

THESIS

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN MATTERS: OFFERING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS GREATER
OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO “ACADEMIC DISCOURSE”

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ABSTRACT

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN MATTERS: OFFERING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS GREATER OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

With 73 percent of students now being classified as non-traditional in some way according to the U.S Department of Education, it is clear that the student populations at the two year colleges as well as universities are no longer as homogeneous as they were originally. This thesis examines the ways in which non-traditional students may differ in their learning styles and how we as educators can better provide better learning opportunities for these students based upon the works of Malcolm Knowles and other education theorists. This thesis explores the ways non-traditional students are placed within marginalized positions within current university and classroom structures. However, I explore the benefits of creating more inclusive classrooms which value students' external experiences primarily through "hybrid" or personal form of writing. This thesis also explores some of the challenges that can arise when incorporating personal writing into the classroom as well as some pedagogical approaches to combat those challenges.

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Prelude

When I read the words of Ting and Tinto, I am immediately brought to a personal place. These concepts are more than concepts for me, they are my history. These concepts for me, are summarized by the names of the instructors who practiced them. For example, when Tinto states that the success for individuals is largely influenced by the willingness of institutions to be involved in the development of its students on both a social and intellectual levels (6) I am reminded of Professor Ann Cummings, who asked “How are you doing?” when I came to class wearing the troubles of my world on my face. I paused and decided to tell the whole truth, informing her that the house I was living in sold in a short sale, and because I was not “technically” on the lease I had to find a new place to live by next Friday. I could not sign a new lease because I was graduating and so the situation was needless to say.... distressing. She, without hesitation, said that if I wanted to make an announcement in class to see if anyone had any rooms for rent I was more than welcome to. Being in a fairly desperate place, I took advantage of that opportunity and amazingly, someone had just had a room open up. I was no longer concerned with where I was going to shower the next week. Those material conditions, that Horner references (36) would have impeded my progress academically but instead were negated by a 30 second inquiry question. She simply involved herself, and that involvement undoubtedly improved my academic performance not only in her class but in my other classes as well. Additionally, my GPA remained high which allowed me to get into grad school. Those 30 seconds, in a very real way, impacted my life’s course and my future career.

When Bizzell discusses the challenges of entering into academic discourse and the conflicts that occur when students enter into a new discourse which is unfamiliar (121), I am reminded of Professor Nancy Barron. The class was required and in all honesty, when I discovered that the topic being investigated was related to peace pedagogies, had my schedule permitted it, I would have dropped the class.

I saw the language as foreign along with the ideas, and being the outspoken individual that I am, I argued almost every major point. She understood the internal conflict occurring between my ideologies and beliefs systems and the ones she was teaching. Rather than overwhelming me with the language of her discipline, her responses were along the lines of “I never said you have to like what I assign, or even agree with it. If you don’t, tell me why you think ‘it sucks’” or why you aren’t convinced.” In more academic terms, she was asking me to collect “evidence” and to pay attention to the structure of the arguments the various authors were making. She provided the opportunity for me to engage my own values and in turn helped to create a mini rhetoric and composition monster.

Professor Laura Gray-Rosendale’s memoir class encouraged personal engagement with the text but did not force it or require it. This class had a significant impact on my personal and academic writing as well as research interests. She provided the space within her class to interact with the “real world” and the larger social issues which infiltrated the memoirs and the classroom conversations we had about them. Her teaching style and classroom structure disrupted my binary conceptions of what I perceived as “academic” and what I perceived as “personal” and allowed my classmates and I to make the necessary connections between the two. This is the practical application of the work of Dorbin, who states that we must understand discourse as existing in a hybrid form (46). For me, Gray-Rosendale’s class best exemplified the

work of Knowles, who concept of andragogy suggests that adult learners benefit from being able to incorporate real experiences into their learning (64).

These pedagogical connections are necessary for improving retention rates in higher education. However, it is these various relationships that have in many ways aided me in my own academic progress. For me, it is the practical applications of these theories and pedagogies which have the greatest potential in higher education. For me, this information will forever be linked with the individual professors who provided me with the best opportunities for my own individual learning to occur.

Professor Lois Roma- Deeley was the first person to tell me that I would “love grad school”. I thought she was full of shit. Honestly. Why should I believe her, this poet-professor who gave the “New York Versions” of “the classics” and large concepts in her 100 level creative writing class to provide context for students when the stories we were writing needed something more. Her versions were usually under 2 minutes, and I thought these stories were amusing. I now see just how useful they were and how those stories worked overall in encouraging me to engage in academic discourse and to feel that what I had to contribute was of value. She made the academic bearable, personal, interesting, but mostly significantly she made it inviting.

She was not the first instructor that I had, but she is the one I remember the most. In fact when our paths first crossed I had already attended two different community college campuses and had intentions of leaving higher education entirely. I was taking her class frankly because I was a creative writer and because I was also terrified of the word “drop out”. I left home before graduating high school and most people I knew assumed that would happen. Statistically speaking, they were right to assume that. According to the statistics (U.S. Department of

Education) non-traditional students like myself have a graduation rate of 31.3 percent. I had insomnia, no money, no support, and too many responsibilities that were meant for those beyond my years.

Dr. Lois Roma-Deeley did not see the statistically probability of my “failure”. She did not see the deficit model or the institutional labels ascribed to her students, instead she saw the potential that non-traditional student voices have to progress through the systems of privilege which currently exist in higher education. She saw the potential of individuals to succeed despite their current circumstances. Over the years I have informed her of my milestones, an email sent here and there. I would not call her a friend, rather a previous mentor. However, it is her understanding and compassion for individual experiences and stories that I have moved forward with and that I have succeeded in part, because of. My fear is not that I will forget her or that I will forget how influential all these small moments have been on my own success. It is my fear that the challenges faced by others, both like myself and unlike myself, will be obscured by the systems of privilege which currently exist in higher education. It is my fear that higher education will work to eradicate difference through policy and practice by denying non-traditional students and adult learners the agency to alter the deficit perceptions which are initially cast upon them when they enter higher education in seek of education and increased opportunities.

Chapter 1

As teachers of writing, we have a distinct role and responsibility in the lives of non-traditional students. However, too often colleges and universities' composition programs and curricula disregard the voices and the experiences of non-traditional students. In doing so we lose the valuable knowledge they bring into the classroom which can enhance and improve the learning and experience of not only these individuals but also the traditional students who enter these classrooms as well. We lose the ability to truly impact the lives of students and in turn participate in and reconstruct systems of power which marginalize and devalue these student voices in higher education. We also diminish the agency of non-traditional students not only within the classroom but, in many cases in the world outside the academy as well, if students fail to fully embrace academic culture by subverting their previous cultures. By doing so we place students at a disadvantage within higher education and this in turn impacts the retention rates of non-traditional students.

I will examine the ways in which colleges and universities keep systems of power and privilege intact while limiting the chances for success for non-traditional students. This thesis will examine the ways in which non-traditional students, specifically adult learners are marginalized within the classroom and in many cases how their external identities and skill sets are increasingly devalued and excluded institutionally. This thesis will also examine current labeling practices within the academy, specifically the ways in which deficit labels harm students from diverse backgrounds and with alternative learning needs. This in turn creates a particular challenge for non-traditional students and decreases their chances for success within an institution, and specifically within composition programs. I do not mean to say that non-traditional students are not successful in higher education. In fact, currently the graduate rate for

non-traditional students is 31.3 percent while the traditional student graduation rate is 53.9 percent (U.S. Department of Education). However, according to a wide range of scholars within the field of composition (Elbow, Bartholomae, Spigelman, Rose) and others in related fields, the incorporation of a variety of personal writing options is one of many methods for improving the reception of non-traditional student values within higher education as well as increasing possible opportunities for non-traditional student success. I do not mean to say that personal writing is not currently present within composition classrooms. In fact, it is already prevalent as a method of instruction. As stated by Candace Spigelman in “What is Personal Academic Writing?,” “We in composition studies must be cautious about choosing sides- personal versus academic writing, expressivist versus social constructivist teaching- for all around us experimental writing is already serving the needs of critical cultural examination. Personal writing can do serious academic work; it can make rational arguments, it can merge appropriately with academic discourse” (2). I want to complicate current understandings of personal writing and the impact that it can have on those whose current positions are marginalized within higher education.

In this thesis I use the terms “non-traditional student” and “adult learner”. I do so intentionally. Within this thesis, the term non-traditional student is used when the relationship being discussed is with the institution as a whole and the term adult learner is used within the specific context of the composition classroom. I use these two different terms in order to better address the needs of adult learners and using this term allows me to separate the adult learner from the more traditionally aged student who is categorized as being between the ages of 18-22. Much of the pedagogy I discuss is based around the *experiences* of non-traditional students rather than the ages of non-traditional students, therefore when I discuss the experiences of adult learners I believe that in many cases the non-traditional student whose experiences resemble

those of their adult counterparts would respond similarly to these pedagogies. Also using the term adult learner allows for the methods of instruction to become more focused on those within the traditional freshman composition classroom which has in many cases already excluded many non-traditional students based upon their incoming language skills and abilities. Therefore, when I use the term “adult learner” within the confines of the composition classroom I do so with an understanding that the population that exists within composition classrooms is not the same as the non-traditional student population at large.

As a young student, I found that my sense of frustration in classes was often aligned with the frustrations of older students. I noticed early on that I was not a traditional student, and that my interests and demands for the details and deadlines were often the same demands that my older fellow students had. I was a student who felt that group work was a death sentence, one that usually meant the loss of some money or a serious chunk out of my schedule to complete a task with other students who had far more time to “discuss” things than I did. I had a job, I had two jobs, I had a life I had to get back to; but that I was trying desperately to get away from. I had other obligations and these same concerns were rarely shared by classmates in my own age group. I had no backup plan, college was the plan. I struggled as my ways of making meaning differed from my classmates, as I made my own connections between texts and writing which were significant only for me. I was fortunate, one of the lucky ones who found a mentor early on in my academic career and who was able to provide me opportunities to create connections and express those connections in a classroom setting or in her office after class.

However, I was constantly struck by how inept some programs (or more specifically the instructors and classroom environments) were at providing students with these same opportunities, or even the opportunities to share external knowledge and relate it to the lessons

that were being given within the classroom structure. Specifically non-traditional students whose time was limited and whose other obligations in life were not negotiable. These experiences are not mine alone and these students exist on every campus in some form or another. For example, Yolanda Hubbard, an African American Woman now in her 50's plans to graduate next year, but began her journey through higher education three decades ago. Her story was featured in the March 9th edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and begins like too many others who get lost within the college system. She began college at the University of New Mexico in 1983 while working at a hamburger chain restaurant. She struggled to find the balance between working and taking introductory classes in English and Math, and dropped out of college. Her life has become more complicated in those 3 decades in between, with recurrent trips into and out of various college systems, and it is clear that there have been difficulties along the way as well as the obligations Hubbard had to others within her own family in addition to herself. Her story is not one that exists in isolation, and in fact is one that the university and community college systems often times fail to accommodate in the classroom. Her story is just one of many that will be featured throughout this thesis, stories that bring to the forefront the exigence of this thesis and its proposed opportunities for advancement of not only the pedagogies of the classroom but also the practices which in many cases further limit the learning opportunities for students like Hubbard.

It is these previous experiences and my personal interactions that have compelled this project and this effort to improve upon an educational framework that implies a dedication for accepting difference but in reality labels that difference as a deficit rather than a benefit. In turn, these labels reduce the authority and agency of non-traditional students in higher education.

I will begin by examining how institutional labeling has become a common practice and how this practice in turn produces and perpetuates systems of privilege within the universities and specifically composition programs. These programs and their corresponding professional associations lobby against these systems of privilege in their pedagogies. One of the most notable of these associations is National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE hereafter) which according to the statement “Assumptions, Aims, and Recommendations of the Secondary Strand, 1989,” bases its practices off the well-researched assumptions and well-meaning declaration that “All students possess a rich fund of prior knowledge, based on unique linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and experiential backgrounds. Acknowledging and appreciating diversity is necessary to a democratic society.” Additionally, CUNY’s open admissions policy on the student body population greatly increased student diversity, but this also challenged the ways in which non-traditional students and their voices were acknowledged (and also marginalized) within the university structure itself and specifically in composition programs (Horner 11). Policies like these and others released by related professional organizations have had little impact on the composition classroom specifically and instead become an ideal that is theorized but has limited impact on the practices which occur within the classroom. Stating that “students possess a rich fund of prior knowledge” is insignificant when these opportunities for learning are not being incorporated more fully into the classroom nearly 23 year later. Systemic change is gradual, and while advancements have been made in education (and particularly the education of non-traditional students) these advancements are still minimal and must be improved upon. These policies specifically and most importantly come into contact with students within the composition classroom. I will examine the ways in which the negative stigmas that become attached to these individuals, (specifically non-traditional students institutionally and adult

learners within the composition classroom) and how these labels may do more harm than good by reducing the agency and voice of non-traditional students in higher education.

In order to effectively investigate this, a few questions became critical to answer.

Can underrepresented populations in higher education speak freely?

Can they be heard when they do?

Can they achieve success in a system (higher education as a whole) which has historically taken on the role and operations of gatekeeping in higher education?

Can the subaltern (non-traditional students/adult learners) in higher education be heard and does their (assigned) subaltern status negatively impact their retention in higher education?

How can recognizing the external lives and lived experiences of adult learners (through personal writing) assist in creating a better learning environment for adult learners/non-traditional students?

The Subaltern in Higher Education

Antonio Gramsci originated the term subaltern in prison writings done in 1920's while he was jailed. He used this term in order to discuss the controlling powers and patterns which suppressed groups such as peasants and laborers. He did this while also avoiding the detection of prison censors. While he held that subaltern groups were oppressed by ruling groups, he also believed that power was less often exercised through force than consent (Apple, Buras 4). Gramsci's meaning of the subaltern was popularized when those journals become public in the 1960's and 1970's and thus the term and its subsequent meanings become more commonly used in their current form. For Gramsci this term became a method of activism. Although covert in

his original intentions to avoid censorship, the term has now become a central part of the conversation within the academy and particularly in the area of cultural studies.

“Building on Antonio Gramsci’s original use of the term subaltern, Spivak used subaltern to refer to marginalized individuals rendered voiceless by sexism, classism, and interconnected web of global and local power configurations” (Asgharzadeh 340-1). This idea is then challenged by Spivak in later years as she examines the possibilities of the subaltern to speak and to be heard by those within the dominant discourse. It is my contention that this same form of exclusion occurs within higher education. To believe education and the academy exist independently of the political and governing bodies is to deny the existence of power. For example, Michael Apple and Kristen Buras state in their introduction to *The Subaltern Speak*,

The struggles over higher education... and the constant dialectical interactions between hegemonic and counterhegemonic actions that involve being heard are ongoing- and they are not limited to higher education. Education struggles are closely connected to the conflicts in larger economic, political, and cultural arenas. The steadily growing influence of rightist position in each of these arenas is pronounced and has had major effects in education and the politics of identity and culture, struggles over the production, distribution and reception of curriculum, and the connections between national and international mobilizations. (Apple, Buras 12)

The action of improvement has become necessary within the system of higher education due to an ever increasing influx of non-traditional students who enter the institution from a variety of subaltern-ed positions. The system of higher education must adapt and improve its current methods of educating non-traditional students who enter into the institution from a variety of subaltern-ed positions from both global and local contexts. This position is then

individually reenacted in classroom but also in the larger context of universities and colleges around the country.

We must address the issue that the system of higher education is struggling to keep up with the lived realities of our students, and this reflected not only in the pedagogies of the past which rely on models designed for classroom populations that don't exist, but also this same ineptness is becoming clear even in our ability to gauge our own efficiency. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* examines this issue as well stating that of the 4.3 million college students (only counting traditionally aged students and not those who attend part time) 3 million of those students remain unaccounted for. The reality is that the US Department of Education has yet to be able to collect data which accurately reflects the lived realities of our students, and even when dealing with traditional students it remains a challenge to track their progress as well as their location on a national level. In truth, many students are not accounted for in national efforts to track progress. I am one of those students included in the survey above. I began college in 2003-4 and according to the methods through which this data (and additionally most data) was collected on either traditional students or non-traditional students, I am a drop out. In reality, I am a graduate student. There is a discrepancy between what the data reflects and the lives our students actually lead. This national effort to increase accountability barely scratches the surface of what it is to be student in the system of higher education today.

History of the Composition Classroom and its Respective Position of Power in the University

In order to fully appreciate the ways in which higher education devalues the voices of non-traditional students and disservices the group, we must turn our attention to the ways in which working class rhetoric and the academy have an exclusionary history. To be working class in

society has historically created a binary understanding of what you are also not. You are not, an academic, because the two discourses have excluded each other historically and continue to do so at many levels including locally, politically, institutionally, and globally. William DeGenaro states of working class rhetorics in *Who Cares*,

Working-class rhetorics analyze the media and popular culture. Working-class rhetorics deconstruct literacy centers and workplaces, considering the intersections of language ideology and, social action. Most of all, perhaps, working-class rhetorics possess a certain consciousness- an awareness that class (and, by extension, class division and class conflict) exists. (DeGenaro 6)

Class division and its working class roots are in many ways still impacting the classroom in ways that the academy has yet to adapt to. There are material conditions which are beyond the design of the institution itself but are becoming increasingly important to address because of the impact these conditions have on student learning, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

CUNY's open admissions policy also had a great impact on the ways in which non-traditional students were regarded in relationship to the university. Student activism was also equated with illiteracy as a whole, and during the time which CUNY opened its doors to students who would not otherwise be able to attend a traditional university. However, the reality is that the public sentiment was the result of the corresponding attitudes which prevented many from having access in the first place. For example, it was believed by many in the general population that the majority of the students were from ethnic minorities who were admitted through the open admissions policy. As Bruce Horner states

Issues of social justice could be presented as co-terminous with rather than a distinct from and potentially a threat to the academy and its “educational integrity.” But the Board statement instead works to represent prior practices and students admitted under earlier admissions policies as normal, possessing educational integrity and academic excellence, and to represent those students to be newly admitted as a threat to these. The university would add to its roles that of ‘change agent,’ but the change was to be enacted on neither the definition of the university’s integrity as it had existed in the past nor on society but on new students (Horner 11).

Moments like these in the history of the composition are present in policies currently impacting students today, and to overlook that is to deny the influence of history on the present. Student’s impacted by CUNY’s open admissions policy were impacted by these conflicted positions held by the university. “Students to be admitted were cast in the role of those desiring not to overthrow society but to join and become more productive members of it” (11-12). There are assumptions that lie in the middle space of these texts and impressions, to become a more productive member after experiencing the academy denies that same level of agency to those who reside outside the academy. A privilege is enacted and the implications of that privilege continue to influence higher education today. For instance, individuals who do not receive or “achieve” a college degree are left to deal with the negative stigmas attached to that ascribed “failure”. When and if these individuals come back to college they are forced into marginalized positions within the academy which describe their experience as “non-traditional.” Additionally, the skills which adults or non-traditional students have acquired in the non-academic world rarely have a place within the composition classroom. These experiences are excluded from the

classroom and a student's ability to draw upon these experiences is also limited thereby limiting their potential for success within the academy.

The realities that students live in and are trying to (in some cases) improve are the realities which simultaneously cause them to be in a disadvantaged position institutionally. For instance, a student who works, (as most do according to the more recent data from U.S. Department of Education) has less time to devote to their academic responsibilities. This same circumstance is reflected in Alexander Astin's *Theory of Student Involvement* which indicates that the students' academic abilities are often challenged not only by students' abilities but also the competing factors for time in students' life. This theory and its impact will be explored more thoroughly within a more specific context later in this thesis.

The current attempts to track non-traditional students in higher education have revealed that there are greater issues, not only in tracking these students but also in continuing to assign institutional goals of success to individuals. One of the first things that must also be considered when addressing the needs of non-traditional students is that their overall goals may be different than the traditional student's goals due to the other obligations in their lives. As educators and policy makers we must consider the impact of institutionally defined goals as the measure of success, and how this applies to the individual, particularly the non-traditional individual. For example, simply defining a student's success by the measure of degree completion, whether that degree be a four year degree or an associate's degree may further marginalize their position by defining their failure to achieve a degree as a deficit which does not apply to the student as an individual. We as educators must be aware that some individuals enter into higher education with different goals in mind. We must also acknowledge that an individual's overall goals may not

align with institutionally defined goals and therefore the measures for success must be acknowledged with the student's intentions in mind.

However, progress has been made. Currently the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES hereafter) has begun to collect data with students' self-appointed goals as opposed to institutionally defined goals. The data collected by the U.S Department of Education uses the students own indicated goal objectives (14) in their data collection. However, the reality is much of the data collected tracking non-traditional students and their progress generally do not use individually defined goals. For example, Rob J. Rock's story was also featured within the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the title of his short bio "25 years After High School, Degrees in Sight", reflects how his goals differ from those of a traditional student. He appears in his photo in a black collared shirt, a 44 year old male, returning as a student to Kellogg Community College in Michigan. He spent 25 years working but, like many other non-traditional students returning after long absences in their formal education, he was recently laid off. He made the decision to return back to school to acquire new skills. He is currently on track to earn an associate degree in general studies but would also like to get a pair of associate degrees in graphic design and photography as well (Gonzales A10).

Rock's story exemplifies the variety that exists in student goals and reveals the flaws with some current measures of assessment for student success. Those flawed systems of assessment have a greater impact than many initially realized. Those flawed systems of assessment marginalize students by ascribing a deficit (not completing a degree) to students who may have no intention of achieving a degree. When educators and policy makers rely on institutionally defined goals for degree completion, those students who goals are different than the traditionally assigned goals fail to be represented accurately and are marginalized institutionally because of

this. However, using the degree completion statistics available from the 1990-89 we can gather some data which reflects the difficulty that non-traditional students experience in their progress towards their degree/s.

The number of non-traditional students who achieved their goals is drastically lower than the number of traditional students who achieved their degree goal. When considering the goal of a Bachelor's degree being achieved within 4 years, 53.9 percent of traditional students had achieved their goal and attained a degree as compared to the 31.3 percent of non-traditionally students. The number of students who achieved their goals also drastically decreases with a direct correlation to the degree of their non-traditional status. Those who are minimally non-traditional have a 42.4 percent completion rate. Those who are categorized as having a moderately non-traditional status have a degree completion rate of 16.9 percent as compared to those who are classified as highly non-traditional and have a degree completion rate of only 11.2 percent after 4 years (U.S. Department of Education). However, this information needs to be contextualized further. There are still more students who are still attending school but have not yet completed their degree, this is to be expected, particularly with non-traditional students who have a greater chance of attending school part time. Additionally, by examining the number of students who are not enrolled towards their degree after 4 years (1994 in this study) we can see that the relative patterns for degree completion continue with 19.2 percent of students surveyed in this study not attending at all. The number of non-traditional students who are not enrolled in classes after 4 years is respectively higher with 32.5 percent of non-traditional students as a whole, not working towards their degrees after 4 years' time has passed. This percentage increased as well with those who have a higher degree of non-traditional characteristics (26.2, 40.7 and 42.1 percent respectively for each increase in non-traditional classification). This

information stays consistent for within the associates and certificate degree completion categories as well.

What this reveals are the ways in which higher education is not working for non-traditional students in the same ways it is working for the traditional student body population. Most alarming are the differences in the ways in which non-traditional students fair in higher education and what this means when that degree is connected with its real world applications.

When a college degree leads to a lifetime of better opportunities, it is oppressive when current labeling practices, (and most importantly composition classroom practices) work against non-traditional students by limiting their opportunities for learning by limiting their agency. The result of this is an unequal access to privileges such as better job opportunities, higher overall income in a lifetime (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) and other opportunities for advancement in life that are reserved (in many cases) for those with college degrees. By relying too heavily on the labels meant to categorize students, rather than the students' individual circumstances and needs, we restrict non-traditional students' access to these opportunities in oppressive and systemic ways which place individuals at a disadvantage.

When we consider the implications of these statistics it is clear that the university and colleges within higher education are not explicitly designed for the success of non-traditional students. However, there are external factors which cannot always be overcome by the university, its support systems or the composition classrooms. Graduation rates for non-traditional students may always be lower, but we must admit that from these numbers, the majority of students who attend colleges and universities around the country are non-traditional students. Yet, these are the students with the lowest rates of degree completion even when these goals are self-reported.

To ignore this inherent inequality within the system is to ignore the inequality that these systems act to preserve. Higher education is structured to serve the minority of its students (traditional students) and then adheres to systems which benefit those students at the expense of non-traditional students who are the majority. Students who make up 73 percent of the student body are not provided equal opportunities for success, but instead pay a higher price for the opportunity to participate within the system in which they are often times placed at a disadvantage.

To complicate matters, there are also the intersecting realities which our students live in which greatly impact their lives in both, academically as well as personally. However, we fool ourselves into thinking that the only way in which we can address these issues is through the classroom. In order to improve our understanding of students' lived realities, I will draw upon the work of Horner and its impact on the materiality issues which impact the classroom and most importantly, students. He states "students are viewed as products of the social, to be worked *on* for the social, but not, as students, already working in and with the material social process together with their teachers" (Horner 35). He also expresses how these material conditions and the social worlds in which students, and particularly non-traditional students, are impacted by these material conditions and lack thereof. "*These* are 'lacks' in students rarely addressed or even acknowledged, despite the ongoing and profound and quite immediate effects they have on what students can accomplish in our classes" (36).

It is my contention that the subaltern can be and must be established as the non-traditional student in higher education. However the question remains: Is the subaltern an idea that is relinquished to those in far more dire circumstances?

The case can be made that the term subaltern is perhaps, too strong a term to categorize the current conditions for non-traditional students within the context of higher education. I will say that yes, the concerns of the subaltern (as the non-traditional student, specifically the adult learner) can perhaps be viewed as less dire than the conditions for those concerned with more basic freedoms and human rights. However, current educational practices must be questioned and with the upmost urgency. We must question current practices because, if we idealize the classroom to be a place that subaltern can speak then we must address the growing concern that it may not be. If we wish for education to transform world practices and create more democratic spaces which value the voices and stories of every individual, then we must protect and challenge the “values” and value systems which influence that space of inquiry with the same intensity that we would protect other basic liberties.

If those in power limit the ability of any group to question its position of relative powerlessness then using the term subaltern is justified. The subaltern can no longer afford to remain silent or be concerned with whether the dominant powers consider it to be truly “subaltern”. The subaltern should not be required to prove itself sufficiently marginalized for those in power to consider its own systems of oppression and in this case the gatekeeping functions of those systems in terms of higher education and its connections to class and individual meritocracy. The dominant powers begin to take effect in small ways initially and therefore the practice of questioning and demanding reform in these smaller but still significant areas is necessary.

I believe in order for this investigation to be complete it is essential to acknowledge my own subject position as I investigate this topic. To begin, my own subject position is that of a working class individual. I grew up working class to lower class and I continue to hold the

position of a working class individual currently within higher education. I was raised to appreciate and desire knowledge, which has heavily influenced my life's direction thus far and is reflective of my lower-middle class upbringing. I begin to see these intersecting values in my current field of work and appreciate the positive learning practices which my parents participated in and helped to establish during my childhood that have led me to my current position within higher education. I do maintain a working class status, a position in society from birth which allowed me to experience roadblocks ranging from financial to familial obligations and it is these roadblocks and their subsequent/reflective intersections with my positions of privilege that have led me to my current area of learning and focus. I believe that many of those within higher education face a variety of exclusionary practices and issues that limit their potential to reach optimal success within higher education. My research will therefore not focus on the negative as a means of understanding those within the subaltern position within higher education but rather investigate the ways in which higher education can improve its current practices of improving adult learner and non-traditional students' retention within higher education specifically through the theory and practices of the composition classroom.

Labeling: What it Reveals About "Them" And "Us"

It is critical and necessary to examine the act of labeling and its intrinsic effect on the system of higher education and its subsequent relationship to communities of learning that exist outside the academy. I mean to decipher the relationships that are both clouded and illuminated by this labeling process. I also want to draw attention to the coercion and power that is created by such labeling processes. Often times the individuals who are labeled within such powers must submit to these labels in order to participate within and gain power from these systems, generally higher education and most specifically the composition classroom which is greatly

impacted by the labeling that occurs at the institutional level. If according to Gramsci power is derived from “coercion” rather than “force” (Apple, Buras 4) then we should question whether institutionally ascribed labels which reflect a lack and need for improvement are coercive or forced methods of maintaining the current power dynamics which provide the academy with power over the agency of the individual.

Activist scholars such as Ellen Cushman criticize the mere act of labeling. She draws attention to the oppressive nature of labeling that begins to form when using terms. These terms are terms that limit but also expand our understanding of the individual and their respective positions held both inside the academy, but also those same categories also reflect material realities that impact their own learning as well as the learning opportunities that they are exposed to. Gayatri Spivak states in *Outside the Teaching Machine*, “When a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the center wants identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the center. It should be pointed out that what is being negotiated here is not even a “race or social type”... but an economic principle of identification through separation. (55) Spivak discusses labeling with the context of labeling of the speaker, and in this case an educator speaking at a conference. This statement must be applied to the labeling process that higher education also subjects students to, particularly non-traditional groups within higher education and for my thesis adult learners.

It is through this subjective labeling that we begin to learn and expose the realities that our students are from and how these realities impact their respective learning. We struggle to adjust our definitions of students to fit and reflect the places they come from in an attempt to better understand these students but also in an attempt to make assimilation possible.

Cushman begins her book *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community* by distancing herself from traditional scholars and positioning herself as an “activist scholar”. She also discusses the common practice of scholars to define those in subordinate positions in a variety of ways that express “a lack”. Cushman states

using the idea of false consciousness, critical scholars fix individuals’ political positions on society’s hierarchy, calling them: the ‘disenfranchised’, the ‘marginalized,’ the ‘disempowered,’ the ‘less powerful’, the ‘underclass’, the subaltern’, the ‘oppressed’, the ‘dominated’, the ‘subjugated’, and the ‘subordinate.’ They describe their literate abilities with more categories: ‘the preliterate’, the ‘illiterate’, ‘primary oral cultures’, at best ‘the functionally literate.’ They define the individuals by what they do not have, do not do, do not measure up to. Then as critical scholars and teachers they claim to have the theories to liberate them, to have the skills individuals need to produce change and organize together against their oppressors. Critical theories become the measuring rods for what counts as social action and agency, and too often, individuals fail to measure up. (Cushman xviii)

She shows a great deal of discomfort with the practice of labeling and identifying lack within subordinated groups. She also points out that scholars who fail to acknowledge that by doing so they then place themselves into respective “savior” positions, or being someone who has the ability to bring those out of their disenfranchised state. Cushman does not adhere to this practice nor this pedagogical approach and instead places herself at a distance from these terms and their subsequent (savior) ideologies.

Her position as an activist scholar rather than an academic scholar may free her from the burdens of the academic language and subsequent categorization that occurs. However, it is significant to reflect upon the importance of these labels that follow and trickle down into the consciousness of the academic community, (including but not limited) to the individual students who make up these populations. These individuals are then labeled by the institutions which they enter into.

With 73 percent of students now being classified as “untraditional” in some way (U.S Department of Education), it is clear that the student populations at the 2 year colleges as well as universities are no longer homogeneous as they were originally. The significance of this statistic is that its examination reveals the complicated reality from which most students are currently involved in. For example, the statistic indicates that several factors make up the definition of non-traditional student. Currently, according to the more encompassing criteria for the definition of non-traditional students in higher education there are several different factors which the U.S. Department of Education uses to establish the existence of and then categorize non-traditional students in higher education. These criteria bring into focus the complicated and challenging lives and roles which non-traditional students live in. Some of the criteria used to define students in higher education are as follows.

- *Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);*
- *Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;*
- *Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;*
- *Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid,³*

- *Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);*
- *Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or*
- *Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).*

(U.S. Department of Education 2)

By examining the criteria used to categorize non-traditional students according to Horn's definition, we are left with the continuum of non-traditionality which is theoretically broad enough to examine the impact these factors have on retention rates in higher education.

However, what this standardizing method does focus primarily on the factors present within the student's lives, rather than issues which are often categorized within the category of language learning ability, disability, or student- veteran status. While categorizations and criteria exclude these many considerations we are not excluding these students from the conversation of the non-traditional student in higher education, but instead categorizing non-traditional students more broadly in order to create a greater sense of how many students no longer fit within the traditional student model for education that higher education still clings to in order to educate a wide audience.

Labeling while necessary on some levels because of institutional realities and relationships to government funding and tracking efforts, is not something that should be relied upon too heavily to reveal the details of our students' lives. Indeed labeling can illuminate the circumstances for some students, but for others it may obscure the more significant factors influencing their progress within institutions.

Labeling is also significant act and powerful act. For example, Cushman labels herself an “activist scholar” and does so in order to challenge traditional power dynamics within and outside of the academy. Students however, become representations of the labels that are institutionally ascribed to them. Students themselves are perhaps not best defined by these labels which have been ascribed to them, or additionally find these labels limiting. However, in many cases these labels still fail to reveal the complicated realities which our students’ lives are profoundly impacted by. If labeling is an institutional necessity then it must be done with caution and the impact of these labels on student identity must also be considered. When labeling places students at a disadvantage institutionally, or “Others” individuals before they enter a classroom, these labels and their impact must be renegotiated. However, there are limitations to the impact that relabeling or un-labeling can have. For example, an older student may still likely feel isolated in a classroom of traditionally aged students. However, by institutionally segregating students through these labeling processes, we condone and perpetuate that isolation in our own policies and possibly limit the opportunities non-traditional students have to interact within institutions.

It should also be noted that the mere act of labeling itself is subjective due to differences between institutional policies and criteria. Vincent Tinto who has spent the majority of his 20 year career looking at retention issues with higher education with students both traditional and non-traditional discusses the inherent difficulties that arise when attempting to track or accurately assess students who enter into higher education. He states that the variety of records kept at different institutions pose problems when trying to collect data regarding the entrance or goals of students into higher education. This becomes a more significant problem with two year institutions which have a greater number of students attending part time than most four year

institutions and also have a greater number of students can be classified as non-traditional students. These inherent problems only begin to scratch the surface when the conversation is then turned to non-traditional students in higher education who are consistently underrepresented in the current research because of issues such as these as well as migration issues. He also argues that “effective assessment must be sensitive to the broad range of student experiences and the longitudinal character of student passage through the institution” (Tinto 6).

Primarily, it is an area that suffers from a lack of longitudinal research, due in many cases to the migratory nature of non-traditional students as compared to the rather stationary traditional student counterparts. Much research has yet to be done on the long term status of non-traditional students who in many cases take longer to graduate or change institutions and are then not able to be reflected within the studies that are done. When students enter and exit institutions these labels follow them while the acquired and personal knowledge that educators and campuses have of these students fails to accompany them to other institutions in the same fashion.

Many non-traditional students come into and out of the institutions at both the two year colleges as well as universities and are never fully incorporated. The changes and relocations play a significant role in the outcomes of non-traditional students’ success. There are a variety of differences in the ways in which non-traditional students are identified. These categorizations become the central theme for unification but the terms and categories which are meant offer insight are created in such different ways that the term becomes less meaningful because the definitions are individually constructed through varying institutions and studies. This presents a particular challenge when trying to cross examine studies. The results attained with varying definitions of “non-traditional” students then challenge the educational institutions or researchers to deconstruct the individual that exists within these highly manufactured categories.

Tinto states directly that community involvement is where the secret to success lies for student retention rates in higher education.

If there is a secret to successful retention, it lies in the willingness of institutions to involve themselves in the social and intellectual development of their students. That involvement and the commitment to students it reflects is the primary source of students' commitment to the institutions and of their involvement of their own learning. (Tinto 6)

His perspectives reflect the need for awareness on an individual student basis by the institutions and educators. He also discusses a sense of shared responsibility between individual students as well as institutions, and their ability to be responsive to these students' needs. Tinto proposes that assessment is a necessary part of student success and retention at institutions of higher learning.

We as composition instructors are in a position to better incorporate and validate the wealth of external knowledge that non-traditional students. By acknowledging the wealth of information that adult learners have and offering opportunities to incorporate the rich differences in both experience (through personal writing) and learning styles into the classroom we can provide positive learning environments which actively seek to incorporate the students external identities into the classroom and their educational experiences. Their home discourses and external literacy skills can be valued through a reform of current pedagogical practices in ways that not only value but also expose traditional students to the variety of experiences.

By incorporating difference of experience into the classroom and valuing that difference rather than undermining it through our assimilative practices we gain a richer perspective as educators and we offer students that chance to circumvent and incorporate difference more fully

into the practices of the academy. The classroom can heighten their feeling of “belonging” in higher education by validating the wealth of external knowledge that non-traditional students bring rather than seeing those differences as a detriment to learning

In addition to this work with non-cognitive factors of student success, Astin’s *Student Involvement Theory* (1984) also illustrates connections between the amount of time and involvement on campus which has a significant impact on retention rates in higher education. This theory also acknowledges that “educators are competing with other forces in the student’s life for a share of the finite time and energy” (Astin 301). Astin also states “the extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to those activities” (Astin 301). Policies and work in composition that fail to acknowledge these realities fails to be responsive to the actual needs of students and instead responds to an idealized version of a student. In reality our students are engaged in other aspects of life besides those provided within the context of the academy. Students like Marianne Durling exist regardless of whether there is proper record of her, her progress as a student in some institutions. Durling has now completed a variety of degrees which she began earning credit for years ago. She, now 48, has traveled with her husband to and from Arizona for military work. She has worked in a variety of positions throughout her life, including a position on an ambulance which placed her on 24 hour calls. These various positions in life conflicted with her overall goal of a degree and at times her life became an impediment to her degree progress. A notable moment in her history that exemplifies her complicated position in life was the time during which her schedule with work was too difficult to align with a school schedule. She left college because of this conflict at one time, and her course progress and degree progress was altered yet again, by circumstances beyond her control. These circumstances were complicated

by the college system she was seeking accreditation through (Lipka A16). This conflict of interest and the limited possibilities that were made available to her at that point in her life marginalized her and forced her to leave school, and moments like these are persistent in the lives of non-traditional students like Durling. These conflicts also occur more often for students who are already struggling to find opportunities for advancement. However, the class is structurally set up in most cases to provide incoming or returning students in higher education with a “measure of their entering literacy skills and preparation for the demands of their future academic, professional, civic, and personal lives” (Flemming 3). It is also a course which plays a large role in the initiation process into academic discourse in higher education. However, oftentimes this process has been criticized as a mainstreaming and normalizing force within higher education rather than a course which encourages a variety of voices which are reflected through the students in higher education.

Composition programs and colleges must acknowledge students who lead complex lives such as Durling’s and when possible provide accommodations or differently structured programs (specifically composition classes for this thesis) to optimize the opportunities for completion for students.

While student experiences like Durling’s may be beyond the purview of the academy, these are still issues that should be addressed when possible. When students are forced to change institutions there is sometimes little that can be done to compensate for that. However, many colleges are now increasing the number of online classes that are available, and this in turn creates its own set of complications for learning that are beyond the scope of this particular thesis. However, issues such as Durling’s are not uncommon and with an increasingly difficult job market, the number of working professionals whose primary obligation is not school are on

the rise. When student like Durling, (who are forced to leave school for reasons beyond her control) are left with the negative labels and stigmas associated with a “failure” to receive a degree, it can further marginalize that student in higher education.

Also, there is the limiting reality that many are defined and limited within the category of basic writer and it is very common for the discussion of basic writers to be limiting for the basic writer, and also by association, the non-traditional student. Generally speaking the non-traditional student can become mixed and associated with the stigmatized and well discussed subject of the “basic writer.” The basic writer is then limited by discussions of basic writing issues, rather than adjusting the concept of basic writing to that of the student as an individual. These are the constructed identities that labeling creates which identifies generally the writing ability of students rather than the other impacting and varied aspects which create these students.

The basic writer and non-traditional students are often times discussed together within the pedagogies of composition in higher education. This becomes clear after a few minor searches and when one looks further into the student examples being used to elaborate on the learning and related realities that basic writers are engaged in. In many cases, the language abilities of students are the primary concerns and therefore become the focus of their assigned role in the academy. This “basic writer” identity becomes a defining factor when discussing the student. I bring this point into focus not to deny the usefulness of labels but instead to create a greater awareness of the influence that labeling has on individuals. In fact, when dealing with larger numbers of individuals grouping individuals can serve as a valuable strategy in attempting to better accommodate learners based on their varying needs. However, another point to consider are when labels and their subsequent value systems impact students negatively despite the better intentions of such processes. When the label becomes attached to the individual, rather than

providing educators with information perhaps more relevant to the student's individual needs it becomes a reductive force in the student's experience. We must be mindful when producing labels and discussing students in relationship to those institutionally defined labels. We as educators must acknowledge the wealth of information that these labels conceal as well as reveal about students. In truth the area of research that revolves around the term "basic writing" has already begun to address such issues in higher education and would provide an excellent framework for re-evaluating the labeling process of non-traditional students.

We also know that while the conversations regarding these "basic" writers has changed in recent years to look beyond the skill sets that students enter with and has been challenged to consider the student and the encouragement that professors and educators can offer these students. The conversations occurring regarding the basic writing classroom vary, with some scholars such as Gail Stygall (Stygall 321) challenge us to consider the role of the academy and its impact on the role of the basic writer, and the role of the institution in creating those identities for those individuals. Victor Villanueva (Ball, Muhammad, Smitherman) challenges professors of basic writers and writers alike to challenge themselves to think past the limiting cognitively deficient perspectives that are commonly associated with basic writers. He challenges the individual professors to think beyond these limiting deficient perspectives but, also to create confident writers that are able to see beyond the preconceived perceptions of deficiency that are commonly associated with writers who are defined by institutions as basic.

In truth much of the literature and research done with adult learners resides within the "basic writing" classroom. Rather than the marker being their status as an adult learner, it instead becomes an assigned status based upon a lack of skill set, rather than a lack of exposure to that skill set. As Laura Gray-Rosendale explains in *Rethinking Basic Writing*, "Although identity

categories alone such as race, class and gender- represent an important progress over purely formal criteria and definitions, examining them to the exclusion of other factors has also at times limited our understandings of Basic Writers. This reduces their lives, situations and utterances, both spoken and written, to the categories.” (13)

Additionally Gray-Rosendale states “often identity as culturally constructed according to race, class and gender differences is marked by oppressive boundaries. To break free from such oppression, individuals must transgress or rebel against these boundaries” (Gray-Rosendale 29). These boundaries come in many forms in higher education, and do not exist solely within the context of the “basic writer”. While Gray-Rosendale examines discursive practices in relation to the basic writing classroom and individuals who are placed there, these same principles can and must be transmitted to the conversation of the adult learner within the composition classroom. The challenges faced are similar, and at times overlapping. The individual is left to rectify their own previous identity with a newly developing student identity, one that has been defined by institutional labels as one within a marginalized and subordinate position. The adult learner within composition is different, is defined by institutions as lacking the skill sets and behavior patterns that their traditionally aged classmates have. The adult student must conform and adapt to a new system while being told simultaneously that their previous system of knowledge is “less”, and not conducive to their success within the realm of higher education. For example, when students enter the classroom and begin writing for the “academy” rather than more familiar audiences the tone and structure that was once natural for them is no longer available, specifically words like “ain’t” or perhaps more culturally specific terms which are used in home environments are no longer “appropriate” for academic contexts. While this may be a necessary modification for future academic audiences students will write for, it is not a structure that is

most helpful when students attempt to enter academic discourse for the first time. Students attempt to sound “smart” and many times this initial attempt holds back understanding rather than enhances it. Students must assimilate to new privileged practices in order to become successful, in essence their difference must be eliminated and then redeveloped in order to receive accreditation from the system which has been established as the power distributor (in the form of grades [individual classes] and degrees [institutional]).

The historical roots of higher education were not to encourage difference but rather to minimize it, to create a common set of knowledge in individuals and the same general education. As David Flemming states of first year compositions’ history “For more than a century, and nearly everywhere it has exists, freshman composition has been a standalone course in expository writing a the college level; required of all or nearly all student on campus; taken early in their undergraduate careers as both a measure of their entering literacy skills and preparation for the demands of their future academic, professional, civic, and personal lives” (3). This has become a rather complicated process as student body populations become less homogeneous due to open enrollment opportunities as well the GI Bill and the educational benefits which expand the incoming populations yet again. (44)

First year composition performs as the gatekeeper of institutions and those who cannot perform at the required level are sectioned off and placed within subsequent categories, categories which express a lack and require individuals to in turn spend more money because of that lack. They are placed at an even greater disadvantage in many ways because of this. How can we so easily cast aside the implications of a system whose primary function is both to assimilate writing skills, while extracting those who do not fit within said parameters? Composition departments privilege this skill set by continuing to separate students who do not

have the desired skill sets in order to more “effectively educate individuals” who are at different stages in their learning. While this may be necessary, the potentially negative impact of this practice on student identity should also be a more dominant part of the conversation regarding non-traditional students and basic writers alike.

Composition is perhaps tasked with the greatest challenge of educating individuals towards a common language while also attempting to encourage individual thought and individuals to progress past the standard thought.

The overall goal of composition is to create literate and thinking individuals but the literate standard is one that is defined by institutional standards which reflect public practices and needs however are not dictated by the public. The most notable example of this is “No Child Left Behind” education act which is generally viewed by educators in K-12 as inhibiting educator efforts rather than fostering them (Apple, Buras 168).

Institutions in higher education define literacy in their own views while privileging “academic discourse” over the discourse of the public. Rose comments of his place within the academy and his teaching history

My work in the classroom has mostly been with people whom our schools, public and private, have failed: working class and immigrant students, students from nonmainstream linguistic and cultural backgrounds who didn’t fit a curriculum or timetable or definition of achievement and were thereby categorized in some way as different or deficient. There are, as we have seen along this journey, long standing social and cultural reasons for this failure of our schools, tabled and disturbing histories discrimination, skewed perception, and protection of privilege. (Rose “Possible” 412)

It is this protection of privilege that we must become more sensitive too, because to teach within the system of higher education, to receive that accreditation is to inherently have adhered to this system and the subsequent position of power and privilege it provides individuals. Institutional values also become a part of that process and are passed onto individuals who “succeed” and who choose to carry on the tradition of instruction.

The best option is to be aware of these influences, (perhaps even painfully so), in an effort to remember their history and the affiliations that may still persist.

Rose also acknowledges that policies which were once thought to be progressive are now seen as detrimental to student progress. Additionally, Rose asks those in education (and beyond) to remember the ways in which often “standard wisdom and sanctioned practices” were damaging for students and while these policies were influenced by larger social forces, students were experiencing those policies as individual “acts of cruelty” (Rose “Possible” 427). This is not something that can be relinquished to the sites and policies of K-12 educational policies and practices. In fact these injustices, both small and large, have taken place within the classrooms and impacted the ways in which our systems operate currently. To deny this is to deny the impact of history, (for better or worse) on our current educational practices. More specifically, the system of higher education’s primary purpose was not to educate the working class but instead was to educate only the elite. We must in order to be effective educators challenge the assumption that we have moved beyond this false ideal.

Our discipline has undergone changes in both ideologies as well as pedagogies, and it will continue to do so in the future. However, we must not forget that a system whose roots lie in

a desire to only educate the monolithic and well off few, may not so easily adapt to an increasingly diverse populations needs.

The composition instructor's position then is a tricky one, to decentralize the power of a language by sharing that knowledge with others. As David Bartholomae states of writing instructors,

Most of us would say that our lives as students were marked initially by a struggle to enter into those habits of mind (those ways of reading and writing that define the center of English studies), just as many of us would say that later the stages were marked by a desire to push against that center- to debate redefine the terrain, and establish a niche that somehow seemed to be our own. (112)

The relationship with writing and teaching writing is one that remains complicated and one that enacts privilege. To teach without privileging while teaching from a position of power and authority is a maneuver that is easily overlooked. As we teach, we perpetuate this system of higher education and an accreditation process in which some have acquired "skills and knowledge" and others are not. Those who are not accredited in these language skills, those who do not pass the required courses then "fail" to have mastered the necessary skills to move forward, regardless of an individual's relationship or need for the language.

We must consider the ways in which this system of accreditation is particularly challenging and often times rightfully frustrating for non-traditional students, particularly adult learners whose language skills might be considered acceptable in the external world from which they came, but upon entrance into higher education could find themselves in a newly marginal

position. Often times the adult learner is relinquished to a subordinate position because of a “lack” in skill for a particular task, such as academic writing.

While much of this conversation is limited to basic writers there are many possible associations that can be made for the ways in which the non-traditional student is defined and discussed within the academy. The non-traditional student is often viewed with a lack, at times this lack is defined as lack of skill, rather than a lack of expose to a required skill set such as academic writing, much like the basic writer. The non-traditional student also suffers from institutionally defined deficiencies while the individuals within these institutionally constructed categories are left to internalize or fight against these characteristics which have been ascribed to them. Rather than viewing the non-traditional student in higher education as lacking something, more effort should be made by educators and on institutional levels to reflect the value that these students have and the qualities and experience that can be brought within the classroom.

I walked through halls unable to escape the institutionally assigned labels that were used to define me and, in some ways I was unable to define myself as a student without them. When I spoke at times I felt ignored, my reality conflicting with the academic demands placed upon me. I was forced to restructure my life at times to become a part of colleges and classrooms. I was fortunate enough that this was possible, for others it is not. For Durling, one of the non-traditional students mentioned earlier this was not always possible and her education suffered setbacks because of this in part.

Scholars such as Villanueva, Gray-Rosendale, Horner and countless others echo this claim with similar sentiments for the adjustment of the culturally deficient models for basic writers and non-traditional students. Jerrie Cobb Scott examines this practice more thoroughly in

the piece, *Literacies and Deficits Revisited*. Cobb states that the creation of the deficient model is created by two key factors. She believes that traditionally defined literacy helps to create this deficit in basic writing pedagogy. She believes that because of our reliance on the traditional model of literacy also creates a privileging of certain types of discourse. The second key factor Scott addresses which plays a role in creating a pedagogy which relies upon deficit models and therefore leads to reactive pedagogy which is restrictive to those models. The second factor is the reliance on the “uncritical dysconsciousness” which is the “acceptance of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of intentions, defend the advantages of insiders and the disadvantages of out outsiders” (46). By adhering to the unchallenged belief that those on the outside are always at a disadvantage we in turn as educators invoke this privilege when we do not question the practices which lead to the deficit models for the pedagogy for basic writers and the groups those labels subsequently impact through the privileging of certain discourses.

While the number of non-traditional students entering into higher education increases, community colleges and universities around the country rush to label these entering students by their circumstances and their abilities. These labels have institutional power and in turn require that students conform or submit to these labels. There is no place for a student who does not see themselves as the institution defines them. There is no place for the student who clings to their external knowledge and identity primarily. They become non-traditional, different within higher education. They become different inside a system that is in many ways is still struggling to accommodate that difference.

Students are exposed to the glances of younger classmates who wonder not so silently what the “old person” is doing here. These younger students sense an imposter in their midst, the non-traditional students themselves sense their own difference. Rather than becoming a part of

the academic community, or rather a learning community, adult learners instead more often than not become ostracized through detrimental labeling which occurs within both the institution and specifically within composition classrooms.

This sentiment of detriment has institutional implications, for not only individuals but the subsequent relationships/roles non-traditional students are required to take on this role in order participate within higher education.

The Illusion of Equality and Equal Opportunity for Success in Higher Education: The Responsibility of Composition Classrooms and Institutions

Research done by Allen Tough in 1979 found that all normal adults are motivated to continue developing and growing, but this desire is frequently blocked by institutional and personal barriers which impede the students potential for success. These barriers include but are not limited to a negative self-concept as a student (greatly impacted by deficit models which impact students' self-concept), inaccessibility of resources and opportunities, as well as time restraints, limited resources and programs which violate the principles listed above (Knowles et al. 68).

This again brings to focus the inherent difficulty for adult learners and non-traditional students in higher education. The system is not structured in a way that promotes equal opportunity for success and while some factors are beyond the institutions control and compositions' reach, many are not.

When programs are not able to adapt to the needs of the individual within that setting privilege and oppression become the dominant force in that educational setting. When classes are structured around the needs of traditional students at the expense of non-traditional students a

privilege is enacted and the oppression of an individual and a group of individuals blocks their equal opportunity for success the system has failed to adhere to its pedagogical practices of equality and equal opportunity. This happens specifically when non-traditional students are denied the opportunities to learn new skills with the pedagogical strategies which work best for non-traditional learners (Knowles et al. 64-67) including but not limited to the inclusion of personal writing. For example, when non-traditional students are denied the opportunity to engage their previous experiences when learning new strategies and skills, this is an oppressive act which limits their potential for success. There is a disjuncture between what institutions claim to be and what composition classrooms specifically claim to be working towards and what composition classrooms do.

In higher education, those who do persist also become a part of a system which require their assimilation therefore becoming a part of the same machine of education which has played a significant role in altering said individuals of their previous identity in many ways. Their patterns of thinking, writing and acting have been replaced and reformed rather than appreciated. Their previous way of knowing has been shown to be inferior when compared to the new knowledge they have acquired. As Patricia Bizzell states “the ability to participate in a new discourse will change the student’s relationship with other discourses- particularly in the case of academic discourse. Because academic discourse is identified with social power, to show familiarity with it can mean being completely alienated from some other, socially disenfranchised discourses” (Bizzell “Academic” 121). While Bizzell concludes this is inevitable and not necessarily a negative occurrence overall, we as educators must acknowledge the impact this has on student learning and question whether it enhances or unnecessarily hinders the learning initially for non-traditional students.

We must hear non-traditional students voices as subaltern, as part of compositions quest for equality and democracy. To hold the position that non-traditional students (and specifically the adult learners within the composition classroom) do not suffer from institutionally ascribed labeling based upon deficit models is to ignore the history of our institution, and to ignore the ways in which we currently and systemically limit or impair an individual's ability to succeed. That failure is then ascribed to the individual more often than not. We as educators must examine the role the institution plays in creating the opportunities for failure rather than success. The composition classroom plays a key role in this assimilation/accreditation process and therefore must be open to possibility that institutionally ascribed deficit labels play a negative role in the education of adult learners and non-traditional students. Composition classrooms are greatly impacted by institutional policies and labeling. These labels play a significant role in the ways in which individuals are segregated or marginalized for their difference specifically within the composition classroom. Individuals are forced to take on a marginalized role (to adhere to a subaltern status- their voice cannot be heard until it has taken on the voice of the dominant discourse) within higher education and then forced to assimilate to (within) a system of privilege which has not been constructed in ways that allow them to reach their full potential. We as educators as obligated to question the practices of our institutions and our composition classrooms, we must ask the question which scares us most.

Can underrepresented populations in higher education speak freely (can they be heard when they do?) and can they achieve success in a system which has historically taken on the role and operations of being a gatekeeping component in higher education?

Are these individuals meant to succeed and if they do is it in spite of the system itself?

In chapter two I will discuss the ways in which privileging academic discourse impacts the pedagogies of the classroom in ways that are undemocratic and violate principles of equality that composition claims to work towards. I will examine the ways in which discourse and current working definitions of literacy both adhere to and violate the democratic ideal of higher education.

In chapter three, I will discuss possible methods by which professors in higher education can increase students' possibilities for retention and degree completion. I posit that conditions for learning can be improved by allowing more opportunities for personal writing and validation of previous knowledge in the classroom and creating a sense of community within the classroom. The classroom must become a classroom which respects and reflects the "real lives" of non-traditional students and thus systemically and individually increase the adult learner's chances of continuing towards their educational goals. I will also examine the limitations of this practice.

Chapter four will complicate the idealized versions of the composition classroom and personal writing strategies presented in Chapter three. Chapter four will also examine and complicate strategies for engaging non-traditional students while problematizing notions of personal writing in the classroom.

Chapter 2

Privileging Academic Discourse and the Impact on Student Writing

In chapter two I will discuss how privileging academic discourse impacts the pedagogies of the classroom in ways that are undemocratic and violate principles of equality that composition claims to work towards. I will examine how current working definitions of academic discourse both adhere to and violate the democratic ideal of higher education. I will also examine the ways in which this impacts non-traditional students in higher education both on an institutional level and in the composition classroom in particular and how this affects the identity and experiences of non-traditional students.

What is Academic Discourse Anyway?

Bizzell offers a basic definition of academic discourse, stating “a primary way to define academic discourse is to see it as a language of the community, hence the phrase academic discourse community” (Bizzell “ALT DIS” 1). She offers this definition to begin the conversation about what an alternative form of discourse then would be: those respective communities which create meaning beyond the institutional parameters and who create meaning from differing forms of communication. She also continues that academic discourse is a language which belongs to a human community, and therefore it can never exist in a stagnant form, it is constantly in a period of adjustment because of its human connections, as opposed to the sometimes present association with academic discourse as a monolithic creation of “the system” of higher education (1). It is instead a language created by people within a community, and that community is the one to determine its rules and its regulation. This community she also states has very recently (respectively) undergone changes. Academic discourse is now

determined and engaged with and by those who occupy different positions; originally it was predominately white European American, upper and middle class males. She contests that while this is changing, this is still the subject position of power that is predominant within institutions (1-2).

In contrast to Bizzell, Peter Elbow states “I hate academic discourse” in his essay “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshman Composition and Colleagues.” He of course prefaces this statement with a pretext of “I love what’s in academic discourse; learning, intelligence, sophistication- even mere facts and named summaries of articles and looks; I love reasoning, inference and evidence; I love theory” (95). He, like many notable others, creates a distinction between classroom learning and the theory and scholarship of academic discourse and the mechanics which are interlaced with that discourse. He expands this understanding with

Discourse carries power. This is especially important for weak or poorly prepared students- particularly students from poorer classes or those who are first in their families to come to college. Not to help them with academic discourse is simply to leave a power vacuum and thereby reward privileged students who have already learned academic discourse at home or in school- or at the least learned the roots or propensity for academic discourse. (95)

He draws upon the much cited work of Shirley Brice Heath who showed that middle class urban families instinctively provide the training that prepares individuals for school, placing students from lower classes and economic circumstances at a disadvantage in schools, where teachers assume that students lack skills that in reality they were never (or rarely) exposed

to. He therefore defines the discourse of the academy as the discourse which has power and which if not taught will therefore deny power to those who are not given opportunity to learn it. He instead makes the claim that nonacademic writing should be incorporated into first year composition courses, but that it should not wholly replace academic writing.

However, there are those who contest this notion of academic and public discourse being pervasively separate entities. Sidney Dorbin states in his article “A Problem with Writing (about) ‘Alternative’ Discourse,”

We must understand that all discourse is hybrid, mixed, even “alternative” and that labeling and discussing any particular discourse as somehow a hybrid unlike other discourse or an alternative forms of discourse suggests that there are somehow identifiable, codifiable, recognizable discourses that we can clearly identify and study.(46)

His reasons for placing quotations around “alternative” are to draw attention to the reality that all discourses are hybrid and that no one discourse is the home or parent discourse, that the discourses exist in a mixed or alternative form indefinitely. He goes on to conclude that while he does push for the inclusion of more forms of discourse which “promote change, shift, alteration in the entrenchment of academic discourse” (54), however his point remains that we “may be risking silencing and neutralizing a good number of discourses when they interact with academic discourse.” He and many others believe that by labeling the center (academic discourse in his words) and then defining those discourses that exist as alternative, we risk potential impact of those discourses. Bizzell and other scholars do notably shy away from or use the terms “alternative discourse”, “hybrid”, or “mixed” discourse carefully and strategically, in an effort to

avoid reducing the agency these discourses have by identifying and labeling them in as an alternative. Dorbin explains “to discuss hybrid discourses is to enact a meta-discourse that is wholly academic and functions to label, identify and codify “alternative” discourses as not equivalent to academic discourse but as an alternative to that accepted discourse (45). This same sense of confrontation between the center and the margin exists again in the labeling practices taken on by those within the institution and in positions of power which labeling in many cases reenacts rather than examines.

As Jaqueline Jones Royster examines the wealth of knowledge and definitions of academic discourse she determines there are three central insights to the concept and defining elements of academic discourse. The first is that “academic discourse, like all language use, is invention of a particular social milieu, not a natural phenomenon.” The second insight she ascertained was that academic discourse “is not now, and quite frankly has never been, an *it*. We recognize now that discourse in the academic arenas is, indeed, plurally formed, not singularly formed, within the contexts of varying disciplinary communities as these arenas have been sites of social and intellectual engagement and as they have developed and changed over the histories of these engagements.” The third insight is that “academic discourses, even plurally formed, should *still* not be perceived as existing apart, above, or beyond the discourses around them” (Royster 24). She comes to these three basic principles of what academic discourse is in order to develop her idea of what academic discourse is and additionally, how it should and does function within the academy as well as outside of it. She wishes to take the mystery away from the notion of what academic discourse is and rather than defining it simply, she defines it by its principles and its modes of operations. Her overall aim is to focus the concept of academic discourse around people and their interactions with it, rather than identifying academic discourse through

its operational functions. By identifying academic discourse as a recursive and individually enacted and interactive discourse, or engagement, she in turn accomplishes the difficult task of understanding discourse as something that is constantly being impacted and created by those who use it and those who do not. It is a language which is created by individuals and groups of individuals, it is manufactured rather than something that takes on in many cases, a monolithic and detached definition which reveals little of its practices and instead only solidifies the notion that it exists as an external and impenetrable force in higher education. Indeed it is far more complex than that and it is a discourse which is reflective and should be capable of change and should be changed to perform the tasks required by individuals and their surrounding society. She goes onto state

We have naturalized the academy as exclusive space with predetermined, preset values and operations that should reign supreme and that can do so without such reflection or negotiation. Current research is compelling us, however, to critically engage, raising questions about exclusions, about what is endemic, what is socially, politically, and culturally assignable, about what can be questioned and negotiated. (Royster 26)

In truth, the discourse that is currently labeled as academic in many senses is already a “mixed” or “hybrid” discourse. It is a discourse which is reflective of the epistemic changes brought about by the cultural revolutions and critical pedagogies of many scholars who seek to expand our definitions of “academic discourse?” However, for all the expansion that the discourse has claimed to have undergone, we as educators must submit to the notion that we may be blinded still by its limitations and the limitations it places on those who do not have access to this still specialized and highly manufactured language.

Educators who have access and an understanding of academic discourse believe it is not a monolithic form. However, when academic discourse is taught in departments and specifically in composition classrooms it often takes on that monolithic form that we claim it is not. When it is taught, it becomes an isolated and unreflective form with standard rules and regulations that only “experts” are able to break away from. Academic discourse in fact only appears multifaceted when an individual has already become accustomed to using it, rather than in the initial process of learning it. We as educators are able to use academic discourse in its varying and flexible forms however, those same luxuries are not generally transmitted to students in their initial use of discourse. For students, the rules are meant to be learned and then broken which can severely hinder students’ ability to use the discourse effectively in their learning initially.

While some of this discomfort is unavoidable and even necessary, we must understand the greater strain this places on non-traditional students and how this creates negative relationships between students and the new language being used to cloud their understanding. Academic discourse can be used in a hybrid form in theory, however when taught in the classroom (to beginners) it still in many ways resists the hybridity that would make it more accessible for students. This is reflected in the ways students are introduced to academic language. It is *not* the language used with “their friends”. They are informed of the ways in which their previous communication styles are no longer “appropriate” for their new audience. This audience is often referred to as “an academic audience” and that academic audience is not one that is presented in a hybrid form but instead retains a monolithic representation of the academy that “experts” no longer see.

Why it Doesn't Work: The Disjunction Between Pedagogy and Practice for Non-Traditional Students and Adult Learners

The standards are determined by the center (the institution) and the margin must submit to these standards in order to gain access to the benefits and privilege of that system. While the system (specifically higher education) has somewhat adapted or modified its language to reflect that of the people, it still remains an elite language in that those who have mastery of that language have greater access to positions of privilege.

As Donna LeCourt investigates in her book "Identity Matters," there are multiple interactions that writers (both graduate students and basic writers) have with writing and their awareness of the power and privilege are associated with this language. These interactions continuously impact their relationship to this discourse and also interact with their identities and agency. Students at all levels understand the restrictive access and agency that language has and in the future could give them access too. However, when they are confronted with a language which has power over them, through its restriction of their understanding, students react in ways that pedagogy is unable to accommodate or alter in many cases. Le Court states of graduate students and particularly basic writers,

perceiving academic discourse as an entity separate from themselves leads the students to characterize the power of this discourse much differently than when they felt identified with it. Rather than discerning academic discourse as their own to exercise with their intentions- something over which they have control- the discourse is now presented as having power over them. Part of this power includes the ability of the discourse itself to withhold its language from them. (Le Court 46)

The relationships students have with a dominant discourse can be evaluated based upon their interactions with language and in many case their previous interactions with the dominant discourse, in this case academic discourse specifically, are negative and because of their restriction to this power and the agency which competency provides.

Connecting back to chapter one's discussion of the historical context regarding the gatekeeping function of compositions, it is clear that the implications of this power dynamic are implicit within the system and one that cannot easily be overlooked with a simple solution such as skill level. Those who participate within academic discourse are doing so through their same subject positions. For adult learners and non-traditional students this position is one on the margins, one in which academic discourse has been used to historically empower certain individuals while disempowering others.

We must also be aware that when asking students or requiring students to learn the dominant discourse they in turn must take on that subordinate position within the academy. Bartholomae states "It is impossible to speak like an expert without pushing against ways of speaking that are taken to be naïve" (Bartholomae 117). The place, again, of the composition instructor is a tricky one. The place of the composition instructor is one that remains in constant flux, most prominently because our students and their respective and varied identities will also always be in flux. So while our position relative to the center may be pronounced, and clearly identified, we must remain vigilant in our observations of the systems which we stand to both preserve, but also to adapt. We must not assume that the role we play, and the role we require students to submit to is one that will create "successful" individuals, by our own standards. We must not dismiss the place in which we require students to start in this process. Academic discourse is useful for non-traditional students because it often requires students to anticipate

counterarguments and develops skills that will be used in other course work they are required to take. However, this same language can become a roadblock to their success in the academy when it is taught as a superior discourse rather than a supplemental language.

It is these relationships between language, power, agency and the academy that make the transition for non-traditional students and adult learners with the composition classroom challenging. It must also then be understood that there may be some resistance to the dominant discourse because in many ways, once a student has become accustomed to that discourse their status on the margins has become complicated. To learn the dominant discourse is to gain access to those positions of privilege and power, while simultaneously restricting the use and agency of students' previous forms of discourse (LeCourt 49). Institutions and individuals who communicate within the dominant discourse therefore reduce the agency of that previous discourse in place of academic discourse. Students are essentially recruited and become agents of the institution rather than acquiring agency within the constructs of their previous identities that have perhaps even been defined by their marginal positions in society.

Institutions (and we as educators) preserve this institutional power by the problematic reality of our positions of relative authority within the composition classroom. The focus here then becomes not to preserve this system of privilege, but to make this system of privilege accessible to individuals without requiring said individuals to marginalize their previous and/or developing selves. This can be done by presenting both academic discourse and students' home discourse as having equal power, but with different audiences. We must be responsive as educators to the conditions of learning and the identity issues that likely result from those conditions. This is particularly important with adult learners in the classroom. We must adapt our current classroom practices institutionally to accommodate adult learners and non-traditional

students during this process. We must provide opportunities within the classroom for individuals to utilize their previous skills in order to promote a more inclusive model for agency which does not privilege academic discourse over the students “home discourse”.

As LeCourt goes on to state,

By requiring what the writers intuit as a certain types of reading process, the institution and therefore its discourse disallows processes and interpretative strategies that the writers feel are more ‘natural’ to them. Similarly, the requirements for speaking and writing in school are portrayed as impeding the writer’s ability to speak and write in languages that feel somehow closer to their ‘true’ sense of themselves. (Le Court 49)

What is most alarming about this process is that our pedagogies as well as our professional associations have made efforts for 30 years to counteract these reactions and power relationships. A notable example of this is from 1972 when the Executive Committee at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC here after) constructed the policy “Students’ Right to their own Language” in which their position on the subject was reviewed in 2003 and reaffirmed. Other professional organizations have also adopted similar policies including the National Council of Teacher of English. The general statement reads

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language- dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.

Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse

heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects.

(Students' Right to Their Own Language)

However, while this statement demands acceptance of various dialects, those within the composition classroom are then challenged to address what this does in practice, particularly when the task is to teach composition, and more specifically when the task is to teach academic discourse.

The question, then, is not whether students can make language changes, for they do so all the time, but whether they can step over the hazily defined boundaries that separate dialects. Dialect switching is complicated by many factors, not the least of which is the individual's own cultural heritage. Since dialect is not separate from culture, but an intrinsic part of it, accepting a new dialect means accepting a new culture; rejecting one's native dialect is to some extent a rejection of one's culture. (Students' Right to their Own Language)

When the histories and public policies which impact our teaching clearly connect writing to culture, how is it that when the conversation turns to non-traditional students and adult learners that we still underemphasize the complicated cultural shifts which take place within the composition classroom? It is not that the conversation regarding these shifts has been absent from our conferences or our consciousness, it is that the current efforts are in many ways still discrediting the previous dialects and communication styles of students. What's more significant is that within the composition classroom, the transition is then mandated by the privilege, agency and positions of power that become accessible in many cases due to the advantage that comes with the ability to communicate within the realm of academic discourse.

Patricia Bizzell in 1992 wrote in “Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness”,

We realized that if we were to go on teaching academic discourse, two things would have to change: our relationship between the academic discourse community and the students’ discourse communities. Thus we turned to those aspects of our students’ lives that had been ignored in the old composition course: their thought processes and their social circumstances. (Bizzell 108)

However, we must ask if these changes have yet to take hold institutionally or if these changes are still only available on an individual basis in the relationships that individuals have with teachers. Are these student discourse communities in fact only relinquished to those who do not find themselves in marginalized positions in society? Our pedagogies implore us to take on a position of acceptance while simultaneously requiring our students in many ways to reject (or at the very least not communicate) in their previous manner. This has serious implications for the cultural ramifications and acculturation process that accompanies those within higher education. This has a particular significance for adult learners or non-traditional students who according to Ting are at a higher risk for leaving school because of this disjuncture of cultures. “A key for success appears to be learning in a small group, and focus on strengthening students’ academic and psychosocial adjustments during the first year of university study” (Ting 11). This finding is significant because it can be applied within the first year composition classroom which is generally required for most incoming students unless they can test out or come in with transferring credits. Bartholomae specifically comments on the impact that this has and the ways in which our current curriculum fails to take these instances into account.

Our curricula take for granted that some students lack the required literate skills for college study... They are in college (or somewhere on the margins of the university); they are not out there, doing some other kind of work. These marginal students, (and I call them basic writers, but out of default, since I argue that this is a slithery label) are where they are because of the ways in which they read and write. We act as though we can be fairly confident in marking the boundary lines between those students who can read and write with fluency yet the question of what this facility actually is, like the institutional processes that determined who is included, excluded, remains largely unexamined. (Bartholomae 112)

Pedagogy Impacting Composition

The term “Andragogy” is often used within the discussion of adult learning theories. The term itself originated with Knowles who began to use the term to define the ways in which adult learners differ from traditional students. Knowles determined that there were four principles which impact the ways in which adult learners learn and adapt to their new learning environments. He states, “The andragogical model is not an ideology; it is a system of alternative sets of assumptions, a *transactional* model that speaks to those characteristics of the learning situation” (Knowles et al. 72).

Each of these points has significant implications for adult learners and the differences that can exist between their learning styles as compared to the learning styles of traditional students (or more frequently children in the K-12 education system).

It should be noted that each of these characteristics focuses on the differences and often those differences are taken on in a negative way. My contention here is that these differences

should not be viewed as deficits but to disregard the implications of such research further limits adult learners' opportunities for success within the classroom. However, in the work of Knowles, the adult learner becomes the student who "lacks" skills or habits that their traditionally aged and experienced classmates have. I knowingly use the work of Knowles and others despite the perceived deficit model it perpetuates because I believe, and research has shown that differences do exist. However, it is when we view those differences become and are permitted to function as deficits that we as educators further marginalize all students with different abilities or experiences in the classroom. This relates to my original contention that we are working with a system that is not designed for the adult learner and therefore their characteristics and differences in learning styles become potential problems which must be "overcome" in order for the student to become an effective learner. For example, when an adult learner is thrust into a new academic environment they may have language skills that are more applicable in a professional setting but not in academic ones. Their previous styles of communication may be more akin to that of a professional environment, where directive communication is used when dealing with group tasks instead of non-directive communication styles sometimes used in classrooms to elicit a variety of responses from a group.

In actuality it would be more beneficial if the characteristics were resituated just as differences rather than deficits, or if the system which is experiencing an increasing number of non-traditional students and adult learners was able to better address the needs of these students without positing these needs as deficits in skill, habit, and mindset. However, Knowles offers educators the opportunity to incorporate better strategies for learning into the classroom by acknowledging the differences of adult learners within classroom structures and other non-academic learning environments.

The six main characteristics of learning which Knowles posits are different for adult learners are as follows.

1. *Need to know.*
2. *The learners' self-concept.*
3. *The role of the learner's experiences*
4. *Readiness to learn*
5. *Orientation to learning*
6. *Motivation* (Knowles et al. 3)

The first characteristic of a non-traditional student is that adult learning is focused upon a “need to know” basis. Knowles states, “Adults need to know what they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it” (Knowles et al. 64). Knowles expands upon the work of Tough who “found that when adults undertake to learn something on their own they will invest considerable energy in probing into the benefits they will gain from learning it and the negative consequences of not learning it” (Knowles et al. 64). Knowing this and allowing for this to impact the ways in which professors and educators construct and relate assignments to non-traditional students is essential to providing non-traditional students with not only the assignment but also the relevance of that assignment and the skills acquired by doing so which impact their daily lives. One possible way in which this characteristic can be related academic writing contexts is to provide students with real life scenarios in which academic writing (or some mixed form of academic discourse) has been particularly effective in altering conditions of marginalization, such as Martin Luther King’s, Letter to Birmingham Jail. Another assignment

option would be an assignment in which students bring in examples of writing from their own discourse communities which they believe are powerful and capable of altering social conditions which impact their lives. This would provide students with the opportunity to create comparisons between writing that is more familiar to them and writing that reflects academic discourse. This also provides opportunities for the inclusion of such documents as classroom “texts”, which would institutionally value the writing that occurs in home discourse communities.

The second characteristic of non-traditional learners that Knowles expands upon is that the learners’ self-concept is also essential for the development of the student. “Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction” (65). This becomes important to the andragogy model for adult education because this impacts the ways in which students relate to assignments. Consequentially, it also must impact the ways in which the professor or educator in the given environment regards their students. This can also present a challenge in environments where the population is mixed between a traditional student population and a non-traditional student population. Adult learners may feel insulted by the repetition of assignment deadlines but for other students this may be an essential element for their own success and comfort within the classroom structure. Knowles also expresses that students (adult learners) may “resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them... This assumption of required dependency on the facilitators subsequent treatment of adults as children creates a conflict within them between their intellectual model- learner equals dependent- and the deeper, perhaps subconscious psychological need to be self-directing” (65). This characteristic can be utilized when teaching adult learners in the composition classroom by providing adult learners

with the opportunity to investigate topics in academic writing, or individually constructed assignments, that are related to their own interests. Doing so provides students with the opportunity to feel in control of their own education and the direction of their learning while also giving agency to the individual student which is acknowledged in many cases helping to mediate the power relationships in the class. While this is a common occurrence in many classrooms, providing these opportunities earlier in the semester counterbalance early feelings of marginalization within the classroom setting.

Another point of the andragogical model for adult education is “the role of the learners’ experiences” which can play an important role in the progression of an adult learner. Adults come into their new learning environments with a variety of individual experiences and information knowledge bases from their own lives. In adult education it is important to acknowledge this external information and utilize it within the classroom in order to create a more encompassing environment for students to actively participate in and contribute to. This can be particularly helpful when dealing with a mixed student population because the sets of experiences that each student brings to the conversation can provide learning opportunities and connections for students between their own course work and the ways in which this information applies to real world contexts. This is also another way by which non-traditional students can better access and understand the relevance of lessons and their impact on the future learning goals as was discussed previously. Additionally, allowing adult learners to use their own experiences as “supporting evidence” in academic writing can increase opportunities for learning. For example, if an adult learner who has worked for a government agency is creating an academic argument regarding the national debt, the individual may have specific examples in which they witnessed funds being used less than effectively. This would be an opportunity for

the individual to incorporate their experience into their writing in ways that also institutionally acknowledge the academic value of those experiences.

The fourth characteristic of the adult learner lies in the individual's *Readiness to learn*. This characteristic simply stated means that an individual is ready to learn when the material has been properly scaffolded, and the previous material has been built upon accordingly. This can also be expanded to the adult learner's need for the information being taught. Most importantly the question becomes "how is this useful for me and when will I use it?" As educators this poses a challenge at times within the classroom. However rather than facing this challenge as a negative, it should be noted that once this information has been established and the task or skill becomes situated for the student the desire to acquire that skill set can be significant for adult learners in ways that may not be present yet for their traditionally aged counterparts. This is already inherently a part of the compositions classrooms strategies in that many writing assignments are already scaffolded, particularly when the writing is academic.

The fifth characteristic of the adult learner is focused on the *Orientation of Learning*. For example while children and youths subject centered orientation to learning in school is the standard, "adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations" (Knowles et al. 64). This point is also echoed by more recent scholars who find that while younger students do not need the frame of context for the information that is given, adults benefit in educational setting from information being presented with real life contexts in which the subject can be connected to the real lives of the students and their interactions with the world (Kenner, Weinerman 94).

The sixth aspect of adult learning that is specific to andragogy and therefore adult learners is the impact of *Motivation* on the learning process. Adults are responsive to some external motivation (ie, better jobs) but the majority of their motivation is from internal pressures such as the increased satisfaction individuals receive from attaining a job which improves the overall quality of their life. Understanding the impact of motivation on an individual's desire to learn and adapt to a new learning environment is critical in the advancement of adult education because this differs so significantly from the motivations of younger or traditional students. This characteristic can be applied to the writing that occurs in the classroom in a variety of ways. Instructors can provide opportunities for students to reflect upon their decision to come to school (or for adult learners the decision to return to school) through low stakes writing and or personal writing. Providing students the opportunity to reflect upon the reasons and motivations for their own success can be useful for not only adult learners but also the traditional students within the classroom as well. Instructors can also provide opportunities for students to reveal in writing what they hope to achieve from their classroom experience or how this will benefit them in the long run beyond this particular classroom setting. Again, in many classrooms this is already occurring or a part of common practice. However, by structuring earlier assignments in ways engage a variety of these characteristics for adult learners in the classroom, we can make the initial transition easier for adult learners and impact overall retention rates.

These six principles or characteristics of andragogy have been researched and expanded upon by more recent scholars from a variety of fields but perhaps the most surprising is that these six principles still remain relatively intact and unaltered but instead expanded upon and developed in further detail. Additionally, Hicks and Klimoski, Tannenbuem et al. and others

have applied these principles to training fulfillment and also it has been also adopted by those interested in organizational training in more corporate settings. (Knowles et al. 64)

There are also theories of learning which can be particularly useful when discussing the varying needs of adult learners and non-traditional students within higher education. These three theories include but are not limited to tactic theory, informal theory, and formal theory. While each of these theories has specific applications in the process that individual students go through upon their reentrance into higher education, the purpose of identifying these main theories of adult learners is in order to create a better and more equipped classroom educator who can better attend to the differing needs of adult learners, specifically within the composition classroom.

Tactic theory offers educators the ability to better understand where the learning styles of adult learners stem from and where they have developed previously in the student's life. By understanding the theories related to adult learners and their varying needs educators can be better equipped to manage the classrooms and writing prompts of individuals who enter their classrooms after a significant gap in their formal education. Tactic theory explains that adult learners learn their metacognitive skills from their peers, teachers and the local culture that they come from. This can influence the way in which they learn new skills and may be critical in their reception of those new skills or learning tasks. For example, if the adult learner comes from a culture which does not respect academia and its practices than the incorporation of those practices and new/required skill sets into the students' academic functioning may be difficult. According to the Knowles research and others who have supplemented new knowledge in the development of these theories over time adult learners may have the skills sets which can be counterproductive to the established "successful" skill sets that make academic advancement easier in the long run in higher education. For example, the adult learner may be better suited to

an environment that inherently only requires one specific answer rather than the development of several possible “correct” answers that may be more acceptable within the academic environment. However, because of the inherent difference between these two learning styles there is often conflict between the individual’s old learning style and the new one. Adaptation is also said to be difficult for the non-traditional student in ways that are not as prevalent for traditionally aged students who enter into higher education.

Regardless of the flawed deficit model and mentality which these theories of learning draw from (ie. the non-traditional student requiring additional time to adjust to authorized institutionally privileged or traditional styles of learning), it is still one of the primary ways in which non-traditional students or adult learners engage with a new topic and acquire new skills which can serve their needs more effectively in higher education. (Guessetti et al. as cited by Kenner, Wienerman 89) For example, non-traditional students may need the time and opportunity to compare their old learning styles with the newer learning style. New study skills may also be needed in order for students to effectively engage in new topics. Non-traditional students may also need time to formulate new information through a trial and error of the old system of skill acquisition. Additional time should be scheduled for this to take place, and in order for new skills of acquisition to be established that may be more suitable for new learning tasks (Kenner, Wienerman 89). The example most heavily relied upon to illustrate this point is one in which the individual must adapt their previous reading style to the more in-depth reading required to produce meaning from more analytical texts.

While these six basic principles or characteristics are productive in examining the ways in which we as educators approach the classroom (and particularly non-traditional students within that environment), there has also been some criticism in that these six principles are based

upon assumptions rather than empirical evidence. Knowles himself stated in his autobiography published in 1989 that his feelings regarding the theory have changed over time. He states “I prefer to think of it as a model of assumptions about adult learning or the conceptual framework that serves as a basis for emerging theory (Knowles et al. 163). While the theory has infiltrated and continued to impact current practices regarding adult learners, it is a theory that is based upon assumptions and has been openly criticized for not having substantial qualitative research to verify the effectiveness of these strategies (Grace, Pratt as cited in Knowles 163). However, this is a claim that can be made for much of the work within the field of adult education. This reality is also due to the material realities which disproportionately impact non-traditional students as discussed in chapter one. Non-traditional student populations have thus far been excluded from accurate representation in many national studies due to the increased level of migration and relocation of individuals to other institutions.

Additionally, there are also other methods and learning models which are applicable to the adult learner and non-traditional learner conversation. The article *The Shape of the Container* is based on principles outlined in David Kolb’s Experimental Learning Model/delineation of learning styles as discussed in “Career Development, Personal Growth and the Experimental Learning”. This theory is applicable to the adult learner in many environments because it takes into account lifelong status of learning and applies it to not only immediate experiences but also concepts and books that “one takes in a process.”

He identifies and labels four learning styles, the converger, the diverger, the assimilator and the accommodator. “Learning style has been defined as an individual’s characteristic method of responding to and processing learning events and he or she experiences them” (Krahe 17). These four differing learning styles are then discussed in relationship to the adult learner and the

composition classrooms. Educators of adult learners and non-traditional students must have the ability to adapt to the learning styles of the individuals in the classroom rather than having the students adapt to the classroom. This becomes particularly relevant when considering the construction of the composition classroom which has an increased number of non-traditional students in it as compared to theorized classrooms which tend to overlook the non-traditional students existing alongside their traditional counterparts. When working with adult learners this can be especially challenging because the previous ways of thinking or approaching a subject may not be the ‘most effective’ by standard measures. However, if we fail to acknowledge attempt to accommodate for the differences in learning that occur for adult learners, we as educators are providing these individuals with an unequal opportunity for learning and restricting their future access to the privileges that accompany academic discourse.

Vincent Tinto’s, *Theory of Student Departure* has also been a cornerstone in the conversation of adult learners and non-traditional students, particularly the social factors which impact student success (defined by degree progress) and their respective connections and experiences in the institutions of higher education. He states

If there is a secret to successful retention, it lies in the willingness of institutions to involve themselves in the social and intellectual development of their students. That involvement and the commitment to students it reflects is the primary source of students’ commitment to the institutions and of their involvement of their own learning. (Tinto 6)

Tinto states directly that community involvement is where the secret to success lies for student retention rates in higher education. His perspectives reflect the need for awareness on an

individual student basis for students by the governing bodies and educators of these students. He also creates a connection between the individual students' commitment to individual success, by doing so he creates a sense of shared responsibility between individual students as well as institutions and their ability to be responsive to these students' needs.

His theory obviously has implications for non-traditional students whose needs may be more pronounced than a traditional student's. These differences if not institutionally acknowledged and dealt with, can become a greater roadblock for student success for non-traditional students than with traditional students.

It is the institution's responsibility to provide these opportunities for learning to non-traditional individuals. To deny students the opportunity for advancement and success at the systemic level while appearing to provide equal opportunities for education, advancement or accreditation is unethical. We know from Tinto's theory that individual interactions become a critical part of the student's commitment to success and therefore this must be addressed at both the institutional level and at the level of the composition classroom in order to provide all individuals with opportunities for learning.

Ting also focuses on student retention theories and these include Astin's *Theory of Student Involvement*, as well as Tinto's *Theory of Student Departure* which I will focus on individually. However, his inclusion of these two theories is significant because they play a large role in the connections made between the underlying theories of student retention and the conditions both inside and outside the classroom that have a significant impact on student success and progress within higher education.

He states

Tracey and Sedlacek (1989) identified 8 non-cognitive factors proved to be related to academic success: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, ability to cope with racism, a preference for long term goals, a strong support person, leadership experience, demonstrated community service and acquired knowledge within a field. (Ting 19)

Ting relies heavily upon and suggests the effectiveness of creating and using a Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (NCQ hereafter) to better access student needs at institutions. NCQ's have already been adopted by a handful of universities for a variety of things including not limited to college admissions, scholarships and academic programs (Ting 10). There is evidence that suggests that when this NCQ is adopted there will be an increase in minority student enrollment as well as a subsequent increase in the retention rates of students. The example he uses is from Louisiana State University (Sedlacek as cited by Ting 11). He selects other examples which mirror similar results and shows the increased usage of NCQ and its impact on the increase in enrollment of minority populations in schools as well as its application when used as criteria for scholarship opportunities. The impact of these non-cognitive factors on success rates of students indicates that the success rates of students are not linked as closely to tests scores such as entrance exams. Instead Ting posits that other factors can have a significant impact on student success. The factors are not related to students' incoming abilities but rather the ways in which they are incorporated into student life and university settings once they arrive. Many of the connections made to student success are indicated through staff involvement with student lives and connections made between individuals and the mentors and teaching staff at varying institutions.

This is particularly significant when viewed in light of the ways in which non-traditional students become isolated from their student peers as well as academic advisors in traditional academic settings. Ting's findings show that serious improvements to student retention rates that can be made by addressing issues that exist outside of the traditional scope of the classroom. While this has no direct link to academic writing per se, if educators and institutions are more acutely aware of their students' needs on an individual basis, the student is then better able to be directed to possible resources which can improve their academic performance. For instance, if a student is returning after a long absence and has young children, it may be helpful if that student is made aware of child care services that exist on campus. This may in turn increase the amount of time the student has to devote to their academic responsibilities by reducing the amount of time it takes to travel to child care facilities that exist off campus or at a greater cost. Strategies for intervention are number but Ting's findings support the previous scenario. "The NCQ has also been adopted effectively as an intervention strategy within academic programs and students' services in universities.... In the results the students were found improved their grades, retention and graduation rate" (Ting 11).

Ting's findings also state that "A key for success appears to be learning in a small group, and focus on strengthening students' academic and psychosocial adjustments during the first year of university study" (Ting 11). This finding is significant because it can be directly applied within the first year composition classroom which is generally required for most incoming students unless they can test out or come in with transferring credits.

An additional scholar who contributes to the discussion of educational and student conditions is Alexander Astin. His theory begins with a general critique of the complicated nature of most theories of student development that have emerged and explains his subject

position (a researcher of student development for the last 20 years) as well as the need he sees for a model such as his which is capable of incorporating the principles of psychoanalysis and classical learning theory (Astin 297). His definition of student involvement refers simply to the amount of energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. He also states that this definition relies more heavily on the action as student takes rather than the intended action or disposition of the student. The model is therefore related to behavior and motivation of the student as well the developmental aspect of traditional pedagogies which speak to student learning.

He also expands upon the ideas of involvement and the different areas that involvement can pertain too. He describes the Student-Faculty Interaction as being “more strongly related to the satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional involvement” (Astin 258). This is an impactful statement in that it has the ability to be connected to the composition classroom because this classroom is one that has the potential in many cases to have the smallest student to teacher ratio and therefore the opportunity for connections and interaction is much greater in this setting. This also connects to the work of Tinto who also states that the interactions that one has with the institution are significant in student success in academic settings.

According to Ting, the Student-Faculty has the ability to greatly impact the students’ satisfaction with the college and therefore also increase their chances of remaining at the institution. Another significant finding is that “perhaps the most important application of the student involvement theory to teaching is that it encourages the instructor to focus less on content and teaching techniques and more on what student are actually doing- how motivated they are and how much time and energy they are devoting to the learning process” (Astin 259).

This statement is problematic because while it focused on the impact that teachers can have on student success without relieving students of individual responsibility for their education, it seems to relieve teachers also of their need to improve their teaching techniques in order to become better educators.

However, that does not mean this theory finding doesn't have merit for the composition classroom specifically. If composition instructors are able to become more aware of the conditions their students are learning in and learning from (particularly with adult learners), it stands to reason that students will be more able to respond to the individual learning needs of their students when possible and appropriate. Additionally, by increasing the interactions between students and faculty the power balance can be redistributed on an individual basis rather than a on a larger classroom basis. Additionally, by acknowledging student experiences and realities (as a member of the institution) it also validates these experiences on an institutional level. Even short one on one interaction are likely to be influential in creating a greater understanding and appreciate for the places that students come from and the places they are going.

The connections between these non-cognitive factors, Student-Faculty interactions, and the six andragogical principles that were examined earlier are remarkable. The overlapping concepts which point to the increased potential for student success are clear, particularly concepts which emphasis the importance of the learner's self-concept in andragogical principle two and the role of the learners experience (Knowles et al. 3) which have both been found to play an important role in student success. There are also connections between Astin's *Student Involvement Theory* and the impact that faculty interactions have on student success rates.

However, it is important to note here that the experiences and lives of adults and non-traditional students are (at times) remarkably different than the previously envisioned student body population at traditional four year institutions. Colleges and universities were not initially intended for the student populations that they now serve. Of course there are exceptions to this. For instance, the two year institutions who statistically serve a larger portion of the non-traditional student population may be better designed for the student body populations which they serve and just as there are differences in the students themselves, there are also differences in the colleges and universities which they attend. No two colleges can be said to operate in exactly the same way in each classroom.

Additionally, each institution has its own distinctive history and purpose in mind. There is indeed also the realm of colleges now which have been designed for non-traditional students but who adhere to a for-profit model. The most notable of these colleges is The University of Phoenix. However, we must be careful to avoid the assumption that because a college is designed with a specific student body population in mind that these same institutions also provide the resources needed to support these students through their transition in academia. The opposite assumption must also be debunked, because despite the intended student population, most institutions do provide some level of support for non-traditional students such as Writing Centers and other student support services. That being said, composition classrooms are in a particularly powerful position to impact the lives of non-traditional students whose opportunities for learning and engagement within the campus may be limited due to the increased responsibilities as discussed in chapter one. However, by becoming more aware of the conditions which most impede the learning of non-traditional students and adult learners, we as

educators can become better educators who are more able to adapt to the varying academic needs of our composition students.

Chapter 3

Benefits and Problems with Personal Writing

- Private/public divide is challenged
- Conflict of Values (individual/institutional)
- Possible reenactment of privilege

My overall goal is not to lobby for the inclusion of personal writing within the composition classroom. Indeed, this is something that a variety of educators and scholars with far more power and influence have already pushed for and with a great deal of success. Instead, I wish to examine the challenges of this approach and through addressing those challenges enhance the ways in which the personal essay or personal narrative is used within composition classrooms. To simply include the personal narrative in the classroom is not enough. If we believe for a moment that it is then we have duped ourselves at the expense of students.

The inclusion of the personal essay or personal narrative has a place in composition, but its use can be improved upon and challenged on a daily basis. The challenges and improvements are not only through the students use of this type of writing, but also in the ways in which we as educators interact with these stories and these individual attempts at understanding and deployments of rhetorical agency. It is only when we as educators adjust our gaze and view personal writing as equal to academic writing, (or at the very least complicate the dichotomy that currently is in danger of further separating the two), that the personal can democratize positions of power and systems of privilege which inhibit student learning, particularly with those whose voices have been historically excluded from higher education.

To credit the inclusion of personal writing as having the power to unravel existing power structures is to dismiss the challenges that exist in surrounding cultures and complicate what learning is or, even worse what learning earns the stamp of approval and what does not. We as educators move towards transformative goals which challenge the status quo however, we too are a part of the deigned and systems of power which have marginalized those very voices through their institutional structures.

At the centre of many critical and liberatory pedagogies of voice is a dissatisfaction with the status quo- with educational practices which silence the experiences of large numbers of students and reproduce social relation of inequity. The imperative to give space to student voice has been founded on the assumption that to do so will improve things and contribute to universal goals of liberation and social transformation. (Kamler 46)

In other words, personal writing alone cannot overcome the challenges that students face within higher education and the challenging intersections that exist within personal spaces and cultures that are not a part of higher education. We as educators must be mindful of the power and privileged positions which we bring into the classroom as well. These challenges may even be exacerbated by the inclusion of the personal within the composition classroom. However, personal writing can play a critical role in student learning and therefore should be a part of the composition classroom, and particularly those classrooms which serve non-traditional students.

For example, as Richard Miller states in the essay “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone” “Reimagining the classroom as a contact zone is a potentially powerful pedagogical intervention only so long as it involves resisting the temptation either to silence or celebrate the voices that seek to oppose, critique and/or parody the work of constructing knowledge in the classroom”

(Miller 407). However, the purpose here to consciously make efforts to incorporate personal writing into the composition classroom in rhetorically significant ways that do not discredit the ideas and preexisting knowledge which students bring with them to the classroom.

The purpose of incorporating student writing into the composition classroom is multifaceted, as are the students who enter into classrooms each semester. Personal writing simply provides greater opportunities for engagement with the materials generally presented in composition classrooms, particularly for non-traditional students. However, there are a variety of pitfalls to be negotiated and a variety of ways in which this can be done poorly. We as educators must be cautious of reenacting these same systems of privilege and power through personal writing. For example, building off the works of various scholars in composition studies (mainly Miller, Faigley, and Bizzell), Candace Spigelman states

Personal writing assignments may be judged inappropriate when student writers are asked to report personal observations, behaviors, or dialogues and then find themselves evaluated on the basis of their lives rather than their writing. In this case, the personal essay may offer a particular advantage for certain non-traditional students, whose experiences seem more colorful, or more desperate, to their middle class teachers. On the other hand, expressive self-disclosures may be a liability if the behavior or beliefs recounted in the student's narrative are immoral or unlawful, if they are inconsistent with the teacher's value system, or if, by the instructor's standards, the student fails to achieve "appropriate" insight regarding the significance of his or her experience. (Spigelman 21)

It is our duty as educators to challenge those structures and include those voices which may challenge us, our authority, our faith in higher education and perhaps we must listen to those stories and voices which even challenge us on more fundamental levels. We must invite in those voices which may even repulse us and strike nerves that we are unprepared for. We must let those voices in which challenge us and we must give them the space to be heard. We must do so even when those voices challenge the principles of equality that we strive to uphold within the classroom. We must do so because if we do not, then we become a part of the homogenizing forces that we strive against in our pedagogies.

When we acknowledge the identities of students within the classroom and give those voices the chance to be heard we open the classroom up to a wide range of possibilities, we approach a place in writing that can respond to both the lived experiences of our students and the developing knowledge that may compliment or contradict that. As Spigelman states, “The personal signals an identity...because such notions of the personal are both invisible and indelible, writing theorists and teachers are rightfully cautious about encouraging students to invoke their experiences” (32). The reality is when the student voices opinions that are not that of the institution and that perhaps even challenge basic principle understandings in the academy, we as educators must no longer silence or ignore those possibilities for engagement. While those possible intersections of knowledge and culture guide our research we must also allow them to guide students’ developing understanding of new ideas that are presented. For instance, if working class adult learner reflects in her or his personal writing sentiments that challenge the effectiveness of “writing” in reaching a wider audience, it should be featured within the class or commented on within the writing. Rather than attempting to “convert” or avoid the student’s belief it would be more respectful to allow this opinion a space within the classroom rather than

attempting to initially debunk this belief structure. Also when possible suggest further reading that would both compliment and complicate this belief would less the defensive posture the student would be more likely to take on if the belief is solely challenged or worse overlooked.

We must rupture the binary that has been created between the personal and the academic and continue to move towards goals of creating classrooms that can acknowledge both without privileging one over the other. To include personal writing is not simply enough, it must be viewed as equally challenging. Spigelman also discusses how novice teachers, and even graduate students often view personal writing as an easier or more accessible mode of communication, or additionally, that it is “too soft, and too emotive” to be included in a first year composition classroom. This view is challenged by many experienced educators who have come to understand how personal writing offers students a variety of strategies which allow for the subversion traditional styles and expectations for writing (38).

It stands to reason that I would fall into the first of these categories had I not finished this thesis or had such a strong personal connection with writing. For me, the personal has always bled helplessly over into the realm of my so called “academic” interests. For me, the personal is the path through which I learn, the personal for me is inescapably bound to the professional and will likely always be. Our flaw as educators and as participants in the system of higher education is that the personal has become code word for beginnings rather than endings, or recursive learning strategies that exist in individuals. So while I find myself nearing the end of this thesis, I also find it compelling that the personal is still present and without the internal apology that proceeded it initially.

That internal sense of apology is what students, and particularly non-traditional students, are impacted by most significantly in classrooms. When previous experiences are discredited and the personal appears to have little value in the academy everyone loses. The academy loses its ability to become responsive to those experiences and the non-traditional student loses her or his ability to engage with the material being presented in ways that are pedagogically significant for their learning style.

How the Personal Becomes Complicated: Student Writing

“Increasingly academic writers have found that by strictly adhering to the academic ‘code’ for writing, as required by many of their professors, they not only have had to suppress their own voices, but that they more often write for the assignment than for the an idea that is important to them” (Richard, Miller 42). It is in moments like these that composition fails its students, and particularly the non-traditional students in our classrooms whose theorized primary methods of engagement with learning have been in many cases excluded from the classroom based upon pedagogical preference needs designed for the traditional student population that is currently the minority.

The composition classroom is designed for the traditional student at the expense of the non-traditional student. Specifically, this happens because providing students with the limiting outcome of only ‘academic writing’ which arguably is still a type of writing that resists definition. For example, Debbie Mimmitt described her initial experience in freshman composition as follows, “My voice wasn’t objective or professional enough for academic writing, so I borrowed the voice of others, which allowed me to write, but not to speak honestly through my writing... As my writing became more objective and ‘professional’ I was always

aware that my words never truly reflected my own thoughts” (Richards, Miller 41-42). It is through these interactions with writing that the question should surface, whose voice is being heard and whose thoughts, if not the students are being preserved through their repetition? If the purpose of education is to challenge beliefs rather than stifle them, to enrich the responses that students are able to make both inside and outside the classroom and varying academic contexts of higher education, then whose voice is being preserved through this system? Voices like Mimmitt’s have survived despite the academy’s presence in many ways. She states of her master’s degree and the process of writing which followed her there as being one of difficulty, in many cases the same difficulty that she experienced in her initial confrontations with writing for the academy. She continued “I didn’t mind having to redraft different parts of my paper; however, I did mind the context changes that eventually gave rise to a very different piece than I first envisioned. In fact, the paper that I wrote embodies a thesis with which I didn’t particularly agree. I didn’t argue with my committee members because I knew all I wanted was to get the degree and get on with my life... In fact, if someone asked me what it was about, I’d have to say that I don’t recall. I only remember what it was supposed to be about” (Richards, Miller 42). Moment’s like these reflect the ways in which student writing is impacted at all stages by the visions educators retains about what “academic writing” is. However, when that vision causes the misrepresentation of students’ understanding rather than compels it forward, we must question the ethics of our practices and the notions that guide them.

Learning and writing both exist within a recursive space, but when that recursive space acts to suppress the developing ideas and concepts of students, we must decidedly ask ourselves who is being “educated” and who is being forced to regurgitate the ideas of others. Traditionally speaking, ideas of difference have trickled into the classroom from time to time, as is expected

from a classroom which is bound to the world beyond the academy. However, when those ideas take a backseat to the dominant discourses and ideas being promoted and perpetuated within education systems, we cannot in good faith ignore the systemic oppression which is being condoned. We must view these differences, these personal stories and experiences which we find distressing or perhaps even in opposition to the ideologies the classroom hopes to embody through its discourse, we must hear these stories regardless of whether we agree with them.

While these learning opportunities are more frequent, those who reveal differences are often times critiqued for doing so and in ways that create complicated divisions for educators. For instance Dan Morgan states in the article *Opinion: Ethical Issues Raised by Students Personal Writing*,

To me, the inescapable conclusion is that the very nature of teaching itself has changed, especially in a field such as composition, where ‘context’ is most often the students’ own writing. With all the safeguards possible- legal, ethical, professional- our interaction with students, our responses to their work, have become more personal. A teacher’s responsibilities always did entail more than context expertise and classroom management, always did include listening, encouraging, mentoring, and even occasional, some degree of informal counseling. (321)

However, Morgan continues with notions that complicate and harm the non-traditional student in higher education who in many ways is presented negatively in articles which discuss the growing concern of showcasing the personal in place of the traditionally revered “academic writing” that has before been at the center of our pedagogies. Morgan states “But now we live in a time when many more college students have ‘special needs’, when we see

a much higher proportion of students who have led nontraditional lives, a larger number of what I call ‘broken wing’ students. And so our roles have of necessity become even more time consuming and challenging” (Morgan 321). These sorts of sentiments are expressed by countless others and, while several of these notions are lethargically balanced by a tenderly placed sentiment which gives reference to the positive experiences presented in the classroom- those positive student experiences are hardly the focus in essays which discuss student writing that engages the personal.

Those stories are again silenced in many cases by the few experiences that can have negative consequences in the classroom. Instead, the notion of personal writing is conflated with the underprepared and broken student who misconstrues the classroom with a glorified and rather public therapy opportunity. Personal writing is (by some) viewed as a landmine within the realm of teaching, and particularly for teachers who have not yet experienced ‘the attack of the far too revealing personal essay’ that is featured in many of these stories. These so called ‘*broken students*’, who hold positions and beliefs which may in some cases may even be harmful, should not be excluded from academic discourse because of they are unsettling or deemed inappropriate opportunities for engagement with the material. In truth, students will reveal too much at first, or not enough. Students will make mistakes when attempting to write in new ways and for new audiences, as will some educators at dealing with those situations when they arise. In truth, there is no script that can be prepared to deal with the personal writing that comes into the classroom. In truth, personal writing is personal and because of that it will continue to remain elusive and it will continue to resist standardization. This is necessary because the individual who practices personal writing and lends their experiences not only to their learning but also to the learning of

others who may be exposed to these stories will do so in ways that disrupt standardized discourse, that is the very nature of personal writing.

In the article *Class Affects, Classroom Affections*, Julie Lindquist concurs with the perspectives presented by Amy Robillard: “literacy educators should direct their pedagogies to that experimental space where memory and ambition collide in the most potentially damaging, and potentially transformative, ways. It is in this affectively dangerous space that one might begin to imagine a more humane, and more productive pedagogy” (Lindquist 193). Indeed, in order to become effective educators we must open up the possibilities for potentially damaging, and the possibly progressive ideas, to find their way into the classrooms but also from the lives of students. We cannot as educators continue to let the unknown interactions that could complicate learning environments for individuals place students at a disadvantage within the composition classroom, and more importantly, silence those students institutionally. I say this not to provide some idealized version of the classroom, and not because I have never encountered these situations within the classroom or perhaps even crossed that line myself. I believe all those who seek to understand at some point cross a threshold in their learning, break some social rules or decline to observe some standardization that exists within fields. In truth, it is through these complications that learning can begin, when perspectives are challenged rather than protected within “safe learning environments” or “contact zones” as Mary Louise Pratt has most notably coined these challenging spaces in the classroom. These complications and moments of discomfort challenge students and educators alike.

On the other hand, when the personal becomes a part of the classroom when we ask for the responses of our students we as educators must be aware of the difficult nature of this request for many. Indeed students will often times share their visions and experiences, often times far

beyond the comfort levels of the instructors of the institutions that they do so in. In doing so the personal becomes the professional for the student, in ways that can be unsettling for educators and well as the individuals themselves. For example, as stated in the book, *What is Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing?* “In contrast, some of my students take more personal risks than I do in their narrative self-disclosure. These run the gamut from being profoundly to moderately personal, from sad to happy, from didactic to understated. Some of these disclosures cover an array of such vulnerable topics as personal depression, harmful religious experiences, child abuse, the tragic loss of intimate relationships, professional scandals, racism and sexism, homophobia, incest, career scandal and failure and the erosion of hope and meaning” (Nash 30-31). This is not to say that personal narratives or personal scholarly narratives always take on subjects with such dire and negative experiences attached to them. However, these are the narratives that we teach in fear of. These are the stories that perhaps do not find the support in the academy that more uplifting subjects do. We as educators must in turn be prepared to take on these narratives when we open the personal up within the space of the composition classroom. These experiences are in many cases the opportunities for connections that are currently missing or deemphasized within the academy.

For instance, the standard thesis driven essay may limit opportunities for engagement for many students.

The unquestioned dominance in schools and colleges and the virtual absence of living models of such essays in the real-world reading experience of students have rendered it an ossified and ritually practiced form unlike to be perceived by students, (or their teachers as having much authentic social or intellectual purpose, even if it will produce a respectable score on an Advanced Placement test or on similar

assessments of competence in writing about literature. (Sheridan Blau as qtd. by O'Conner 175)

Sentiments like these are shared not only by the educators in the composition classroom, but in many cases are also embodied by the students themselves who are in need of these untraditional opportunities for engagement with the materials being presented.

However, we as the listeners are also not relieved of our positions of power and with that power there the grade and the power of grading associated with it. For example, when the personal becomes the professional in the composition classes, the educator in many cases is faced with the responsibility to grade the individual stories which are heard. In the essay "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone", Richard Miller discusses a piece of student writing done in a pre-college-level community college composition classroom which was taught by Scott Lankford at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California. The student essay featured most dominantly within the article is an essay titled "Queers, Bums and Magic" and as one might infer based upon the title itself, the essay incorporated a rather uncomfortable personal tale within a piece of writing that was generated for a classroom. As Miller states, "Here is writing that cannot easily be recuperated as somehow praiseworthy despite its numerous surface flaws, writing that instead offers a direct access to a voice from the margins that seems to belong there" (Miller 326). What makes the essay significant is not because it reflects a voice from the margins but that this essay has troubled academics at a variety of conferences in which the grading aspect of this essay becomes the central focus. The reactions and recommended actions to this essay are discussed during the essay but there were three ways in which, individual educators or conference paneled educators sought to deal with this voice that was not reflecting institutionally condoned messages in institutional language. Miller states that most of the reactions people had or recommendations

individuals had to Lankford's student essay were to "read the essay as factual and respond accordingly; read the essay as fictional and respond accordingly; momentarily suspend the question of the essay's factual or fictional status and respond accordingly" (Miller 326). The instructor who had the opportunity to experience this essay in a classroom context (Scott Lankford) did so with a tentative approach in which he graded the paper by commenting on the formal features of the essay and he determined the essays grade to be a low B. "Although this strategy provoked the wrath of a larger portion of the audience, Lankford, argued that it was not without its virtues; by focusing only on the formal features of the essay and its surface errors, Lankford was able to successfully deflect the student writer's use of his writing to "bash" his professor, and with the unexpected result that the student not only stayed I the course, but actually chose to student with Lankford again the next semester" (Miller 327), which is particularly positive and even hopeful outcome for this specific situation because Mr. Lankford is an openly gay instructor and the student is reported to have had improved communication with the instructor despite the initial personal writing the student began their interactions with. Moments like these, featured stories which reflect upon the complicated and personal connections that are made through the inclusion of personal writing within the composition class, are as varied as their occurrences and the individuals who dare to attempt learning through personal narratives which reflect values not primarily held by those within the academy.

As educators, we must strive to provide the space for more these types of encounters with personal writing to occur because we know that these attitudes exist and when they are absent from the classroom we are in turn only silencing those student voices and perspectives that are counter to the institution. If educator hopes to challenge those perspectives which restrict the equality democracy of others, then we must provide greater (through the inclusion of personal

writing) opportunities for those perspectives to be engaged with in a manner that is respectful rather than marginalizing for the students who hold them.

Additionally, these moments exist in classrooms across the country in classrooms that provide those opportunities for learning to exist but additionally open up the classroom to a world of difference. Roni Natov, a professor of English at Brooklyn College stated

My classroom is the place where students, in their variety of thoughts, questions, reflections, in their diverse spoken and written languages, present the challenge to make my imagination large enough to relate an inclusive environment for them. Here, in this place of intellectual improvisation, I am forced to become porous, to enter a liminal world created in this moment of spontaneous interaction has never been before and never will occur again. Here, in this pace of chaos and uncertainty, I am being taught, actually forced, to listen for difference. Here I am learning to avoid indulging what is at times my own and my students overwhelming desire to focus on similarly, to identify like experience and feeling, to merge. Here I work not to flee but rather to inhabit those areas of faulty or partial comprehension, where we are left without close, nothing in my education, nothing I can remember being taught at home or at school or in this culture at large has prepared me for this work. (Natov 187)

By acknowledging that the views and thinking that may begin to show up in our classes may be different than the culturally sanctioned knowledge and opinions that are held by those within the academy, we as educators place students at the center of their own learning. This is particularly useful for non-traditional students. Learning that takes place in ways that are unauthorized are provocative because they allow ideas that originate in culture to become the classroom and to impacted by the classroom.

The classroom becomes a transformative place which provides students opportunities to engage with topics in ways that are meaningful on individual levels and do not overlook the realities which impact those constructed meanings as well. For instance, Natov shares the stories of her students, most of whom (of those featured) are non-traditional but are encouraged in classroom conversations to employ the personal and additionally, difference in their own learning. Natov speaks of her students and her experiences with in the classroom and, beyond what that classroom accomplished. She also speaks to the moments of possibility that exist and the relationships between students that are negotiated during these classroom exercises and conversations. She tells the story of K, who reveals pieces of her childhood which was less than ideal, she reveals the complicated and abusive relationship that her student experienced with her mother. However, it was a relationship that brought together the learning of the student and the interaction between the real life experiences of that student. K. a Haitian immigrant woman whose was a non-traditional student at the time this narrative was published, felt comfortable enough within a classroom setting and within writing to use these opportunities to create connections. The end result of this exercise was a poem and a review of that poem, in which K revealed a voice that was distinctly hers and carried with it the messages she was intent on and comfortable with sharing. Natov states of this poem and its review, “written from her depths and in doing so, she echoes the boldness of her language, claims the right of the reviewer to subjectivity, the only really honest stance” (193).

Moments like these create spaces for learning for non-traditional students in ways that traditionally relied upon strategies for engagement fail to provide. K. the student from the above scenario was one of the more quiet reserved students within the class, as well as being one of the students whom Natov describes as being “one of my weakest writers”. However, this unique

opportunity for engagement presented itself and the student showed interest in this type of writing and this became a positive writing experience for K. within the composition classroom.

Therefore, classroom must become a classroom which respects and reflects the “real lives” of non-traditional students and thus systemically and individually increase the adult learner’s chances of continuing towards their educational goals.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis I will provide an overview of the challenges that face non-traditional students in higher education and how personal writing can counterbalance some of those challenges. Chapter four will reveal various strategies for engaging non-traditional students in personal writing which can provide bridges for academic discourse. Chapter four will conclude with questions for further inquiry and desired and for future study.

Chapter 4

Making Connections: Overview of Challenges Non-Traditional Students Face in Higher Education

Institutional and Personal Challenges for Non-traditional Students

- Non-cognitive factors/materiality issues
- Age/ Life experiences differ from traditional student population
- Institutionally defined roles (Non-traditional) limit the agency of students
- Invalidated life experiences/ Identities leads to reduced agency within the classroom
- Culture/identity clashes

Ideally each of the challenges listed above would fall nicely into one category or the other, with little overlap. However, this is not the case here in this document, or in the lives of our non-traditional students. While each student within higher education will face challenges, non-traditional students and adult learners are the students who are impacted by many of these challenges at a disproportionately high rate. While these challenges stem from several different areas, that does not mean that we as educators within composition are unable to improve some of these conditions and roadblocks to learning for the non-traditional student.

Miriam T Chaplin (at the time she was the chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication), stated in her response to a “Distressed Composition Teacher in Florida” in 1988,

It is unlikely that we will be successful in solving all of the problems before us because many of them stem from the roots of issues far beyond our classrooms. However, the success of our profession and your personal success in the classroom depend on a bold

confrontation of the issues that affect the teaching of composition, on the experience and knowledge that we gain as we put those issues into perspective and on our collective courage turn possibilities into realities. (Chaplin 61)

While this statement was made over 24 years ago it still remains a central concern within composition classrooms today. These confrontations are still taking place, and must continue to take place.

If we as educators intend to improve the quality of education for non-traditional students and enrich the learning experiences for students in higher education then, we *must* acknowledge not only the challenges which exist within the composition classroom, but also those that exist beyond the classroom. We can no longer afford to minimize the challenges and the impact these challenges have on students in the composition classroom. We must, as educators, extend our gaze beyond the composition classroom in order to make that composition classroom a place of real inquiry and a place which develops the skills necessary for success not only within the academy but beyond it as well. The composition classroom must adapt to meet the differing needs of increasingly diverse student populations. To underemphasize this reality is counterintuitive to the principles of public education, and is to ignore the exclusionary potential of these institutional powers and their subsequent privileges.

Changes are necessary. In the institution of higher education there are far too many students who are not having their learning needs meet with the right opportunities for learning. The composition classroom and its instructors can change the experiences that non-traditional students have in higher education and better enable students to reach their own optimal level of success through some of the following methods. This chapter posits new or modified approaches

for instructors within the composition classroom which will provide students with improved opportunities for learning through various strategies which employ personal writing.

High and Low Stakes Writing in the Non-Traditional Classroom

High and low stakes writing is another way in which educators can provide greater opportunities for learning in high education. This type of writing is one that allows students again to be at the center of their learning by placing them within the structure of their own comfort level, but also by allowing them to leave it behind.

Peter Elbow is an advocate of low and high stakes writing also, stating “Writing feels like an inherently high stakes activity- especially because most people learn and use writing primarily in school, where it is virtually always evaluated, usually with a grade” (Elbow 209). This same insight is important particularly when working with non-traditional students, and particularly adult learners. Non-traditional students and adult learners often times have had significant gaps in their education, that is not to say that these students aren’t writing and engaging in learning through writing.

Low stakes writing, or simply just writing, takes place in the world more than it previously did. We have adapted to the use of technology and this technology has increased the amount of writing individuals are engaged in or exposed to on a daily basis. So it is important not to assume that simply because an adult learner has just appeared in the classroom that this adult learning has not participated in writing. Instead the writing has simply not been exposed to the types of writing and thinking that are traditionally privileged in the academy as “academic discourse”. Moving forward with this understanding is beneficial for the non-traditional student

especially, particularly when we as educators provide increased opportunities for learning to occur within their own comfort levels.

Incorporating low stakes writing into a classroom structure has several benefits, one of which is the possible reduction of writing anxiety in non-traditional students or students who have not yet become comfortable writing for academic audiences. This is true because “low stakes writing helps students involve themselves more ideas or subject matter of a course. It helps them find their own language for the issues of the course; they stumble into their own analogies and metaphors for academic concepts” (Elbow 291) and this understanding is best accomplished in many if not all cases, when an individual can understand and discuss the concepts in their own lingo first and then translate that understanding into one that may resemble academic discourse when the occasion presents itself or is necessary for the classroom structure (291). The methods by which people understand these concepts with language and its use are related to both the home or personal language.

This experience is significant particularly when the students are non-traditional students or adult learners in a composition classroom. It is these concepts and this language that can at times keep these experiences locked away, particularly when we as academics limit their ability to connect to these experiences by limiting all use of these personal private languages which belong to these students themselves. If it is these experiences which hold the connections for students to concepts and the discourse of the discipline it is our obligation to these students to provide these opportunities for learning with the classroom and sector of public education.

Conversely high stakes writing also has its own methods of creating understanding, however when approaching a new and complex concept with the much more rigid construct of

academic discourse students in many cases “struggle in nonproductive ways and produce terrible prose” (Elbow 291). These limitations prohibit the learning that we are struggling to provide our students with.

Low stakes writing is particularly effective in the classroom setting and in reality students who come into higher education who occupy non-traditional status, are likely engaged in the world in ways that are fruitful and require thought, allowing students to build off these experiences and discussions within a classroom setting and be more productive in some cases more so than with direct instruction. Continuing there are several moments in which the writing itself is the thing that is preventing us from appearing to be knowledgeable on a subject. This is not something that is relinquished to the students themselves but rather this is something that impacts writing at all phases, the trick is to work with the meaning first, then then to adapt the language to the occasion which the writing warrants.

Academics confess, Elbow in particular, “I acknowledge that some students can understand something well and yet be hindered from explaining it in writing because of their fear of writing or lack of skill” (290). By incorporating more relaxed writing opportunities into the composition classroom, we can complicate the power structures that at times stand in the way of writing and learning opportunities that would otherwise be exchanged with more fluidity.

Although Freirian pedagogy has taught ways to restructure power relationships in the classroom, so long as grades are given, the transaction of trading paper for grades will strongly influence how students and teachers construct themselves and their writing. This is perhaps the first way and the deepest level which students recognize that their texts are no ‘neutral’ accounts of self-evident truths. Their ‘normal’ way of writing must be shaped to meet ‘what the teacher needs’. (Carroll 129)

By providing opportunities for students to learn in their primary and more comfortable “home discourse” students do learn the in’s and out’s of academic discourse, but they learn it through their own thought patterns and actions, rather than through the language of the institution. There are many moments in which the student becomes the focus for the lesson and this focus on the student allows for the student to become a more active participant within their learning process.

Returning to the concepts of Knowles again, as a guiding force in the ways in which we approach a non-traditional student body population its clear several of the characteristics are also well suited for this type of writing as well. Knowles proposes that in addition to the adult learners ability to create new meaning from previous experiences there is also a need for the adult learner to display a readiness to learn (Knowles 4) which is impacted by not only the task being within the appropriate range as a developmental task - in many cases this is referred to a scaffolding approach for larger concepts which are built upon to increase the comfort level of the individual in their ability to complete the task with the previous skills acquired. However there is another component of the *readiness to learn* of individuals and that also has an impact on the learning of Adults as opposed to more traditionally aged students in a classroom setting. That ability is related to the life related factors which could become more present in writing which does not have to conform to academic standards, instead writing that happens in a more free form fashion.

When Knowles discusses the writers reliance on previous life related experiences for creating new meaning. For example Knowles states “It also means that for many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves” (Knowles 66). These experiences and rich opportunities for learning and meaning making come through in low

stakes writing as well as several other approaches which more effectively incorporate possible opportunities for learning and connections than would otherwise exist.

Low stakes writing can also appear more frequently in many of the new mediums available for text creation and meaning making which can also impact the students in the composition classroom. As educators when we step away from more strict forms of writing within the classroom, we can also step away from the genre of “academic writing” as well while still encouraging the similar thought processes which is also taught within composition classrooms.

Methods for Inclusion: Incorporating Student Identities into the Composition Classroom

In the composition classroom there are various writing opportunities which better can be adapted into the classroom that will better provide students and particularly non-traditional students’ or adult learners’ opportunities to engage with the material.

Composition theorists and practitioners in the last several decades have worked to alleviate the problems experienced by nontraditional students by helping them ‘find their voice,’ that is, to come to believe that they have something valuable to say and to learn to express it with authority. (Fredericksen 115)

These voices are the voices that have been excluded from higher education historically and this is a reality that is not so easily erased from the practices of the composition classroom. However, through continued efforts to incorporate the voices and stories from those in our classes whose stories have been generally ignored, we can begin to provide individuals with better opportunities to create understanding and allow them access to academic discourses but also the conversations that exist beyond the classroom as well.

According to the research of Alivine, Dome, Pillion and Connelly (as stated by Milner) as well as many others, “teacher educators have recognized the importance of the individuals lived experiences as relevant to the development of what he or she will bring to the classroom” (5). Specifically this is discussed in many cases with the pedagogies of the teachers’ ethos and the sharing of their own personal experiences to enhance the students’ concepts in relation to the position of the instructor within the world and specifically within the classroom and the lived experiences of racism in multicultural education. However, this position can also be adapted to fit the classrooms which house non-traditional students. This can be done by expanding the opportunities for students to engage with the text by providing them with opportunities to apply their real world knowledge to the classroom.

The curriculum actually does something; if teachers are the curriculum, what they teach, how they teach, how they live, and what they model, what they say, and where they focus all they have the potential to shape students’ learning. Thus, the curriculum is a verb as well as a noun. It does something. (Milner 184)

We must approach the learning opportunities of students in this same fashion. We must engage teaching in the college composition course a way that releases the opportunities for learning beyond the teacher/student divide, particularly when the students have such a rich personal history to pull their own connections from.

We must acknowledge that the stories our students have interacted with issues and realities that should be featured within the classroom. These positions are not solely embodied in pedagogies but also in many cases within students’ past experiences. These experiences should have time to be explored in the classroom in ways that will produce fruitful and meaningful

connections between the material, and the process of writing and students. However, this is not something that is easily accomplished. The classroom can be a complicated place and one that must deal with the contending factors and often times preconceived ideas of what a writing classroom does. There are also the individuals to contend with, differing opinions and perspectives to engage with and exchange ideas with.

Modern writing classrooms encourage the development of writing communities where students work together with one another and with their instructors in a non-threatening atmosphere where criticism aims to be positive rather than negative and where revision policies allow beginning writers to take risks that would otherwise not be possible.
(Fredericksen 115)

Providing students with a positive initial experience in the writing classroom, and one that permits them to make mistakes and learn from them rather than be penalized for them is one that encourages learning and engagement with the material in ways that previous classrooms were not able to do. This becomes increasingly important as classrooms become more diverse and as the students entering into higher education do so with a wider range of experiences and perspectives. These perspectives can either be reinforced positively within the classroom, or negatively. The ways in which colleges, and individual instructors react initially with these differences in writing or understanding sets the tone in many cases for the rest of the students time within that class and possibly beyond that classroom. These initial interactions with these “voices” are critical in that they set the tone in many cases for the student’s experiences beyond that specific composition classroom.

Fear of being different, of not being liked, of failing- all these may result in the kind of silence which impedes academic success. What can be done to less fear in the writing classroom? Certainly a feeling of community is essential, and this can be accomplished through frequent class discussions and small group work where every student is encouraged to speak and where everyone opinion is considered valuable. The teacher determine how well such an atmosphere flourishes by setting the proper tone, by listening to each student and by letting it be known that all voices matter. (Fredricksen 117)

However, there are limitations to the ways in which this can be effective within the classroom, and to assume that each interaction with a student will go as planned is to disregard the very nature of learning and the challenging conversations that occur within those classrooms. So while attempts to open up the classroom space are helpful, they are constantly complicated by the real worlds which interact with the idealized classroom.

By allowing students to fully incorporate their identities within the classroom, and by expanding the classroom to include the experiences of individual students, (whether those experiences belong to a raced body, or an aged body, or a body which has these different positions within varied contexts and experiences) that individuals experience is also of value in the classroom. Additionally, by allowing and promoting students to share their experiences, the classroom expands to possibly meet the different needs and perhaps methods for engagement which are necessary at times for non-traditional students to make connections. Milner states “

If we define curriculum as what students have the opportunity to learn in schools, and if we believe that students learn from a combination of information (from what is formally

taught as well as what is shared from each other's experiences and from teachers' experiences as told in stories) then we must consider the enormous role race plays in opportunities to learn. (Milner 189)

This same concept of learning and the opportunities that are represented when the students have the opportunity to engage their whole selves with the process, is one that aids in the overall goals of learning associated with the composition classroom as well as others.

Sonia Nieto states "The relationships are at the heart of teaching... Developing strong and meaningful relationships with students means, first of all, recognizing who students are, and secondly accepting this social reality" (Nieto 227). This same sense of acceptance should also be extended to the non-traditional student and the adult learners within the composition classroom. By allowing students to incorporate their non-academic identities into the classroom we provide opportunities for those experiences to become not only valued within the intuition of higher education but also in the classroom.

There are of course complications that can arise, as there will be with any learning opportunity that is unscripted and responsive to students' needs. When classrooms are unscripted and opened up for discussion we must be careful that classroom spaces do not further marginalize students whose views may not match the more dominant views held by their classmates. For instance, students who have beliefs and/or world views that are unlike their classmates may not feel that the classroom is a safe and open space for them. Their views may be so different that to share them within the classroom may further marginalize their position or may further stigmatize them. For instance, perhaps a non-traditional student has life experiences that traditional students are unable to relate to because they are so different that traditionally aged students still view

these experiences or qualities as “bad” or a representation of the character of that individual. The non-traditional student may become further isolated from their classmates when this experience is shared.

Encouraging a student to share experiences that their traditionally aged or experienced counterparts are unable or unwilling to understand is also an abuse of power that infringes upon a student’s right privacy, or perhaps just their desire to remain distanced from the traditionally aged students in the classroom. The educator in this case has then, in many ways further marginalized the non-traditional student and has exacerbated their sense of isolation and discomfort within the classroom, rather than creating a more inclusive community. Additionally, that student perhaps experiences a tokenization of their experience and this may also further ostracize the student.

While some of this can be overcome through classroom structuring and early community building exercises, it would be naive to believe that these activities can compensate for all differences in beliefs and equalize all bodies within a classroom. In reality, classrooms are microcosms of the world and therefore run the risk of creating the same (or different) patterns of prejudice that exist in the world.

Some of this may be alleviated by having students express their views in personal writing journals that are collected as a graded, but low stakes writing prompt. However, this hardly creates the same sense of community that classroom conversation can provide. We as educators then must be diligent about our commitment to creating classrooms which provide students the safe space to communicate their views, while also not requiring students to share beyond their own comfort zone.

However, the greater disservice is to do nothing, to refuse to adapt or acknowledge differences in student populations when the statistics show that current practices have failed to improve retention rates as they are currently defined on a national scale (see chapter 1). Providing student with these opportunities for learning is particularly important when the student would like to make those connections between their lived experiences and the lessons being presented. To deny students this opportunity is to deny not only their identity but also their experiences and agency in learning. For example, when utilizing the one of the six andragogical learning characteristics of adult learners, adult learners (and those traditionally aged students within the classroom) may gain an increased understanding of subject when they are provided the opportunities to showcase connecting experiences within the classroom.

Increasing Opportunities for Learning Through Various Types of Personal Writing In the Classroom

A method of introducing multiple identities into the classroom is through the inclusion of different texts which feature the experiences and knowledge of those communities that exist beyond the ivory walls of the academy. This can be done by either providing the students with the chance to reflect upon their own history of interaction within the personal context, a common version of this activity is the personal literacy narrative as outlined below. Generally this is an assignment given in the beginning of the year, and it provides students with the chance to reflect upon the ways in which they became associated with language. There are also opportunities for the student to discuss their interactions with other languages, or even dialects within the language. Students are provided the opportunity to engage with the subject of language learning from their primary socially constructed and individually experienced identities. Students have the

chance to engage with the new language or new skill set being presented from their own subject positions rather than the assumed position of the institution.

In many cases the reading that leads students to their own process and writing with critical engagement is not limited to the student creating the text, but often times also reading a text created by someone in a marginalized position. This is often effective because by providing other less prominently featured narratives, it may in turn promote students to connect to these experiences and the subsequent writing practices which stem from those experiences.

“Meaningful engaging curriculum narratives provide students with the opportunity to analyze, interpret, and comprehend the multifaceted dimensions of globalization” (Singh 119). By incorporating the narratives from others in the class, a new framework of connection opportunities are created through these interactions and the possible discussions of these interactions within the classroom. This also reduces the some of the pressure put on students to share initially, which some may be unwilling to do. By adapting the course texts to reflect the complexity of increasingly diverse societies as well corresponding composition classrooms, new learning opportunities can be forged from these non-traditional narratives, just as the experiences of non-traditional students and adult learners within the classroom can provide students the opportunity to forge their own understanding of new discourse. This understanding includes (but is not limited to) academic discourse and the subsequent power structures it interacts with. These very structures are in many cases lived by students within the classroom and should be featured within the composition course.

Providing students with exposure to stories from beyond their own perspective are also effective ways in which narratives and related experiences can be incorporated into the composition classroom. Additionally this is something that may assist educators in creating

classrooms that are more accepting of different experiences and may reduce the tokenization of students who share stories that are beyond others student's purview. Providing multiple examples of stories of difference can decrease the pressure felt by one particular student whose story is different. Singh states "Not only are disempowered groups such as women, transnational bilingual communities, gays/lesbians, and Indigenous people claiming the power to name themselves and to reject their naming by ethno-nationalist patriarchs, they are claiming the authority to narrate history's truth claims" (126). Increasing the opportunities for this type of learning and engagement with materials in a classroom, and extending it to the composition classroom in particular, increases the chance for non-traditional students not only to represent themselves but also to be represented within classroom structures which have historically been used to disempower them or other groups in the past can also send a powerful message to the students. That message can be a positive one in which the stories which have traditionally be excluded from the narrative of higher education can be heard by students, and even at times engaged in by the students. We can expand the pedagogies of the classroom to adhere to its policies of equality in both theory and practice by valuing the cultures of the students within the classroom.

Ira Shor discusses the ways in which the "rules for talking" play a larger role in how students are empowered or disempowered in classroom conversations. He also makes note of the way in which 'teacher-talk' can become a one sided interaction which sets the tone for learning for students (Shor 15). These concepts and questions become the focus of the classroom and in many cases these questions guide our education and the values and cultures which it promotes inherently in its practices.

While one sided “teacher-talk” may be in some ways necessary, it is important to note that including students in that experience is an additional option. Often times classrooms are structured in ways which provide individuals with the opportunity to direct the learning of their classmates through group presentations and while in some cases this beneficial, but it should also be noted that for non-traditional students group work may be incredibly difficult due to the additional obligations they have, such as family and work. Personally speaking, as a working non-traditional student I often times found group work to be far more difficult and a times near impossible because I worked nights and took my classes during the day time. Educators assumed (in many cases but not in all cases) that I was a traditional student who had the time to work on group activities but in reality I was working the night shift and these group presentations placed a significant amount of strain on me academically and in some cases financially.

Additionally, when placed in groups that were required to meet outside of class, I was often pressed for time and therefore rushed the groups I was involved with complete tasks. I had no other options but in some cases this experience actually decreased the amount of learning that occurred for my classmates and increased the amount of work that I was required to complete due to my inability to work with others. There were negative social ramifications for me as well. While, I was/am an easy going person, those who worked with me in groups were often not left with that impression. Group work in many cases, is intended to create a greater sense of community between classmates and provide students with networking opportunities. However, for me in many cases it further exemplified my different and enhanced others awareness of my circumstances in ways that were not positive and that resulted in further isolating me from the general student body population.

Shor continues

Education is more than facts and skills. It is a socializing experience that helps make the people who make society. Historically it has underserved the mass of students passing through its gates. Can school become empowering? What educational values can develop citizens who think critically and act democratically? (15)

We understand that as a total institution the non-traditional student has been underserved in many ways by the traditional mode of education. This is reflected through current retention issues.

The composition classroom is a place that has the opportunity to progress the students and student-centered methods of education which provide opportunities for the adult learner to engage in the material by way of their primary identities. The primary identities are often identities that may or not be the identity of a “student” but rather may be the identity of a person who exists in other realms of the world primarily, and who can use information gathered within those environments to make connections which are otherwise not acknowledged within the composition classrooms structure. As Shor states,

Human beings do not invent themselves in a vacuum, and society cannot be made unless people create it together. The goals of this pedagogy [student –centered] are related to personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality and change. (15)

Shor encourages engagement within the classroom in order to promote empowerment within students, and I will further this claim from the K-12 setting and encourage that this same principle be promoted for classrooms where difference may also be considered within an experiential context (in addition to other identity or subject positions) which non-traditional

students and adult learners exist in. We must not limit our constructs of culture to just the constructs of race as it appears in the classroom but also the experiences of non-traditional students is also part of their culture. By providing students with the opportunities to engage their own identities within the composition classroom either through their own writing or through their classroom interactions, we as educators can help to provide opportunities for engagement with the material in ways that better suit non-traditional learners.

bell hooks writes about her personal experiences growing up and discusses her own experiences as both a raced body and a classed body. She explains

Even though dad worked hard, in our household there was never enough money because there were so many of us. Yet we never lacked the basic necessities of life. Mama cooked delicious food. We always had clean clothes... We did not think about class. We thought about race. The boundaries of class could be crossed. At times class-based conflict surfaced, often over the desires middle-class school teachers had for their working class and poor students that differed from parental desires. (hooks 273)

She discusses the intersections of both class and race in her life and the subsequent impact those two identities has on her professional development in addition to her personal one. She states

When I chose to attend a “fancy” college rather than a state school close to home, I was compelled to confront class differences in new and different ways. Like many working-class parents, my folds were often wary of the new ideas I brought into their lives from ideas learned at school or from books. They were afraid these fancy ideas like the fancy schools I wanted to attend would ruin me for living in the real world. At the time I did not

understand that they were also afraid of me becoming a different person- someone who did not speak their language, hold onto their beliefs and their ways. (hooks 273)

Providing students with the opportunity to be exposed to narratives and other experiences like hooks allows for students not only to feature their own identities and experiences within the composition classroom's context but also to address the concerns that they may have within the classroom.

We must as educators address the impact that class may have on a student's interactions within the classroom but also within the institution. If class cultures interact negatively with the students newly developing academic identities then these interactions must be considered and their impact given credence within the classroom structure. To ignore these implications and their impact on learning, particularly with an adult learner who may feel that their identity is less fluid than a traditionally aged student who does not have a "permanent identity marker" which I would posit is individually defined but often times with external factors. For instance, a person whose is committed to their primary identity as a mother may not be as comfortable redefining herself with respect to her newly developing student identity. If these two identities clash within a cultural context, the learning of the non-traditional student or adult learner may be inhibited by the external factors which can have a larger impact on her day to day existence than her identity as a student.

hooks states of her success

It has been a journey full of personal hardship and struggle. And I knew that I would never have finished without the ongoing support of the working-class world I had come from. These connections were my strength. The values I had been raised to believe in

sustained me when everything in the new worlds I entered invalidated me and the world I was coming from. I felt that I had both a debt and responsibility to that world- to honor it and remain in solidarity with it despite the change in my class position. (275)

Experiences like these are also mirrored by individuals in classrooms across the country and this impacts education and non-traditional students' experiences in the classroom in ways that have yet to be discussed in ways that encourage a fluidity of identity. Rather there is a distinct message in much of education that one must adapt to the new identity of a student, and in many cases this can cause some anxiety because of the inherent differences in experiences.

Shor continues with "The difference between empowering and traditional pedagogy has to do with the positive or negative feelings students and develop for the learning process. In traditional classrooms, negative emotions are provoked in students by teacher-centered politics"(23). However, this view point is complicated by the work of Knowles, Sommers and others who focus their work around the non-traditional student or adult learners in variety of learning environments. For example, Knowles and other insist that at many points in the adult's reintegration into an academic setting, the previous learning style is relied upon by the individual to create new connections to the text. The student may rely heavily on the previous methods of learning. In some cases it should be noted that the students previous method of learning (and subsequent comfort level in that learning process) may be teacher-centered or authoritative in which case, a student centered method for learning might in turn heighten the individuals anxiety or discomfort level in the learning process.

hooks is an example of a now prominent name in the academy who used her previous experiences with class and race to make connections between her previous existence and the new academic one. She states

one way to honor this working class world was to write about it in a way that would shed a more authentic light on our reality. I felt that writing about the constructive values and beliefs of that world would act as an intervention challenging stereotypes.

Concurrently, I did not want to become one of those academics from a working class background who nostalgically fetishes that experience, so I wrote about the negative aspects of our life. (hooks 275)

Her understanding was enhanced by her previous experiences and by allowing for those experiences to become a central focus in her learning and understanding of not only new material but also a newly developing identity she was able to merge the world of the academic with her own previously embodied experiences of class and race. This same method is one that is recommended for non-traditional students and adult learners as well. hooks is only one example. There are countless other students and educators who do this in their classroom and in their lives. We must adapt the pedagogies of the classroom to promote this learning style more often and provide more opportunities for learning of this nature to take place. If we fail to do so, it is the non-traditional voices that will be silenced in higher education.

In order for non-traditional students to have the best possible options for success in higher education we as composition educators must seek out opportunities to actively engage and value these experiences and knowledge bases within the classroom in order to provide better opportunities for learning to occur within the composition classroom.

However, there is no standard way in which non-traditional students will react or engage with opportunities provided to incorporate their personal stories into the writing that takes place within their composition classrooms. The purpose of this thesis is not to provide a map of those

classroom experiences, because just as the classroom exists within a certain time and space, it also exists with its own personality, and in that there is room for chance and difference that expands beyond the possibilities of what a thesis can do, and arguably what any written document can ever do completely. This thesis merely examines a few possible ways in which we as educators can provide further acceptance of variance while also providing the critical framework and skill development which is required in first year composition classrooms.

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