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# Un-Conditional: Reflections on Teaching Conditionally-Enrolled Students

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UN-CONDITIONAL: REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING CONDITIONALLY-  
ENROLLED STUDENTS

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Educational Leadership, Higher Education

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by  
Emily E. Virtue  
May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

In this study I explore my pedagogical choices in teaching conditionally-enrolled students in a summer bridge program. I address who conditionally-enrolled students are, what support they may need in the classroom, and larger problems in higher education related to conditionally-enrolled students. This study was guided by two research questions: what pedagogical choices do I make in the classroom that foster an engaging environment for conditionally-enrolled and academically underprepared students? What are the emotional and tangible effects of teaching a literature course for conditionally-enrolled students and how does daily reflection of these effects impact pedagogical choices?

I use Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) to examine how prolonged, critical reflection (Brookfield, 2017) and the use of *phronesis* (Birmingham, 2004) as a model of reflection impacts the instructor. SPN is a qualitative form of inquiry that positions the author's experience as central to the discovery of new knowledge and relies heavily on the author's voice (Nash, 2004). I share stories of teaching conditionally-enrolled students in a summer bridge program to highlight the challenges and opportunities of teaching underprepared students. I used a conceptual framework guided by Kahu (2013) to focus on developing engagement in the classroom to prepare students for college-level work. I argue that continual reflection of teaching throughout the duration of a course allows for the instructor to adapt to the needs of the students. Challenges to consistent reflection (such as time and emotional fatigue) and implications for instructors of conditionally-enrolled and first-year students are addressed.

## DEDICATION

To my students—Scarlett, Selena, Laura, Dustin, David, Ellie, Martha, Colin, Ioan, Liz, Alexis, Lauren, Telissa, Travis, Clayton, Albert, Samuel, Fernando, John, Greg, Luke, Phil, Shelby, Jen, Titus, Miguel, Joey, JP, Carter, Mark, Tom, Michael, Daniel, Kevin, Sean, Ashley, Nate, Dre, Maurice, and Heather—thank you for the hard work, the conversations that went down rabbit holes, and for the daily reminders that the hard work of teaching is always worth it.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### IS THIS WHAT FACULTY REALLY THINK?

*“I did not set out to change my views; experiences changed them for me.”—Jane Tompkins*

To say I was excited about this teaching opportunity is an understatement. I was asked to teach in the Summer Bridge program (SB) at the last minute to meet enrollment numbers that were greater than expected. The Associate Vice Chancellor (AVC) for Student Success requested that I take part in the program because he knew my love for first-year students and learning communities. I had just finished my first year as a Provost Fellow for Learning Communities and had taught in a first-year learning community the past year. When I met with the AVC, my reports about working with the students and how much energy I had after my time in the classroom were often central in our conversations.

At this point I was familiar with the Learning Community model at Mountain University (MU—a pseudonym) but I knew little about the SB program, except that it was for students who were conditionally-enrolled. I was thrilled to learn that the course I would teach allowed for quite a bit of creativity. Freshman seminars at MU traditionally allow the instructor to teach a topic in their field in any way they wish. Finally, I could pull all my favorite pieces of short fiction together and have some rich conversations with new students. At a usual Friday evening get-together, I expressed my excitement to fellow teachers.

My colleague quickly warned, “You know, the students you’ll have in SB...they aren’t your typical student. I wouldn’t expect too much.” I asked for clarification. “They

have to pass this summer, so most people don't teach as hard as they would if it were a *normal* course. They don't grade as hard either. Most of these kids don't make it through college. You'll see." I was flabbergasted. This colleague, though speaking in generalities, was referencing his own experience as he, too, taught SB. He believed SB students simply could not succeed as compared to their traditionally enrolled peers. "After all," he argued, "if that were the case, why wouldn't they have been admitted just like everyone else?"

Last summer, my colleague taught both SB students and Peak students. Peak students come to MU the summer before the fall semester starts for a five-week session similar to SB. Peak is advertised as a way for students to jump-start their academic career and is intended for student who were admitted for the fall term. While Peak students and SB students do not take classes together, the course content can be the same. My colleague continually shared experiences of how the "Peak kids" would "blow the assignments out of the water" whereas the SB kids would struggle to get anything above a C. He resigned himself to teaching the SB students yet was enthusiastic to teach the Peak students. When one SB student showed a great deal of promise in his class, he wondered aloud to the student, "what are you doing in SB? You're too smart to be here."

Students in SB often have to fight against the perception that they are not as capable or worthy of higher education as their traditionally enrolled peers. As this story shows, faculty members can harbor negative impressions of conditionally-enrolled students. My colleague's comments not only irritated me, they moved me to act and think defensively. I have recalled this interaction many times, and each time it seems obvious

to me why I was so upset. Yet, in telling this story to my husband and friends, few had the reaction I did. Finally, I was asked to reflect on my reaction. *Why did I care so much about this one comment?*

The truth is, I see so much of myself in students who are conditionally-enrolled. Though I was not conditionally-enrolled myself, I share so many qualities with these students. I was a first-generation college student from a low-income family. Though there was a family expectation that I attend college, I did not get into my first-choice school. I started to question my intelligence as I decided to go to one of my “safety” schools. I further questioned my abilities when I was not awarded a large scholarship to attend. As a student, I constantly felt out of place and as if I had to prove myself. My grades were great, but I felt as though others saw me as inadequate.

Being told, “you are not good enough” or even perceiving that others feel that way, is powerful. My desire to remove such negativity for SB students was just as much for my former self as it was for my students. Years ago, I needed someone to say to me, “You belong here. You will do great here.” No one said that to me, and as a result, I was not certain I did belong. I was not certain I could do well in the eyes of others. I always felt like I had something to prove. Those feelings of inadequacy clearly had lasting effects.

Each time I reflect on that Friday night conversation with my colleague, I am flooded with emotion. Like the stages of grief, I entered stages of emotion: anger, sympathy, frustration, resolve. I was angry that faculty members could be so quick to dismiss students before the students even had a chance to show what they’re made of. I

was angered twice-over when a faculty member, whose position was “Instructor” (relieving him of service and research requirements), *whose primary job expectation is to teach*, would rather give up on his students than consider what else he might do to foster learning in his class. I find myself angry that students, even those who are being praised, are hearing other students disparaged. My emotions slowly turned from anger to empathy.

I genuinely feel empathy for students who are conditionally-enrolled. They were given this status for a reason, but those reasons are varied and none of the reasons should connote, “you were given this status because you are not very smart.” If that is the message they are receiving, I feel badly for the students and their loved ones who want to see them succeed. As a faculty member, I do not see their conditionally-enrolled status as a marker of intelligence. My experience has shown me that the reasons they are in SB are varied and while every now and then the reason is “I just didn’t want to try hard in high school” or “I waited too long to try” the reason is *never* about how smart a student is. While I continue to empathize with my students, my empathy was followed quickly by frustration.

I was frustrated by the comments of faculty and students who view SB students as *less than*. I questioned, “Why does this person get to teach? Is this what other faculty members think of students?” As I continued this internal interrogation, I concluded, “If this is how teachers view students, then it’s no wonder institutions of higher education have a hard time with retention and persistence.” I let myself imagine what it must feel

like to think a professor considers me stupid, that I simply cannot understand the material, and that I am not worth their time or effort. I resolve to not be that teacher.

As I reached the *resolve* stage, my cooler head prevailed. I recognized that complaining about other faculty members would get me nowhere (at least nowhere I would like to be). While I did not just sweep my anger, empathy, and frustration under the rug, I recognized that those emotions would not allow me to solve any problems. Instead, I started to think about how I could better commit to these students, to show them that even if some professors might question their abilities, I would not be counted among them.

### **Background of Problem**

Federal government leaders, higher educational institutions, K-12 teachers and administrators, social activists, parents, and children are concerned about access to a college education. While access has increased specifically with respect to the financing of higher education (particularly for marginalized populations such as women, people of color, and those from low-income families), high school preparation for students to attend institutions of higher education has not met the demand (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Reardon, 2013). Fike and Fike (2007) explained that 29 percent of students who enter college are not prepared in at least one basic skill such as reading, writing, or math and are therefore underprepared. The term “underprepared” may also refer to students who score lower than their peers on standardized tests or high school grade point average (Tierney & Garcia, 2008). The reasons for underpreparation are varied, but many reasons are linked to social factors such as socio-economic status (SES), race, and ethnicity.

Tierney and Garcia (2008) noted that in California, African American and Mexican Americans had remediation (basic education) rates above 61 percent. Adelman (2006) argued that systematic differences in how low-income and students of color are educated can impede their preparation for college compared to their white, higher-income peers.

Those who are not adequately prepared may gain admission but be required to take remedial courses (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that of students enrolled in two or four-year public institutions, 68 percent took at least one remedial course. Of those enrolled in remedial education, 77 percent were “weakly prepared” students and 18 percent were “strongly prepared” students (Chen & Simone, 2016, p. 16). The authors of the National Center for Educational Statistics study argued that such high numbers of remediation may point to “misalignment between high school and college standards, varying policies on remediation across states, and the different assessment and placement strategies used by different institutions” (Chen & Simone, 2016, p. 16). The prevalence of students taking remedial courses suggests that such courses *should* be normalized, yet the rhetoric about these courses and their impact on students is clear.

Enrollment in remedial courses can slow down the degree completion process (Jaggars, Hodara, Cho, & Xu, 2015) and increase rates of attrition (Hern, 2012), making them less appealing to students and college administrators alike. *Remedial* refers to courses that cover material traditionally mastered prior to college. Use of the term *remedial* may suggest to students that they are unintelligent and not capable of college-level work. To ameliorate underpreparation and risk of attrition, many universities have



implemented programs that conditionally enroll lower-performing or underprepared students. The expectation is that students must do well academically in this short-term enrollment to traditionally enroll as a degree-seeking student.

While literature on first-year students is robust (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), less is known about subsets of the first-year population, specifically conditionally-enrolled/admitted students (DeVilbiss, 2014). What is known, however, is that persistence rates for conditionally-enrolled students are lower than their traditionally enrolled peers (Noel-Levitz, 2013). One of the reasons for this might be that students have a negative academic identity—they do not feel as though they are capable of being *an academic*. Zirkel (2002) succinctly claimed, “young people pursue only that which they can imagine as possible” (p. 358). As such, administrators have called for conditionally-enrolled students to receive more support from institutions as they transition to college (DeVilbiss, 2014; Hrabowski, 2005). These calls have been met by increased programming (such as study skill training) and social support (i.e. peer mentors) via student affairs and student support offices. In contrast, the faculty charged with teaching conditionally-enrolled students may receive little to no training prior to meeting their students in the classroom.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As access to higher education has increased for low-income, first-generation, and marginalized populations, so too have programs to support underprepared students. “Bridge” programs (in that they bridge the gap between high school and college) help

students who are academically underprepared succeed at the college level (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). Many of these programs are specifically for conditionally-enrolled students. Not all bridge programs are meant exclusively for conditionally-enrolled or academically underprepared students. Some institutions offer bridge programs to any in-coming student. For the purposes of this study, however, bridge programs will refer only to those programs designed to serve conditionally-enrolled or academically underprepared. Significant effort goes into planning bridge programs to ensure students are adequately supported when they arrive on campus. However, less time is spent preparing faculty to work *with* underprepared student populations.

In the weeks leading up to my first summer teaching the SB program, I was given little preparation for what to expect. I was told who the students are in broad terms (e.g., what “conditionally-enrolled” means) and what the expectations were of the students and of faculty (e.g., in addition to teaching we had to meet once a week for a case management meeting with the other faculty and support staff assigned to our cohort). However, aside from the conversation with my pessimistic colleague, I was offered no real insight into this group of students.

As the vignette at the beginning of the chapter suggested, students who are conditionally-enrolled in college can shoulder many negative perceptions about their abilities from faculty. Because of the students’ enrollment status, they can be seen (or see themselves) as “less than” their peers (Nemelka, Askeroth, & Harbor, 2017). Such perceptions are held by peers and faculty and can make students feel as if they do not belong at the institution (Covarrubias, Gallimore, & Okagaki, 2018) or that faculty

members do not know how (nor care to learn how) to properly support them (Sauer, 2017). While conditionally-enrolled students may need additional academic and social support as they transition to college, the preparation they receive may only be as good as those who work to prepare them.

Two significant problems come to a head in the bridge program classrooms: (1) students undergoing significant stress and transition may be (2) taught by instructors who are ill-prepared or unaware of how best to support their students both academically and developmentally. Yet, faculty interaction with students can have a major impact on student success (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). This study, in the form of a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), explored how I designed a framework to guide my pedagogical choices in order to understand, prepare for, and support conditionally-enrolled students in a bridge program.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study explores how instructor mindset and preparation affects classroom environment and engagement. I use Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) to tell the story of what it means to engage with conditionally-enrolled students in a personal way. Through relationships and a positive mindset toward student capability, I was able to encourage my students and help them build a positive academic identity. My own identity as a teacher changed as a result of working with my students. In this SPN I demonstrate how my pedagogical choices paired with prolonged critical reflection has helped me better understand my role as an instructor and advocate for first-year students. I offer

suggestions to teachers on how to engage with conditionally-enrolled students, and perhaps more importantly, how to undertake prolonged, critical reflection of teaching.

### **Research Questions**

My experience with both students and other instructors left me wondering about how my choices might further encourage my students to succeed. I knew my students could do the college-level work expected of them. While I acknowledged that much of their success was out of my control, I also started to purposefully think about the things that *were* in my control. These musings took the shape of two research questions:

1. What pedagogical choices do I make in the classroom that foster an engaging environment for conditionally-enrolled and academically underprepared students?
2. What are the emotional and tangible effects of teaching a literature course for conditionally-enrolled students and how does daily reflection of these effects impact pedagogical choices?

### **Pedagogical Framework**

Though some classrooms have seen remarkable changes in educational practices, a large majority of students (both P-12 and higher education) experience learning and instruction similar to those of decades past (seated in rows facing the board with an instructor lecturing) (Lemlech, 1994). While the world around us has changed dramatically, our educational practices have not kept pace with these changes. As students and future leaders are expected to meet the challenges of their generation, the modes of education being deployed in most classrooms have not evolved. Institutions of

higher education, in particular, pride themselves on educating students to become more engaged, civically active, critical thinkers yet often do not change curriculum or classroom practices in order to accomplish these goals (Connolly, 2017; Schlueter, 2016).

To help students meet new expectations, educators must adapt their approaches to teaching. I have based my pedagogical philosophy on the work of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), both of whom asked teachers to reconsider educational practices and to put the students at the center of the learning environment. As a student, I was constantly worried about proving myself in the classroom so that my peers and my instructors would see me a legitimate academic. I often felt, especially in liberal studies classes, I was being talked *to* instead of *in conversation with* faculty. In my own classroom, I wanted students to feel welcome to contribute their ideas and perspectives, so I tried to make their own experiences central to the material we discuss.

Freire (1970) argued that there is freedom to be found in education. He asserted that as people gain knowledge, they also gain the ability to think critically about the world around them. Additionally, Freire argues that education will allow those who are oppressed to understand the nature of their oppression and equip them to change.

Education, according to Freire, was designed by the oppressors to maintain oppression by controlling what is taught. In this “banking model of education” (Freire, 1970) students are given information and asked to repeat it later. The oppressor controls the ideas of the oppressed; similarly (and more applicably) Marion Young’s (1990) explanation of powerlessness suggests that practices in the classroom may leave students powerless. My pedagogical choices are guided by this theory in that I seek to prevent

students from relying on “banking.” Students are asked, instead, to come up with their own answers that require reflection and critical thinking. By giving students power in the learning process, I hope to build their agency and academic identity as learners and creators in their education. hook’s (1994) radical pedagogy is the perfect accompaniment to Freire (1970) and Marion Young (2011).

hook’s (1994) notions on transforming pedagogical practices rely on an understanding that educators must question traditional teaching practices and focus on practices that will allow students to move beyond complacency and boredom. Moreover, she insists that all students be engaged in the learning process. By combining the theories of Freire and hooks, I disrupted the traditional model of “teacher lecturing before student” and instead placed the onus to learn on the entire class. This pedagogical framework informed the conceptual framework for this study (discussed below) as it narrowed my focus on what strategies I employ in my class to build student capacity and academic identity through engaging classroom practices.

In this study, I rely entirely on instructor reflection. The literature on reflection and pedagogy is dense and dates back as early as Dewey (1933). My reflection in this study is guided by Birmingham’s (2004) theory of pedagogical reflection based on *phronesis*—a virtue presented by Aristotle that is “a unifying and essential habit of the mind” (p. 314). She argued that if one uses *phronesis* as a guide, reflection will change in four ways. First, reflection will invite a personal and emotional connection. Second, reflection will consider the community in which the teaching takes place. Third, it “resists being reduced” (p. 322) because it is not quantifiable. Rather, it sheds light on the

reality of the educational experience. Fourth, reflection will also provide opportunities to model and therefore construct new knowledge (Birmingham, 2004, pp. 321-322). This approach to reflection forces the teacher to experience the emotional as well as the tangible effects of teaching and to learn from such experiences to build better, more effective pedagogical practices.

In my daily reflection, I spoke about the content covered in class as well as my reaction to how the students accomplished the day's activities. Not only did I note the details of the day, but also my feelings about how I presented material and prepared my students to engage (in other words, the emotional effects of the day's teaching). A more thorough discussion of reflection will be covered in chapters two and three.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The framework used to guide this study is an adaptation of Kahu's (2013) summary of the four perspectives of engagement that I combined with instructor mindset. Briefly, the four perspectives of engagement are behavioral (the ability to complete tasks in the manner appropriate to the environment); psychological (how students feel based on their engagement/disengagement in the course activity or material); socio-cultural (how students make sense of and experience the world around them); and holistic (how the three previous perspectives combine to help students better experience engagement).

In planning daily lessons, I considered how the content required one or more of the perspectives. The perspectives served as the guide for the day's lesson by allowing me to focus on the literature content and the perspective that would best make the content relevant to the students. Additionally, the Engagement Framework (see Figure 1.1)

placed emphasis on the fact that the instructors themselves will influence how students come to experience the four perspectives of engagement. The extent to which I believed the students could succeed, and how I conveyed this meaning is central to the outcome of having engaged students. Such a connection is illustrative of how classroom environment effects academic identity.

### **Research Design Summary**

Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) is an emerging research method similar to many “traditional” forms of qualitative research such as autoethnographies, memoirs, and biographies (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011). While SPNs are guided by research principles, this format of inquiry and writing welcomes adaptation and interpretation.

When Nash pioneered SPN writing in 2004, he plainly stated, “scholarly personal narrative writing is meant primarily to benefit readers, touch readers’ lives by informing their experiences, by transforming the meanings of events, and, in Gornick’s telling phrase, by ‘delivering wisdom’” (p. 28). This dissertation will benefit other faculty who teach conditionally-enrolled students. Readers will, through my experience, understand what it means to work with and learn from students who have been conditionally-enrolled and who are often thought of as less capable than their peers. Moreover, this SPN may “deliver knowledge” of what it means to be in relationship with students to help them succeed.

SPN welcomes narrative, storytelling, and use of imagery to convey meaning to the audience (Nash & Bradley, 2011). As such, this type of writing is incredibly accessible in terms of readability. Using SPN in this study will allow readers to focus on



the teaching experience in the study and the lessons learned from reflection. While my pedagogical choices and reflection will be tied to previous research, the focus of the narrative will rely heavily on personal stories.

SPN is particularly appropriate for this study for two reasons: first the context of the study was a literature course. Students themselves were asked to engage in course material via reading narratives and writing their own. Further, each reflection I completed was, in itself, a brief story of the day and a time to ponder my own reactions and choices. Storytelling is central to the course *and* study and therefore is central to reporting on the findings.

Though dissertations tend to have a format that seems non-negotiable, SPN has been used in dissertation writing in recent years (Bradley, 2009; Unger 2013). Nash (2004) tells of a former student who was interested in writing a SPN dissertation but worried about the academic and scholarly implications of putting oneself too deeply into research and writing process. Might it negate the academic rigor that is expected in a dissertation? Nash (2004) argued, “write your dissertation in a way that demonstrates a grasp of your discipline’s specialized nomenclature and research methodology. But don’t risk losing something vital and special to your humanity: your own gritty and beautiful, hard-won voice” (pp. 26-27).

This study follows the traditional dissertation structure common in the field of education. Particularly in the first two chapters, I’ve followed customary formats (albeit with narrative weaved throughout to establish my own voice and my understanding of the problem of study). Chapter three, which discusses the SPN history and methodology in

depth, more explicitly defies dissertation writing convention. While the third chapter does identify the research questions and how I will explore these questions, the focus is on how to write SPN and why SPN is a legitimate form of research (rather than simply providing an overview of data collection and analysis procedures). Subsequent chapters take a narrative form of writing. Chapters four, five, six, and seven are guided by the hallmarks of SPN: “themes, issues, constructs, and concepts” (Nash, 2004, p. 30) rather than a recounting of data, analysis, and findings.

### **Limitations**

SPN is a highly subjective form of writing. The experiences and analysis of events in this dissertation are my own. While I make every attempt to point out areas of bias or how events relate to my own positionality, subjectivity cannot be completely avoided.

Some students in my class, despite their enrollment in the program, did not want to be at the institution or in the program. Therefore, any pedagogical choices I made in the course likely would not have affected their academic identity. Delimitations are discussed in chapter three.

### **Significance**

If colleges and universities continue to admit more students, especially those who are academically underprepared, then faculty members must also be prepared to teach these students. This means, for some, a fundamental shift in how faculty members view themselves as educators. Leslie (2002) complicated this notion explaining that

institutional and disciplinary norms and expectations related to teaching and research may dictate an instructor's view of teaching.

Instructors at the college level, for the most part, receive terminal degrees in their field of study, not that of education or pedagogy. Many are not prepared to teach as a part of their degree requirements, often obtaining assistantships for research rather than teaching (Austin, 2002). As such, instructors may rely on teaching methods they experienced when they were undergraduates or as those they observed in graduate school (Austin, 2002). This study provides suggestions for how to engage college students in general and conditionally-enrolled students specifically in the classroom—especially with respect to activities that require reflection, interactive activities, and tasks that go beyond a traditional, lecture format. Information in this study may be particularly useful for those who have not been given extensive training in pedagogy or curriculum design.

This SPN offers guidance on building relationships with students, challenging and supporting conditionally-enrolled students, and creating curricular tools that allow students to become a part of the classroom, not just visitors to it. I shed light onto techniques that may be effective for others who want to build an engaging and empowering classroom environment and encourage achieved academic identity.

SPN calls for *universalizability* in the findings: a way to take one's specific experience and appropriately broaden the ideas to other, related contexts. My study's framework might serve as a floorplan for how to approach teaching and interacting with conditionally-enrolled (or more generally) first-year students. Current or future teachers may read about my experience and find value in my lesson plans, particularly those

activities that teach transferrable academic skills to students which may be used throughout their postsecondary studies.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academic identity-** “Academic identity” refers to how students understand themselves as students and learners—including their perception of ability and the likelihood they will succeed (Chorba, Was, & Issacson, 2012). Chorba et al. (2012) built on Marcia’s (1966) work on identity status which theorizes that identity is comprised of four statuses: diffuse, foreclosure, moratorium, and achieved.

To have an achieved academic identity means that the student has explored alternatives and is committed to the identity (e.g., believes they are able to do well or pass the class and likely persist to graduation). Moratorium describes a time when students may be considering their identity and the feasibility of their choices. Foreclosure status is signified by the adoption of goals that are given to them by others (i.e., parents, partners) but have not committed to the identity on their own. Diffuse status connotes a person who is not looking for direction or commitment of any kind (Chorba et al., 2012, p. 61).

Three of these statuses are ones that I would consider to be negative academic identities. A student in moratorium, foreclosure, or diffuse has not considered their role as an academic nor committed to being an academic. To have a negative academic identity is to be without the belief of success or feeling as though scholastic success will be limited. Students may move through the four phases of academic identity throughout their academic careers. The process is not a linear one and not all students will experience

each stage. As Alder (2016) argues, academic identity is not static, it is always changing and may depend on performance in class, relationships with professors, or social factors in the students' life. In this study, I am concerned with helping students reach achieved academic identity (also referred to as "positive academic identity") so that they might persist to traditional enrollment and beyond.

**Bridge program-** Programs that intend to "bridge" the gap between high school and college are often referred to as "bridge programs." These programs, usually held the summer before a traditional fall semester start, are often required of students who are academically "at risk" or underprepared (Nemelka, Askeroth, & Harbor, 2017). Though programs differ, most have requirements including earning a specific grade point average (GPA) or course grade to continue as a student at the institution. In addition to grade requirements, components of many bridge programs include additional social support and activities, study skill development, and community engagement opportunities.

**Conditionally-enrolled students-** These are students who are not granted full enrollment privileges upon acceptance and enrollment. Many universities and colleges also use the term "conditionally-admitted." These students must complete additional requirements (often in the form of course or program completion) to traditionally enroll (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Though program and requirement models for conditionally-enrolled students vary, these programs are often meant to enroll and support underprepared students.

**Engagement-** The term "engagement" has been defined numerous times in literature concerning elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education (Fisher, Frey,

Quaglia, Smith, & Lande, 2018). This study uses Harrington, Sinfield, and Burns' (2016) definition of engagement which "encompasses students' academic and professional development as well as their social integration" (p. 108) and is further guided by Kahu's (2013) four perspectives of engagement: behavioral, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic. Each perspective will be discussed at length in chapter two.

**First-generation college student-**These students are the first in their family to enroll in a post-secondary institution. Definitions of what constitutes a first-generation college student vary, though for the purposes of this study (and in line with much of the current literature) a student is considered first generation if they will be the first to attend and complete a college degree (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). This definition includes students whose parents enrolled in an institution of higher education but did not complete a degree and is the definition used by the study site (Eligibility, 2018). Of the students enrolled at the University where I conducted the study, forty-eight percent of the total undergraduate population is considered to have first-generation college student status (Gorman, 2018).

**Low Socio-economic Status-** Socio-economic status (SES) has been defined in a number of different ways by various scholars (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). Factors that contribute to one's SES may include income or employment status, education, and capital (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Perna, 2006). This study defined low-SES by students' ability to qualify for Pell Grants. Pell Grants are the product of a federal program run by the U.S. Department of Education (Federal Student Aid, 2018). These grants, which do not have to be paid back, are awarded to undergraduate students who

have “exceptional financial need” which is determined by the expected family contribution (Federal Student Aid, 2018). Because data on actual family income was not available but Pell Grant recipient status was, this study uses the Pell Grant definition to define low SES.

**Rural-** Similar to “first-generation college student,” the term “rural” has no single definition. The federal government uses different classifications for rural which depend on population and identifying what a location is *not* –that is that rural areas are *not* urban (Ratcliff, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016). The Census Bureau’s definition of rural is based largely on population density. According to the 2010 U. S. Census, there are 704 counties (or statistical equivalents) that are “completely rural.” According to Ratcliff et al. (2016), completely rural counties “have no areas that are identified as urban and are home to less than 2.0 percent of the total U. S. Population” (p. 6). The counties from which much of the student population at the study site reside are classified as either mostly or completely rural.

**Sense of belonging-** This term refers to whether a student feels connected to the campus (Strayhorn, 2012). Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann (2015) expanded the definition to include a “psychological dimension of student integration” (p. 62). Factors that relate to this connection are: relationships with faculty (Maestas et al., 2007), feeling valued and welcome by the institution and peers (Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017), and being given a place to share opinions (Wilson, et al., 2015).

**Underprepared students-** These are students who lack basic (college-level) skills in at least one of three areas: mathematics, reading, or writing (Stewart & Heaney,

2013; Tritelli, 2003). High school GPA or standardized test scores are often the measures used to determine this designation.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of how I explored my pedagogical choices to create an engaging classroom environment that fosters a positive academic identity. The problem which grounds my study is a national one: underprepared students are now being given access to higher education but once they arrive on campus are not always given the appropriate support to succeed. A number of factors can be related to student success such as socio-economic status, first-generation college student status, race, ethnicity, and rurality. My approach to teaching conditionally-enrolled students was informed by Kahu's (2013) perspectives of engagement—the basis of my Engagement Framework. Scholarly Personal Narrative as a method of qualitative inquiry is introduced.



CHAPTER TWO  
UNDERSTANDING CONDITIONALLY-ENROLLED STUDENTS AND THE  
COLLEGE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

*“Who are you and whose are you?”—Michael Sorrell, President, Paul Quinn College*

**Introduction**

I moved to the Appalachian mountains, sight unseen, soon after my husband landed a tenure-track job. Drew enjoyed his campus visit—on the phone the morning before his formal interview began, he recalled his first night there. He had dinner with a professor from his prospective department. Afterward, they made the hour-long drive to campus through winding mountain roads. It was so dark he had no idea where he was going. All he could remember was the billboard of the glowing mountain lion eyes—the school mascot—and how arresting that image was. Darkness but for the watchful eyes in the mountains.

The day he came home to Minneapolis, there was a job offer waiting on our answering machine. We could not afford to fly down together for me to check out the area, so I had to trust Drew when he accepted the job at Mountain University (MU). Three months later we moved. When I got off the plane still an hour away from my new, rural home, I cried. *Why did he think I could live here? Shouldn't my husband know me better?* I was overwhelmed by the stark differences between my former life in Minneapolis and my new life in rural North Carolina.

At first, I was bothered by the aesthetics. It was beautiful, but it was suffocating. I could not see the horizon, I never knew what direction I was facing and neighborhoods

like I was used to in the city simply did not exist. My first few months in in the mountains were torture. There was something about Appalachian life (or rather, *many* things about Appalachian life) that I just did not understand: small things, like the fact that there is no weekly curbside garbage pick-up (we had to take it to the dump ourselves) to large things like consistently seeing the confederate flag flying (my personal values do not align with that symbol). In short, I felt like I did not belong.

About two months after moving, I landed a teaching gig in the English department. The process was astonishingly easy: the chair (my husband's new boss) knew I wanted to teach so when she learned the department needed to add more classes to meet the increased enrollment needs, she told me to fill out the application online and the job would be mine. The privilege of quickly obtaining the job was not lost on me. Because I was qualified (by way of my master's degree in English), and I already knew the department chair, *and* was married to a new tenure-track professor, I was offered a position many likely were hoping to have.

This would be my first real teaching job, and I was nervous. *What would the students be like? More importantly, what was I supposed to teach and how was I supposed to accomplish that task?* Aside from a document the chair forwarded me with a departmental curriculum guide, I received no training. The administrative assistant rustled up a copy of the required text (full of dense readings) and an instructor guide for the book. It was the academic equivalent to getting a tap on the shoulder and an encouraging, "go get 'em!" whispered in my ear like an athlete being urged onto the field.

Though I earned a bachelor's degree in writing and a master's degree in English, I had no real preparation for teaching. Beyond submitting a cover letter and resume, I did not have to demonstrate any teaching capability. I had "taught" (read: facilitated) first-year experience courses and run numerous leadership and health-related workshops, but formally teaching was new for me. In three short weeks, I was on my own in a classroom with 24 first-year students. They looked at me as if I knew what I was talking about. I leaned on my years of high school and college theater training and acted like I did, indeed, know what I was doing.

I started teaching because I wanted a change. I had worked for years in student affairs and while I was given a good deal of independence in my previous positions, I always answered to someone. I would have weekly meetings with a supervisor to talk about my progress, the projects I was working on, and the students I was working with. But now as a teacher I was on my own in a classroom with no one to guide me along or check in on my progress.

I had no idea how to write a syllabus or an assignment prompt. *Classroom management* was not even a term I had heard of, let alone an issue I thought about. Here is what I thought I knew something about: college students. I felt I knew what college students were like and understood their mindsets pretty well. After all, I had just spent five years working with them outside of the classroom. What I quickly realized, however, is that not all college students are the same. The students at MU were different from the students I had been working with at St. Olaf College. And more to the point, working with students in a classroom setting was lightyears different than running a Wellness

Center or advising programming boards. I thought about how I was basically thrown to the wolves that first semester and for a long time I assumed it was because I was an adjunct. I had read enough articles in *The Chronicle* and on the website *Inside Higher Ed* to know universities have a reputation for not treating adjuncts very well.

But, as time went on and I was eventually hired as a full-time lecturer, what I surmised was this: virtually no one trains professors (adjunct to full) to be a teacher. Many rely on what they observed or experienced as an undergrad (for some, that was decades ago). Some do not think about what their students need for learning to take place. Others avoid all talk of pedagogy or teacher development. To teach in an institution of higher education does not mean one is prepared for or cares about teaching.

Unfortunately, I observed, this means many students are not being engaged in the classroom and may not be learning. A number of students in my classes did not seem prepared to write at the college level and I was not sure how to “bring them up” to the level of writing I expected. Many of my students those first few semesters admitted that they were not strong students in high school (they did not earn a very high GPA) and that MU had a reputation for being a back-up or last-chance school. I started thinking more about what my students needed from me so they could learn. I also started to feel like I owed an apology to my students from my first semester of teaching.

By the time I was asked to teach for SB, I had researched teaching strategies, asked colleagues for guidance, and put serious thought into my teaching philosophy. I had been teaching at MU for a few years and felt like I knew the school population and the larger Appalachian area from which the school primarily draws its students. I knew

there would always be room for improvement, but I felt comfortable teaching first-year students at MU.

What follows is a literature review that explores how teaching and learning, engagement, and social factors relate to conditionally-enrolled and/or underprepared students and their academic identity development. As I discuss major themes and findings in the literature, I share personal stories to highlight what scholars have described in their findings. These stories from my own life or that of my students' serve to give a realistic picture of my own teaching and positionality in the context of my work at Mountain University. To conclude the literature review, I explore research on pedagogical theory, provide a conceptual framework for the study, and discuss the practice of personal reflection on teaching.

*“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”—Zora Neal Hurston*

### **Conditionally-admitted or Conditionally-enrolled Students**

Students who are not granted traditional admission are referred to as either conditionally-admitted or conditionally-enrolled (DeVilbiss, 2014; Heaney & Fisher, 2011). The two terms both refer to the same group and are often used interchangeably. This study uses the term “conditionally-enrolled” to be consistent with the terminology used at the study site (MU), though much of the literature refers to these students as “conditionally-admitted” (Stewart & Heaney, 2013) as this status is conferred during the admission process rather than the enrollment process.

Conditionally-enrolled students may have additional criteria to complete before the admitting college or university considers them a traditional college freshman.

Enrollment criteria is specific to each institution but generally requires students to pass a specific number of courses with an appropriate GPA and without violation of the student code of conduct. Students who are conditionally-enrolled are often underprepared or “at-risk” of academic failure (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Mattson, 2007).

Conditionally-enrolled students need additional support services to help them succeed in college (Grimes & David, 1999; Wilmer, 2008). Stewart and Heaney (2013) argued that not only is support necessary, but the messaging about their status as students needs to be purposeful as the first communication with the institution sets the tone for the student experience. Such messaging can “bolster or inhibit” the students’ “confidence and academic self-image” (p. 27). As conditionally-enrolled students enter college, there is evidence that in addition to promoting academic skills, non-cognitive skills (such as persistence, grit, and metacognition) can strengthen underprepared students’ ability to succeed (Adebayo, 2008; Higbee, et al., 1991; Sriram; 2014). The research on conditionally-enrolled students identifies a number of factors that may contribute to a student’s underpreparation for college-level study including socio-economic status (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015; Tough, 2014), race (Hu & St. John, 2001; Tough, 2014), ethnicity (Mapes, 2011), and rurality (Ardoin, 2018).

### **Low-Income, First-Generation College Students**

Much has been written about programs and strategies designed to support low-income, first-generation, and traditionally underserved student populations. In particular, many studies have addressed bridge programs which traditionally have served low-income, first-generation, and minoritized populations (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013;

Covarrubias, Gallimore, & Okagaki, 2018; Nemelka, Askeroth, & Harbor, 2018). Within these programs, students build both academic and non-cognitive skills, but the results of these studies are varied (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013).

Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) noted that as early as the seventh grade most students have decided on their educational or occupational outcomes and that these are strongly related to socioeconomic status. Lower income students have lower educational expectations compared to higher income students (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001) and may struggle with persistence and determination however, it would be naïve to state that such students do not arrive at college with some of these skills firmly in place.

Engberg and Allen (2011) examined how low-income students compared to high-income students on their choice to attend college. The study was framed by an understanding of cultural capital, human capital, and social capital and found that family background characteristics have a lasting influence on educational decision-making and that “low-income students were surrounded by a greater number of familiar and proximal influences who endorsed and encouraged postsecondary attainment” (p. 802). These findings might suggest that if continued focus on attainment is provided in the college environment, students will be more likely to succeed.

Was and Isaacson (2008) found that student academic identity effects academic achievement. Chorba, Was, and Isaacson (2012) clarified these findings which explored the extent to which students self-handicapped (prevented) their academic efforts. Chorba and colleagues (2012) explained that those with “achieved academic identity” (the

highest level of identity) (p. 61) reported fewer self-handicapping behaviors than their peers which suggests that *believing* in one's abilities can positively influence academic outcomes such as retention and persistence.

As the work of Was and Isaacson (2008) and Chorba, et al. (2012) suggested, one of the barriers to academic success is related to mindset—for example, first-generation students feel more academically unprepared than their second (and higher) generation peers (Cruce, Kinzie, Williams, Morelon, and Yu, 2005). Similarly, students from low-income families or who grew up in low-income school districts often have been operating from a systematic deficit for years.

In the 2006 U.S. Department of Education report *The Toolbox Revisited*, data suggested that those with lower socio-economic status (SES) are unfairly influenced by standards created by those with higher SES (who traditionally have more support and resources for success). Alderman (2006) explained, “there are inequities in opportunity to learn and proclivity to learn that are reflected in the geo-demography of schools [...] socioeconomic status will modulate some of the effects of curriculum” (29). In other words, the U.S. Department of Education acknowledged that some of the barriers to student success are entrenched in environmental factors such as where the school is located and how well the school is funded. Through no fault of the student's own, they may receive an education that is “less than” that of someone whose parents have a higher tax bracket. Low-income students, therefore, are often underprepared when they arrive at college, and the lack of preparation can limit success.



The systematic oppression of low-income students that is illustrated by lack of resources, teaching, and educational opportunity becomes more pronounced in the admissions process. As a result, low-income students are less likely to gain entrance into college because measures of college readiness treat all students and all colleges the same (Porter, Polikoff, & Smithson, 2011). Klasik and Strayhorn (2018) extended this argument by demonstrating that “there is substantial variation in the predictions of college readiness for students from different backgrounds attending different colleges” (p. 340). Just as income level impacts a student’s college readiness, so too does race or ethnicity, though the level of readiness also depends on the type of institution the student eventually enrolls in. What Klasik and Strayhorn (2018) argued is made visible in the story I shared in chapter one about the colleague who wondered why such a “smart” student was conditionally-enrolled. The metrics institutions use to measure readiness might not account for the unique make up of an institution. While that particular student may not have been prepared for *all* colleges, he certainly was prepared to excel at MU.

### **Rural Students**

This study takes place in a rural Appalachian university in the Southeastern United States. A majority of students enrolled at MU are in-state students (93%) and over one third of these students hail from the western-most counties, all of which are rural (Student Body Profile, 2017). Because so many of the students in this study are from rural areas, specifically Appalachia, it is important to understand what it means to be raised in a rural setting.

As multiple sources (Ardoin, 2018; Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2018; Ratcliff, et al., 2016) note, it is difficult to define what *rural* means. Most sources define *rural* by what it is not (as in not urban) (Ratcliff et al., 2016). Flora et al. (2018) explained that *rural* is defined by many designations including distinctions made at the county level (less than 10,000), by the U.S. Census Bureau (open countryside or towns of fewer than 2,500), and by Congress (based on population and use of resources) (p. 10). In this study, *rural* refers to the U. S. Census Bureau definition of “mostly” or “completely rural” (or *not urban* or *suburban*) which includes 11.9% of the total population in the U.S.

While not all of Appalachia is rural, a majority of the land recognized by the U. S. Census Bureau as Appalachia is “mostly” or “completely” rural. Appalachia includes the mountainous regions of 13 states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (n.d.), while the rate of poverty in Appalachia has decreased dramatically since the 1960s, the number of high-poverty counties in the region is more than 1.5 times the U. S. average. While poverty is less widespread than it once was, many areas still struggle with infrastructure and strong economies.

Negative views of Appalachian people and their culture are well-documented in both popular culture (for example, television shows such as *Justified*, *Moonshiners*, and *Buckwild*), contemporary non-fiction (Vance, 2016), and scholarly literature (McGuire, 2010). Stereotypes of Appalachian people depict “dumb hillbillies” who have no intellect or potential for personal improvement. McGuire (2010) related her personal experience to

the cultural history of being viewed as poor, unintelligent, and unlikely to succeed. She recalled the displacement of coal workers, the 1964 “War on Poverty,” and poor rural education as examples of how Appalachian people have been looked down upon for over a century. While these stereotypes do not paint a glowing picture of the Appalachian region and its people, it does inform our understanding of perceptions (and misconceptions) about where students grow up. In rural, poor areas of Appalachia, there may indeed be a distrust of outsiders, a heightened desire to remain in the community, and a value for blue-collar jobs (Flora et al., 2018).

Often, rural students also identify as low-income or first-generation college students (Pappano, 2017). Showalter, Klein, Johnson, and Hartman (2017) noted that in nearly half of American states, rural families are low-income families. The authors also reported that “more than one in four is a child of color, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous year” (Showalter et al., 2017, p. 1). As such, academic achievement can be difficult for some students though Showalter et al. (2017) noted that on average, rural student achievement “fares well” (p. 1). Rural students’ struggles as college students are also unique based on their rural upbringing. The study of the effects of a rural upbringing on educational success has been steadily increasing in the last two decades (Ardoin, 2018; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; King, 2012; Pappano, 2017).

As access to higher education increases, so do concerns about whether students who arrive on campus will succeed. Showalter et al. (2017) explained that college preparation is a concern, citing that while 87% of rural high school students graduate, only 77% of rural students of color do (p. 2). In North Carolina, one-third of students

attend a rural district (Showalter, et al., 2017). In the case of rural students, researchers have found that a students' previous environment can have a dramatic effect on both their performance and their attitudes concerning higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Judy, Butler, & Schneider, 2011; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Pappano, 2017). Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found that income, family, and student aspirations all affect a student's ability to succeed. Further, the authors argued there are a number of limiting factors that students from the Appalachian region in particular may face, including regional isolation that may prevent information accessibility and assistance in the transition to higher education (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).

Pappano (2017) explained that many colleges and universities do not spend time or resources to recruit rural students. Often rural schools lack resources and personnel, and some teachers fill the role of both instructor and guidance counselor. Bryan and Simmons (2009) underscored this point in their study in which only one participant stated they felt adequately prepared for college. These findings shed light on what many students enrolled in SB may have endured prior to their college admission: they may have been raised in a small, isolated town with few resources to prepare them for college. For first-generation students, their families may not have been keen on the students attending college.

Keefe, Reck, and Reck (1983) argued that the regional isolation some college students may have experienced prior to arriving on college campuses may have resulted in their culture becoming a unique ethnicity. The smaller enclaves and communities in Appalachia take on characteristics, habits, and values that are so unique to their location

and people that it is as if a new ethnicity exists. Identity in such a unique ethnicity is a tie that binds those in the culture and can be vastly different from other rural communities. This could be seen in words or speech patterns used only by those in the group. While connection to the greater region and nation has likely improved with technology developments, the impact of having a unique ethnic identity may still greatly impact both student upbringing and student identity when they arrive on campus.

Though cultural influences can change over time, the changes may be slight and, depending on how isolated and interconnected the family is, familial culture, beliefs, and values may be deeply rooted. For example, as students in my class were discussing social identity, one mentioned that he had never seen a black person until he arrived on campus. He was surprised to meet a black person because he simply had never entertained the notion that his path would cross with one. His tiny, rural community consisted of only white people and he had no indication that when he moved to another rural town, not far from his own, that the people he would encounter there might be different than him. Clearly, the location (particularly rural, Appalachian locations) in which students were brought up can have a great influence on their experience at college.

The isolation previously experienced may also have an effect on student identity. Whereas prior to arriving on campus students may have seen themselves as an Appalachian with strong ties to family, arrival to and integration on any college campus may change that view of identity. Bryan and Simmons (2009) explained that students sometimes experienced dissonance between the dichotomy of their identities at home and at school. The students did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences of college when

at home (especially if their views changed). The authors found “those who had stronger identities as college students all had decreased the frequencies of their visits home whereas first year students and those with less strong identities indicated they returned home every single weekend” (p. 397). As students moved from one environment to another, they had to decide which environment best suited their identity and often felt that the two could not blend. Those new to the college environment may struggle to adjust as they feel the need to hold onto their identity and experiences that relate to their home life.

Lubrano (2004) explained that many first-generation students (regardless of geographic upbringing) struggle to connect with their non-educated family members and often cut or loosen ties to the family as education increases. Students feel that their family members will not understand their struggles in school or understand what it is like to live in the new environment. Rather than constantly deal with the discomfort in familial relationship, sometimes first-generation students reduce their visits home (Lubrano, 2004). When they have completed their undergraduate studies, many students decide not to move back to the community in which they were raised. Out-migration or “brain drain” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) in rural communities is common. Many students who do earn a college degree often do not return to their home communities (Ardoin, 2018).

The influence of family has been well documented in the literature about rural and low-income families (Ardoin, 2018; Flora et al., 2018; Pappano, 2017). For example, students determine whether to attend college based on family support and family members’ education level (King, 2012). Recently, J.D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*

(2016) explored his often-competing ties to his Appalachian upbringing and his desire for higher education. Family members questioned his choices, assumed that he thought he was better than them, and disparaged his new life. While Vance was able to complete both a bachelor's degree and a law degree despite family support, lack of family support can have a profoundly negative impact on students.

When family support is present, rural students are more likely to attend college. Though the rate of support for college attendance in Appalachia is not known, the overall college-completion rate for Appalachian students was just 22.6% in 2015 (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2016) compared to 59% of students nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These numbers give quantitative evidence for what is qualitatively seen in the literature: Appalachian students simply are not enrolling at rates comparable to their peers in other parts of the country. Economic, family, and educational preparation are likely reasons for these statistics. Walpole (2003) explained that the rural students who *do* attend college are often enrolling at less prestigious institutions and are less likely to persist to graduation. If students struggle with any of these factors, instructors may see evidence in the classroom.

During my second summer teaching SB, I had a student, Elijah<sup>1</sup>, who was a first-generation student. Though he grew up less than thirty miles from MU, his family had never set foot on a college campus. They were angry with him for choosing to attend college and “abandon” them to a new life. He would receive daily calls from family members informing him of all of the issues at home (lack of food or income, the power

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<sup>1</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.

being shut off), informing him that because of his decision to leave (and therefore not contribute financially), they were worse off. His mother and grandmother implored him to come home because he was “no better than” the rest of the family and he should not assume he was merely because he was admitted to college.

The endless stream of disparaging remarks and guilt-laden calls eventually wore on Elijah. He fell behind in his work. He was often late because he would run home after class to check in on his family and would stay the night. He’d have to wake up early to get back to campus in time for his 8:25 class. Though Elijah wanted to be in college, he could not handle constantly being pulled in two directions. Elijah did not pass SB that summer and returned home. His story is not uncommon for rural, Appalachian students.

Much of the literature on Appalachian students presented here operates from a deficit orientation—one that focuses on the qualities students may *lack* as they seek a postsecondary degree. Institutions of higher education may also operate with this same deficit mindset as they focus on students’ deficiencies related to their first-generation status or their close connections with family members back home. Yet, other scholars argue that such close ties to family may be the strength students use to continue their education. Yosso (2006) argued that in marginalized populations (particularly people of color), forms of “wealth” are extended beyond financial wealth to include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital.

Rural Appalachian students may have robust aspirational capital, which Yosso (2006) defined as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow



themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without objective means to attain those goals” (pp. 77-78). Many students noted in the literature (Ardoin, 2018; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Pappano, 2017) explain their dreams of higher education as a driving force for their enrollment and persistence in the college setting. As I taught this summer, I tried to build on students’ aspirational capital.

In the sum of the literature presented, most institutions continue to perceive rural students from a deficit mindset rather than with ability or cultural wealth. Similar deficit-focused findings were made with regard to Latinx students, yet scholars have called on educators and researchers to consider other strengths-based models that “explain the successes and challenges” students face (Kouyoumdjian, Guzmàn, Garcia, & Talavera-Bustillos, 2017, p. 63). If students are to truly succeed, institutional mindset about student ability will need to change as well. Students need to understand that the institution believes in their academic ability and identity just as much as the students themselves do.

### **Academic Identity and Academic Literacies**

When I began my PhD program, I had been working in higher education for nearly a decade. At this point in my career and scholastic pursuits, I felt like I belonged. Having taught writing and rhetoric for a number of years, I felt confident in my own academic, writing, and research abilities. Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins (2009) note that many PhD students and post-PhD writers struggle with writing “know how.” I had yet to feel that sense of anxiety or questioning. Yet, the distinction of working *for* the academy and being *in* the academy are two different things.

The *for* or *in* dichotomy became clear in introductory research classes that focused specifically on research design and making a case for how one might answer a research question. My sense of what constituted research was challenged and expanded in ways I felt ill-equipped to address. Writing began to feel lonely, isolating, and almost injurious. Literature reviews, in particular, were a task that took the shape of a new form of torture. I enjoyed reading and learning, but to make sense of what I learned, to pick apart the most salient points, to make my thoughts clear to my audience? This was a task I did not feel I was up to.

Cameron et al. (2009) explained that I was not alone in these feelings pointing to the “intensely personal relationship with the self during the writing process” (p. 272). Like my students, my identity as a student and writer was shifting. The changes I experienced were not only in my academic skills but in my emotional development and in my identity. The more reading I did and the more I worked through uncertainty, I was able to form my own identity as a writer and an academic. Like my students, my identity as a student and writer was shifting.

If students enter college with concerns about their academic preparation (warranted or not), they may struggle to succeed academically (Johnson, et al., 2015). Unfortunately, literature on first-generation and low-income students is rife with deficit-focused language that laments the obstacles such students need to overcome (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). This type of language will influence (consciously or subconsciously) how students view themselves as students or academics. Zirkel (2002) noted that what adolescents see structured in society “correspondingly [encode] in the

identities they form” (p. 358). In other words, students who are told they cannot do well, or are prevented from seeing role models who do well academically, are less likely to believe in their ability than those who have positive role models. Their academic identity may be weak because of the lack of support and positive images around them to suggest they have potential.

While much of the literature on underprepared students maintains a deficit focus, a number of findings and strategies focus on helping students progress in their education. Unfortunately, findings can serve to further confuse educators as outcomes can often contradict one another. Kane et al. (2014) noted that for underprepared students, developing metacognitive skills (such as persistence, grit, and generally, thinking about thinking) can help students feel more prepared in their classroom setting. Farrell and Tighe-Mooney (2013) complicated this notion in their findings by questioning whether it is appropriate to build skills (specifically writing skills) at a time when students are in significant transition (p. 11012).

Goodman and Cirka (2009) noted that the success of an English course depends on the instructors’ ability to develop self-efficacy and reduce writing apprehension in students. Likewise, Kill (2006) argued that students must undertake two negotiations of identity: their interaction with others and between their various presentations of self. She continued to assert that the work of renegotiating classroom identity could not fall to students alone but that instructors may need to help foster identity development.

Students who struggle with their academic identity often do not feel at home in the classroom (Goodman & Cirka, 2009; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Mann

(2001) argued that changes in pedagogy to eliminate alienation should be radical rather than cosmetic. Instructors should consider their role in alienation and how they contribute to it in five different ways: solidarity (expressing empathy for students and sharing personal experience), hospitality (welcoming new students and helping them feel at home), safety (creating places/classes where students will be respected and can explore ideas without fear), redistribution of power in the educational process (assessing where instructors limit students' ability to learn and where an instructor might exert power over a student), and criticality (being aware of context, our responses as instructors, and our ability to adapt).

Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007) suggested that students often desire a relationship with their instructors and when they are unable to connect, student identity is affected. Past experiences with education (or lack thereof) are likely to influence students' perception of self and that "situated interaction with significant others in the new learning context is a critical ingredient in the formation of new student identity" (Scanlon et al., 2007, p. 237). Here, the "significant others" are not romantic partners, but rather the instructors and peers in the classroom who play a significant role in the student's learning.

**Academic literacies for all students.** Academic identity is connected to the concept of academic literacies. Whereas academic identity relates to how students view themselves as academics (and capable of higher education studies) academic literacies are the languages and ways in which students interact with writing and communication conventions in academia.

Lea and Street (1998) explain that different conventions in writing and the switch from secondary writing expectations to higher education confounded many students. The authors questioned how feedback was given to students and whether or not it was done in ways that would allow students to develop their academic knowledge (and therefore identity). Traditionally, academic literacies have been viewed as precise and rigid, yet scholars are now suggesting that this view be expanded.

Hathaway (2013) argued that instructors need to approach student academic literacies as essential for all students, not just certain subsets. This assertion was influenced by Gourlay's (2009) argument that when students obtain academic literacies they help construct identities as first-year students. Hathaway (2013) went on to argue that providing better instruction on academic writing for all students would reduce addressing students from a deficit model and reduce student resistance toward taking remedial courses.

By reducing a reliance on the deficit model, instructors could help build student confidence and see not only the development of academic identities but also a persistence to succeed to graduation. For example, if a student excels at understanding the big picture of the assignment but struggles with sentence structure, the instructor would see better results by beginning writing instruction that focuses on what the student clearly understands (the argument) and then moving on to the roadblocks that keep the student from conveying information (poorly developed sentences).

Horner (2013) joined Hathaway (2013) in the call to address academic literacies but extends her argument to point out that those in academia value some student literacies

and abilities more than others. He implores instructors to “explore ways by which academic literacy/ies might be transformed to counter noxious power relations advanced by dominant ideologies of academic literacy as ‘autonomous’—a single set of stable, discrete, internally uniform, politically neutral skills” (Horner, 2013, p. 3).

If instructors follow Horner’s lead, they will create a more equitable and welcoming environment for students who are underprepared or less valued in academic settings. For example, a student might enter a college course unaware of how to formally cite a source, yet in conversation they are able to articulate where they heard the information and why it is important. While the technical skill might not yet be present, the student is academically literate in the awareness that an argument is incomplete when one does not acknowledge where their points come from. By acknowledging the various ways in which students can demonstrate academic literacies, instructors can help foster positive academic identities.

Literature about low-income, first-generation, and/or rural students has traditionally approached concerns from a deficit model and can have a negative impact on academic identity. Research explored in this literature review suggests that English classes are an appropriate environment to build academic identity. If instructors broaden academic literacies, they may be able to support low-income, first-generation and/or rural students to perform at higher levels.

### **Teaching and Learning**

Scholars in the field of teaching and learning have evidence that effective teaching requires instructors to consider a number of different factors including a learning

environment that is learner-centered, structured, personalized, social, and inclusive (Istance & Dumont, 2011). Additionally, instructors must be equipped to engage students at the appropriate level while challenging them to surpass their expectations. Yet many instructors are ill-prepared to illicit such engagement from students.

One reason for lack of engagement may be explained by Bandura (1971), who argued that “actions are [...] regulated to a large extent by anticipated consequences” (p. 3). Therefore, many students make decisions related to their college coursework based on previous educational experiences. If the students struggled in high school or found content boring and teachers unhelpful, they are likely to expect the same at a new institution. Student choices and expectations may make constructing an engaging learning environment particularly challenging for instructors. Yet Stephens, Brannon, Markus, and Nelson (2015) noted that students can succeed despite these obstacles when they feel as though they “fit” in the classroom setting. The next section explores current literature on effective learning environments and engaging students in these environments.

**Defining “engagement”.** As scholars have noted, “engagement” is an often-used term with myriad meanings and connotations (Fisher, Frey, Quaglia, Smith, & Lande, 2018; Harrington, Sinfield, & Burns, 2011). Because of the many ways one can define engagement, it can be a term that is haphazardly used and rarely fully defined. Fisher, Frey, Quaglia, Smith, and Lande (2018) noted that for some, “engagement” can mean that all students have a pencil in their hands and paper in front of them, while for others, “engagement” has more to do with interaction between teacher and student. For college

faculty, the lack of a clear definition poses problems when they are told to increase engagement yet do not know how the term is being used.

Harrington, Sinfield, and Burns (2016) explained that engagement “encompasses students’ academic and professional development as well as their social integration” (p. 108). Concern about engagement is more than a question of definition. Students often do not feel motivated to engage in the classroom. Fisher et al. (2018) stated that 43% of students say school is boring and only 54% enjoy participating in class. In the case of incoming freshmen, especially ones who are academically underprepared, evidence suggests that students have essentially been trained to have low expectations of school. Many of them are bored or find school boring and little over half will want to participate. This supports Bandura’s (1971) findings related to response consequences (discussed later in the chapter).

**(Dis)Engagement by Design.** Whether or not a student experiences an engaging classroom environment is determined by the instructor and systematic expectations at both the K-12 and higher education levels. Instructors must be aware of student needs, expectations, and abilities. Additionally, instructors should be aware that student expectations about classes are largely based on their prior experience in the classroom (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2009). For many students, including my own, entering an engaging college classroom environment will disrupt their notion of what class should look like.

To engage students academically, professionally, and socially in the classroom means designing activities, assignments, and curriculum that will address three



engagement dimensions: behavioral (how students complete tasks such as taking notes by hand), cognitive (students are actively thinking and trying to make sense of material), and emotional (how the student feels or reacts to the content, for example anger at not understanding a difficult topic). These three dimensions, developed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) demonstrate that learning and engagement are based on a number of different factors, and though all three are not addressed at the exact same time, students need to be developed and challenged in distinct ways.

Kahu (2013) extended these dimensions into four perspectives: behavioral (how students complete tasks related to learning), psychological (how students emotionally respond to content), socio-cultural (what elements from a student's life experience or culture impact their engagement), and holistic (all perspectives together).

In addition to working to address the perspectives Kahu (2013) defined, instructors must also consider their own mindset and beliefs about student ability. In recent years there has been a trend toward encouraging students to develop grit, persistence, and a growth mindset (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2006). Generally, these terms describe a person's ability to work through hard times, to not give up, and to believe they can learn new skills. These same mindsets also need to be held by instructors.

Quaglia and Corso (2014) found that while 88 percent of students believe they can be successful, only 73 percent of students perceived their teachers to believe in them. It is a disservice to students to place them in a classroom with an instructor who does not

believe in their ability to succeed. My own experience teaching in the Summer Bridge program at Mountain University provides evidence of this.

While lack of engagement (by both students and faculty) is a concern, there are many students who are eager to learn and desire engagement in class and interaction with faculty members (Boren, 2016). An instructor's ability to display enthusiasm for the subject matter and the students can leave a lasting impact on the student and encourage involvement in class (Boren, 2016). Likewise, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) asserted "engagement depends on what teachers and students do together...neither can do it alone" (as cited in Kahu, 2013, p. 767). It is vital, however, to understand that given power dynamics (perceived or real), the onus is on the faculty member (and the institution) to create an environment in which students are invited to engage and are supported in their attempts at engagement.

**The effect of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*.** Concern about student engagement is not unique to higher education. Indeed, the test-score driven K-12 public education system in the United States has placed teacher and student focus on achieving standards at the expense of learning (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Smyth, 2008). Students who enter college today grew up under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era of public schooling in which national focus was placed on all students achieving acceptable test scores. Such an environment placed pressure on teachers to prepare students for standardized testing and, some argue, has resulted in classroom environments that could be characterized as disengaging (Smyth, 2008). Though many politicians and citizens

saw promise in President Obama’s Race to the Top (RTT) initiative, scholars argue that the trend of teaching to the test continued.

Tanner (2013) argued RTT has done just as much, if not more to hurt education as its predecessor NCLB did. He explains that the program brought about the “retrenchment to basic academic skills” which was a “throwback to the skill—drill—kill curriculum of the nineteenth century” (p. 5). Because performance on standardized testing remained a critical value, teachers and school administrators continued to focus on quantifiable measures of success which left little room for intellectual curiosity or engaging teaching practices.

Onosko (2011) warned that RTT would “imperil” public education as it “homogenized” teaching and learning (p. 2). Interestingly, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) reported that there were no clear outcomes (positive, negative, or neutral) on RTT (Dragoset, et al., 2016). This suggests that despite political efforts to create policies that would help students learn and be prepared for postsecondary education, these efforts have largely fallen flat. When students arrive on college campuses having endured nearly twelve years of being taught to take a test, it is easy to see why their perceptions of school sound more like summations of watching paint dry on a wall.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Bandura’s (1971) social learning theory posited that humans learn behavior based on observation and direct experience. He suggested that responses are learned based on these experiences and observations, and that reinforcement works to both incentivize and

inform behaviors. For example, school-aged children learn about classroom behavior by seeing other students model it. If their peers sit quietly at their desks and raise their hand to be called on, so too, will the new students. To some degree, all people unconsciously rely on social learning theory to help them understand the context they are in and to respond appropriately. However, what students have learned in their K-12 classroom setting might position them to struggle in higher education classrooms.

**Response Consequences.** When the realities of today's traditional K-12 educational practices are contextualized with Bandura's (1971) explanation of response consequences, the importance of an engaging higher education experience, especially for first-year, underprepared students, becomes clear. Response consequences, which are typically considered to occur unconsciously and automatically, have three functions.

Information is imparted (an instructor lectures for forty minutes—without engaging the students in conversation each time the class meets), response consequences serve as motivators through value (students become bored, do not listen, and do not ask questions), and responses can be strengthened (the next time they come to class, they expect the same boring format) (Bandura, 1971). These three functions explain the mindset many students may have when they enter higher education classrooms.

As instructors welcome new students into their classrooms, they need to be aware of response consequences and be prepared to create new responses (for example students may come to expect lively conversation, being asked to lead discussion, or solving a new problem during the class meeting). Such work takes planning and conscious effort;

however, I argue the outcome will result in students who not only connect with the curriculum and one another, but will come to expect such engagement in future classes.

### **English Classes as a Venue for Identity Exploration and Development**

Research on how to engage with students in English classes (either writing or literature) is robust, particularly as it relates to identity development (Alder, 2016; Blythe, Darabi, Simon Kirkwood, & Baden, 2009; George, 2012; King, 2013; Mann, 2001). King's (2013) autoethnography about her academic identity as a researcher used fiction to explore her identity. The concept of identity exploration via a familiar text may allow students to explore themselves in similar ways using what King calls the "novel" method.

Alder (2016) explored how students in an English class gain a better understanding of their identity, yet notes that identity formation is difficult because it is ever-developing and negotiating. Alder also argued that despite the constantly negotiating nature of identity formation, personal connection to material and being allowed to think independently is crucial. George (2012) also found that personal identity is a difficult concept for students to grasp because it is ever-changing, but exploration of identity in a writing classroom is a worthy endeavor. Other scholars noted that in terms of retention, the type of course may not necessarily matter, but those who are academically "at risk" (or underprepared) are likely to benefit from specific courses aimed at their demographic (Blythe et al., 2009).

## Strategies for Engagement

There are various pedagogical methods that an instructor can consider to prepare their students for engagement in the classroom. The following section outlines how curricular choices and emotional interactions can create a more engaging environment. Each of these strategies can influence relationships built between instructor and student.

**Curricular environment.** Student engagement in the classroom requires instructors of underprepared students to use different strategies to welcome their students in and demonstrate the belief that students can succeed. Gabriel (2008) and McGuire (2015) outlined six strategies for effectively teaching unprepared students. Use of these strategies will create an environment that will welcome engagement from even hesitant students. Five of the strategies relate to curricular needs:

1. Establish high expectations and clearly define *student success*
2. Interweave assessment and teaching
3. Meet students where they are
4. Present metacognitive strategies to students
5. Clarify student responsibility (Gabriel, 2008; McGuire, 2015)

Each of the strategies presented above is dependent on the instructor's mindset in addition to curricular choices. For example, an instructor must believe that students can achieve and then be prepared to show them the way. Additionally, the instructor must build the curriculum so that she has prepared the students for the task she wants them to complete. If the instructor has not adequately prepared the student and given them the proper tools, then the strategies above will not work.

Establishing high expectations for all students is important because it forces students to work hard to meet challenges. To do so may disrupt the students' previous experiences of teachers having (sometimes perceived) low expectations and students' low motivation to complete work. Teachers should not be the only ones with high expectations. Students should also have expectations of their instructors and be given the opportunity to share with instructors their assessment of the course.

Assessment and testing should include regular and specific feedback to students to help them better understand the material, where they excel, or where they may be falling short. Likewise, students should provide assessment during the course (McGuire, 2015). For example, instructors may administer a mid-semester survey to have the students share their thoughts on the class. Such data might help the instructor understand if students are struggling with a particular topic or do not enjoy a specific mode of instruction. The instructor may then adapt to better meet the needs of the students. Additionally, soliciting student opinion will help students feel heard and valued as a partner in the learning process, something Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) argued is essential to student engagement. In the current study, students were given the opportunity to provide feedback about the class at the mid-point of the semester. The University's office of teaching and learning conducted the feedback process and provided me with a summary of results.

“Meeting students where they are” is a hallmark of fostering engagement because rather than overwhelming the student with material they are not yet prepared to undertake, the instructor must adapt to the students' needs (McGuire, 2015). Accepting

and welcoming students regardless of their abilities or prior experiences demonstrates to students that their experience is valued (McGuire, 2015).

Adaptations like those listed in the previous paragraph do not mean lowering expectations. McGuire explained, “We must not assume students aren’t smart just because they lack foundational knowledge or basic skills. On the contrary, we should assume that every student can make an A in our classes if he or she undertakes correct behaviors” (p.158). Instructors should, however, prepare accordingly to walk students through content and foundational strategies that will prepare the student to complete rigorous work in the weeks that follow. At the same time, instructors can enact strategy five, clarifying student responsibility. As instructors provide guidance, students should understand it is up to them to do the hard work of the course, whatever that work might entail. Being open to providing additional support will give students comfort and help them progress toward meeting the expectations outlined.

**Emotional engagement.** Each of the strategies outlined above can be bolstered by an instructor’s use of strategy six, staying connected (Gabriel, 2008; McGuire, 2015). Instructors should be open to increased interactions with their students in a variety of ways: open office hours, verbal communication, sending emails to students, or attending out of classroom activities to support students. These actions all demonstrate an instructor’s dedication to the student’s learning in an engaging (and perhaps new) way. Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) found that instructor characteristics such as providing encouragement and interacting with students are likely to increase a student’s sense of belonging and motivation to achieve. For some, engagement in the classroom



setting might be difficult because of personality (for example, if a student is shy and does not like to speak up in class) but if instructors are open and available in a variety of contexts, students can still engage with the course material and meet expectations.

### **Pedagogical Theory**

For at least two decades, scholars have argued that our educational system and practices have led to a “crisis.” In 1994, bell hooks published *Teaching to Transgress* in which she plainly stated that our nation was in an educational crisis and that teaching practices needed to change. While some educators (and even systems of education) have changed educational practices, what students experience in the classroom today is largely similar to what students experienced in the 1990s, 80s, 70s, and previous decades (i.e. sitting in desks lined in rows which face the front of the class where an instructor lectures). By following traditional modes of pedagogy, students are bored, disengaged, and apathetic. Yet at the same time, scholars, practitioners, teachers, and administrators are all calling for students to perform well, be civically engaged, work hard, and to make a difference. The reality of our educational practices seems to be diametrically opposed to the changes we need and expect. In the following sections I outline foundational pedagogical theories that call for engaging with students, valuing each individual’s unique perspective and challenges, and how such factors relate to a student’s academic ability and sense of belonging on campus.

**Liberatory Pedagogy.** Liberatory pedagogy, made famous by Freire (1970), asserted that freedom is found in education. As people become educated, they can become critical of the world around them and ultimately, make change. Yet, while

education can free people from oppression, merely being educated is not a solution to oppression. Oppression also occurs *in* education and can take many forms—including who is educated how their education takes place. Iris Marion Young teases out the concept of oppression further, arguing that many uses of the term *oppression* really reflect *powerlessness*. In other words, while students may not be *oppressed* (as Freire’s context illustrates), students have little to no power in their educational settings. For example, students are often required to read only assigned texts or write on predetermined topics and are not given an option to explore other interests. Students may have interests related to course requirements but do not have the power in the classroom to learn and explore in a manner they would find useful and fulfilling.

The oppression Iris Marion Young describes can be applied to many conditionally-enrolled students. She explains, “all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings” (Marion Young, 2011, p. 40). The author goes on to explain that while oppression is too difficult to define broadly, there are five categories of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Some students, particularly ones who are academically underprepared or conditionally-enrolled, may have experienced one or multiple categories of oppression. For example, students of color may only read texts by white, male authors that do not interrogate historical systems of oppression. As such, they are not encouraged or even taught how to question historical and cultural norms dictated by the majority.

Many SB students have not been given opportunities to learn and engage with the world that their traditionally enrolled peers have. For example, some SB students come from extreme poverty in rural Appalachia, some have learning disabilities or attention disorders and as a result have been told (by administrators, teachers, and family) they will not succeed in college. These examples point to structural oppression, which is defined by causes that are “embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of those rules” (Marion Young, 2011, p. 41). In the above examples, students are victims of norms that largely go accepted and unquestioned in society: the poor will remain poor (and are often unintelligent and/or lazy); there is only one way to excel in school (i.e. high performance on standardized tests); or “college is not for everyone.” In instances such as these, students experience a powerlessness that is born of structural oppression and impacts their ability to access and succeed in higher education.

One of the central tenets of Freire’s (1970) work is that in order to experience freedom from oppression, the oppressed must understand their oppression and then work toward liberation. When Freire’s (1970) and Marion Young’s (2011) theories of oppression are applied to SB students it is clear they have often been unjustly served by those in power over them (educators, administrators, family members).

As we begin the semester in my class, one of the first things we discuss is what high school was like for the students. I ask them to tell me how they were taught material and they often describe lectures, completing work sheets, and memorizing facts. When I ask them about their English classes, most say they read books, poems, and short stories

and took quizzes. Many recall writing research papers or papers based on the novels they read for class. I have not been surprised by these summaries, as their experiences were similar to my own high school education.

As our conversation drifts to what the students did or did not enjoy about English class, quite a few piped up and said, “reading out loud in class” or “being read to.” I was not surprised to hear students did not enjoy reading out loud, most people do not. However, “being read to” was a practice I did not expect to hear. I asked the students to tell me more and they explained they often would read entire books out loud in class, either by taking turns or by being read to by their instructors. *Entire novels were read aloud to high school students.* These students were forced to read a book together (or follow along as being read to), and in doing so, they experienced powerlessness. They lost the ability to read for themselves, to take the time to mull over words and phrases they did not understand, were intrigued by, or wanted to explore further. They stopped when they were told to stop and had discussions as directed. Their inability to choose when and how to interact with the content was taken from them. After hearing this, I was not surprised by their reticence to have another English class. I vowed that their college experience, on the other hand, would allow them to remove themselves from the educational powerlessness they previously experienced.

Freire (1970) wrote at length about how education is used to oppress by explaining the “banking concept of education” (p. 72) wherein (much like the American K-12 systems of today) students are given information (a deposit is made) and then later asked to regurgitate that information (a withdrawal—similar to what No Child Left

Behind and Race to the Top call for). The issue with *banking* is that it relies only on information given by a person in power over the oppressed and does not allow for questioning, critique, and critical thinking. Pedagogical approaches that ask students to move away from the banking concept and towards an approach that allows them to understand the validity of their own voice is crucial for engaged learning and feeling welcome in a college environment.

**Radical Pedagogy.** hooks' (1994) perspective on pedagogy leans heavily on Freire's work as well as feminist theory. While the content of hooks' book *Teaching to Transgress* may not be most accurately described as a theory, hooks' argument about the use of feminist theory to make change in teaching (and politically, more broadly speaking) is informative. She explained, "[...] as feminist activists we affirm our commitment to a politicized revolutionary feminist movement that has as its central agenda the transformation of society. From such a starting point, we automatically think of creating theory that speaks to the widest audience of people" (hooks, 1994, p. 71). This assertion helps those interested in changing pedagogical practices think broadly about the implications of their choices. It is not enough to think locally (one's own classroom). One must also consider how students and faculty might be moved by practices that welcome all, question traditional teaching practices, and move educational agendas forward in a progressive manner (towards interaction, in which all students have a voice rather than just the teacher alone).

Progressive agendas (like the ones hooks describes) can be interpreted by some as having no place in higher education. Such thinking puts the "blame" of poor educational

outcomes on the shoulders of instructors confined by limited resources and perspectives, and worse still on the shoulders of students themselves. hooks (1994) argues that educators must disrupt the narratives so ubiquitous with today's higher education teaching practices and instead focus on pedagogical moves that will allow us to move beyond complacency and boredom:

As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence. Since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and concern themselves only with the presence of the professor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. (pp. 7-8)

To this end, my pedagogical practices disrupt the tradition of a lecturer standing front and center and instead focus on building community in a classroom. It is important for each student to make their voice heard in a manner with which they are comfortable. As such, I use assignments and course activities to welcome multiple modes of communication based largely on personal experience and related course readings.

In one assignment, the students are asked to explain how setting and environment helps the reader better understand the characters and situations in *Fangirl*. In groups, the students develop a "map" of the main character's world that visually represents how the character understands her life in college. Following the group activity, the students then create their own maps. They draw or write word maps that highlight the places and influences that are most important to their own understanding of self. Finally, the

students share these maps with one another (see Appendix D). In doing so, students tell stories (often humorous, sometimes emotional) about the way they see the world.

Welcoming the students and valuing personal experiences reaffirm a student's sense of belonging (described below) because it demonstrates their value to the classroom and the campus community. Previous studies asserted that students' ability to share their experiences with one another is important to their development as an academic (Cohen & Sanabrai, 2015).

Using both liberatory pedagogy and radical pedagogy approaches in the classroom allow me to not only provide an engaging classroom environment, the approaches help me build a sense of belonging for students in the class. Strayhorn (2012) defined the sense of belonging in college as:

students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e. g. faculty, peers). (p. 3)

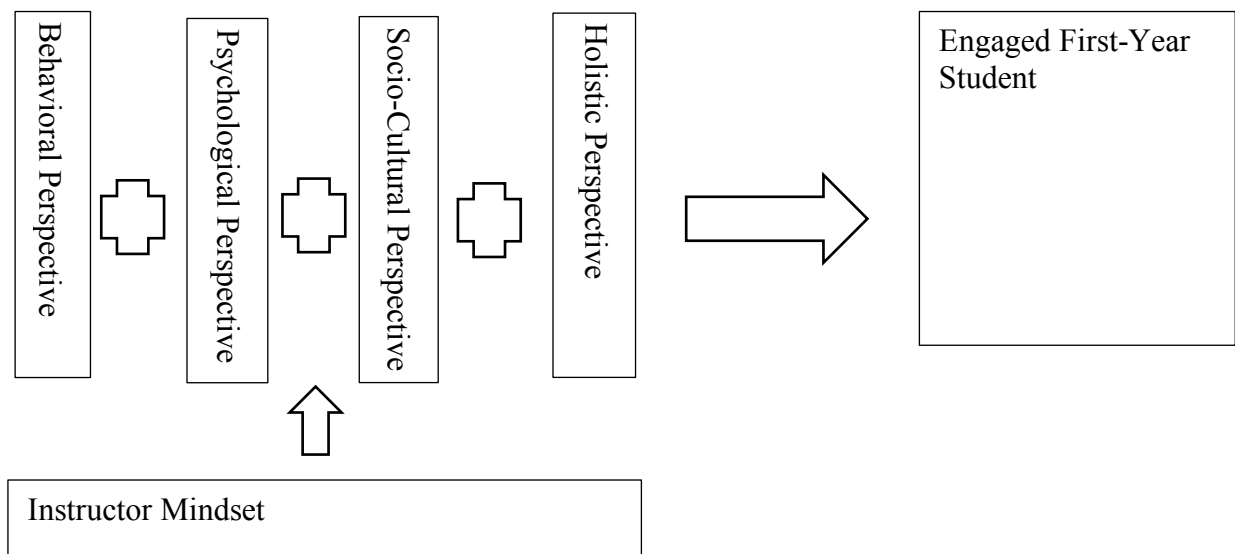
Sense of belonging needs to be fostered by all members of the community, though it is unlikely to happen if faculty do not demonstrate this in their classrooms. I am particularly interested in developing a sense of belonging in my students who are enrolled in SB because they are conditionally-enrolled. As a result, many worry about whether or not they should be at the institution at all. In some ways, SB can feel like a proving ground, an arena in which students must demonstrate to the institution they are worthy of traditional enrollment. My goal as an instructor is to welcome students into the

classroom, make them feel valued, heard, supported, and understood. At the same time, I want them to understand they are capable of the hard work ahead of them. To accomplish the task of fostering a sense of belonging I combine liberatory and radical pedagogy practices into a framework that focuses on encouraging engagement in a welcoming environment. My approach to teaching relies on Kahu's (2013) summary of the four perspectives of engagement.

### **Conceptual Framework for Engagement**

There are a variety of ways instructors can approach Kahu's (2013) four perspectives of engagement. The key is for instructors to be holistic in their attempts to welcome the students. Instructors must first be aware of prior learning and the consequences of that learning, then they must design physical, curricular, and emotional environments to meet the students' needs. My own framework for working with SB students combines Kahu's summary of perspectives with instructor mindset (the instructor's deep-held belief that all students can achieve given the proper support) to meet the goal of creating an engaging classroom environment for incoming college freshman (see Figure 1.1).





*Figure 1.1. Engagement Framework.* Framework for increasing classroom engagement in a first-year bridge program. When instructor designed environment and mindset attend to the four engagement perspectives, the result is an engaged first-year student.

**Instructor mindset.** My personal mindset toward SB participants is the heart of the framework as it grounds my intentions and informs my practices. I truly believe that all students who are enrolled in SB are capable of succeeding given the appropriate support and guidance. I know that many students in SB did not enjoy high school (though the reasons vary), but most of them view attending college as a personal goal they would like to achieve. To me, SB is more than a program, it is a period in time where students can figure out whether or not they can make it in college (I believe they can) and find value in all the opportunities college affords them, not just academic opportunities.

Additionally, while I recognize that many of my students are underprepared for college, I think instructors potentially harm students if they operate from a deficit model wherein instructors focus too heavily on skills students do not have instead of the ones

they currently possess. Finally, my mindset toward student ability acknowledged that I needed to adapt throughout the duration of the program. Just as I expected students to learn new techniques, I had to learn new ways of teaching and utilize new strategies to elicit engaged students. Similar to Healey et al. (2014), I believe learning is a partnership and must be approached as such in order to see students thrive.

### **Perspectives of Engagement**

Kahu (2013) described four perspectives of engagement. Below are brief explanations of the perspectives with examples of what these perspectives look like in my classroom. I used these perspectives to guide my daily lesson plans. I considered how the content in the pieces of fiction we read might allow me to create activities with these perspectives in mind.

**Behavioral.** Attending to the behavioral perspective of engagement is most difficult because, as Kahu (2013) pointed out, the definition of behavioral engagement is limited and unclear which restricts its usefulness in research. Nonetheless, I approached behavioral engagement with the acts (or behaviors) students display in the classroom and in preparation for class. As such, my role as an instructor is to provide resources to develop and maintain positive academic behaviors.

The first assignment in my class is for the students to read an excerpt from chapter three of *I am Charlotte Simmons* by Tom Wolfe. The excerpt details the title character's move-in day experience in which she becomes acutely aware of her social class (she grew up in rural Appalachia and is the first in her family to attend college) and how it differs dramatically from that of her peers.

I used the document camera and read aloud with the students. I had them stop me when something needed highlighted, was confusing, caught their interest, or needed defined. Each time we stopped, I asked the students to explain their reasoning. Sometimes, I stopped before they did and pointed out something I thought was important and explained why. The class split into groups and continued to read different sections of the chapter to make similar notes. We came back together as a class to go over the excerpt in its entirety. The result was an inked-up document full of our comments and questions. Finally, we ended by making a list of actions they took during the process that helped them, including the fact that they had now read the piece more than once.

At the end of this class, students had a better sense of what it means to read literature in college. It might be the same for them as it was in high school or it might look completely different. Either way, they have examples to keep with them, a list in their notes, and a classroom of people who understand what the expectations are.

As we progress through the semester, we cover other positive behaviors including writing strategies, research and citation, using evidence from a text, and listening and responding. Modeling the behaviors allows the students to see the expectations before they are asked to use them and it gives the students confidence to know they can do what is being asked of them.

**Psychological.** Kahu (2013) explained that “engagement as a psychological process is considered to be malleable, varying in intensity and responsive to the environment” (p. 763). With this caveat in mind, I acknowledge how crucial it is to

understand that psychological processes in engagement will ebb and flow given the context of the classroom and the content of the curriculum.

In my assignment design, my goal was to encourage students to explore their understanding of themselves through the lens of literature. At times, this could mean wrestling with past mistakes or personal hardships. As an instructor, when I read their writing and heard their thoughts during class discussion, I had to attend to their psychological reactions: encouraging them in their exploration, being aware when a student was in distress, and advocating for them to keep working through difficult circumstances.

In addition to increasing engagement, these practices have been linked to student “fit” at an institution (Stephens et al., 2015). When students feel as though they “fit” or belong at an institution, they are more likely to persist. Further, “fit” also supports Strayhorn’s (2012) notions of belonging—when students feel as though they fit or have “a sensation of connectedness” they are likely to succeed in the classroom and persist at the institution.

**Socio-cultural.** The socio-cultural perspective refers to the broader social context students experience on campus and beyond (Kahu, 2013). In designing my course, I tried to find examples from literature that both affirm the experiences my students will likely be going through and offer perspectives that challenge them to think differently. My goal in attending to this perspective is to broaden their understanding of the college context and situate the students as rightful inhabitants of the college environment. One way to

attend to this perspective is to create a community within the classroom where students know each other well and hold each other accountable (McGuire, 2015, p. 89).

The first day of my class focused on getting acquainted with one another and the course expectations. I spent about half of the class time discussing the nuts-and-bolts of class structure, assignments, and expectations and the other half doing ice-breaker activities to get to know one another. However, the “getting to know you” portion of the class did not stop on day one. Each day I began the class with a question that each student answered about themselves. Sometimes the question related to content they read in class but largely it asked students to share their thoughts and impressions (topics range from what’s the best/worst food you have had in the cafeteria so far, to future plans for careers, to favorite guilty pleasure TV show). These activities allowed students to get to know one another and to be real with each other so that when we discussed more difficult content related to their reading they felt comfortable sharing perspectives.

Additionally, my students engaged in a social identity workshop that encouraged the students to consider who they were as individuals (with a focus on race, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, politics, socio-economic status, and physical and mental abilities). The workshop allowed students to consider the value of their own experiences and helped them better understand those who are different from them.

Later in the course, students continued to explore their identity in narrative writing form. Cohen and Sanabria (2015) noted that personal narratives are an important strategy in English classrooms because they serve “as a lens for students’ own insights [and make] them realize that the more scholarly academic pursuits required of them in the

university setting always begin with their interests in mind” (p. 99). As such, narrative writing in my course allowed the students to ground themselves in the context of their new lives at MU.

**Holistic.** The holistic perspective combines the three previous perspectives to consider how the perspectives work in concert with one another. Though Kahu (2013) explained there have been problems defining this perspective, the larger concern for an instructor is to understand that for students to be engaged, students—at different points in the class—need to have all three perspectives attended to. By considering behavioral, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives, the student is likely going to feel more connected and supported.

In the final assignment of the semester, students engaged in the holistic perspective. The assignment asked students to consider one or more characters they read about in the course material and relate the character(s) to their own lives. Students were required to use direct quotes and evidence (behavioral perspective) from their personal experiences in order to complete the assignment. They had to reflect on their upbringing and values (socio-cultural perspective) in order to complete this assignment. In addition, they had to explain what they learned about themselves (psychological perspective). While the students engaged in each perspective individually throughout the semester, this assignment pulled the individual perspectives together to consider their educational experience holistically.

## **Pedagogical Reflection**

John Dewey (1910, 1933) pioneered the scholarship and discussion on reflection and countless scholars have aimed to be more precise about what reflection means and looks like with respect to pedagogical practices. Mena Marcos, Sanchez, and Tillema (2008) argued that while the importance of reflection is rarely refuted in scholarship, many studies have found that the practice of reflection is murky and unclear. As such, the authors explored *how* teachers reflected on their work and how they use such reflections to interpret or refine their practices (p. 96). The study confirmed that reflection can take on various forms—so many there “is no well-defined or fixed format to characterize how teachers reflect on their work” (Mena Marcos et al., 2011, p. 107-108). While there may not be a standardized procedure for how to go about reflection, in order to succeed as a teacher, one must reflect on their pedagogical choices and how the students react to the work.

**Models of reflection.** Brookfield (2017) argued that teachers must be critically reflective of their teaching experience because one can never be sure of the effect one has on a student’s learning experience. Critical reflection “is the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions” (p. 3). When teachers critically reflect, they can ascertain what and how the student is learning and if any content has affected students in an unexpected or unintentional way. Moreover, it forces teachers to identify any underlying assumptions they might have about teaching methods or students (for example, believing that large

group discussion is always the best way to explore an assigned reading) (Brookfield, 2017).

Like other scholars (Birmingham, 2004; Brookfield, 2017) Mankey (2014) suggested that reflection must occur continually in order to be effective. The benefits of reflection are difficult to summarize as outcomes are dependent on goals and context. Fook and Gardner (2007) noted, however, that critical reflection can lead to informed choice, “more enlivened teaching” (p. 130), emotional grounding, and improved professional practice.

Just as instructors need to determine their own teaching philosophy, so too must they choose a form of reflection that will allow them to explore issues that are most salient to their interests. In this study my reflection took two forms: first, my daily reflection followed the engagement framework I created (discussed in chapter one and earlier in this chapter). Second, my reflection *on reflection* (what many qualitative researchers would call *analysis* though SPN favors both *me-search* and *re-search*) shed light on my pedagogy and helped me unearth “new considerations” (Shadiow, 2013, p. ix) or ideas newly discovered upon further reflection. The second reflection process was informed by Birmingham’s (2004) explanation of *phronesis*.

**Phronesis as reflection.** As discussed briefly in chapter one, *phronesis* is a virtue first presented by Aristotle that he considered to be “a unifying and essential habit of the mind” (Birmingham, 2004, p. 314). I was drawn to this model of reflection because the concept of *phronesis* suggests a practice that becomes regular and holistic, rather than a one-off attempt at reflection.



In my previous years of teaching, the English department would require all instructors to write a yearly reflection of their teaching. With very little direction, we were asked to explain what it is we do in the classroom and how effective we think we are. I *despised* this practice and, in all honesty, largely copy and pasted what I wrote the previous year in an attempt to simply complete the task and call it a day. Because of my inconsiderate approach to the task, I did not benefit at all from this practice. It merely seemed like a hoop I had to jump through. While the intent of the exercise might have been for instructors to reflect on their work, I found it difficult to summarize in one page all the ways I interacted with and taught my students over the course of a year. I knew what I did in the class, but I did not often think about the big picture.

*Phronesis*, on the other hand, invites the teacher to be personal, to consider the community, to *not* reduce the work into a few simple phrases, and to provide new opportunities to construct knowledge (Birmingham, 2004, pp. 321-322). Clandinin (1992) explained how practical knowledge (identified by reflection) is “carved out of and shaped by situations; knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection” (p. 125). The iterative process of reflection that I engaged in served to acknowledge the context of my classroom and the situations therein. Moreover, as Clandinin (1992) and Birmingham (2004) suggested, my reflection of these experiences serve to create new knowledge.

While Birmingham (2004) noted four main benefits to *phronesis* (as described above) other scholars have noted the importance of reflection in practice. In particular, Mankey (2014) argued that “reflection serves us best when we look inward to our own

intentions, emotions, and actions in order to compare them with what we espouse our beliefs to be” (p. 86). Palmer (2007) noted the importance of being “inward bound” so that teachers might eventually be “outward bound” and able to influence others. As I engaged in reflection, I focused not only on what did occur in the classroom and how I interacted with students, but whether or not my actions mirrored the pedagogical philosophy I *believe* guides my practice. This reflection forced me to be critically reflective of myself and identify where I fell short in working with my students.

### **Summary**

Engaging with first-year college students in the classroom can be a challenging task. Most students are products of the No Child Left Behind era in which heavy emphasis was put on achieving high test scores rather than knowledge acquisition and application. Many conditionally-enrolled first year students face significant pressures to succeed and stigmas that work against their ability to achieve an academic identity. Pedagogical choices, especially those that are liberatory and radical in nature, may help welcome students into the college environment. Such practices can be used to demonstrate to the students that they are valued members of the class and that they are academics in their own rights. To attend to pedagogical choices, critical reflection, especially via the *phronesis* method, aided in my ability to engage with conditionally-enrolled students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DEFINING SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

*“I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means.” — Joan Didion*

#### **The Problem with Bridges**

Many institutions of higher education are committed to creating better access to a college degree (Garcia & Paz, 2009; Nemelka, Askeroth, & Harbor, 2017). “Bridge” programs exist as one of the ways institutional leaders increase access. Bridge programs bridge the gap between high school and college, particularly when students are thought to be underprepared for collegiate study. Henry and Stahl (2017) noted the “effects of being underprepared and/or misprepared for the next step grow exponentially” (p. 612) and argued that bridge programs can help align students to the rigors of college-level academics. Bridge programs usually take place in the summer and combine required coursework with social activities and structured support from student affairs staff and faculty.

Students who enter bridge programs, regardless of their level of academic preparation, must transition to life on a college campus including rigorous academics and new social dynamics. Developmentally and emotionally, the college transition is difficult for most students, perhaps more so for students in bridge programs who have been conditionally-enrolled and will only be allowed to continue in college pending their success in the program (Covarrubias, Gallimore, & Okagaki, 2018). Yet, in terms of bridge program implementation, university time and energy are spent primarily on

supporting students. Less time is spent on preparing faculty to work with underprepared student populations.

Two significant problems may come to a head in the bridge program classrooms: (1) students undergoing significant stress and transition may be (2) taught by instructors who are ill-prepared or unaware of how best to support their students both academically and developmentally. Because faculty interaction with students can have a major impact on student success (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011), faculty members should be prepared to teach conditionally-enrolled students. Such preparation should include a clear understanding of who their students are (academically, emotionally, and socially) as well as how to engage them in college-level coursework. To do so, instructors must not only purposefully plan their curriculum, they need also be able to adapt to the needs of their students and reflect on how the students are engaging in the material as the semester progresses.

While numerous studies have explored best practices of teaching and learning (Ashe & Clements, 2016; Mankey, 2014; McGuire, 2015), Brookfield (2013) argued few people in the academy seem to value explorations that are personal. Higher education, and certainly scholarship on higher education, is deeply concerned with what is generalizable—to suggest what others might use that has been proven effective. Qualitative studies are sometimes given short shrift because of their perceived limitations. Such responses seem to suggest that nothing of value comes from the sharing of personal experience.

Conversely, Shenton (2004) argued that qualitative researchers have developed criterion that ensures trustworthiness, including detailed accounts of data collection and fieldwork so such studies might demonstrate transferability. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) is one way to share personal experiences that gives context and presents new ways of thinking about teaching. While SPN does not explicitly *require* the researcher to define their methodology in a manner akin to its qualitative cousins autoethnography, narrative essays, and phenomenology, SPN does meet some of Shenton's (2004) criteria: demonstrating credibility, making a case for transferability, and exhibiting dependability (each will be discussed later in the chapter).

### **Positionality**

Who I am and how I understand myself as an instructor is an integral part of how I explored my pedagogical choices in this study. Positioning oneself at the center of the narrative is exactly what an SPN calls for. This may sound narcissistic, however, the intention of the SPN is not to dwell on oneself for the sake of glory or praise, rather to use oneself to explore ideas and share those ideas with peers (Bradley, 2009). Further, by stating my positionality, my predispositions are made apparent to the reader. As themes and findings arose in reflection, I acknowledged my thoughts and struggles as they related to my positionality. Such discussions reinforced my trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004).

There are facts about myself that cannot be ignored in the writing of this study. I am a white woman who is currently middle-class. I grew up in a two-parent home with an older sibling. While my family socio-economic status growing up was low-income, I

never felt pangs of hunger or worried about losing the roof over my head. I may have wanted for material items, but my parents did their best to make sure my life was comparable to the middle-class families in our neighborhood.

The biggest influence on my day-to-day family life was not financial, but religious. My parents are conservative Southern Baptists—our home was quiet and restrained. I attributed most of what I lacked to my parents’ religious beliefs rather than financial hardship. The reality of my family’s financial situation did not register with me until I applied for college and had to figure out the confusing process of filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). I learned how much money my parents made and, when compared to how much college would cost, I realized just how ill-equipped my parents were to pay for my education. I recognize without the loans my parents and I took out to pay for my education, a college degree would not have been a reality for me. As such, I feel I understand the concerns many of my students have about the cost of college and the stress of working, doing well in classes, and graduating in four years.

Not only was I a low-income student, I was also first-generation college student and am the first in my family to earn a graduate degree. I know how proud of me my parents were when I was accepted to college and throughout my four undergraduate years when I consistently earned good grades. Though my parents were not terribly vocal about their pride for me, I knew they told their friends and co-workers about me. Their pride (and my belief that I could not let them down) is one way in which I can connect with my students. My parents never indicated that they would be disappointed in me if I did not do

well in college, but I certainly did not want to let them down. I loved learning and academic success came easily to me, yet I drove myself to do the very best I could because I wanted my parents to understand going to college was worth the loans they took out on my behalf. Like many of my students, this self-assigned pressure to please was a driving force in my undergraduate career.

While I was not conditionally-enrolled, I certainly felt like a fish-out-of-water as I began college. Because I can identify with many of the low-income, first-generation students in my classes, I tend to believe I understand their experiences and struggles. I know I have a soft spot for first-generation students because I see so much of myself in them. I have volunteered to mentor first-generation students and always make a note of who the first-generation students are in my classes. Some might argue this makes me biased, but I believe it puts me in a position to relate with students and bond over shared experiences and struggles.

As I alluded to earlier, the more I learned about my family's financial status, the greater perspective I had about my own status in the world. I derived new meaning from my experience, and as time went on and I became a college student, my perspectives changed again. I have come to understand myself as a constructivist, in that I construct meaning in my life based on my experience. The events and memories that are most important are salient because of the meaning I have assigned to them. Likewise, as I reflected on my teaching throughout this study, I constructed meaning for myself and drew conclusions based on my thoughts during my summer of teaching and how I understood those impressions as I wrote this SPN.

## Methodology

In the fall of 2005, I was enrolled in my final year of undergraduate study. I was required to take the Senior Culminating Experience (SCE) class wherein I was expected to write my final project as a writing major (other institutions call this a senior thesis). Our professor, Dr. Rodney Dick (we all called him Rodney, for obvious reasons), only required one book that semester—Robert Nash’s (2004) *Liberating Scholarly Writing*. At the time, I was a bit irked to have to buy any books at all—this semester was supposed to be about our own writing, not reading.

I begrudgingly read Nash’s book and my ideas began to develop—I had originally thought I would write a more traditional research paper, but I really dreamed of being the next Jon Krakauer. Was there room for me to explore this dream while writing my SCE? *Into the Wild* (1996) was the most riveting piece of non-fiction I’d ever read. After finishing *Into the Wild* I read more of Krakauer’s work and *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003)—an exploration of fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints—struck a chord. Like Krakauer, I had a religious subject I wished to explore (the Southern Baptist Convention—SBC) but I wanted to write from a personal standpoint (I had been raised in a Southern Baptist family and attended a conservative SBC church and summer camps throughout my childhood). Nash’s book showed me how I could marry the scholarly with the personal. Though I will not say I wrote particularly well, writing the SCE was a pivotal moment for me as a writer and a scholar.

Rodney’s insistence on our reading *Liberating Scholarly Writing* was indeed liberating. I found, like Nash (2004) argued, “your own life has meaning, both for you



and others” (p. 24). Thirteen years later, I had all but forgotten SPN, but when my dissertation chair suggested SPN, a light flickered inside of me. Again, I turned to Nash’s book and found myself pulled to SPN.

Nash’s (2004) first book on SPN was heavily influenced by Gornick (2001) and Behar (1993). Both authors explained the power of personal narrative and why there is value in one centering themselves in their research. Writing from the first-person perspective, both argued, is essential because there is no real way to divorce oneself from one’s writing. Nash and Bradley (2011) explained that research methods of SPNs are both similar to, yet distinct from, “traditional” forms of qualitative research such as autoethnographies, memoirs, personal narrative essays, and phenomenology. As such, while SPNs are guided by research principles, the SPN format is more welcoming of adaptation and interpretation.

The key to SPN writing is to “find a way to connect the personal and the professional, the analytical and the emotional, and, most important, to show the relevance of these connections to other selves” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 57). My goal in writing the SPN was to demonstrate to readers (ideally faculty members who teach conditionally-enrolled or first-year students) how my own experience teaching in a program for conditionally-enrolled students changed my pedagogical choices, my relationships with my students, and how the students viewed themselves as academics.

In her SPN dissertation, Bradley (2009) explained how comfortable she felt writing an SPN because, “it allowed room for my own knowledge base (developed from my own experiences) to become important to my writing” (pp. 20-21). I, too, wanted to

draw from my own experience as a way to share knowledge with others. A few months ago, I was at a poster presentation for scholars of teaching and learning. In a conversation with my poster neighbor to the left, we discussed what we do in our classrooms.

She pulled out her mini dry-erase boards and dry erase markers and proceeded to show me how she gauged student understanding in her chemistry classroom. We told stories back and forth for twenty minutes. At the end of the session, I walked away with new ideas to try in my classroom and a better understanding of why some of my students might be struggling in their chemistry classes. All of this knowledge-gain transpired through the stories of an instructor's work.

Similarly, the SPN format welcomes and validates personal experience as a legitimate form of knowledge, one that should be shared with others. Nash (2004) notes “the stories we construct then turn around and construct us, and we them... forever” (p. 36). When I was in the classroom with my students this summer, they told me their stories. This changed who I was, how I taught them, and how I built relationships with them. My stories, I hope, might construct some meaning to you, the reader.

The format and methodology of SPN lends itself to stories and is still developing (Nash, 2004; Nash and Bradley, 2011), yet it draws on narrative forms of inquiry such as autoethnography, phenomenology, and memoir (Bradley, 2009; Nash, 2004). As such, it is helpful to define SPN by what it is *not*.

**Autoethnography.** Hughes and Pennington (2017) define autoethnography as a “unique” form of research in which “the researcher is the subject of the study” (p. 5). This form of research is concerned not only with the study of self, but specifically with

the self in a particular cultural context (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). An autoethnography is primarily concerned with the lived experience *in context*.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) used autoethnography as an avenue to make research more accessible and meaningful for their readers and to note how the researcher's personal experiences influence the research process. The autoethnography, therefore is more concerned with the researchers' influence on the study whereas SPN can invite the researcher to be the subject of the study. An SPN is concerned with the author's study of self and is delivered in an accessible, story-centered fashion. However, an SPN may be specific to one context (for example, a summer course taught by the author/researcher) but also may span previous experiences, events, and interactions that took place before or after the primary context.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) explained the process of autoethnography includes selectively writing about epiphanies that were born of being part of a culture or having a specific cultural identity. Analysis of such experiences, including a consideration of how others might experience similar epiphanies is central to autoethnography (pp. 3-4). SPN, in contrast, is most concerned with the self—it should invite the reader to consider how they may be impacted by the reading, rather than the author of an SPN positing how their work may impact the reader or those in similar situations.

**Phenomenology.** A well-known method of qualitative study in education is that of phenomenology. This philosophy and method, according to van Manen (1990) is used to describe “how one orients to lived experience” (p. 4) and “the study of the lifeworld—

the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). In contrast to other qualitative methods, phenomenology first looks at an experience as it is lived rather than as how one interprets it. SPN is concerned with the author’s *reflection* on their experience—in some ways one might consider it the opposite of phenomenology because SPN requires deliberate reflection and meaning-making. The interpretation of the lived events is key.

**Memoir.** The genre of memoir is relatively new and gaining in popularity (Karr, 2015; Zwerdling, 2017). Memoir is more distinct than its previously mentioned counterparts in that it tends to be highly personal and selective in its content. It may rely on a theme, though a theme is not necessarily memoir criteria. Memoir may be focused on one’s whole life or the parts an author chooses to tell. Karr (2015) explains “you can count on a memoirist being passionate about the subject. Plus, its structure remains dopily episodic [...] the books are held together by happenstance, theme, and (most powerfully) the sheer, convincing poetry of a single person trying to make sense of the past” (p. xiii). SPN, on the other hand, is more precise in its goal to understand an *aspect* of lived experience, rather than the past as a whole. However, SPN leans towards hallmarks of memoir such as creativity and welcomes the writer who plays with form.

If one were to look at research and writing methods focused on individual experiences as a continuum, autoethnography would sit far to the right and memoir would occupy the same space far to the left. SPN, from my perspective, is a centrist—it fits

squarely in the middle. Those who use SPN seek to situate the author as central to the message, yet recognize how the author's perspectives might complement or contrast with any number of professional peers.

## **Methods**

SPN researchers connote data differently than traditional qualitative researchers. Whereas qualitative data traditionally relies on interview transcripts, document analysis, and the like, SPN researchers rely on their personal experience and perspectives. Nash and Bradley (2011) explained:

SPN researchers think of what they do as giving personal testimony to make their points rather than accumulating empirical *evidence* to prove something beyond a shadow of a doubt [...] For SPN researchers, scholarship is *credible* when it flows from what writers believe and love [...] with all their hearts. This meaning of credible (L. *credo*) comes very close to the notion of personal creed. (p. 83)

Content for my SPN was based on my personal experiences teaching, informed by my previous journaling and voice and video reflection each day after teaching. Extensive journaling of my reactions to daily interactions with students, case management meetings<sup>2</sup>, and class content allowed me to reflect on experiences going back a number of years.

Journaling practices allowed me to write about the “subjective experience” defined by Nash and Bradley (2011) as the main design objective of SPN, which seeks to

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<sup>2</sup> Case management meetings are attended by all instructors in the cohort, a residential life case manager, the program coordinator for the SB program, and a student intern. The weekly, hour-long meetings consist of conversations about students who may be struggling both in and out of class and how to address the issues and support the students to complete the program.

“investigate, present, and analyze the inner life of the writer in order to draw insights that might be *universalizable* for readers” (p. 83). SPN’s notion of *universalizability* answers Shenton’s (2004) call for transferability in qualitative work in that the author must give enough contextual information about the study so *the reader* might be able to make a transfer to their own context. The stories I tell based on my teaching experience include detail about the objective for the day’s lesson plans and readings. Such thick description allows other teachers to find connections to their own classroom contexts.

Throughout the writing process I utilized members from the case-management staff (the two other teachers in our cohort, the Residence Life Case Manager<sup>3</sup>, and staff who run the SB program) to check my recollection or details about particular students. By utilizing feedback from my peers, I “overlap[ped]” methods and increased dependability (Shenton, 2004, p. 71).

### **Elements of SPN**

The leading scholars of SPN (Nash & Bradley, 2011) explained that the method takes place in four stages: pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search. Pre-search is the exploratory stage the author experiences when she identifies a problem and develops a research question. Me-search is a reflective stage that involves finding one’s voice. Re-search refers to the stage in which the author considers her audience and develops a format for writing that will be appropriate for her audience. Finally, the we-search stage requires the author to move from particulars to universalizability. Each of these stages

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<sup>3</sup> The primary responsibility of a Residential Life Case Manager is to engage with first-year residents outside of class and make sure they are adapting socially and academically to college life. The case manager connects with students when behavior or other concerns arise and advises the student on how to handle any problems they may have.

(explained in more detail below) are vital to a successful SPN. While the end product of the SPN will look different for each author, the process of writing an SPN is grounded in four stages.

**Pre-search.** The pre-search stage of SPN work is what many would consider a brainstorming stage. This is a time when the author thinks about the nagging questions she wants answered. Nash and Bradley (2011) argued this stage is essential because it forces the author not only to ask vital questions of herself and her interests but also consider what questions she is willing to take a long time to explore. My pre-search stage for this project began not when I first encountered that faculty member who was so displeased by the thought of SB students, but likely semesters before when I noticed how many colleagues, particularly those with tenure or who were on the tenure-track, would bemoan teaching undergraduates. Though I think most teachers enjoy an occasional barb at the expense of students (especially a crack at the age difference), the number of professors I met who disparaged students was alarming. I started to think about my reaction to their statements and my own experience working with undergraduate students.

Years before I taught formally in the classroom, I worked in various student affairs roles. I learned about how students develop and what their struggles were, particularly outside of the classroom. I read about (and then observed) developmental changes that take place in students. In conversations with my husband (who teaches technical writing at MU) I would often lament, “if teachers could just understand what students are going through, I think they’d be more compassionate.” My lamentations multiplied as I spent more time with faculty members. It seemed to me faculty members

were like my parents: they themselves lived through the parenting process but seemed incapable of remembering how hard being a new parent is. All faculty lived through the undergraduate experience but some seemed incapable of remembering how difficult a transition it could be. What faculty needed to know, I thought, was a basic understanding of student development theories—a topic that most faculty never encounter (many do not receive any training to be a teacher, either!). My pre-search stage spanned years—years of pondering and complaining and questioning—before I figured out what I really wanted to know about more about was teaching, relationship building, and understanding students so I might help them succeed.

**Me-search.** The second stage of SPN work is called “me-search” because the focus of this stage is to dig into what one knows about one’s self and finding one’s voice. In academia, many forms of research disparage writing in the first person. My own students are often amazed when I encourage them to use first person in their writing—their previous instructors informed them that such a practice was strictly *verboten*.

Researchers in many disciplines are often asked to divorce themselves from the material. Though qualitative researchers, generally, make a point of stating their positionality, few researchers allow themselves *into* the research. Nash and Bradley (2011) argued, “our personal lives and experiences are central to our research and scholarship” (p. 58) and therefore state that use of the author’s life is “unavoidably an integral element” (p. 58) in our speech and writing. For this SPN, the author’s voice is particularly important because it is first and foremost an exploration of myself in the classroom. While I reflect on relationships and interactions with and among the students



in my classroom, my own perspective is the most crucial element to this dissertation. A large part of the *me-search* process was done in a traditional way—writing the first two chapters of this dissertation. I made notes to myself along the way. For instance, when I was digging into the literature on rural students, what did I question? Where did I see reality reflected in the writing of others? How did I personally identify as a member of a rural community? The answers to these questions helped me find my own voice and understand my positionality. The reader will see these answers explored in later chapters.

**Re-search.** Scholarly articles and “research” (including dissertations) are traditionally formatted into five sections that generally reflect the research process: introduction, literature review, methods, findings, discussion. Throughout my coursework in the PhD program, particularly in my research methods classes, this format has been emphasized as professional, necessary, and correct. For many empirical studies, such a format is appropriate, but SPN is less concerned with traditional format and more concerned with *how* the research question will be answered. The author must choose how she will go about sharing her findings with her audience and, should the research question allow for it, narrative might be the best option. The fluidity with which SPN operates, therefore, means the author must be aware of what the audience will need as well as how to prove to the reader that while the methods of SPN are not traditional in form, the value it adds to the knowledge base is. Nash and Bradley (2011) explained this balance:

SPN writers will need to know when to be non-traditional—subjective, experimental, creative, artistic—and when to be traditional—objective,

authoritative, data-driven, and credible. SPN writers will need to know how to live within the conventional borders of research, when to cross them, and when to transcend and transform those borders. (p. 80)

In the following paragraphs, I explain how my research study followed traditional norms and when I took advantage of opportunities to be creative, experimental, and artistic.

### **SPN Format**

Unlike a traditional five-chapter dissertation, the remainder of my SPN will not follow the conventions of dissertation writing. Instead of an analysis chapter followed by a discussion chapter, I will use narrative to explore my findings and their implications for both myself and those who are interested in supporting conditionally-enrolled first year students. Each of the following chapters focuses on a specific perspective of engagement. To maintain continuity, I forgo the use of chapter summaries.

Chapter four relates stories focused on the behavioral perspective. Chapter five considers the implications of attending to the socio-cultural perspective. Chapter six explores the complexities of the psychological perspective. Finally, chapter seven considers the holistic perspective and the impact of *phronesis* on my teaching. Each chapter contains a number of epitaphs, or quotations, that guide the theme of the discussion and illustrate or highlight a particularly important topic. The chapters are meant to be easy to read while rich with description. By providing detail and rich description I meet Shenton's (2004) criteria for transferability.

**Collecting perspectives.** The data collected on myself in the form of journals and voice and video recordings are traditional methods of data collection. SPN researchers,

however, eschew the term “data” in favor of “perspectives” because of its constructivist leanings (in that it allows the author to give meaning to observation) (Nash & Bradley, 2011). In each of the daily reflections I collected in the summer of 2018 I utilized the same set of questions to guide my reflection (similar to following an interview protocol):

1. Summarize the day's lesson (what I did, how I felt, and how students responded).
2. Describe my "mindset" and the perspectives I anticipated addressing in the lesson (behavioral, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic).
3. Discuss my insights for adapting/changing my instruction based on the day's lesson.

While I have “data” on which I heavily relied, I also used introspective questions as I reviewed my previously recorded perspectives.

The introspective questions came about as I identified themes that emerged in my teaching and reflection (a necessary step in the SPN process that allowed me to work toward universalizability). Such introspective questions required further writing and reflecting on the teaching experience. This continued reflection deviated from traditional data collection in that it was on-going and allowed for prolonged reflection and change in viewpoint given the difference in time between initial reflection and review.

Further, my reflection *on reflection* was key because while my summer 2018 course was complete, I was still an instructor to the same students the following fall. My reflection of teaching them changed as I continued to learn more about my students, their struggles, and how they have developed over the summer. Because of my continued

interaction with these students, I came to better understand what I saw in the classroom this summer with new information presented after the course was complete. While traditional forms of data collection may not allow for a constant flow of data collection, SPN welcomes the changing, real-time variables that allowed me to better understand pedagogical choices I made months ago.

Many SPN pieces are written without formal data collection, hence the use of the term *perspectives* rather than *data* (Nash & Bradley, 2011), yet I chose to be methodical in my approach to collecting my perspectives. My decision to follow a specific protocol was made so I might ensure a rigorous method of perspective collecting that would still allow me to share the information in narrative form.

***Analysis of perspectives.*** Saldaña (2009) argued that there is no correct way to analyze qualitative data; the researcher must decide how to proceed based on the goals of the study. After transcribing each of my video and audio recordings, I developed an *a priori* coding scheme (Appendix E). Saldaña (2009) explained that creating *a priori* codes allows for “harmonizing with your conceptual framework or paradigm” and “enables an analysis that directly answers the research question” (p. 49).

In the first round of coding I read through each transcript and identified where content matched the *a priori* scheme I had originally developed. I also took note of and made a list of new themes I identified. Each of these new codes were added to the code scheme. Once new codes were added, I returned to the beginning of the transcripts to ensure I had not missed content that related to the new codes.

After first round coding based on the *a priori* scheme, I then returned to the transcripts and applied magnitude coding. This process allowed me to differentiate between positive and negative reactions to the codes. As I read through the transcripts the first time it became apparent that while the *a priori* codes were appropriate, the codes did not account for the various interpretations possible in the context of each lesson plan. As a result, I adjusted the codes to differentiate between broad themes and increasingly specific findings.

Similar to discourse analysis, my reflection on reflection (*phronesis*) relied on detailed notes on transcription. Reflection on reflection itself served as a form of analytic note-taking. I began with two rounds of coding on my transcription as a means of pragmatically looking at material to which I was personally and emotionally involved. My use of *phronesis* provided a space to again personally engage with the material and critically reflect.

The second reflection took place four to five months after the initial reflection. During the second reflection, I followed the tenets of *phronesis*, wherein I focused more intently on myself, considered the community of students I was working with and reflecting on, avoided reducing my reflection (as I often did in the first form of reflection) and then made notes on how this reflection might add knowledge to the profession. I coded the reflection on reflection in the same way I coded the initial transcripts. Finally, I looked for additional themes that were brought about by my reflection on reflection.

**We-search and it's limitations.** Central to SPN is the development of constructs or themes that allow for universalizability (Nash & Bradley, 2011). In the SPN context,

“universalize” is not meant to suggest that my own experience might speak for another in a *carte blanche* manner. For SPN authors, one who is able to “universalize” their research is an author who can “spell out and recommend, in a humble way, the implications that [an] SPN may have on your profession” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 106). Following this directive, I used my experiences to reflect on how my pedagogical choices and understanding of student development and academic identity impacted my interactions with students.

To articulate universalizability, SPN methods suggest that one move from the particulars of their perspectives to generalizability. An author must recognize that while her experiences will not speak to everyone in her field, there is value and validity in her personal experiences. These experiences may, in fact, lead to more questions about the phenomena of study (Nash and Bradley, 2011). The “we” in “we-search” also suggests that I should connect my own experience to that of other researchers and previous literature. My experience, while personal and unique, at times did echo or mirror others’ experiences. I make those connections known to the reader and suggest what implications may come from those connections in chapters four through seven.

### **What Good am I Doing? The Purpose of Self-exploration in Teaching**

Teachers often get bogged down in the tasks that need to be done: prep a class, grade a quiz, complete an IRB so that data collection can begin. As a teacher and researcher, I can get so enmeshed in the day to day *business* of teaching, I often forget the *purpose* of teaching and even the *people* I’m hoping to teach. So many of my teacher-friends have said the same. As a result, sometimes I can lose sight of my goals: to help

students understand new ideas and to think in different, challenging ways. I try to equip students with the skills to solve hard problems and prepare them to interact with one another beyond the walls of our classroom. But I can forget that teaching is more than presenting information to students with their eyes and ears open. Teaching is personal, relational, and can be intimate. At the same time, teaching is also likely guided by clear parameters: learning outcomes, time in the classroom, the classroom itself.

When teachers approach the task of teaching in a personal way (building relationships with students, allowing the students to explore their own values, ideas, and perceptions in class) learning goals are met without feeling as stringent. Students learn better when teachers build relationships with students in the classroom, and to do that, we (teachers and students) must share a part of ourselves. To share ourselves, we tell stories—embarrassing ones about sitting on a tack in class, or difficult ones about how hard it was to focus in high school when medication ran short. As we tell these stories, we learn about one another, about our community, and about ourselves both as people and as academics who have something important to share.

Both radical pedagogy (hooks, 1994) and liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970) call for teachers to welcome their students into the classroom and share their own experiences and beliefs. Sharing stories not only allows others to better understand one's perspective, it allows each individual a way to make sense of their own lives and to keep ourselves striving even when life is difficult. Joan Didion (1979) is famous for writing, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." Like Didion asserts, the stories I share of my teaching have helped me understand what it means to teach new college students and just as

importantly, what it means to me *to be a teacher*. The stories of triumph give me comfort when I am struggling to reach a student and help them grow. The stories of failure remind me that teaching is a craft that can always be practiced and adapted. Importantly, regardless of the subject matter, stories are vital. The narrative nature of this dissertation conveys to the reader the personal, intimate nature of teaching and its impact on both teacher and student.

In the Freshman seminar in literature course I teach, I use stories as a way of exploring the features of good writing and argumentation. Within the course we use stories to make sense of difficult social topics. We also use stories to make sense of college and our place in that new context. It is only appropriate that just as my students used stories to explore their understanding of literature concepts, I also use stories to make sense of my teaching them.

I designed this study to explore how I made pedagogical choices to welcome conditionally-enrolled students to the world of higher education and to build their confidence and abilities in this new community. Each day in class, I tried to find space for students to be themselves, yet to challenge them in new ways of thinking and learning. The choices I made were intended to support the underprepared (often rural, first-generation) students in their summer bridge program. Similarly, using SPN as a means to explore our classroom dynamic meant that I relied on my own experiences and used narrative to convey the meaning that took shape in our classroom conversations. By sharing my pedagogical reflection via SPN, I hope to engage readers in a new way of



thinking about teaching: one that is personal, reliant on relationships, and still steeped in rigorous intellectual work.

### **I Want to be Like Rich—Research Questions to Guide the SPN**

Much of the literature about conditionally-enrolled students focuses on who the students are, what they need, and what services are in place to support them on campus. From my first semester in my doctoral program in Educational Leadership, professors asked us to design research questions. I knew I wanted to understand more about the program I taught in each summer. It seemed that every stone I overturned exposed more to sift through in the form of information about students, who they were (or were not) and what they needed. This was a helpful place to start, as I certainly began to understand the conditionally-enrolled population, however it never felt fulfilling. It never felt like I knew what all this information meant *for me*.

One of the best aspects about teaching in the SB program is the case management model that accompanies the academic coursework. Students are placed in cohorts of 25: they take the same three classes with the same 25 students each day. Each week, the three instructors have a case management meeting with the professional staff members who run SB: the program director, the student intern, and the residential life case manager.

The case manager, Rich, is the kind of person I want to be when I grow up. Everyone, and I do mean *everyone*, loves Rich. He has a heart for SB students and he wears it on his sleeve. He knows each of the 200 students by name—beyond that, he knows them personally. After only one week of the program, if one of the teachers has identified a student who seems to be struggling, not only has Rich also already noticed it,

it is likely that he has already had a conversation with them and knows what past experiences have brought on the concerns: recent surgery, financial trouble at home, a recent death of a friend from back home. To call Rich charismatic seems to belittle his character. From my perspective, he is loved by all and people are drawn to him, but it is truly because he is able to connect with students.

At the risk of sounding jealous, I wanted what Rich had. When I worked in student affairs years ago, I had more relationships like Rich's. Certainly, some of the reason for the change in the relationship was the classroom dynamic. As the teacher, I do have some power in the classroom that can prohibit students from opening up about what might be troubling them—it can be hard for students to share personal information in a classroom environment that does not traditionally welcome discussion of a personal nature. Yet, Rich, like me, also is in position of power: his job is to look out for students and help them when they need it. Sometimes, that might mean requiring students to meet with a conduct officer, dean of students, or counselor. However, despite his power, students connect with him and often say he is their favorite person on campus.

While I do not necessarily want to be everyone's favorite person, I do want to be the person someone can go to for help. I thought about why this was for a long time. Why did I want to be like Rich? Because I, like Rich, care deeply for my students and I want them to know it. So, I began to think more intently on how I could be more Rich-esque. I studied Rich in meetings. I listened to what he said and I listened to what students said about him. What if I approached teaching the way Rich approaches case management?

What if I focused more on getting to know my students, learned what their struggles were, and showed them the skills they needed to build their academic confidence?

As my literature review in chapter two suggests, first-year students desire a personal connection with their faculty (Mann, 2001) yet there is not a great deal of research literature on what such relationships mean to faculty members (there are plenty of great memoirs about this such as *Life in School* (1996), *Teacher Man*, (2005), *It Won't Be Easy* (2017)). I thought if I was purposeful about what I said and did in the classroom, I might make a difference in the lives of the students and in turn, they might make a difference in mine. All those formal and informal musings led me to two research questions:

1. What pedagogical choices do I make in the classroom that create an engaging environment for conditionally-enrolled and academically underprepared students?
2. What are the emotional and tangible effects of teaching a literature course for conditionally-enrolled students and how does daily reflection of these effects impact pedagogical choices?

### **Context and History**

Mountain University runs two summer programs for new students, and while both technically are considered “bridge” programs, the demographics of the students enrolled in the programs are quite different. Students who are enrolled in SB have an average ACT score of 18.876 and an unweighted GPA of 2.75. SB has a high concentration of first-generation (48%), low-income (64%), underserved, and marginalized (11.8%

Black/African American, 3.5% Asian, 7% bi-or multiracial, 0.8% American Indian/Alaska Native)<sup>4</sup> students. Students enrolled in the other summer bridge program, Peak, have an average ACT score of 22.1 and an unweighted GPA of 3.14. The context for the current research will focus on my experience teaching in SB at Mountain University will serve as the basis of the SPN.

**SB Involvement.** I have taught in the SB program since 2016 but the majority of my SPN will be focused on my experience teaching in summers of 2017 and 2018. I did not journal or approach the course content with a particular theme in mind during the 2016 year. Because my approach to the course and my lack of *perspectives*, the majority of the SPN I will not focus on my 2016 experience. I will, however, use it to frame my experience and understanding of the SB program in general.

The 2016 year taught me a great deal about the program and student expectations which has informed the following two years of teaching. In 2017 and 2018, course readings focused on the theme of identity and transition. Students read numerous pieces of drama, fiction, and poetry that centered on personal identity and the transition to college. See appendix A for a full list of course readings.

### **Delimitations**

When my children are clamoring for me to help them with three different things at the same time, I often say, “I’m only one person. You’ll have to be patient” or, when I’m

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<sup>4</sup> Race/ethnicity data from a 2018 report from the SB Office at MU. It is important to note that the word choice for race or ethnicity is the word choice used on their data collection instrument. Further, though zero students reported ‘Hispanic’ as their race, the SB office argued that some of the students are, in deed Hispanic. This was the first year the SB office noted a large rise in the percent of students who chose not to disclose their race or ethnicity (3.9%). We posit that this increase may be due to the location of the school in rural Appalachia combined with the political climate of 2018.

irritated, it comes out as, “one thing at a time!” Those reminders: “I’m only one person” and “one thing at a time” have been guiding principles in my approach to teaching SB for the last two years. I truly wanted to make a difference in the lives of my students while they were in my class; I found I needed to focus my attention more explicitly on what they needed and what we could accomplish in our short time together. We were not going to move mountains in five weeks, but we certainly could demolish some molehills.

My concern with conditionally-enrolled students was that many of them lacked confidence and an academic identity that might allow them to truly flourish in college. I would ask students during the first week of SB about the topics which most concerned them about being in college. So many of them said, “I’m not a very good student” or “I had a hard time in high school.” As they began to turn in writing for the class, they would couch what they turned in with a note on Blackboard or a comment in class on the day an assignment was due: “Sorry, I’m just not a very good writer!”

I wanted to see if there was a way to build academic identity (to see themselves as academics—capable of doing college-level work) and help students think about their own transition process at the same time. It would be foolish to ignore in the classroom everything going on beyond its doors, up the hill in their residence hall and down the street in the cafeteria.

I started thinking about how reading fiction had always brought me comfort—I did not have a bachelor’s degree in writing and master’s literature for no reason. I have always loved reading about experiences other than my own and found great comfort when I could relate to what a character was going through. I knew there was a chance my

students might also find something that resonated with them through a good piece of fiction, I just needed to find the right pieces for my students to read.

First, I turned to Google and found a list of the “best books about college” and spent months combing through the titles. Some I read cover to cover, others I abandoned halfway through. Many on the list focused on professors or administrators who worked on college campuses. More than one involved murder, sexual relationships between teacher and student (no, thank you!), or some sort of crime. Nothing was quite right. Just like TV shows and movies, it seemed no one could get college just right. The myriad examples of “college life” in popular culture are mostly unrealistic—highly glamorous, socially (rather than academically) focused, and few characters that experience any significant consequences to their actions. In short—popular culture portrayed college as a blast, a non-stop party where everyone had friends and loved the experience right away. I wanted pieces that reflected the transition to college in a realistic light—one where characters might be hesitant to start college, feel homesick, or have trouble making friends in the first few weeks. After all, these were the issues so many of my former students dealt with in their first-year transition.

I remembered reading *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) when I was in college. It certainly did not reflect every aspect of my college experience, but Charlotte’s experiences at least seemed plausible. However, at over 600 pages, I knew it would not work in my classroom. Finally, I found *Fangirl* (2013) by Rainbow Rowell. I devoured it in a matter of days (slowed down only by my obligation to read for my own classes). The main character, Cath, was realistic and her trouble adjusting to college was reminiscent of

so many students I interacted with in the past. The curriculum grew around *Fangirl*. We explored the theme of “identity in college” by reading Rowell’s entire novel, a few poems, and excerpts of *The Art of Fielding*, and even a piece of Wolfe’s *I am Charlotte Simmons*. (It is a long novel, but the scene when Charlotte and her parents arrived on campus was one that so many of my students would connect with, I could not ignore it). By the summer of 2018, I had whittled down the focus even more, removing much of the poetry in favor of taking more time with *Fangirl*. By keeping the focus of the course on identity in college, the students were able to build a solid understanding of and vocabulary around literature concepts and transition issues. It also meant that as the instructor, I kept a narrow focus on curriculum so that we could dive deep into the topics.

The following chapters will explore what my students and I experienced as a result of my course planning. The students enrolled in the literature class did not have a choice about which class to enroll in, nor did I have a choice in who would be placed in my class. The stories I will share will illuminate what it meant for me to work with SB students and what I learned along the way.

### **Summary**

This study highlights my personal experience teaching conditionally-enrolled students as they transition to college. Using SPN, I explore the ways in which I sought to build relationships with my students, create curriculum that would prepare them for college-level academics, and explore how my perspective of teaching has changed as a result. SPN allows me to tell stories of my day-to-day interactions with my students and most importantly, reflect on what I learned from my students so that I might be a better

teacher in the future. It is my hope that readers will see the value of one teacher sharing her story just as my students found value in honoring their own stories.



## CHAPTER 4

### DOES ANYBODY HAVE A MAP? ATTENDING TO THE BEHAVIORAL PERSPECTIVE

*“Does anybody have a map? Does anybody happen to know how the hell to do this? I don’t know if you can tell but this is me just pretending to know.” –Dear Evan Hansen*

I’m quick to admit that when traveling the notion of having a map is appealing to me because of my Type A personality. I like to know what the plan is, where I am going, how I’ll get there, and what I should expect along the way. When I do not have a map I feel lost, anxious, and unprepared. If I am in a new city and driving my husband’s old Ford Ranger (sans the modern convenience of GPS), I become hyper aware of my surroundings. If my printed out Googlemaps directions fail me, I know I’ll have to lean on my attention to detail. The need for a map is both literal and metaphorical. When I’m on the road, I need a map. When I’m doing something new, I need a map—something to give me direction and let me know where I am headed. I have found that my students need maps too.

When young children enter school, most are eager to be there. Each day brings a new adventure, new facts to learn, a different part of the world to explore. Along the kindergarten to senior year path, many kids lose their sense of academic wonder. They learn new skills and behaviors to help them survive (even thrive) in their academic setting: memorization, test-taking skills, and proper practices for in-class behavior. In a way, the map they start off with as young children (the “map” that tells kids learning is interactive and fun) is revised to teach kids that learning is a process and the goal is

graduation (perhaps enroute to college). There are no alternate routes—or if there are alternate routes, they usually are not worth the journey.

As I mentioned in earlier chapters, I spent a good deal of time the first week of class getting to know my students, their academic habits and behaviors, and their expectations of the class. Each year, I am hopeful that more students will, during that first week, express their love of learning, of reading, or discussing ideas with others. Each year, very few state such interests so plainly. I'm always a bit disappointed. Not disappointed *in them*, but in the fact that so few have any outward interest in learning. At any rate, I tend to take their lack of enthusiasm as a sign that we should discuss our expectations for the class. What do they hope to accomplish in class? I've already laid out my expectations (in the form of the syllabus and some discussion about what assignments students will complete to meet those expectations) but I want to hear from them.

### **An Introduction to ENGL 190: Freshman Seminar in Literature**

English 190 is a Freshman Seminar that allows the teacher to design the curriculum to their liking. A 190 designation means that students should be exposed to basic concepts in the field of study while also providing an introduction to the rigor and expectations of college academics. My course is centered on the theme of college transition and includes a number of readings in which the main characters are entering college for the first time. On the first day, I go over the syllabus, spend some time getting to know my students, and ask them what expectations they have of me.

This year, my students surprised me. In my second class of the day a group of four students sitting front and center in the room explained to me their hesitation with

college (and this class in particular). They shared that they did, indeed, want to be engaged in the learning process but they were not sure where to start. Some of them were read to in English class in high school. More than one student in the class emphatically claimed to have never read a book cover-to-cover. Right here in front of me was a young man in a green, United Methodist camp shirt telling me, “I want to do well in class and have good conversations, but I don’t know how to do that.” *What these students needed was a newer, updated map.*

Based on what my students had told me, I imagined that their map for how to do well in high school was quite different from the map for how to do well in my class. I interpreted their needs as a reflection of their K-12 experiences in which they (and their teachers and school administrators) were concerned with end-of-grade assessments and standardized measures of achievement.

When discussing Bloom’s taxonomy (a topic I cover to get my students thinking about *how* they learn), my students indicated that they rarely ever progressed beyond the first two levels: understand and remember. They worked on simply understanding a concept for class, remembering it for a period of time, rewriting it for the purposes of test, quickly moving on to the next topic. I wanted to give my students a map that would lead them to move beyond *understand* and *remember*: at the very least they learn how to *analyze*. If I gave them good enough directions, they may progress to *create*.

I do not want to suggest that the students enrolled in my class were so ill-prepared that I was disheartened or that I thought they were incapable of the work required of the class. I simply understood what my students were sharing with me was a matter of fact:

many of their high school courses prepared them to do well on a standardized test. Standardized tests do not leave much room for in-depth explanation of perspective or critical thinking. My students were not incapable, but very few had been asked to engage in this way before. If I wanted them to share their thoughts, consider perspectives different from their own, and have conversations about the connections they might make to the course material and to one another, I needed to model the way.

By proving a map for the students, I attended to Kahu's (2013) behavioral perspective. I modeled the task that was expected of them (Appendix C). As I mentioned in a previous chapter, one of the first ways I did this was to have my students read the beginning of a chapter from *I am Charlotte Simmons*. This was the only time we read anything aloud in class. Using a document camera, I projected the pages onto a screen and we read aloud. I began with the first paragraph, highlighting, underlining, and annotating as I went. When I came to a word I thought some may not be familiar with, I pulled out my Merriam-Webster app on my phone and defined the word. I wrote the definition in the margin.

As a class we talked about what was going on in the story, why I highlighted what I did, and why we thought the passage was important. Then, the class broke up into small groups to tackle a page at a time. When each group felt they were done, we shared their annotations as a large group. It was a slow and painstaking process for all, yet I know it was a vital one. Each time I do this activity, I have to fight back the urge to move along quickly like I feel my students want me to do. We talk about every word underlined, defined, highlighted. Why are these things important? What did the class miss? Each

group fails to define all of the words that give them trouble. Why is that? One student ventures a guess, “I think it’s because when we read the sentence it seemed to make sense. We could guess what the word meant based on the context.”

I asked someone to look up *arboreal*, *floribunda*, *prodigious*, *ocher*. As the definitions were read aloud, another student raised his hand. “I didn’t point these words out because everyone else seemed to know them. I didn’t want to look stupid. I figured I understood enough of the story to keep going.” Many heads nodded in agreement. It was the second day of class, the students barely knew one another and they barely knew me. The last thing they wanted was to appear unintelligent. Having done this exercise in the past, I knew students were reticent to share their weakness (who among us likes to do that?). To demonstrate that I understood, I shared with them my own copy of the reading from years ago. My copy is also marked, a little crumpled and worn. I showed them the different colors of ink. Not only did I have to look words up and make notes the first time I read it, I noticed new words I had missed the first time. Like them, there were words I thought I understood based on context the first time around. The second (or third or fourth) time I read it, I realized maybe it meant something other than what I thought.

Showing my own “weaknesses” to the class does two things: first, it demonstrates that I am not perfect, nor do I expect perfection. Many students seem to think that they must do very well the first time around, and if they do not, they consider themselves hopeless. On the contrary, I want to show them that learning is a process—sometimes a slow, methodical process that requires thinking and rethinking about topics. The behavioral perspective is one which invites practice: learning a new skill in school takes

practice. Second, this activity highlights that I understand where the students may be in the process of transitioning to college. This activity, and our discussion of it, focused on the reality of their coursework. After the activity they understood I would not ask them to do work I have not prepared them for. If I find they are not comprehending a concept, we will circle back to it. I will challenge them, but I will also support them as they struggle. While we will not spend more time reading aloud in class and going over readings paragraph by paragraph, we may have discussions centered around two sentences or two pages in a reading. They have the map for how to read and can now forge ahead on the journey.

After day two of class, I was feeling pretty good about myself. I demonstrated how to read for class—I'd handed them the map and showed them how to use it—day three was bound to be good. We were set to discuss the first act in *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman. The past two summers of teaching this play taught me that my students (who were born after Matthew Shepard was killed) usually have no familiarity with Shepard's story. Though I give them a brief description of what they are going to read at the end of day two, I do not tell them much. It's time for me to see if they use the map I gave them.

My energy and excitement for the day quickly crumbled—I expected to be met with discussions of characters, emotional reactions to the content, and questions about what would happen next. What I actually heard was a lot of complaining. The piece was confusing, there were too many characters to keep track of, and the brief quiz I gave at the beginning of class was “unfair.” I felt deflated, as if I had failed them. I knew the

content of the play would not appeal to everyone, but because I'd taught *Laramie* before, I knew most of the students were moved deeply. This time, however, the students not only had very little reaction to the play's content, they had strong reactions to how I was running the class.

Quizzes are the bane of my existence as a teacher. For years I refused to give them, taking on the “sink or swim” mentality. I knew many students did not read or prepare for class because they felt as if they could “bullshit” their way through class—course evaluations at the end of the semester confirmed these notions. After a student wrote in a course evaluation, “maybe you should add quizzes, so it forces me to read” I decided it was worth a try.

I started doing pop quizzes on readings. I felt like I was being tricky, as though I was trying to catch the students in their game (okay, I was indeed trying to catch them in their game) but I did not like that feeling. I was adapting to the audience. If students were telling me without hesitation that they would not read without the incentive (or threat) of a grade, then so be it. Quizzes they shall have. Perhaps unremarkably, reading increased. Discussion improved. So much so that by my third year of teaching in SB, giving quizzes became rote.

What I had learned in those first years was that the first quiz was jarring. Students were not expecting a quiz (I told them on day one that quizzes would be unannounced) after the first one, they were often mad. This year, I tried something different. Instead of giving them the first quiz as I normally would (individually) I let them work in groups. I thought taking the quiz together would allow them to see what a quiz in my class tended

to look like, this would allow them to assess how well they had prepared, and by working in groups, the students might learn how others prepared and adjust their own strategies. Quizzes in my class are always open-note. I ask them to prepare for readings by taking notes to help them remember and understand, so I feel it only makes sense to use their notes when called on to make sense of the reading. *Gosh, this is going to go so well. I'm attending to their behavioral perspective by giving them the first quiz this way*, I thought to myself. Part of me was proud for making this pedagogical choice. I thought I would nip anger in the butt with this new strategy. The students would work together, figure out the answers, and feel ready for the next quiz. I was wrong.

As we went over the answers to the quiz questions, I quickly realized how many were unable to answer the questions correctly, even in groups. The questions were all centered on references characters made to recent events (in Waco, Texas and Jasper, Texas) and cultural references to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. These references are incredibly crucial to understanding the historical context of the time of the play—a time that was quite different than now, twenty years after the play takes place. Not one person looked up these references when they read the night before. Not one person answered all of the questions correctly. I clenched my jaw. I took a deep breath. I wanted to ask, “what did we spend all of the last class doing? Why didn't you apply those skills to last night's reading?” Instead, we found the answers together.

I asked the students to pull out their phones and Google the towns in Texas and the title of Kushner's play. They had trouble finding what specifically I was looking for. Most of them just typed in “Waco” or “Jasper.” We talked about using the clues in the



play to help them narrow their search down. The play was written in 1999, so why not add that year to the search? *So much for Digital Natives*, I thought. I really did not expect to have to teach students who grew up in the digital age how to accurately search something on Google. Multiple scholars have noted, however, that the belief that students possess expansive knowledge of digital technologies is incorrect (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013). Just because students grew up in environment in which technology use was commonplace does not mean they are competent in their use of technology (Cimbricz & Rath, 2016).

With some coaching, the students found the answers we were looking for. After we finally discussed why these references mattered, we had another discussion. “Tell me what you thought of that quiz,” I asked the students.

“It was unfair.”

“There’s no way we could have known the answers.”

I pushed back. “No way? Weren’t we able to find the answers together in class?”

“Yeah, but we had to look things up on our phones, and you had to tell us how to do it.”

Again, I pushed. “Could you have done that last night when you first read it?”

“Maybe, but the reading was long, and I had other work to do. Reading like this takes a lot of time.”

“It does,” I agreed. “It takes a lot of time. This is a literature class. You’re going to read a lot. Every day. You’re going to have to set aside the time to do the work.”

My agreement did not do much to comfort the students. I did not back down regarding my expectations. I simply confirmed their beliefs and challenged them to do better tomorrow. Outwardly, I demonstrated high expectations. Inwardly, however, I wondered if my pushing back would lead to my ruin.

I wanted the students to respect me, value my interactions with them, and honestly, I wanted them to like me. Jane Tompkins (1996) shared similar desires in her own reflection on teaching. She realized she was in her own “good cop/bad cop” (p. 3) scenario wherein she would vacillate between being the friendly, humorous teacher everyone liked and the hard-lined teacher who expected discipline and hard work in the classroom. Like Tompkins, neither of these roles suited me well. As a result, I felt like I appeared a bit loose, or as my mom would say, a bit “wishy-washy” in my role as teacher. One day we would be laughing about a funny meme someone found on Twitter and the next I would refuse to give make-up work to students who had missed class. I’ve tried hard to strike a good balance but the trouble is, for many years, I could not decide for myself who I wanted to be as a teacher, let alone how to accomplish the task when I did figure it out.

### **Lies about education we’ve learned to believe**

*“Labeling has become an epidemic in our schools—a toxic habit with no known limits [...] The categories keep splintering, getting nuttier as they go, and the problem is that all of it lowers our sights, misdirects our vision, suppresses possibility. Labels are limiting, they conceal more than they reveal.” –William Ayers*

Perception is everything. At least, it has the power to be, especially when new students are involved in the equation. I learned from colleagues that in terms of SB, the English 190 classes had the reputation of being the “easy” classes. Though I had not

noticed students treating my class as the “easy” one before, I started to see evidence of this everywhere. It’s like when one learns a new word for the first time and suddenly the new word is seemingly everywhere. One simply could not *fathom* how commonplace that word really was.

I noticed that students prioritized my class after their Global Issues class. They would tell me, “oh, well I didn’t finish reading for your class because we have a quiz in Global Issues today.” Or, “I would have finished reading but we have a paper due in Dr. Mendes’ class, so I just couldn’t take the time to read all those pages last night.” The basic sentiment was *I can get by on doing little to prepare for this class*. While I am aware that at times students need to make critical choices about which class to focus on, that choice should not be consistent and unchanging. If one class is constantly being pushed to the side, that action speaks to how the student views and values the class.

Rather than concentrating on behavioral tasks related only to my class, I found myself also needing to talk with my students about balancing their academics. Though I had previously seen my role as “teacher in the SB program” as one who introduces the students *academically* into college life, I found that I also needed to introduce them to the *habits* related to academics. It was not enough for me to teach the students how to read for class (an on-going and not guaranteed process, I had learned). I also had to teach them to consider how they managed their time.

I thought, *if taking the time in class to have this conversation leads to better outcomes in their work, I’m happy to devote a day to this discussion*. And so, I led a discussion at the beginning of class near the start of the second week. I asked them to

check in with me about how SB seemed to be going for them as a whole. How did they like their other instructors? What aspects of SB were difficult for them? As the students started to share their thoughts, my stomach started to churn and my mind began to race. I had opened up a can of worms and now I had to deal with it. I realized that while my intent was to help the students figure out their own responses to the demands placed on them, they were in turn asking me to consider what it was I was asking of them. Though their requests were not overt, they were asking me to change my plans.

My challenge became clear. Not only did I need to articulate why attending to the demands of each class was important, I also needed to consider the learning outcomes for my class and how I was going to get the students there. This meant I had to push myself far outside my comfort zone. I had already planned my lessons for the entire five weeks. While I had built in a little wiggle room here or there to account for good discussions going long or activities taking less time than I had planned, I knew what I was going to do each day.

I had planned my lessons in a specific manner for a reason: I thought if I followed my five-week map, my students would be well-adjusted, articulate critics of literature. They would see the value of reading fiction and be able to make an argument about what they had read. They would also feel like they could handle being a college student come fall semester. *I had already made clear, thoughtful plans. If we stuck to the plan, we would succeed. To change them now would be chaos.* Actually, I realized, to stay the course would be chaos. What the students needed was a bit of adaptation. Probably not for the last time, I had to tell myself, *this is not about you. This is about the students. If*

*the students are telling you they need help, you need to give it to them, even if it disrupts your plans.* Rather than asserting my own power over the students (what hooks (1994), Freire (1970), and Marion Young (1990) all caution against), I let the students guide my planning.

First, I slightly reduced the amount of pages the students had to read per night. I removed a day or two of poetry in favor of giving the students more time to delve into reading *Fangirl*. I made peace with the fact that not everything was going to go as planned. Just like I asked of my students, I tried some new activities that allowed for closer inspection of themes and I learned to adapt to a slower pace. In doing so, I reduced the amount of power I had in the class in favor of giving it over to the students. Marion Young (2011) argued that oppressed people “suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop” (p. 40) and I noticed that my stringent plans were at times, inhibiting my students’ ability to develop the skills they needed. By listening to my students and adapting my plans, I increased the likelihood that they would develop their skills in our class.

One of the best changes I made to my course activities was born out of the students’ need to slow down and my belief that Fridays should be fun. Nearly everyone looks forward to the weekend, no matter what age they are. Fridays signal *freedom is right around the corner*. When I was a kid, Fridays meant we had pizza for dinner or we went out to eat at a restaurant. Fridays were a treat. In college, it meant that I could take a break, hang out with my friends, and do something fun. As an adult, I still look forward to Fridays. The work-week can be long and by this time in the week I feel a little punchy.

I know my students are usually tired of school. One Friday morning as I was preparing for class, I scrapped my boring lesson plan.

I am a huge fan of Twitter and nothing makes me laugh louder than a well-timed meme. For Friday's lesson, I decided we could tackle discussing the *theme* of the story by creating *memes*. At the start of class, we briefly discussed the concept of themes, why they are important, and how they help us understand and argue about a text. For the rest of the class, students had to create a *meme* that demonstrated visually and verbally one of the main themes of the book. I walked around the electronic classroom as students worked on their memes. It became a bit of a competition: who could get Emily to laugh the loudest?

While the assignment sounded silly to the students, it forced them to think critically about how to convey a complex idea in only a few words or images. Not only were the students successful at completing the activity, many students who otherwise would not consider themselves "good at English" turned in the strongest artifacts. This assignment proved to them that their skills were translatable to the English classroom and boosted their confidence. It also allowed them to remain engaged in class at the end of a long work week and have fun while doing it. I did not have to sacrifice an entire lesson, I just had to put a new spin on how to discuss it.

### **Loosening Anxiety's Grip**

*"Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don't drop-kick a puppy into the neighbor's yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper."- Anne Lamont*

So many of my students come into class with anxiety about writing. Their reasons are varied: they do not perceive themselves to be good writers, they find it boring, they were not expected to write much in high school and think college will require many papers with long page requirements. For the most part, students see writing as a means to an end. They must write a paper to receive a grade and, eventually, to pass a class and take another. I will not argue that such a perception of writing is *wrong*. Students do, indeed, need to write paper, they will receive grades and, if done well enough, they will pass a class and move on. However, as a writing teacher, I do not want my students to think I am assigning a paper merely because it must be done. I want to understand how they think and process ideas. I want them to use writing as a means to convey their own thoughts, emotions, and ideas. I want them *to be writers*.

Even if students do not fancy themselves as writers, or ever care to be writers, almost all of them care about their academic success and want to be considered intelligent. Their academic identity needs to develop to *achieved* status (Was and Issacson, 2008) yet writing skills (or a perceived lack of skills) can prevent this status. Additionally, students who do not write well may feel alienated and alone in a classroom (Mann, 2001). While writing is often a solitary process, I want my students to feel as though they are a part of a community of academic writers.

In college, I considered *writers* to be only people whose *job* it was to write. Those who were paid to do their craft. Those who, by some standard (i.e. publication) were good at writing. Though I was a Writing major, I did not consider myself *a writer*. I *wanted* to be a writer. For a brief time I considered pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in

non-fiction writing but decided I did not have the chops. Writing is hard. Being a writer is harder because, in my mind, it meant there must be some sort of accolade to accompany the title. It was not until after finishing my graduate program in English that I started to reconsider the notion of what it meant to be a writer.

I had written countless pages as I worked to earn my MA. I wrote a thesis, for God's sake, yet I still did not see myself as a writer. Two years into my career as a student affairs professional, I was asked to write an article for the trade magazine *Campus Programming*. I agreed and labored through the writing process. I was out of practice and even if I was not, I had never written a magazine article before. The genre was new to me and I wrote draft upon draft. Finally, the deadline came and I had to turn the article in. I was embarrassed to put my name to it, I thought it was terrible. Yet, I had agreed to write the article and I felt compelled to meet my obligation, even if I was not pleased with the result. To my shock, the editor only suggested minor revisions. In a few months' time, I was a published author. I was *a writer*.

I share that story to help my readers understand that I know what it feels like to think you cannot do something or that you are not who people think you are. As I declared my major my first semester of college (theater) my dad offered up his own opinion, "I really think you should be an English major. You love to read and you're a good writer." I rolled my eyes, what did he know? Though I do not know how he knew it, two years later, as I filled out the carbon copy paper with the appropriate signature declaring me Writing major, I laughed to myself. I guess my dad was right after all. A writer I was not, but a Writing major I was. As a teacher and a writer I want and need my



students to see themselves as writers with something valuable to say. I need them to see themselves as writers and I need them to think like writers. For those who did not see themselves as good students, let alone good writers, this was going to be a challenge.

Many scholars (Goodman & Cirka, 2009; Lea & Street, 1998; Mann, 2001; Mann, 2008) have written about students' anxiety and discomfort related to college level writing and have offered suggestions for how to alleviate anxiety and build confidence in writing skills. I have followed suggestions by some of the best in the field and my own experience teaching echoes what others have previously said: writing is psychological. One must believe they can write in order to write. The problem is *how*. *How* do I get students to believe in themselves? It certainly takes more than my cheerleading alone (though I do think the encouragement helps).

It may be an assumption on my part, but I think students who are not interested in writing are more likely to be interested in the use of visuals—both to learn and to express themselves. As a way to test my theory, I developed an activity that would allow students to first use pictures and art to make sense of themselves before they had to formally write anything (Appendix D). After a few days of reading *Fangirl* the students had a pretty good understanding of who the main character (Cath) is and what the most important aspects of her life are (both on campus and back home). Their challenge in class was to draw a map of Cath's world. They needed to include the locations where she spent her time, as well as any other important details of her life they saw fit (most students included Cath's sister, father, roommate, teacher, and love interest).

To follow up, the students were then asked to complete a map of their own world. Each person had to draw the major influences on their life: the things, people, and places that were important to them. Afterward, they had to verbally explain their map in small groups. Students shared family issues such as poverty or abuse, personal accomplishments, and funny stories no one would have expected: like the time Laura and her friend jumped off a neighbor's roof to avoid getting caught and broke their legs in the process. The stories had the students both howling in laughter and wiping away tears. Though most of the students did not realize it, this activity served as a pre-writing exercise for their final assignment, one in which they would need to be comfortable telling stories and establishing themselves as writers.

To understand themselves as writers, the students first needed to understand themselves as people. When asked to express their identity to others, they had to think about how they would describe themselves and the importance of their lives. They created the story they wanted to share. This experience allowed many students to see their stories had value or showed them that they actually did have something to say.

Many felt as though they had nothing to share: the students were 17 or 18 years old. Being on the cusp of adulthood had suggested to them that they might not have lived long enough to have anything valid to say. When the focus of the assignment became drawing pictures, however, their focus shifted as well. They began to see themselves as people who had something to share. Their stories may not have been impressive or particularly noteworthy, but they were something worth sharing nonetheless.

Day by day, the students engaged in the behavioral perspective of engagement. I asked them to read, prepare, discuss, and write only after showing them how to do so. By modeling the way, I helped create a map of how to accomplish the hard work of reading and writing at the college level. Each in-class activity required the students to demonstrate the appropriate classroom behavior or practices that would allow them to succeed. In doing so, they not only completed the work, they built their confidence. For those who were hesitant about taking an English course, they began to understand they were capable of being college students. For many students, their academic identity had moved towards the “achieved” status that Chorba and associates (2012) identify as the most positive for students to obtain.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### COMMUNITY: ATTENDING TO THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

*“We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and our own.”*  
—Cesar Chavez

Though we as Americans live in an individualistic society, in order to thrive, we must rely on one another. This is true in many facets of our lives. Regardless of age, education, or ability, people tend to do better when they are not facing their challenges alone (Stephens, et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2012; Zell, 2010; Zirkel, 2002). Yet, in my years of working on college campuses I have observed that new college students tend to equate their newfound freedom with the expectation that they must face all of their challenges alone, without the help of anyone be it their peers, their teachers, or their parents. Unfortunately, trying to handle the stressful transition to college without the help of those in one’s community can have damaging effects. Students can get overly stressed, have trouble connecting with peers socially, struggle with academic expectations, or simply feel exhausted. It is because of these observations that I knew I wanted to work on a component of community-building with my students.

We started each day with an attendance question that allowed the students (and me) to share a bit about ourselves. Usually this information sharing gave us the opportunity to learn about one another’s personalities, likes, dislikes, fears, and goals. Though sometimes we would struggle to come up with interesting questions (and lean on default ones like, *what is your favorite color?*), we would often share deeper desires, dreams, and personal stories. While these daily class openers were a way to learn about

one another and focus on what is going on in the classroom, I knew it would not be enough to grow the class into a cohesive group. Most importantly, I wanted to the class to feel not only that they knew something about one another, but that they could trust one another. Like it or not, the people in their cohorts were the ones they would have to rely on if they were struggling.

### **Getting to know you**

I asked a colleague in the Multicultural Awareness Office, Safia, to lead a workshop on social identity so my students could better understand how people perceive themselves and how our ideas about ourselves might be different from one another. This content not only matched up with the concept of character in literature but also fit in with the diversity modules the students were to cover in another class, University Studies (USI). Safia, Troy (the instructor for USI), and I explained what the “big eight” social identities are (gender, sexuality, race, national origin, religion, ability, socio-economic status, language). Safia asked the students to think about which identity they thought about most often, least often, and wanted to know more about. Each time she asked the question, students had to move around the room to the stand by the corresponding identity. She asked students to share why they were standing where they were. Some students opened up freely while others remained silent.

One of the reasons Safia is so skilled at her job is because she is a listener and an observer. She noticed how students responded to questions: who kept their eyes down, who was rocking from side to side, who looked like they wanted to talk but appeared nervous to do so. Gently, she called on these students. When JP, a tall, quiet football

player was asked to speak, he gave one-word answers. Safia asked follow-up questions to get him to expand on his ideas—she required more information but was not pushy. She knew how to ask questions to illicit clearer responses to her questions. Slowly, some of the quietest students came out of their shells.

As we got to the question, “which identity do you think about the most?” five students moved to the *ability/mental health* section of the room. People huddled near other identities shared their thoughts: they thought about race because, as people of color, it was the aspect of their life that others seemed to notice first; they thought about their religion the most because it was an aspect of their identity they felt gave them direction; they thought about age the most because they were looking forward to the age milestones ahead of them and were aware that many still viewed them as children. Safia noted that no one in *ability* had spoken, so she called on them.

A particularly quiet student, Ellie, was asked to share. Her voice trembled. She took a deep breath, and her neon hair fell forward and covered her face. She explained the daily struggle of taking medication and the debilitating feelings depression can cause. Through tears, she explained how hard it was to make her friends understand her mental pain. The other students who were standing around Ellie nodded their heads.

Martha then spoke up and shared how she tried to manage her ADHD despite the “muffling” effect it had on her creativity. Safia thanked the students for sharing their thoughts. The room was starkly silent after these responses, many students were looking at the floor or avoiding eye-contact. Others coughed awkwardly just to make some noise to fill the silence.

Safia asked one last question, “what identity would you like to know more about?” Again, students moved about the room to indicate their interests. To my surprise, many of them moved to the *ability* section. Safia noted the shift as well and asked some students to share their opinions. Dre spoke up, “I never really thought about what Ellie said, about how consuming an aspect of someone’s mental health can be. I’ve heard people say they have depression before but I definitely always thought it was just a case of being really sad. Hearing her say that made me want to learn more about it so I can be a better friend.” Other students agreed. “I guess I never think about this because I don’t struggle with mental health. I think I should learn more, too.” The students who spoke up for the final question were definitely not the ones I would have expected to share.

Though the social identity workshop was held the second week of class, I already felt I knew my students well. We saw each other five days a week and most of the class was discussion based. I had already come to know which students would be the first to share their thoughts, which ones would remain silent in large group discussion, and which ones would answer if called on but not volunteer their thoughts otherwise. Dre was one of the students who I had learned was emotionally closed off. He was willing to share his thoughts in class if they were related to the texts we were reading, less so if the discussion moved to sharing personal information.

When Dre spoke up about learning from his peers, I was floored. I did not imagine he would be one to speak up about personal issues. His willingness to share humbled me. Here I was asking students to have an open mind and learn about themselves and others, yet I was not doing the same. I had already expected my students

to act a certain way—I thought those who had been closed off would remain so. I thought those who seemed narrow-minded in the first week of class would show little progress. Even though my goal for the day was to move students to think differently, my reaction to Dre’s shift was surprising. This reaction indicated that I was also harboring some implicit bias of my own. Though no one could see my thought process about Dre, internally I was demonstrating the same poor behavior I was hoping to remove from my classroom.

Just as other colleagues had done before me, I assumed I knew my students and mentally put them into their appropriate categories without making room for change. I cannot say whether my students had any inkling that I had formed expectations about how they would react to the workshop but making this realization for myself was a gut check. As I planned my lessons going forward, I needed to be cognizant of my own mindset and how it may affect my students. It was not enough to simply say, *I know you are capable*, I needed to believe this was true. When I started to doubt the truthfulness of such statements, then I needed to explore what factors are causing my doubt.

The days immediately following the workshop were not instantly transformational for my students. As they walked out of the workshop the students seemed more connected to one another than they once were. I certainly felt more connected to the small group of students I worked with as we processed the activities at the end of the class period. However, as time progressed, the class continued more or less as normal. I felt like I had failed myself and my students. I thought for sure that adding this social identity component into the course work would open the students up to having some deep,



meaningful conversations, yet without my prodding, class discussions were surface level and only a few students in each class seemed to have any desire to really delve into the subject matter on any given day.

As I reflected on my notes and journals from the day of the workshop and those that followed, hindsight allowed me to better understand what was going on that first week in July. I expected to see the change in my students almost immediately. I wanted their transformation to be stark and instantaneous, as if they all took a magic, community-building pill. They had just heard their peers share deeply personal aspects of their lives, how could they not be moved?! Present-day Emily can understand what past Emily had forgotten to account for.

The social identity workshop was one day of many. I had planted the seed for community building in my students in the few days leading up to the workshop when we started to get to know each other in class. The workshop merely fertilized the seed. It would be days, even weeks before I saw the “plant” grow, if it did at all. Growing community between people cannot be forced. It takes time and a number of different (often uncontrollable) circumstances in order for community to grow and be established. I was being too hard on myself in that second week of the program. I wanted to see results immediately, but it would take weeks before I would see the tiny blossom of community begin to grow.

Three days before the end of the semester, we had a field trip scheduled. Each cohort in SB was given funding to take a field trip that would enhance the learning that takes place in the classroom. Because SB is five weeks of intense coursework, the

fieldtrip also serves as a nice break in routine. My co-instructors in the cohort decided to take our students to a nearby county to learn more about the indigenous people of our region. The trip consisted of a guided tour through the Native American Museum and a visit to the Village, a replica village that highlighted the skills and everyday practices of the Native people. The field trip did not directly correlate to topics we discussed in class, but it was a chance to explore the identity of the people who lived on this land prior to colonialization. The museum and Village highlight a history that is often overlooked in history classes and gives students an opportunity to think critically about their new community and those who came before them.

As we emerged from the buses, I quickly reminded the students about the purpose of our trip and asked them to be respectful of those who were guiding the tour and working in the Village. Many listened intently as we made our way through the Village to learn about basket weaving, carving, weaponry, and rituals. At the end of the guided tour, guests were welcome to walk around the rest of the village to explore the various buildings such as sweat lodges for healing, family homes, and gathering places for tribes to perform ceremonies.

Six students entered the ceremonial building—a circular structure with raised benches for seating. A short moment later, the woman working in the building called me over and asked me to remove the students from the building for being disrespectful. I did so, calling the six men over to me and sternly saying something to the effect of, “do not be disrespectful. Please go apologize.” They mumbled an apology and walked away, clearly irritated with me. My face was red, my anger close to spilling over. I was so

embarrassed. I had expected better, though, it occurred to me, I was not in the room and I did not know what transpired.

I returned to the guide and asked her what exactly the men had been doing. She said they were climbing on the benches and making rude hand gestures, poking fun at Native American traditions. I apologized again, said I would speak with them, and walked up the hill to find the men. When the guide first called me over, I was surprised she had something negative to share as the men in the building were some of the best in the class. Always polite, increasingly more aware of their peers and connecting with one another, and incredibly respectful to me and my colleagues. This is likely why I was upset by what the guide told me, I knew these students normally would not act the way she described.

As I approached the men, Troy brought me up to speed. The men were not poking fun of the traditions, nor were they imitating them. They were playing *Zip, Zap, Zoom*, a game that involves hand gestures, one they often played throughout the summer including in our classroom as they waited for class to begin. The men acknowledged they should not have done so in the ceremonial building, but that they were not intentionally being disrespectful. They were taking a break.

Nearly five weeks in, I still was not ready to give my students the benefit of the doubt. Rather than asking them to explain what they were doing, I took the observation of one as gospel truth. I immediately accepted the worst perception of my students and did not think about their perspective or their truth. What is worse is that *I knew these men*. They had already proven to me, daily, that they were respectful young men who valued

one another's friendship. Yet when given the opportunity, I accepted the most negative view possible. We had almost finished the program and I was still failing to prove that I was the instructor I wanted to be.

I missed an opportunity to talk to the students about a problematic aspect of their behavior and instead allowed my whole perception of them to change. A conversation I should have had with my students after the event would have discussed the appropriateness of playing *any* game in a space that was meant for learning. While the men were not being blatantly disrespectful or mimicking the Native American heritage, they were not giving the place and the culture the reverence it deserved. I wanted my students to learn through our experiences and change their perspectives, yet my failure to follow through on an important discussion prevented a real change or understanding to take place. My vision of my ability to teach and help students develop was blurred that day as two things became clear: I am not a perfect teacher and my students are not perfect either.

### **Teaching for Change**

*“Teaching always involves being engaged with other human beings, and the interesting thing is what happens to that teacher, those students, and what happens in the field between them.”—Ari Lessing*

Like so many before me, I looked at teaching through rose colored glasses. If I just prepared enough, was nice, and funny, and honest, and encouraging, I could change the face of teaching. Practical realities fly right out the window when I think about teaching. In the prologue of his memoir *Teacher Man* (2005), Frank McCourt writes in the second person about the dreams of being a teacher. With a tongue-in-cheek style, he illustrates what so many of my brothers and sisters in teaching also dream:

Principals and other figures of authority passing in the hallways will hear sounds of excitement from your room. They'll peer through the door window in wonder at all the raised hands, the eagerness and excitement on the faces of those boys and girls [...] You'll be nominated for awards: Teacher of the Year, Teacher of the Century. You'll be invited to Washington. Eisenhower will shake your hand. Newspapers will ask you, a mere teacher, for your opinion on education. This will be news: A teacher asked for his opinion on education. (p. 5)

We imagine not only that we will make a difference in the lives of the students we teach, we imagine we will make an impact on the world. If we do this one thing exceptionally well, someone will take notice.

I must admit that I start nearly every semester with similar thoughts. I actually daydreamed of being asked to the White House (though not under the current administration) to share my thoughts on higher education. These, of course, were lofty, nearly unattainable dreams but they represent the way I feel about teaching. It is an immense responsibility and one that should be recognized. Teachers shape the culture in which children grow up. They help students form opinions. They represent what being an adult in the real world looks like.

When students graduate from high school and move to college, they are still looking to their teachers for guidance. I imagine that I might be the person to guide them. It might be naïve or idealistic, but I start each semester imagining the best outcome from being enrolled in my class. I imagine that I might change my students for the better. The reality might not be anywhere close to my daydreams, but those dreams give me a

perspective to aspire to, one that I think is vital to good teaching. It is important to not only believe in my students, but to learn about and understand the culture and values my students grew up with, especially with an understanding that we may be vastly different.

When Kahu (2013) wrote about the socio-cultural perspective, she argued that students are influenced by the cultural and social norms around them. As students enter new environments, they will again have to negotiate that space. As a researcher and teacher, it is easy for me to consider what might be difficult or merely different for my students to encounter. However, I spent less time thinking about what socio-cultural negotiation looked like in myself. Reflecting on my work with students helped me better understand myself as well.

### **Negotiating socio-cultural experiences**

*“One way our upper class can promote upward mobility, then, is not only by pushing wise public policies but by opening their hearts and minds to newcomers who don’t quite belong.” –J.D. Vance*

I was raised in Akron, Ohio. Growing up, I had dreams of living in New York City. Though Akron is a sizeable city (with a population just shy of 200,000) it felt fairly small to me. I had no interest in staying in Akron after I graduated from high school. I took multiple trips to New York and endlessly daydreamed of what it would be like to work in a publishing house, being paid to read by day and attending Broadway shows by night. It never occurred to me that I might ever reside in a small town. Years later, I thought living in Minneapolis was a dream come true. It had all of the appeal of big-city life without the cost or the relative danger.

Moving to the Appalachian mountains was a choice dictated by the job market rather than my personal desire. The first six months we lived in the mountains, I begged

my husband to go back on the job market. He did, and received an offer at prestigious school in Cleveland, but in lecturer position, rather than a tenure-track job. Ultimately, we decided we would try living in the mountains for one more year. By the time the following fall came around, I had accepted my new, rural home as home. I found friends and a community of people who supported me and my family.

Rural life had its perks: the beautiful mountain views, seeing friends no matter where you were in town, never worrying if you locked the door when you left the house—no one was going to come in anyway. Over the years, I have come to identify myself as a member of this community. We stopped looking for jobs elsewhere and became more involved in our church. If I visited family back in Ohio or my husband's home in Illinois, I would share all the great things about living in the mountains. Occasionally, someone would make a joke about Appalachian life and I would quickly defend my new home. Yet, I when I was teaching in the mountains, I always seemed to clarify that though I lived here, I'm not *from here*.

By virtue of living in the mountains, I started to believe that I knew what it was to be from the mountains. The more I learned, the more I felt a distance from true Appalachian people. My family members did not live in close proximity to me (I recently had my first encounter with a “holler”—a small enclave in the mountains where family members, usually with deep Appalachian roots, live in close proximity to each other), nor did I have any century or even decade-long ties to the location. Though I enjoyed living on a road with little traffic, I did not really value privacy. If anything, I went out of my way to meet new people.

I connected more with people who were affiliated with the university than with those who lived and worked in the town. Even now, I can count on one hand the families I know who have no connection to the university. In reality, though I live in a rural, southern, Appalachian town I am neither southern or Appalachian. I may think I know about the rural, southern Appalachian culture (indeed, I did a great deal of reading about it in preparation for this dissertation), but I am simply not a part of it. When I try to connect with some of my students, the distinction of our cultural upbringing is apparent.

There are times when I feel a quick and easy bond with my students, particularly those who are first-generation or low-income. I understand their often-unvoiced struggles and when I share my own experiences with them, they light up and say, “yes!” We recount for one another our escapades in cheapness—pulling together Halloween costumes from whatever clothes we could find in the house, surviving the summers by eating canned tuna fish and off-brand boxed mac-n-cheese and more recently, only going off campus to eat when there was a really good deal (we were already paying for the meal plan, after all). Being (or feeling) poor was a common experience and we found comfort in sharing these experiences with those who would understand. However, connecting with students who primarily identified as (or presented themselves as) southern or Appalachian was difficult for me.

My first semester of teaching I had four different young men write papers about hunting. Another cache of students wrote about gun control (before I had the good sense to prohibit this topic—it is terribly difficult for anyone in a first-year writing course to make a new, unbiased argument about gun control with only a few references and a six-



page limit). The culture I was now a part of was wholly new to me and my students provided me with an education I desperately needed.

Through their writing, my students explained to me why hunting was important from an environmental and safety standpoint. I learned about how families might use guns not to hurt or scare people, but to practice a family tradition of marksmanship competition. I came to understand that “hunting” as I had envisioned it (as pure sport) was important culturally to my Native American students who hunted with and then fed their families. I even had my first taste of bear meat—a student proudly handed me a mason jar labeled *Bear '13* on top when he learned I had never tasted it before. Within the jar were thick chunks of meat, carrots, and onion in a cloudy, red juice. He instructed me to cook it like beef stew and anxiously waited for me to report back on my dining experience (not bad, though the meat was tougher than I expected). I came to respect that which I earlier would have eschewed. Though you will never find me dressed in camouflage hunting gear of any sort, I now respect why others would.

It is difficult to build connections with people who seem so dramatically different from oneself. The expectations I have for my students to build community with one another and accept one another’s differences is a lofty goal. Yet, the value in learning about others (and in the process learning about oneself) outweighs the discomfort people may feel along the way. As our class continued to explore how authors develop character, I layered it with discussions of how individuals identify themselves.

We started the semester by reading *The Laramie Project*, a play that detailed the murder of Matthew Shepard and the investigation of and the reaction to his death by the

people of Laramie, Wyoming. Reading drama is an excellent way to understand identity because of the way characters are developed throughout the play. As the students read through the three acts over three days, they discussed their reactions to characters, assumptions they had about characters (and where those assumptions came from), as well as how their perceptions of characters changed over time.

Reading *Laramie* usually causes students to react emotionally. They are often moved by Matthew Shepard's tragic death as well as how the townspeople reacted. After we read the play we often watch the film version and I always make sure I bring a box of tissues to class that day. Very few dry eyes persist throughout the viewing. Students had emotional reactions this year as well, though not in the way I anticipated.

In class discussions many of my students struggled with the content of the play. While they, of course, believed that murdering a person is wrong, many of them shared their disdain for "the homosexual lifestyle." Just as the people of Laramie said twenty years before, many of my students had a "live and let live" mentality wherein as long as gay people "left them alone" they were "okay with them." However, during a discussion of the first two acts of the play (where the accused murderers are introduced but do not speak) a few students appeared almost sympathetic to the accused. On day two of reading *Laramie* I led the students in an activity called a "personal inventory" (See Appendix B).

The purpose of this activity is for readers to consider their own reactions to what they have read. Often in preparing for class, students read for content and plot points. Unless specifically directed to do so, students may not take the time to think about how they are reacting to the reading and where those reactions might come from. The personal

inventory is a set of questions that asks students to consider their reactions and why they reacted the way they did. Questions include: what aspects of the text challenged or confirmed your beliefs and values; where do you believe these values originate from; why does this aspect of the text challenge me; how does the exploration help me better understand myself and my initial response? These questions helped the students filter through their own beliefs and helped me better understand their perspectives.

Having been raised in a conservative Baptist home, I felt like I understood the values many religiously conservative people hold. Yet, as my students moved through the personal inventory, I was taken aback by their reactions to *Laramie*. As I worked my way around the room to hear what students were sharing with one another after they had written their responses, I heard a group of men mumbling in agreement. I stopped and asked them what they were discussing. Daniel spoke up, “we’re just talking about our reactions to the play.” *Duh*, I thought, *that’s what I asked you to do*.

“And what about it? What values were confirmed or challenged?” All of the men in the group looked to Luke. He hesitated and then mumbled, “I guess it challenged my beliefs because I don’t really believe in it.”

“What is *it*?” I asked.

“The gay thing. I don’t believe in it.” I practiced my poker face and then turned my head slightly to the side, about to ask what he meant. Fernando beat me to the punch. “What do you mean you don’t believe in it? Like it doesn’t exist? Because being gay is a thing.”

Luke's response was quiet. "I'm a little uncomfortable. I don't want to talk about it because..." He couldn't finish his sentence. I got the sense that he was worried we would judge him for his response.

"Okay, you don't have to. But remember, the purpose of the assignment is to explore your own feelings and there's no right or wrong there. As long as you are being respectful, your peers aren't going to disrespect you either."

"Well, the thing is," he replied, "I don't really agree with homosexuality. I don't think it should be a thing. It takes a woman and a man to make a baby so that's how it should be. I'm kind of like the folks in Laramie. You do your thing and I'll do mine." Seeing Luke struggle shifted my focus on what it might be like to hold his opinion. He appeared incredibly worried that he would be met with backlash for sharing his opinion, as if he knew his opinion was unpopular yet he could not deny how he felt.

The small group discussion he just engaged in must have been incredibly stressful for him. Though he was not forced to share, he seemed to feel that he should explain his thought process. Had he shared his thoughts with the rest of the class, he would have found others who agreed with him. Yet, in the moment, he felt quite isolated in his feelings and worried about being made unwelcome in the future. Luke shared a piece of himself even though he knew it might lead to social strife among his peers. He contributed to the community because he wanted his peers to understand him, even if they did not like what he had to say.

Luke did seem a bit apologetic for his opinion, as if he believed that in the eyes of society (and more importantly, his classmates) his opinion was "wrong." He also likely

knew that he had a few classmates who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. He seemed to understand that those peers might take it personally, even though he did not refer to anyone in particular. As I looked back on my notes and watched my video reflection of teaching that day, I imagined just how hard the class discussion might have been on Luke. Now, I am proud of him for sharing and his perspective. I do not hold the same values as Luke, but I do respect his willingness to share.

Because I have taught *Laramie* for a number of years, I always mentally prepare myself for how students will respond to the piece. Most often, I have a few students who either identify as a member of the LGBTQ community or are questioning their sexuality. Sometimes, these students find discussing *The Laramie Project* uncomfortable because they worry they will hear hurtful reactions (like Luke's) or feel scared or worried about the trauma they read about. Some, perhaps, have even felt fear about such actions being taken against them or are reminded of pain they have suffered because of their sexuality. I have had conversations with students based on these reactions because I was aware of the possibility they would arise.

As a teacher who is dedicated to having critical conversations about sexuality and race in the classroom, I have tried to be most aware of how the room might be safer for those who typically feel the least safe in the classroom (in this case, those who identify as LGBTQ students). Students who are marginalized in society have come to expect nothing different in the classroom, so I find it imperative to make the space welcoming for their voices and critical of those voices who overtly or implicitly suggest that being any sort of "other" is unwelcome. Though I feel as though my classroom was indeed a safe space on

the days we discussed *The Laramie Project*, my conversations with Luke and his peers should have taken more time and pulled the entire classroom into the discussion.

Luke's perspective was one I was not prepared for. My mental reaction in class as well as my initial reflection of the day was far less welcoming. When Luke first shared his opinion, I was bothered. I have family members who hold similar beliefs and I recognize that many people (conservatively religious or not) view homosexuality as "wrong." I tend to think of this stance as antiquated. At the very least I do not often hear about young people having this stance. My initial reaction to hearing Luke's position was, *what can I do in my class that will change his opinion?* followed quickly by, *surely, he won't still think this way once he finishes reading the play tonight!* What silly thoughts these were. We were talking about values—values tend to be deeply held and though not impossible to change, such changes require time for thought, reflection, and new experiences to take place.

I do try to keep my political opinions to myself in the classroom but social issues (which honestly, are always also political) are particularly important to me. Conceptually, I understand that people hold ideas and beliefs that are different from my own, but practically speaking, I have trouble conjuring a mindset that would allow me to view the world the way others do. It is as if others do not see the humanity in people that I see.

Some of my students are extremely politically conservative. In previous course evaluations students stated they were put off by my calls for social justice and equality. (I've found these comments frustrating as I believe it is my job to engage students in conversations about race, social justice, and equality, despite the fact it makes them

uncomfortable. Recognizing privilege and finding it uncomfortable is the point of such discussions.) But by not showing any part of myself to my students, I felt disingenuous.

I feared that my personal concerns related to politics and social justice may make me appear as though I am unwilling to engage in conversation with those who hold opinions different than my own. hooks (1994) argued, however, that “no education is politically neutral” (p. 37) and even when one tries to remain neutral in conversation, our pedagogy reflects our political perspectives. With hooks’ explanation in mind, I consider it important and socially responsible to engage in conversation that will allow students to consider the perspectives and life experiences of others and will allow traditionally marginalized groups to have an equal part in our classroom discussions.

I recently attended the National Learning Communities Conference and found myself in a session entitled “Promoting and Fostering Student Mental Wealth in Learning Communities.” Much of what the presenter said resonated with my teaching philosophy and my concern for my students. I was scribbling notes furiously on the pages she provided. If we were in a place of worship I’d have raised my hands in the air as she shared her perspectives of engaging with students and making them feel welcome in the classroom. Though she did not comment specifically on politics, one statement she made stands out above the rest: “If you want them to share with you, be shareworthy.”

What Ms. Bankert-Countryman was trying to convey to us was just as we want our students to come to the classroom as whole people who have lives and interests beyond the topics of our class, we too have interests and beliefs that allow us to be individuals. To move completely away from discussion of our beliefs or to remove any

indication that I lean politically one way or the other would be wrong. It is not that my students and I need to believe the same thing or need to persuade one another to change, it's that we need to see one another as humans—someone worthy of engaging in conversation with.

The presentation ended with a brief statement to highlight the main points. Bankert-Countryman said, “learning is most effective and life-changing when we feel accepted.” Though this is the philosophy I try to constantly keep in the forefront of my mind as I teach my students each day, it is not something I often hear other teachers say (I am sure many believe this, but we do not often talk about it). To hear a fellow teacher make such a mission statement to the room was an invigorating reminder of what students need and what I, as a teacher, must work hard not to forget as I enter the classroom each day. *Learning is most effective and life changing when we feel accepted.*

The *Laramie Project* days were opportunities to demonstrate to my students how all perspectives are welcome in the class. Sometimes discussion of perspectives will challenge us and make us uncomfortable, but no voice will be pushed aside without comment. I want my students to feel welcome to share, but at the same time, I need them to also understand that sharing without regard for others is also unacceptable. I want students, even ones I disagree with, to know they can share their thoughts, but I need all of my students to know that they will be asked to consider what their values mean not only for them personally, but what their values mean for their community and their world. Though I could not simply change Luke's beliefs, I could ask him to consider how his beliefs might affect his interactions with others.



In the days that followed our *Laramie Project* discussions and social identity workshop with Safia, I noticed small changes in the students. True, there was no massive shift in their demeanor, they did not all sing “Kumbaya” together, they were not all attached at the hip. They were however, a bit more accepting, a bit more open, and listened to each other a bit more intently. During the workshop, Phil came out to his classmates. He shared his experience of recently losing a family member, the only person in his family who did not negatively react to his coming out as homosexual. He had a hard couple of years, first by coming out to a mostly unsupportive family, then losing the one person in his life who supported him. For Phil, coming to college seemed to be a bit of a fresh start. He was still a shy, quiet guy, but thought college might allow him to open himself up to others and be accepted in a way he had not yet experienced.

During our reading and discussion of *The Laramie Project*, however, he learned that while many of his classmates might accept and support him, another contingent might not. He may have worried his peers might not want to be his friend or would ridicule him because of his sexuality. Yet, during the social identity workshop, he came out anyway. He decided that he did not want to hide a part of himself. Even if peers in his class struggled with accepting homosexuals on a conceptual level, not one person in the class made a negative remark or gesture. Not one person did anything to suggest that Phil might not be welcome to participate in class.

Before the workshop my fellow instructors and I noted that Phil did not seem to have any good friends. In the days that followed the workshop however, this changed. Scarlett and Martha exchanged phone numbers with him. Joey and Shelby invited him to

a study session for their Global Issues class. At the end of the week, they all went on a hike to explore local waterfalls together. When the students were asked in class to break up into pairs or small groups, Phil never had to search for a partner. Nor did anyone else.

Though these actions went unacknowledged by myself and the students, we all seemed to be aware of the change that was taking place in them. Slowly, in small ways, the students were reaching out to one another. They were building a community, learning to accept one another, and maybe expanding the way they saw the world and people around them. Their values might not have completely changed, but perhaps some of their values, like treating one another as they would want to be treated, started to grow.

As I asked students to share their own values, beliefs, and culture, I also had to consider the socio-cultural context which I tried to create in my classroom. I tried hard to allow for all voices to be heard, and at the same time challenge ideals that promoted inequality. However, my desire to seem politically neutral inhibited my ability to foster the open dialogue of my dreams. I wanted to see change happen in my students, but cautiously avoided stepping directly on toes or pushing too far. I rationalized this by not wanting to make my political affiliations clear. However, as a result, I probably missed my chance to fully advocate for students or push discussions of privilege to the forefront.

Creating a socio-cultural environment that welcomes all is a constant practice that requires clear expectations and models for the class. It also requires constant awareness of classroom dynamics and relationships. While my goal in class is to create an environment that welcomes all and encourages engagement, I often wanted to see the

effects of this work immediately. I came to understand, however, that such changes take time.

When I began reflecting on my teaching experiences, I remained very focused on what was happening in the classroom and in the lives of my students. I rarely spent any time making connections to what my students were going through and how that affected me. Months later, however, I read through the notes from *The Laramie Project* days once again and I thought of my own experience being a college student and figuring out my place in the world. I do not recall a specific *a-ha* moment when I realized how important it was to learn about and accept experiences that were different from my own. I am most certainly still learning those lessons today.

I find myself wishing I could go back in time—years, months, weeks—to tell myself to give my students a bit of grace. More importantly, I need to extend that same courtesy to myself. Change does not happen overnight. Transitioning to a new setting can take weeks, months, or years. Learning about, accepting, and living in a new culture means more than reading a local newspaper and unpacking some boxes. It means interacting with new people, asking questions, really listening, and ultimately, considering what all this new information means for yourself. As my students demonstrated to me this summer, change takes time and does not usually happen right in front of your eyes. Going through moments of transition takes time and patience, both of which I need to allow myself, and my students, a little more of.

## CHAPTER SIX

### HUMANITY IN TEACHING: ATTENDING TO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL

#### PERSPECTIVE

*“Teaching is only sometimes about teaching [...] teaching is more often about doing all the work to get a student to that moment, is more often supporting a kid who is far away from being taught that day.”- Tom Rademacher*

In his book *It Won't Be Easy*, Tom Rademacher (2017) writes honestly about the challenges teachers have in their profession. Over the course of the book he shares stories from his ten-year teaching career—most of which have very little to do with teaching and everything to do with being in a classroom and in community with his students. He explains a fundamental principle of teaching that many teachers do not initially consider when they walk into a classroom. Many of our students might not be ready to learn because of life circumstances. As teachers, we need to be aware of those moments and address them, he argued. We need to acknowledge their lives outside the classroom and how those lives might take precedence over, for example, exploring imagery in a Whitman poem that day.

My experience (and countless research articles) have demonstrated the various ways in which students need support in their transition to college (Cabrera, et al., 2013; Grimes & David, 1999; Schreiner, et al., 2011; Wilmer, 2008). When I designed my literature class to highlight the commonality in the issues that often make students feel so lonesome, I hoped students would open up to one another about their struggles and find support and comfort in the class and their classmates. Rather than pushing all that awkward, messy, confusing *life stuff* out of the way, I chose to embrace it.

My first year teaching in SB, I looked forward to teaching every day. I loved the extended classroom time (nearly 90 minutes) that would allow for robust discussions. I was finally able to teach a course that focused on literature (rather than rhetoric and writing) and I was always eager to hear what my students had to say about the day's assigned reading. I envisioned classes similar to my own undergraduate experience. My peers and I came in prepared, lines highlighted in books, notes scribbled in the margins, sometimes talking over one another as we argued about why a character took action, what their actions said about the time period, what the author was trying to convey throughout the story. It was blast.

What I wish I remembered during the first year of teaching, that I clearly remember now, is that my memories were from fiction-writing classes I took during my sophomore and junior years. Though my first English class certainly had moments of intense discussion, only a few of us really got caught up in the reading and subsequent discussions. Most of my peers sat by and let us eager beavers have our say. Once, my mother-in-law Jeanne, in trying to make the point to the family that she understood now what she did not understand before said, "hindsight is 60/40." She confused the representation of perfect vision being 20/20 for the notion that something perfect is one hundred percent (and therefore sixty and forty combined). She was trying to convey that she was one hundred percent, or fully, clear now on what happened in the past. Though Jeanne obviously *meant* 20/20 she said 60/40—and I have since loved the notion of hindsight being 60/40.

Our recollections of the past do not usually lead to perfect understanding. We might, however, understand the past a lot better or in a totally different way that makes us see a bit more clearly. My teaching life is full of those 60/40 moments. I've lost count of how many times I wanted my class discussion to go one way, but it went another. This summer I reflected on each day's class. Time passed, I mulled over my teaching some more, and now I think I am at 60/40. I think I know now what would have been good to know then. However, it is not as if my 60/40 vision has changed everything about how I teach conditionally-enrolled students. Such vision only allowed me to know *this specific* group of students well—while some of what I observed from my students can be applied to other groups, I will need to continually reflect, think, and reflect again to get a sense of what each group of my students need. I am more prepared to teach SB this coming summer, yet I will always have more to learn.

### **60/40 Vision**

That first summer of SB, when I envisioned a raucous conversation of intellectual banter, I was using the wrong memories to feed my dreams. I should have remembered that such deep conversations were few and far between in my own freshman English class. Dr. Price, I remember now, asked plenty of leading questions to get us to think critically. We did not always hit the mark. My students did not either, and many of those misses were probably my fault.

A few weeks into SB 2015, I assigned “The Holocaust Party” by Robin Hemley. Our recent discussion on Flannery O'Connor's “A Good Man is Hard to Find” had gone so well I was certain that Hemley's piece would bring about another round of engaging

conversation. When my students arrived at 8:15 that morning, they were dragging—which really was, despite the hour, unusual for this bunch. Most days they rolled into class with energy to spare. Yet on this day, something was up. Their answers to the daily attendance questions were monosyllabic in contrast to other days where I had to cut them off. One student was absent that day, and though absences were not an everyday occurrence, they were not atypical either. I made a note on my attendance sheet that Jake was absent. Instead of taking a moment to ask the students about the palpable change in their attitudes that morning I plowed ahead.

I launched into a brief lecture on understanding context and history (the unit that tied to both O'Connor's and Hemley's pieces). "The Holocaust Party" takes place in Edina, Minnesota. It's an uncomfortable story to read because of the awkwardness the characters endure as they make assumptions about one another and hide truths about themselves. I asked my students what they knew about Minnesota (*it's cold*) and what they knew about the Holocaust (*it's bad, Jews were killed, Hitler is awful*). Economy of words seemed to be the theme of the day. I was irritated, yet still I soldiered on. I had a lesson planned, after all.

I continued to ask questions: What did the students think of the main characters (*Meh*), what's up with the father (*don't know*—and by their lack of response, they seemed not to care, either), what of the holocaust survivor, Rose (*old, weird*)? The conversation, clearly, was going nowhere. Their silence suggested only one thing to me: they did not like the story and did not care to discuss it. *Well, who asked them? This was my class. We were going to discuss this story. It's a great story! They need to see that! This was the*

*plan for the day and tomorrow we'd read something equally as good and this is the way of the literature world. Read, discuss, feel enlightened, repeat.* Twenty more minutes of academic teeth-pulling later, I finally acquiesced. I let them out of class early, warning of a quiz the next day and sharing my disappointment in their lack-luster discussion. I suggested they read their homework that night more closely than they had today.

Later that same day, we had our weekly case management meeting. As I waited for the whole group to arrive, I told Xavier, another teacher in our cohort, how poorly my class went that day. Of course, I blamed everything on the students. *I was prepared, I wanted to discuss the story with them. It was the students who brought nothing to the table that day.* Xavier agreed that something was off with the students that day. His class, however, is lecture based so while he noted their energy was down, he did not rely on the students for class to continue. He lectured on as always.

The director of SB came into the room along with the SB intern, the USI instructor, and finally the case manager, Rich. Xavier and I warned Denise, the USI instructor, that the class was in rare form so she could be prepared for a tough crowd that afternoon. Finally, Rich spoke up. "You should know that last night Jake and a few students from another cohort were extremely disruptive and campus police were called. They were all under the influence."

Jake, the student who was absent from my class that morning, was a particularly charismatic presence in our class. He reminded me a lot of *Saved by the Bell's* Zack Morris. Like Zack, Jake could push the limits a bit too far, unable to think about real



consequences. It was clear he'd grown accustomed to squeaking by on a hope, a prayer, or just a winning smile. This time, however, he had not been as lucky.

The effects of Jake being caught after making a poor choice certainly affected the rest of the cohort. During class that day they were not themselves. It must have been something for the students to see their own Zack Morris get caught and not be able to talk his way out of it. Some classmates were probably worried about Jake's choice to use drugs in the first place (they later told me it was acid), others who were close to him likely were surprised that he was being punished. In the coming days, the students let slip that this was not Jake's first transgression on campus, just the first one where someone in authority took notice.

While I should have been concerned about Jake, his reckless behavior, the example he set, and (I now knew) the influence he had to persuade his peers, I was really just irritated with myself. *Why hadn't I noticed what was up with Jake? Were there other signs in his behavior that should have sent up a warning flag?* It is not that I thought I could have done or said anything that would have changed Jake's behavior, but I felt I should have at least known. I should have sensed there was something else going on with him.

My 60/40 vision revealed there were clear signs that Jake was enmeshed in some shady business. Students constantly whispered about him in class—most of the whispering was at the mouths of female students so I assumed it had more to do with his sex appeal than anything else. Jake often rolled into class in pajama pants, a crumpled shirt, and mussed hair—I attributed this to his inability to wake early—that's what he told

me when I commented on his attire early in the semester. In my first summer teaching SB, when Jake began to crumble and take the class with him, I should have been more attentive to what I passingly noticed.

I was quick to shrug off signs of student distress in favor of maintaining laser focus in the classroom. There was a schedule to uphold and by God, I was going to follow it. What I lost with that mentality was a chance to connect with my students, a chance to ask them what was going on in their lives and the lives of their friends. Scholars note that teachers are more effective when they exhibit immediacy or “behaviors that reduce physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students” (Andersen, 1979, p. 543) and that in doing so motivation and learning increases (Christophel, 1990). I put my own, selfish, Type-A need to stay on schedule before the needs of my students. In doing so, I did not demonstrate immediacy and I lost an opportunity to support them. My reaction that day did not dramatically and irrevocably change my relationship with my students, but it certainly did not bring us any closer, either.

What Rademeacher (2017) suggested in his book, and I would like to extend, is that sometimes the life issues that are happening to students might push our lessons to the side. Sometimes, however, it might be that rather than moving away from a lesson altogether, a teacher might use the students’ situation as a lesson in and of itself. Let me be clear that to take the approach of pulling a student’s life into the classroom as content for discussion, the class needs to be a community. This is not some first-week-of-the-semester-business. This is some we’ve-been-in-the-trenches-for-awhile-now business.

Something like this can only be accomplished if the class sees themselves in community with one another.

When Jake was missing from class and his peers were distracted by his absence, we were already weeks into the semester. I thought we knew each other well (though clearly not as well as I had hoped). I knew more than a few passing facts about each of my students. We were beyond traditional markers such as hometown, major, and favorite color. I had read their personal essays, had individual conferences on their writing, and knew about them *as people*. It would have been completely appropriate and not very surprising for me to reach out to my students that day and start a conversation about what was going on.

Sometimes lesson plans need to get placed on the back burner so the real learning—about being a human who messes up—can take place. This is especially true in a program for conditionally-enrolled students as the goals of the program are not only to get the student acclimated to college academics but college life in general. The life experiences that take a hold of students' attention are not always drastic matters, yet still need to be considered with care. After my first year of teaching in SB (Jake's year), I made a more concerted effort to present my classroom as a place that welcomes conversation about our real-life issues. Many first-year students struggle with the transition to college and may seek help from their peers and professors (McMurtrie, 2019; Terenzini, et al., 1996).

I changed assigned readings to reflect the reality my students may face in their first year. Writing assignments can provide students an outlet to express their concerns

and seek services on campus (McMurtie, 2019). By focusing on the first-year transition in reading assignments, my students were exposed to common issues that normalized their experiences and helped them understand possible ways to navigate their challenges. Further, their writing about issues they specifically dealt with helped me better understand them and respond to their needs.

By giving students a space in class to voice their concerns, my students understood not only that their instructor cared about them and would help them succeed, but also that they are not alone in their concerns. Similar to my own class, Chuck Tryon also used his writing class for students to explore concerns they had about their academic experience and found that both the students and the professor benefitted from the marrying of course content to academic outcomes (McMurtie, 2019). Tryon had a better understanding of what thoughts occupied his students' minds and the students felt a sense of relief knowing they were not alone in their fears and worries.

As teachers continue to engage with students, particularly first-year students in a time of stressful transition, they need to not only be aware of how transition issues might manifest in the classroom but also consider what their classroom has to offer in terms of ways to mitigate, or at the very least, process and explore these issues. When this is done, students may be more likely to focus and succeed in class—their primary concerns have found a much-needed avenue for appropriate exploration, even if they have not yet found a clear resolution.

In order to have a classroom that invites discussion of the self, however, it is important for the instructor to remember her experience as a student may not be similar to

her students. While there can be value in recalling one's own time as a first-year student, as teachers, we must be aware that each student will struggle with different aspects of their college career, many aspects we have no personal experience with. The point is not to solve student problems, the point is to allow students the space to explore their own feelings and issues, to know they are not struggling alone, and to demonstrate that support and success will be likely for all students.

### **Revision Wreaks Havoc**

*"...teaching should be thought of as among the human-services professions—like counseling, therapy, and nursing. We work with people and try to help them to develop—a task that requires much more of us than our academic training."-David Gooblar*

When students are having a fairly normal "I'm here and ready to learn day" it is possible to get some real work accomplished. However, it is also possible to be tripped up by the psychological perspective. Kahu (2013) suggested that what students think about themselves and the world around them (in other words their interpretation) will affect their approach to learning. Some days my students seemed ready to learn and to do the work before them until I outlined *exactly* what that work would entail. Working on revision is the best example of the disconnect between attending to the psychological perspective and knowing where the students are psychologically when I begin.

If there has been one consistent student mindset I have observed while teaching English for the last five years, it has been the mindset around revision. Generally, students view this process as a pain in the butt, but one that they can finish in a matter of minutes, or an hour, tops. Teachers and writers, however, know that revision is actually a

painstaking, slow, and methodical process—a process that is also tightly connected to emotions.

Students equate revision with what writers call *editing*. Revision looks at big picture issues: organization of the text, whether or not the writing answers the prompt, word choice and clarity, removing redundancy, and adding crucial details. Editing, on the other hand, requires a keen eye for detail: misspelled or misused words, checking for correct punctuation and capitalization, ensuring that formatting is correct. Revision means moving chunks of prose around or sometimes removing it completely. It means getting rid of the example or quote that was a favorite because it does not really help answer the prompt at all.

After the students wrote a first draft, I asked the students to bring it to class. I spent a bit of time lecturing on the difference between editing and revision. Then, we broke up into groups and I gave each group a paragraph written by a student from years before. As a group, I asked the students to revise the paragraph. At first, the students changed or removed or word here or there. I walked around the room and checked their progress.

When I asked the groups what they thought of the paragraph they had been given, most of them confessed they thought the paragraph was quite bad—even if they've only made minimal changes to the paragraph. "What's keeping you from making it better?" I asked. "It's needs so much work," or "I'd have to completely start over" were the most common answers. *Yes! You're going to have to rewrite the thing!* My students did not want to rewrite. It was not *their* work so they were adverse to doing the activity. I kindly

asked them to try it for me to see what they can come up with. I told them I knew they could make it better.

After a mish-mash of striking lines through sentences, using circles and arrows to indicate where ideas should now be, and rewriting some paragraphs altogether, the students came up with new paragraphs. I put the old ones on the projector and had the students read through the new ones. The results were pretty dramatic. In the span of an hour they had completely rewritten a paragraph. They began with a paragraph that barely made sense and transformed it into a paragraph that truly conveyed meaning to the reader. It was not an easy process, but most students felt great at the end.

The activity boosted their own confidence because it was easy for them to see what might have been “wrong” with the paragraph to begin with. This proved to them that they do, indeed, know about writing and analyzing literature. The rewriting part of the task was harder, but as a group they were able to work out what was valuable and determine how to make their paragraph better. The students were pleased with themselves, as well they should have been. When we were done sharing the revisions, we talked about what the process was like. Was it easy or hard? Why? How did they feel at the end? Most importantly, what do they do now? Unsurprisingly, the answer was for them to revise their own work in the same manner.

The rest of the assignment took place on their own: that evening it was their job to *revise* their papers. They needed to make significant changes to the document and not be afraid to cut things out or rewrite altogether. It was obvious they knew this assignment was coming, but they looked a little defeated anyways. It was easy enough to pull apart

someone else's work, it was much harder to pull apart one's own work. The process was particularly hard for students who came into class that day feeling like they had already written a solid, "A" worthy paper. Why change anything now just because Emily asked me to?

It is difficult to want to do hard things. This might just be an aspect of human nature: easy is good. Except when it is not. Sure, it would be easy to just turn in the same assignment, claiming extensive revision already took place. But what is just as important to the *process* of revision are the *products* of revision. First, the students have a better paper to turn in for a significant grade. Second, my hope is they have developed some pride or confidence. They have a better understanding of what it means to write and revise and can feel good about the fact that they are doing it. If the students were worried about their writing abilities before, this assignment proved they can do it. Revision might not be easy, and it certainly will take time, but they *can* do it and the knowledge of that is priceless. The exercises in revision attended to the behavioral perspective by demonstrating the skills of revision. More importantly, however, it attended to their psychological perspective. Students decreased their hesitancy to revise and pull apart their own work and gained confidence in the process.

My conversations with other first-year writing teachers once in a while devolve into "how do they [the students] not know this?!" territory. We find ourselves assuming that our students will come to us with the exact same knowledge base and ready to do the work we put before them. When our expectations and reality do not align, it's easy to blame someone else for being in such a predicament. I'm learning though, that



understanding what our students need is an opportunity for us to also investigate our expectations and critically reflect on what we want our students to know and why we want them to know those skills. It's also an opportunity to see how well we can teach them. Teaching revision is hard, but the pay off, can be worth the time commitment. As I continue to reflect on my teaching, I'm now challenging myself to ask more questions about what my expectations of my students and how I can help them meet those expectations.

### **The Struggle is Real: Writing, Learning, and Life as a student**

Writing can be exhausting, and so can teaching and learning. By the middle of the fourth week of the semester, the signs of exhaustion were starting to show. The number of students who brought coffee to class increased. A few men in my class came in at 10:10 on the dot every morning, just when class was scheduled to begin. They each had a Starbucks coffee cup in hand. It had become a running joke in class. They arrived, and I asked them what they've brought me. We discussed our strong feelings related to coffee: the lines at Starbucks so common during SB (*should they have more baristas working during class change?*), the temperature of the coffee (*iced or hot during the summer?*), what ingredients make a good coffee (*them: flavored syrups and lots of cream and sugar, me: cream only, no sugar ever*).

One day during week four, the three men strolled into class in the nick of time. Usually they entered the class and squeezed behind their peers already in their seats in the U-shaped room. On this day, however, Greg walked right up to the front and placed a coffee in front of me, the other two men smiling proudly. "There's no sugar in it!" they

proclaimed. Perhaps it was my own exhaustion wearing on me, but I almost cried.

Though we have been joking about this for weeks, I think I made it clear more than once that they should not spend their money on me. Starbucks is expensive! Yet here they were, bringing me a drink.

When they handed me the coffee, I simply thought it was a nice gesture. Every time I've thought about it since then, both in passing and more deliberately as part of my reflection process for writing this dissertation, I understand it was more than making good on a joke. This simple act demonstrated three things: first, the students respected me. They always made it to class on time, and that never changed throughout the course of the semester. Second, our daily banter about coffee allowed me to connect with these students on a personal level. We got to know one another outside of the often-strict confines of teacher/student relationship. While coffee preferences themselves can be fairly benign subject matter, it also allowed us to understand one another as humans. We forged a connection beyond their need to pass the class and my need to disseminate information. Third, they showed their ability to think of others and listen to what the other might need or want. Though I never actually asked them to bring me coffee, when they decided to, they brought me what they knew I would like, not what they wanted. They *listened and remembered*. Though the subject matter was just coffee, it was an act that solidified our relationship.

In the following week, when one of the students was having a particularly hard time with writing and revision, he showed up at my office. He sat down, close to tears, asking for guidance because he simply could not figure out how to revise his paper. We

had a good conversation about what to work on and how to accomplish it. I honestly do not think that he would have come by if he were not already comfortable talking to me. Spending a few moments each day building relationships with my students was a good use of my time. Allowing myself to be vulnerable, to share my own stories and preferences (be it coffee preferences or my love of musical theater) helped me connect with nearly all of my students. While all of them might not have been writing “A” papers by the end of the semester, they were all doing solid work.

In my own work as a student, I’ve noticed that the hardest part of any task has been related to my perception of whether or not I can actually do it. In my undergraduate program, I believed fully and completely that I would never understand Chemistry. I would meet with my professor or friends in the class and no amount of tutoring helped. I simply did not think Chemistry was a concept I could grasp. Psychologically, I could not convince myself I was able to do the work and I lived up (or perhaps down) to that expectation of myself. I squeaked by with a barely passing grade.

In my master’s program, I sat in a literature theory class and wondered why all of my peers seemed to understand the nonsense Derrida was going on about. What in the actual hell was this theory stuff about? Finally, I spoke with the professor of the class, a strong, no-nonsense young faculty member. She basically told me to stop crying and start reading. Her approach is not one I would have taken, but her sentiment was appropriate. “Tell yourself you can do it and then do it, or just stop.” I decided I wanted the degree more than I wanted to quit. I read closely, took better notes, and even if I did not understand *everything* Lacan and Derrida had to say, I started to understand why they

were important and how theory could help me uncover meaning in texts. By the time I enrolled in my PhD program, I knew I wanted to learn and to have “Dr.” precede my name more than I wanted to actually give up. Though I hated nearly every minute of my multiple regression class, I was determined not to let it get the best of me. I’d learned a bit about persistence and could apply it to my life.

Since it was not until my third degree that I could psychologically push myself to complete the tasks before me, it should have come as no surprise that students in SB also deal with feeling inadequate and entertain the idea of giving up. I had a few classes in undergrad in which I truly struggled, and of those classes, I only had one instructor who vehemently encouraged her students to succeed. I passed Finite Math because Dr. Triplett simply would not let us fail. She was always in her office and willing to help. She never let me give up, instead, she asked me to think about the problem in a new way. Dr. Triplett was patient, understanding, and most importantly, every day in class, she modeled for us how to complete the work. She did not expect us to always understand right away, but she did expect us to use the tools she gave us to try.

I have no way of knowing if Dr. Triplett had read about self-efficacy—one’s belief they can do the task before them—but her efforts to get her students to work hard and believe they could accomplish the goal certainly addressed our self-efficacy. Margolis and McCabe (2004) noted “struggling learners with low self-efficacy must succeed on the very type of tasks they expect to fail” (p. 241). In other words, teachers must understand their students (or common student issues) well enough to know how to build assignments and activities that will build skills that students often struggle to

acquire. The authors explained, “to achieve this, teachers need to (a) give struggling learners work at their proper instructional and independent levels, and (b) adhere to instructional principles likely to improve self-efficacy” (p. 241). Teachers must be thoughtful and deliberate in their assignments, demonstrating an awareness of student perception and evidence of how to overcome these obstacles.

When I teach English, be it in SB or otherwise, I try to take the same approach as Dr. Triplett did fifteen years ago. I know my students can achieve the goals I’ve set for them as long as I give them the appropriate tools to use along the way. Doing well in class is just as much about believing you can do the thing as it is about actually doing the thing. I read about ways to teach learning as I prepared my classes and some of those sources (especially *Teach Your Students to Learn* (2015) and *Make it Stick* (2014)) really helped me hone my teaching skills. But what is most important is that as teachers it is our job to believe in our students. The wall so many students have built for themselves around learning is too large for them to climb over by themselves. We have to be the ones on the other side throwing them ropes, climbing chalk, and appropriate shoes. We have to say, “see, you just read those chapters and talked about those characters, now you can say more” followed quickly by “grab your gear and let me show you *how*.”

James Lang (2016) explained that showing students *how* to accomplish a task is essential to good teaching and effective learning. He argued that many college-level instructors do not want to do the work of explaining the process for how to do a task, rather they assume students already know this information from previous classwork (including high school). Yet, in making these assumptions, college instructors find

themselves disappointed later when discussion and critical thinking are lacking. Lang (2016) succinctly suggested “we have to know things [...] to think critically about them” (p. 15). By taking the time in first-year and introductory courses to ensure content and process knowledge is present (the behavioral perspective) the students will be able to engage in more meaningful, deep learning later.

As the deadline for the final assignment in class loomed, my students were doing the dreaded work of revision. Their emotions were heightened—would they do well enough to pass? How much revision was *really* necessary given the pull of completing assignments for two other classes? What if they worked hard on revision but still did not do well? What if, honestly, they could not identify where revision was necessary? Even my brightest and most hard-working students questioned themselves in the last week. The pressure (self-imposed or otherwise) was intense. Some students were visibly bothered by the end-of-the-program-demands, others seemed calm and collected. Nate was a student who seemed to fall clearly into the “I’ve got this” category. His work throughout the semester was good, he came to class prepared, and his previous writing assignments showed little cause for concern. When he arrived at my office hours the last week of the term, I was a bit surprised.

Nate’s blue eyes, hidden behind his thick, Warby Parker frames were narrowed as he waited for his computer to load his assignment. He wanted help on revision. “I know I need to revise it, I just don’t know what you’re looking for.” We read through the paper aloud, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see him thinking. His nose squished up

and his mouth puckered. His long, blonde hair fell over the headband holding it away from his eyes. “What have you noticed so far?” I asked him.

“Well, the sentences are kind of long. I mean, you took a breath in the middle of reading a few of them.” I agreed, the sentences were running together. Yet, at the same time, the sentences did not contain a lot of new information. Sentence by sentence, we read the piece aloud and discussed what could go and what needed to stay. It was a slow process, and at times a bit frustrating. Nate’s paper went from five pages to three. The loss of length seemed to concern him. Nate, like so many of his peers, equated length with value. By most students’ standards, the more you say, the better the paper is. Nate and I talked about economy in writing: being clear and succinct in word choice. Rather than assuming many words makes an essay valuable, economy in writing means knowing that sometimes, *less is more*. By the end of our time together, Nate’s brow had unfurrowed. He looked visibly at ease as he stood up out of his chair to head back to his room and revise some more.

The twenty or so minutes I spent with Nate that day helped me better understand something that is crucial in my teaching practice. Even students with the “everything is fine” demeanor may be struggling with a concept. I’m glad that Nate chose to take advantage of office hours that day. His writing improved and he felt better about his work and his ability to finish the assignment on his own. But I also recognize that Nate was one of 42 students I had that summer. First generation students, in particular, are less likely to engage with their faculty during class sessions (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Nate did not mention his struggles in the classroom when I walked around and spoke with students

individually. While he chose to get help during office hours; his peers likely wanted more help but did not seek it out. Even ten minutes of conversation could have been enough for a student to talk through a writing challenge and receive further guidance. However, not all students feel comfortable asking for help.

Though it is unlikely that teachers will help every student precisely the way they need it, it is possible for teachers to open themselves, their classrooms, and their offices to the opportunity. Sharing a story about oneself, bonding over coffee, or laughing over a funny meme created in class contributes to a student's sense of belonging (Maestas et al., 2007). My experience confirms what previous scholars on sense of belonging have argued: students who feel valued and welcomed by peers (Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017) and have a place to share opinions (Wilson, et al., 2015) feel more connected to campus. It may also be the reason students feel comfortable enough to continue on in their education, because they know they have someone in their corner rooting for them.

Relationships built in the classroom are one aspect of attending to the psychological perspective, the course material is the other. It is imperative that instructors develop curriculum that will pique student curiosity and interests. I chose to focus on identity and the transition to college because these topics would be relevant to my students. They were curious about what their new lives in college would be like and interested in succeeding. They also found comfort in reading material that mirrored their own experiences. I found classroom discussions to be both invigorating and confirming for the students. Not only were they able to learn and discuss literature topics and build



their academic confidence, they were able to identify themselves as legitimate college students.

## CHAPTER 7

### ATTENDING TO THE HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

*“The institution hires you for competencies, but the whole self comes to work.” – Jim Gould*

#### **What you do is part of who you are**

The quote above reminds me how often we as teachers compartmentalize our lives. We can be different people in the classroom than we are in real life—as though our authentic selves are not appropriate for the professional world. Much like an interview for a job, one presents the best parts of themselves to the committee. My husband calls this sending your “representative” in for the interview. While I do distinguish that there are aspects of one’s life that a teacher should not bring into her classroom (I certainly would not share details of my sex life with my students), to act as if we are not whole people serves as a barrier to creating relationships with students. If we as teachers want to help students better understand themselves as learners, to better engage with their education, and ask them to consider the hard questions about who they are and how they see themselves, then we must also ask those same questions of ourselves.

We must share a part of ourselves with our students: maybe we share that we, too, were first-generation college students or that math was a particularly hard subject for us in undergrad or, simply, that we are having trouble focusing today because we received some bad news about the health of a parent. What and how we decide to share is up to us, but we must bring a sense of vulnerability to the classroom if we expect our students to do the same (hooks, 1994; Rademacher, 2017).

I have always been drawn to storytellers. The faculty members I gravitated toward in undergrad were the ones who offered up a piece of themselves in class. Though I had plenty of wonderful educators who helped me understand, apply, and use course material in class, I was more engaged in class and ready to learn with the professors who showed something of themselves in the classroom.

For three years of undergrad, I took a number of courses taught by Dr. Kelly Lowe. He was the first professor I had who allowed us to call him by his first name and that, alone, was proof to me that professors are real human beings. I had a tendency to view professors as B-list celebrities: even if I did not know exactly why they were important, I knew a lot of people really liked them and I should give them deference. I considered professors to be the keepers of knowledge. As a first-generation student I was not familiar with the “ivory tower” conceptions of higher education, nonetheless I imagined my professors setting in their cozy, book-cluttered offices doing the hard work of thinking.

Kelly was incredibly intelligent and challenged his students to work at his level. His sardonic wit and dry sense of humor were a stark contrast to some of the other faculty members in the English and Writing departments. Over the course of many semesters, I learned more about Kelly—his involvement in local theater, his love of Frank Zappa, and the fact that we could tell his mood based on the socks he was wearing. Because Kelly offered a piece of himself to the class, I found it easier to be real with him.

When I started to consider attending graduate school, he was the first person I asked for advice. Even after he changed institutions, he kept in touch and counseled me

in my transition to graduate school. Thirteen years later, if I had to choose one faculty member who most influenced my education and career trajectory, Kelly would be at the top of my list. Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2009) found first-year students in particular seek relationships with their professors. My own experience (starting my freshman year and continuing through subsequent years) reflects these findings. Each summer I taught in the SB program I built relationships with students and Scanlon and associates' assertions were made real. Relationships matter—they matter to the student and the teacher.

Building relationships with students means understanding yourself and your students. As a displaced city girl living in rural Appalachia, I often struggled to connect with my students in the first few years of teaching. Diving into the literature on rural students helped me apply theoretical and empirical knowledge to the realities I was seeing in the classroom such as students' lack of confidence (Pappano, 2017), experience with poverty (Showalter, et al., 2017), and under preparation (Ardoin, 2018). Yet, the most influential artifacts were not scholarly.

Reading the local paper (published once a week), meeting parents in the public elementary schools, and exploring the region I now called home also opened my eyes to the circumstances in which many of my students were raised. By engaging in the community, I gained a better understanding of where my students came from and to where they might hope to return. As my own cultural understanding grew, I found that I was a better listener and was more prepared to help my students. The holistic approach I took to prepare myself to better serve my students may seem unrealistic to many readers,

though much of it was accomplished simply by choosing to put down roots and engage in my community. Aside from the scholarship I read in preparation for my dissertation, nearly all of my concerted efforts to learn more about my students were accomplished in my free time, often with my family, and was always enjoyable.

On weekends, my family and I would explore the region by taking car trips to unexplored counties. We would hike and then find a local restaurant and talk to the customers and employees—an easy task for both my husband and my daughter, both of whom have never met a stranger. We started volunteering in the fall and winter months to cut and deliver firewood to heat the homes of the elderly and aging in our community. Each time we arrived, we would chat with the residents we were helping and learn about their lives, their connection to the land, and hear about how living in the region has changed. As a result, I better understood both the poverty some students come from and the pride they have in their family, their homes, and in mountain life.

Connecting with students is a two-way street. I found I was able to do this best when I was prepared with both scholastic and real-world knowledge. Teachers who wish to connect with their students and prepare them for the rigors of college academics must offer something of themselves and be willing to learn more about their students. Above all, they must be caring and cognizant of the fact that while academics *should* be a student's primary focus, there are often circumstances outside one's control that can derail this focus (Rademacher, 2017). If we allow students the time and space to explore their needs and concerns in the classroom, when larger issues present themselves,

students can return to us and know that they have someone on their side, someone who will care about their academic progress *and* care about their humanity.

I have a wall hanging with a quote from John Wesley that reads “do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can as long as you ever can.” This piece used to hang in my office, but I packed it up when I started to work on my PhD and no longer had an office wall on which to hang it. I recently found it in a box with other office bric-a-brac and hung it on a new wall. I was struck by how the sentiment was so appropriate to my work, all these years later. The best I can do as a teacher is to help my students grow—to teach in a variety of ways, to demonstrate care, and to help them when they feel lost. The value of teaching first-year students is not only in preparing new academics, it is in the relationships I built and the knowledge that in some small way, I helped students in their journey. As I end this process of reflection and can share some of the best outcomes and moments of clarity, I realize I was not always looking through rose-colored glasses while reflecting.

Reflecting on teaching leads to a lot of “what if” questions. Some days after class I would journal or record my reflection and just ask myself a bunch of questions. A few times, an idea would take shape and I would ramble on or scribble a few notes down to use the next day or maybe to table the thought for next summer. (That list of “what to do next time” just keeps getting longer.) I found myself wrestling with the questions I was asking. It was straight up tiring to reflect on my work every day. Worse, on the days when the lesson did not go as planned, or my students had twenty side conversations that distracted me and everyone else in the room, I started to feel like a failure.

The “what if” questions are only one component of teaching. Before I, or any teacher, could reflect on the work of the day, I first had to complete a number of other tasks: reread the texts I assigned; prep activities; write a syllabus; create assignments, grade columns, and informational links of Blackboard; grade assignments (with helpful and timely feedback); and correspond with students, SB staff, and colleagues in my teaching cohort. This list may seem exhaustive, but it only reflects the needs of teaching one class. It does not include any other responsibilities I had on any given day (such as finishing my own coursework for the PhD, or writing manuscripts and analyzing data for other projects), let alone being a wife and mother. Even in the moments when teaching was going well, I was tired. My exhaustion was mental and physical. While my exhaustion often did not feel as though it was a direct result of teaching, teaching certainly wore on me.

Scholars note that faculty “burnout” is common (Sabagh, Hall, & Saroyan, 2018) and comparable to those who serve in school (p-12) and healthcare settings (Watts & Robertson, 2011). The demands of teaching are intense and emotionally stimulating. Though I have always been an early-to-bed-early-to-rise gal, I found myself going to bed promptly after my kids went to sleep, sometimes before 8:00. One night, I fell sleep in my son’s bed waiting for him to nod off for the night.

I tried hard not to let my exhaustion show to my students because I felt that I owed them my best self. I reasoned that I could slog through my own homework and save my energy and enthusiasm for who needed it most: my students. But right there in the middle of the summer term, when *everything* seemed to be due: assignments to my

professors, daily discussion board posts, a book chapter to an editor, and all the assignments due to me that I should have been grading...I felt as though I was going to implode. I was short with my students. They were not giving me their best work (so I thought) and I was frustrated by this. Perhaps I was not giving them my best, after all.

I ended class early that day. I did my damn reflection that I was tired of doing. I hit the red circle button on my smartphone to stop recording. I started to cry. Then, I did something I had never done before. I listened to the reflection I just recorded. I noted what I complained about and made a list. The list, it turns out, had nothing to do with the students—even though I felt like they were my primary complaint. The list contained all of the *other* things that were preventing me from actually teaching.

I took stock of what was on the list and decided I needed to temporarily let some things go. I could not very well remove “taking care of the kids” from the list, but I could ask for an extension on my book chapter. I could reschedule when and how I would contribute to my online class. I could take a brief hiatus from making food or teaching Sunday school at church. I found some time, readjusted my priorities, and got back to work.

My recordings the following days were noticeably different. Of course, I still had many responsibilities to attend to, but I’d also found a way to put my students first on that list. I probably did not get any more sleep than I had before, but I had more energy. I wanted to finish the summer term on a high note: where I could give them the feedback and attention they needed so they could finish the semester successfully. Just like my



students, I had to focus first on what was going on outside of my classroom so that I could be attentive inside of it.

While tiring, reflection of teaching practices and how those practices are affected by other life obligations plays a vital role in an instructor's ability to reach her students. As a teacher takes stock of her daily interactions, she may realize, as I did, that I was taking on too many responsibilities that kept me from giving the students the focus they deserved from me. Birmingham (2003, 2004) noted the importance of validating "the personal elements of teaching" and that teaching is often "more akin to personal development than professional development" (p. 321). Teaching demands a lot of the instructor: social engagement and awareness of students, attention to how students are learning and encouraging them to work independently and often with others. As we reflect on our teaching practices, so too, are we reflecting on our personal lives.

Godsey (2016) explained that for many K-12 teachers, the fatigue associated with the socially demanding requirements of teachers has led many to change careers altogether. The need to reconsider one's teaching obligations and recharge is vital to avoid burn out, especially in teachers who are introverts (Godsey, 2016). Though Godsey's article focused on secondary educators, much of what he found can apply to college educators as well. Reflection is key, but so too is the time away from prolonged interaction that would allow for rejuvenation and a return to focus. Unfortunately, as I pressed myself to finish teaching and meeting my end-goal of completing my PhD, I did not often pause for rejuvenation.

My questions about how to improve shifted to questions about my ability to teach at all. Was I helping them? Were they learning or gaining academic skills they did not have before? I did not know and felt like there was no way to tell. The only thing I knew on those days was that reflecting was the pits and I hated it. Birmingham (2004) would probably say to me, *that's the whole point*. The fact that I felt so emotionally involved in the work, that I was willing to reflect even on the days I knew I would not be pleased with the outcome, that's what reflecting is all about. That's *phronesis* in action. My reflection on reflection has demonstrated the value of the process. I do not expect my next summer of teaching (and the ones to follow) to be perfect, but I do expect them to be better than the ones that came before because *I* will be more prepared than before—I will continue to build relationships with my students, listen more intently, and outwardly share my mindset that they can succeed.

When I worked in student affairs, I would always end the year with hand-written notes to each of my peer educators. I would sit on my couch and write about the funny jokes we shared that year, how proud I was of the work they did, and what I looked forward to in the next year. I was honest in each letter and I always had great things to say to my students. The time it took to write these letters was worth it because it gave me time to reflect on the work of the year and put into words all the times I silently thought to myself, “that student is doing a remarkable job.” At the end of the summer semester this year, I thought about doing the same for my 41 students. As I looked at my list of students, I found that writing those notes would be nearly impossible.

For five weeks I had taken diligent notes on my students. I thought I knew them well—and yet at the end of the semester, I was not sure what to say to them. I refused to write the same, basic words in each letter. I figured they would probably compare notes and consider my words empty and meaningless. I felt again as though I had failed. I accepted defeat on the personal-note-writing front and decided to settle for a heartfelt speech accompanied by treats on the last day. It was awkward.

We did not meet in our regular cohorts the last day—their exam required them to be in groups and to have a discussion on a short story they had read the night before. So, six different times I asked my students if they wanted any muffins and when their discussion time was up, I quickly mumbled a few words about how proud I was of them and how much I enjoyed getting to know them. The voice in my head was screaming at me: *Blah, blah, blah, you look like such a goober. Just stop talking.* The look on my students' faces really did suggest they took pity on me, the lame teacher who got all blubbery over a bunch of college students. (Did I mention it was embarrassing? All six times.) I cringe thinking about the exchange even now.

Despite my awkward attempt at a heartfelt send-off, I think my students understood the message I was trying to convey. They mattered to me and I knew they would do well at Mountain University. The desire to perfectly teach and see the outcome of 41 completely prepared students who will always do well in college is a fruitless pursuit. But that does not mean that as teachers we should not try to build relationships with our students and help them the best way we know how. This means constantly checking in with what we think we know and seeing if there are better ways to do our

work. Tom Rademacher (2017) explained the hardship of teaching best: “Sometimes you’ll feel like you suck, and sometimes you legitimately will. Do you care? You’ll be fine. Do you care a lot? You’ll probably be great” (p. 94).

### **Implications for Teachers and Practitioners**

While the format of SPN requires the author to share the “subjective experience” (Nash and Bradley, 2011, p. 83), the goal is to take that experience and make it *universalizable* to others. My experiences teaching in SB were certainly context dependent and no other teacher will have the same experiences as me. However, many of my experiences may be mirrored in classes for first-year or conditionally-enrolled students. Many students struggle with issues related to the student transition including struggling to see themselves as academics and adjusting to a new environment while encountering different cultures and perspectives for the first time. Thus, my recommendations below, though guided by personal experience, may inform those who encounter similar situations and contexts. As Shenton (2004) argued, the reader must consider the similarities and differences in their own practices and apply the information from this research as it fits to their own circumstance.

**Classroom implications.** Teachers of first-year students can help students succeed in a number of ways, but most of those strategies must be grounded in the *desire* to teach the students who arrive on our campuses, even if they are not the ones we would have expected or chosen. My own desire to appropriately teach the students before me was central to my undertaking of this study. Those who also have that desire or find themselves in a classroom with underprepared students may have similar moments of

success. Goldrick-Rab and Stommel (2018) explained that while students today are drastically different from those of previous generations, “this fact is neglected by many researchers and by too many faculty members who think of their own experiences in college rather than students’ when crafting teaching plans” (para. 5). Lang (2016) and Warner (2018) asserted that teacher expectations of what students are like when they arrive in their classrooms are often different from who those students really are. It is imperative that educators, especially those who teach conditionally-enrolled students understand who their students are and what they need to succeed in college.

**Implications for higher education professionals.** Institutional leaders (particularly those in admissions and academic affairs) need to not only inform their faculty members of student demographics but also make explicit how these students may differ from common notions of who a college student is. This may mean training faculty members who teach introductory courses how to prepare students to take a test, or what research says about studying. Additionally, it may mean teaching faculty members (new and established alike) to think beyond traditional markers of what makes an in-coming student “well-prepared.”

Ardoin (2018) argued that a stronger emphasis on rural students’ cultural capital would allow them to succeed in the college setting, particularly if rural and underprepared students have access to mentors and are in classes where curriculum attends to the issues of transitioning to a new place and academic culture. I echo these sentiments and ask administrators and teachers do more to prepare themselves for their students rather than expecting the students to do all the legwork themselves.

Graduate programs, regardless of the discipline, should require courses on pedagogy and undergraduate student engagement. While not all graduate students intend to pursue a career in academia, those who do should be prepared in more than content they will cover. New faculty members would feel more prepared to step into a college classroom if they receive the appropriate training. Further, if specific disciplines cannot provide pedagogy classes, colleges of education could collaborate with departments to train future instructors.

More than simply informing faculty members about the students who arrive on campus, however, leaders need to take the time to identify why they are admitting students, how it supports institutional goals and mission, and how faculty members are a vital part of student development and institutional success. Having such information may help hesitant faculty members embrace their new students. In my first year of teaching SB, I would have welcomed a more nuanced understanding of why the SB program admitted the students they did and why my institution valued this group. Though I came to love my students and was able to see the contributions they made to our university community, it was through my direct experience, rather than through praise or excitement from administrators.

Faculty positions are hard to obtain and are offered to candidates for a variety of reasons beyond their capacity to teach: professional experience, research promise, and ability to serve the institution. Yet, if institutions of higher education are going to continue open access to education, they must look for and prepare faculty who can and will teach students with a variety of needs. Moreover, faculty at all ranks and years of

service may need additional training as new students representing different demographics than have been traditionally found on college campuses join the student population.

There are many faculty and staff members on each campus dedicated to helping students learn. These faculty members should be our leaders and teach their peers how to build relationships with students that will foster learning, academic identity, and capacity to succeed. Similarly, administrators must be aware of who these faculty members are and encourage their involvement. I was identified to teach in the SB program for a number of reasons, and I'd like to think that the most important one was because an administrator knew I loved teaching.

**The value of reflection.** As teachers work toward improving their practices, they should also engage in reflection of these practices and their interactions with their students. Teaching is more than disseminating information, it is a personal practice that should engage the whole classroom—each student—in ways that are meaningful and developmentally appropriate. Birmingham (2004) reminds us, however, that making sense of reflection will not be easy and will likely not be succinct. Reflection is not meant to quantify our abilities, rather it is meant to help us understand the work we are doing and, ideally, improve upon it.

When I first started thinking about the process of intentional reflection on my teaching, I thought about it in this sort of lofty *ah yes, the life of the mind!* kind of way. I imagined I would sit and think, then write—long-hand—all the encounters and conversations I had in the given day. I soon realized that was no way to write a dissertation or reflect in a meaningful way. With the help of my chair and many teacher

friends who are far wiser than me, I began to do what many gifted teachers do: I wrote a brief lesson plan for reflection. Through a number of drafts, I whittled down a reflection protocol that guided my reflection and kept me focused. As such, throughout the summer course I was able to maintain focus on the issues that were most salient to my daily teaching: thinking about engagement perspectives—behavioral, socio-cultural, psychological, and holistic—and whether my Engagement Framework seemed to “work.”

In order to for teachers to learn from their students and the work they are doing in the classroom, I suggest teachers frame reflection in a style similar to their lesson plans. Regardless of the specific goal, reflection should be intentional, prolonged (i.e., over a sustained period of time), and structured enough that when the teacher engages in a second round of reflection, the perspectives before them seem to be connected. Without such structure, reflections may have a tendency to meander through various topics and while cathartic, may not guide one toward the goal of better understanding one’s teaching.

The structure one creates should be focused on the goal of reflection (what do you want to learn about yourself as a teacher?) and the practicality of accomplishing the goal. I started with a long list of questions to consider each day and eventually narrowed the list down to three items on which to focus my attention. For reflection to work, it needs to not be chore or, at the risk of sounding *blasé*, a total time-suck. Reflecting on teaching is likely one of the most important work tasks you’ll do each day, but it should not take the whole day. Following a guide of three to four prompts will allow you to speak precisely and quickly through your day. Additionally, providing structure gives additional rigor to



the data one will collect. Brookfield (2017) noted, “the lens of personal experience is probably the lens of critical reflection that’s taken least seriously” (p. 170). While Brookfield’s observation may be true, if the intent of reflection is to share personal experience with others, then thoroughly attending to personal experience is essential and worthy of the time and effort required.

Finally, I suggest that the second-pass on reflection (*phronesis*) will be invaluable. The reflection on reflection is when a teacher can really take the time to think about what the teaching experience meant. Such reflection *should not* happen during the semester in which you are teaching. The time and space you give yourself to think and rethink about your teaching will likely lead to a better understanding of your teaching practices and what those practices mean for you and your students.

The Christmas and New Year season often bring with it a time of reflection for the year that has gone by. Over the 2018 holiday season, I was deep in reflection mode. I had completed coding my transcripts from my summer of teaching and was re-reading and pondering what it was I had learned about myself. Between reflection periods, I was inundated with family—my kids wanted to play, bake cookies, wrap presents, go sledding—so I was forced to take a break. The times for intense reflection of my own work were sandwiched between periods of reflecting on my life in general. I was wrapping up a major chapter in my life (I knew I’d finish this dissertation in the Spring) and trying to be thankful for the experiences and relationships that had been created and changed because of it. I found many similarities between my formal reflection on teaching and informal life reflection. I noted that the most stressful times with my family

lined up with my stressful days of teaching and studying. Indeed, teaching (and learning from teaching) is a holistic practice, one that should be entered into with great care.

### **Thinking about Teaching**

At the end of a long day of teaching, I have a hard time getting my mind to settle into sleep. I recount what happened in class: from the short conversations with students before class starts when we recount our favorite musicals and when a tour will be anywhere near our remote location to our difficult conversations about what is happening in the world around us. I consider how I shared a bit of myself with my students and hope that they know I work hard each day to see them, listen to their needs, and find ways to support them. Sometimes, I fall short. Many nights, however, I lie awake thinking about getting to class in the following days, so we can continue to engage with and learn from one another. I look forward to my time with my students, I love to see them come into their own. Even though for most of them their development as academics has just begun, little glimmers of the students and academics they will someday be peek through each day. As I try to get to sleep each night, I remind myself that every day, I have a chance to do important work.

As access to high education increases, faculty and institutional leaders must address the changing needs of students in their classrooms. These changes can only be addressed if, like my work in this study shows, teachers take the time to think about their teaching practices and how such practices might inhibit or encourage student growth. My own work on pedagogical reflection allowed me to better understand not only my students, but my role as an instructor and mentor to students. Faculty members who are

willing to do the hard work of sustained and critical reflection may find opportunities to better support their students and find more enjoyment in their roles as teachers.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### List of reading materials for English 190: Freshman Seminar in Literature

Kaufman, M. (1999). *The Laramie Project*. New York, NY: Dramatist Play Service.

Rowell, R. (2013). *Fangirl*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Harbach, C. (2011). *The Art of Fielding*. New York, NY: Brown, Little and Company.

Whitman, W. (1982). *Song of Myself*.

Wolfe, T. (2004). *I am Charlotte Simmons*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

## Appendix B

### Personal Inventory Lesson Plan for *The Laramie Project* (adapted from *Strategies for Reading and Arguing about Literature*)

First: Have students work together to summarize the events of the play so far. What questions do they have about the plot?

A Personal Inventory allows you to dig deeper into your response to the text. In the following slides (on Powerpoint) I will pose a series of questions to help you with this process. Interview yourself to better understand your reaction to the text. Answer (in paragraph form) the following questions:

1. What aspects of the text challenge or confirm your beliefs and values?
2. Where do these beliefs originate in my life experience? How might they be different from a particular character's experience?
3. Why does this aspect of the text challenge me?
4. How does this exploration help me come to better understanding of the story and my initial response?

Thinking and taking time with our thoughts is good. We cannot process and make connections to the material otherwise.

In small groups, talk through your responses to each question. (Give them a prompt for each question again so they do not rush.)

What did you learn about yourself and your interpretation of the text? How did this differ from others?

## Appendix C

### Lesson Plan: The Whys and Hows to Read for Class

Make a list of whys: pleasure v. required

Make a list of hows: pleasure v. required

Active engagement--skills that we will learn and apply in class today!

#### **Activity: How do you know what to bring?**

Show the students a picture of a landscape. Have them come up with a list of what to bring if they were going to go there. How did they know what to bring?

Just like looking at the details of a landscape to determine what would go inside their luggage, academic reading asks you to look at details to understand the world around you.

Start the semester with **primary texts**. You'll read, interpret, discuss to understand content, theme, plot, characters.

Begin reading from *I am Charlotte Simmons* together. (Use doc camera).

What stands out to you in the first three paragraphs? Highlight the moments of importance that they missed (vocabulary words, crucial details—Momma's dialect, the time they left for DuPont, "what did *she* lack?")

Break into groups. Finish reading the text (assign each group two pages), making note of things that seem particularly important.

As a large group, discuss findings.

What do they think was the theme?

What were their expectations as they moved forward in the story?

What do we think the author was trying to tell us? How do we know?

Look at the piece after it to get a better sense.

Discuss their reaction to the exercise. What were their impressions? How hard/difficult will it be to do this every day? Why?

Finish Class with a practice upload on Blackboard. Go through the process of saving a document, finding the assignment, attaching the assignments, and ensuring that it has been properly submitted.

## Appendix D

### Mapping Your World Lesson Plan

Show students John Green video about mapping. (Related to communities of learning and discovering new ideas)

Discuss the video—what did they note of interest? How do they think about the world around them? How do they tend to think about learning (is it a solo activity?) Other things to note (if students don't bring them up): creating your own hurdles in learning, the “cartographic enterprise” to make sense of the world around you

What is Cath's community of learning? What communities does Cath engage in? What's the value of this type of learning/ community?

In small groups, with the supplies provided, draw a map of Cath's world and the people in it. Show what, where, and who are important in this world.

Present to class.

Individually, create your own map of your world.

Discuss in small groups. What did we share? What did we learn about ourselves? How did we decide what would go on our map?



## Appendix E

### A priori Coding Scheme

Theme	Codes	Number	Emergent Themes/Notes
Behavioral	Process/the "way" to do	52	Feedback- 3
	writing	19	
	reading	11	
	discussion	22	
	note-taking	2	
	preparation	43	
Psychological	Feelings	8	Clarified as student reflection.
	Belief in self/self-efficacy	24	Encouraging success/working through hard things.
	Prior educational achievement	3	How they worked/accomplished tasks in HS
	Perception of achievement	17	Level of comfort/ Grades
	Outside of classroom factors	2	
	Stress/anxiety	11	New: Teacherfail moments (4)
Socio-cultural	Religion	0	New: building community (4)
	Politics	0	
	Rearing ("how I was raised")	4	
	Social identities	4	
	Geographic identity	1	
	Identity (how I see myself)	8	
Holistic	Combination of perspectives	7	Including classroom environment
	Big picture/larger community perspective		

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