

THESIS

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES: TOWARD  
A NEW THEORY OF MOTIVATION IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Submitted by

Kevin W. Van Winkle

English Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

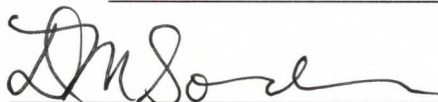
Summer 2010

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

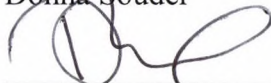
November 4, 2009

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR  
SUPERVISION BY KEVIN W. VAN WINKLE ENTITLED PSYCHOLOGICAL  
PRINCIPLES AND PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES: TOWARD A NEW THEORY  
OF MOTIVATION IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM BE ACCEPTED AS  
FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF  
ARTS.

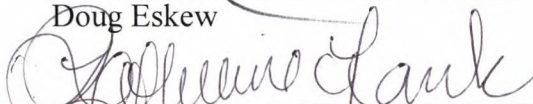
Committee on Graduate work



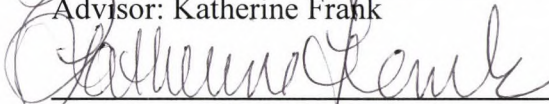
Donna Souder



Doug Eskew



Advisor: Katherine Frank



Department Chair: Katherine Frank

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES: TOWARD  
A NEW THEORY OF MOTIVATION IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Despite its importance, the issue of a student's motivation to engage in the composition process is rarely discussed in composition theory. As a first step towards correcting the absence of motivation as a topic in composition theory, this thesis advances the notion that more attention should be paid to what can motivate students to engage in the composition process. The central tenet of this thesis is that students motivated to write are more likely to become better writers and fulfill the expectations composition instructors hold for them. Furthermore, the key to motivating students to engage in the composition process requires composition instructors make connections between the use of composition and the students' original goals for entering the university. This thesis puts forth the argument that rhetoric, as learned and developed through composition studies, is the most useful aspect of composition studies for students, and therefore the teaching of rhetoric in the composition classroom is most likely to motivate students to write. As a result of the dearth of research and discussion on the topic of student motivation in the composition classroom, it was necessary to search outside the composition theory field and look at what others, namely

psychologists, have to say about motivation as it relates to individuals and their participation in academic endeavors. Lastly, this thesis makes suggestions for future areas of study as related to student motivation in the composition classroom.

Kevin W. Van Winkle  
English Department  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
Summer 2010



## INTRODUCTION

*Since all writing is communication, or at least the attempt to communicate, there must be the desire or the need to communicate...*

-- Edith E. Layer, "Motivation of Freshman Composition on the University Level"<sup>1</sup>

I often see a familiar bell curve in the requisite undergraduate composition course. A small percentage of students, one or two, start and end on the left side of this curve; they do not attend class, never engage in their coursework, and drop out or fail before the course is even finished. Conversely, a similar amount of students start and end on the right side of this curve; they never miss a day, nor an assignment, and they complete the course with an A in a way that makes it look easy. The rest - the majority - fall somewhere in between. Why is this? Why do some students succeed so brilliantly while others fail so miserably? Why can some students start the semester lost, overwhelmed and confused, and end focused, in control, and confident of their writing ability while

---

<sup>1</sup> This quote appears in Edith E. Layer's essay "Motivation of Freshman Composition on the University Level," written for the 1952 issue of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Journal *College Composition and Communication*. In this essay Layer proclaims that if composition instructors truly desire their students become better writers, then composition instructors should work to remove the apathy so many students maintain towards the writing process.

others cannot? The difference should not be accredited to students' intellectual abilities. A student's intelligence can accentuate his or her capacity to write, surely, but it is not the most significant component for success. A better correlation between a student's success or failure in the composition classroom, I argue, is found in his or her motivation to engage in the activity of writing.

In the February 1952 issue of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Journal *College Composition and Communication*, Edith E. Layer, at the time an English composition instructor at Western Reserve University, wrote an article entitled "Motivation of Freshman Composition on the University Level." In this article, Layer considers the very same topic that I intend to address in this project: the role of motivation in the composition classroom. She poses the question, "How can we sell freshman English?" (3). She follows her question with the justification for it: "For sell it we must if we are to get any degree of active cooperation from those who will write the themes we assign and read the selections we expect them to discuss. Since all writing is communication, or at least the attempt to communicate, there must be the desire or the need to communicate if ideas are to be exchanged" (3). Layer's is an intriguing view of student motivation, as it pertains to the composition classroom, particularly because of her use of the word "sell." In the fashion she has chosen to use it, "sell" has several poignant implications. The first implication being that the buyers, the composition students that is, must see that the product, composition, has value. To sell something, anything, to someone else requires that the seller convince the buyer of the product's value or worth. Secondly, Layer's use of the word "sell" implies that composition students should not only see the value or worth of composition, but that they should want



to possess that which is valuable and worthy within composition.<sup>2</sup> It is not enough that a salesperson prove his or her product to be a good one, but, also, he or she must prove to the buyers that they should want or need to possess the product. Thirdly, Layer's use of the word "sell," especially when considered in the whole phrase, implies that the responsibility to convince the students of the value of composition and that they should want to become good at composing is the instructor's responsibility. In Layer's view, composition instructors are salespeople and composition is the product. Composition is a valuable product and students should recognize this value, because composition instructors have convinced them of this value, and they should want to possess it. And all of this selling, Layer argues, is necessary to motivate the student to write and to do so well.

While I agree with Layer's advocacy for motivation being taken into account more seriously in the composition classroom, I find her suggestions for doing so deficient and not resulting in the motivation that is needed to help students become better writers. For instance, the first of three methods Layer lists for selling English composition is to "approach Freshman English as a service course," one that will help the "student while he is on the campus and serve his vocational needs after he leaves college" (4). I, too, want the composition course to be useful to students while in college and in their potential vocational endeavors; however, Layer's call to sell English as a service course is too narrow and restrictive. Layer does not make the connection between the composition course and the needs of the student explicit. Furthermore, teaching English as a service

---

<sup>2</sup> More specifically, since composition is not a tangible product per se, but more so an activity that aids in cognitive development, students should want the benefit of the type of cognitive development that comes from practicing composition.

course does not necessarily segue into student motivation. The second method for motivating students Layer puts forth is the idea of “shared reading experience” (4). By “shared reading experience” Layer simply means utilizing reading anthologies that appeal to the whole class. She states that “contact must be made and maintained with the student’s world if he is to respond in the desired way” (4). Again, I agree partially with Layer. Using current and relative readings in the composition classroom can be very helpful in arousing the interests of students, but, as with Layer’s first method, doing so is not actually a guarantee of motivation. The third and final method Layer offers to help “sell” English composition and motivate students is to “define the type of writing expected” (5). Defining the type of writing expected is, of course, necessary when teaching a composition course, but defining expectations is not motivation. Merely telling someone what is expected from him or her is not in and of itself motivating. An explicit goal is helpful, even necessary for the successful completion of a task, but defining expectations is not the same as motivation.

While Layer’s methods for motivating students are lacking, her focus on student motivation is not. How to motivate freshman composition students is as important a pedagogical issue now as it was in 1952 when Layer wrote her essay. Unfortunately, few researchers or theorists have taken up the issue and therefore the role of motivation in the composition classroom remains a largely undeveloped area of study in composition theory and pedagogy. In fact, the majority of significant research conducted on the subject of motivation and education has been conducted by psychologists concerned with the broad field of academics and not individual courses or specific areas of study. Since these researchers are concerned with the very broad topic of student motivation as it



pertains to all academics, the conclusions and findings they arrive at commonly have only a tangential relationship to composition. This is unfortunate, for the instruction of composition is a unique combination of discipline and art, and it is therefore unlike any other general education class taught at the university. Because of its exceptionality, composition requires a focus on motivation more than any other general education class at the university. Composition instructors must not only teach grammar, vocabulary, formatting, research, and citation, but they must also teach students how to combine all these things and more into a written work. Composition instructors must instruct students how to read rhetorically and how to think critically. Composition instructors must educate their students on how to both speak and listen. Composition, with all of the requisite aspects I have mentioned and some I have not, is so far different an academic endeavor than something like the study of chemistry or history, that it requires a focus on motivation in a far more important way than these areas of study; because it is an activity that students must practice to become good at and not simply a list of facts or dates, equations or rules, composition requires student motivation in far more explicit and essential ways than other classes conducted at the university.

Given that the role of motivation is so uniquely important to the instruction of composition, and since, despite the role of motivation's importance for composition studies, it has been largely overlooked, I will initiate a discussion on the subject of motivation in the composition classroom with this project. My intent is that with this project myself, other composition instructors, and anyone else interested in English composition can begin, at the very least, to consider the distinctive and essential role motivation plays in the composition classroom and the composing process. The goal of



such an endeavor is to encourage a more robust discussion of the subject of student motivation as it relates to composition, perhaps a discussion that can lead to a small shift in composition theory and pedagogy which places student motivation more at the forefront. Focusing on student motivation in the composition classroom, I argue, will be helpful to reaching the ultimate goal of composition instructors regardless of what that may be. Whether it is students who think more critically, write more clearly, or even understand the fundamentals of grammar more fully, the goal of the composition instructor is always a positive cognitive development in the student. Understanding and utilizing methods for motivating students to achieve the cognitive development the composition instructor envisions, whatever it may be, could be incredibly useful.

To accommodate a discussion on motivation and composition, I will begin by reviewing and analyzing an essay by Donald M. Murray, which has proven to be central to the way composition instructors currently teach writing, yet one that fails to address adequately the role of motivation. From there, I will move on to evaluating the work done by psychologists in the field of academic motivation, so that I may explain how composition instructors can begin to adapt the findings and conclusions of these researchers of psychology to the field of composition theory where the study of motivation is lacking. Then, I will put forth my own suggestions for how composition instructors can better motivate their students to engage in the composition process. To finish, I will offer a final appeal for further understanding of the useful and important role of motivation in the composition classroom, specifically calling for further focus on and discussion of the role of motivation in composition as it relates to gender, class, and most importantly technology.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*...it does not make sense to expect children to get interested in learning subjects for which they don't see any likely use.*

-- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation"<sup>3</sup>

Many of the essays written by respected theorists in the field of composition theory help composition instructors recognize what they are teaching when they teach composition or how best to teach it, but when it comes to why students should engage in the writing process, the very same theorists fail to offer any advice or suggestions that truly helps composition instructors motivate their students to write. Take for example Donald M. Murray's "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." In this essay, Murray claims that "once you can look at your composition program with the realization you are teaching a process, you may be able to design a curriculum which works" (3). Murray then goes on to list the implications of such a pedagogical realization. Murray's list includes incredibly useful observations and suggestions on how one should teach

---

<sup>3</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is one of a very few educators to take up the issue of student motivation and literacy. This quote appears in his essay "Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation" written for the Spring 1990 issue of *Daedalus*. In this essay, Csikszentmihalyi points to students' "inertia to learning" as the biggest obstacle facing educators.



writing.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, he advocates for the teaching of writing as a process, one that encourages students to understand the viewpoints of others while also enhancing their own critical analysis abilities. Murray's reasoning for teaching writing as a process is based upon the end result of enhanced critical analysis abilities for the student, but, when it comes to why students should want to begin the process of writing, Murray fails to provide a useful justification. He asks, "[h]ow do you motivate your student to pass through this process, perhaps even pass through it again and again on the same piece of writing?" (5). His answer: "by shutting up" (Murray 5). Murray rationalizes silence as a precursor to motivation by explaining that "[w]hen you are talking [the student] isn't writing. And you don't learn a process by talking about it, but by doing it" (5). Murray expands further on his suggestion to motivate students by "shutting up" when he explains that composition instructors have to be "quiet, to listen, to respond" in order to motivate students to engage in the writing process (5). "We are not the initiator or the motivator; we are the reader, the recipient," he says (5). These passive actions, Murray contends, show respect for the student and allow him or her to navigate their one journey for the truth by way of writing.

While Murray may be correct that a talkative instructor could distract students from actually writing something, he has not provided a sufficient explanation why these

---

<sup>4</sup> The implications of teaching writing as a process Murray lists in "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product" are as follows: 1) the text of the writing course is the students' own writing; 2) the student finds

his own subject; 3) the student uses his own language; 4) the student should have the opportunity to write all the drafts necessary for him to discover what he has to say on this particular subject; 5) the student is encouraged to attempt any form of writing which may help him discover and communicate what he has to say; 6) mechanics come last; 7) there must be time for the writing process to take place and time for it to end; 8) Papers are examined to see what other choices the writer might make; 9) the students are individuals who must explore the writing process in their own way; 10. there are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives.

same students would want to actually write. Why does Murray think that just because an instructor is silent, students will suddenly want to begin to write? That has not been my experience, and Murray's conception of students motivated to write because the instructor has finally provided them the silence to do so is a *non sequitur*. Students, especially those that appear in a composition class, are too new to the ideas and methods of composition to arrive at the valuable way it helps one discover truth on their own. They need assistance, an introduction even, to the composition process. They need to be informed of the usefulness of writing. Once students have at least a little understanding of the value composition holds, they may engage in the composition process autonomously, as Murray believes they will, but without the guidance of an instructor it could be a very long wait. It may even be that, without someone pointing them in the right direction, students might never arrive at the type of appreciation for composition that Murray envisions for them.

Murray's recommendation of silence on the part of the composition instructor is emblematic of a larger silence on the subject of student motivation in the field of composition theory; the inattention to student motivation is endemic to the field.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, in order to review the role of motivation as related to composition, it is necessary to look outside of the field of Composition Theory. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist primarily concerned with motivation and its role in personal development; however, he briefly chose to focus on the role of motivation as it relates to literacy in an

---

<sup>5</sup> I can only speculate why motivation is for the most part overlooked in Composition Theory; however, I suspect that it may have something to do with the types of people who contemplate composition and how to teach it. For composition instructors or English graduate students, it would seem, the value of writing is a given. Therefore, it may be the case that many composition theorists overlook the obvious question held by many students: why write?



article entitled “Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation.”<sup>6</sup> While literacy and composition are not identical, they are related and Csikszentmihalyi’s research and evaluation of the role of motivation as it pertains to literacy is a useful companion to understanding motivation and composition.<sup>7</sup>

In “Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation,” Csikszentmihalyi insists that “researchers and practitioners are investing their energies in teaching methods modeled on computers and other rational means for processing information” (115). “The implicit hope is that if we discover more and more rational ways of selecting, organizing, and conveying knowledge, children will learn more effectively” (Csikszentmihalyi 115).

Csikszentmihalyi believes that for too long cognitive science as it relates to pedagogical practice has been misguided in its focus on understanding *how* students think about academic endeavors rather than analyzing the reasons *why* students think about academic endeavors. Csikszentmihalyi declares that all of the “new models of the learning process, new methods of instruction, new teaching technologies” (118) devised by educational researchers and cognitive psychologists reach a point of diminishing returns. To further demonstrate his point, Csikszentmihalyi writes:

Textbooks are getting revised so that the information they contain is more clearly presented (in terms of the currently fashionable theories); the latest advances in computers, data processing, and audio-visual equipment are harnessed to the task of delivering information to the recalcitrant students. This apotheosis of

---

<sup>6</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is currently a professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University. He is most recognized for his study of *flow*, a theory of human motivation that puts forth the notion that humans are most motivated when they are absorbed completely in a task that makes them happy.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the connection between reading and writing read National Writing Project contributor P. David Pearson’s “The Synergies of Writing and Reading in Young Children” or “Thinking About the Reading Writing Connection.”



educational innovation, however, seems to make few inroads into the inertia of learning. (118)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, interesting readings, a room full of computers, a well developed and implemented theory of the learning process, and a smaller number of students in a class are all desirable and helpful when it comes to teaching students, but they will not solve the problem of an inert student body. It is not that these techniques do not help. They do. It is just that they do not address the root problem of students' inertia to learn and therefore are limited in their efficacy. And if these techniques do reach a point of diminishing returns, why then, as Csikszentmihalyi asks, "are we exhausting our energies trying to improve the teaching of English and math, when the real problem is to stimulate the desire for learning?" (119). Csikszentmihalyi claims that "if educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results" (116). Making learning enjoyable is key to understanding Csikszentmihalyi's method for motivating students because it is intrinsic motivation that he argues will bring forth the best results from students, and intrinsic motivation requires that an individual derive enjoyment from the task. Csikszentmihalyi explains why he aims for intrinsic motivation as a remedy to the "inertia of learning" when he writes "[i]ntrinsic motivation, which is operative when we learn something primarily because we find the task enjoyable and not because it is useful, will be examined more closely because it is claimed to be a more effective and more satisfying way to learn" (116).

As correct as Csikszentmihalyi may be when says that "[i]t is time...to seek solutions to our educational impasse that take motivation into account more seriously," he is incorrect to aim for intrinsic motivation (119). Csikszentmihalyi's allegation that

learning something because it is useful is not as motivating as learning something because it is enjoyable is ill-advised and would be severely limiting when it comes to both composition and the broader field of academics. If the only type of motivation Csikszentmihalyi encourages is intrinsic, and this type of motivation only comes from activities the individual enjoys, then intrinsic motivation is not going to be very useful to anyone aside from those rare students who revel in academic endeavors. Furthermore, there are other reasons why Csikszentmihalyi's type of motivation should not be the goal those of us interested in motivating students should aim for. The main reason being that intrinsic motivation is so rare as to be practically unattainable. To understand why Csikszentmihalyi's focus on intrinsic motivation is unrealistic, one need only review the types of human motivation as differentiated by the psychologists whom Csikszentmihalyi initially relies on for his definitions of the different types of motivation.

Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci's work holds immense sway over the subject of human motivation, as theirs are the definitions of "extrinsic motivation" and "intrinsic motivation" Csikszentmihalyi relies upon to make his argument.<sup>8</sup> In an article for *Contemporary Educational Psychology* titled "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions," Ryan and Deci characterize the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to the authors, the difference between the two types of motivation is "based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to an action" (Ryan and Deci 55). "*Extrinsic motivation*," Ryan and Deci write, "is a

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard M. Ryan is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Rochester. Additionally, Ryan is the editor for the journal *Motivation and Emotion*. Edward L. Deci is also a Professor of Psychology at the University of Rochester. He is distinguished for his work and theories in the area of human motivation, and is perhaps most well known for his participation in the development of self-determination theory (SDT), a current and influential theory on human motivation. Ryan and Deci frequently appear as co-authors and contributors to many publications and studies concerning human motivation.



construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome” (60). A separable outcome in this case means an outcome, either reward or punishment, that is not inherently related to the task. Examples of a separable outcome not inherently related to the task in an academic setting are grades, parental sanction, or monetary rewards. These types of separable outcomes are very common motivators for students of all ages. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” (Ryan and Deci 55). Herein lies the problem with Csikszentmihalyi’s aim. His proposal that instructors create intrinsic motivation in their students is oxymoronic; by the very definition of the word intrinsic, an individual cannot instill such a thing in another. Motivation either exists because the student has some preexisting inclination towards the task, in which case it would be intrinsic motivation, or it does not.

The flaw with Csikszentmihalyi’s desire to create intrinsically motivated students is not an issue of semantics. If Csikszentmihalyi or any instructor of composition seeks to create intrinsically motivated students, then they are sure to be disappointed, and therefore might come to doubt the influence an instructor can have when it comes to motivating students. Composition instructors can certainly increase the motivation of their students. It just requires that they aim for something not quite as unachievable as intrinsic motivation, namely a higher level of extrinsic motivation.

Ryan and Deci identify four types of extrinsic motivation: external regulation, introjections, identification, and integration.<sup>9</sup> These four sub-categories of extrinsic

---

<sup>9</sup> What specifically makes these four types of extrinsic motivation different requires a lengthy explanation of human needs and motivation that is not really needed for the purpose of this thesis. It is sufficient

motivation represent a rising scale where the results of the task improve as the level of extrinsic motivation rises. The level of extrinsic motivation rises in line with the individual's identification and integration with the task's usefulness to some future goal. To exemplify this point the authors ask us to consider the "boy who memorizes spelling lists because he sees it as relevant to writing, which he values as a life goal" (62). According to Ryan and Deci this boy "has identified with the value of this learning activity" and its instrumentality in helping him achieve a future goal, in this case to become a writer (62). Based on what Ryan and Deci have found in their studies on motivation, instructors interested in motivating their students should aim for higher levels of extrinsic motivation, particularly the levels of identification and integration, in their students and encourage them to these higher levels through identifying the instrumentality of composition to their future goals.

Jenefer Husman and Willy Lens, in their article "The Role of the Future in Student Motivation," further explore the concepts of instrumentality and the future as it relates to motivation.<sup>10</sup> They write "many students are not only motivated by immediate intrinsic goals and extrinsic rewards but also by future goals" (113). Therefore, "[t]he question of how to combine intrinsic rewards with activities that are useful in the long

---

enough to know that these four types of extrinsic motivation are hierarchical, and that external regulation is the lowest type of extrinsic motivation whereby the individual shows little engagement with a task or care for its completion, while integration is a type of extrinsic motivation in which the individual shows the most engagement with a task and desires to complete it successfully. For more information on the four types of extrinsic motivation refer to Ryan and Deci's "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions" or "The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior."

<sup>10</sup> Jenefer Husman is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University. She also sits on the editorial board of the *Journal of Educational Psychology and Contemporary Educational Psychology*. Willy Lens is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Leuven, Belgium.



run is an important one for many motivational researchers” (Husman and Lens 114). Husman and Lens have defined the “long run” more formally in their studies as Future Time Perspective (FTP). “FTP is the degree to which and the way in which the chronological future is integrated into the present life-space of an individual through motivational goal-setting processes” (Husman and Lens 114). Put another way: “FTP can be defined as the present anticipation of future goals” (Husman and Lens 115). FTP is important and relative to establishing student motivation because studies have shown that students with a stronger sense of the future, meaning students that have long term goals such as the goal to obtain a certain career, are more motivated than those who do not. Husman and Lens claim that students who have these long term goals are “not only more motivated for distant goals but also for proximal subgoals that lead to the (provisional) final goal in the more distant future” (116).

Making composition a “proximal subgoal” to students’ goals for the “distant future” is central to student motivation. Csikszentmihalyi similarly acknowledges this circumstance when he writes “it does not make sense to expect [students] to get interested in learning subjects for which they don’t see any likely use” (136).<sup>11</sup> Making the composition a “proximal subgoal” for students, one for which they can recognize the “use” of composition requires composition instructors to make the argument for the instrumentality of composition. And by making the case for the instrumentality of composition to the students’ future goals, composition instructors can aid students’ movement from low levels of extrinsic motivation to high levels of extrinsic motivation.

---

<sup>11</sup> In acknowledging that students understand the use of a particular task, Csikszentmihalyi contradicts his early statement on the need for intrinsic motivation, which depends on the joy an individual derives from a task and not the perceived use of the task. This further substantiates my own claim that intrinsic motivation is not the type of motivation composition students need to better engage in the process.



Before composition instructors can argue for the instrumentality, or the use, of composition to their students, they, of course, must know it themselves. The Executive Committee of the 2005 Conference on English Education (CEE) offers some useful guidance on the use of composition. In 2005, the CEE convened an Executive Committee for a policy summit in Atlanta, Georgia titled *Reconstructing English Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>12</sup> The CEE's intention was to "assemble a collective knowledge base and a series of written position papers to guide future policy efforts of English teacher preparation and development in this country" (CEE Executive Committee). The product of their meeting was a document entitled "What is English?" While the CEE Executive Committee may be specifically dealing with all of English studies and not just the composition component of them, and while they may not specifically employ the word "use," their answers to "What is English?" are helpful to understanding my own inquiry into the use of composition. They form their answer as a Beliefs Statement, divided into three dimensions: "(1) the teaching and learning of English, broadly and inclusively defined; (2) the preparation and continuing professional support of teachers of English at all levels of education; and (3) systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning of English" (CEE Executive Committee par. 1). With dimension two, the authors advocate

---

<sup>12</sup> The summit took place during May 20-22, 2005 in Atlanta, Georgia and was entitled *Reconstructing English Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Participants and authors of this position statement include Janet Alsup and Robert Yagelski, co-conveners; Janet Alsup, Purdue University; Lynne Alvine, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Sheridan Blau, University of California at Santa Barbara; Rebecca Calder, Georgia State University; Gina DeBlase, Wayne State University; Todd DeStigter, University of Illinois at Chicago; Janet Emig, *Emerita*, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; Ken Kantor, National-Louis University; Michael Moore, Georgia Southern University; Ben Nelms, *Emeritus*, Universities of Florida and Missouri; Robert Petrone, Michigan State University; Gordon Pradl, New York University; Mary Sawyer, State University of New York, New Paltz; Robert Tremmel, Iowa State University; Robert Yagelski, University at Albany, State University of New York.

for “the preparation and continuing professional support of teachers of English at all levels of education” (par. 1). What the CEE Executive Committee means by “continuing professional support of teachers of English at all levels of education” is that current English educators should “instruct and mentor pre- and in-service teachers as they gain pedagogical expertise, become content area experts, and create (and re-create) their professional identities” (par. 8). Dimension three advocates that English educators engage in “systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning of English” (CEE Executive Committee par. 1). By being curious and critically inquiring into their field, English educators, the CEE Executive committee contends, can seek “to answer questions and create theories instrumental in improving the teaching and learning of all aspects of English language arts” (par. 10). These last two dimensions justify this project. I am suggesting that we question the “teaching and learning of English,” but as it relates to student motivation. Also, I have done so in order that other composition instructors and I may create expertise in this area and improve our pedagogies. However, these last two dimensions of English education provided by the CEE Executive Committee are not especially germane to the topic at hand. These last two dimensions address ways to improve English pedagogy, which of course will benefit students in the long term, but the first dimension is the only one helpful for understanding the use of composition.

The CEE Executive Committee describe their first dimension, “the teaching and learning of English broadly defined,” as the “subject of English consist[ing] of that area of curriculum responsible for preparing students ... to become sophisticated writers and readers, broadly conceived” (par. 4). The authors reason that “English educators understand that to meet this goal, they must conceive of English studies as encompassing



a wide range of intellectual content, a wide variety of communicative genres and literacy practices, pluralistic and inclusive approaches to literacy use and instruction and diverse ideological perspectives” (CEE Executive Committee par. 4). Of the many results of English educators conceiving of their field this way is that “English educators model and strive to foster in K-16 students the mastery of personal, civic, and cultural literacies” (CEE Executive Committee par. 5). Personal literacy here is defined by the CEE Executive Committee as “engagement with reading, writing, and popular media that will bring students personal satisfaction, foster a sense of connection with themselves and those around them, and promote lifelong learning” (par. 5). “Civic literacy,” as the CEE Executive Committee defines it, “involves working with ideas and information that students will need to be mature, productive, and responsible citizens” (par. 5). Lastly, the CEE Executive Committee characterizes cultural literacy as a “familiarity with stories, plays, poems, speeches, essays, and similar texts that will help students identify with their culture and empathetically understand the cultures of others” (par. 5). Notice that within this call to foster a mastery of personal, civic, and cultural literacies is a focus on the gain and benefit of doing so for the individual student. The CEE Executive Committee is defining the use of composition for the student here. When the CEE Executive Committee identifies personal literacy as a reason for English Studies they cite “personal satisfaction” as a motive for the student’s engagement in the writing activity. When the CEE Executive Committee identifies civic literacy as a reason for English Studies, the authors refer to an individual student’s need to be a “mature, productive, and responsible citizen” (par. 5). And when the CEE Executive Committee identifies cultural literacy as a reason for English Studies the authors advance the notion that students have a need to

understand their own culture through the comprehension of classic and current literature. The attention to the benefits and advantages of English studies for the individual student laid out in the first dimension of the CEE Executive Committee's belief statement is striking. If this position statement is viable, and based on the renown and esteem of the members of the CEE Executive Committee I think it is, then we can extrapolate that at least a third of the answer to their title question "What is English Education?" details a personal gain for the student. In this context, a significant part of the use of English studies then is to help students' cognitive development in ways that will aid them now and in the future, also in ways that will enable them to appraise and understand and possibly improve their own personal, civic, and cultural circumstances. The possibility of improvement for the individual student in these areas is useful for the student of English Studies, and therefore useful for composition.

In her classic text on English studies *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann asks a question very similar to the CEE Executive Committee's own titular question. Lindemann titles the first chapter of her book with "Why Teach Writing?" Her answers are very similar to the CEE Executive Committee's answers to "What is English Education?" Lindemann provides some concrete reasons for the teaching of English, and, much like the CEE Executive Committee's reasons, hers reflect the benefits and advantages available to the student. For example, Lindemann's first listed reason for English Studies is writing as economic power. Her argument for writing as economic power is far from abstract. She writes:

even though many entry-level jobs do not demand exceptional writing skills, students applying for these positions are instantly branded as illiterates if their resumes or letters contain misspelled words. Employees create similarly adverse



impressions on the job if responses to memos, notes left for secretaries, and brief reports written for supervisors are confusing. (4)

While not the most sought after skill in the workplace, accuracy and clarity in emails, resumes, proposals, and any other of the myriad types of professional documents one may encounter in the modern working environment are far from unimportant. Even on this basic level, Lindemann stresses that the “ability to write well still creates economic power” (4). Lindemann’s proof resides in her way of thinking that “[a]lthough writing well may not guarantee promotion, writing poorly jeopardizes success” (9).

Even though the actual activity of writing is usually a solitary one, Lindemann asserts that the “ability to write well is also important because language is indispensable to living in society” (5). There are two reasons, according to Lindemann, why an individual’s role in society should necessitate the ability to write well. The first is that “[w]e write to remember and to organize our lives” (Lindemann 6). She points to things like note-taking in a meeting, lists for the supermarket, and diaries as examples of this type of writing. For Lindemann, even though this type of writing is often private, it gets its meaning from the context of society. The second reason why writing well is indispensable to living in society is that “[w]riting is also an established form of social commitment” (Lindemann 6). Lindemann points to the authority that comes from putting things down on paper as her justification for this second reason. Consider the important arrangements in our society such as marriages, mortgages, degrees, and the like to see the truth in her logic.

According to Lindemann, the third and final reason why students should learn to write well is for its epistemic qualities, or as she puts it “[w]riting as knowing” (6). Lindemann asserts that “[w]e discover who we are by writing” (7). In both a private and



professional sense, writing is the way we work through issues, reach conclusions, and communicate what we learn to ourselves and others. Lindemann provides two useful examples of problems to justify her characterization of writing as an activity which can lead to self-knowledge. The first is a letter written to Ann Landers.<sup>13</sup> In the example, a woman asks Landers for advice on whether or not she should marry her current boyfriend. The advice seeker begins her letter with a list of her boyfriend's weaknesses; however, when she begins to move on to his strengths, she realizes she has nothing to document, causing her to conclude that she should probably not marry a man about whom she cannot find anything good to say. Hence, the advice seeker's writing helped her answer her own question. The second example of writing as knowing that Lindemann gives is that of a researcher who begins a project out of personal curiosity. As the researcher progresses through his or her study "[t]hey must record their attempts to find logic in experience" (Lindemann 7). Eventually, according to Lindemann, such researchers will "need to share their knowledge with others" (7). Sharing this information is initially accomplished through writing. In each example the activity of writing is essential to problem solving and the discovery of knowledge.

Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for English Teachers* and the CEE Executive Committee's "What is English Education?" intersect in many ways. The CEE Executive Committee's concept of personal literacy, for example, is very similar to Lindemann's concept of writing as social necessity. The CEE Executive Committee contends that writing for personal literacy allows students to "foster a sense of connection with themselves and those around them" (par. 5). This is not much different from

---

<sup>13</sup> Ann Landers is an author and syndicated advice columnist.

Lindemann's tenet that writing as social necessity relies upon "[h]uman beings [being] social animals who use language to make sense of the world" (5). The CEE Executive Committee's concept of civic literacy and the way it enables students to be "mature, productive, and responsible citizens" (par. 5) is comparable to Lindemann's contention that writing has economic power. Cultural literacy's ability to "help students identify with their culture and empathetically understand the cultures of others" (CEE Executive Committee par. 5) runs parallel to the idea that writing is a device for acquiring knowledge because "[w]riting permits us to understand not only the world but also the self" (Lindemann 7). Yet, the CEE Executive Committee's concept of English, and Lindemann's view of English are most alike in the way that they maintain a focus on students' personal growth and development as accomplished through English Studies. These two similar viewpoints then become useful to helping composition instructors understand how to motivate students because they help address the problem Csikszentmihalyi laid out when he wrote "it does not make sense to expect children to get interested in learning subjects for which they don't see any likely use" (136).

Not all composition instructors may agree that the uses of composition identified by the CEE Executive Committee and Erika Lindemann are the best to use for making connections to the students' future goals, but from this information created by the CEE Executive Committee and Erika Lindemann, composition instructors can at least have some experts' ideas of the use of composition so that they may communicate it to their students. Composition instructors may identify any number of uses for composition for their students. Although I think some uses of composition lend themselves to connections with students' future goals better than others, to begin motivating students it is sufficient



enough that composition instructors just have some idea of the use of composition and communicate it to their students so that connections to the students' future goals can be made. Understanding the "use" or "instrumentality" of a task for the student, as Csikszentmihalyi points out and Deci and Ryan, and Husman and Lens support, is a necessary first step to being motivated to do the task. And when an individual is motivated to do a task, such as composition, then the likelihood of success, however one defines it, is increased.

## ARGUMENT

*The remedy...is to rethink our practice by starting with the needs of our students*

--Robert E. Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English*<sup>14</sup>

Student motivation depends upon students recognizing the connection between the *use* of composition and their future goals. Therefore, I argue that the motivation of composition students requires composition instructors to communicate the use of composition as they see it and help students make connections to the use of composition with their future goals. Furthermore, it need not be a complicated process or a complex method by which the composition instructor helps the students make this connection. My own practice in motivating students has proven to me that making the connection between what one can learn with composition and what a student hopes to do in the future is actually a relatively easy thing to do and only requires a few simple steps.

The first step to making connections between students' future goals and composition is that the instructor speak of the use or uses of composition in ways that students can understand. Take, for instance, some of the uses for composition the CEE Executive Committee and Erika Lindemann detail such as civic literacy, personal

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert E. Scholes graduated from Yale University. He currently teaches at Brown University. Scholes is also the president of the Modern Language Association of America. In his book *The Rise and Fall of English*, Scholes makes the case for reengineering English studies so that the focus is on analyzing and interpreting all texts that students encounter, namely the current media in all its forms, and not just canonical literature.



literacy, or writing as knowing. Both the CEE Executive Committee's and Erika Lindemann's conceptions of the use of English studies are valid, and I suspect they are agreeable and reasonable explanations to most composition instructors for some of the uses of composition. However, I find that these reasons and uses for composition outlined by the CEE Executive Committee and Erika Lindemann do not make much sense to students. What does "civic literacy" mean to a student, or anyone for that matter, who has not heard it before? What about "personal literacy" or "writing as knowing"? These concepts are easily explained, but they still require explanation, especially to students who are not already familiar with composition, as those in a composition class are likely to be.

To be specific, I begin the process of communicating the use of composition to my students with an in-class reading and analysis of the course catalog description for English Composition. At Colorado State University-Pueblo (CSU-P), the composition classroom is described in the catalog as: "Emphasis on critical thinking, reading, and writing clear and coherent essays that reflect an understanding of the writing process, rhetorical analysis, argumentation, and academic discourse" (*CSU-P Catalog 2009/2010*).<sup>15</sup> I find that many students, despite having spoken with an advisor and enrolled in the course, have not bothered to read the description of the course. Furthermore, even if they did read it, it is likely that they did not take the time to consider what it means to think critically or analyze a text rhetorically. I am generalizing, but still,

---

<sup>15</sup> I currently teach English Composition I and II, requisite courses for any degree program at the school, and Foundational Practices in English at CSU-P, a course that prepares students to use the rhetorical techniques and language that provide the foundation for future academic writing, specifically in English Composition I. I am also the Associate Coordinator for CSU-P Senior-to-Sophomore Program. In both of these roles I work with students who are new to the composition process.

the majority of the students I encounter in my Composition I, Composition II, or Foundational Practices in English classrooms are there because some higher entity at the university or, more likely, at the state level has required their attendance. Composition for most public institutions, if not all, is a requisite course and students attend for that reason more than any other. Since most composition students are compelled by their universities to attend a composition class, I find it very useful when attempting to motivate my students to spend some time, a whole class period usually, discussing what it is that they will learn in the composition classroom. My students and I will discuss the meaning of each concept offered in the course catalog description of the particular composition course they are in. Often, these discussions have the same result: students refigure the description of what goes on in the composition classroom into their own words; students refashion ideas and concepts like “critical thinking” and “argumentation” into more manageable and relatable definitions such as “being smart” and “persuading others to agree with you.”<sup>16</sup>

The second step to motivating students to engage in the composition process is for the composition instructor to help students make the connections between what one can learn in the composition class and its instrumentality or usefulness to the students’ future goals. Once students understand what the composition class is about, what it is they are there to learn, the second step to motivating them follows rather naturally. Composition instructors who take the time to discuss the composition course and what its purpose is with their students will find that as the discussion of the aim of composition progresses,

---

<sup>16</sup> These are two examples taken from my most recent classes, English Composition II and Foundational Practices in English taught in the fall of 2009, but students, I have found, usually arrive and these exact definitions or ones similar as we start to analyze and discuss the concepts put forth in the catalog course description.



connections to the students' uses for it happen rather organically. For students, identifying the use of composition and connecting it to their future goals is intuitive because their participation in college is a future oriented endeavor. Students are in the composition classroom, indeed college, *now* because they hope to achieve some *future* goal. Consequently, it is natural for them to make connections between the two.

Even though the connections between the use of composition and the students' future goals may be natural, it never hurts for the instructor to have some understanding of his or her students' goals so that he or she can accommodate the process of connection. In the Spring 2007 issue of *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, Jennifer L. Schultz and Jeanne L. Higbee questioned students enrolled in a first-year experience course at a large Midwestern research university. The researchers asked a basic question: why are you attending college? Beyond vague answers like "to get a good education," the most common responses were in some way tied to a job or career. Even though their sample was small, I speculate that their results are emblematic of the majority of current college students in America, and the way composition instructors can most easily identify the job or career a student anticipates holding in the future is by considering the student's college major. At CSU-P instructors can easily identify the majors of their students. At the beginning of each semester each composition instructor is given a roster of students and specified on this sheet is the enrolled student's major. If this is not the case, a composition instructor could easily incorporate the declaration of major from students on the first day of class as part of a meet-and-greet exercise. The method is not as important as the information, for an instructor's knowledge of his or her students' majors and how that often represents their anticipated or desired career is integral to step three of the

student motivation process: making specific connections between the use of composition and the student's future oriented goal, often a career oriented goal.

In the past, I have accomplished step three in different ways. Sometimes I simply initiate an open discussion in the classroom, asking my students, who now understand the aim of English composition and its use because we took the time to analyze and discuss the course catalog description of the class, to tell me how composition can help them in their future endeavors. Other times, I have encouraged my students to make these connections by way of an informal writing assignment. As a writing prompt, I may ask "Why should a nurse be able to write well?" to a nursing major. Or, "Of what use is rhetoric to an engineer?" to an engineering major. Other times, I have just discussed the issue with my students one-on-one, commonly in a conference session. Even though most students enroll in college as a step towards a career, the differences in their backgrounds, attitudes and personalities mean that some techniques for asking students to make specific connections between their future goals and composition work better for some more than others. It is difficult to say which method of helping students make connections between composition and their future careers works best, but I can say that, regardless of the technique, requiring students to make connections between their future goals and the use of composition is very helpful when it comes to motivating students.

I realize that teaching students to write because it will help them with their future jobs seems an insufficient goal of composition. To do so seems base and not worthy of the high regard in which composition theorists would like the activity of composition to be viewed. To this, I have two responses. The first is that I do not suggest or recommend that composition classrooms be revamped to teach students the exact types of writing



they will be doing for their jobs. I do not want composition instructors teaching nursing students how to write patient assessments, or business students how to write quarterly reports. Instead, I simply suggest and recommend that composition instructors take the usual and common aims of composition, things such as critical thinking, rhetoric and argumentation, and fashion them in a way that helps students see their use. Because students are future oriented around a career, students will often, initially, see the use of composition as it relates to their future jobs, but just because a student's motivation begins with his or her recognition of the use of composition for their future career does not mean he or she will not come to appreciate composition for its inherent worth, for the critical thinking and practice of rhetoric it facilitates. And regardless if students ever even do come around to valuing composition for its use beyond job and career related functions, it will still be with more motivation in which they engage in the writing process, and this can never be a bad thing.

The second reason why discussion and incorporation of the use of composition as it relates to our students' future career goals is not something to be avoided by composition instructors is best said by Robert Scholes in his book *The Rise and Fall of English Studies*. Including himself in the larger category of composition instructors, Scholes suggests that we "rethink our practice by starting with the needs of our students rather than with our inherited professionalism or our personal preferences" (84). Scholes identifies the needs of students as individuals living "in a society that is more fully and insistently textualized than anything people have experienced in the past" (84). Because of the overwhelming media saturation American college students experience, Scholes posits that "to function as a citizen of these United States one needs to be able to read,

interpret, and criticize texts in a wide range of modes, genres and media” (84). I agree with Scholes. There is an overwhelmingly influence currently had by the media in this country, and students should be equipped to analyze and interpret it accurately and effectively. However, as correct as Scholes might be about the need for citizens to have the ability to critically analyze texts, it is not what our students want. The ability to critique and analyze the media is what Scholes, reasonably and justifiably, wants for them. And no matter how justified Scholes is in his desire for students to be able to make sense of the media that they are inundated with, his goal for students is not their own and will not motivate them to engage in the writing process as readily as connecting the aim of composition to their career goals will. Perhaps, by connecting the use of composition to students’ future career goals, Scholes’s hope for a citizenry of critical thinkers is more possible though.

If a composition instructor were to follow the first three steps as I have described them, he or she will see they have created a point of focus for the student, one that becomes a foundation for their continued engagement with the class. Students have been given a reason, a cause that justifies their participation and motivates their engagement. The use of composition they identified will not simply be forgotten after the initial classroom discussions on the use of composition, nor will it be put aside after the students have completed an essay connecting composition to their future goals. Instead, this connection will be remembered by the student and referenced to by the instructor. The result is an entire semester of meaning and purpose for the students. They understand why they are in the composition class, and it is not simply because someone told them to be there.



The results of motivating students range from the subtle to the overt. Of course, as any composition instructor could probably verify, not every technique works for every student. Students are individuals, of course, and their attitudes towards composition are incredibly varied, making it all but impossible for any method of motivation to work uniformly. Despite the uniqueness of students, though, a technique for student motivation as I have outlined above can be seen at the most basic level in many students' changed attitudes towards composition. I see evidence of this in my end-of-semester course evaluations. Recently, one student wrote in her course evaluation that "the greatest motivator for [her] to become a better writer is the likelihood of success in future career endeavors" (Anonymous Student #1 Course Evaluation). Another student wrote that she wanted to "improve [her] writing so that [she is] seen as professional when having to write at [her] job" (Anonymous Student #2 Course Evaluation). And yet another student made the connection between his motivation to engage in the writing process and his future goals very explicit when he wrote, "[a]s a historian writing and writing well is a critical component. You must be able to convey your ideas intelligibly and cite your sources properly" (Anonymous Student #3 Course Evaluation). Within these three students' comments is the evidence of the directly proportional relationship between student motivation and engagement with the task.

As grateful as I am, as a composition instructor, for an improved, more motivated student attitude towards composition, the evidence that motivation makes for better student writers presents itself most clearly when my students take on an English minor. In the past semester I taught two composition classes. Each class had approximately twenty students each. Among these forty or so students, I had three students add an English

minor. Two of these students were business majors, and one was a nursing major. These are very career specific majors. The business majors know what they want for their futures very definitively – to be involved in business – and the nursing major has a very direct line between study and work. Before my class, composition was nothing more than a requisite course needed so that they could move on to their other more career-centric courses; however, because these students came to recognize the use of composition, these three students came to appreciate just how much composition could help them achieve their specific career goals. They understood the value of English.

Making the connection between career goals and composition motivated these three students to engage in the composition process more rigorously and with more motivation, and engaging in the composition process with more rigor and motivation improved their writing. If most of the students who spend time in a composition program are like these three students who added English minors and enrolled in college now so that they may lay the groundwork for a better future, then it is possible for composition instructors to motivate students to write, and once students have the motivation to write, the likelihood of success for both them and the composition instructor increases greatly.



## CONCLUSION

*...don't you wish that the energy and motivation that students bring to some of these other genres they would bring to our assignments?*

-- Kathleen Blake Yancey, "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key",<sup>17</sup>

If you agree that the majority of college students who appear in composition classrooms are learning inert and not incapable of writing, and if you agree that the majority of college students have the capacity for intellectual thought, and if you agree that this same group has within them the ability to write good, purposeful, and persuasive essays on important academic topics but they just need a good reason to do so, well then "[i]t is time, therefore, to seek solutions to our educational impasse that take motivation into account more seriously" (Csikszentmihalyi 119). This project was an attempt to draw some focus to the issue of motivation in the composition classroom. Stated simply, I posit that students are more likely to become better writers if they are motivated to do so, and a primary way in which composition instructors can motivate our students is to appeal to their self interests. I even suggest that a good way to accommodate our attempts to appeal to our students' self interests is to have them make the connections between the beneficial

---

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Blake Yancey is the Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English and Director of the graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University. She is also the Editor of *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*. She has written several books and articles on the role of technology and its use in composition studies.

skills that can be developed from participating in the act of composition and those skills that may best aid them in their futures. In the ongoing attempts to figure out how to help students become better writers, my suggestion appears to be a simple one; however, like Judith Layer's proposal to "sell" English, it has inferences that when considered expose a deeper level of usefulness. First, simply by doing such an exercise, we composition instructors put some focus on student motivation. Students doing a simple writing assignment like the one I have suggested means that the instructor realizes the importance of student motivation and has made at the very least an attempt to motivate his or her students. Second, composition instructors employing an assignment like the one I have suggested requires an acknowledgement and attention to the students' reasons for attending college. The more we know about our students, the more likely it is that we can identify useful and specific ways to motivate them to write. Third, instructing our students to connect with the benefits of composition makes instructors consider the benefits of composition. As seemingly obvious as they may be, I still suspect "What am I teaching in this class? And why?" are often overlooked questions. A good answer to either of these questions can be incredibly useful to not just motivating students, but also to ensuring composition remain more than just a simple service level course in which students learn to write well enough to create the papers and essays they will need to accomplish for all their other, future courses. Composition is more than this, and every composition instructor should know why, and so should their students.

It is difficult for me to write much more about motivation as it relates to composition, for so little discussion on the subject has been achieved thus far. I am unable to point a study that proves my point, or to implement and test the theories of



another composition instructor who also values student motivation. Csikszentmihalyi's discussion of intrinsic motivation and literacy was helpful, but, even though they may be related, literacy and writing are still two separate things and each deserves further research and development. There simply must be more research and analysis done on the role of motivation as it specifically relates to composition. If this were to be accomplished, I could imagine the myriad branches of focus that would arise around the topic. Does gender play a role in student motivation to write? How about class? What role does technology have on student motivation?

This last area mentioned, technology, it seems to me, could be the most fertile ground for motivating students to write. Technology, especially as it relates to blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, has made the act of writing as vibrant as it ever was and motivated thousands, if not millions, of people to write. In a recent blog entry for the *More Intelligent Life* website, Anne Trubek, an associate professor of Rhetoric & Composition at Oberlin College, says as much in her post "We Are All Writers Now." She writes, "[g]o back 20, 30 years and you will find all of us doing more talking than writing. We rued literacy levels and worried over whether all this phone-yakking and television-watching spelled the end of writing" (par. 3). Trubek notes though, that "[f]ew would make that claim today" (par. 4). People are writing, on their own, in a myriad of genres. And while it may seem that the type of writing Trubek is speaking of, that is the type done on social networking sites and even seemingly frivolous blogs, is not of the same caliber as the serious and academic essays we hope our students create, technology enabled writing has many of the same activities of serious composition associated with it. Trubek writes that within in these technology enabled genres "most of us do labour to

write well: an e-mail to a potential romantic partner is laboriously revised and edited...; a tweet to a prospective employer is painstakingly honed until its 140 characters convey an appropriate tone with the necessary information. A response to our supervisor's clever status update on Facebook is written carefully, so to keep the repartee going" (par. 7).<sup>18</sup> In each of these instances the writer employs many of the same techniques we composition instructors typically highlight. The act of revision for clarity, an attention to audience, and critical analysis of our own words and the words of others are part of the composition process we hope to teach. What is astounding and encouraging about so many people writing via the current technology available to them is that they have chosen to do so on their own.

In her address to the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," Kathleen Blake Yancey commented on the motivating role technology has on writing. Yancey wants us to note that among all the many people writing in technologically enhanced ways "no one is *making* anyone *do* any of this writing" (298). She later repeats her assertion when she says: "no one is forcing this public to write" (300). She asks her audience, "[d]on't you wish that the energy and motivation that students bring to some of these other genres they would bring to our assignments?" (298). I certainly do, and it is why I think any future serious discussion of motivating students to write will have to include a heavy focus on technology. The reason why technology is so crucial to motivating individuals to write is, as Yancey points out, "the writing seems to operate in an economy driven by use value" (301). The writers are not writing for a grade, they are

---

<sup>18</sup> A tweet is the name of the message type a Twitter user would post. They are limited to 140 characters.



writing because what they write on the web has value. Someone besides just a teacher or the student's classroom peers can see it. The students writing can have a real audience, a real purpose, and therefore a real impact. Technology has made more singular individual's writing matter, and therefore they are more motivated to do it. This inherent interest in writing is something composition instructors should welcome and, frankly, exploit to create better writers.

Once composition instructors begin to take motivation into account more seriously, beginning by understanding why composition has value and selling students on the value of composition, they can ultimately begin to eliminate one of the oldest diagnosis for poor performance in school: the unapplied student. It is a familiar and persistent condition affecting many students: they are smart, they just do not apply themselves. They could do it, if only they cared to. At the core of this oft repeated analysis of a student failing to live up to his or her potential is the function of motivation. Overcoming the obstacle of low motivation is crucial to helping students become better writers, but composition instructors cannot depend on their students to correct the problem of their low motivation. Motivating students to compose is the concern of the composition instructor, or at least it should be to any composition instructor that wants to help his or her students become better writers.

## Works Cited

- 2005 Conference on English Education Leadership and Policy Summit Executive Committee. "What is English Education?" National Council of Teachers of English. 19 May 2009. Web.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation." *Daedalus*. Spring 1990. 115-140. Print.
- Horner, Winifred Bryan. "The Roots of Modern Writing Introduction: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Britain." *Rhetoric Review*. 8.2 (1990): 322-345. Print.
- Husman, Jenefer, and Willy Lens. "The Role of the Future in Student Motivation." *Educational Psychologist* 34.2 (Spring 99 1999): 113. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Colorado State University - Pueblo, Pueblo, CO. 27 Jan. 2009 Web.
- Layer, Edith E. "Motivation of Freshman Composition on the University Level." *College Composition and Communication* 3.1 (1952): 3-6. Print.
- Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.
- Murray, Donald M. "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *Cross-talk in Comp-Theory*. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003. 3-6. Print.



- Pearson, P. David. "The Synergies of Writing and Reading in Young Children." Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools. Ed. Carl Nagin. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. 33-35. Print.
- Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25.1 (Jan. 2000): 54-67. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Colorado State University - Pueblo, Pueblo, CO. 27 Jan. 2009 Web.
- Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior." *Psychological Inquiry*. 11.4. (2000): 227-268. 27 Jan. 2009. Web.
- Scholes, Robert. *The Rise and Fall of English*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Schultz, Jennifer L., and Jeanne L. Higbee. "Reasons for Attending College: The Student Point of View." *Research & Teaching in Developmental Education*. Spring 2007. 16 June 2009. Web.
- Trubek, Anne. "We Are All Writers Now". *More Intelligent Life*. 5 Jul. 2009. Web.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." *College Composition and Communication* 56.2 (2004): 297-328. Print.