

THESIS

MEETING STUDENTS AT THEIR POINTS OF DEPARTURE:
PRIOR KNOWLEDGE, TRANSFER, AND
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

MEETING STUDENTS AT THEIR POINTS OF DEPARTURE: PRIOR KNOWLEDGE, TRANSFER, AND FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

First-Year Composition students bring with them a vast supply of prior knowledge that influences their expectations for the outcomes of a First-Year Composition course. Composition faculty also bring with them an even greater wealth of prior knowledge that informs their expectations for the outcomes of First-Year Composition. This study sought to explore the intersection between First-Year Composition students and faculty in terms of their beliefs about writing and their expectations for the outcomes of the First-Year Composition course at the beginning of the semester. The goal of studying this inflection point involves consideration of how faculty engage and develop the prior knowledge of students through a rhetorical approach to writing in order to aid in transfer of learning from the course into students' academic, personal, public, and professional lives. Beliefs and attitudes of faculty and students were explored through a three-phase qualitative study involving surveys and interviews in order to gain clarity regarding the complex interaction of these two subject groups. Results indicate that faculty and students have different expectations for the First-Year Composition course, and these expectations are influenced by the different contexts each group is situated in. Composition faculty and WPAs should consider the First-Year Composition classroom as a complex "Teaching and Learning Situation" in order to meaningfully engage and develop the prior

knowledge students bring with them to the course and to ensure the transfer of learning to future contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

There comes a point in every college instructor's career when they begin to formulate conceptions about what they are actually trying to accomplish in the classroom. We might hope that such conceptualizations come as early as possible. Yet, clear conceptions take time to develop, and why shouldn't they? Teaching is a complicated process that takes significant time and energy to do well; one has to continuously stay informed and up to date on current scholarship, theory, pedagogies, best practices, and other areas of focus that circulate, and in some cases, gain traction inside of disciplinary circles.

One area of teaching that has been significantly studied in this regard is First-Year Composition, which has been a standard university course offering since the turn of the last century. As research on First-Year Composition is situated within the larger field of Writing Studies, there is a vast amount of literature to consult in regards to which approach to teaching writing is the most effective for students—hence the long history of disciplinary “turf wars” that argue over this very issue. As a result, finding one's place in this rich history can be daunting and potentially unnerving. Scholars appear to hold their stances on approaches to writing with great enthusiasm and passion, sometimes drawing harsh (and seemingly arbitrary) lines between approaches to writing instruction in an attempt to progress the field theoretically. Yet, to the novice First-Year Composition instructor, these rigid “camps” can make it difficult to situate oneself; as one such novice, I find myself asking, “am I being *too* expressivist here? I know the field values social-epistemic rhetoric but Peter Elbow really has some insightful, valid things to say.” It's difficult to locate oneself because the approaches *all* feel valid, at least initially. Like I

said before, teaching writing is complicated work, and takes time and reflection to locate oneself in the field of Writing Studies.

Therefore, this project reflects my continuous effort to make sense of the First-Year Composition classroom in order to ensure that my practices align with my hope that students walk away from the course with something that can meaningfully inform their lives. In this project, I focus on “transfer of learning”—arguably one of the broadest areas I could be focusing on, given that any learning situation requires some sort of “transfer of learning” from one previous situation into another (Bransford, Pellegrino, and Donovan 53). Yet, to me (as a novice, aspiring First-Year Composition instructor) I find this broadness essential to engage with. “Transfer” directly addresses the enormous questions akin to: “What do we want our students to learn in this course?” or, phrased differently, “What do we as instructors want our students to take away from the course, and how can we ensure that this happens?” Question like this demand that instructors reflect on what it is they are doing in the course; in a word, it helps them formulate a distinct reasoning for why they are teaching First-Year Composition, as opposed to literature, or anything else, really.

Furthermore, for this project I focus on one area of “transfer”—prior knowledge—which is again, quite broad. But, it is an essential notion since everyone has knowledge derived from experience that informs how they operate in the world. Students are no different--they enter the First-Year Composition course with beliefs, values, and expectations about writing and what the writing course should be doing. Thus, this study seeks to engage with this idea directly, addressing the question of: “What do students and instructors bring to the First-Year Composition course in terms of beliefs about writing, and how can instructors navigate this prior knowledge in order to ensure that students are transferring approaches successfully?”

When I first started teaching First-Year Composition just a year and a half ago, I didn't have any idea as to what I was getting myself into. I *knew* I enjoyed working with people on their writing and I *knew* that working with first-year students was something I wanted to do, given that the first-year of college is really a one-of-a-kind experience that burns like a very chaotic flame. I figured that I could connect with these students—I could bring in my not too-distant experiences as a first-year student to aid others in this importantly disruptive stage of life. After all, I was not anything close to an excellent student during my first year of college as I spent the majority of my time leaning more into the “freedom” than the academics. I had an awfully hard time understanding that the expectations were actually higher than before, and I had no idea what I wanted to do with anything that I was learning, much less any idea as to what I wanted to do with my life. I figured that I could bring this personal knowledge of uncertainty to students who very well might be experiencing similar things.

I remember my first feeling of overwhelm about four weeks into the start of my M.A. degree and Graduate Teaching Assistantship. I was sitting in our required professional development course and felt beat down. Every day seemed to provide me with something new to think about and thus, increasing my awareness about what I was *not* doing in the one section of First-Year Composition I was teaching. First it was addressing racial justice, then disability studies, student veterans, LGBTQIA+ students, students with mental health issues, critical pedagogy, and by about a month in, I had to step back and attempt to situate myself. After all, I was still just trying to remember my students' names and return their in-class writing assignments in a timely manner with meaningful feedback. I felt overwhelmed yet also accepting of this shift in perception. My expectations for what a First-Year Composition course actually did and engaged with were being completely stripped down and re-built from the ground up. Yet,

I felt ready to engage all of these challenges head on, even though I knew that it would take me years of constant practice and commitment to do so.

Now, it feels like there is even more to take into consideration. I write this not bitterly, but rather from the position of a novice First-Year Composition instructor where current conversations surrounding diversity and inclusivity initiatives provide an endless number of topics a First-Year Composition instructor can focus on in order to cultivate an inclusive, and student-centered learning environment. Given that the field of Writing Studies is increasingly emphasizing an explicit justice-oriented approach that demands faculty to reflect on problematic histories and practices that have continued to oppress marginalized groups, faculty (especially white, male faculty) must fully embrace their positionalities that contribute to such oppression. Put frankly, there's a lot of heavy material to engage with and meaningfully work through. I welcome the complexity this current moment provides, and I fully embrace it. This movement aligns with my passions for teaching to the whole student—I value their diverse histories, experiences and prior knowledge and strive to practice with this always in mind. The question, “What do we as instructors want our students to transfer?” seems to glare with more intensity now.

As I mentioned before, this study is personal. As I envision myself teaching professionally for the foreseeable future, I want to be deliberate and comprehensive in how I formulate my approaches to teaching. Thus, starting broad with “transfer” and “prior knowledge” can be understood as the beginning of a life-long journey of understanding what goes on in the First-Year Composition classroom. As “transfer” of approaches is the ideal end goal of First-Year Composition, I hope to develop a theoretical foundation to build upon through future engagements with teaching and scholarship.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Situating Transfer

In the introduction to *Transfer of Learning: Cognition and Instruction*, cognitive psychologist Robert Haskell defines “transfer of learning” as “our use of past learning when learning something new and the application of that learning to both similar and new situations,” as well as the “foundation of learning, thinking and problem solving” (xiii). Consequently, “transfer” is inextricable from novel learning situations—new situations depend on the transfer of prior knowledge.

Yet, “transfer of learning” is ultimately different than transfer of knowledge—the latter has histories steeped in the “banking model” of education as expressed by Paulo Freire. Friere states that, in this model, “education becomes an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor,”— a model that then allows students to be active only in limited ways through “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (72). Scholar Mahbubul Alam makes this connection between the banking model and transfer in “Baking Model of Education in Teacher-Centered Class: A Critical Assessment,” stating that in the banking model, “learner knowledge is created as another commodity to be transferred as efficiently as possible from sender to receiver” (27). Therefore, “transfer” in a banking-model context implies that meaning moves from instructor to student and does not allow the student to make meaning for themselves—it is provided by the instructor and absorbed by the passive student. This study will focus on “transfer of learning” in a deliberate effort to work away from the banking model.

The National Research Council Volume *How People Learn* acknowledges that “all new learning involves transfer based on previous learning,” suggesting that our conception of

“learning” a new skill or task involves engaging with our prior experiences and the skillsets used to navigate these prior experiences (Bransford, Pellegrino, and Donovan 53).¹ Yet, situations change, and the knowledge used to navigate these previous situations may not be adequate to complete the tasks at hand in other situations—there might be a gap, a momentary impasse. Thus, “learning” becomes an instance of students always already building off of prior experience and the knowledge, tools, and skills used to navigate these prior experiences. Therefore, when the authors of *How People Learn* claim that “transfer is...an active, dynamic process rather than a passive end-product of a particular set of learning experiences,” this notion of *building* upon what people already know emerges; it posits that “learning” is something that involves a conscious and deliberate effort while also being in a constant engagement with the tension between previous knowledge and the new experience that requires a necessary expansion of this previous knowledge to successfully engage with this new knowledge. Also, given that transfer of learning is an “active” process, it works against the banking model by suggesting that while faculty can certainly facilitate transfer, students are always in charge of what they do or do not transfer.

Different Types of Transfer

“Transfer” is a complex theoretical term because different *types* of transfer are possible. Educational psychologists Gavriel Salomon and David Perkins (who are considered the “godfathers” of transfer by Writing Studies scholars Robertson, Yancey, and Taczak) outline the components that make up the umbrella term “transfer.” In “Transfer of Learning,” published in

¹ My use of *How People Learn* is highly influenced by Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s use of this source in their publication, *Writing Across Contexts*, which will be heavily referenced later on in this project. *How People Learn* offers a sturdy bridge into discussions regarding the interdisciplinarity of the notion of “transfer”—it highlights the term as one not only gaining momentum as a phenomenon of study in Writing Studies related fields, but as one foundational to psychology and education.

1992, Perkins and Salomon expand on “transfer” and introduce notions of “positive transfer,” “negative transfer,” “near transfer,” and “far transfer.”

Positive and Negative Transfer

Positive transfer is when learners in a new context successfully perform in another context by navigating their prior knowledge effectively (Perkins and Salomon 3). On the other hand, negative transfer occurs when something that is learned in one context negatively affects learning in another context (3). For instance, writers in the First-Year writing class might think that it is necessary to *always* write a five-paragraph essay in any given writing situation, given that most high schools imbue their students with this model. But, as Perkins and Salomon are quick to point out, “negative transfer” is something that can be corrected, given that the student understands rather quickly (possibly through a grade or feedback) that their deployment of prior knowledge was not adequate for the current context. Although students entering into First-Year Composition might be incredibly well-versed at writing five-paragraph essays in preparation for AP tests or various other high school writing situations, solely using this knowledge to navigate every writing situation inevitably reaches a limit and reveals a “gap” in knowledge when these students are asked to write for different purposes; the “learning” here then becomes the deliberate engagement with the limits of their prior knowledge due to the expansion into new experiences.

Near and Far Transfer

Furthermore, the authors discuss the theories of “near” transfer, which focuses on how transfer occurs between contexts that are related in nature (such as using similar skills that one might use to drive a car to drive a truck), and “far” transfer, which suggests that transfer can

happen between two seemingly unrelated contexts, such as the relationship between chess moves and a military campaign—an example that Perkins and Salomon use (4).

High Road and Low Road Transfer

Closely related to “near” and “far” transfer, Perkins and Salmon also introduce the notions of “high road” and “low road” transfer, which can be understood as a transfer of knowledge that either happens with or without “mindful abstraction” (7). In the case of “low road” transfer, the transfer of knowledge is automatic—the subject in a new context successfully adapts to that new context because the knowledge required is closely related to the subject’s prior knowledge; for instance, someone who knows how to operate a canoe might find that operating a kayak requires similar skills and knowledge of operating a canoe, and in this context, that someone might find this transition to be something that happens almost “automatically,” given that their prior knowledge and experience can positively inform their current situation (7).

“High road” transfer requires a “mindful abstraction” of the current situation the subject finds themselves in, given that there is an existing mental gap between the knowledge the subject knows and the knowledge expected in the new situation. The key difference here is that “mindful abstraction” is also a skill that needs to be taught for learners to successfully understand “how” to potentially transfer materials. Otherwise, the potential to revert back to a “things that have worked in the past” mentality increases, and the subject stands a greater chance of unsuccessfully navigating the new learning context (7). For example, a student writer who learns in a First-Year Composition course how the overall concept of “design” can help one achieve a specific purpose in a writing assignment might be able to utilize this concept in a new communication situation—for instance, a marketing internship. Here, the student would have to abstract that knowledge

originally learned in the First-Year Composition classroom and apply it to that new context, given that the two contexts are not directly related.

Transfer and First-Year Composition

In situating this current study, it is key to consider the notion of “transfer of learning” within a larger set of beliefs about the purpose of the First-Year Composition class. One key document that focuses on the broad “outcomes” or “take-aways” of First-Year Composition in the discourse surrounding the “take-aways” or “outcomes” of First-Year Composition, is the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” Published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 2014, it is widely understood as the central document guiding first-year composition programs across the country. This document summarizes the key areas of knowledge to be covered within the First-Year Composition course in order to establish a sense of coherency across writing programs. Here, the key areas are described as “Rhetorical Knowledge,” “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing,” “Processes,” and “Knowledge of Conventions” (WPA). Given these key areas, the statement ideally functions as a reference guide of writing skills and knowledge for professors and instructors outside of the First-Year writing discipline to review and expand upon in their respective disciplines (WPA).

In keeping with the genre conventions of outcomes statements, this document *expects* the skills and knowledge taught in the First-Year Composition course to be used in new contexts. Also, it expects these skills to evolve and expand in line with the demands of these new contexts. For instance, the document notes that “as students move beyond First-Year Composition...their [writing] abilities will diversify along disciplinary, professional, and civic lines as these writers move into new settings where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge”—suggesting that it is inevitable that the learning in the First-Year Composition course can function as a sort

of basecamp for students to refer back to when entering into a new writing situation and adapt and evolve their writing accordingly to meet the demands of that situation (WPA). Yet, as the outcomes statement also notes that students will encounter writing situations outside of academia in “professional and civic lines,” it can be seen as preparing students for future college *and* career contexts. Therefore, the WPA Outcomes Statement draws attention to the evolution of writing in contexts subsequent to First-Year writing, relating to the well-established and continuously growing body of work in Writing Studies surrounding the notion of “transfer” or, as it is sometimes referred to, “transfer of learning.”

Other indications of “transferable” material are located in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. As the audience for the *Framework* are “instructors who teach writing and include writing in their classes at all levels and in all subjects,” the document essentially functions as a bridge between high school writing contexts and college writing contexts with the purpose of addressing discussions of “college readiness” in terms of writing (Framework). Overall, the document addresses essential writing “experiences” as well as “habits of mind” students can be expected to possess upon their entrance into post-secondary writing contexts. For instance, the “experiences” are broken up into four categories: “Developing Rhetorical Knowledge,” “Developing Critical Thinking Through Writing, Reading, and Research,” “Developing Flexible Writing Processes,” and “Developing Knowledge of Conventions”—categories similar to the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. This correlation suggests that students transitioning from secondary to post-secondary writing should not be surprised in regards to what is expected of them in the First-Year Composition course. Yet, this study will suggest that there is a gulf between secondary and post-secondary writing contexts—one that students and often also college writing instructors do not fully grasp, at least initially.

In addition to these documents that provide a broad foundation for what there is to expect in the First-Year Composition course, scholars in the Writing Studies discipline have theorized about their own key outcomes they envision the First-Year Composition course will accomplish. In “Threshold Concepts in First-Year Composition,” Doug Downs and Lianne Robertson note four areas they find most important to focus on in the course: “writing as human interaction (rhetoric); textuality; epistemology (ways of knowing and the nature of knowledge); and writing process” (107). While threshold concepts are understood as “concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice,” Downs and Robertson’s ideas here can be considered another discipline-specific view regarding what they envision students to learn and take with them from the First-Year Composition course (Kassner and Wardle 2).

The Elon Statement on Transfer

Just as documents like the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition” and the *Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing* suggest that the notion of transfer of learning is gaining increased attention, the discipline of Writing Studies has also explicitly declared their interest in the topic. “The Elon Statement on Writing Transfer” outlines the current state of the research and scholarship on transfer, specifically as it has been used within the Writing Studies discipline. An important point to make in framing this document is that there is an attempt to engage with the complexities surrounding the word “transfer”; here, the authors note that “‘transfer’ accurately describes the phenomenon of using prior knowledge in a routinized way and functions as an umbrella term”; as a result, “transfer” is a stand-in for a much larger notion of how prior knowledge affects the learner’s learning experience (Elon).

Furthermore, the “Elon Statement on Writing Transfer” provides a comprehensive list of “what writing transfer entails” or the essential conceptions of “what we know” regarding writing transfer, informed by an expanding body of literature. Broadly, The Elon Statement’s working conception of the notion of transfer is that “writing transfer is the phenomenon in which new and unfamiliar writing tasks are approached through the application, remixing, or integration of previous knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions” (352). As this posits “transfer” as directly related to prior knowledge, the list continues. This study is mostly concerned with two main findings stated in the ELON statement: (1) “prior knowledge is a complex construct that can benefit or hinder writing transfer. Yet understanding and exploring that complexity is central to investigating transfer” and (2) “individual dispositions and individual identity play key roles in transfer” (352).

While the Elon Statements provides Writing Studies with a comprehensive list of the various areas of knowledge being used to approach the notion of “transfer” in the writing classroom, the list gets very complicated very quickly. In its essence, the ELON statement situates “transfer” at a confluence of three areas: “Learner, Learner’s Actions, or Learner’s Process”; “Knowledge”; and “Describing Context/Comparing Situations” (351). The ELON statement uses a Venn-diagram figure to explain the interrelationships between these three areas, and the intricacies and theories that underscore these overlaps. While the map can be overwhelming at first, Donna Qualley in her article “Building a Conceptual Topography of the Transfer Terrain” clarifies what the overlap of these areas entails and provides a detailed description as to how one might navigate or read this map and, therefore, what the current state of “transfer” within Writing Studies entails.

In “Building a Conceptual Topography of the Transfer Terrain,” Qualley walks her readers through an eight-step construction of the transfer map provided by the ELON statement. While the entire map is helpful in understanding the full breadth and complications of the current state of transfer, my study is only interested in the complexities surrounding “prior knowledge,” as explained earlier. Within this area, Qualley connects the “Learner, Learner’s Actions, or Learner’s Process” category with the “Knowledge” category with a byline that reads “Relationship between Learner’s Prior Knowledge and New Knowledge,” which has the potential to produce “conceptual breaks” in which the learner must engage with their prior knowledge in this new situation (78). This current study takes a similar approach and is interested in the “conceptual breaks” students experience between their knowledge about writing and writing courses, and the agreed-upon purposes of writing courses, as discussed by Writing Studies scholars and researchers.

While Qualley’s map provides various areas of entrance into current scholarship on transfer, my decision to focus solely on prior knowledge stems from the idea that transfer of learning cannot occur without the presence of prior knowledge, as *How People Learn* mentions. Consequently, prior knowledge must be accounted for when attempting to explain the question of “why or why not is transfer of learning occurring?” Also, prior knowledge takes into account that learners have a robust pallet of knowledge they bring with them to any learning situation; learners always have, to reference Gonzáles, Moll, and Amanti, “funds of knowledge” that stem from their experiences and home communities (x). Therefore, learners are *always* working from pre-existing knowledge bases in learning situations. The challenge then—for faculty—is engaging this prior knowledge in meaningful ways to ensure that learners are navigating their present contexts accordingly and repurposing prior knowledge effectively.

Studies on Transfer and Prior Knowledge at the Post-Secondary Level

The majority of the literature surrounding transfer studies has focused on if (and if so, how effectively) students transfer material *from* First-Year Composition into their disciplinary specific courses, or into more professional settings (McCarthy; Wardle; Nelms and Dively; Beaufort). While these studies are helpful in assessing how effectively students might “transfer” material, (or if transfer of learning is even *happening* from First-Year Composition) these studies are interested in a situation further away from the core interest of my current study, which is the question of the prior knowledge of incoming First-Year college writers.

Within the context of First-Year Composition, “prior knowledge”—in terms of what students bring with them from high school to college—has been mostly studied in terms of genre awareness (Aretmeva and Fox; Reiff and Bawarshi; Devitt; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi). These studies have reported similar findings that, although students do bring with them a certain level of genre awareness to First-Year Composition, they might not be aware of repurposing their prior knowledge of genres to inform new learning contexts. Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi provide a helpful way of thinking through this by locating prior knowledge as the “incomes” students bring with them to the First-Year Composition classroom (99). Thus, prior knowledge does manifest itself in First-Year Composition classrooms, and one of the instructor goals becomes locating how to build off of this prior knowledge or, drawing on Devitt’s work, working from the “antecedent genres” and knowledge surrounding how to implement this genre knowledge effectively. Yet, other areas of prior knowledge have been largely unexplored—areas that might be especially valuable towards understanding the beliefs of students upon their entrance into First-Year Composition, as well as how to adapt pedagogy to fill these gaps accordingly.

One of these largely unexplored gaps is the effect that students' beliefs about writing and the First-Year writing course may have on the potential transferability of First-Year writing course content. In "Disciplinary and Transfer: Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write," Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick examine how students write in academic, post-First-Year Composition contexts with the goal of gaining more "understandings about developing as writers they take with them as they move from First-Year Composition to writing in other disciplines and prepare for writing in workplace settings" (126). Through focus groups, their findings indicate that student beliefs towards writing--and specifically, the writing done in English courses (here First-Year Composition) --can inhibit meaningful engagement in course content and leave students in a position to *not* transfer material. For instance, Bergmann and Zepernick find that students predominately see English courses as "personal and expressive" rather than a primer for disciplinary writing; in a word, students do not see the First-Year Composition course as a disciplinary course and thus devalue First-Year Composition since they do not believe this course will benefit them in their specific discipline (128). Also, Bergmann and Zepernick emphasize the large impact these beliefs about writing can have: "the attitudes expressed by our respondents suggest that the primary obstacle to such transfer is not that students are *unable* to recognize situations outside First-Year Composition in which those skills can be used, but that students *do not look for* such situations because they believe that skills learned in First-Year Composition have no value in any other setting" (139).

This gets at the heart of the issue around the question of finding value in the First-Year Composition course that emphasizes "First-Year writing" as a legitimate discipline to inform the writing done in contexts post-First-Year Composition. In a word, if students don't see the point or the *reason* why we do the things associated with First-Year Composition, then they will not be

able to transfer the materials. Essentially, there would be nothing to transfer since “writing” in the “writing class” is not something that is valuable for their future learning—it is a detached phenomenon that merely *happens* without students actually gaining the awareness that the material in the course can be a helpful primer for engaging in future writing situations.

While Bergmann and Zepernick’s study focuses on in-depth focus group interviews of students outside of the First-Year Composition context, Dana Lynn Driscoll in “Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain: Student Attitudes about Future Writing Contexts and Perceptions of Transfer from First Year Writing to the Disciplines” focuses on First-Year Composition students, specifically on “the types of beliefs students hold about transferability of writing skills, what factors impact those beliefs, and how those beliefs change across the course of First-Year Composition and into disciplinary writing” (3). Through a mixed-methods study involving surveys, interviews, and a grounded theory analysis, Driscoll codes student beliefs and attitudes about how aligned students are with the “transfer” component of First-Year Composition into four different categories: “explicitly connected,” “implicitly connected,” “uncertain,” and “disconnected” (10-11). For Driscoll, “explicitly connected students...anticipate future writing situations and...transferability while “implicitly connected students” ultimately “value writing ‘in general’ but do “not have a clear sense of how they will be writing in the future” (10). Additionally, “Uncertain students...do not know (or do not care to know) where and when they will be writing in the future.” Lastly, “Disconnected students “foresee little or not writing in their futures” (11). As these responses were collected during the end of the semester, Driscoll notes that “if students were unable to make these direct connections, then they said they were less likely to retain and transfer knowledge” (12). Furthermore, Driscoll works to explain the *why* component in regards to *why* almost half of the responses fell into the “disconnected or uncertain

categories.” Her work here extends into an examination focusing on students’ definitions of both “writing” and “good writing” (13). Findings from this particular section of the study indicate that “definitions.....are quite similar and nearly all lack a rhetorical or disciplinary understanding of writing” and that “good writing” is defined in purely stylistic terms and “belletristic values”—definitions influenced by previous high school experience where the composing done is constrained and usually written for the teacher as audience (14).

First-Year Composition students already hold certain beliefs about themselves as writers, which is an important area of focus for not only this study, but also for one of First-Year Composition’s overall goals of developing student writing skills. In *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak theorize the role that prior knowledge plays to formulate these beliefs and conceptions students have about themselves as writers, and thus bring with them to the context of the First-Year Composition classroom. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak theorize what they call the “point of departure”—a concept that attempts to account for the complexity of beliefs and factors that influence students’ conceptions of themselves as writers (105). Specifically, the authors suggest that this “point of departure” is, in its essence, the starting point for students on their academic and professional writing careers—it is where students stand at the beginning of their engagement with college writing and is mostly comprised of external “benchmarks” that contribute to the way students have been “represented” as writers throughout their past experience with writing classes in high school and otherwise (106). Not surprisingly, this “point of departure” is heavily influenced by both the grades and test scores students have received prior to entering into the context of the First-Year Composition classroom. Essentially, assessing students’ point of departure has to account for how students’ multiple and complex histories of engagement with writing have

shaped their current attitudes and the beliefs they have about writing; furthermore, understanding a student's "point of departure" also involves understanding what tools and skills they already use when they write, and why they might use them. In a word, a student's "point of departure" is a way into understanding the "what" component of their knowledge about writing and their beliefs about themselves as a writer, as well as the "why" component in accordance to where this knowledge and these beliefs emerge from (106).

For example, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak discuss the various factors that influence the "points of departures" for the subjects in their study. They found that "grades, or the approval of the instructor" influences student's perceptions of themselves as "either good or bad" writers—an influence that resonates more than hoped for (107). The authors then suggest that these "external benchmarks" have the potential to completely influence students' identities as writers, leaving them ineluctably "good" or "bad" writers, which, by the nature of this identification, can allow the student to have a lower confidence level of their ability to write, as well as decrease value they ascribe to writing (107).

Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak note that students who are implicitly aware of catering to the rhetorical situation of the high school writing classroom have the potential to carry over this analysis of the classroom situation into the college course:

For...students, this idea—discover expectations, deliver expectations—had emerged through the success of their method in each local writing context: delivering what they perceive as the marks of good writing, which is rewarded with good grades, and which then confirms their sense that, indeed, they are good writers across contexts. (107)

The implications of this are that students that hold onto the goal of satisfying the teacher expectations with their writing might actually be more resistant to moving past these identifications of “good” or “bad” writing. This correlates with Chris Anson’s claim in his short section in *Naming What We Know* that argues that “habituated practice can lead to entrenchment”—here, the logic applies in the sense that if a student is *always* identifying as a “good” or “bad” writer due to their adherence to the influence of “external benchmarks,” they will continue to adhere to this belief that writing for grades and teacher satisfaction is in fact a measurement of their ability and identity as writers (77). This dilemma then moves us into the discussion revolving around the epistemic potential of writing: writing to report knowledge (potentially for a grade that the teacher can assess as either “good or bad”) or writing to create knowledge in the sense that students who write for their teacher potentially view writing as a reporting of the knowledge in order to receive some sort of reward for reporting that knowledge that the teacher might *want* to hear. This is in contrast to a writing to create knowledge approach, where students write to expand their belief systems and expand the ways in which they apprehend the world. This latter mentioning here might in fact result in lower grades, but it can be argued that the student might in fact grow more in terms of their thinking and writing abilities if they release themselves from the fetters of the traditional, embedded rhetorical situation of the writing classroom.

While students have an abundance of prior knowledge that constitutes their belief systems about writing and themselves as writers, there are specific gaps in knowledge that constitute the various points of departure students embody when entering the First-Year Composition classroom. Termed accordingly as “absent prior knowledge,” Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak argue that students entering into First-Year Composition lack an understanding of

“key writing concepts” and “non-fiction texts that serve as models” for their writing; in a word, students have a lack of exposure to the realistic kinds of writing they will be completing in college, as well as a way to talk about writing in meaningful ways (109-110). In regards to students vocabulary when discussing writing, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak show that the majority of students primarily categorize writing as “expression” or “a vehicle for authorial expression, not as a vehicle for dialogue or an opportunity to make knowledge,” which they then correlate to the prominence of “imaginative literature” taught in high schools (usually through the western canon), an approach that tends to romanticize more *creative*, fictitious types of writing that thereby portray writing as more “expressive.”

The implications of Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s findings suggest that students entering into the First-Year Composition course potentially enter in having complex relationships with writing that includes an entrenched conception of themselves as writers as well as conceptions of writing that might be at odds with what the First-Year Composition course is attempting to accomplish. Thus, when exposed to the purpose of the First-Year Composition course and the types of writing and communication expected from this course, students might find themselves in a moment where the prior knowledge they have about writing and the conceptions they hold about themselves as a writer are held in constant tension: some of the skills learned and practiced in previous academic writing contexts might not adequately account for the expectations of the college writing class and, thus, might encourage students to resort to old tactics and tricks that deviate from the rhetorical approach to writing taught in the majority of writing programs across the country.

Thus, it is no surprise when Doug Downs and Lianne Robertson argue in “Threshold Concepts in First-Year Composition,” that First-Year Composition contains two goals:

(1) for students to examine and ideally reconsider prior knowledge about writing in light of new experiences and knowledge offered by their First-Year Composition course(s), and (2) for the course itself to serve as a general education course, teaching transferable knowledge of and about writing so that what is taught and learned can be adapted to new contexts of writing (105).

Wardle and Robertson are quick to note that these two goals are incredibly challenging and complex, given that their argument works directly from the idea that “learning” and “transfer” are connected to prior knowledge. While these two goals are noted as separate, they always inform each other. For instance, students’ “prior knowledge” that is initially negotiated correlates to the “point of departure” Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak theorize as a potential inhibitor for students to engage meaningfully with course content. Downs and Robertson then argue how the engagement with the course can potentially be beneficial in future communication situations. Therefore, Downs and Robertson provide a meaningful trajectory for the First-Year Composition class: the student arrives in the first year writing class with various attitudes and beliefs about writing as well as conceptions about themselves as writers (constituting their point of departure) and engages this prior knowledge about writing and writing courses to the point where their mindset has shifted into one that not only understands a broadened view of writing, but also comprehends it to the point where, upon leaving the course, they can repurpose that knowledge positively in other communication situations.

While these two goals sound promising, they are idealistic in the sense that beginning at the first goal, “righting misconceptions,” has an incredible amount of complexity built into it. For example, locked up in students’ conceptions about writing is their *identity* as writers which (as Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak have explained) is constituted by various experience with

writing and assessment (whether standardized or otherwise). Thus, one goal of the First-Year Composition course becomes engaging what students bring with them to the First-Year Composition classroom, which validates this prior knowledge. A second goal, then, is increasing student awareness about the affordances of a rhetorical approach to writing, which implies adding to or shifting students' epistemology of writing.

METHODOLOGY

This IRB-approved study attempts to answer three research questions in order to understand more about transfer, prior knowledge, and First-Year Composition and also to contribute to current Writing Studies scholarship surrounding these topics:

1. What are students' beliefs about writing and the larger purpose of the First-Year Composition course at the beginning of the semester, and why?
2. What are First-Year Composition faculty members' beliefs about writing and the larger purpose of the First-Year Composition course, and why?
3. How might Composition faculty engage students' prior knowledge about writing and the First-Year Composition course in order to ensure the successful transfer of course content?

This chapter will focus on the methods I used to approach to see answers to these questions.

Researcher's Role

My positionality as a researcher is complex; I am currently teaching First-Year Composition as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and am also a graduate student in a Rhetoric and Composition program.² Therefore, I occupy a "liminal" position as my purposes are split between my role as a teacher and as a student; in a word, my identity is in flux (Winstone and

² Here, I use the concept of "positionality" derived from Rebecca Walton, Kristen R. Moore, and Natasha N. Jones's definition of "positionality" as defined in *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn*. "Positionality" emphasizes how location and context influence one's identity and, consequently, how and why one operates within that context. Walton, Moore, and Jones illustrate this connection between social context and identity, arguing that "positionality is a way of conceiving subjectivity that simultaneously accounts for the constraints and conditions of context while also allowing for an individual's action and agency" (64). Furthermore, referencing Alcoff, the authors argue that "social contexts and constraints do not create an identity which a person then discovers but rather form a position from which a person can craft meaning and use as a point of departure for action" (64). Therefore, since I am positioned as a both an instructor and student, I can utilize this duality to my advantage in both research and teaching.

Moore 494). This “liminal” positioning is key, as I am fully embedded in the act of teaching First-Year Composition, but I am also interested in research related to teaching First-Year Composition.

The Ideally Designed Study

For this project, I originally intended to use a mixed-methods approach to study faculty and student beliefs and attitudes about First-Year Composition at the beginning of the semester. My initial goal was to begin with semi-structured interviews with Composition faculty members in order to establish a departmental perspective of what they believed students should be taking away from the course—or, what they should be transferring post completion of the First-Year Composition course. These interview responses were intended to function as a foundation for the study, originally idealized as forming the dependent variables for the subsequent survey that was to then be distributed to a *different* sample population: First-Year Composition students. I envisioned my goal here was to statistically analyze the survey results and compare these findings to faculties’ interview responses as a way to understand how “aligned” faculty and students really are in terms of their expectations for course outcomes and overall goals for the course. After completion of the surveys, I then wanted to follow-up with First-Year Composition students through semi-structured interviews in an attempt to probe their prior knowledge and further my understanding as to “why” they might have responded the way they did.

Therefore, *originally*, I strove to follow a *sequential, mixed methods designed* which divided the study up into three phases with separate data collection procedures occurring over an extended period of time (Tashakkori and Tebbbie 46, emphasis orig.). Resultingly, I envisioned myself adhering to a Qual→Quan→Qual design with each phase informing the next: the first, qualitative interview section would inform the creation of my quantitative survey distributed in

phase two, and the survey responses would inform the semi-structured interviews with students in phase three. My goal was to discover a “convergence of results” through this method by approaching my research question through a larger variety of angles (Greene et. al. qtd. in Creswell 1995). Yet, as my study got underway, my methods shifted.

The “Real” Design

While the initial goal of the study stayed the same—to compare faculty expectations, attitudes, and beliefs with students’ expectations, attitudes, and beliefs at the beginning of the semester of a First-Year Composition course in order to unearth any sense of alignment—my study ended up being a three-phased *qualitative* study. Phase one included semi-structured interviews with First-Year Composition faculty; phase two included surveys distributed to First-Year Composition students; and phase three included semi-structured interviews with First-Year Composition students. While the instruments for the phases all stayed the same from my original intentions, the data analysis shifted to analyzing all the data qualitatively.

The initial interviews with faculty still served as the foundation for the study, but instead of using their responses to inform the creation of the dependent variables for the survey in the next phase, I ended up approaching this transition more in terms of “constructs” or the “abstract idea, underlying theme, or subject matter that one wishes to measure using survey questions” (Lavrakas). I refer to these “constructs” later on as *question buckets* but conceptually they are one and the same; I labeled each group of questions of my interview script for the instructor interviews in phase one as they corresponded to my areas of interest: “Purpose of First-Year Composition,” “Beliefs about Good Writing,” “Key Concepts in First-Year Composition,” and “Transfer of Learning.” When I amended my survey to distribute to students for phase two, I focused in on these constructs in order to create a foundation for comparing the two sample

populations. Also, as I amended the survey, I also amended the semi-structured interviews that would occur after the survey data collection phase was completed in order to understand where I was ultimately headed. Here, I envisioned that the interviews with students would build off of the data collected in the surveys in specific ways, ultimately enhancing my analysis.

It was also at this point that I amended the survey to focus on eliciting responses that could be analyzed qualitatively as opposed to quantitatively. I accomplished this by shifting away from emphasizing close-ended, Likert-scale questions to emphasizing open-ended response-type questions. While the final survey still included close-ended Likert-scale response-type questions, these questions were only analyzed based on percentages to gain a broad sense of trends that occurred; for instance, since over 80% of students at least “agree” that the First-Year Composition course will “help them with their college courses,” I was able to use this to deepen my other findings from open ended-questions that approached “why” students believed this. Yet, overall, the switch from a quantitative focus to a qualitative focus for phase two was due to a few factors.

First, I am a novice when it comes to statistical analysis. This is not to say that I do not value what quantitative analysis can accomplish, but rather that I understand and accept my own limitations. Simply put, immersing myself in learning statistical analysis while simultaneously performing statistical analysis on a Master’s thesis felt as if I was overstepping my boundaries, out of my depth, and without sufficient time in my program to take the appropriate courses and develop my skills.

Second, I reasoned that focusing on qualitative data would provide me with a sense of coherence and consistency throughout my analysis and put me on firmer ground. Thus, I could focus in on one qualitative data analysis method and hone that skill—I would not have to

fluctuate between learning two different skills, each extremely complex in their own right. Resultingly, I ended up using constant comparative analysis to analyze the language data collected throughout—a process that will be discussed later in more depth.

Third, I made the decision that complexity in responses is what I was trying to achieve, and open-ended responses provided this very complexity as this format allowed students to have more freedom in articulating their beliefs. Given that my research question and overall study is fueled by the *funds of knowledge* theory, my focus was subjectivity. Therefore, I was interested in *why* students might have different (and potentially conflicting) responses when asked “what are your expectations for the [First-Year Composition] course?” (See Appendix B).

When I entered the third phase, I had a large amount of qualitative data from students that corresponded to the constructs outlined in the faculty interviews. Additionally, I had access to potential participants for the semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews with First-Year Composition students were utilized to gain more specific information about who students were in terms of their histories with writing and their beliefs about writing and the writing course.

Overall, my research design is heavily influenced by Dana Driscoll’s design in “Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain: Student Attitudes about Future Writing Contexts and Perceptions of Transfer from First Year Writing to the Disciplines,” especially phases 2 and 3. Driscoll operationalizes her study in two phases: a survey with both open and close-ended questions and follow-up interviews conducted with a smaller, more concentrated population (7). Yet, Driscoll’s study period was ultimately longer in duration than mine and involved data collection in the beginning *and* the end of the semester, allowing the findings to suggest how beliefs and attitudes change over time (7). As a result, I included the faculty component in order

to bolster my data collection and make more informed insights about the situation at the beginning of the semester in a First-Year Composition course.

Data Collection/Participants

In order to gain access to the research sites in this study at a large, public research university in the Midwest, I sought permission from both the chair of the English department, as well as approval from the IRB to conduct interviews and surveys with participants. Overall, my study depended on a “convenience” sample of First-Year Composition Faculty and First-Year Composition students since they all were available in my immediate location (Palinkas 536). Given that the sections of First-Year Composition surveyed were linked to the instructors interviewed, all participants were convenient for my research goals.

After receiving IRB approval, the first qualitative phase of this study occurred during the end of the fall semester of 2020. Participants of this phase consisted of eight Composition faculty members who were recruited via email to participate in semi-structured interviews via ZOOM communication during the first two weeks of December, 2020. These participants were selected based on their involvement in the Composition program and, therefore, proximity to one of my goals for this research: to understand what faculty members believed students should be transferring from the course. Additionally, given the current public health protocol and complications of meeting in-person due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely and recorded for analysis purposes.

At this university, Composition faculty members are grouped into subgroups: Composition administration, Composition Instructors, and Graduate Teaching Assistants. Within the Composition administrative team, there are three existing levels: Director of Composition, Assistant Director of Composition, and Composition Lead Instructors. For this current study, the

positions of Director of Composition and Assistant Director of Composition were conflated to represent the top tier of the Composition departments hierarchy, resulting in four subgroups.

These subgroups are:

1. Directors/Assistant Directors of Composition
2. Composition Lead Instructors
3. Composition Instructors
4. Graduate Teaching Assistants (who, at this university, are considered instructors of record).

For this study, two faculty members from each group were interviewed. They are as follows:

1. The current director of Composition; a past director of Composition who is currently teaching First-Year Composition
2. Two Composition Lead instructors currently teaching First-Year Composition
3. Two Composition Instructors currently teaching First-Year Composition
4. Two Graduate Teaching Assistants pursuing graduate degrees in the “Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change” concentration.

Given the expansive faculty arrangement of the Composition program and the limitations present when conducting a thesis-bound, empirical study, group three—consisting of three Composition Instructors—was limited to faculty teaching FYC within the last two years. This decision was influenced by the Composition program’s requirement for all incoming instructors to adhere to the “common curriculum” for the first year of their employment; this curriculum is developed by the Composition administrators and lead instructors in an effort to maintain consistency of instruction. Therefore, my decision to interview instructors who had one to two years of experience teaching at this university was due to my belief that, since these instructors adhered to

the common curriculum for the first year of their employment, they would be closely aligned with the Composition program's broader aims for what the First-Year Composition course should be accomplishing; I envisioned these instructors as embedded within the Composition program's approaches to teaching First-Year Composition, even after they technically gained more academic freedom after their First-Year .

Additionally, Graduate Teaching Assistants at this institution stem from seven possible disciplines: Poetry; Fiction; Creative Non-Fiction; TESL/TEFL; Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change; English Education; and Literature. Similar to Composition Instructors, GTA's are required to adhere to the "common curriculum." While I considered identifying and seeking out GTAs from the various disciplines mentioned above, my decision to include GTAs from the "Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change" (WRSC) concentration was influenced by results from a preliminary stage where I pre-tested interview questions on GTAs inside and outside of the WRSC concentration. The results from this preliminary stage suggested that GTAs in the WRSC concentration clearly showed an understanding of the current professional and pedagogical concerns of the Writing Studies discipline while others outside of this concentration did not. Therefore, I limited myself in terms of selecting this sample population because, at the time, I envisioned there to be a higher chance of alignment in responses between GTAs in the WRSC program and current Composition faculty, given that WRSC graduate students were in the process of assimilating into this discipline and were likely to share similar viewpoints currently circulating in the field. Further research might test this assumption and further explore the differences between GTA responses across multiple concentrations.

Also, at this point in designing my research, I was focused on understanding more about how *students* compared with faculty responses as opposed to teasing out the differences between

the experienced faculty and the non-experienced faculty, or differences between graduate students from varied disciplines. Yet, differences between faculty *did* inevitably emerge in my data analysis and explicitly focusing on these differences as a result of both disciplinarity and experience might be a fruitful area for further exploration and research.

I therefore consider this sample population to be what Palinkas et. al calls a “criterion-i” purposeful sample population. According to Palinkas et. al., purposeful sampling is beneficial for qualitative research that has “limited resources” and also has a subject population that displays a “willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner” (534). As I assumed Composition faculty would have experience to draw from and as well as display a “willingness to participate” given that they all had or were planning to complete a thesis project or dissertation related to writing instruction, I felt confident to reach out to individual faculty that fell into one of the categories I’ve mentioned above. Furthermore, a “criterion-i” sample requires the researcher to “identify and select all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance”—here the “criterion of importance” is that they are currently involved in the Composition program.

Additionally, all faculty chose their own pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality when presenting data. As a result, the two GTAs in this study are Natalie and Molly; the Composition administrators, Tom and Casey; the Composition Instructors, Martha and Kurt; and the past/current directors of Composition, Chris and Elaine.

In phase two of this study, I distributed a 17-question questionnaire that included including both closed and open-ended response-type questions to six sections of First-Year Composition after receiving permissions and consent from the faculty. At the time, only Natalie, Molly, Tom, Martha, and Chris were teaching First-Year Composition. Therefore, each section

surveyed was taught by a Composition instructor interviewed in phase one, with only Natalie granting permission to survey two of the courses she was teaching at the time. I surveyed two of Natalie's courses because at that point in my data collection procedures, I had not reached what I thought to be an adequate number of survey responses from students and therefore, added on one last section to hopefully increase the amount of data collected.

I chose student participants based off of their enrollment in First-Year Composition and, more specifically, their enrollment in sections of First Year Composition taught by faculty members who participated in phase one of this study. I therefore consider this sample population a convenience sample due to the students' association with the faculty members interviewed via their course enrollment and their local availability. Although any sort of "convenience" sample, according to Palinkas, is "neither purposeful nor strategic" and is based off of issues of access" (something that limits the generalizability of results), these students still met the qualifications for this phase of data collection by being enrolled in a First-Year Composition course (536).

Out of the seven sections surveyed, 86 students consented to and participated in the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, students were given the option to provide contact information in order to be contacted for follow-up interviews. In total, 17 students consented and were contacted for follow-up interviews.

In the qualitative, phase three of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with currently enrolled First-Year Composition students. Out of the 17 students previously mentioned who provided their contact information at the end of the phase two questionnaire, four students agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews during the first two weeks of February. Three out of the four interviews were conducted over ZOOM, and one occurred in-person, in accordance with the public health protocol in place for the COVID 19 pandemic. All of the

interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were recorded for transcription purposes only. I did not compensate students for their participation in this study.

In all phases of this study, I distributed consent forms to participants, and participants returned these consent forms electronically prior to their engagement with the study. These consent forms included information about the expectations should subjects choose to participate as well as language that clearly stated the protection of the confidentiality of research participants.

For the phases involving interviews (phases one and three), I informed research subjects that they were being recorded, and that the recordings would only be accessed by me and would be destroyed after the completion of the data analysis and study. The interviews were conducted via ZOOM technology due to the research occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic. As phase two required the use of class time, the secondary researcher and I sought permissions from the professors to gain access to these classes, all of which were operating online at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As students completed the surveys through Qualtrics (a software program accessible through the university's membership), I was unable to trace responses back to specific individuals and class sections. Additionally, through the distribution of consent forms and verbal recruitment, I ensured that all students understood that their participation in this study was both voluntary and disconnected in all ways from their current First-Year Composition course, the latter explicitly stating that their instructors would not be aware of their participation, nor would it affect their grade in their specific section of the course. Furthermore, through initial recruitment and the distribution of consent forms, I was clear with students and participants that the data collected for this research would be used for the immediate purpose of completing this

thesis project as well the larger purposes of contributing to the growing body of knowledge concerning “transfer” in the Writing Studies discipline—a contribution that will ideally inform FYC instructors’ best practices.

Instruments

Phase One

I implemented semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth responses from faculty members (see Appendix A). I made this decision under the assumption that the responses from faculty members in the Composition program would be complex and thorough, given their professional position and expertise in the field; furthermore, I envisioned this complexity to be captured by not closing questions off with limited response options. As opposed to a structured interview format, semi-structured interviews allow for a “greater freedom” that then permits extra “probing and clarification” in regards to the responses from research subjects (Mann 102). For example, one of the interview questions, “What do you see as the overall purpose of [First-Year Composition]?” warrants a varied response from research participants based on their current expertise and knowledge about First-Year Composition. Thus, the openness to complexity is achieved—something that multiple choice question such as “Do you believe that the purpose of First-Year Composition is...” does not. Here, I sought interviewee elaboration and articulation of their own beliefs that were not colored by my own subjectivities—something that might have occurred if my questions were more structured.

In contemporary Composition research on transfer and prior knowledge, focus group methodology has been predominately used to understand current faculty values and beliefs (Zepernick, 126-127). Yet, focus group methodology has not been deployed here, given that I assumed a focus group with both GTAs and Directors of Composition involved might influence

responses from GTAs as they are “lower” on the hierarchy in terms of both pay, expertise, and experience; I did not want those more “novice” First-Year Composition faculty members to be influenced by responses by experienced faculty members or feel compelled to say the “right thing” for fear of being judged. After all, for GTAs, Directors of Composition are the closest equivalent to a supervisor.

Rachel Ayrton clarifies this idea of focus group power dynamics in “The Micro-Dynamics of Power and Performance in Focus Groups.” Here, Ayrton offers a brief literature review describing the influence of power on focus group sessions. Ayrton concludes that current literature involved in this area establishes power as “a procedural problem that sabotages interaction and therefore limits data quality...which leaves little space for the observation of everyday interaction, much less any insight into power dynamics within the group” (325). Thus, through the use of semi-structured interviews instead of focus groups, I attempted to address the negative effects of power dynamics that literature shows has the potential to arise in a focus group setting.

Phase Two

The survey instrument used in this phase consisted of 17 questions with four closed-ended questions response types and 14 open-ended response types (see Appendix B). I broke up this survey into four different sections in an attempt to glean information in regards to the following areas: expectations for the purpose First Year Composition; the transferability of First Year Composition course content; awareness of First Year Composition course concepts and content; and definitions, beliefs, and examples of “good writing.”

As a whole, the survey is informed by Dana Driscoll’s study deployed in “Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain.” Specifically, Driscoll’s questions regarding what she refers to as

“transfer questions” have been repurposed here in both their closed and open-ended formats. The close ended questions repurposed from the Driscoll study are:

- “What I will learn in my First-Year Composition course will help me with other [college] courses.”
- “I expect my First-Year Composition course to prepare me for writing in my major.”
- “I expect my First-Year Composition course to help me with writing beyond college.”
- “I expect my First-Year Composition course to prepare me for college writing.”

Students were able to note the extent to which they agreed with these responses via a 5-option, Likert-Scale. Driscoll also offers the space for research participants to elaborate on their responses in the form of open-ended responses. For example, follow-up questions were asked as to “why” students expect the FYC course to prepare them for writing in their major or career, etc. Also, open-ended questions were repurposed here from the Driscoll study, allowing students to produce a variety of responses. The questions were:

- “What do you think a First-Year Composition course is all about?”
- “What do you expect to learn in this class?”

Building off of this frame, I added additional questions that I thought best expanded these areas of emphasis that attempted to approach the tension between high school English courses and First-Year Composition, such as students’ expectations for the course and what the course actually aims to do, as well as students’ conceptions of “good” writing.

Driscoll’s findings suggest that students’ conceptions and definitions of “good writing” are important in terms of understanding “perceptions of transfer” (13). Furthermore, in *Writing Across Contexts*, Robertson, Yancey, and Taczak find that students’ conceptions of “good”

writing is correlated to the works that they read, or what has been circulated as “good” writing publicly. Therefore, I chose to add additional questions to this survey instrument in an attempt to explore these theories. Students were asked to complete the following statements about “good writing” as well as provide examples regarding what they believe “good” writing is:

- “I believe that ‘good writing’ is...”
- “I believe that a ‘good writer’ is someone who...”
- “Who are some examples of ‘good writers’ and why?”
- Please provide 1-2 examples of texts that you consider ‘good’ and explain why.

I derived these questions from a study conducted by Jeff Sommers in which he asked his students on the first day of class to complete statements such as “I believe writing...” and “I believe writing courses ...” (104). These questions were used to gauge students’ prior knowledge and unearth the complexity behind students’ participation in the course upon their arrival; thus, they are relevant to this present study.

Phase Three

Here I used a semi-structured interview script with questions that attempted to elicit responses in regards to the following areas: affect and writing, prior knowledge about writing, and prior experiences with writing and the writing classroom (see Appendix C). I derived my questions from the Driscoll study mentioned above, which actually originated in a study conducted by Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick titled “Disciplinary and Transfer: Students’ Perceptions of Learning to Write.” These questions aim to elicit responses from First-Year Composition students regarding their previous English courses and academic writing experiences and the assessment practices used in these contexts and, hence, are applicable to the scope of this current study. Additionally, I also derived questions for these interviews from the studies

conducted in Robertson, Yancey, and Taczak's *Sites of Writing*. This grouping of questions aimed to uncover students' relationships with writing based on their previous and personal experience with writing and writing classrooms.

The only question included in this interview script that was not derived from an existing study aims to uncover some "key experiences" in students' experiences as writers, both in the academy and not:

- "Think back through your experiences with writing. Are there any key experiences that you can recall that have influenced your approach to writing?"

This question was included because current research by Robertson, Yancey, and Taczak suggests that students potentially are constrained by certain writing "outcomes" in their high school courses, such as high-stakes assessment exams, placement exams, and overall assessment practices (106).

Data Analysis

As I collected a plethora of data from qualitative interviews from different subject populations as well as data from open-ended *and* closed ended survey responses, all of the data was analyzed simultaneously in order to uncover a more robust understanding of the relationships between sample populations (Tashakkori and Teddlie 126). In all of the qualitative phases of this study, I analyzed the data through coding procedures outlined below; this included the open-ended questions of the surveys in phase two. As mentioned before, my coding focused on the qualitative, open-ended responses from surveys—all of the responses to the Likert-scale questions were analyzed based on percentages that then allowed me to comment on broader trends the data suggested. In future studies, inferential statistics could be used to determine the relationships between variables which might lead to new interpretations.

Ultimately, a “grounded theory approach” guided my data analysis, even though I cannot claim a grounded theory; rather, I was informed by an approach where the researcher attempts to uncover findings present in the data itself without applying any existing frameworks or theories to the data under examination. In a word, I attempted to generate findings from the existing data *only* through a method known as “constant comparative analysis,” forwarded by Glaser and Strauss in “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” (1). This is a method that “is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (but not previous testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems” (104). Furthermore, Melanie Birks and Jane Mills in “Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide” discuss the method as a “constant comparison of incident with incident in the data” that then “leads to the initial generation of codes” (94). From there, data is then always “compared with existing codes...codes are compared with codes, groups of codes are collapsed into categories with which future codes are then compared to categories and are subsequently compared with categories (94).”

For this study, my coding procedures were heavily influenced by Teresa Carmichael and Natalie Cunningham’s discussion of the “incorporation of gerund coding into the analytic process based on the study data” as articulated in figure 1. Thus, as the qualitative data sets were initially coded as “concepts,” they then began to generate categories that related to each other and which then informed the discovery of “themes.”

For example, for the current study interview transcriptions and open-ended survey responses were initially coded “into as many categories as possible,” which were then compared and essentialized into core categories (Glaser and Strauss (105-108). After completing these initial coding procedures, the emphasis then shifted to comparing “incident with properties of the

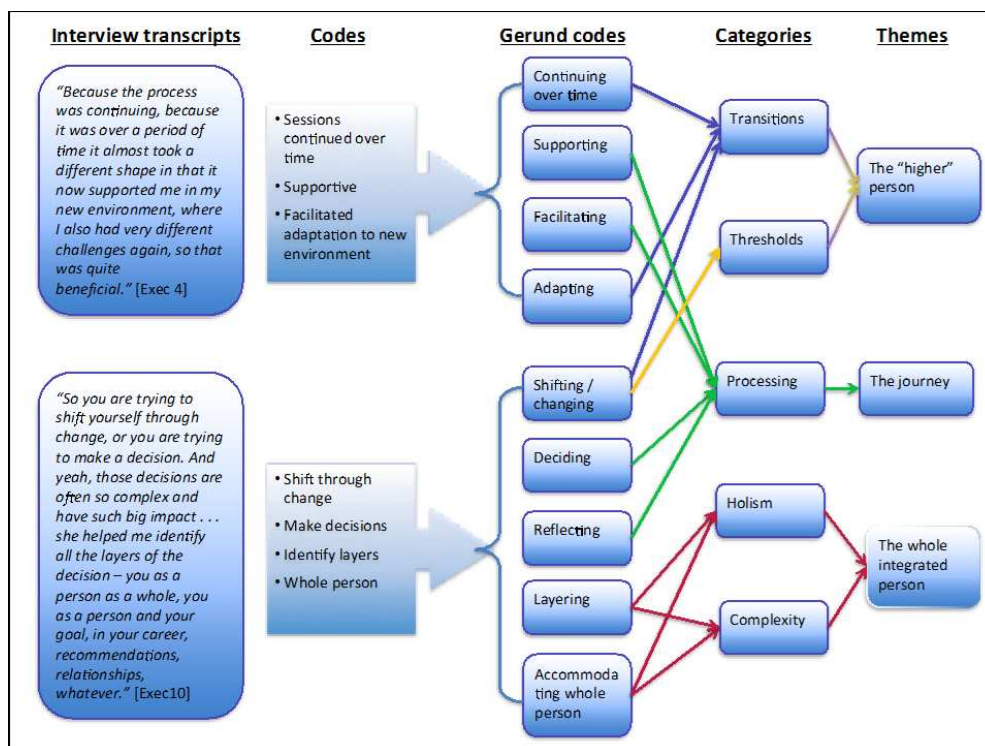


Figure 1: Cunningham, Natalie and Teresa Carmichael. "Incorporation of gerund coding into the analytic process based on study data," Theoretical Data Collection and Data Analysis with Gerunds in a Constructivist Grounded Theory Study." *Electronic Journal on Business Research Methods*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2017, pp. 59-73.

category that resulted from initial comparisons of incidents" until "theoretical saturation"

occurs—the point at which no new incident can progress the category created by the existing data (108,111). Outlined below in Table 1 is a sample of my own coding procedures used when analyzing students' open-ended responses to the survey questions. Specifically, Table 1 is an example of how data saturated when students responded to the question, "Please explain why you think this course will or will not prepare you for future writing assignments in your major courses."

Additionally, Table 2 presented below shows an example of the coding procedure I used when analyzing data from interviews with faculty, specifically in terms of the question, "what are 2-3 concepts you want students to transfer from the course?"

Table 1: Sample coding procedure for open-ended survey questions.

Open Ended-Response	Open Codes	Gerund Codes	Categories	Themes
"I don't particularly expect a general Composition course like this to be extremely helpful for my future as a biology major, but I also don't think it would be useless. I think what would be more helpful would be a scientific writing class so that I can focus on the sort of writing which is going to take up most of the rest of my work as an undergraduate student."	I don't particularly expect a general Composition course like this to be extremely helpful for my future as a biology major (discipline-negative attitude), but I also don't think it would be useless. (neutral) I think what would be more helpful would be a scientific writing class (discipline-specific) so that I can focus on the sort of writing which is going to take up most of the rest of my work as an undergraduate student (relevance-value).	Ascribing negative to neutral value based on discipline Offering suggestion for more discipline specific writing Ascribing value to discipline-specific writing	Disciplines Values Interests	Student expectations and relation to discipline
While I think that learning foundational writing is very important for any major, my major is chemistry, so unfortunately there are limits to what I can absorb here that will impact my career as a chemist I think a class focusing on lab reports specifically might be more immediately valuable to me at the moment.	While I think that learning foundational writing (foundation) is very important for any major (discipline) (value), my major is chemistry, so unfortunately there are limits (limitations) to what I can absorb here that will impact my career as a chemist (discipline-tension) I think a class focusing on lab reports (discipline-specific genres) specifically might be more immediately valuable (value) to me at the moment	Ascribing broad value to the course Valuing learning writing as applicable Limiting relevance due to discipline Ascribing value to learning discipline-specific writing	Essential skills Values Disciplines Relevance	Student values of writing in relation to discipline

Table 2: Examples of Coding Procedure from Faculty Interviews

Interview Transcription	Open Coding	Gerund Coding	Categories	Themes
"First-Year writing courses as a group help prepare students to start thinking differently. We want them to think in a broader sense about how they would operate in the world. So, the rhetorical situation becomes extraordinarily important. You've got this critical idea of audience and purpose you've got context you've got the fact that you're working with a large number of sources you've got technology...and it also instills in them this critical thinking in a way that is consistent with a lot of the issues we face at the university. How do we get our students to think critically? How do we get them to engage with ideas? How do we get them to move from the point of acquiring information to beginning to apply, to analyze, to reflect on things—to begin to evaluate and create their own stuff?"	Shift in thought Broader perspective Complex world University expectations Analysis	Complicating the world Bringing awareness Critically thinking	Complex Operations Relationships	Social Awareness Student Operations
"Writing is always located in a rhetorical situation and I hope that you'll [student] be able to take a moment before you decide to put your valuable words out into the world and think about what that context is and what the consequences are of entering into that conversation. I'm thinking about the academy but I'm thinking beyond the academy too... I want them [students] to be thinking about the relationship between context and audience, their communication choices, the change that they want to see,	Social context Critical citizens Social change	Reflecting Evaluating consequences Evaluating contexts	Operations Awareness Relationships	Social Awareness Student Operations.

the kind of world that they want to live in, and how important language and writing ends up being in that world.”				
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Based on this coding procedure, my data revealed the following themes as shown in Table 3 below. These themes and the differences between subject groups will be discussed more in depth in the data analysis chapter of this project.

Table 3: Coding Themes for Data Analysis

Subject Population	Themes around “good writing.”	Themes around the “purpose” of First Year Composition
Faculty	Responsive to situation; influenced by university context	Overcoming stigma of good writing; adaptability; social awareness; student operations
Students	Popular literature; affective; immersive; presentation-based; personal satisfaction	Students’ expectations and relation to discipline; students’ values of writing in relation to discipline; students values and expectations in relation to their personal interests

Methodological Limitations

According to Creswell, the data in a qualitative study is always “mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines” (147). Thus, qualitative research becomes “interpretive research” where the researcher actively operates as the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis.” The implications of this positioning are important to acknowledge, as the researcher’s “biases, values, and judgements” inevitably influence not only how the data collection proceeds, but how the data is analyzed as well (147). As a researcher, this influence becomes difficult to negotiate, especially in terms of a grounded theory approach and constant comparative analysis, as Glaser and Strauss have well documented in “The Discovery of Grounded Theory.”

Glaser and Strauss argue that one of the main tenets of grounded theory is that the engagement with the data is dependent upon the level of “theoretical sensitivity” or the ability to critically reflect on one’s theoretical knowledge that is cultivated through experience within their discipline or area of inquiry (46). Yet, they claim that “potential theoretical sensitivity is lost”

when the researcher allows specific theories to influence their data collection and analysis procedures, as opposed to approaching the data inductively, allowing the data to speak for itself and for categories to form. Consequently, the researcher becomes “doctrinaire and can no longer ‘see around’ [their] pet theory or any other,” which leads to a limitation of what the data could potentially yield, as the researcher’s analysis procedures are now skewed by a predisposition to *find* something specific that adheres to specific theories, rather than work to generate their own (46). Thus, Glaser and Strauss argue that the researcher must work to find a “balance” between the current existing theories surrounding the phenomena under study and what the data presents; they note that reading extensively around the area of study increases the potential of skewing the analysis, and thus limits the possibilities of what the resulting theory can yield (253).

In the case of this current research project, the balance between reading the literature and performing a “pure” constant comparative analysis (one that aligns with *true* grounded theory) was difficult to achieve for a few reasons. First, I am a novice researcher, just beginning to explore the current topics under debate in the Writing Studies discipline. Consequently, the reading I engaged in prior to performing this study *was* extensive, thus influencing the data analysis within the light of present literature. As the initial design for this research project was created specifically with Dana Driscoll’s findings in mind, as presented in “Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain” as well as the findings presented in *Writing Across Contexts* by Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, the instruments and data collection procedures were not truly created and informed by exploration within the datasets themselves, but rather as a result of developing knowledge of this researcher, as I conducted extensive reading on the area of study, transfer of learning in writing courses. Consequently, I attempted to navigate the tension between applying theories *a priori* to a dataset and generating new theories from the data set.

Additionally, I limited my findings in this study by only interviewing GTAs in Phase One who are a part of the Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change (WRSC) discipline. In a future study, it would be important to hear what other English Studies GTAs believe about the First-Year Composition course they teach, given that they may adhere to a completely different disciplinary subset of English that promotes different epistemologies. Yet, I find that my choice to only include WRSC GTAs is reflective of my positioning as a novice researcher. I attempt to limit my project in scope by limiting my engagement with a participant group that might be expected to align more fully with the central philosophy of the course—a rhetorical approach. Future studies might consider how GTAs from varied disciplines employ multiple and valuable ways of being and seeing that influence their expectations of students and their writing.

Another limitation is that I did not provide incentives to students or faculty to participate in either of the phases of this study. While faculty still were willing to participate despite no incentives, the effects of non-incentivizing students led to a diminished sample population of students for the interview portion. Within this diminished population, the majority of the students who did participate noted that they had “good relationships with writing” which, given that they volunteered to talk with me for no longer than 30 minutes, makes sense—they had somewhat of a passion for writing and were interested in talking more about it. Further studies could certainly benefit from a more diverse population of students who come to the writing course with varying relationships with writing—some positive and some negative.

Lastly, the COVID-19 Pandemic limited this study, especially since this study relied on human subject research and human interaction—something that was to a large extent out of the question given public health guidelines and mandates. I saw this pandemic affecting student participation, directly related to the incentives paragraph I’ve just discussed. For instance, in a

non-pandemic era, I could have easily offered incentives such as pizza or various food and drinks for students who are willing to participate in the interviews. However, due to public health protocols, I was legally not allowed to do this and, as a result, worked only with a small subset of the students who initially indicated interest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This IRB-approved study gathered data from the following participants at the beginning of the semester: eight Composition faculty members who participated in semi-structured interviews in phase one, 88 First-Year Composition students from eight sections of First-Year Composition who participated in a survey in phase two, and four of the 88 students who agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews in phase three. Therefore, this section will analyze the data from all three phases of this research study: interviews with faculty, surveys with students, and interviews with students. It will begin with focusing on data collected from faculty members during phase one before focusing on data collected from students in the survey and interview phases. Within each section, subsections will describe beliefs and attitudes of the respective group. In the last section, I will circle back to data collected in phase one and articulate some potential “barriers” faculty perceive with regards to explicitly teaching for transfer in First-Year Composition.

Additionally, research participants from phases one and three will be referred to via their pseudonyms. For clarification purposes, Natalie and Molly are both Graduate Teaching Assistants enrolled in the WRSC concentration; Kurt and Martha are Composition Instructors; Tom and Casey are Composition Lead Instructors; Elaine is the current Director of Composition; and Chris is a past Director of Composition who is also currently teaching First-Year Composition, as shown in Table 4 below. For data analysis of phase three interviews with First-Year Composition students, data will be analyzed from students with pseudonyms Vienna, Elena, Nikki, and Carly, respectively.

Table 4: Positions and Names of Faculty Members

Position	Name
Current/Previous Directors of Composition	Elaine; Chris
Composition Lead Instructors	Tom; Casey
Composition Instructors	Kurt; Martha
Graduate Teaching Assistants	Natalie; Molly

Composition Faculty Members’ Beliefs That “Good Writing” is Rhetorically-Based is Influenced by Institutional and Disciplinary Contexts

My coding procedures indicated that, when asked their beliefs about what “good writing is,” all eight Composition faculty across four categories of instructor type or category agreed that “good writing” is rhetorically based. All faculty responses focused on audience, purpose, context, an articulation of the interaction between these concepts, or delineation of the entire rhetorical situation model, as proposed in Tom’s response—a Composition Lead Instructor—that “good writing responds to the situation.” As this response makes clear, key faculty in this writing program promote a specific approach to writing and, consequently, a level of consistency in the delivery of content.

Additionally, my coding procedures revealed the theme “influence of university context” as it corresponds to two faculty interview responses: Kurt, a Composition instructor, and Chris, a past Director of Composition. This theme suggests that the programmatic context one instructor finds themselves in influences the conceptions of what “good writing” is and, consequently, how composition faculty approach assessing student writing.

Kurt, a Composition Instructor, drew on his previous experience teaching at a different institution to illustrate this idea of how context can shape definitions of “good writing”:

Obviously at [university] we base [First-Year Composition] on rhetoric but in my previous grad before my MFA it was more of a cultural criticism approach and this was

years ago but it was this idea of trying to communicate like an analysis of something and it's still similar to logic like if you can analyze a graphic text or an ad that sexualizes women or sexualizes men how can you communicate the different facets of that? So essentially for that approach it's like can you break down the different points and articulate it? For a rhetorical approach it's like can you communicate within this situation that you've determined.

Thus, Kurt might have valued “good writing” as something different when working in a “cultural criticism” approach that emphasizes deep “semiotic analysis” in light of societal forces or “cultural codes” (Berlin 26). Additionally, in an interview with Chris, a former Director of Composition who is currently teaching First-Year Composition, he noted that the “role” of First-Year Composition within the university “varies depending on who’s directing it and who your university leadership is and how the faculty as a whole sees it,” suggesting that differences could potentially arise in regard to ideas of what “good writing” is, depending on what program one finds oneself embedded in and the people associated with the program. Therefore, context appears to be an influential factor that shapes faculty beliefs and values in terms of the outcomes of First-Year Composition. Specifically, within the state of Colorado (where this study took place), there are contextual factors that help explain and “situate” (to reference Lisa Ede’s idea in *Situation Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*) faculty members’ responses.³

³ While Ede offers an extensive argument that culminates in a “politics of location” regarding Composition as a whole, she does offer a short segment regarding the importance of understanding how one is situated *individually* in the field. Ede argues that it is essential to “acknowledge [one’s] own situatedness in the work of Composition, and the ways this situatedness influences [one’s] perspective” (21). Drawing from Jacqueline Jones Royster’s ideas of “passionate attachments,” Ede shows how one’s passions, interests, histories, and identities cannot be separated from one’s course of action—in her case, she discusses how these attachments influence and inform her own research (21). I hope to extend this idea of situating oneself through one’s “passionate attachments” by also accounting for the moves instructors must make as they navigate between their own “passionate attachments” and the desired outcomes for First-Year Composition, the institutional concerns and expectations established by the

Currently, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education states in the “Competencies for Statewide Guaranteed Transfer” or the “GT Pathways Curriculum,” that, for a GT-CO2 course (GT Pathways), students are expected to leave the First-Year Composition course with the ability to “employ rhetorical knowledge” which is explained as students being able to “exhibit a thorough understanding of audience, purpose, genre, and the context that is responsive to the situation” (GT Pathways). Yet, this adherence to a rhetorical approach to writing is a revision as of 2016. Before, the GT Competencies statement for “written communication” spanning from 2005-2016 did *not* include any mention of rhetorical writing; rather, it included broad areas of “information acquisition,” “application,” “analysis,” “synthesis,” “communication,” and “evaluation”—areas that allow an incredible amount of latitude as well as potential for inconsistency in programs (Competency: Written Communication). Furthermore, in terms of holding students accountable for being able to repurpose writing knowledge past First-Year Composition, the areas mentioned in the older competency statement do not guide non-Composition faculty in a specific way to engage the prior knowledge of students and facilitate transfer of learning. In other words, the older competencies are broad; “analysis” lacks a center of gravity especially when compared to “rhetorical analysis” given that the latter is a specific theoretical framework and includes a substantial body of literature.

Making the distinction between the two competency statements is an important distinction to make as it suggests that the Colorado Commission on Higher Education is working towards consistency of this one approach for all writing programs. Therefore, if a student transfers between schools (say, from a 2-year college to a 4-year college), they should

systems one participates in, and also students’ expectations, passions, and interests regarding the First-Year Composition course. For example, as I will discuss later on, some students come to the course passionate about expressive writing—a passion potentially at odds with the discipline’s approach.

understand the expectations for writing and maintain this consistency. Also, it suggests that, in terms of transfer, a “rhetorical approach” is relevant to students as they move from their First-Year Composition courses into their disciplines and careers.

One of the effects of the emphasis on both a state-endorsed and disciplinary-endorsed rhetorical approach is that it creates the expectation for First-Year Composition faculty to adhere to rhetorical principles. Therefore, while the responses from faculty that indicate that “good writing” is something that is rhetorically-based might seem an obvious outcome of theory, the articulation of standard rhetorical outcomes suggests that there *should* be a sense of consistency within a program—and we can expect this consistency to occur given the standards and adherence to these standards. If responses indicated otherwise, this could be a serious point of inquiry for Composition programs to address.

Therefore, on one level, there are the institutional and discipline-specific expectations for the outcomes of the First-Year Composition course. Yet, these outcomes are abstracted from the material experiences of the faculty. While they work to inform faculty ideas of what the First-Year Composition course should essentially be doing, it’s helpful to understand the material expectations faculty have in terms of outcomes for the First-Year Composition course. Understanding these expectations for faculty can help us situate their positionalities when compared to what the students expect to gain from the course. If faculty expect one thing, and students another, then this is the exact point of tension (or misalignment) that we have to work with in our instruction.

Faculty Believe that the Rhetorical Model has Various Affordances for First-Year Composition Students

As previous sections have noted, all Composition faculty across rank and appointment type at this institution work through a rhetorical approach to the writing class, and they work within the idea of “outcomes” located in the various statements that guide the field, such as “The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” *The Framework for Success for Postsecondary Writing Instruction*, and (for the state of Colorado specifically) the “Competencies for Statewide Guaranteed Transfer.” Yet, my coding also revealed that First-Year Composition faculty identify their own key outcomes of CO150. The themes I generated from coding faculty responses in regards to what they believed the First-Year Composition course should be accomplishing were “overcoming the stigma of ‘good’ writing,” “adaptability,” and “social awareness and student operations.” These themes ultimately emphasize *why* the rhetorical situation is an apt theoretical model for the transfer of knowledge within university contexts and beyond.

Faculty Believe That Overcoming the Stigma of “good writing” is a Key Area of Focus for the First-Year Composition Course

Responses from faculty also indicated that they hope to dispel students of the myth that they were not “good writers.” This took a couple different forms; Martha, a Composition Instructors member, noted that she wanted to urge students to understand writing not so much as “good or bad writing,” but “effective or ineffective writing” which they then related to the rhetorical situation as a key to effective writing:

I have a lot of students that fear of not being good writers and so I try to emphasize it’s not about good or bad writing it’s about effective or ineffective writing and then I try to link that to the rhetorical situation so what’s important about thinking about audience and

purpose and context and the genre you're writing in and how you effectively reach that audience?

Two other interview responses from instructors brought notions of “improving” and “practicing” into overcoming students’ potential anxiety about being “good” writers. One Composition Lead Instructor, Tom, focused on overcoming the stigma surrounding “good writing” by demonstrating how all writers are in constant states of development:

Usually half of [students] say: “Well, I’m not a good writer,” or something along those lines. I’m sure you’ve seen similar comments and I want them to get rid of that notion just to remind them that everybody is a student writer to some extent no matter how long you do it you’re always learning something you’re always improving your craft and I want them to get that out of their heads because I think that’s nothing more than a hurdle that causes them undue stress.

Here, we see this instructor noting the importance of reminding students to always accept their novice-ship—a theory articulated by Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz (127).

Molly, a Graduate Teaching Assistant, focused on the idea of debunking writing as beyond a skill:

I think there are some broader lessons from CO150 that can be taken away to up to anything. Everything is a skill and can be practiced and that you know as long as you are putting in that little bit of effort and have a good attitude you can do what it is you want to or need to.

As it will be shortly discussed, dispelling the myth of the “good writer” will be important, given that student’s conceptions of “good writing” are different than what faculty believe them to be;

as we have seen, faculty focus on adaptability, while students tend to lean more towards creativity.

Adaptability

As First-Year Composition faculty articulated their beliefs about the essential transferability of the First-Year Composition course, the theme of “adaptability” emerged. Tom suggested that “adaptability” is related to teaching students to “have the tools they need to adapt to different situations”; here, the “tools” are in reference to MLA style guides and the rhetorical situation:

That’s the primary thing I would like them to take away—that they can adapt and that they’ve been show ways to do that and so I just prompt them to think about the questions they need to ask in any given situation to really figure out what they want to do so that’s the primary thing: adaptability.

It’s apparent that the “question they need to ask in any given situation” is in direct reference to the components of the rhetorical triangle—questions like “who/what is the author, audience, context, genre, or purpose?”

While Tom, a Composition Lead Instructor, explicitly articulated the term “adaptability,” the reasoning was echoed throughout multiple responses. Chris, a past Director of Composition, echoed this idea of tools, using genre as an example:

I believe it’s important to take away an understanding of the tools that they have—the notion that there are genres, that there are particular types of tools you can use to create things, to design...writing as a form of design. But for me those things are also part of the rhetorical situation that they take away with them.

Natalie, a Graduate Teaching Assistant, noted that that she wanted to foster a sense of students understanding of how the rhetorical situation can help students navigate situations past academic writing:

Building off of the rhetorical situation...it doesn't just apply to academic writing. It applies to when you enter a new space like when you enter a classroom like really consider the rhetorical situation, what's going on around you, who is it meant for, what is the purpose, and you know it's like bringing that awareness of the rhetorical situation outside of Composition to other disciplines and situations.

Here, the rhetorical situation functions in terms of outcomes due to its focus on allowing students the ability to adapt to a plethora of communication situations. Specifically, through a rhetorical approach, students are provided the tools to ask the questions to successfully navigate any communication they find themselves in.

Social Awareness and Student Operations

Responses from interviews with Composition faculty also indicated that they want students to see the social context of writing, emphasizing that through a rhetorical approach to writing, students have the ability to necessarily complicate the world in order to understand its complexities and intricacies.

Chris noted this “shift” in thinking they want to promote in First-Year Composition students:

First-Year writing courses as a group help prepare students to start thinking differently.

We want them to think in a broader sense about how they would operate in the world. So, the rhetorical situation becomes extraordinarily important.

Here, the rhetorical situation is directly linked to expanding students' positions in the world through critical thinking. Chris continued, expanding on why he sees this as the case:

You've got this critical idea of audience and purpose...you've got context...you've got the fact that you're working with a large number of sources you've got technology...and it also instills in them this critical thinking in a way that is consistent with a lot of the issues we face at the university. How do we get our students to think critically? How do we get them to engage with ideas? How do we get them to move from the point of acquiring information to beginning to apply, to analyze, to reflect on things—to begin to evaluate and create their own stuff?

Therefore, as Chris noted, students are able to see the world more “critically” through taking a deep-dive into absorbing the nodes of the rhetorical triangle as well as into the interaction between the points of the triangle. Additionally, he focuses on how he can encourage students to think about how communication is influenced by a variety of factors, ultimately complicating any communication situation.

This notion of students “operating” in the world in critical ways through the use of the rhetorical situation is the focus of Elaine's response when asked what they would tell a student the knowledge that they want them to transfer from the First-Year Composition course:

Writing is always located in a rhetorical situation and I hope that you'll [student] be able to take a moment before you decide to put your valuable words out into the world and think about what that context is and what the consequences are of entering into that conversation. I'm thinking about the academy but I'm thinking beyond the academy too... I want them [students] to be thinking about the relationship between context and audience, their communication choices, the change that they want to see, the kind of

world that they want to live in, and how important language and writing ends up being in that world.

Here, Elaine suggested that as communication situations become more complex for students, the rhetorical situation can aid them in making sense of this more complex world through taking a moment to understand that the communicative choices one makes have social ramifications and implications. Furthermore, Elaine's response indicates that there is a relationship between students' communicative strategies, the rhetorical situation, and a social change element— "the change that they want to see, the kind of world that they want to live in." This idea of writing as a means to "change" something is echoed in a response from Chris's response quoted in this section.

Elaine further noted that students have a purpose to their writing—one that is more in line with these "change" initiatives:

They're writing to make an action in the world, to change people's beliefs, to change their knowledge to convince or persuade them to take action or to believe something.

Students can then be seen as working through the rhetorical situation as way to think more critically about the world while also understanding that—as they begin to unravel the complexities of the world—they have a purpose of affecting change to some degree in their audiences. This latter notion approaches the idea of "rhetorical agency"—a term used to qualify the current goals of a democratic pedagogies and realistically approach the notion of "agency" which has become a buzzword of sorts in conversations surrounding the goals of rhetorically-based Composition.

In "Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted," Marilyn M. Cooper combats the notion of actual "agency" being possible. Here "agent" is understood as "one who through

conscious intention or free will causes change in the world” which suggests that we are subjects acting upon the world, treating it as an object and thus able to make change but subjugating the object and acting on it (421). Cooper suggests that a more relational, situational notion of “rhetorical agency” must be accepted, arguing that, instead of a subject acting on an object, it’s more of “agents acting with agents” which decenters the subject as someone doing the act and situates them in a complicated, social web where the audience of a situation too has agency and “concrete others who have opinions and beliefs grounded in the experiences and perceptions and meanings constructed in their brains” (442). Therefore, instead of viewing “agency” at students attempting to “change” the world, “agency” in a rhetorical sense promotes the idea of changing *with* the world, in all of its complexity. Thus, “rhetorical agency” as promoted by Cooper suggests that a subject operates with a complex awareness of their surroundings and contains the ability to adapt to these surroundings as a result of this awareness.

Faculty at Different Levels of Expertise Differ in Their Articulations of the Purpose of the First-Year Composition Course

Up until this point, my data analysis has focused on broader themes that emerged from interviews with Composition faculty. The data was coded with the goal of understanding broader themes and similarities in terms of how faculty view the transferability of First-Year Composition content. This section will focus on the differences in responses to the interview question “What do you see as the overall purpose of CO150?” from the different categories of faculty members—Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), Composition Instructors, Composition Lead Instructors, and Current/Past Directors of Composition. Since faculty in this study inhabit different positions, they are each situated differently within university and disciplinary context; consequently, their responses reflected this difference in situatedness. Results suggest that the

more embedded faculty members are in the discipline, the more complex their articulations regarding the purpose of First-Year Composition become.

Furthermore, in regards to instructors' responses when asked about the purpose of the First-Year Composition course, my coding indicated the following themes:

- Graduate Teaching Assistants discussed the purpose of the course as preparing students to grapple with different approaches and definitions of writing that would then contribute to their success as students in new contexts, leading to the emergence of the category “engaging conceptions of writing.” This category contributes to the larger theme that emerged—“limited”—given that Graduate Teaching Assistants viewed the purpose of the course in limited ways when compared to more experienced faculty.
- Composition Instructors still saw the purpose of the course in “limited” but rather focused their responses on how the First-Year Composition course can prepare students for the academic demands they will face throughout college, thus leading to the emergence of the category: “academic preparation and success in academic contexts.”
- Composition Lead Instructors' responses indicated the categories of “engaging conceptions of writing,” “writing as an epistemic act,” “adaptability” and “engaging multiple perspectives.” Composition Lead Instructors saw the purpose of the course in more complicated ways than Graduate Teaching Assistants and Composition Instructors which led to the emergence of another theme, “multiple” in regards to the purposes of the course.
- Response from the current and previous Directors of Composition indicated the categories of “social and academic awareness” as well as “complicating thought processes.” While these categories are not as numerous as the categories that emerged

from responses from Composition Lead Instructors, the categories are more abstracted which led to the generation of another theme: “Abstracted/Complex.”

Graduate Teaching Assistants

GTAs Natalie and Molly had different articulations of what they believed about the purpose the First-Year Composition course. While they both suggested that the course should, in a way, meet students where they are in terms of their beliefs about writing, Natalie’s response appeared to be more in tune with the discipline’s expectations for course outcomes.

Natalie envisioned the purpose of the course to be something that “support[s] students in their academic writing” as well as something that “start[s] creating that identity as a writer.” Additionally, she noted that the First-Year Composition course is a space where students should engage with a rhetorical view of writing as a way to broaden their ideas regarding what writing is; the course has the goal of “opening [students] up to what writing could be,” stating that writing is more “nebulous” than students initially believe it to be. Here, Natalie displays an awareness of the rhetorical situation—she hopes to meet students where they are in terms of their limited knowledge of writing as a way to broaden their perspective and, thus, help them be successful in future academic contexts.

On the other hand, Molly’s response did not focus on specific, rhetorical skills but rather broadly approached the course as a space where students can “practice” writing and learn to understand writing as a skill to be developed as opposed to a talent:

I think that putting writing in that category as a skill and not a talent because I feel like that’s the sort of cultural dichotomy that we face...I think it really is about developing writing skills and realizing that writing is a skill that can be practiced and getting a better understanding of it from that perspective and realizing that it is a practice.

While Molly's response approaches the idea that students have certain conceptions regarding what writing is, Molly does not appear to articulate *what* students should be practicing, and *why* they should be practicing for reasons beyond their personal understanding.

Overall, Natalie and Molly appear to be articulating the purpose of the course in limited ways—they view the course as only really doing one or two things, whether that be allowing the space for students to “practice” or to prepare students for their future writing situations through broadening their definitions of writing.

Composition Instructors

Composition Instructors Martha and Kurt articulated the purpose of the First-Year Composition course as something that prepares students for academic success. Martha noted that “First-Year writing should be able to transfer to other areas of their [students] college experience” and should accomplish this by “letting students write about things that maybe interest them, are related to their major, or [things] that they could see themselves using to write a lab report or to do a research project in another class.” Therefore, Martha's response correlates the “purpose” with students in their immediate academic contexts.

Kurt's response is related to this but is more focused on the how the First-Year Composition course is conceptualized as a space to aid students transition into a new stage of their life:

A big part of it [First-Year Composition] is just how to navigate being a student in general and then hopefully you can add other layers on top of that as an instructor, but I think first and foremost it's a matter of preparing them for the next three years which is why we try to get them in the first year.

This emphasizes a larger purpose of the course which is to help students understand what it means to be student. Kurt also focused on broader skills such as “how to prepare them [students] for the rigor of time management or even just like management of being a human being.”

Therefore, it appears that Kurt envisions the course as having the purpose of preparing students for their immediate academic success—it is a foundational course that occurs earlier on so that students can understand the expectation of a college environment.

Composition Lead Instructors and Directors of Composition

While Graduate Teaching Assistants and Composition Instructors have valid responses regarding the purposes of the First-Year Composition course, differences arise especially when responses are compared to Composition Lead Instructors and Directors of Composition. As my data will suggest, as Composition faculty move into positions closer to administrative roles, their articulations of the “purpose” of First-Year Composition become increasingly multiple and complex.

Composition Lead Instructors

Composition Lead Instructors Tom and Casey suggested multiple purposes for the First-Year Composition course that focus on preparing students for future writing contexts both inside and outside of academic contexts. Tom was quick to note that “First-Year writing does a lot of things” before focusing in on three distinct areas: disabusing students of what they learned in high school, writing to creating knowledge instead of “reporting knowledge,” and fostering a sense of awareness in students in regards to how to “adapt” to various writing situations through providing them with “the framework to ask the questions they need to be able to understand that situation well enough to write to it.”

Casey also began her response by noting that she had “a million things running through her head” before focusing on being “clear in communication” through being able to “consider different contexts,” the ability to start “thinking outside of your own perspective and your own biases” while “being able to recognize the values [and] the ideas that other people have,” and the ability to critically evaluate how one gathers information in the world.

Therefore, these Composition Lead instructors show an increased awareness regarding the multiple purposes of the First-Year Composition course, ultimately suggesting more abstracted goals than the immediate, “college readiness” goals suggested by Composition Instructors; Composition Lead Instructors’ responses in this study seem to expand the purposes past the academy and into one’s overall critical operations. Furthermore, Composition Lead Instructors are more specific than Graduate Teaching Assistants in the implications of what this “practice” can accomplish, as well as what this new “nebulous” form of writing can afford for First-Year Composition students outside of academic contexts.

Directors of Composition

Similar to the Composition Lead Instructors, Current Director of Composition, Elaine and Past Director of Composition, Chris, mentioned multiple purposes for the First-Year Composition course. As Elaine noted that the purpose of First-Year Composition is “not just one thing,” she did locate the purpose within the immediate university context with nods to a broader applicability of the course to students’ personal lives. She stated that while the course aims to “help students understand what it means to be a writer at the university,” it also has the purpose of helping them understand what this means, specifically in terms of what it means “to be a critical reader” or “communicate rhetorically.” Expanding on this, Elaine suggested that one of the main purposes is “to help students understand that writing is a place they can turn to [in

order] to understand the world [and] to communicate with the world.” Thus, as a result, Elaine conveyed dual purposes for student outcomes: to be able to understand “the community aspects as well as the disciplinary aspects.”

Chris’s response was complex but ultimately focused on preparing students to engage more deeply with the world as well as developing their abilities to be successful in academic contexts. Chris focused on how the course prepares students to “start thinking differently” through engaging with a rhetorical view of writing, given that students are arising out of secondary contexts that promote the idea akin to “what do I have to do to get through this course?” Alongside of this response, Chris also noted that there still needs to be a certain level of preparing students for their disciplinary pursuits, noting that “we want to help students get to the point where they can write effectively for their disciplinary course.” Thus, Chris and Elaine’s responses are similar in the sense that they see a larger, social purpose to the First-Year Writing course, but also the practical, “college-readiness” aspect to it.

Therefore, as faculty become more embedded in First-Year Composition, the “purposes” of the course become increasingly complex, given that these faculty members inhabiting Composition Lead Instructor or Director of Composition roles have made it one of their professional focuses to understand how the outcomes of a First-Year Composition course are situated within university and disciplinary contexts. Additionally, it appears that the more situated faculty members are in the field of Writing Studies, the more they are able to abstract the goals from the course away from the current academic context. For instance, both Elaine and Chris’s responses focus on the idea that the course should complicate students’ world view—a seemingly large distance away from focusing on “practice,” as the main purpose of the course, as Molly suggested.

Students Have Their Own Points of Departures as a Result of their Experiences and Interests

This section will observe responses collected from student surveys and interviews in phases two and three. As Composition faculty members' points of departure have been analyzed in the previous section, this section will examine the beliefs and attitudes of First-Year Composition students articulated at the beginning of the course.

Working from Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's idea of "point of departure," the authors claim that there is a tangible influence of prior knowledge on "several dimensions of students' writing experience" (103). Here, the authors note that important factors to consider are students' "attitudes toward writing; the strategies they drew upon; the knowledge about writing contextualizing their practices, and, consequently, their development as writers" (103). As the authors also argue from their findings in their study, students "[see] themselves as writers through the lens of what we call a point of departure, which functioned as a primary point of reference as they began college composition." The authors here theorize that this point of departure consists of the beliefs and attitudes students have about writing, as shaped by their previous experiences with writing and writing contexts (105-106). More specifically, Yancey Robertson and Taczak note that students' point of departure is mostly made up of various influences "like grades and test scores" that influence how students see themselves as writers in the First-Year Composition classroom (106).

Through 88 survey responses and four semi-structured interviews with students (out of the 88 surveyed), I gleaned information regarding students' "point of departures" in areas regarding students' expectations for the course, as well as how students perceive the transferability of course content. Thus, this section attempts to locate students at their point of

departure in terms of what they expect the course will do for them in the future and what they will ideally transfer after completing the course.

Yancey, Robertson and Taczak understand transfer as “a dynamic activity through which students, like all composers, actively make use of prior knowledge as they respond to new writing tasks”; thus, prior knowledge is a key to consider in terms of how students approach the First-Year Composition course (103). Therefore, my surveys and interviews with students attempted to locate what students expected the course will ultimately do for them and where they see the course aiding them in the future—I attempt to locate students’ “points of departures” in terms different than Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak; while these authors focus on how students are “represented” as writers through various factors and assessment practices, my study focuses on what students are bringing to the course in terms of prior knowledge and attempts to work through these ideas that ultimately differ than the expectations from the course.

This idea correlates with the notion of “funds of knowledge” articulated by Norma Gonzalez, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti in the preface of *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. These authors state that funds of knowledge “is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (X). In other words, students come to the First-Year Composition course with knowledge from their life experiences that instructors can then engage and build from. As Genesee M. Carter approaches funds of knowledge in terms of literacies, she notes in “Mapping Students’ Funds of Knowledge in the First-Year Writing Classroom,” that instructors can actually “empower students by validating their home knowledge while teaching them how to be members of multiple communities” (25). Carter suggests that through the processes of attributing value to students’ knowledge upon their entrance into

college, students can become aware of how their prior knowledge is valuable in specific contexts that might not necessarily directly align with the one they are currently residing in—in this case the First-Year Composition classroom (25).

Therefore, in the context of my study, students enter the First-Year Composition course with various beliefs and attitudes towards writing as a result of their life experiences—these beliefs contribute to the formulation of students’ points of departure. Yet, while these experiences are *valid* experiences, they have the potential to influence students’ perceptions about the outcomes of the First-Year Composition course to the point where these perceptions form a mismatch with faculty perceptions, creating a point of tension that faculty must engage with in order to facilitate the transfer of course materials.

Overall, CO150 students’ have different points of departure from faculty as they differ in expertise and are situated differently within the university institution. Yet, as students have a surplus of writing knowledge, this writing knowledge misaligns with the faculty’s expectations and understandings of the course’s outcomes. This misalignment of instructor and student expectations is due to this very different positioning. After all, faculty are situated within disciplinary and university contexts that demands an adherence to a specific approach while students are not. As my data will soon suggest, First-Year Composition students are predominately operating out of contexts that do not emphasize a social approach to writing

Students Perceive “good writing” as Something Different Than Faculty in Terms of Popular Literature

As it has been established above, faculty perceive “good writing” as something that is rhetorically-based; “good writing” is writing that “responds to its situation.” Yet, when asked through open-ended survey questions what students believe “good writing is,” incoming First-

Year Composition, my coding indicated two themes that correspond with students' conceptions of "good writing": "affective" and "immersive." These codes suggest that students ultimately lack a comprehensive view of writing as something that is rhetorically-based and appear to latch on to more limited ideas of writing and lean towards the creative realm.

I saw these ideas broadly reflected in the students' responses to open-ended survey questions. While students do show signs of understanding that there are "readers" for writing, they focus on the affective dimension of writing and are limited in terms of understanding the rhetorical concept of "purpose" as multiple; for the majority of students, writing has *one* purpose, articulated in a plethora of ways. This corresponds with Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's idea of students having "absent prior knowledge" in terms of understanding "key writing concepts" which, from a Writing Studies perspective, implies that students cannot talk about their writing in terms that the discipline—ideas such as the rhetorical situation, audience, purpose, context, and genre (108).

In the open-ended section of the survey, when asked to complete the statement, "I believe that 'good writing' is..." students see writing as something that affects the reader as a result of the author's passionate interest in writing; students believe that "good writing" is something "important or memorable to the reader," "interesting," or something that "lure[s] someone into your work and make[s] your reading enjoyable." Furthermore, there is a notion that writing "enables readers to transport themselves into the identities, struggles, and environment the writer presents," suggesting that the writing must fully immerse the reader in scene—a creative writing construct.

This seems to stem from the idea provided by students in their open-ended responses to the same question that "good writing" is "written with passion and feeling," or "something that is

filled with passion and heart.” In an interview with one student in phase three, they echoed this idea of good writing as having an affective dimension to it, stating that they want writing to be “good and readable and to connect to someone.” Thus, while there is a mentioning of audience, students perceive that the goal of writing is to make your writing evocative of emotion.

Additionally, students’ survey responses indicate that they understand “good writing” as something more presentation- based, focusing here on style, mechanics, and an ability to write with a certain level of clarity and concision. Here, in the categories of clarity and concision, students discuss the idea that writing does have a point, and that the writing needs to stick to that point throughout. This process is then guided by the organization and adherence to current style and mechanics of the piece. For example, one student mentioned that “good writing” is “correct grammar, well-organized, and can successfully inform the reader of what the writer is trying to say” or that good writing is writing that “explain[s] your message thoroughly with advanced language.”

Students also discuss “good writing” as writing that is related to the personal satisfaction of the author upon completion. Here, students understand the importance of having pride in one’s writing as one of the key components of what makes writing good. For example, one student notes that “good writing” is “whatever you believe is your best writing” while another, eschewing the concept of audience completely, suggests it is “writing something that you are proud of, even though others may not agree with the same things you do.” As these responses are certainly valid, they are also of valid concern. While writers should be proud of the texts they produce, conceptualizing “pride” as a key component of “good writing” is problematic given that “pride” on its own does not adequately take into consideration the social context writing occurs in; one can feel “proud” of a piece that drastically misses the expectations of the context that

writing is situated in, ultimately lowering the credibility of the writer. Yet, while one can be proud of their ability to adapt their writing to meet the demands of various writing contexts (ideally the sort of pride a First-Year Composition instructor would hope for), this was not mentioned in the students' responses and suggests a more insular notion of "pride."

These findings align with the findings presented in Dana Driscoll's study "Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain: Student Attitudes about Future Writing Contexts and Perceptions of Transfer from First-Year Writing to the Disciplines." In this study, Driscoll finds, from 15 student interviews, that students understand "good writing" must "be clear, interesting, on topic/gets point across, grammatically correct, organized/flowing well, conveys message to audience, creative/original, and informative" (13). Driscoll continues to note that these definitions are all distanced from a rhetorical approach to writing and "demonstrate a set of underlying belletristic values about writing" or an overly "romanticized" understanding of writing as primarily an artistic form (14).

The explanation for this, as Driscoll assumes, is that the writing done by students inside of high school as well as the pleasure-writing students do on their own time influences these conceptions (14). Yet, as my study indicates, considering the *reading* done (both in high school and out) as an essential piece of prior knowledge that constitutes students' points of departures is key to understanding why students have these responses as the influences from these literature-based classrooms are readily felt.

When asking students to provide examples of "good writing," in the form of an open-ended response on the survey, the responses were overwhelmingly focused on popular, creative fiction that is widely published, circulated, and read. Just to give a hint of the plethora of examples coded into these categories, some example responses included *Harry Potter*, *The Old*

Man and the Sea, *East of Eden*, and *Catcher in the Rye*—results that correspond with Yancey, Robertson and Taczak’s findings in *Writing Across Context* (110). One student’s response to this survey question encapsulated this belief, noting that examples of “good writing” are simply “classic novels” given that these authors “were able to really put themselves in the characters’ shoes so they could give the full effect of the book.”

This last response hints at the main criteria guiding student responses to the survey question that asked “why” these works are considered “good.” Students remained in the affective dimension of describing why; they articulated these works as being “good” because “people enjoy it,” noting the author’s ability to “transport” the reader or how writing can “immerse you into a completely different setting.” Additionally, students mentioned this idea of texts being provocative in the sense that they make [the reader] analyze [their] own morals and actions” or “make the reader think about common problems in society.” Thus, these writings are “good” due to their ability to relate to the reader through creative, narrative strategies that aim to relate to the reader in an affective realm. Given that the majority of First-Year Composition students are emerging out of a high school English classroom that emphasizes literature, their understanding of writing can be seen as influenced by this prior experience (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 108-109).

When asked in an open-ended survey question if students believed that the First-Year Composition course was going to be different than their high school English courses, the majority of students perceived a difference—the most tangible point of tension being the “literature-focus” of high school classrooms and the “writing focus” of the First-Year Composition classrooms. One student commented that “pretty much every semester of English had a much more prominent focus on reading and understanding literature than creating good

writing,” while others noted similar responses such as “high school English classes were more about critically reading a book and analyzing them” or “there has always been a literature portion in every English class I’ve taken.”

In congruence with Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s findings, students in my current study seem to have “absent” prior knowledge in the sense that they do not have “non-fiction texts that serve as models” for the writing that they should ideally emulate. These authors describe the relationship between the high school course’s emphasis on “imaginative literature” and the effect this has on students in terms of the reality of writing they will be doing in college:

Put another way, when these students write the non-fiction texts characteristic of the First-Year Composition classroom, they have neither pre-college curricular experience with the reading of non-fiction texts nor mental models of non-fiction texts, which together constitute this second absence of prior knowledge (110).

Therefore, although students have a knowledge of writing that is valid, it misaligns with the actual content of the rhetorical approaches defined by faculty in section one.

Students Responses Regarding the Transferability of the First-Year Composition Course Content are Dependent Upon Their Current Disciplinary Pursuits

Given that students’ conceptions of writing appear to be out of alignment with faculty conceptions, students demonstrate a vague understanding of how First-Year Composition will benefit them after completion. In asking students about the future application of the First-Year Composition content through a series of survey questions, student responses appeared to be primarily influenced by their current majors as well as their personal aspirations, interests, and identities as writers. My coding here revealed three major themes in students’ responses:

- Student expectation and relation to discipline.

- Student values of writing in relation to discipline.
- Student values and expectations in relation to their personal interests.

Therefore, this coding suggests that students are articulating responses based on their positionalities and current identities as students emerging from high school, as well as students pursuing degrees, professions, and interests.

Data from survey responses suggest that the majority of students believe that the First-Year Composition course has the purpose of preparing them for their college and career experience. A common response from students to an open-ended survey question that asked them about the purpose of their college writing course was that they wanted the course to “teach [them] how to write in college,” “help us [students] develop skills necessary for writing in college,” or “provide the framework so that I can continue to grow and learn as a writer throughout college and be ready for a career.”

In regards to the potential reason *why* students might have these responses, students’ survey responses note that they expect the course to help them “develop” their writing abilities, mostly through organizational skills such as “presentation,” “structure,” or even more style and mechanics-based skills, such as the response “how to make my words flow and to expand my vocabulary.” As these are not invalid by any means, they do seem to depart from the expectations that First-Year Composition faculty has for the course. Yet, given that students are in a position where they are just coming out of high school with the majority of them viewing “good writing” as something expressivist, imaginary, and style-based, these responses make sense. In a word, the large majority of students do not have the means to articulate an expectation of the course that aligns with the critical-thinking, rhetorical approach faculty members bring to the course.

From surveys with students, the majority of students “agree” that the First-Year Composition course will help prepare them for the writing they will be doing in their major courses and careers. Yet, when asked “why” these students see the connection between the course and their futures, the responses depended on the students’ current disciplinary interests and career trajectories as well as whether or not they view writing as relevant to those chosen disciplines and potential careers.

For example, students responding here to an open-ended survey question noted a disconnect between the writing done in the First-Year Composition course and the writing they think they will be asked to do in their major-specific fields, consisting here of predominately the STEM disciplines. Responses like “I don’t particularly expect a general Composition course like this to be extremely helpful for my future as a biology major,” “I am a STEM major, so I am unsure if my college Composition class will be helpful in teaching me more about scientific writing,” and “my major is chemistry, so unfortunately there are limits to what I can absorb here that will impact my career as a chemist” approach this larger theme that students perceive the course as *limited* in terms of how they can apply the content to their specific major and careers. One student went as far as to make the claim that “different majors have different requirements and writing styles, so it’s a very diverse amount of students, and the class is not based off of a specific major, so it can be non-inclusive.” While this response does suggest that this student is aware of the different writing expectations for different disciplinary contexts, this response ultimately establishes a realistic base for what the First-Year Composition instructor is working with at a research university where STEM tends to dominate: a classroom of non-English majors that have specific views of writing that are steeped in an experience with high school literature

that focuses on imaginative writing. Yet, students are quick to offer recommendations for how they see the course benefitting them more so than their current perceptions.

Furthermore, students' survey responses indicated their beliefs that discipline-specific, First-Year writing courses would be more beneficial to them as they foresee that to be the types of writing they will be doing most often throughout their time in college and in their careers. For example, one student noted that they "think what would be more helpful would be a scientific writing class so that I can focus on the sort of writing which is going to take up most of the rest of my work as an undergraduate student" while another suggests that a "class focusing on lab reports specifically might be more immediately valuable to me at the moment." It's important to note here again that this data was collected strictly at the *beginning* of the course where students do not necessarily comprehend the entire purpose of the course, nor have a comprehensive understanding of what the First-Year Composition course aims to achieve with its curriculum.

These findings relate to Dana Driscoll's "disconnected students." Questioning students about their perceptions of how the First-Year writing course knowledge will transfer beyond the course, Driscoll notes that "disconnected students identify students who do not believe First-Year Composition writing is useful," in terms of its *direct* applicability to their majors (11). Driscoll then shows that the "disconnected" student might actually be related to how students conceptualize "good writing"—if "writing" is something based more in the creative realm, then students' predispositions regarding writing are actually at a loss and "writing" might tend not to apply to their STEM courses, given that writing for these class is vastly different than the narrative-based, creative texts students described as "good" (13-14).

On the other side of things, some survey results indicated that students who foresee the relevance of writing in their major are predominately located in liberal-arts courses such as

history and journalism. For example, one student noted that “I think this class will help me in my major because I am a journalism major. Writing and English are heavily relied upon for my major” while another noted that “[b]eing a History Major I do a good amount of writing. This will help me with writing in other courses.” Thus, students seem to find value in the courses that historically value writing. Yet, while this data focuses on students who predominately see writing as something separated from their majors, interviews with students allowed a closer look into students who identify as writers and, regardless of their disciplinary interests, hold onto a passion for writing.

Students Responses from Surveys Indicate Higher Levels of “Utility Value” in Regards to First-Year Composition

One theory helpful in locating these survey responses is “task-value”—one section of the larger “expectancy-value theory” as discussed in a literature review by psychologists Allan Eccles and Jenna Cambria (4). “Task-value” is understood as a “subjective” designation by individuals in different contexts; “values” are defined “with respect to the qualities of different tasks and how those qualities influence the individual’s desire to do the task. Thus, it is directly tied to motivation to engage for certain external factors (Wigfield and Cambria 4). Here, the “task” is the First-Year Composition course, and students ascribe value to it according to their histories, values, and beliefs.

Although task-value is understood as having four components—attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost, it appears that the category of “utility value” as discussed by Jacquelynne Eccles and Allan Wigfield appear most often in student interview responses (Wigfield 119). “Utility value” leans in the external direction, as it is “determined by how well a task relates to current and future goals, such as career goals” (120). Consequently, one can

ascribe value to a task even if it lies outside of their subjective interests—it might be beneficial for them on a professional level even if there is no immediate personal satisfaction (Eccles and Wigfield 120). I saw this occurring in the data when students’ survey responses that the First-Year Composition course is one that will aid them with the completion of college through preparing them for their college courses as well as more professional writing situations they might find themselves in, as noted in the above section.

Dana Driscoll uses expectancy value theory to situate her findings as well. Driscoll notes that expectancy-value theory can be helpful to understand students’ motivation to engage with the course, specifically in terms of how students value writing. Essentially, Driscoll argues that students who see a greater “usefulness” to writing in terms of their personal value systems have the potential (at least initially) to engage more actively in the course—they might be more motivated to engage with the course since they believe that writing holds value in their lives either in their disciplinary, career, or personal aspirations (5; 17). Yet, in terms of my study’s results, it seems as if a tension point emerges given that students more or less hold views of writing that misalign with faculty; they view the First-Year Composition course as performing a specific role, yet these views are ultimately limited within themselves, given that students don’t have a full conception of what the course offers. Therefore, this idea of “task-value” might be thought of as generally affecting some students *initial* motivation for engaging with the course—one that exists before they really comprehend what the course is doing and how the skills will be able to transfer into their own lives post First-Year Composition.

Students’ Beliefs and Values About Writing and the Writing Course Have the Potential to Affect Their Initial Motivation in First-Year Composition

In interviews conducted with four First-Year Composition students, three students noted that they had a strong relationship with writing while one did not. The three students that shared a passion for writing, Vienna, Elena, and Nikki, entered the course with a more expressivist approach to writing. Another student, Carly, noted that she “thought that [she] wasn’t the best writer” and entered the course with specific expectations as to what writing courses *should* be doing. Carly’s responses were not focused on writing as an act, but rather the writing course as a place. Overall, Carly’s responses implied that she was looking for a robust classroom experience with lots of dialogue—an experience that appeared not to be occurring in her current First-Year Composition course. Overall, my coding suggests the following themes from interviews with students: “passions” and “values and personal interests.”

As Vienna, Elena, and Nikki entered the course as, more or less, expressive writers, they were still able to find meaning and value in the course in ways that were relevant to their interests and, thus, progressed their craft. In Carly’s case, she seemed to be negatively affected to engage with the course when what she valued in a writing course was simply not occurring. Therefore, all of the students interviewed here demonstrated what expectancy task-value theorists Eccles and Wigfield discuss as “intrinsic value” (119). As “intrinsic value” is defined as “the enjoyment the individual gets from performing the activity or the subjective interest the individual has in the subject” (120). I see this occurring in my data in the responses of Elena, Vienna, Nikki, and Carly as they describe the writing course in terms of what they value in both writing and writing courses (120). As these values ultimately stem from their prior knowledge inside and outside of academia, they have the potential to affect motivation in the course.

For example, Vienna identified as an “amateur writer” who is currently working on a book that is upwards of “220,000 words.” She further noted how she entered the class already

understanding rhetorical knowledge from their previous schooling experience but, given their creative writing background, still struggled with responding to specific writing situations:

Doing English classes is so hard because there's word limits, there's specific things you need to get in, there's a format to follow and I feel like I wasn't very good at writing and expressing a specific idea [or] formula before and not that I have worked on being more descriptive, using more adjectives, figuring out how to make one thought a new paragraph it's so hard to dial back and I feel like comp might give me more structure and formalized which is something I definitely need to realistically write for a review, an article, a paper.

Therefore, although Vienna came to the course with a passion for creative writing and considered themselves a writer, they still found the notion of situational constraints helpful in aiding their overall approach. Thus, Vienna might appear to be more of an 'expert' in regards to writing (valuing creative writing), limiting the creative writer's expression actually proved to be beneficial in terms of the student's perception of the "real world" writing they are more likely to do in the future.

Also, as it was apparent that Vienna valued creative writing and the affective, poetic notion of writing, there appeared to be a correlation between their value of expressive writing and what they envisioned a First-Year Composition course to be focusing on:

I feel like we should be teaching people more about, not necessarily recreational writing but how to develop a tone in the style—how to feel like you're able to write for yourself and that's a skill that you take throughout life like in *Dead Poets Society* they say it's like we have all these perfunctory jobs it's for all these things that make life worthwhile and

I'm not sure that comp class—helpful as it is for those functional skills should deviate from that entirely....

Nikki, another student who was currently majoring in neuroscience but in the process of switching to nutrition noted in their interview that they enjoyed the First-Year Composition course because it allowed them to express themselves and their opinions based in personal experience. This statement extends from what this student mentioned that they enjoyed writing in the first place because it gave them their “own personal platform to express [themselves]” and corresponded with their impetus to write in the first place, since this student wanted to “help people through [their] writing and through [their experience].” In this case, Nikki is ascribing importance to this course in alignment with their own values for writing.

Elena entered the First-Year Composition course with a background in creative writing as well, noting that she had written “a couple of books ranging from 60 to 120 pages.” Additionally, Elena expressed that writing was “a relief” to her—an activity that allowed her to “escape into [her] own world.” Yet, Like Vienna’s response, Elena noted that she faced a “challenge” when asked to write in the genres currently being assigned in her First-Year Composition course, mentioning that “switching to a formal, argumentative kind of voice” was difficult. This difficulty stems directly from Elena’s involvement with creative writing:

I found that when someone gives me a prompt or I’m told to creatively write it’s the same thing as when I’m doing art...I have a hard time getting motivated. But, it it’s for myself, sure.

Elena appears to be noting that when she is “told” to write creatively, it almost devoids the purpose of writing for herself as a way to “escape,” as she mentions. As a result, Elena has a

difficult time motivating herself to write in situations that she finds constraining—something that does not align with what she values about writing.

Another student, Carly, mentions that she “always thought that [she] wasn’t the best writer” regardless of the fact that she enrolled in honors English courses all through high school. Yet, Carly’s motivation to engage with the course is not clearly affected by her histories with writing but rather the tension between her previous enrollment in high school writing courses and the environment of the section of First-Year Composition she is enrolled in, given that the class itself is not very lively in terms of discussion—something she clearly values based on past experience:

In the honors English class I came from the discussions were, you know, I didn’t always speak out because there were a lot of strong voices in the class but it was nice to actually hear thoughts and opinions whereas I feel like being in your standard English class that’s not very prevalent...it’s a little frustrating because I don’t want to always be the one to talk in the class. I find it embarrassing and kind of just redundant to always be the one putting in my input.

Here, Carly appears to value a classroom fueled by dialogue. This value directly stems from her previous experience in a high school classroom environment where active dialogue was present. Thus, Carly’s frustration with the course appears to be influenced by her prior knowledge about what an ideal writing class (for her) might consist of, motivating her to engage more with the course, as opposed to being “frustrated,” as she mentions. Consequently, Carly’s values for the writing class, influenced by prior knowledge, appear to impede on her attitudes and potential engagement (or disengagement) with the course.

As it has been discussed, students have certain beliefs about writing that stem from their prior knowledge about writing—in other words, their personal experiences and histories with writing and writing courses. While Vienna and Nikki articulate specific capacities that they believe they will develop in the First-Year Composition course, these capacities align with their interests in writing. Yet, Elena and Carly’s responses suggest that they find it difficult to engage, given that a tension arises between their values and the reality of the course. To reiterate—if these values and beliefs are not engaged at the beginning of the course, they can potentially affect how motivated students engage with the course, potentially affecting performance (Driscoll 17).

Composition Faculty Perceives Barriers to Explicitly Teaching for Transfer

As I have demonstrated, students have different expectations for the course than faculty. This section will look at the point at which these different expectations, or different points of departures, meet: the First-Year Composition classroom. This section will begin by noting how, although instructors ideally envision students to transfer specific materials, certain barriers get in the way of them accomplishing this.

Interviews with Composition faculty indicated that faculty members conceptualize “transfer” as repurposing knowledge (in this case the rhetorical approach to writing) from one context into another as a way to aid their navigation of the new task in that new context. Furthermore, my data indicates that First-Year Composition faculty see a potential to teach for transfer through the rhetorical situation in the First-Year Composition course, yet faculty members note that there are barriers in regards to specifically teaching for transfer. My coding indicated that two main themes emerged: “time and curriculum” and a “lack of disciplinary knowledge.”

Time and Curriculum

Faculty members noted that “time” was a main barrier in explicitly teaching for transfer, given that Composition faculty are asked to cover an impressive amount of material over the course of a semester. As Elaine mentioned that “time is one that we all often face...just trying to put too many things into a particular class session,” this suggests that we as faculty might be attempting to do *too* much in college Composition courses. Tom’s responses expanded on this notion of “doing too much”:

I think a lot of it is just that it’s easy to forget places where we can emphasize that [transfer] better because we’re so busy trying to teach the million other things that we teach because in a lot of universities—and it seems to be fairly similar at [First-Year Composition]—freshman writing is also often introduction to research, introduction to argumentation, and often it’s just introduction to being a college student and so we’re trying to do way more than we can do in a semester.

Chris discussed this potential barrier in terms of how it is common for the First-Year Composition instructor to still be figuring out the curriculum while they are simultaneously teaching the course. Given that the majority of First-Year Composition faculty are novice instructors, potentially teaching for the first time, they might have trouble understanding the future goals and outcomes for the course due to their lack of experience:

It’s challenging enough learning how to teach writing with a particular syllabus as you probably know. It’s really challenging issue so how do you get to the point as a teacher where you’re able to make these connections in a way that maybe you couldn’t have done as a grad students...I’ve observed an awful lot of first and second year instructors and you know they’re still busy focusing on how do I structure this, how do I manage the

classroom, how do I do other things like that and they may not have the wider perspective that they'll get over time...that'll help them start to make those connections.

Given that there not only a vast number of things required to teach in the First-Year Composition course, combined with the fact that faculty might not have the experience to be as “forward-looking” (as they are just hoping to survive the class period), it is no surprise they mention this as a barrier.

Lack of Disciplinary Knowledge

Another barrier faculty members mentioned was that they often found themselves lacking the disciplinary-specific knowledge of the writing that the students will be doing in the future—specifically in their major courses. Some faculty related to how it is difficult to use examples that some students might encounter in the future that are inclusive to all majors, such as Casey, a Composition Lead Instructor:

Students are coming from such a wide variety of disciplines in [First-Year Composition] where you might be able to say “oh for example in this discipline you'll do this and this discipline you'll do that but you might be missing a student in yet a third discipline and so I think there's some struggle in making explicit connections.

Furthermore, Molly, a Graduate Teaching Assistant, noted this same phenomenon but phrased it more as that they did find the ability to relate their examples to the “breadth of disciplines” given the fact that they “don't necessarily know what those experiences are going to be.” This then has the potential for instructors to assume certain qualities about certain disciplinary writing conventions that may be incomplete. Thus, it makes sense that instructors might shy away from this altogether.

There appears to be a need for Composition faculty to understand “disciplinary knowledge” and conventions so they can appeal to each student’s individual academic and career trajectory. While this is certainly a valiant effort by instructors to consider each and every student in their practices, it is slightly unrealistic, given the diversity of majors instructors engage with in a First-Year Composition course. A rhetorical-approach to writing that focuses on teaching a broader framework is not necessarily supposed to be working with specific disciplinary conventions—it rather provides students with the means to navigate various writing situations as they slowly become more immersed in their disciplines. Therefore, teaching “transfer” through a rhetorical approach in First-Year Composition is meant to be broad—in this course, students cultivate a foundation for understanding writing before moving forward to academic contexts and courses that will ideally provide them with ample opportunities to hone in on disciplinary skills and conventions. In a word, developing writing is a process and every writing situation cannot be fully taken into consideration in just one semester-long course.

This section has suggested that Composition faculty envision transfer as occurring at least initially on the college level as one of the main purposes of the course appears to be preparing students for success in their college courses. While this is an important aspect of transfer, it is not the entire vision of transfer that a rhetorical approach to Composition affords. The next chapter will take a deeper dive into the complexities surrounding the transfer of learning from First-Year Composition onwards.

IMPLICATION, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Implications

As my data suggests, when students enter the First-Year Composition course, they have an abundance of prior knowledge about writing and the writing classroom that stems from their prior experience inside and outside of academia. As instructors enter the First-Year Composition course, they too have an abundance of prior knowledge regarding writing and the writing classroom. Consequently, students interpret the expectations and purposes of the First-Year Composition course differently than instructors, given that the positionalities of instructors and students are different—they are working from different contexts that consist of past and present influences that have shaped and continues to shape their interests, needs, beliefs, values, and expectations regarding the First-Year Composition course. These interests, needs, beliefs, values, and expectations interact through the medium of the First-Year Composition classroom; if this clash of influences is not attended to by instructors, students have the potential to leave the course unable to successfully transfer material as they step into new contexts, academic and otherwise.

The Teaching and Learning Situation

Here, I theorize that the interaction between students and instructors is a complex “teaching and learning situation” (see figure 2) that instructors need to engage with in order to ensure that students are leaving the course with an awareness of how to meaningfully repurpose First-Year Composition course material as they engage with future courses, careers, and social change initiatives. Derived from Professor Mike Palmquist’s image of a Writing Situation Model, initially created to establish a more “modern model of the rhetorical triad” (see Appendix

D), the “Teaching and Learning Situation” *is* the rhetorical situation of the First-Year Composition course at the beginning of the semester (Palmquist).

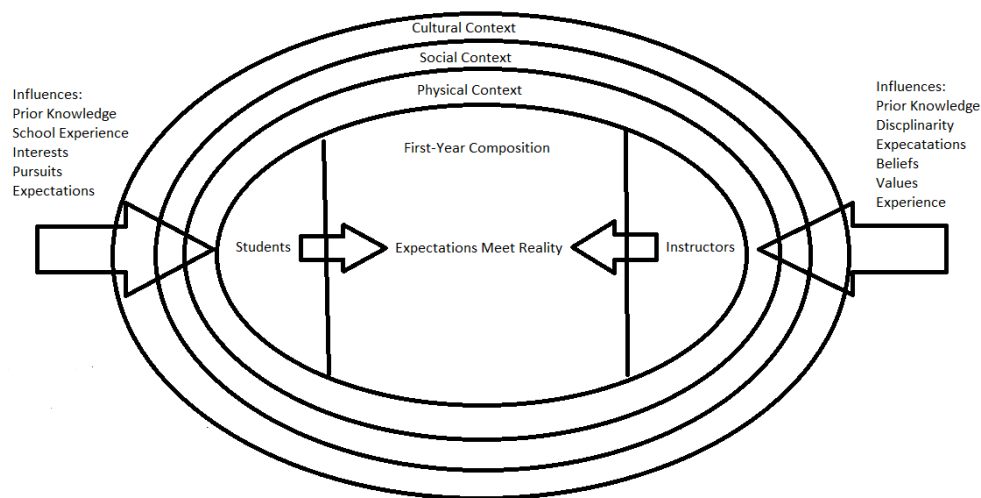


Figure 2: The Teaching and Learning Situation. Adapted from “The Writing Situation.” Palmquist, Mike.

What this model suggests is that both students and instructors are embedded within multiple contexts that influence their ways of being and seeing the world. Furthermore, it suggests that the way students and instructors have operated and continue to operate in these contexts contributes to their expectations for the First-Year Composition course. Simply put, instructors and students are approaching this space with *different* expectations based on their different experiences, histories, and positionalities—in other words, their prior knowledge. Therefore, when instructors and students meet in the “text” of the First-Year Composition course, they are bringing their diverse experiences and their positionalities to this course, which influence their expectations of what the course should be accomplishing.

Broadly, this model might function as a framework for instructors to use in order to inform themselves of the complexity of the beginning of the semester in a First-Year Composition course. It should ideally persuade instructors to slow down the course and encourage them to deliberately engage the *funds of knowledge* that students bring to the

classroom in terms of their expectations for course outcomes. With that in mind, this model does not assume that any two students' experiences are the same—it rather provides suggestions as to why students might have expectations that ultimately differ from the instructor's, given that they enter the course with a variety of previous experiences and knowledges. In a word, students' points of departures are complex and contribute to their understanding of the First-Year Composition course outcomes. If these beliefs are left unattended from the beginning, students have the potential to be adequately informed about the benefits of the course to their personal, academic, professional, and civic lives.

As the model states that “expectations meet reality,” this means that students expect specific things that they will learn in the course, while instructors expect things as well. Given that instructors are embedded within a discipline and a university context, they are approaching this situation through this lens—in other words, they have beliefs about what the course should be doing that stems from involvement in the discipline and awareness of best practices. Therefore, the role of the instructor here is to simultaneously engage and navigate the prior knowledge of students regarding their expectations about the course in a way that validates student knowledge but ultimately extends this knowledge through emphasizing the affordances of the rhetorical approach to writing.

Transfer as Both/And: Professionalization and Passions for Social Change

Students appear to enter into the Composition course with the expectations that the course will prepare them for the writing they will do for the next four years to complete college and, if their careers call for it, in their careers. This idea of a writing class that focuses on “fundamentals” as students call them is not invalid by any means—in fact, Composition situated as a foundational, college-writing prep class can be extremely helpful for students who envision

college partly as a means to an end: they take courses that prepare them for other courses which lead to job opportunities, which leads to income, which ultimately justifies the entire college experience. This view is echoed in one faculty member's response in an interview that one of the purposes of the First-Year Composition writing course is tied to a legacy of "career readiness" embedded in the university where this study took place:

[First-Year Composition] prepares students for the writing they're going to do throughout the university and begins that path towards what they're going to do down the road. That's a critical part of this as well—we want to help students get to the point where they can write effectively for their disciplinary courses. There's some upsides and downsides to that but that's one of the key issues that we look at and certainly that's part of the legacy or the tradition that we've had at [university] for a number of years.

In times of "economic challenges" as Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander argue, there seems to be a promoting of "more attention to skills building and career preparation—certainly understandable as an anxious citizenry tries to secure its future" (484). Given that the work of Lauren Berlant positions the current neoliberal market in a "precarious" moment where jobs are always in flux and livelihoods are relatively unstable, this attention to career readiness is not unwarranted—it's actually fairly realistic given the current socio-economic context (192).

Yet, as members of the Composition faculty, we seem to hold onto a deep belief that there are other motives to why we teach writing—these motives are primarily the ones that incoming First-Year Composition students are largely unaware of. Surely, it is important for us to consider the practicality of teaching a rhetorical approach so that our students repurpose these skills in professional contexts to effectively compose the correct email or the most polished,

organized resume, but we as instructors have to ask ourselves, is that all we want students to transfer?

As my research has shown, instructors value teaching the rhetorical approach to writing as Composition allows (if emphasized in the course) the space for students to begin to understand writing as an empowering, social act through the process of cultivating a critical, social awareness and an awareness of how they can be rhetorical agents operating in complex systems. But, as my data has suggested in the beginning of the course, it appears that students rarely recognize this potential, creating the key tension point between instructors and students that warrants explicit attention and engagement. The tension point here is influenced by students understanding the course as narrow—it eschews the interests of the liberal, more “democratic” pedagogies in favor of the neoliberal, nearly vocational interests or creative purposes associated with expression; in a word, their view generally eschews the well-established “social turn” much less even more ambitious objectives such as the empowerment of students’ rhetorical agency on matters relating to “change the world”—an idea that many students state as an objective they hold for their college education, as mentioned in the results of a study conducted by Corey Seemiller in *Generation Z Goes to College* (135).

As John Trimbur notes in “Taking the Social turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process,” the “social turn” is,

a post-process, post-cognitivist theory and pedagogy that represents literacy as an ideological arena and composing as a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions (109).

While this definition establishes the notion of writers working within social contexts, a more recent undertaking of working out the current social turn is conducted by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander in an introduction to a special edition of *College English*. These authors, referencing Kinney, Girshin, and Bowlin, describe the turn as compiled of more of a starting point for “embodied activism”—one that moves towards “a more nuanced sense of the personal and the political and how those fields intersect” (482). Yet, Rhodes and Alexander are quick to point out that the current socio-economic situation warrants an approach to education that is increasingly neoliberal—one that puts higher education in a bind “between pressures to promote a project of liberal self-development while also training students to work in the managerial and post-managerial middle class” (485). Working within this tension point, the authors argue that we need to prioritize inclusion in the classrooms while also accepting that the precarious market calls for the economic emancipation of students. Furthermore, the authors are specific in their language, saying that there needs to be an approach to social change “that works toward justice by thinking beyond simple job readiness and career preparation” (485). This notion of “thinking beyond” job readiness and career preparation gets to the heart of the matter: there exists a split between a professional, career-oriented education and a liberal, “democratic” education. Is one necessarily exclusive of the other?

Through an expansive critique of James’s Berlin’s work, Donna Strickland works at this schism in *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies* and argues for the convergence of these two seemingly disparate outcomes for First-Year Composition:

Sometimes democratic pedagogy appears to be aimed at empowering students to become change agents. Sometimes it seems aimed at help them to lead middle-class lives. (105)

Further along in the chapter, Strickland locates this split purpose in Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*, quoting Berlin at length to justify how the "social" moves into the "political," making the social-epistemic approach to rhetoric the "normalizing discourse in the field of Composition studies (109-110):

We have begun to see that writing courses are not designed exclusively to prepare students for the workplace, although they must certainly do that. Writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply active participants. (Berlin qtd. in Strickland 109)

Consequently, the social approach grounded in the rhetorical situation produces what Gail Summer calls a "both/and" education which combines the cultivation of professional workplace skills with the development of "moral, intellectual, and civic-minded citizens" (22). With this in mind, the First-Year Composition course has the potential to prepare students for their disciplines and future careers, but it also has the potential to bring about the social contexts of writing as a way to empower students to become rhetorical agents and enact social change. But, as my data suggests, students do not articulate the "change agent" side of the both/and. What might we do then?

In regards to my data collected for this study, it's interesting to note that while the majority of students see the purpose of the course as preparing them for college and careers through the cultivating of writing skills, current literature suggests that this generation of college students generally have the capacity and drive to engage in passionate, social change initiatives.

Local Implications

For Composition faculty members, it is important to grapple with the "Teaching and Learning Situation" of First-Year Composition in the beginning of the course. Such engagement

can provoke necessary discussions regarding student expectations about the course as, given what this research suggests, these expectations initially misalign with faculty and the instruction involved in rhetorically-based First-Year Composition.

One practical suggestion for Composition faculty to consider that aligns with the Teaching and Learning Situation is an activity that Jeff Sommers discusses in the article “Reflection Revisited: The Class Collage.” At the beginning of the course, Sommers has students participate in a “reflection-on-action” assignment that is meant to unearth some beliefs, attitudes, and expectations students have about the writing course. The assignment includes students completing the statements, “I believe writing...”; “I believe revising...”; and “I believe writing courses...” as a way to engage their prior knowledges and points of departure in terms of expectations (104). Then, Sommers suggests that students discuss with one another these “credos” as a way to situate themselves in the current moment given their past experiences (104). Here, an instructor might facilitate this discussion by working with these expectations, using them as an initial jumping off point to show how the rhetorically-based writing classroom ultimately departs from high-school level writing and has a split both/and purpose of preparing students to be successful in writing situations while also aiding them in their social change pursuits.

While “reflection” and “transfer” are notably intertwined in the literature surrounding how to explicitly “teach for transfer” as proposed in *Writing Across Contexts*, “reflection” in terms of the transferability of the rhetorical situation is inseparable from Perkins and Salomon’s notion of “high-road transfer.” As “high road transfer” “depends on mindful abstraction from the context of learning,” it requires a “deliberate search for connections” to effectively repurpose

knowledge from one context to the next (7). This type of transfer works well with what Perkins and Salomon call “far transfer” or transfer that occurs between two seemingly disparate contexts.

Composition faculty can use these ideas of transfer to their advantage when talking about the transferability of the rhetorical situation model. Given that the rhetorical situation model is a theoretical framework or a “tool” (as faculty in this study noted), “transfer” in terms of utilizing the rhetorical situation depends on the instructor’s ability to be clear about how this “tool” will aid students in their future writing contexts. Therefore, as opposed to approaching transfer in terms of only “skills” such as organization or presentation (as students mention), “transfer” can be approached through focusing on how the rhetorical situation is an abstracted model that can be applied to various situations and inform these situations. As one instructor, Tom, noted, it is all about the “questions” that this model permits students to ask in any given situation that will help them navigate it with the best possible outcome, whether that be career-oriented or social-change driven.

Also, when approaching this notion of encouraging students to meaningfully understand both the professional and social justice possibilities of learning the rhetorical model of writing, affect must be considered. As the data suggests, we know that students more or less want to succeed in college and land something that resembles a career. Yet, we also know that that many students also want to make a difference. The risks here, as I mentioned above, is that the neoliberal market now emptily lauds those with inclusive mindsets while it is less successful at holding diverse and socially-just initiatives. Yet, Composition faculty members have a unique opportunity to engage students activate their nascent rhetorical agency is and that there is never just one thing—neither a buzzword nor a bullet point on a resume—but rather that it is an

embodied and active *process*, an epistemology—a way of being in the world that involves the increasingly effective use of language in writing.

WPA Implications

In approaching the dilemma Composition faculty noted about the amount of information and content required to teach in the First-Year Composition course, I return to Doug Downs and Liane Robertson's chapter in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies*, "Threshold Concepts in First-Year Composition." As discussed earlier, Downs and Robertson argue that First-Year Composition has two main goals "addressing [students'] misconceptions and teaching for transfer" (107). While "misconceptions" can be addressed through the practical sections mentioned above, Downs and Robertson ultimately argue for an essentializing approach to First-Year Composition through the use of "threshold concepts" or "concepts critical or continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice" that engages common misconceptions about writing as the primary "conceptual framework" to teach in the course and, therefore, teach for transfer (Kassner and Wardle, 2; Downs and Robertson 106). Downs and Robertson suggest that when used to structure curriculum and content, threshold concepts can act as "anchors" to "transform student understanding of writing (115).

Furthermore, Downs and Robertson address that students come to the First-Year Composition course with various experiences that inform their beliefs about writing that have the potential to misalign with what the First-Year Composition actually aims to accomplish (111-112). The authors specifically note the affordances threshold concepts play when addressing students prior knowledge:

Teaching threshold concepts exposes, and requires that students reconsider, prior knowledge that might be a barrier to learning to think in new ways about writing, and it asks students to think about writing conceptually rather than formulaically. (112)

They then argue that threshold concepts can “loosen” students’ prior knowledge, given that the threshold concepts for Writing Studies most likely differ from the concepts students bring in to the First-Year Composition course about writing (112).

While the primary areas they focus on are “writing as human interaction (rhetoric); textuality; epistemology (ways of knowing and the nature of knowledge); and writing process,” instructors can use these threshold concepts broadly to inform their course learning outcomes (114-115). Therefore, one suggestion to WPAs is to not only understand which threshold concepts best respond to their students’ prior knowledge and expectations for the course, but also to engage these factors through crafting meaningful learning outcomes and activities that explicitly address the mismatch between instructor and student expectations.

Additionally, WPAs can utilize the “teaching and learning situation” to inform their teacher training materials when initiating new hires and GTAs about the importance of understanding the misalignment between student and instructor expectations regarding the course. As new GTAs might be completely new to not only teaching First-Year Composition, but also teaching in general, they may be unaware of how they are situated within university and disciplinary contexts. As a result, GTAs might not be able to accomplish crucial things such as consistently advocating for the affordances of the rhetorical situation (provided that they might be learning these concepts alongside students) and effectively navigating their expectations of the course alongside students’ expectations, given that they lack the expertise. Therefore, presenting the course in terms of limited “threshold concepts” to the novice First-Year

Composition instructor might prove to be extremely useful in establishing a solid center of gravity for faculty to adhere to, thus increasing consistency across sections and increasing the chances for student transfer.

Limitations of the Study

I wish to re-acknowledge at this point my own positionality as a novice researcher. As a current Graduate Teaching Assistant and graduate student, this was my first field study; consequently, it was my first attempt to code data and draw evidence from a large data set to support an argument. Thus, given my positionality as a novice researcher, I viewed the data through this positionality as a novice—a certain “terministic screen” that suggests a limited way of seeing that potentially eschews another way (Burke 45).

The sample population for this research is also limited in a few ways. For the “faculty” phase of this research project, only eight Composition faculty were selected to be interviewed. In this small sample, I did not include samples from any creative writing teachers currently teaching First-Year Composition, nor did I interview any current MFA graduate students. Thus, the perspectives I am offering are highly limited in terms of the teacher sample.

Another limitation is that the students sampled for the survey and interview portions do not adequately resemble the total population of First-Year Composition students. I only received 88 responses from surveys distributed to approximately 114 First-Year Composition students, and only four of the survey respondents agreed to be interviewed. Furthermore, in the interview phase of this study, the majority of the students interviewed appeared to have a passion for writing and this might have influenced not only their participation but their responses as well. Students who *did* participate appeared to hold certain predispositions about writing and had a specific relationship with writing that might have driven this participation. For example, three

out of the four students interviewed disclosed that they had strong relationships with writing, noting that they frequently write creatively outside of the course.

Also, as the survey and interview phases with students occurred during the beginning of the spring semester, timing became everything. The goal here was to work with students before they “knew too much” in regards to the instructor conveying to them their ideas about the course. As I strove to obtain responses from students who were not yet aware of the course aims and goals, this did not always work out. Even though I surveyed students within the first two class meeting periods of the semester, some of their responses were affected by their quick engagement with course materials such as the syllabus or course description. For instance, when asked “why” students believed they might learn specific concepts in the course, some students noted that they had “read the syllabus” or that their instructor had already discussed these notions with them in class. Thus, I had to take this limitation into consideration when observing the results from students; even though they suggested ideas from the syllabus, this did not necessarily mean that they were fully immersed in them yet.

Lastly, another limitation of this study was that it did not measure students’ beliefs about the transferability of writing at the *end* of the course after a semester’s worth of engagement with the course content. As I will note in the “suggestions for future research” section, a longitudinal study that collects data from various points in the semester to track student progress with understanding the concepts has the potential to yield fuller and richer results regarding whether students are leaving with what faculty expect them to be leaving with, i.e. whether the objectives are transferring.

Suggestions for Further Research

As this study looks at the confluence of instructor and student at the beginning of the First-Year Composition course, it lacks data from the end of the course which might lead to conclusions regarding if students are transferring what instructors expect them to transfer. Consequently, a longitudinal study of First-Year Composition students that focuses on how students' beliefs about writing and the First-Year Composition course change over time can expand on the findings from this study in profound ways; specifically, data might suggest that students are *not* transferring what First-Year Composition instructors expect them to be transferring from the course and, if this is the case, demand an analysis of both the curriculum and instructor's methods in engaging students for transfer.

Additionally, as this study focuses predominately on the students' prior knowledge, a subsequent study that focuses on the instructor's prior knowledge and the effects that this has on the transferability of the First-Year Composition course might be of great benefit to Composition programs. Given that instructors have their own histories and various external factors that influence their approaches and beliefs about writing, an in-depth study focused on instructor positionality might yield more nuanced findings about *why* instructors teach the way they do.

Yet, since many of the instructors who teach First-Year Composition are Graduate Teaching Assistants, an in-depth study that specifically looks at how Graduate Teaching Assistants "teach for transfer" has the potential of yielding additional information about barriers to teaching for transfer. Furthermore, a study with a focus on Graduate Teaching Assistants might also be able to show how graduate students' disciplines affect their approaches to teaching First-Year Composition. As Walton Moore and Jones state that "positionality" accounts for context and allows for agency, individuals who identify as creative writers might flex these

muscles in different, albeit productive ways within the constraints of the First-Year Composition curriculum.

Conclusions and Final Thoughts

Overall, we as First-Year Composition instructors need to meet our students where they are. First-Year Composition students are not *tabula rasas*—they are complex humans with varied histories and experiences that shape and continue to shape their expectations, values, and beliefs. Consequently, from the immediate moment students step foot into the First-Year Composition classroom, we need to engage their ideas about writing and the writing course to ensure that we establish a point the point we are building from. After all, students have complex, valid ideas about what writing is and what the writing course is likely to be about—it is then our job as instructors to engage these ideas about writing, validate them, interrogate them, and challenge them so that we can show how our approach will ultimately help them succeed in academic, professional, and public contexts without their losing sight of their passions with regards to writing.

Therefore, when discussing the “role” of the First-Year Composition instructor in the complex “teaching and learning situation” that emerges in the First-Year Composition classroom, one can envision that the instructor must show how students’ conceptions of writing do have worth and use, but that the current focus in Composition Studies on the social turn and a rhetorical approach to writing will provide students with the tools to be adaptable writers when faced with varied situations. In terms of a First-Year Composition course, *this* is what we as instructors can strive for in terms of transfer: validating students’ different approaches to writing, but also demonstrating that the rhetorical approach offers the ability for students to navigate complex communication situations through being aware of the contexts they are writing in.

Additionally, we can provide the means for students to ask the right questions in any given situation in order to understand both the context and the content of messages and behaviors, whether that be personal, academic, public, or professional.

Furthermore, as instructors situated in a discipline, we need to be explicitly advocating for the rhetorical situation as we teach our courses. Of course, there are limitations and constraints to teaching a rhetorical approach; one, for instance is that we tend to avoid expressive and evocative writing. Two is that we may not be explicitly addressing cultural forces and uses and abuses of language as but one component of systemic racism and oppression. Yet, any theoretical lens or pedagogical approach is going to have limitations. Therefore, while some may wish the rhetorical approach focused specifically on disciplinary writing, or had more expressive components, or was more political, we can focus on the affordances the rhetorical situation provides for students who, more generally, are not English majors, are not creative writers, but who may be looking for capabilities that will prepare them for the myriad communication challenges they will face. Demonstrating advocacy for a rhetorical approach can prove to students that this approach matters, thus leading to more engagement, more motivation, and successful transfer of materials post completion of the course.

Yet, the rhetorical approach is just one approach and we have to be able to also keep this in mind as instructors, as scholars, and as people. We may be transferring ideas we are not even aware of and, in turn, we may have the opportunity to do more than we imagine by introducing students to language and being flexible with what we hope they take away, what they transfer. Limiting ourselves as teachers to a sole “terministic screen” can be problematic as one stands the chance of excluding other possibilities (Burke 45); we can’t just be fully machine-like in our quests to foster “college and career-ready” students through a rhetorical approach. Nor ought we

to engage students in taking on every injustice in the world. Perhaps sometimes what they need is to be addressed where they are. Maybe what they sometimes need and will take with them derives from a more expressive approach to writing that students often seem to latch on to.

Also, as we have seen, sometimes the world takes a turn for the worst. As global pandemics, rampant racial violence, active shootings, and natural disasters continue to paint a rather bleak portrait of the world, we as instructors cannot and should not avoid addressing how these events affect our students. If we really want to be able to meet our students where they are, and if we want them to take something from their writing class with them, sometimes this warrants an emphasis on the personal and the affective. We need to provide the space for students to engage their feelings and positions in the tumultuous times in which they live.

There is room to flex expressive muscles in a rhetorical approach, just as there are rhetorical muscles to flex in a more expressivist approach. Within the field of Composition, where “turf wars” and theoretical arguments result in specific “camps,” theoretical battles may cause more harm than good, especially for Graduate Teaching Assistants and other beginning instructors in the field who are attempting to locate themselves in terms of best practices.

Overall, instructors need to attempt to meet their students where they are in the most meaningful and robust ways they can. Then, instructors need to pay attention to the opportunities for passing along something positive, ennobling and valuable that will stick.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR FACULTY INTERVIEWS

1. Opening Question: Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with teaching First-Year Composition?
2. As you well know, here at CSU, CO150 is part of a larger general education requirement. What do you think the overall purpose is of general education curriculum?
 - a. Probe: Where do you think CO150 fits into this larger general education curriculum?
3. What do you see as the overall purpose of CO150?
4. What might you believe that incoming students might think the purpose of CO150 is?
 - a. Probe: What might influence this belief?
 - b. Probe: How might you account for this in your teaching?
5. I'd like to ask you about how you approach the teaching of First-Year Composition.
 - a. What are your core beliefs about teaching First-Year Composition?
 - b. Probe: How are those beliefs reflected in your CO150 classroom?
 - c. Probe: Do you think students share your beliefs?
6. What would you say students are most concerned with when taking CO150?
 - a. Probe: What might be influencing these beliefs about these concerns?
 - b. Probe: How might you account for these concerns in your teaching?
7. 7. I'd like to ask you about CO150 course content. What are some important concepts you hope students take with them from C0150?
 - a. Probe: Why might these concepts be beneficial?
 - b. Probe: Do you find yourself reinforcing these concepts more often in your class?

8. 8. What concepts do you think that students will say that they want to take with them from CO150?
9. As a Composition instructor, what do you define as “good” writing?
 - a. Probe: Do you think that the definition of good writing changes based on if you’re in, say an English class versus your major class?
10. What might incoming students define as “good” writing?
11. What do you believe influences students definitions of “good” writing?
12. Are you familiar with the concept of “transfer of learning?”
 - a. Probe: do you see the potential for teaching for the transfer of learning in the current CO150 curriculum?
 - b. Probe: Why do you think teaching for transfer might be important for CO150?
 - c. Probe: Do you feel it is your job to teach students how to write in their disciplines? Why or Why not?
13. What might inhibit students from transferring knowledge from CO150 into other contexts?
14. 14. What would you do if you were approached by a student in the sciences who was upset because he didn’t think the course content was relevant to his major?
15. What might inhibit you from explicitly teaching for the transferability of course content?

APPENDIX B: PHASE TWO SURVEY WITH FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION STUDENTS

CO150 Thesis Survey: Student Beliefs about First-Year Composition

Start of Block: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

Q1

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

What I will learn in my First-Year Composition course will help me with other college courses.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
 - ☐ Agree (2)
 - ☐ Neutral (3)
 - ☐ Disagree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q2 I expect my First-Year Composition course to prepare me for writing in my major.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q3 Please explain why you think this course will or will not prepare you for future writing assignments in your major courses.

Q4 Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:

I expect my First-Year Composition course to help me with writing beyond college.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

Q5 Please explain why you think this course content will or will not help you with writing beyond college.

Q6 Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:

I expect my First-Year Composition course to prepare me for college writing.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neutral (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly Disagree (5)

End of Block: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

Start of Block: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

Q7 What do you think a First-Year Composition course is all about?

Q8 Is this different than what you'd think a high school English class is about? If so, why?

Q9 What do you think is the overall purpose of your CO150 course?

Q10 What do you expect to learn in this class?

Q11 Please list 2-3 concepts that you think you will learn in this class.

Q12 Why do you believe that you will learn these in this class?

End of Block: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

Start of Block: Please complete the following statements:

Q13 I believe that "good writing" is...

Q14 I believe that a "good writer" is someone who...

End of Block: Please complete the following statements:

Start of Block: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability

Q15 Who are some examples of "good writers," and why?

Q16 Please provide 1-2 examples of texts that you consider "good" and explain why.

End of Block: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability

Start of Block: Optional Question

Q17 If you would like to be considered to be contacted for a follow-up interview, please provide contact information below. If chosen for interviews, you will be contacted via email. Contact email:

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION STUDENTS

1. Could you please describe yourself as a writer?

Follow-up: Could you describe your current relationship with writing?

2. Could you please describe your previous English courses?

Follow-up: What kinds of writing were you assigned to do in them?

3. Say you're given a new writing assignment by your writing teacher—how would you approach writing it?

4. Think back through your experiences with writing. Are there any key experiences that you can recall that have influenced your approach to writing? (Some examples might include a conversation, a writing assignment, test prep courses, etc.)

Follow-up: What might be some “rules” about writing that you carry with you? Where did these rules come from?

5. What do you think college writing teachers are concerned with when reading your writing? Why do you say that? What did your previous English teachers focus on when reading your writing? What effect do you think that this had on you as a writer?

APPENDIX D: THE WRITING SITUATION MODEL BY MIKE PALMQUIST

