as a fly and placing it into the seemingly extraordinary scene of someone witnessing their own death, and the various devices used Dickinson such as slant rhyme, double-meanings of words, and extended metaphor.

When I asked Prof. Joyce why students should imitate the work of Emily Dickinson and what purpose this activity served, he noted that “I simply think that she’s probably the first sort of great writer who really articulates some of our modern sensibilities in terms of students and psychology and anxiety. I just think she’s really imaginative and a great place to start with students to just see how cool it is to say one or two lines that really blows you away” (22 August 2010). For some students, modeling this particular poem made the process of writing easier. Ian in particular mentioned that “It was probably just easy because it seemed like [Dickinson] had very specific things that she did, so I could try to mimic those….that helps me, having a format to follow” (7 September 2010). Ian expressed that while he wasn’t “a huge fan of [Dickinson’s
poems),” that his re-creation was “pretty fun to write” and he felt like he could “just fill in the blanks” left by Dickinson’s form. Indeed, Ian’s poem centered on the theme of death and several stanzas utilized dashes and slant rhyme, such as this one where “Death” is first introduced and there is the presence of the slanted end-rhyme “ocean” and “when:”

I took a trip – to meet with Death

Somewhere – Beyond the ocean

Though I had felt one day we’d meet

Nobody – ever know when (9 – 12)

While Ian seemed more focus on replicating the form and devices utilized by Dickinson, Wes was more intent on personifying death his poem. Specifically, he created a scenario in which death was supposed to take the speaker out on a date:

Death stood me up – again

For the third time in five nights.

Thoughts of worry run through my head-

I hope everything is all right. (1 – 4).

As he explained, “Basically, you’re supposed to meet death...you’re ready for death, but death keeps standing you up....when the date finally comes, you die” (8 September 2010). Here Wes is utilizing some of the double-meaning employed by Dickinson, date of course meaning a “date” on the calendar, as well as the process of courting. However, this first stanza and Wes’s subsequent stanzas have little use slant rhyme (one exception being the final stanza with the words “soul” and “afterall”) or dashes. In the case of Samantha’s Dickinson imitation (reproduced below in full), I got the sense that her construction of the poem was almost an afterthought:
Death I fear – you not

for I have meet you before-

you lost your icy group grip on my heart-too hot

But you’ve come back for more- (1 – 4).

Taking into account Samantha’s medical history there is certainly some significance here, particularly if one considers the 3rd line in reference to her heart condition and the amount of surgeries she had to undergo as a child; but as Samantha explained to me, the Prufrock and Dickinson poems “were constraining because I felt like I had to do it in a certain style....That doesn’t help me write – like, that kind of constraint isn’t good for me....Because of all the constraints you put on this form of poetry I can’t put it on paper, and that aggravates me because that’s what ideas are for, to be put on paper....If you can’t get it out on paper then you can’t share it with anyone” (7 September 2010).

The third poem asked students to write a “weird poem,” with Prof. Joyce challenging students to think about “what is the weirdest thing I could put down on paper” (2 September 2010). Consequently, “weird” for my student-participants fell into two basic categories: weirdness of form/construction of the poem and weirdness of subject matter. James, for example created a piece entitled “The IJKs” that experimented with double-meanings, acronyms, tech-talk, and even palindromes, while Samantha created the following piece that maximized the spatial dimensions of the page and employed the extended metaphor of pulling taffy in relation to love and the human body:

Pull

I

Want
To

Pull

You

apart.

Like some sweet taffy,

Stretch you out and see how far you can bend.

Is a part of you just as good as the whole?

Or are you only useful in one piece.

Where do I start my love? (1 – 11).

Though it did not dawn on me to ask Samantha if it influenced her writing here, the class did practice in creating extended metaphors during the discussion on Emily Dickinson, with Prof. Joyce explaining how an artist can extend any metaphor, no matter how bizarre. In the context of class that day, Prof. Joyce blurted out “This table is like a rocket ship” and he subsequently asked students to expand upon that notion. Students responded that both a table and a rocket ship are inanimate objects and built by humans. Prof. Joyce called out another one, “This pen is like an amine convention,” and students’ responded with how both a pen and an amine convention can create crazy ideas. As Prof. Joyce would explain to me later, “I’m trying to demonstrate...how imaginative people are, how easy it is to make enormous leaps of the imagination and you don’t have to be terribly imaginative to do it. Again, it doesn’t take long to start coming up with reasons why a chair is like a mustache....You could make an argument that all writing and all art is about metaphor. Any work of art is a substitution to some degree or another of something” (13 September 2010). Though Samantha’s metaphor of taffy being like a person is not terribly bizarre, indeed there are many representations of humans “pulling” upon one another (ex. the cliché “tug at your heart strings”), there is a
sense of Samantha picking two things that are at least physically dissimilar, “taffy” and “humans,” in order to create something imaginative and slightly weird.

In terms of “weird” subject matter for the third poem, Ian created a piece entitled “Initial Thoughts in a Dreamscape” where he wanted to create a sense of “you wake up and you’re in a dream, and you know it’s a dream, and you... just sort of experience it” (7 September 2010). Indeed, the poem is quite ethereal with lines such as “Burning black, the sky performs in the / theater of eternity (1 – 2) and “Breathe in deep these far off visions / Take your mind off these stars / Celestial collisions” (22 – 24) with little in the way of concrete imagery. Wes, on the other hand, had some concrete imagery, including “Peanut butter sandwiches with an orange juice chaser / I have a feeling that it’s gonna be a good day, sir” (1 – 2), but interspersed his imagery with inside jokes with friends, “One Coke Zero rules them all” (14) and other references to the speaker losing his mind, “My mind starts to crumble away like chalk / In the rain” (4 – 5). Interestingly, Wes noted that The Beatles song “I Am the Walrus” was a tremendous influence on him when writing the piece. Specifically, he said “The story goes that there was an Oxford Literature class that was analyzing Beatles lyrics...and the analysis was way off. So, [Lennon] said I’m going to write a song that has no meaning, I’m just going to throw in the weirdest shit I can think of and see what people come up with.’ So, that’s sort of what I was going with in a few of these lines that don’t have any meaning” (8 September 2010). I didn’t have the heart to tell Wes that, in the world of postmodernism, even something perceived to have no message or no meaning still inherently, inevitably, has meaning.

The fourth and final poem allowed students to write about whatever they wanted. Though some student participants like James and Samantha experimented with text and
spatial layout to create a sense of weirdness, some students like Ian decided to a more subtle approach to indentation and spatial layout for their “freebie” poem. In his poem “Hate Mail to Our Creator,” a direct and somewhat vehement address, Ian often used indentation and line breaks to take the place of punctuation such as commas:

The world you see
    is all there is
    is all there was
    is all there ever will be
The world you see
You have created
But only that which you see (1 – 7)

Ian expressed that “as you read it you’re suppose to go through and think of it like you’re talking to God, but I was actually talking to my Dad in it. So, it’s sort of the same creator type deal” (7 September 2010), and when asked what purpose of the indentation and lack of punctuation he remarked “I like to make things look interesting and how each one of these stanzas has its own unique feel to it…When I see this [poem], I don’t know if it’s interesting to anybody else, but when I see it I think it’s cool looking” (7 September 2010). Similarly, Wes’s “freebie” poem was extremely sparse in terms of punctuation, though he contended that this “happened by accident. Obviously when you’re writing a poem, because you want it to flow, you may forget things like periods” (8 September 2010):

The cart starts to crash, falling back to Earth
It’s all so fast, he loses track of his body
His head seems to be stuck in space
His body, in a completely other place
The ride is intense and he want it to end
Nausea sets in, panic take over
He fights it with all his strength (17 – 23).

Aside from reiterating that this poem derived from a psychedelic drug experience and noting that he wrote the poem as a freshmen, “changing some things around just because they didn’t sound very good” (8 September 2010), Wes did not have much else to say about the poem or its construction. His re-use of a previous work, however, became somewhat commonplace for my student-participants by the end of the semester, particularly for the dialogue assignment since many of my student-participants, as mentioned above, had already had some exposure to screenwriting.

I asked each student participant about the comments they received from Prof. Joyce on their poems and how those comments might translate into revisions if they had been given the opportunity to revise. The two prevalent things that students noted were that Prof. Joyce illuminated issues regarding repetition of certain elements and the concept of utilizing description to “show” rather than “tell” the reader about what transpires in the poem. In Wes’s case, he remarked how Prof. Joyce conveyed to him the idea of “turning ideas into images,” which for Wes meant being more concise in his writing. Specifically, he stated that “I tend to ramble, so I’m trying to now get to where my writing is more concise, more straight to the point instead of just bunch of rambling that doesn’t need to be there” (19 October 2010). Ian had a similar experience with the comments received from Prof. Joyce, as he was told to balance abstract versus concrete words, to “instead of completely saying everything, [show] it” (21 October 2010). In addition, Ian also had the phrase “turning words into images” adorn his packet of poems, which to him meant “instead of coming out and saying ‘This person felt this way,’ it’s sort
of just showing what they do” (21 October 2010). Samantha, too, was told to “show, don’t tell,” stating that “I need to work on...less clichés and more, I guess physical verbs, like touching.” I began to wonder if all my student-participants were experiencing the same difficulties, or if I was witnessing carbon-copy comments from the instructor.

James, however, had a different and insightful perspective:

Well, Prof. Joyce’s criticism is really constructive always. He’s really constructive about whenever he gives you comments. So, I mean, it’s been pretty positive and just basically stuff that would help you develop what you already have, you know? I remember particularly for my Emily Dickinson poem, he told me that, ah, it was just a structural thing – he told me that Emily Dickinson poetry would be shorter lines, which I totally understood (26 October 2010).

Indeed, James’s Dickinson poem has far greater complexity (at least in terms of imagery, attempt at metaphor, and subject matter) than other student participants, with lines like “This hole- / In the gently-woven Blanket of reason and institution- / The wool that warms the masses- has gripped me” (9 – 11). This lies in stark contrast to, for example, the lines produced by Wes: “We made a deal – at midnight we’d meet / at the top of the abandoned tower. / With my Feet dangling over the edge – / I wait hour upon hour” (5 – 8). While James clearly has an ethereal, figurative tone, with the image of a hole in a blanket that represents “reason” and “institutions” of the masses, Wes has a more literal (if not chronological) approach to his writing as he conveys a series of events in succession, a series of words without image. This is not to imply, however, that James is an inherently “better writer” than Wes or has greater command of poetics; rather it is a more thorough justification for the comments students receive from Prof. Joyce beyond the mere buzz words or phrases that can proliferate creative writing classrooms.
Since students were not asked to revise any of their works throughout the semester, I asked my participants what they would have done had they been given the opportunity to revise. The answers were wide and varied. When I asked Samantha if she ever completed major revisions on her works, she noted “Not usually. I hate proofreading. It’s hard for me to proofread my own things because I know what it’s supposed to say, which I know isn’t always how it ends up on the page. So, I usually ask my roommate to do the grammatical editing and then ask her if it makes sense” (22 October 2010). What was striking to me about Samantha’s answer was that, considering her experiences in multiple institutions and other English classes, her view of revision was grounded in lower-order concerns, grammatical issues, and mere proofreading instead of significant re-workings of a text. When I asked if she had ever considered re-writing, say, an entire scene from a fiction piece (her main area of concentration), Samantha asserted “Not substantially, not unless I can see it being a problem later. Like as I’m developing the story. Unless it’s severe character editing stuff, I usually don’t because I think [what’s there] should be there” (22 October 2010). For Samantha, there was a belief that the way she envisioned and constructed her work was how it was supposed to be, with little need or want for change. Wes had similar views pertaining to revision, specifically a concern with editing and having little need for attempting significant changes: “The revision process...I might just cut out a word or two here, reword this sentence a little differently to help make...my writing more active, get to the point and explain to the reader ‘This is what I want, this is how you should be taking it’” (19 October 2010). While this approach is certainly valid, it illuminates the problem Prof. Joyce saw with Wes’s work – trying to explain or tell the reader what he wanted to convey through the piece rather than allowing the reader to be shown or to make their own assertions, connections, etc. from the text.
Ian also had some concerns pertaining to the readers of his poems, expressing to me that he worried “Are people going to get this, or does it only make sense to me” (21 October 2010), but he also noted that, if given the opportunity, he would certainly “keep in mind the stuff about being redundant...or I can just change some words to make things sound better or to put the hard, concrete images in there” (21 October 2010). Much like Ian, James was open to Prof. Joyce’s comments for potential revision, stating “Obviously I’ll take some of Prof. Joyce’s advice” (26 October 2010), but also remarked on the value of putting work aside “for a couple of days or a couple of weeks, or however long and then look at it later” before revising in order to establish new ways of “looking at” and “reading” the piece (26 October 2010).

Having heard students’ reactions to Prof. Joyce’s comments and noting how they would make revisions if they were required to do so, I asked Prof. Joyce some of his impressions regarding the work students had done, whether it was what he had been anticipating or if anything stood out. He noted, “I want to say I was a little disappointed....I was a little disappointed at how many of them were just like sing-songy, just the classic ABAB rhyme scheme...just because, again, that’s not the examples we’ve been showing” (13 September 2010). While Prof. Joyce only required students to fashion one particular poem after the work of another poet, it is clear he was hoping students would utilize some of the examples that were read for the class to influence their own. However, as Prof. Joyce made clear, “It’s not over with yet,” and was hopeful that through his comments and grading he could expose students to different ways of approaching their work. As he elaborated, “If I notice that everyone of [a student’s] poems is following this [ABAB] structure I’ll say, ‘Huh, it looks like you like to rhyme. Maybe next time you could try not rhyming.’ Or, for that matter, I’ll see someone who never rhymes and I’ll say, ‘You know what? Next time why don’t you try rhyming?’” (13
September 2010). For Prof. Joyce, he hoped that to offer students avenues where they could try new things and “get [students] out of whatever rut they are in, because most of us get into some sort of rut when these things happen” (13 September 2010). At this early point in the semester, Prof. Joyce expressed that he expected some degree of repetition in terms of the students’ work, but also remarked that “It’s really disappointing when you get to the end of the semester and you still get ABAB. I understand what it’s like. I mean, it’s hard to break out of that. If that’s what’s stuck in your head as to what poetry is, it takes some relatively serious effort to break it” (13 September 2010). Indeed, considering some of the attributes that I previously discussed in terms of activity systems and genres in composition, I found Prof. Joyce’s assertion to be particularly accurate. If students have become conversant in a particular form or genre of writing, which, in the example Prof. Joyce provides is ABAB iambic pentameter, and are then exposed to new forms of a particular genre (i.e. unfamiliar activity systems), then students invariably have difficulty writing within those systems. With that in mind, I would like to turn attention to a brief activity analysis of the entirety of the ENG 285 class, followed by revisiting my student-participant Wes and his assertion that the in-class activity of quick-writes helped him to understand his own style and certain aspects of his writing. In other words, I track Wes’s progress from the quick-write I had him replicate during our interview to his other writing and triangulate these texts with our interviews and my observations.

**ENG 285 as an Activity System**

If we examined Prof. Joyce’s ENG 285 class as an activity system, the subjects were a classroom of 20 students, which included my four student-participants, with a
demographic of predominantly traditional (18 – 24 year old), Caucasian, male students (indeed, there was only one African-American student and three females in the entire class). Another subject was, of course, Prof. Joyce, a male instructor in his mid 30s who had received a terminal MFA in Creative Writing from a low-residency program where he focused on poetry. The community encompassing the ENG 285 course was the Department of English at NMU, as well as the creative writing program itself, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the university. However, students in the course were also exposed to communities outside the university setting through visiting writers, writing festivals, and local readings. Indeed, it was not uncommon Prof. Joyce to encourage students to attend readings at nearby coffeehouses or performance halls within the community. Furthermore, the presence of visiting writers and poets in Prof. Joyce’s classroom, individuals who hailed from outside the influence of NMU, exposed students to a wider-community of their contemporaries and allowed students to engage in conversation with working writers and poets, each from their own distinct communities that invariably shaped how they viewed writing, process, and what it meant to be an artist. One such example was a visiting writer by the name of Matthew Hart, an individual who had attained some notoriety as a member of the 1990s punk rock band “Squirt Gun,” and utilized this experience to bring a performative aspect to his poetry, often eliciting responses from audience members through yelling and changing tonalities while reading. The objectives for the course were, of course, somewhat contingent upon the individual or institutional entity. In terms of the English department, the main objective was to introduce students to “the nature of the creative process and to the nature, forms, and techniques of writing fiction, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction.” However, as Prof. Joyce made abundantly clear in numerous instances throughout the study, his main objectives for the course were to create “an audience for people who are
going to be good creative writers” (22 August 2010), provide students with opportunities
to “not be scared of literature” (22 August 2010), and ultimately change students
perceptions about art – primarily that art did not always have to be a laborious task, but
could be done rather easily. For many students, however, such as James, Ian, and Wes,
the initial objective for the course was to simply pass it in order to complete the
prerequisite for other creative writing classes, most notably the screenwriting course that
they hoped would contribute to their degrees in telecommunications and film or theater.
Their objectives changed somewhat as the course progressed, however, as Ian felt more
comfortable sharing his material with the class and Wes noted the enjoyment he felt
through greater exposure to literature and becoming more aware of his creative voice.
Samantha seemed to have very few expectations or objectives for the course, viewing it
more as a step toward more advanced creative writing courses that she felt would
challenge her, places where she could write more, and perhaps not have to read quite as
much.

The tools for the course consisted of numerous prompts (ex. quick-writes),
readings in multiple genres, and pedagogical techniques, such as reading aloud, the
instructor conveying personal experiences in order for students to more easily relate to
the readings, and allowing students the opportunity to share their work with the class
without critique. The required texts for the course consisted of the Gardner, Lawn, Ridl,
and Schakel text *Literature: A Portable Anthology*, as well as Janet Burroway’s heavily
canonized book *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, and the instructor would
also provide students with handouts with work from selected authors not included in the
anthology (ex. Kurt Vonnegut) or visiting writers who came to class. As already noted,
certain assessment tools were also utilized, such as reading quizzes, a midterm, and a
final. Technological tools were at an absolute minimum, at least within the classroom,
but students completed their out-of-class assignments utilizing word processing software and often noted listening to music or having other ongoing, ancillary activities occurring while composing (ex. a television program on the background). In addition, Prof. Joyce would e-mail the class various announcements or reminders, such as when he had to reschedule the midterm exam because of inclement weather in consideration of those commuting from far distances. During class, students utilized non-digital tools such as writing utensils and piece of paper when asked to do in-class writing assignments.

Rules and division of labor within the class often fluctuated depending on the activity for the day; however, the typical class period that I have outlined above often created an environment where implicit rules or norms of behavior were conveyed. For example, Prof. Joyce would come in and sit at the head of the room with the rest of the students sitting in a circle. He and students would converse informally for a few minutes as an ice-breaker activity that would often lead into some discussion about some local or national social issue. Aside from the first packet of poetry, where students were given a specific poet to model and specific types of poem (ex. a “weird” poem) and the creative nonfiction piece model after the story “The Knife,” students were given very little restriction or rules over their writing. Even in Prof. Joyce’s comments to students, there was a sense that his feedback were mere suggestions, not absolute actions for how to proceed. Finally, the division of labor in the class constituted Prof. Joyce providing students with prompts for certain writing activities or assignments, or giving students the opportunity to choose their own subject matter, form, etc. He would often guide discussion by posing certain questions to the class and awaiting responses, relaying certain interpretations of the text under examination and solidifying his assertions through anecdotal experiences or examples within contemporary or popular culture to which students could relate. When given an in-class writing assignment, both the
instructor and the students would engage in the activity. Prof. Joyce would be the only source of commentary for students, as students were not allowed to offer critiques or criticisms of each others’ work – although, as was the case with my roommate participants Wes and Ian, criticism could occur between students outside of the classroom setting.

The outcome for ENG 285, much like ENG 103 is difficult to decipher since this is not a longitudinal study. I cannot say with any certainty that any specific activity or the class as a whole will allow students to achieve long-term goals, such as becoming a better creative writer or at least being a more appreciative reader of literature. However, it is possible to look at a single activity with the single subject of one student participant to determine if some significant outcome or change occurred in the context of a product they created – to, in essence, back-track through the activity or activities that lead to that specific outcome or product. What follows, then, is just such an analysis. I revisit our earlier discussion of Wes and his fondness of quick-writes and breakdown my replication of the activity, while also discussing how my changing of the activity facilitated a different type of product.

In terms of the original activity of quick-writing, the subject(s) consisted of Wes, his classmates, and Prof. Joyce all participating in the activity simultaneously, the community being the class and the course itself operating under the larger umbrella of the creative writing program, the Department of English, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the university. Aside from the brick and mortar surrounding the students in the classroom, however, there was not much in terms of an awareness regarding these larger institutional forces. Indeed, as many other pedagogues, creative writing researchers, and historians have expressed, the creative writing class often represents an
escape from these entities, a small (and sometimes exclusive) haven from the “intellectual rigor” associated with university study. In that vein, the object of the activity, as noted by Prof. Joyce, was to essentially get students not to think, to just engage in the act of writing within a specific genre (in this case, poetry) with the motive being to demonstrate to students that they did not have to labor over their work, that the process in fact could be considered relatively easy. The primary tool utilized was the act of students yelling out specific words after a certain time period in order to shift the direction of the activity, to place emphasis upon a new word in order guide the writing toward new subject matters, metaphors, etc. Students also relied upon the physical tools of pen, pencil, and paper to jot down their quick-writes. The rules for the activity were comprised of the instructor explaining to the students that they would volunteer a single word and students would then write on that word for a set period of time, consisting of generally a few minutes. The instructor would then call out for a new word and students would continue their composition by somehow incorporating this new word, its meaning(s), antithesis, etc. Since the instructor and students completed the activity together, the division of labor is minimal, with the exception of the instructor calling-out for changes in words and eventually asking for volunteers to share their creations. Frequently, Prof. Joyce concluded the activity by reading his product.

Now, all of my student participants expressed an enjoyment for this activity for a variety of reasons. For Samantha it was to see how other students utilized the various words, for James it was something he believed he could add to his repertoire of writing techniques, something “to keep in mind when you’re writing that will make you take different routes or do different things to change up your writing” (26 October 2010). For Ian and Wes, however, there was an assertion that this activity allowed them a window into what Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle have described as the “operationalized,
unconscious – what is often called tacit knowledge” (par. 4) of their writing practices. Specifically, and as I quoted previously, Ian remarked “when you just sit there and write things out you can really see your thought process, because you sit there with this specific goal, ‘Write about this,’ and so you just write about it” (21 October 2010, emphasis added). I asked Ian what it meant to “see” his thought process and how one does that. His response is worth quoting at length:

For me, when I write in class, I try to just start out wherever. I'll sit there for a second while he says whatever it is we're supposed to be doing and then I'll think, “Okay, well, this is this.” And then I just kind of start and – I don't, I don't think a whole lot when I do it, I just sort of see where things go. And sometimes it goes off in a completely random direction, but sometimes it kind of evolves into something that I would never have actually thought of (21 October 2010).

The apparent absence of consciousness thought, of course, does not mean that there is an absence of unconscious thought and Ian seemed to realize this through his comments about the quick-writes revealing a direction completely different than he originally intended in his writing. What is key, however, are the comments Ian’s roommate Wes made to me, where Wes stated that both he and Ian “sat down and read our stuff, and we sort of criticized it, and we both found our writing style” (19 October 2010). By examining these quick-writes after the fact, writing where the conscious mind was quieted, both Ian and Wes had come to a better understanding of the possibilities within their writing, to see that they could break themselves out of their typical style or favorite subject matter, as well as begin to develop greater knowledge about what was implicit or inherent in their own writing.
Looking again at Wes’s poetry, there are glimpses of the sometimes random association prevalent in the quick-writes. I specifically looked at the “weird” poem he constructed for Prof. Joyce, and although still representational of his overarching style (couplets and rhyme) and subject matter (insanity), his attempt to have various lines “that don’t have any meaning” created the perfect opportunity to change orientation between various words, creating lines such as “Robin Williams and the tree people; I wanna go fast” (9) and “Sitting in the treehouse with the captain and his crew” (11). The fact that when placed into his own environment, when writing in his dorm room at his computer screen he relied upon familiar forms, cues, and subject matter should not be surprising. As I already articulated, genres as activity systems and how those genres have been constructed in the minds and experiences of an individual become difficult to break or un-train, and although Wes consciously intended to create a poem that (in his mind) made no sense and consciously had to think of words that would create a rhyming pattern, he had to rely somewhat on the unconscious mind to create some lines or associations.

In my attempt to replicate and record this in-class activity, several components had to change and, by proxy, the activity and outcome changed as well. Wes became the sole subject under examination, which decreased the community aspect of the activity considerably. Wes was, in effect, in isolation without a community of peers or a professor also engaging in the activity. My primary objective or immediate goal for the activity, however, remained the same – for the student-participant to write as much as possible without conscious thought, to produce some form of writing. The tools also changed as Wes utilized my laptop and a freeware screen-capture program named “Jing” to capture the act of him composing, something which Wes expressed created a sense of “being watched.” In addition, the 5 minute time-limit on the screen-capture (complete
with a ticking clock at the bottom, left-hand corner of the screen) also placed a significant restriction on Wes, at least from a psychological standpoint. While there was a “time limit” in a sense to the words being called out during the in-class activity, Wes could physically see the second and minutes ticking away, which forced him to move quickly and sometimes abandon certain lines that he felt needed greater attention. In terms of rules, I did not call out multiple words to Wes, but (as previously noted) provided him with the two specific words of “water” and “ice.” Consequently, the division of labor consisted of Wes completing the activity and me administering it. Because of the changes to the activity I have noted and as my analysis in the preceding section demonstrates, the outcome, or the poem that Wes produced, was created in a situation where Wes could not tone-down his conscious mind.

Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, I will bring these two specific classrooms back into conversation with one another by discussing the prevalent themes that emerged in each, again centered around those areas of contention including pedagogy, authority, use of technology, and products/assignments, and pointing toward implications for future study.
Conclusion

Introduction

As I have stated elsewhere, my overarching purpose of this study was not necessarily to draw comparisons between the first-year composition and introductory creative writing classrooms I observed; rather, I sought to substantiate or refute previous lore-based scholarship dealing with the apparent similarities and differences of these undergraduate entities, but from the perspectives of the students and instructors who participated in these classes on a daily basis – to ask, what is happening here? What activities transpired? What do students and instructors have to say about the work that is done in these specific classrooms? Therefore, part of this concluding chapter addresses how in some instances, in the hands of the actual instructors working in the trenches with students on a day-to-day basis, what transpired in the classroom often did not line-up the disciplinary perspectives surrounding pedagogy, use or non-use of technology, authority, and assignments or products in composition or creative writing. In a similar vein, one of the most intriguing discoveries of my study was that the instructors under examination reached many individual outcomes for their courses, outcomes that reflected what they hoped to accomplish with students by the end of the semester or what they themselves believed was important in teaching the act of writing,
but these outcomes did not completely align with the institutional objectives of NMU. More specifically, there were several instances where the instructors had to negotiate their departmental responsibilities with what they believed were their personal and collective ethical responsibilities to students. In addition, in this final chapter I revisit my original research question and summarize what activities emanated from these introductory writing courses and discuss if there were, indeed, substantial differences in relation to those supposed binaries of pedagogy, use or non-use of technology, authority, and assignments or products. Unlike the preceding two chapters, where I consciously chose to segregate the two classes in order to give each substantial focus and avoid the impulse to create comparisons between the two, in this chapter some comparison inevitably has to be drawn. Consequently, these comparisons aid in pointing those individuals interested in the juxtaposition of composition and creative writing’s various practices and disciplinary perspectives toward future study. Finally, I provide the reader with some reflection on what I would have done differently if I were to conduct this study for a second time. However, I begin here with a discussion on the manifestation of pedagogy in these two writing classrooms.

*Pedagogy*

When I first began this study, I thought that throughout the course data collection I would be able to categorize the instructors and their practices according to some textbook definition – to say, for example, that Prof. Beckett is a process pedagogue because students were required to complete multiple drafts of assignments or that Prof. Joyce had expressivist tendencies in his teaching since the audience was often secondary in light of each students individual vision for their creative work. While some of this may
in fact be true, trying to encapsulate these instructors, their teaching, and their practices into these narrowly defined categories is unrealistic given the very nature of the classroom environment. The ebb and flow which occurs from semester to semester, the changing needs of students, and changing curriculums create a space where instructors often have to be conversant in and adopt a variety of pedagogical practices and techniques in order to better meet the needs of students and the needs of their institution. This is not to say, however, that the instructors I observed did not have practices that they found to be particularly useful or an overarching philosophy of teaching composition or creative writing.

In the case of Prof. Beckett, he articulated to me early on that he saw his job of a composition instructor as being akin to the role of a minister, of someone who by design is there to shape and mold individuals, but also understand that those individuals have a variety of ways that they deal with and understand a particular subject, whether it’s notions about God or notions about writing. His job, then, was to enable students to better understand their own notions about writing, identify their “individualized approach [to writing] and better understand what it is” (22 August 2010), as well as provide students with the opportunity to practice the skills necessary to succeed in “their upper-academic programs, for their future in business, [etc.]” through the major writing assignments. These skills which created a “good composition,” according to Prof. Beckett, consisted of creating focus through “a solid argument, singular claim, solid details, analysis...as well as understanding audience and the purpose of your writing” (22 August 2010). To put these skills into a particular context, the assignments Prof. Beckett required asked students to begin with the personal and slowly expand outward, incorporating the perspectives, opinions, and research of others into their compositions. In doing this, in scaffolding and building upon previous assignments that moved from
the personal to a wider community or audience, it was Prof. Beckett’s hope to gradually
de-center the egocentric writer prevalent in so much student writing and, coupled with
activities such as peer review, foster an environment where students could learn to write
as a reader. Here was perhaps the closest connection I saw between Prof. Beckett and
what he identified as his largest influence in the study of composition, theorist James
Moffett; specifically Moffett’s contention that communicative practices must change
based upon the audience, that writing for the narrow audience of oneself or a select
group of individuals familiar with the subject matter being discussed, while a good place
to start to mine for material, is bound to cultivate self-indulgent prose that might
alienate a more generalized reader. As Moffett explained, in such prose “I cannot allude
to things and ideas that only my friends know about” (37), and instead “I must use a
vocabulary, style, logic, and rhetoric that anybody in [a] mass audience can understand
and respond to. I must name and organize what happened...in such a way that this
mythical average reader can relate what I say to some primary moments of experience of
his own” (37 – 38). Murray’s argument is augmented by Vygotsky’s notion of
“internalization,” whereby individuals are given a series of activities, often within a
cultural or social group, in order to gradually develop a mastery of skills (whether non-
physical skills such as the use of language, or physical skills such as using a writing
utensil), which can then be internalized and evolve over time. In relation to Prof. Beckett
and his pedagogy, there was an attempt to give students the social space of the classroom
in order to not only learn and internalize the skills of a “good composition” noted above,
but also internalize an exterior audience (i.e. fellow classmates) through social activities
such as peer review, which could then allow students to be more conscious of potential
audiences when composing their assignments.
Consequently, Prof. Beckett’s pedagogical practice of trying to get students to de-center their egocentrism and internalize a generalized audience or average reader, though apparently successful in some instances such as with my student-participant Elizabeth, was problematic, particularly in light of the goals or outcomes he articulated for the course. More specifically, Prof. Beckett hoped to teach skills that would serve students in future academic endeavors, as well as possibly their future careers, objectives that were not completely a part of larger institutional goals for ENG 103. Though the course goals for ENG 103 at NMU do list understanding “how persuasive visual and verbal texts are composed for different audiences and purposes,” as well as for students to “develop strategies for becoming more critical and careful readers of both their own and others’ texts,” the attainment of these goals does not necessarily equate to a greater understanding of the specialized audiences, language, readers, and disciplinary conventions required once students begin studies within their respective majors or when they enter their chosen professions. In this light, though Prof. Beckett may have had some success with assignments and activities advocating for a generalized reader or audience, an environment was created where the skills of argument, detail, singular claims, analysis, Etc. were done in relative isolation. Essentially, the only connection for students becomes their personal attachment to the subject matter, which effectively created a scenario where many students had tremendous difficulty, or were simply unable, to write for an audience other than themselves.

In shifting our attention to Prof. Joyce and the introductory creative writing classroom, he too had some particular views about audience in relation to writing and the writing process. In fact, Prof. Joyce made it clear to students on numerous occasions that the audience was an integral part to the reception of one’s work, as the audience has always had the power to like, dislike, ignore, discredit, or exalt works of writing.
However, with Prof. Joyce at the helm, the introductory course became a place to disregard the audience to some degree, to mentality provide these students with a space to experiment instead of trying to write for or impress some real, imagined, or internalized audience. This sense of experimentation coincided with another prevailing tenet of Prof. Joyce’s pedagogy, namely, the belief that many of the students in the class were not necessarily going to become great contemporary writers and that the introductory course in creative writing was not a place to hone the craft of each undergraduate telecommunications, English studies, and creative writing major he saw. Rather, Prof. Joyce believed that his classroom was a place where he could help expose students to various genres through reading and writing in those genres, and thus create an appreciation and audience for those who were already great contemporary writers.

This personal goal for the course was particularly urgent for Prof. Joyce considering the restructuring of the composition sequence at NMU to downplay the use of literature, a subject that he felt students needed in order to be considered well-rounded, college educated individuals. Interestingly, however, while Prof. Joyce forwarded certain disciplinary perspectives of undergraduate creative writing, such that the purpose of such courses were “not to educate artists but to teach students critical reading skills, the elements of fiction and verse...and an appreciation of literary works of the present and past” (Fenza qtd. in Mayers 19 – 20), there is nothing in the course goals or directory for NMU that note audience-building for contemporary writers as a departmental or institutional objective for ENG 285. Instead, the course directory lists the class as being an “Introduction to the nature of the creative process and the nature, forms, and techniques of writing fiction, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction.” And so, in this sense, the goal of Prof. Joyce to create an audience for contemporary writers, a goal
which was successful with student-participants such as Wes, did not explicitly align with the institutional objectives of NMU for the course.

Perhaps because of Prof. Joyce’s assertion that students in the introductory class were not there to be groomed into great writers, there was almost a complete absence of the prevailing pedagogical model for creative writing known as the workshop in his class, a model which effectively creates an audience of peers within the classroom for critiquing and providing feedback on written works. Although there was a certain sense of community in the classroom, with the students and the instructors sharing tidbits about their personal lives, volunteering to read their in-class writing and out-of-class assignments, and arranging the room in such a way where they could see and communicate with each other more easily, there was little critique or criticism of the work produced by students. Indeed, there was no peer criticism at all in the classroom setting, although classmates/roommates Wes and Ian frequently gave each other criticism outside of class, and even in the context of the one-to-one conferences with Prof. Joyce and in the comments he provided to students, there was little in the way of criticism. Still, several of my student-participants expressed a desire for more criticism, particularly from Prof. Joyce, and possibly be given the opportunity to revise or submit a portfolio of their work.

In revisiting my original research question and considering some of the practices I described above, it is apparent that there are some differing pedagogical activities that took place between the first-year composition and introductory creative writing classes I observed. As already noted, one fundamental difference was Prof. Beckett’s use of activities such as peer review in order for students to internalize some generalized audience and then compose with that internalized audience in mind for future
assignments. The absence of peer review in Prof. Joyce’s classroom, however, provided an environment where students could ignore notions of audience, experiment with the written word or subject matter in various ways, and not concern themselves with creating a “good” piece of writing. In terms of what I observed, then, there was a greater sense of play within the creative writing classroom as compared to the composition classroom. Indeed, one of the most significant differences between the pedagogical leanings of Prof. Beckett and Prof. Joyce were their views on this specific point of work versus play; more explicitly, whereas Prof. Beckett hoped to “[rid students] of the idea that writing is creative” (30 September 2010) and instill within them that “writing is a lot of damn work” (30 September 2010), Prof. Joyce believed there was a need to help students “see writing and creative artistic work as fun first and foremost” (22 August 2010), that students were “capable of being artistic because being artistic is really pretty easy” (22 August 2010). In this light, Wendy Bishop’s claim that I described in chapter one, whereby creative writing has been viewed as expressive, fun, and student-centered, while composition is viewed as dictated themes, topics, and formulas, appears to have some credence.

While notions of writing as a labor-intensive activity may have differed between the two classrooms, there were some notable pedagogical similarities. In addition to both instructors modifying certain aspects of their courses because of the shift within the first-year composition sequence (i.e. Prof. Beckett’s incorporation of a short story analysis into ENG 103 and Prof. Joyce’s increased emphasis on exposing students to contemporary literature in ENG 285), both instructors encouraged students to mine their own personal life for material in their writing and then attempt to bridge that material outward into the wider world. This was most prevalent in Prof. Beckett asking students to select topics of personal interest and his insistence on locating primary
sources outside of academia for major assignments. Likewise, many of the informal discussions lead by Prof. Joyce at the beginning of class periods, discussions that were really meant to just “break the ice” with students, dealt with current social, political, economic, and cultural issues and the class would invariably expand the conversation to include how such issues were manifested in the works of literature they examined, as well as how such issues could inform their own writing.

Both instructors also provided an environment where students could attempt to understand their own personal approaches to writing and hopefully dispel some of the myths surrounding writing and the writing process; however, the approaches these instructors utilized in dispelling certain myths (such as writing as an activity that is done in relative isolation, or that “good” writing could only occur when inspired) were considerably different. In the case of Prof. Beckett, fostering an understanding of one’s own writing process was most visibly present in the “meta-cognitive coversheets” he required students to complete with each major writing assignment. Students were being asked to recall their writing processes after the work had been completed, and such an assignment allowed students to begin thinking about how seemingly ancillary factors, such as their environment when writing and what distractions they faced, had some sort of impact on their writing. Similarly, through in-class writing assignments such as “quick-writes,” Prof. Joyce asked students to engage in an activity that required many students to change how they went about the act of writing and see that writing could be done relatively quickly and within a group setting.

The mythology surrounding writing and the writing process was also addressed by both Prof. Beckett and Prof. Joyce through incorporating the perspectives of contemporary writers in their classrooms. More specifically, with the 4th writing project
for ENG 103 students were required to analyze a work of contemporary fiction and many of the authors, such as Barbara Zimmerman and Craig O’Hara, had provided Prof. Beckett with supplementary written materials describing how they had developed their plots, characters, and also went about writing in general, materials which students could then use in their analysis. With Prof. Joyce’s ENG 285 class, he frequently invited visiting writers and poets (such as “Prof. Henry”) to talk about their work, their life as a writer, and where their ideas originated. This tool, this direct contact with writers and their insights, demonstrated to students that writing (and especially creative writing) did not necessarily stem from some mythical force known as a muse or occurred entirely from the imagination of the author, but that written works were frequently a composite of real events, people, places, situations, and conflicts existing in the real world with the imagination of the writer. In considering how both instructors supplemented the reading of contemporary work with the perspectives of authors, it becomes apparent that the notion of “reading from the inside,” whereby “practical experience in writing [reading, and analyzing] literature leads to greater knowledge and appreciation of it” (Dawson 49), as well as a greater understanding of how a creative text is composed, was prevalent in both the composition and creative writing classes I observed.

__Digital Technology (Use and Non-Use)__

Perhaps the clearest demarcation between these two classrooms was their treatment of digital technology; specifically, in the context of Prof. Beckett’s composition class, there was a notable presence and use of digital technology, while Prof. Joyce’s creative writing class was devoid of digital technology completely. However, this apparent difference can be deceiving. As noted throughout my observations and
interviews, the ability of students to bring their laptops or utilize the computers in the classroom during designated work periods created the opportunity for distraction as students would only spend a small fraction of time working on various class assignments (and, in some cases, not at all). In terms of class and course management, Prof. Beckett used platforms such as Blackboard and campus e-mail to communicate with students outside of class, provide students with a forum to submit early drafts of work (although Prof. Beckett required printed copies for final drafts of assignments), and disseminate supplementary materials. I say supplementary because, as was the case with the “Character’s & Narrative: Revisiting WP2 Considerations” handout, these additional materials were seldom required assignments or readings, as compared to the materials present in the course packet, which consisted of printed pages in a binder. In spite of these observations, Prof. Beckett did express a responsibility, but also hesitancy, in teaching technological literacy to students in the composition classroom since he felt students struggled enough with issues of thesis, organization, supporting arguments, etc. in an alphabetic essay, let alone a multimodal or digital composition. Still, Prof. Beckett was someone who constantly sought to change and evolve certain aspects of his teaching, including how he could better incorporate technology into his classroom. He expressed to me how “I’m going to look at blogs [for next semester] on Blackboard and try that. Discussion boards have worked pretty well in the past, but I got frustrated with that because the steps to use discussion board have changed and haven’t worked as well. Yesterday I was over in the Teacher’s College going over the discussion board stuff, and you have to be willing to do that” (30 September 2010). Aware that it was “the nature of [the students’] generation, to be doing blogging and Facebook” (22 August 2010), Prof. Beckett hoped that utilizing blogs in the future would allow for increased student discussion, participation, and a sense of putting their work in quasi-public forum
(Blackboard, of course, being password protected, does not allow for the same level of transparency as other blog providers). Still, it was not uncommon for Prof. Beckett to defer questions or problems pertaining to technology back to the students, to have the individuals in the class teach each other about the affordances and nuances of a particular program or platform. I recall one such instance in particular when my student-participant Brad was trying to deduce how to change the formatting of his paper from single-spaced to 1.5 spaced. After some trial and error, Brad asked several of his neighbors in class, who promptly showed him the steps involved in making the change. Primarily, however, Prof. Beckett viewed digital technology as being about accessibility, about creating yet another way for students to be able to reach him and the material for the course.

In terms of a disciplinary perspective, the composition class I observed was not a place for utilizing the burgeoning work of new media, social media, multimodality, etc. for composing, but rather a place where digital technology continued to maintain the early functional relationship seen when computers, e-mails, listservs, etc. were introduced into the composition classroom, a place where the communication, composing, and research involved in creating standard alphabetic, academic prose was made easier by computers and technology and not necessarily the focus of composing itself. Indeed, part of the institutional objective for ENG 103 at NMU was to utilize technology in order to emphasize the “increased influence of visual” (Papper et al. 20) elements and components in compositions, something which Prof. Beckett did not necessarily see as a viable objective for his class considering his assertion about students’ difficulties with alphabetic texts.
In the case of Prof. Joyce and his introductory creative writing course, there was a clear message to students that any form of digital technology, be it laptops, cell phones, iPads, etc. were not wanted in the classroom because he believed they would cause a distraction similar to the one seen in Prof. Beckett’s course. Interestingly, however, Prof. Joyce did not have an aversion to digital technology in the world of the creative writer; quite the contrary, he found various forms of digital technology to be a useful resource and tool when composing and researching various texts. In this regard, the disciplinary perception that creative writing was somehow unfriendly toward digital technology seems unwarranted. Indeed, though students were not asked to compose or read works of electronic literature, digital poetry, etc., there was not a sense through my observations or interviews that there was a hostility toward technology in this particular introductory creative writing classroom, merely the desire of the instructor for students to maintain a certain degree of focus during class, a focus which happened to be on the traditional genres of poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and drama. From an institutional standpoint, these genres were all that Prof. Joyce was required to teach according to the master syllabus for the course, and, coupled with upper-level, experimental courses in creative writing on various “remediations” and “remixes” of traditional genres (infrequent as they may be), there seemed to be little reason or cause for Prof. Joyce to teach students about digital genres. When digital technology was utilized, it was often in the same vain as Prof. Beckett’s class in that Prof. Joyce would frequently communicate with students through e-mail about changes to the course schedule, remainders about upcoming campus readings, or (occasionally) to provide students with electronic copies of course readings.

To summarize, in terms of the similarities and differences in the use of digital technology between the composition and creative writing classes I observed, there was
clearly a greater presence of technology in the composition classroom; however, much of the technology use on the part of the instructor was strictly relegated to issues pertaining of course management and the dissemination of materials. Though there was an absence of digital technology in the actual creative writing classroom, the technology Prof. Joyce used outside of class served a similar purpose – i.e. informing students and providing them with access to materials. Still, neither instructor saw compositions that relied heavily upon the mediation of digital technology, other than perhaps a word processing program, to be imperative to their objectives for the course, nor did either class utilize computers or other technologies to interrogate the writing process of students.

Authority

For both Prof. Beckett and Prof. Joyce, there was a clear sense that they wanted students to feel that they were “with them” in the composing process, that just because they had been given a certain degree of authority by being placed at the front of the classroom, designing the syllabus, giving assignments, and had been awarded certain degrees or titles, that did not mean they had not struggled with the subject of writing themselves. Indeed, Prof. Beckett frequently referenced his early difficulties with both writing and acclimating to college life (having flunked-out of college as a sophomore); experiences which he felt endeared him to students and allowed for a unique perspective on the apprehensions of incoming freshmen. As he remarked, “I also want [students] to know that I don’t want them to do what I’ve done – I want them to understand that if they develop the same habits I developed when I was an undergraduate for the first time, they will flunk out too” (16 November 2010). Prof. Joyce, too, shared several of his personal experiences, though these were often interesting stories about encounters in his
day-to-day life, sometimes relevant to a particular work or topic being discussed, and only occasionally peppered with his experiences as an artist and publishing poet.

Though these stories were sometimes used as “attention-grabbers” in class, Prof. Joyce felt that “hopefully in some cases...the stories...[are] beneficial at illustrating a point or making something more clear” (13 September 2010). One thing that did become clear with Prof. Joyce when he shared his personal experiences was that he placed himself on equal footing with students, that much of the authority given to him through the title of “professor” was inconsequential because “all of that wears off pretty fast if [students] think you don’t know what you’re doing or they don’t respect where you’re coming from” (22 August 2010). Consequently, this sentiment was shared by Prof. Beckett to some degree, as he noted that “I think there are times when students come to college...and don’t think their teachers do anything normal, somehow their different from everybody else. So, that’s the basic issue of, ‘Does somebody who has a Ph.D. put on their trousers differently than I do?’ [Sharing personal experiences is] just to let them know that that’s not the case, that I’ve struggled through things” (16 November 2010). In addition to both instructors attempting to de-center their authority by sharing their personal experiences with students, they also shared their writing; however, I would contend that Prof. Joyce had more success in showing his struggles with the writing process through this act than Prof. Beckett. Specifically, while Prof. Joyce wrote along with students during in-class writing exercises, effectively sharing his work while it was still in a rough and unpolished form, Prof. Beckett’s writing was included as part of the course packet (an authoritative document) and had gone through numerous drafts before students had the opportunity to read it.

Still, in spite these attempts to de-center their authority, both Prof. Beckett and Prof. Joyce had to manage the day-to-day operations of the classroom – dictating the
agenda for the class, redirecting students if they were off-task, and often guiding students through a particular discussion. As already noted in chapter 4, Prof. Beckett often had a specific set of assignments or goals that students could work on during a given class period and also gave students specific directives for their writing, the most notable of which being the “Do Not List.” Again, Prof. Beckett’s notions about what constituted good compositions garnered an authoritative presence over students and their writing, a fact that was not lost on student participants such as Brad and Derrick who often sought to “give Prof. Beckett what he wanted” by gravitating toward the lower-order grammatical concerns Prof. Beckett pointed out in class, on the “Do Not List,” and in his comments on student writing. Ultimately, though Prof. Beckett allowed students a certain “authority of experience” (to borrow a phrase from bell hooks in her text *Teaching to Transgress*) in terms of selecting personal subject matter for assignments, much of this authority was voided considering Prof. Beckett’s years of experience with student writing in a college setting, which consequently gave him greater authority over the subject matter. To put it another way, Prof. Beckett did not engage in a dialogue with students about what constituted good writing, establishing perhaps a set of criteria with students for each assignment and discussing how and why this criteria may differ from students previous experiences in secondary education, but instead students were told what good writing was based upon the instructor’s range of his experiences and were expected to understand what Prof. Beckett’s expectations were for each assignment.

Prof. Joyce also had a certain authoritative presence over students, a sense of the old Freireian notion of depositing knowledge within students as if they were receptacles, and this presence manifested itself most noticeably during class discussions when Prof. Joyce would fill-in the gaps of students’ knowledge pertaining to certain terminology, cultural or literary references, or autobiographical information of certain writers.
Though Prof. Joyce would first ask students questions about a particular piece of writing, their interpretation, or if they understood certain references, he often would have the last word, offering his particular interpretation of the text after students had lent their perspectives to the discussion. This act, though not necessarily “the master/apprentice educational environment [of the workshop that] often facilitates the instructor having the final verdict over the value or merit of students’ creations” (Bizzaro 303), creates the impression of Prof. Joyce’s interpretation or perspective as being “the right one” or having the most clout in the classroom.

Of course, the notion of authority, how much authority one has and how much authority is delegated to others, exists on a continuum to some degree. In the case of Prof. Beckett, he readily admitted that towards the beginning of the semester the classroom was more “teacher-centered and by the end of the semester it’s more and more student-centered” (22 August 2010), and this was certainly the case as students began working together in relative autonomy from Prof. Beckett for the final project, though he still required groups to meet with him in the library periodically to go over the specifics of their project. For Prof. Joyce, however, the level of authority afforded to students remained relatively constant. Aside from having to proctor unscheduled reading quizzes to keep students engaged and reading the material, as well as asking students to occasionally model their creative works after certain pieces they had read, students had a significant amount of freedom to choose specific topics, write in a variety of forms, utilize or experiment with a multitude of literary devices, etc. This was somewhat in contrast to Prof. Beckett’s class where although students were allowed to draw upon personal experiences or issues of personal relevance to them, they needed to stay within the confines or guidelines stipulated by Prof. Beckett for a given assignment. The freedom to experiment can also be partly attributed to Prof. Joyce’s belief in not
grading students on their creative work, a practice which he, again, found arbitrary, believing the purpose of the class was to develop an appreciation and readership for contemporary writing and writers, rather than focus solely on the writing of students, a practice which also illuminates his attempt to de-center certain aspects of his authority over students and their work.

In comparing the manifestation of authority in these two classrooms, then, it can be said that both instructors had similar tactics for de-centering their authority, though with differing results. Both clearly valued the activity of sharing their personal experiences (as well as hearing or reading about the personal experiences of students) and both utilized this practice as an effective teaching tool. In the case of Prof. Beckett, his experiences were a way to inform students about the mistakes he had made in the past with the hopes that students would not repeat those same mistakes. For Prof. Beckett, his personal experiences were a way to connect his life with the material under discussion, as well as place him on an equal footing in the eyes of students. There is a divergence, however, with these instructors sharing their personal writing with students. Specifically, Prof. Beckett’s writing had a connotation of greater authority as students were only able to read work that had considerable polish. Including his writing as part of the course, both in terms of his personal essays and his handouts on specific writing related items, was a deliberate act for Prof. Beckett, as he contended that “[Students] need to be able to understand the writerly mind of the person that in the front of the classroom” (22 August 2010). However, it is difficult to acquire a complete sense of the “writerly mind” unless students are able to witness works in progress, something which Prof. Joyce did in completing “quick-writes” alongside students in class. And yet, both instructors’ personal experiences, the sheer amount of years and study they had on students, lead to instances where students silenced, where their authority of experience
was devalued, either through giving the instructor what he wanted in written assignments (as in the case of Prof. Beckett), or getting the final word during class discussion (as with Prof. Joyce).

Assignments and Products

In chapters four and five I discussed at length the assignments that students were required to compose, as well as shared excerpts from their work, so I will not go into great detail here. Rather, I turn once again to my original research question and parcel-out some of the similarities and differences between specific assignments or non-physical products in these two writing classrooms. To begin, clearly there were some similarities between certain assignments, both in terms of the genres students were required to produce, as well as in the various objectives set forth by instructors. In terms of genre, the most notable parallel was the early narrative assignment students were required to complete for the composition course, which asked students to construct a narrative about a particular issue or topic relevant in their lives, juxtaposed with the fiction and creative nonfiction works required of students in the introductory creative writing course; more specifically, both instructors emphasized to students the importance of narrative flow (beginning, middle, and end), description, and providing detail to bring real or imagined characters to life. Interestingly, these narrative-based genres, though utilized in two different introductory writing classrooms with different student populations, created similar difficulties for students in terms of “telling” rather than “showing” their readers the events, emotions, and movement of plot that transpired, which (as I will describe later in this section) most likely was the result of students receiving conflicting messages from instructors about using their personal
experiences for material while simultaneously being told to de-emphasize notions of “the self.” What’s more, though grounded in the institutional objectives surrounding the University Core Curriculum and the Writing Program at NMU, both the composition and the creative writing course emphasized the notion of reading and writing as complimentary activities, that (to quote the Writing Program Handbook) “the best way to teach one is to foster excellence in the other” (5), and students in both classes were provided with opportunities to model their work after the writings of more professional or experienced writers that they read. Though stressing the importance of reading within a writing classroom does not necessarily imply the reading of literature (indeed, “reading” could encompass any number of genres in both alphabetic and visual texts), both Prof. Beckett and Prof. Joyce advocated for the use of literature in their classrooms – to read, discuss, and write about literature, though in the context of the composition class this occurred in the form of a short story analysis, while in the creative writing class there was a midterm and final exam. Consequently, utilizing literature for their classrooms, both instructors were able to create greater transparency with regard to writing or creative processes and the interpretation of certain texts, as Prof. Beckett asked students to read the “View from the Author” document and Prof. Joyce had visiting writers or instructors discuss their writing with his class.

In addition to these similarities, I noticed that two very specific, non-physical or artifact-related products emerged from both classrooms: an emphasis on the notion of “self,” and the exploration of how writing, whether it was the writing of students or the writing of others, could reflect issues within our society. In terms of the emphasis on “the self,” the assignments for the composition class asked students to always start with the personal, whether it was a particular topic, person, or reading that they could relate to, and then connect one’s “self,” one’s lived experience, to greater social, political,
moral, ethical, or cultural issues. However, as already described in the “Pedagogy” section of this chapter, students were faced with a conflicting message when they were asked to deny “the self” and eliminate egocentricism in their writing by tailoring their work toward a more generalized audience. Interestingly, students in the creative writing course were also asked to break away from thinking about themselves through exercises such as the observation assignment, where students sat outside the classroom building, wrote down observations about their surroundings, and formed a short piece that focused on a specific character created from their observations. Here too, students faced a conflicting message, as visiting writers and instructors (such as Prof. Henry) emphasized how much of creative writing is based upon what surrounded the writer, their life, and the people they know. It could be argued that these contradictory messages were a contributing factor to the difficulty students had, in both classrooms, with the concept of “showing” rather than “telling.” It should be noted, however, that students at this particular age (approximately 18 – 24 years old) are in the midst of massive changes in their lives, of developing a sense of “self” that is evolving while instructors such as Prof. Beckett and Prof. Joyce are simultaneously trying to change, redirect, or expand it. Thus, the objective of students interrogating their sense of self as part of these classes becomes extremely complicated.

Aside from the concept of “self,” both courses placed a tremendous amount of emphasis on interrogating a range of larger issues and exploring how writing, whether it was the writing of students in the composition class or the writing of professional writers in the introduction to creative writing class, could put students in conversation with issues of race, violence, spirituality, sexuality, the over-inflated expectations of the American Dream, and many other topics in the social strata. Consequently, though my study revealed certain inconsistencies with the overarching pedagogies of instructors’ in
conjunction with their objectives for the course, as well as the writing of students focusing so heavily on one's personal experiences (in spite of being asked to convey those experiences to audiences other than oneself), the presence of larger, worldly discussions suggests that students in both these courses were, not surprisingly, functioning within an institution that forwarded the perspective of a liberal arts curriculum. Specifically, and as I made note of in chapter 4, the specific goals of the Writing Program were to provide students “with the learning necessary...to succeed in [their] chosen career, involve [themselves] in the civic sphere, assess and evaluate cultural pressures and products, and deepen [students] sense of self and [their] connection to the physical and social world” (5). Though these goals were written specifically for the Writing Program and students enrolled in the first-year composition sequence, clearly there was some overlap in terms of the creative writing course I observed. Perhaps this is not surprising, considering Prof. Joyce’s experience teaching in the first-year composition sequence, and it would be interesting for further study to explore FYC teaching versus non-FYC teaching creative writing instructors, to observe if there is a similar correlation of occurrences or activities between the two types of classrooms that they teach, or to observe if other non-liberal arts institutions have similar occurrences in their writing classrooms.

**Implications for Future Study**

In addition to further study pertaining to the correlation of FYC versus non-FYC activities of a single instructor, my study also provides interesting avenues of exploration for those looking to expand the conversation of juxtaposing the various practices and disciplinary perspectives of composition and creative writing. The analytical tool of
activity theory, for example, seems to be an ideal starting point to understand not only the nature of individual pedagogical activities, but also how some of those activities might be brought into conflict with larger disciplinary or institutional goals; to better understand, in a sense, how changes to certain activity systems (such as the change to goals, objectives, and outcomes of the first-year composition sequence at NMU) facilitates change, but also resistance and adherence to older activity systems (such as Prof. Beckett’s continued use of the short story analysis assignment). In addition to examining pedagogical activities, activity theory could also be utilized to determine how the division of labor and the rules set forth in the classroom, two aspects of an activity system that are clearly defined by notions of authority, have an affect or change certain aspects of a particular activity system. Take, for example, Prof. Joyce’s implementation of reading quizzes. One of the implicit rules for the course was to complete all the assignments, including reading assignments; however, it could be argued that students were given too much leeway, that Prof. Joyce did not initially utilize his authority as the instructor to reinforce this rule. The lack of students reading threatened to jeopardize some of the objectives for the course (i.e. exposing students to contemporary authors and developing an appreciation for those authors), and thus Prof. Joyce created a new rule, reading quizzes, which elevated his level of authority and changed the overall dynamic and behavior of students in the classroom. Indeed, once students knew they would be tested, they read the material, and the more students that read the material the more involved the class discussions became.

In terms of possible avenues for future research regarding the use or non-use of digital technology, my replication of Prof. Joyce’s in-class “quick-writes,” where one particular student-participant utilized a form of screen-capture while composing, did provide some insight into the student’s writing and composing process. Though limited
in the sense that the student-participant was timed and he felt as though he was being “watched,” I believe that the use of similar screen-capture programs or requiring students to compose at least one piece with the “track changes” function activated in a word processor could be a more accurate indicator of students’ “individualized approach to writing” than, say, the meta-cognitive cover sheets required by Prof. Beckett since students would not be reflecting about their composing practices, the surrounding environment, difficulties, etc. after the fact in the form of reflection. In addition, while screen-capture has begun to gain some popularity in terms of a research tool, particularly in studying workplace environments, few studies have examined such programs as a pedagogical tool that can help students (and their instructors) identify certain areas of concern pertaining to composing practices.

Last, there is also, at least in the case of Prof. Joyce’s creative writing classroom, the issue of assessing the creative work of students. While Prof. Joyce did not necessarily see the value of assigning a grade to introductory students creative work, I think that, considering the goals and objectives he had for the course, that he may have missed an opportunity to include students in the process of assessment and again foster that notion of equality between himself and students as artists and participants in the classroom. As I have referenced elsewhere, in the article “Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom,” Brian Huot describes what he calls “instructive evaluation,” where students are involved in each step of the assessment process and are made aware of what they are trying to create and how to draft their compositions toward certain linguistic or rhetorical targets, such as understanding context, audience, and purpose. For Huot, this means that students continually revise statements about what makes good writing as they learn. In addition, the work of George Hillocks, Jr. describes how criteria for assessment need to be discussed in the classroom between instructors
and students, applied to specific texts, and that the suggestions which emerge between instructors and students for assessment criteria have a real effect on student papers. Though the writings of Huot and Hillocks were in reference to composition classes, their ideas certainly could transfer easily to creative writing classrooms. In the context of Prof. Joyce’s class, based upon the writings and the works of literature that students have read, it might have been useful to have had students develop their own criteria for what constitutes an A, B, C, D, or F poem, short story, non-fiction piece, etc. and, as they read and were exposed to more and more literary works, revise their notions about what makes an “A” poem or a “C” short story.

**Student Expectations**

As the semester came to the close I conducted my final interviews with my student-participants and asked each of them if their expectations for the course were met. Though my study is not meant to provide any sort of judgment or measure as to the value of these courses, or even whether students had made some sort of progression from the beginning of the semester to the end, I feel it is valuable to include their voices here one last time. To, in essence, let them have the final say.

For my student-participants in the ENG 285: Introduction to Creative Writing course, there was a general sense that the class helped them to improve in some areas, such as the sharing of work or widening their literary palette, but that the emphasis on reading over writing was the least favorite aspect of the course. For example, my student-participant Wes contended that he felt his “expectation for the class and the things I wanted to get out of it” (1 December 2010), including a greater appreciation for literature, were met, although he admitted that he wished “we would have written a little
more, like another short story or two...I would have liked to have written a little more outside of class, had a little more time to revise them and sort of hash them out” (1 December 2010). Similarly, my student-participant Samantha noted, “I feel like I did less writing than I did reading, and I think we should [have done] more writing and less reading. I like the stuff he [had] us do in-class, like the writing exercises and stuff like that...but I feel like we need more writing with a specific goal mind” (6 December 2010). For Samantha, the emphasis on literature did not suit her needs to want to write more and write with specific goals or objectives in mind – for example, instead of just writing on a specific word like “elephant,” to “use the word elephant and write a paragraph showing not telling that the elephant is actually miniature in size” (6 December 2010). In this regard, Samantha wanted more prompts and exercises to hone her craft, something which, again, was not a goal for Prof. Joyce. Only my ENG 285 student-participant Ian, who initially felt uncomfortable sharing his work in front of the class, did not mention a want for more writing in the class, stating “it’s definitely a lot easier to share stuff now than it was at the beginning of class because we were given the opportunity so many times, and it’s just one of those things where the more you do it the easier it becomes in the end” (5 December 2010).

In the ENG 103: Rhetoric and Writing course, each student noted some sort of progression, though this progression most often was in reference to grammatical issues or concerns. As Brad noted, “Honestly, my sentence fragment errors and comma usage actually got a lot better” (7 December 2010), and we went on to elaborate that this change in his writing was facilitated by Prof. Beckett “adding commas and I would re-read it with his comma and just keep re-writing like how he said and made marks and it just kind of came to me” (7 December 2010). In addition to this moment of epiphany, Brad also utilized the Writing Center on occasion, noting “that actually helped a lot,
because...I would bring in my rough draft and they would break it down with you, like each sentence and why to use or when to use it and that helped out a lot too” (7 December 2010). Elizabeth also felt as though she progressed throughout the semester, at least in terms of certain sentence-level issues, remarking that she thought she was “better at not writing ‘it’ and ‘that’ and stuff like that, which is good because I want to go and do something professionally and I’m going to have to do a lot of writing, so that’ll be good” (13 December 2010). In Elizabeth’s case, an increased awareness of the professional writing skills Prof. Beckett hoped students would attune themselves to, such as cutting out unnecessary or non-descriptive words, took root, though she did note that she still had difficulty with introductory and concluding paragraphs. For Derrick, he felt as though he too progressed and that writing was somewhat easier for him, primarily because of “the [packet] that Prof. Beckett gave me. That thing was chalked [sic] full of examples and do not’s and dos and what to put in and what to take it” (3 December 2010), but Derrick still contended that “I still don’t like to write papers, but now that I went through the course it definitely made it a lot easier on me in terms of how to write and what to write” (3 December 2010). Lastly, Kari, similar to Ian in the creative writing course, felt as though she progressed somewhat by being able to more readily share her work with others and stated that “I think I write pretty much the same way that I do, but I think I’m more free, like more open. I don’t like to share, I’m not a person that usually likes to share personal stuff about me – but this year has taught me to be more open about what I want to say and how I feel about what I’m saying” (3 December 2010).

**Instructors’ Expectations**
In addition to the students and their expectations for the course, I also asked Prof. Joyce and Prof. Beckett how they thought their classes went, if students made some notable progress, and if those classes that I observed were typical of similar classes they had taught previously. For Prof. Joyce, he mentioned that “overall, it was not the greatest class” (14 December 2010), citing that the “imbalance of males to females in the class” (14 December 2010), i.e. a male-dominated class, accounted for a lack of participation. As he elaborated, “A fair amount of those dudes, let’s say, 8 to 10 of those dudes, [they] were absolutely, completely silent. You know…that discourages the other guys that may well participate. Obviously there were some people that did participate, but on the whole we could’ve had more participation” (14 December 2010). Still, Prof. Joyce felt responsible to some degree for not fostering more of an environment where there was “a little sense of community and maybe get people to open up a little bit” (14 December 2010). The quality of student work was “really uneven” (14 December 2010) for Prof. Joyce, but he noted that those individuals “who I thought were pretty good writers…did some pretty good work – and actually I’m always to some degree or another a little surprised at how good students can do, even ones who clearly don’t know what they’re doing, but they stumble upon something halfway” (14 December 2010). Overall, however, Prof. Joyce felt the class “wasn’t the greatest in terms of the quality of the work. It was average” (14 December 2010), and felt that the greatest contributing factor to the quality of the work was that “the complexion of that class (ENG 285) has changed a great deal…in the past couple of years because of the telecommunications students – and, um, it’s just a slightly different group of people than what use to be in the class. I feel like maybe I’m still adjusting to that” (14 December 2010). This adjustment was, as I mentioned at the beginning of chapter 5, the move from the introductory creative writing course being strictly reserved for creative writing and English majors, individuals who
already had a particular level of familiarity with various creative genres, as well as an enjoyment of reading, to partnering with the telecommunications program whose students were more adept at writing for television, movies, or other productions.

In asking Prof. Beckett if the expectations for the ENG 103 course were met for him, he noted that “8 o’clock classes can be difficult in that there was a stretch where we were average just 16 students in the class for about 2 and a half weeks” (13 December 2010), but overall he “[couldn’t] really complain. There were some pretty quiet, reticent individuals, and on the other side there were some pretty noisy individuals that talked a lot and could monopolize the conversation. So, you’re always kind of concerned about that” (13 December 2010). Indeed, Prof. Beckett recalled how one of his in-class Q & A sessions went awry, how one student dominated the attention of Prof. Beckett “and nobody ever really finished getting all the information about what they were trying to do. And, of course, once that certain timeframe has closed, there’s not much you can do about having the other people who didn’t get a chance to talk that day in class to ever say anything” (13 December 2010). Still, Prof. Beckett mention that “the grades [were] pretty good” (13 December 2010), which for him equated to the writing being good as well, and went on to remark that “all and all, I wasn’t disappointed – it wasn’t the best 8 o’clock class I’ve had, because I’ve had several top-notch ones in the last few years. And there were, you know...weak students in that class...[but] thereweren’t any contracts with the devil in that class...because of attendance situations” (13 December 2010).

Conclusion (Final Reflections)

As I sit here contemplating all that has transpired over the course of the last 10 months, the countless hours of transcription, the hallway conversations with committee
members, and of course the one-to-one interactions with the students and instructors I observed, I am at a point of relief. I feel relief in the sense that I completed a substantial work, that I was able to see this project through to the end (despite numerous occasions of feeling overwhelmed by all the data or simply questioning my abilities as a budding researcher in the fields of composition and creative writing studies), but there is also relief in the knowledge that my research effort was not a case of being all for not, that I discovered several things of substance throughout the course of my study. For example, in the case of both the composition and the creative writing instructor, I learned that institutional changes such as the revision to the first-year composition curriculum at NMU (which eliminated or significantly inhibited a focus on literature within the composition sequence) effectively created a need for them to redirect some of the content of their courses – to incorporate or place greater emphasis on literature in the classroom since students, unless they were English majors, would not be required to study, analyze, or write about literary works at the college-level. Had I not been present, reporting and contextualizing what occurred in these two classrooms, such information would not have been discovered.

My study also revealed various similarities and differences between these two classrooms – how those areas of pedagogy, technology, authority, and the assignments/products created in these classrooms were treated, viewed, and utilized through heavily situated perspectives. In the case of pedagogy, both classrooms were concerned with notions of “audience” for their writing, though for ENG 103 it was students trying to internalize a generalized audience that they could possibly apply to future academic or professional endeavors, while in ENG 285 there were attempts to ignore audience in order to foster an environment of experimentation. Consequently, the presence of peer review in ENG 103 and the absence of a workshop format in ENG
285 spoke to these objectives. Both classrooms also believed in reading and writing as highly integrated activities, that by reading “good compositions” or great works of literature and developing an understanding of the conventions, techniques, terms, etc. surrounding various genres, students would invariably become more capable writers. Part of this process involved both instructors attempting to dispel some of the myths surrounding writing and the writing process through sharing their personal experiences, as well as inviting visiting writers to discuss their work, process, and the subject of writing with students. In terms of technology, neither classroom utilized the affordances of digital technology to nurture the practice of reflection leading to meta-cognition and allow students the opportunity to interrogate their writing process(es) as they happened. Still both instructors saw the value of certain technologies for their introductory writing classrooms, particularly in terms of course management and disseminating materials. In other words, technology use was often limited to a strictly functional role. Regarding authority in these two classrooms, both instructors sought to de-center their authority to some degree, particular by sharing their personal experiences, though by having such a wide-range of experiences in comparison to students, particularly in terms of the subject of writing, the instructors invariably had more authority in the classroom. What authority students did have manifested itself through their selection of certain topics (as was the case in ENG 103), or experimenting with certain forms or subject matter (ENG 285). For assignments and non-physical products, clearly both classrooms utilized similar genres or forms, such as narration and analysis, and also placed a certain degree of emphasis on students interrogating larger social issues, as well as the concept of “self.”

Of course, what can be gleaned from my study is limited in the sense that I only examined two writing classrooms for the duration of a semester and only had the benefit of 11 total participants to lend me their unique perspective on the various mediations of
pedagogy, technology, authority, and the assignments or products of these classrooms. Had it been possible, I would have liked to have observed more instructors and students in different ENG 103 and ENG 285 sections in order to get a greater survey of how other instructors teach these courses or how institutional changes may have affected their pedagogy. At the very least, I would have liked to have been able to observe every single class period of the sections I did examine in order to provide the reader with more context for what transpired and fill-in some of the gaps left by my own study (for example, being unable to actually observe a key in-class activity such as Prof. Joyce’s “quick-writes”). In addition, it is difficult (if not impossible) to make any assertions about long-term outcomes, if (in fact) what the instructors hoped students would take away from their courses would be manifested later on in future courses or their professional and civic lives. Consequently, if I were to continue with the work begun in this study, a longitudinal work might help to answer some of those questions.

Naturally, there are a lot of things I wish the reader could have seen in terms of my own growth as a researcher, my struggles (and triumphs) with the process, and how my life co-existed with this project over the last 10 months. Indeed, the confessional aspect of the study was not put on display as much as I would have liked, partly for fear of taking away from the words of my participants, and partly because I frequently had to scrap such sections in order to meet my deadlines. I wish the reader could have seen those late hours, writing or revising chapters with a sleeping infant on my chest, or the love and support I received from family, friends, colleagues, and committee members. I wish they could have seen me reading a quick chapter or article on planes or in cars as I buzzed around the country attending conferences or job interviews. And I wish they could have seen how I came to care about my participants, their well-being, and hoping
that they would succeed in their academic pursuits. But perhaps these are stories for another time.

Though there seemingly will always be a wall between the fields of composition and creative writing, there are clearly gaps where we can come and converse with one another, to attempt to fill in the gaps left by others, and I hope that my study (in some small way) has been able to do just that. I leave with a poem that I feel best represents this sentiment, as well as perhaps the separate (but complimentary) institutional identities of composition and creative writing, Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” and the lines “The gaps I mean, / No one has seen them made or heard them made, / But at spring mending-time we find them there. / I let my neighbor know beyond the hill; / And on a day we meet to walk the line / And set the wall between us once again. / We keep the wall between us as we go” (9 – 15).
APPENDIX: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

“Good Fences Make Good Neighbors:” An Ethnographic Study of First-Year Composition and Introductory Creative Writing Classrooms

The purpose of the proposed study is to observe, record, and report on the activities that occur in one first-year composition and one introductory creative writing classroom, focusing primarily on how instructors and students negotiate between the complex interplay of pedagogy, the use of technology, the amount of authority delegated between parties, and the assignments/products created within the classroom. For this project, participants will be observed during class periods, asked a series of interview questions about their writing, classroom, and/or teaching experiences, and be asked to provide the principal investigator with certain course documents (syllabi, assignments, writing samples, etc.).

All data will be maintained as confidential. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office and retained throughout the 2010 – 2011 academic year. Data such as documents collected from participating instructors and students will be returned no later than May 6, 2011.

The foreseeable risks or ill effects from participating in this study are minimal. There is a small possibility that answering some of the questions during the interview may evoke some feelings of anxiety. Should participants experience any feelings of anxiety, counseling services are available through the Counseling Center at Ball State University (765-285-1376). Participants will be responsible for the costs of any care that is provided [note: Ball State students may have some or all of these services provided to them at no cost]. It is understood that in the unlikely event that treatment is necessary as a result of participation in this research project that Ball State University, its agents and employees will assume whatever responsibility is required by law.

One benefit students may gain from participation in this study is a greater awareness of their own writing process and how the pedagogy adopted by the instructor, the amount of authority relegated to students, and presence (or lack thereof) of technology in the classroom affects that writing process and the products/assignments that are created. This awareness of one’s own process can certainly be carried into other writing situations, both inside and outside the university. For instructors, the ability discuss and rationalize their teaching with a third-party might provide them with a descriptive tool for reflection on their practices inside the classroom.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Participants are free to not turn over any documents they wish to keep private and skip any questions that they wish to skip during the interview process.
Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing the Informed Consent form and beginning the study, and at any time during the study.

For one's rights as a research subject, the following person may be contacted: Coordinator of Research Compliance, Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070.

*******

I, ______________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “Good Fences Make Good Neighbors:” An Ethnographic Study of First-Year Composition and Introductory Creative Writing Classrooms. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

_________________   _____________________
Participant’s Signature   Date

_________________
Principal Investigator’s Signature

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