COMPOSITION STUDIES AND TEACHING ANXIETY: 
A PILOT STUDY OF TEACHING GROUPS 
AND DISCIPLINE- AND PROGRAM-SPECIFIC TRIGGERS

Brennan Thomas

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2006

Committee:

Kristine Blair, Advisor
Sue Carter Wood, Advisor
Ronald E. Shields
Graduate Faculty Representative
Richard Gebhardt
ABSTRACT

Kristine Blair and Sue Carter Wood, Advisors

Although previous studies on teaching anxiety have clarified the general characteristics and manifestations of this phenomenon and established the need for more effective teacher preparation programs, most do not reflect the practices or concerns of writing instructors or indicate how or why they experience anxiety. The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, was to determine how the rhetorical and situational elements of writing instruction contribute to teaching anxiety and to what extent composition instructors attempt to resolve or minimize the effects of potential triggers and symptoms. Over a period of sixteen weeks, five first-year composition instructors completed a series of interviews and surveys related to their teaching and met periodically in small groups to discuss instructional matters and strategies for handling them. Data yielded from interview and group session transcripts and survey responses indicated that a) general teaching anxiety triggers (that is, triggers found in any discipline and at any level) are often compounded by discipline- and/or program-specific anxiety triggers, b) the potential anxiety triggers instructors reported or exhibited seem to interfere with their abilities to successfully impart student learning, and c) instructors’ behavioral responses to such anxiety triggers are influenced by what they consider to be the likeliest and/or most addressable sources of their anxiety. These findings provide several starting points for a much needed in-depth look into the causes and manifestations of and possible remedies for teaching anxiety as well as the long-term effects of teacher preparation and faculty development programs on anxiety and job performance.
To my pillars,

James and Cecilia Thomas,

whose love, strength, wisdom, and inspiration made all this possible,

and to Thomas Plummer,

who made it all worthwhile.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Drs. Kristine Blair, Richard Gebhardt, and Ronald Shields for their indelible support and guidance and especially Dr. Sue Carter Wood, whose expertise and insight were invaluable throughout this process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION** .......................................................................................... 1  
Overview ................................................................. 1  
Literature Review .............................................................. 2  
Writing Apprehension and Blocking .................................................. 8  
Teaching Anxiety in Rhetoric and Composition Studies ....................... 11  
The Teaching Group System ...................................................... 14  
Pilot Study Overview ............................................................ 16  
Study Limitations .................................................................. 21  
Chapter Overview ........................................................................ 23

**CHAPTER II. TEACHING ANXIETY IN OUR DISCIPLINE** ............................................. 28  
What, Then, Is ‘Teaching Anxiety’? ............................................. 28  
Related Variables ................................................................... 29  
What Triggers Teaching Anxiety? ................................................ 37  
What Does Teaching Anxiety Trigger? ........................................... 41  
Writing Apprehension Revisited .................................................. 44  
The Myths of Anxiety .............................................................. 48  
Challenging the Dominant Narrative .............................................. 57

**CHAPTER III. THE PARTICIPANTS** ............................................................................. 60  
Overview ................................................................. 60  
The Writing Program ............................................................. 61  
Placement Process .................................................................. 61
Program Courses........................................................................................................... 62
Student Evaluation and Portfolio Review .............................................................. 63
Teacher Training and Resources.................................................................................. 65
Participant Case Studies ............................................................................................. 66
Elizabeth .................................................................................................................... 66
James ......................................................................................................................... 78
Stephen .................................................................................................................... 90
Brenda ....................................................................................................................... 93
Jessica ....................................................................................................................... 96
Discussion ................................................................................................................. 99

CHAPTER IV. THE TEACHING GROUP ........................................................................ 104
Overview .................................................................................................................. 104
Group Meeting One ................................................................................................. 109
Group Meetings Two and Three ................................................................................ 120
  Meeting Two ........................................................................................................... 120
  Meeting Three ...................................................................................................... 127
Group Meetings Four and Five .................................................................................. 135
  Meeting Four ....................................................................................................... 135
  Meeting Five ....................................................................................................... 144
Discussion ............................................................................................................... 150

CHAPTER V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ................................................................ 153
Overview .................................................................................................................. 153
Quantitative Data ..................................................................................................... 154
Survey Development ................................................................. 155
Data Collection and Processing .................................................... 156
Results ......................................................................................... 158
Data Implications ......................................................................... 162
Qualitative Data Part One: Interview Responses ......................... 164
Interview One ............................................................................... 165
Interview Two .............................................................................. 169
Interview Three .......................................................................... 177
Qualitative Data Part Two: Classroom Observations ...................... 184
Elizabeth .................................................................................... 185
James .......................................................................................... 190
Discussion ................................................................................... 195

CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS ...................... 198
Review of Research Questions ...................................................... 198
Patterns and Trends ..................................................................... 201
Implications for Writing Instructors and Administrators .................. 210

WORKS CITED .............................................................................. 218

APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER ......................... 229
Participant Consent Form .............................................................. 230

APPENDIX B. SURVEY FORM ....................................................... 232
Teacher Survey ........................................................................... 233

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ......................................... 236
Interview Questions: First Session .............................................. 237
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre- and Post-Study Total Response Scores</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pre-Study Sectional Response Scores</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Post-Study Sectional Response Scores</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The term “teaching anxiety” has already been referenced numerous times in teaching manuals (Dethier; Connors and Glenn) and literature on student-teaching and training (Romeo; Coates and Thoresen; Marso and Pigge; Yetkin), as well as a number of published studies from other disciplines, including psychology (Fish and Fraser; Gardner and Leak), accounting (Ameen et al.), and speech communication (Roach). Although such studies have clarified the general characteristics and manifestations of teaching anxiety and established the need for more effective teacher preparation programs, most do not reflect the practices or concerns of writing instructors nor indicate how or to what extent they experience anxiety. In their investigations of teacher training and mentoring communities (Duffelmeyer; Roach), some composition and communication specialists have found traces of teaching anxiety in our discipline, but because they have generally focused on “the assessment of TAs’ satisfaction with training programs” or “investigations of the effects of training in specific teaching skills” (Williams, “The Effects” 586), they cannot tell us how more experienced writing instructors cope with teaching anxiety or how long-term anxiety-sufferers might be helped. Nevertheless, these studies provide theoretical frameworks which composition scholars can use to identify discipline- and program-specific triggers of anxiety and examine the impact teaching anxiety might have on “the teacher-student relationship, the classroom environment, and on student learning” (Roach 166). For the purposes of this dissertation, therefore, I will investigate how composition instructors experience and attempt to resolve or minimize potential triggers and symptoms of teaching anxiety, and in doing so, redefine teaching anxiety as an issue of writing program administration and TA training as well as offer suggestions for improving current WPA and training programs for both new and
veteran instructors. The following chapter provides a) a brief introduction of the significance of this study for our discipline and a literature review highlighting the findings and gaps of previous research studies on teaching anxiety, b) conceptualizations of teaching anxiety and related phenomena, and c) the purpose, methodology, and implications of the study, including a short description of the benefits and general structure of the teaching group system to be used.

**Literature Review**

Most empirical studies on communication, writing, or teaching anxiety have employed one or more self-report scales—e.g., the Teaching Anxiety Scale, the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension survey, and the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (Yetkin). Some of the earliest self-report anxiety scales were pioneered by communication specialist James C. McCroskey (1970), who hypothesized that reticent individuals may experience anxiety in other communicative contexts besides public speaking, including dyadic communication and small- or large-group settings (“Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety” 270). To determine the extent to which individuals from different age groups become apprehensive in such contexts, McCroskey designed and tested three scales—the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for College Students (PRCA-College), the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for Tenth Graders (PRCA-Ten), and the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for Seventh Graders (PRCA-Seven)—as well as a fourth scale (the Personal Report of Public Speaking Apprehension, or PRPSA) to measure public speaking anxiety (“Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety” 271). Although they have since been revised (McCroskey and Beatty 80; McCroskey et al. 165), the PRCA, PRPSA, and similar self-report scales have enabled researchers to establish specific manifestations of communication-bound anxiety in a variety of contexts, including teaching.
Since then, additional communication-specific self-report scales have been created and utilized to determine possible triggers of teaching anxiety. Psychology professors Louis E. Gardner and Gary K. Leak (1994) developed a questionnaire “modified from established state and trait communication inventories” to determine how frequently and intensely psychology instructors experience teaching anxiety (29). Of the 102 participants who completed the questionnaire, 87% reportedly experienced some sort of anxiety associated with teaching. Commonly cited triggers included preparing to teach, standing before a class, addressing student hostility, and offering insufficient responses to students’ questions; formal evaluation, especially from peers and administrators, was also frequently identified as a potential anxiety trigger (30). Gardner and Leak found that the intensity of respondents’ anxiety “was positively related to several situational variables, such as teaching unfamiliar material, […] having new students […], and having negative experiences with a particular class” (30). Similarly, Elsie C. Ameen, Daryl M. Guffey, and Cynthia Jackson (2002), who surveyed 333 accounting educators, discovered that nearly 80% of respondents experienced teaching anxiety (17), citing their unfamiliarity with course material and/or students, classroom preparation, and peer or student evaluation as possible triggers (18). Thomas A. Fish and Ian H. Fraser (2001), who distributed an eleven-item teaching anxiety survey to 93 full-time faculty members from several New Brunswick universities, also found that participants experienced the highest levels of anxiety while returning student work and contending with hostile or disruptive students.

In essence, the rhetorical tasks which distinguish teaching from public speaking—such as “interactions involving questions from students, immediate negative feedback, class disruptions, or end-of-term student evaluations” (Gardner and Leak 28)—also cause teaching anxiety; instructors’ anxieties are thus linked to those situational factors which “call into question their
ability and competence” (Romeo 424). Not all respondents, however, experienced anxiety with the same frequency and intensity as others, and some apparently felt no anxiety whatsoever. Assuming that all instructors (regardless of level, rank, or discipline) encounter at least one or more situational factors which might trigger anxiety, some instructors must therefore be more predisposed to anxiety than others.

Fish and Fraser found that teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience reported greater levels of anxiety than their more experienced counterparts. Likewise, in her investigations of student teaching and supervision, Felicia Romeo (1984) observed that student teachers are far more apprehensive about classroom management issues than veteran instructors (424) because of their unique teacher concerns. In their review of research conducted on teaching anxiety, Thomas J. Coates and Carl E. Thoresen (1974) found that the beginning teacher phase (including student teaching) is generally characterized “by concerns with the self,” the later teaching phase “by concerns with students and their academic progress” (4). Causes or triggers of teaching anxiety reported by new and veteran instructors reflected their specific teaching concerns. Beginning teachers’ anxieties were usually stimulated by negative feedback from supervisors or cooperating teachers, loss of classroom control, poor or strained relationships with students, and concern with running out of lecture materials, whereas experienced instructors cited scheduling difficulties, lack of resources, and large class enrollments as potential triggers (Coates and Thoresen 7).

Like Coates and Thoresen, Elif I. Yetkin (2003) theorizes that certain teacher concerns are unique to inexperienced instructors, “such as anxiety about [the] supervisor’s opinion, or the class teacher’s opinion.” These teacher concerns are shaped by the instructor’s sense of teacher efficacy—that is, her belief in her abilities to “bring about positive changes in students’
behaviors and achievement.” (For a more detailed explanation of this concept, refer to Chapter Two: “Related Variables.”) To see how teaching anxiety correlates to teacher efficacy, Yetkin conducted an empirical study with 27 pre-service instructors, all of whom had had some prior teaching experience. Results indicate that those participants who reported low self-efficacy generally experienced higher teaching anxiety levels, supporting Yetkin’s hypothesis that low teacher efficacy may, in fact, create teaching anxiety: “When prospective teachers experience negative thoughts and fears about their capabilities, those affective reactions can themselves lower self-efficacy perceptions and prompt additional stress and anxiety.” Xiaoping Li and Mingyuan Zhang (2000) also established that lower teacher efficacy correlates to a higher level of teaching anxiety. Using Gibson and Dembo’s conceptualization of teacher efficacy as “the conviction that one can successfully bring about a desired outcome in one’s students,” Li and Zhang speculated that apprehension towards teaching signals “self-defeat” and “the anticipation of future failure”—in other words, low teacher efficacy. Utilizing several self-report scales (including the Teacher Efficacy Scale and the Teaching Anxiety scale) to measure 52 pre-service teachers’ levels of efficacy and anxiety, Li and Zhang found that participants with higher teaching anxiety levels reported lower teacher efficacy.

Other personal attributes, including academic ability, locus of control orientation, and personal communication strategies, also predispose some instructors to anxiety. Ronald N. Marso and Fred L. Pigge (1998) conducted a seven-year study with 117 teacher candidates who, at the study’s conclusion, had completed five years of teaching. In addition to completing the Teaching Anxiety Scale at three points during the study (upon commencement of teacher preparation, near the end of student teaching, and at the conclusion of the fifth year of teaching), each candidate also submitted ACT and CTBS scores and completed Rotter’s locus of control
orientation questionnaire and the Myers-Briggs personality test. Survey results indicated that participants who reported internal locus of control orientation usually felt less anxious than those participants who reported external locus of control orientation; teachers who were less academically able had more difficulty adjusting to teaching and thus experienced greater anxiety; participants’ uncertainty about joining the profession positively correlated to their reported levels of anxiety; and finally, extroverted individuals generally reported less anxiety than introverts.

These data strongly suggest that personal factors, such as previous teaching experiences, personal traits, and teacher concerns, may cause or predispose individuals to teaching anxiety. Such studies also highlight the effects teaching anxiety has on the instructor’s physical and mental well-being as well as her classroom performance, teaching strategies and communication behaviors, and students’ progress. Respondents in Ameen et al.’s study, for instance, reported “heart-rate acceleration” and “gastrointestinal distress” upon encountering stressful teacher situations (16-17). Gardner and Leak, too, found that 45% of respondents reported physical symptoms such as dry mouth and palpitations, and over three-fourths experienced mental anguish (30). In their efforts to avoid physiological and psychological discomfort, however, anxiety-sufferers frequently develop teaching behaviors and coping strategies that ultimately prove ineffective. (For a more detailed explanation, refer to Chapter Two: “Related Variables.”) Anxious instructors are usually reluctant to confront disruptive students or revise ineffective lecture material and frequently overuse class time fillers (such as student presentations, guest lecturers, and videos) to avoid teaching (Ameen et al. 16). They also tend to award lower grades, provide less verbal support to students (Marso and Pigge), and engage in more hostile verbal behavior (Coates and Thoresen 12). Over time, their ineffective coping mechanisms and unwillingness to share feelings of hopelessness and isolation with others often lead to job
dissatisfaction, depression, and eventual departure from the teaching profession altogether
(Ameen et al. 16; Gardner and Leak 28).

Because of the serious consequences for both anxious teachers and students, researchers
have investigated viable options for eliminating anxiety triggers and alleviating related
symptoms. LaVeta Anderson, B. Charles Leonard, and Frederick John Gies’s quasi-
experimental study of psychology teaching assistants (1975) determined that systematic,
formalized training effected teacher competence by increasing participants’ knowledge of
“writing behavioral objectives, evaluation, media, verbal interaction behavior in the classroom
and micro-teaching sessions” (62). J. Gregory Carroll (1977) conducted a similar experiment to
determine whether training improves psychology TAs’ teaching strategies and behaviors towards
students (135), and found that test subjects who completed the training program used more
student-centered teaching practices and were rated more highly than test subjects who had
completed no training (137), thus reaffirming Anderson et al.’s findings that more extensive
training produces better teachers.

More recent investigations, however, have found that training alone is not sufficient for
reducing teaching anxiety. Romeo suggests having novice teachers observe their cooperating
teachers model pedagogical techniques in non-stressful situations in order to “acquire new
behaviors, facilitate the use of behaviors already possessed, and disinhibit behaviors through the
elimination of fear associated with anxiety-arousing situations” (423). This practice of modeling
and observation, Yetkin notes, may increase participants’ self-efficacy and lower their anxiety by
teaching them more effective coping strategies for handling stressful situations. “If teaching
anxiety results from some behavioral and cognitive factors as predicted,” she reasons, “then the
problem can be solved by cognitive restructuring and increasing the quantity and quality of
teaching experiences during graduate training or the early years of teaching.” Gardner and Leak also suggest that teaching anxiety can be resolved or lessened through cognitive restructuring during training: “If teaching anxiety is a form of state anxiety that results from cognitive operations, then it is reasonable to conclude that the problem can be solved by cognitive restructuring during graduate training or the early years of teaching” (31). Likewise, Ameen et al. contend that graduate training programs may not sufficiently prepare doctoral students for the classroom (20); they, too, advocate teacher preparation programs that provide trainees with successful strategies for coping with teaching anxiety. Fish and Fraser as well argue for a more holistic approach towards college instruction that pays “special attention to the emotional, physical, and psychological costs to the individual instructor” and targets “specific classroom situations that are likely to be most stressful for instructors.” Like Romeo, Fish and Fraser propose setting up small teaching communities where less experienced instructors are mentored by veteran co-workers and encouraged to discuss teacher-related issues.

**Writing Apprehension and Blocking**

Although teaching anxiety has not been extensively researched in our field, composition scholars have investigated a similar phenomenon—writing apprehension—and their findings offer some insight as to how anxiety might impact writing instruction. Moreover, in their efforts to understand how, why, and to what extent individuals experience writing apprehension, they have borrowed key research practices and concepts from these other disciplines. One of the earliest self-report writing apprehension scales was actually created by two communication specialists, John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, who observed that writing apprehension resembles oral communication anxiety in terms of the effects on an individual’s motivation, self-concept, and behavior towards others (243). Not surprisingly, several items featured in the
survey were modeled after McCroskey’s PRCA and PRPSA scales (244). The Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension survey is thus indicative of the overlap between other disciplines and our own. It provides researchers with a starting point, a sense of what characterizes an apprehensive writer, which composition specialists would explore in more detail.

Using Daly and Miller’s definition of writing apprehension as “‘some form of anxiety’ when faced with a writing task,” Cynthia Selfe (1985) conducted a case study of an anxious writer to learn how she approached certain writing tasks (83-84). During the two-week study, the student writer (a college freshman named Bev) completed a series of composition assignments and composing-aloud protocols. Selfe observed that Bev frequently hurried through such assignments, stopped and started again, preoccupied herself with surface corrections rather than global revision, and expressed uncertainty as to where her writing was going, all clear indicators that her writing strategies “were determined by her fear of academic writing” (88). Less clear, however, were the underlying causes of Bev’s intense apprehension. “Do [apprehensive writers], as some psychologists suggests, have a general tendency toward anxiety that, in turn, intensifies their reaction to specific situations?” Selfe wonders. “Or does their apprehension arise from a successive series of failures that initiates a spiraling cycle of anxiety?” (92-93).

To understand how personal, academic, and social constraints might influence the writer’s level of apprehension, Lynn Z. Bloom (1985) conducted case studies with two graduate students who were struggling to finish their dissertations. Conceptualizing writing anxiety as “a label for one or a combination feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person’s ability to start, work on, or finish a given writing task that he or she is intellectually capable of doing” (121), Bloom observed that the writer’s internal (or trait) factors—e.g., her knowledge of the
subject matter, her creative tendencies, her level of energy, and her determination to write—not only shaped her composing processes but also her level of anxiety towards a writing task (122-3). Social and academic constraints, such as impending deadlines, family and marital obligations, scheduling conflicts, and teaching responsibilities, frequently triggered writing apprehension as well (Bloom 128).

While investigating the phenomenon of writer’s block—i.e., the inability to start or continue writing “for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment”—Mike Rose (1984) found that blocking often occurs when writers rely too heavily upon rigid and absolute rules that make the writing process seem easier and less mysterious (ex. “If you can singsong your writing, it’s not good stylistically”) (Writer’s Block 48). High-blockers also use inappropriate or inadequate interpretative and planning strategies “for which they do not possess the prerequisites” and which frequently “yield too little or too much information or yield information in a way that makes [the task] inaccessible” (Rose, Writer’s Block 80). Once they begin writing, however, high-blockers are usually unwilling or unable to shift to more suitable strategies because of either their limited planning repertoires or “the absence or limitation of ancillary conditions necessary to certain planning styles” (Rose, Writer’s Block 81). High-blockers are thus compelled to restrict their rhetorical decisions and writing strategies to such absolutes, even though they do not fully understand them (Rose, Writer’s Block 90), and may, like the writers in Selfe’s and Bloom’s studies, become apprehensive towards writing. In a similar study, Carol Kountz (1998) found that novice writers frequently succumb to the anxiety of influence—the desire to both emulate and outdo revered writers—especially when feedback from instructors or peers threatens such lofty aspirations. “However much bravado that student outwardly displays,” Kountz observes, “the exposure creates anxiety for the student,” even to the
point where the student outright rejects feedback or refuses to write at all. Mary Louise Buley-Meissner (1989), who conducted a semester-length study with basic college writers, also found that students’ unrealistic views of good writing inhibit their efforts to write effectively. “For basic writers,” she observes, “the problem’ of how to compose acceptable school essays seems immense and formidable” (10). Though familiar with certain writing practices and rules, basic writers often have no real sense of how such practices and rules are used, and so apply them haphazardly, usually without success (Buley-Meissner 10-11; Rose, Writer’s Block 80). To demystify the writing process for their students, Kountz and Buley-Meissner encourage teachers to help writers replace unrealistic expectations with more practical goals and strategies (Buley-Meissner 11; Kountz) as well as de-sacntify canonical texts and utilize “collaboration, teamwork, and negotiated problem solving” to “promote the skills of listening and hearing what is being said and the ability to feel empathy for another” (Kountz).

**Teaching Anxiety in Rhetoric and Composition Studies**

Just as Daly and Miller recognized parallels between oral communication and writing apprehension, these studies on writing apprehension and blocking may provide some sense of how anxiety affects teachers’ behaviors and practices. To borrow from Bloom’s definition of writing apprehension, teaching anxiety could be a suitable label for those feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person’s ability to start, continue, or finish teaching tasks (such as grading papers, drafting lesson plans, or conducting a writing workshop). Teaching anxiety may also hinge on the instructor’s knowledge of her subject, her determination to impart student learning, her creativity with lesson plan design, and her energy level in the classroom. The social communities she belongs to and academic pressures she faces might also enhance or inhibit her efforts to teach effectively. Anxious instructors may also exhibit behaviors and
coping strategies like those of apprehensive or blocked writers. In their efforts to avoid teacher-related stimuli, they might, for instance, rush headlong into teaching tasks (or procrastinate, conversely), or hastily throw together assignments and classroom materials that have no clear focus or purpose. And like apprehensive writers, anxious teachers may simply be afraid to take risks, settling instead upon one or two teaching techniques without considering their effectiveness or appropriateness. Because they usually do not integrate new methods into their teaching repertoires, anxious teachers experience something akin to writer’s block. Though they may have some sense of what constitutes good teaching, their conceptualizations of and approaches to teaching prove rigid, limiting, and ultimately inadequate.

Recent investigations into teaching anxiety (as experienced and reported by graduate teaching assistants in composition studies) reaffirm the similarities between writing apprehension and teaching anxiety. Communication specialist K. David Roach (1999) conducted an empirical study with 29 teaching assistants (several of whom taught English courses) to determine “the influence of the teaching assistant’s (TA) communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, and state communication anxiety in the university classroom” (166). (For more detailed explanations of these concepts, refer to Chapter Two: “Related Variables.”) Because communication apprehension reduces the individual’s willingness to interact with others, Roach hypothesized that apprehensive instructors would minimize communication during class time, thus appearing less approachable, competent, and knowledgeable and generally unresponsive to student concerns (169-71). Data collected from self-report scales and student evaluations support Roach’s hypothesis: as the TA’s level of communication apprehension increases, “student perceptions of TA reward, referent, and expert power use decrease” (177) because, like
the apprehensive or blocked writer, the TA relies upon inappropriate avoidance strategies to cope with her anxiety.

Changing such maladaptive behaviors requires the same sort of cognitive restructuring that Bloom, Kountz, and Buley-Meissner suggest for apprehensive writers—i.e., replacing self-defeating notions of perfection with more realistic standards and inadequate practices with more effective ones. While conducting a research study with first-year composition TAs, Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer (2003) found that mentoring communities, when combined with extensive orientation and training, effectively alleviate participants’ anxieties towards teaching in computerized classrooms. Duffelmeyer characterizes lab technology as yet another possible trigger of teaching anxiety, particularly for instructors who do not yet understand how to utilize lab equipment to foster student learning. Technology de-centers the classroom, alters communication and power dynamics, and challenges the TA’s model of good teaching. More intensive pre-semester training, however, does not necessarily alleviate TAs’ discomfort because of its transmission-oriented nature; content is simply transferred from trainer to trainee, thus giving new instructors the impression that pedagogical competence is taught, not developed over time. To deconstruct this notion of competence before performance and give anxiety-sufferers a more prominent role in developing their own teaching strategies, Duffelmeyer suggests supplementing current training programs with social learning groups, or communities of practice (298). The community-of-practice approach “emphasizes the role of active participation as a means of becoming competent in social practices” (Cazden qtd. in Duffelmeyer 298). In essence, communities of practice enable inexperienced instructors to develop more sophisticated and suitable teaching philosophies and classroom techniques; they also encourage participants to critically evaluate the purpose of technology and other pedagogical enhancements (Duffelmeyer
308). By developing their own pedagogical practices rather than following prescribed teaching methods, participants become more effective, confident instructors.

**The Teaching Group System**

In addition to alleviating TAs’ anxieties, mentoring communities might also be used to identify factors that cause or contribute to feelings of inadequacy or insecurity (Stanulis et al. 73-75; Duffelmeyer 300) as well as to observe what challenges teachers face and how they work through such challenges in the context of a mentor group (Stanulis et al. 72). I was concerned, however, that a community of practice, which is usually headed by one or two elected team members and coordinated with other training programs (Duffelmeyer 307), might not be de-centered enough for the purposes of my study, especially considering that the chief beneficiaries of such communities are TAs. To learn more about teaching anxiety in our profession, I had to find out how both new and experienced composition instructors communicate with each other (if they ever do) about teaching anxiety; how they cope in new teaching environments or handle classroom conflict; and how they develop or improve strategies for overcoming their anxieties.

I decided, therefore, to utilize a less formalized community format that is inclusive of and beneficial to instructors of all ranks—a teaching group. The teaching group closely resembles a mentoring community in that both encourage teachers to “discuss success and difficulties, listen with empathy to one another’s problems, and work together to offer possible solutions” (Brown) in order to enhance professional development and improve job performance. Confidentially is guaranteed, which, “in addition to ensuring the freedom to discuss any concern without fear of personal or political repercussions” establishes “the atmosphere of trust conducive to honest interaction and problem solving” (Brown). But unlike a community of practice, the teaching group has no designated leader or supervisor; all participants set the agenda, tone, and purpose of
each meeting, though there may be a facilitator (such as a senior department member) who offers support and addresses the other teachers’ questions and concerns (Raymond 28-9). Veteran instructors who participate in teaching groups aren’t doing so simply because they are coaching new instructors, but because they believe they have as much to learn as their less experienced colleagues do (Raymond 27). In this sense, the teaching group is not about acclimating new instructors to the profession but about helping all participants, regardless of status or years of experience, successfully resolve challenges and become better teachers through the exchange of ideas.

Though the teaching group has no hierarchical arrangement, it is not without some structure. Veteran instructor and reading specialist Regie Routman recommends a format that encourages “dedicated professionals [to] voluntarily come together to share ideas” on pre-selected topics of interest (Raymond 27). During each meeting, one of the members acts as the facilitator and presents resource material (such as a journal article or textbook) on a teacher-related issue chosen from the previous meeting by the participants. Other group members then discuss this material, often supplementing it with resources which they have brought with them as well (Raymond 28). Finally, the members share their own experiences with this issue and offer questions and concerns and/or provide suggestions, support, and feedback to other members. The meeting adjourns after participants have selected a new teacher-related issue and facilitator for the next meeting.

Sydney Brown, author of “Help! I’ve Got to Talk to Someone!” advocates a similarly open approach. At the start of each meeting, participants tell brief success or failure stories—what Rogers and Babinks (2002) refer to as “brags and drags.” Each participant also shares updates on any problems or challenges she is currently facing while other members listen and
offer advice. Next, two or three participants select a pedagogical issue, which the other members attempt to “further clarify and define” through discussion (Brown). Once the issue has been adequately described, members brainstorm possible strategies for resolving or negotiating it, and the meeting concludes with a review of events and quick planning for the next session.

Given the collaborative nature of these two structures (both of which will be used for my investigative purposes), the teaching group system can alleviate participants’ anxieties by encouraging them to provide one another more suitable alternatives for handling communication difficulties or classroom conflict. In addition, the teaching group offers a rich source of data which researchers can draw from to more fully understand “the significant influence of teaching anxiety on the [instructor’s] confidence, satisfaction, and performance” (Williams, “The Effects” 586). Through participants’ dialogue, I may come to know what specific teacher-related stimuli trigger anxiety; how these triggers affect a participant’s pedagogical and communication strategies; how peer-group interaction affects the participant’s levels of anxiety and efficacy, instructional methods, and behavior towards students and colleagues; and to what extent a participant replaces pre-existing or ineffective coping strategies with peer-suggested ones. The teaching group system, therefore, is the most logical choice for the study.

**Pilot Study Overview**

The purpose of this dissertation is to determine how and to what extent the rhetorical and situational elements of writing instruction contribute to teaching anxiety. Gardner and Leak characterize teaching anxiety as “a stimulus-specific response” to a stressful (or potentially stressful) social situation (30). In other words, the manifestations of teaching anxiety are shaped by situational factors; triggers and symptoms are thus determined by the disciplinary and program constraints of the anxiety-sufferer. What, then, are the potential triggers and symptoms
of teaching anxiety in composition studies? How do anxiety-sufferers in our field attempt to resolve and/or cope with such triggers and symptoms? To address such questions, I conducted a sixteen-week pilot study to 1) establish how instructors teaching first-year composition at a Midwestern state university conceptualize and negotiate or resolve teacher-related issues in small-group and classroom settings, 2) isolate possible triggers and symptoms of anxiety (as reported or exhibited by participants), 3) clarify any relationships between anxiety triggers and/or symptoms and the participant’s instructional methods, communicative behaviors, and job performance and satisfaction, and 4) establish how and to what extent the teaching group system impacts a participant’s anxiety and efficacy levels, communication strategies with students and other instructors, and pedagogical practices.

Teachers who were currently employed as teaching assistants or full-time instructors during the 2005-2006 academic year and who had taught composition at this university for at least one full year were chosen for the study. (International teaching assistants, first-time instructors, and new full-time instructors were intentionally excluded because these individuals might already be experiencing heightened levels of anxiety associated with culture barriers, language difficulties, “reality shock” (Marso and Pigge), or other forms of work-related stress.) All possible candidates were contacted via email in late April and provided with a brief description of the study’s purpose, requirements, and tentative schedule as well as the potential gains for both participants and the principle investigator. Of the nearly 70 who were contacted, thirteen instructors volunteered. One week prior to the start of the 2005 Fall semester, each volunteer was emailed a digital copy of a teaching anxiety survey (adapted from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for College Students and the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension survey) on four aspects of composition instruction: classroom performance,
classroom preparation, communication with students outside of class, and response to and evaluation of student work. Ten instructors filled out and returned the survey, and nine eventually agreed to participate in the remainder of the study. The final research group was comprised of two male instructors and seven females; three participants were graduate teaching assistants, each with one year of teaching experience, and six were full-time instructors, all of whom had taught writing courses for three years or more.

As part of their participation in the study, the nine instructors were required to meet periodically with one another in a teaching group. For the first meeting (which took place during the fourth week of the semester) participants were introduced to each other and to the general structure and collaborative nature of the teaching group system. Two members then volunteered to present a teacher-related issue (of the participants’ choosing) and accompanying source material at the next meeting. Following the recommendations of Brown and Routman, each subsequent group session followed this format:

1) Each facilitator presented his or her resource material to the other participants (Raymond 28).

2) The participants offered questions and additional resources to define the issue more clearly (Brown).

3) The participants then discussed possible strategies for resolving and/or negotiating the issue.

4) The participants selected a new issue (or set of issues) to be discussed at the following meeting, and one or two participants volunteered to facilitate.
Each group meeting lasted approximately 60 minutes. All sessions were audio-taped for transcript analysis, and field notes of participants’ behaviors towards one another were recorded as well.

The optional component of the study, the classroom observation, was intended for two participants; those who volunteered were observed and videotaped while teaching actual class sessions. (The consent form requests all participants to indicate whether they are willing to complete this portion of the study.) During an additional interview, the participant viewed the videotape and described and assessed his or her pedagogical techniques and students’ behavioral responses. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in the last few weeks of the semester.

Finally, each participant was interviewed three times. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. For the initial interview (which took place during the second and third weeks of the semester), each participant was asked a series of questions regarding his or her educational and teaching backgrounds, pedagogical approaches and objectives, and expectations for the teaching group. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

During the second interview (which was conducted at mid-term), each participant was asked to describe his or her communication strategies with students, pedagogical methods and concerns, and initial reactions to the teaching group. Each interview took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete.

For the third interview (which took place during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth weeks of the semester), each participant was asked to assess his or her teaching performance and the professional, social and/or personal benefits of the group meetings. The participant then completed the teaching anxiety survey a second time (which took 10-15 minutes).
interview lasted 60 minutes. The total time each participant invested in this study, therefore, was approximately 8-10 hours.

Thus, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected for the dissertation. The survey results were processed using Daly and Miller’s writing apprehension formula to determine the extent to which participants’ response scores fluctuated from the beginning of the study to the end (Gall et al. 309). Because the quantitative data was collected from such a small sample, however, it cannot provide detailed information about or account for any additional factors that might have influenced participants’ teaching or communicative behaviors. The interview transcripts may offer more comprehensive data regarding each participant’s anxiety and efficacy levels and assessment of his or her instructional and communication strategies. Yet because participants could not demonstrate such strategies during interview sessions, data from teaching group meetings and classroom observations is necessary to ascertain how participants might communicate with students and other instructors as well as cope with and/or attempt to resolve anxiety triggers and symptoms. This triangulated or multi-modal approach (Lauer 45) thus enabled me to better understand how these participants think, behave, and interact with others in both small-group and classroom settings.

I did not want to limit myself to a specific set of symptoms and triggers of anxiety because new or previously unstudied manifestations of teaching anxiety might have emerged during the data collection process. All transcripts and field notes, therefore, were reflectively analyzed: at times, I had to rely on my own judgment and intuition to identify patterns or themes (Gall et al. 459). Thick descriptions—that is, statements that recreate a particular situation and define “intentions inherent in that situation” (Gall et al. 438)—were recorded for all interview, teaching group, and classroom observation sessions. These descriptions allowed me to compare
the data with findings from previous studies on teaching anxiety and bring to light emerging themes and/or recurrent phenomena (Gall et al. 439-440). Thick descriptions and field notes were also “cooked” during the actual study to determine how I might collect and analyze subsequent data (Gall et al. 449). Finally, I kept a research log throughout the study, which was used to record a) potential themes or theoretical constructs for interpreting qualitative data, b) additional or reformatted research questions, and c) any potential problems or threats to the study (Lauer 49).

**Study Limitations**

Data retrieved from participants’ interview and survey responses and contributions to group sessions was used to a) isolate discipline- and program-specific triggers and symptoms of teaching anxiety, and b) establish correlative and/or causal relationships between each participant’s reported and/or observed levels of anxiety and his or her teacher efficacy, job performance and satisfaction, and instructional and communicative behaviors. Study results, therefore, may not only provide valuable information in terms of how the contextual features of a writing program create or exacerbate bouts of anxiety, but also highlight the extent to which discipline- and program-specific anxiety triggers and symptoms impact practitioners’ pedagogical choices.

Unfortunately, the study’s limited scope posed several challenges for both the researcher and participants. Only nine instructors were involved, most of whom were juggling heavy teaching loads or graduate coursework as well as other professional and personal responsibilities, so I faced the grim prospect that several participants might drop out if the study became too time-consuming or burdensome for them. To compensate, transcripts from only five participants’ interviews were included in the final dissertation so that if two, three, or even four
participants quit, the data collection process would not be seriously affected. There remained, however, the possibility that, in the event some participants dropped out, the dynamics of the teaching group would be altered, especially if those who discontinued the study were quite talkative during group meetings and/or highly regarded by other participants.

Maintaining the collaborative, open-forum nature of the teaching group would prove equally challenging. In my efforts to remain unobtrusive while other members talked, I inadvertently created a power vacuum that participants wanted to fill. I was also concerned that some instructors would feel uncomfortable sharing failures or feelings of inadequacy and frustration with other participants or the researcher, which would interfere with both group participation and the data collection process. Because the participants knew each other (some for years), they might have been somewhat reluctant to speak out or expose themselves too much, for fear of changing others’ perceptions of them. What was said during group meetings, therefore, may have become problematic as well, not only for the participants but for the integrity of the study. Any sort of language or behavior which in some way marginalized one or more participants (e.g., criticisms, put-downs, or other inappropriate remarks) might have caused friction among them and disrupted the group’s collaborative efforts.

It is also possible that participants were performing in a manner which they thought was most conducive or beneficial to the study; their behavior, therefore, would not be an accurate reflection of their anxiety levels or communication strategies but merely a fabrication to satisfy the researcher. This is an unfortunate drawback of qualitative research, the possibility that participants aren’t responding or behaving “honestly.” By observing (and to a small extent participating in) group meetings and class sessions, I inevitably changed the environments and activities of the participants I observed, and thus potentially distorted or skewed data. As such,
any information collected from interviews, classroom observations, group meetings, and survey
responses cannot be generalized to other teacher populations (even to writing instructors
employed at this university), not only because my presence altered participants’ behaviors, but
because the research sample was limited to two university-specific teacher populations (teaching
assistants and full-time faculty members) and did not undergo any sort of random selection
process.

This study also covered a relatively short time span, so I did not have the necessary time
or data to isolate every possible trigger and symptom of teaching anxiety, even with this small
sample. Perhaps a longitudinal study like Marso and Pigge’s would enable researchers to see
more examples of the stressful situations teachers encounter and how they cope with or handle
such situations over longer periods of time, although more field observation, especially in the
classroom, is needed. For this study, I afforded myself only two opportunities to observe
participants teaching. Though data gathered from these observations is useful, it doesn’t provide
much information as to how the instructors handle daily stresses over the course of a semester or
how their communicative behaviors towards students change or evolve. Such investigative
points require more attention, but could not be addressed in this project.

Chapter Overview

The following section offers a synopsis of the study’s research processes and findings. In
Chapter Two: “Teaching Anxiety in Our Field,” I examine and define commonly referenced
triggers, symptoms, and behaviors associated with teaching anxiety—e.g., willingness to
communicate (WTC), communication apprehension (CA), and teacher efficacy—and attempt to
establish correlative and/or causal relationships among these variables. High levels of CA, for
example, correlate to lower levels of WTC and teacher efficacy, which in turn create intense or
frequent bouts of teaching anxiety. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to understand the intricate relationships between the sources and characteristics of teaching anxiety in order to determine how anxiety impacts job performance and satisfaction in our discipline.

To legitimize the use of the teaching group system for this study, however, I must first address several common misconceptions about teaching anxiety—specifically, the “first-day jitters” myth, the “novice” myth, and the super teacher. Although some composition scholars recognize that teaching anxiety can affect instructors for months or even years (Newkirk; Bishop; Tobin), a number of manuals, including *The New St. Martin’s Guide for Teaching Writing* and *The Composition Instructor’s Survival Guide*, equate teaching anxiety to “first-day jitters,” those temporary pangs of restlessness and self-doubt many teachers experience before embarking on a new academic year (Bobrick; Dethier; Connors and Glenn). Closely linked to the “first-day jitters” myth is the assumption that teaching anxiety is limited to instructors new to the teaching profession—or “novices”—because they, perhaps more than any other teacher population, must struggle “to achieve comfort, authority, and success in their new roles as writing instructors” (Duffelmeyer 296). Both the “first-day jitters” and “novice” myths associate teaching anxiety with the unknown, or fear of the unknown; ergo, once the unfamiliar becomes familiar—that is, once the instructor becomes accustomed to her teaching responsibilities or to a new group of students—her anxiety will (or should) fade. What these myths ignore, however, are the problems and concerns of more experienced instructors who find themselves confronted with situations for which they are not prepared (Bramblett and Knoblauch 9) or who continue to feel uncomfortable in the classroom long after their fears should have subsided (Ameen et al. 16).

Our practitioner lore also reinforces an ideal educator that new instructors aspire to and veteran teachers supposedly embody: the super teacher (Newkirk 3-4). The super teacher is
essentially the perfect instructor who, despite program or disciplinary constraints, handles her teaching responsibilities with intelligence, charisma, and innovation. Super teachers aren’t just dedicated; they are successful, flawlessly executing every class session, writing insightful comments on students’ work, and earning the admiration of students and colleagues alike. Of course, no teacher is infallible. Even the most dedicated instructors are bound to have unsuccessful teaching moments, but when these moments are set aside in favor of the glorious accounts of super-teaching, many instructors, especially TAs, are reluctant to share their failures or inadequacies with others, for fear of admitting that because they aren’t living up to or embodying the super teacher, they aren’t successful and won’t be perceived as such. The super teacher myth may thus inflict “psychological damage” on practitioners who expect (or are expected) to “emulate perfection” (Newkirk 2-3).

The study’s first priority, therefore, is to provide a forum—a teaching group—where teachers (both new and experienced) can talk about their experiences without feeling external pressure to edit out the undesirable bits from their accounts. By participating in the teaching group, newer instructors will learn that their problems are not unique to them, that other teachers, even veterans, have moments of confusion, anger, or resentment (Brown; Newkirk 4-5). Likewise, more experienced teachers will recognize that they are not necessarily expected to know all the answers (Raymond 29), that they, too, might come across situations which seem foreign or mysterious to them or which they cannot resolve alone. Through open, honest dialogue, group participants can work together to develop more successful strategies for handling such situations and reduce the effects of anxiety triggers and symptoms.

Chapter Three: “The Participants” offers a brief overview of the writing program and detailed case studies of the participants. Each summarizes the participant’s educational, cultural,
and teaching backgrounds, current professional status, and pedagogical objectives, methods, and concerns so as to familiarize readers with his or her communicative behaviors towards colleagues and students as well as any situational or personal factors that predispose him or her to anxiety. For instance, a teacher whose cultural background sharply contrasts with those of her students might report difficulties associated with teacher-student communication, which may in turn cause feelings of confusion, frustration, or inadequacy when her initial attempts to communicate with students end in apparent failure.

Chapter Four: “The Teaching Group” provides descriptions and analyses of the group sessions, including participants’ communicative behaviors towards each other and strategies for defining and resolving and/or negotiating teacher-related issues. Additionally, transcript materials and field notes recorded during sessions were utilized to determine how participants constructed stories or narratives of their teaching experiences; how other participants responded to such narratives; and how participants’ expressed attitudes towards the teaching profession, the writing program, and students and co-workers evolved in this de-centered, collaborative environment.

The purpose of Chapter Five: “Results and Discussion,” therefore, is to highlight the themes and patterns which emerged from the data. Participants’ survey and interview responses were used to a) isolate discipline- and program-specific triggers of teaching anxiety and b) establish the impact such triggers might have on a participant’s level of anxiety, instructional and communicative behaviors, and job performance and satisfaction. Pre- and post-study survey scores were subsequently utilized to measure the teaching group’s effects on participants’ anxiety levels. Because the statistical data is limited and potentially misleading, however, transcripts and field notes taken from interview, group, and class observation sessions were
analyzed to verify whether participants’ anxiety levels fluctuated throughout the study and to what extent these fluctuations could be attributed to the teaching group and/or other possible influences.

The final chapter, Chapter Six: “Conclusions and Implications,” includes a discussion of the study’s findings and implications for both instructors and writing program administrators. Though this project is not designed to produce definitive results because of its limited scope, it may raise additional questions regarding the extent to which current training and WPA programs can be improved to lessen instructors’ anxieties and increase job performance and satisfaction. How, for instance, might a teaching group system be modified to fit specific program needs or to accommodate teachers with varying levels of training or work experience and professional rank? What are the limitations of teaching groups, and how might such limitations be overcome? The purpose of this final chapter, therefore, is to encourage further research on this issue in order to more fully understand how teaching groups (and other potential remedies) might be used to lessen teaching anxiety and enhance faculty growth.
CHAPTER TWO: TEACHING ANXIETY IN OUR DISCIPLINE

What, Then, Is ‘Teaching Anxiety’?

In its most general sense, teaching anxiety is comparable to communication apprehension, the “physiological arousal, subjective distress, and behavioral disruption” one experiences when faced with a public-speaking situation (Gardner and Leak 28). Many teachers are apprehensive about speaking before a classroom, even to students whom they have known for months. Well aware of the rhetorical value of teaching, they feel an obligation to clearly articulate an assignment’s requirements, to facilitate classroom discussion, or to quickly resolve classroom discord so that the learning process might continue. And they experience great trepidation when something impedes that learning process. Both new and veteran instructors, therefore, may experience communication apprehension not only because they are uneasy about speaking in public but because they also recognize, and are unnerved by, the rhetorical significance of the teaching moment.

Public speaking, however, is only one facet of the teaching situation. Although teachers do perform before student audiences, their relationships with students are longer-lasting and thus more complex than those a public-speaker might have with her audience. “The college teacher faces a much [broader] task than merely conquering the self-consciousness of the public speaker,” Richard Fraher explains. “The first exposure in front of a class is the initiation to an entirely new set of mysteries, involving the communication, in contrast to the possession, of that knowledge” (117). But it is not simply the prospect of facing new students for the first time (or even for the twentieth time) that causes teachers so much angst. It is the bothersome truth that they must excel in this learning environment in order to solidify their place within the teaching profession which sets teaching anxiety apart from communication apprehension. Professional
exigencies, argues Elizabeth Bobrick, not only trigger teaching anxiety but also define it: “It is the fear felt by professors old and young that they cannot teach, and that this time they will be found out.” Anxious instructors face a rather bleak situation in terms of their own assessment. They know something is expected of them—teaching excellence, in its most abstract sense—but are often unsure of what specific standards they must meet or how to meet them. Teaching anxiety might thus be more appropriately characterized as a form of communication-related occupational stress which “tax[es] the resources of university instructors, and […] contribute[s] to time pressures and constraints that are identified as major sources of work-related stress” (Fish and Fraser).

**Related Variables**

Before moving on, however, a number of variables associated with teaching anxiety (several of which have already been referenced in the previous chapter) must be more fully defined for the purposes of this study.

*Willingness to communicate (WTC)* refers to an individual’s “tendency to approach or avoid communication” (Roach 167). Those who exhibit a willingness to communicate voluntarily interact with others; conversely, individuals who are unwilling to communicate avoid such interaction. This tendency to embrace or shun social situations is primarily determined by the person’s predisposition towards communication itself—namely, her overall perception of the potential risks and gains associated with communication. Individuals who feel threatened by or are apprehensive of social interaction, therefore, are generally less willing to communicate than those who find such situations enjoyable or rewarding (McCroskey, “Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety” 270). To some extent, however, the person’s willingness or unwillingness to communicate is influenced by situational factors, including the expectations he
must fulfill (or thinks he must fulfill), his obligations towards those with whom he interacts, and
the characteristics of the speaking situation and those participating in it. The speaker’s
willingness to communicate, therefore, may fluctuate from one speaking situation to the next.

*Communication apprehension (CA)*, or “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated
with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (Richmond and
McCroskey qtd. in Roach 168), may be one of the primary reasons why some individuals are
unwilling to communicate. Because the apprehensive individual’s anxiety about communication
“outweighs his projection of gain from the situation” (Phillips qtd. in Daly and Miller 243), he
generally avoids communication whenever possible. Though it may amount to no more than a
personal preference to not communicate (Opt and Loffredo 557), research studies suggest that
communication apprehension negatively impacts one’s motivation, self-concept, and behavior
towards others (Daly and Miller 243; Roach 169). Highly apprehensive individuals also tend to
perform less successfully in social situations and are generally perceived as less competent,
knowledgeable, and friendly than those with low CA. This crippling fear, Roach argues, ranges
“in scope from a trait-like predisposition to a state anxiety in a given context and/or situation”
(168). State- (or situational) CA is usually associated with a particular context or speaking
situation—teaching, for instance. An instructor who experiences CA when speaking before a
classroom may not necessarily feel anxious in other communicative situations. Individuals with
trait-CA, however, experience apprehension in a variety of situations (McCroskey and Beatty
80), and are thus more susceptible to different types of state-CA. Instructors with trait-CA,
therefore, might not only experience anxiety during class time but also while conferencing with
individual students, addressing fellow teachers in a department meeting, and even socializing
with colleagues or friends after work.
Public speaking anxiety is one of the most common manifestations of communication apprehension, though it is usually considered a type of state- rather than trait-CA because it is the public speaking situation itself, not the speaker’s predisposition towards communication apprehension, which inhibits her ability to communicate. Even for those who are not apprehensive in other communicative contexts, the act of public speaking is both challenging and unsettling. The speaker must not only communicate effectively but also appear credible, self-assured, and sincere in order to establish a rapport with his audience. This demanding rhetorical task, therefore, is fraught with potential for failure; if he cannot gain the audience’s attention or trust, or maintain a poised demeanor, or articulate his message clearly, the speaker’s efforts are rendered fruitless. Fear or anticipation of such failure, however, unnerves the speaker, often to the point where she can no longer communicate successfully in this context. Either prior to or during the speaking act, highly apprehensive speakers experience symptoms of physical and psychological distress (including trembling, sweating, nausea, limited verbal output, and confusion) which impair their abilities to perform (Harris et al. 544; Gardner and Leak 28). Speakers who appear visibly nervous also have difficulty securing the audience’s approval or maintaining control of the speaking situation, and are thus perceived as less credible or persuasive (Roach 169-71). Consequently, those who suffer such anxiety often choose to avoid or withdraw from public speaking situations in order to escape its “immediate as well as extended deleterious effects” (Gardner and Leak 28).

Teacher-Student Communication: Teaching, like public speaking, rests on effective communication (Roach 167; Wolcowitz 24). The instructor’s communicative style not only influences students’ learning, but also shapes their perceptions of and behaviors towards the instructor. “People associate patterns of interaction,” Robert W. Norton explains. “To the extent
that the patterns of association are salient, they give form to expectations,” so “the way a person communicates to a large extent determines self-identity and affects others’ perceptions of the individual” (36). In essence, each time the instructor publicly addresses her students, or conferences with them, or comments on their work, she communicates what is expected of her students as well as what they should expect for themselves. Though the syllabus and course policy are explicit contracts that the teacher uses to clarify the objectives and expectations of the course, she also establishes an implicit contract through her behaviors and attitudes towards students (Wolcowitz 11). The instructor’s language, gestures, pitch, position, and eye-contact, therefore, all set the communicative tone of the classroom.

Instructors who use positive communicative styles usually foster “physical and psychological closeness,” or *immediacy*. Immediacy behaviors such as nodding, smiling, making eye contact, gesturing, and leaning forward (Andersen 45) give students the impression that the instructor enjoys working with them and has a vested interest in their learning; they in turn feel more comfortable asking questions, participating in class activities, and visiting during office hours (Andersen 46; Wolcowitz 14). Thus, immediacy behaviors not only enhance student learning (Andersen 45) but “lower fears about communicating in class—regardless of students’ trait communication apprehension level” (Kearney and McCroskey qtd. in Roach 172). Instructors who are unwilling to or apprehensive about communicating with students, however, are “not likely to engage in verbal or nonverbal behaviors that foster student perceptions of [immediacy]” (Roach 171), and are generally perceived as less caring, knowledgeable, friendly, or accessible than more immediate instructors (Andersen 46). Such apprehension thus impedes the learning process and may actually stimulate student anxiety (Roach 172). Teacher immediacy, therefore, negatively correlates with both instructor and student CA.
The instructor’s behavior towards students as well as his professional practices and goals are influenced not only by his CA and WTC but also by his sense of teacher efficacy—that is, his belief in his abilities “to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy qtd. in Henson). Teacher efficacy is comprised of both general teaching efficacy (GTE) and personal teaching efficacy (PTE). GTE refers to “teachers’ expectations that their instruction can influence student learning”—i.e., how much instructors think they can accomplish collectively as a professional group. PTE is the individual instructor’s assessment of her own competence, her sense of how much she can accomplish (Li and Zhang). Together, GTE and PTE form the instructor’s perceptions of her professional and personal capacities to successfully impart student learning.

Both GTE and PTE are influenced by the instructor’s mastery (or actual) teaching experiences, vicarious teaching experiences (such as classroom observations or conversations with other teachers), verbal persuasion (including feedback about the instructor’s performance), and physiological or emotional arousal while teaching (Henson; Li and Zhang). Instructors who enjoy rewarding teaching experiences, receive positive feedback on their performances, and feel relaxed and self-assured while teaching generally report higher teacher efficacy than those who feel tense or receive negative feedback (Li and Zhang). Such efficacy beliefs, Li and Zhang explain, “influence how much effort [teachers] put forth, how long they will persist in the face of obstacles, and how resilient they are in dealing with failure.” Teachers with high efficacy are more willing to learn from mistakes and “persist in helping students with difficulties in learning” (Yetkin). Teachers with low efficacy, however, are easily discouraged by and likely to internalize failure; they are also more apprehensive about communicating with students and other
instructors and less motivated to teach (Henson). How a teacher perceives herself and the teaching profession, therefore, affects not only her instructional efforts and behaviors but ultimately her success or failure as an educator (Henson).

Teacher efficacy shapes not only our professional beliefs and practices but also “our life interests, things we like and enjoy doing” (Griffin-Jeansonne and Caliste 50)—our job satisfaction, so to speak. Job satisfaction is comprised of the teacher’s self-assessment of his performance, his belief in his abilities to foster student learning, and the level of enjoyment he experiences while teaching. Like teacher efficacy, job satisfaction is influenced by teaching experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal, as well as the professional, academic, and social dimensions of the work environment itself. The instructor’s teaching load, the physical spaces in which she works, the resources she is provided, the faculty and students with whom she interacts, and any other professional demands placed on her all affect her job performance, and subsequently, her satisfaction with her work. Instructors who successfully negotiate such circumstances typically find teaching both rewarding and meaningful (Li and Zhang). Those, however, who “believe that environment and other factors beyond their control limit their abilities to bring about change in children” often “feel helpless and give up trying to help children learn”; they thus tend to avoid any teacher-related stimuli which may cause them to feel anxious or incompetent (Yetkin). Without administrative support or intervention, however, such teachers succumb to low morale, exhaustion, and anxiety (Ward and Perry 120), and may become so dissatisfied or anxious that they quit their jobs. Teaching anxiety, therefore, may be directly linked to those “unpleasant work and career situations” (Ameen et al. 16) which negatively impact the instructor’s job satisfaction.
There exists, however, a positive correlation between the instructor’s efficacy and her concerns for student improvement, teacher-student communication, and effective instruction: “Students [generally] believe [the] ‘best’ teachers are those who feel good enough about themselves to be concerned with students’ feelings and acknowledge the need for beneficial suggestions” (Griffen-Jeansonne and Caliste 250). What preoccupies the teacher, therefore—his teaching concerns, so to speak—is indicative of how much confidence he has in his teaching and how much effort he is willing to invest. Teaching concerns generally consist of a) self-task concerns (such as adhering to and/or meeting program policies and demands), b) self-adequacy concerns (that is, performing teaching tasks effectively), and c) student learning (Griffen-Jeansonne and Caliste 251). The extent to which the instructor focuses on each of these concerns, however, is largely determined by her previous teaching experiences, institutional and program expectations, personal background, current status, and comfort level with students (Coates and Thoresen 4; Park 353). GTAs, arguably the least experienced and most apprehensive teaching population, must often “confront issues relating to identity and notions of self-worth, as their views, beliefs, and ideas are tested and refined in the crucible of classroom contact with students” (Park 354). In their efforts to become acclimated to the classroom environment quickly and efficiently, they often find themselves adopting classroom practices which differ from or conflict with their “professed beliefs about teaching” (Park 355) or which they do not thoroughly understand (North 35), and may thus be more prone to intense or frequent bouts of teaching anxiety when confronted with stressful situations that force them to question their competence.

When instructors do encounter stressful situations (e.g., student hostility, class disruptions, challenges to their authority), their responses not only affect their teaching
performance but students’ perceptions of them as well (Roach 170). How teachers cope, therefore, must be both appropriate to and effective in resolving such problems. *Coping* generally refers to the instructor’s “cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce and master the internal and/or external demands that are produced by a stressful transaction” (Hirokawa et al. 204); these “cognitive and behavioral” efforts are indicative of how confident the instructor feels in his capabilities to resolve stressful situations and how apprehensive he is towards teacher-related conflict. Though instructors might employ any number of coping strategies for handling problems, some strategies are arguably more appropriate than others. *Active coping strategies* allow the instructor to assess, confront, and successfully resolve or minimize conflict. Problem-focused coping, for instance, “includes collecting information and refocusing on the problem” (Hirokawa et al. 204). Emotion-focused coping, likewise, “[…] used to regulate emotion by focusing attention on the emotional response aroused by the stressor and shifting one’s attention” (Hirokawa et al. 204). Together, these coping behaviors encourage the instructor to curtail her emotional arousal in order to process and react appropriately to the situation. When challenged by a student, for instance, the instructor attempts to remain calm, and encourages the hostile student to do the same (Hodges 74). She then assesses the conflict’s source in order to ascertain what sort of responsibility she has towards it and if there is anything she can do. If the student remains hostile, the teacher may seek advice or support from a supervisor, mentor, or colleague. These sorts of responses, therefore, enable the instructor to resolve stressful situations more efficiently and effectively without losing classroom control or creating further conflict.

But confronting conflict head-on is daunting, especially for instructors who have high CA or are inexperienced and therefore less equipped to handle such problems. In some cases, then, the instructor might resort to *passive coping*. Passive coping is essentially “avoid-and-escape
coping, […] [including] behaviors such as escaping from and negatively interpreting a stressful event” (Hirokawa et al. 204). Instead of quelling class disruptions or management issues, the instructor chooses to ignore them, or “appeal to authority or rules,” (Roach 170) or simply wait for the unpleasantness to pass (Bobrick). Such behavior may allow the instructor to function temporarily in an anxiety-inducing environment, thus giving her a false sense of security and competence. Ultimately, however, most passive coping strategies prove ineffective because they do not reduce or resolve the source of anxiety. Over time, they may actually exacerbate the teacher’s anxiety, especially if, having once effectively allayed her fears, they now no longer work. Without intervention, therefore, teachers who rely upon passive coping strategies “could actually learn to be more anxious as a result of performing or practicing in an environment that provokes sensitization and attenuates early habituation” (Behnke and Sawyer 170).

What Triggers Teaching Anxiety?

Ascribing causes or triggers to teaching anxiety, however, can be tricky, considering that teaching is, by its very nature, an anxious craft. Every time he conducts a class session, conferences with students, or comments on their work, the instructor exposes himself “to myriad forms of criticism and rejection, as well as to emulation and flattery and love” (Tomkins qtd. in Battaglia 3); anything that rattles the instructor’s confidence in his abilities might be considered a trigger of anxiety. Student apathy and hostility, for instance, challenge the teacher’s confidence in her abilities to foster student growth and learning (Dethier 95). Awkward or confrontational conferences with “difficult students” likewise drain instructors of their energy (Dethier 99), as do instances of student dishonesty, plagiarism, and classroom disruptions (Hodges 73-4). In short, any teacher-related stimulus or environmental factor that upsets or significantly alters teacher-student communication or classroom dynamics can trigger anxiety.
The anticipation of such disruptions may also trigger teaching anxiety. Anxiety-sufferers generally report experiencing the most intense bouts of anxiety just prior to or at the start of the semester (Gardner and Leak 30), perhaps because they view the last few days preceding a new term as the calm before the storm. “Every August,” Bobrick explains, the instructor’s “track records of publications and years of positive student evaluations suddenly seemed a sham, a mirage, a barely opaque veneer over something far worse than emptiness: delusion.” Anxious teachers are also preoccupied by the possibility of things going wrong—what Lynna Williams refers to as “a teachable moment” (qtd. in Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 77)—and may be unnerved or inhibited by the horror stories of their profession:

> Every story we heard about a Teachable Moment seemed to involve a disaster of some kind in the classroom. Students who made out in the back row were a teachable moment, and students who thought grammar was a bourgeois plot were a teachable moment […]. After a while, none of us wanted to be anywhere near a T.M. unless we were holding an airline ticket to Buenos Aires and the offer of a job from a Fortune 500 Company. (qtd. in Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 77)

Perhaps no other teacher population is more vulnerable to “teachable moments” than instructors who have little experience with and few strategies for effectively handling such problems. The graduate teaching assistant faces a challenging situation during his first semester of teaching. To achieve comfort and success in his new role as a writing instructor, he must master “a rather daunting range of relevant competencies, including […] [the] ability to cope with stress […] and […] understanding of what to reasonably expect from undergraduate students (particularly new ones)” (Park 350). Unfortunately, it is difficult for many GTAs to cope with stress when they
are not quite sure what to expect from their undergraduate students. Most GTAs have had little
(if any) formal training or teaching experience, yet they must now assume those teaching
responsibilities for which they have not been prepared (Andersen 42). Not surprisingly, “for
many graduate students,” Christine Farris notes, “teaching may be the first thing in their
academic careers that has not gone really well from the beginning” (qtd. in Duffelmeyer 296).
Having met prior academic challenges with great success, the GTA usually expects to be an
effective instructor before even setting foot in the classroom (Duffelmeyer 296). Upon
discovering that his actual teaching experiences do not match his expectations, the GTA becomes
quite anxious and confused. After stumbling through a disastrous teaching experience, for
instance, one unfortunate GTA in Duffelmeyer’s study lamented, “I felt that the center of
learning was shifted in a way that was rather bewildering, in spite of my determination to master
this strangeness and be in control of my classroom” (qtd. in Duffelmeyer 299). The GTA
assumed she would be competent from the start, that she would have complete control of her
classroom; when the classroom dynamics changed, she felt bewildered by and resentful towards
her students, her classroom environment, and her own teaching performance. This competence-
before-performance mentality, therefore, often triggers feelings of anxiety and powerlessness,
especially when things don’t go according to plan.

Regardless of rank, training, or previous teaching experiences, however, nearly all
college instructors feel at least some pressure to meet program and institutional expectations,
including teacher competence. “The fulfillment of mutual expectations,” Marso and Pigge
explain, such as teaching effectiveness and strong student performance, “leads to mutual
satisfaction and successful employment; conversely, unmet expectations result in increases in
stress and anxiety which may lead to termination of employment.” Any external constraints
which impair the teacher’s abilities to fulfill these “mutual expectations” or his relationship to his professional community—e.g., heavy teaching loads, insufficient resources or poor working conditions, professional or personal conflicts with students or colleagues, etc.—can trigger anxiety. “Many sources of anxiety for the writing teacher,” Brock Dethier observes, “spring from deep-seated conflict between our beliefs and the activities we engage in, especially when external requirements dictate what we do” (58). Most writing instructors must adhere to established learning outcomes, and their teaching merits are thus determined by both student evaluation and student performance; in this sense, writing instructors are assessed not only by but through their students. Formal evaluation or assessment procedures, particularly those designed and/or administered by evaluators outside the teacher’s classroom, may challenge or even interfere with the teacher’s practices or beliefs. In fact, many teachers consider assessment “an intrusion into their lives, for no good purpose” (White 3) because they feel forced to adhere to standards that are frequently “imposed from outside the classroom” and subsequently “insensitive to the students, to learning, to teaching, and to the discipline” (White 4). These kinds of assessment procedures are a source of considerable anxiety for some instructors, not only because they dictate from afar how teachers should behave or how their competence is determined (Hong 79; Gardner and Leak 30), but also because they could potentially expose the teacher’s apparent inability or unwillingness to meet program and university standards of teaching excellence.

Expectations for teaching effectiveness and student learning may also trigger anxiety because success or failure in these ventures molds the instructor’s sense of self-worth and responsibility to her students—her teacher efficacy. Because teacher efficacy is shaped by the instructor’s teaching experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional
arousal (Li and Zhang; Henson), the extent to which such influences are positive or negative
determine how competent, comfortable, and successful the instructor considers herself, and thus
how anxious she feels about teaching. “Teachers’ repeated negative experiences with teaching,”
Yetkin explains, “[…] result in low sense of efficacy,” thus producing “high levels of anxiety
towards teaching.” Teachers with high efficacy are risk-takers; not only are they more visibly
talkative with students, they also exhibit patience and innovation in their teaching techniques
(Henson). Teachers who question their competence, however, usually avoid communication
with students and are generally less willing to stray from traditional teaching practices (Andersen
46). Consequently, an anxious instructor rarely integrates new methods into his teaching
repertoire. Once he develops a method that he finds safe or comfortable, he is often reluctant to
modify or replace it; it is as if he has been pedagogically frozen. It is at this crucial point, Roach
argues, that “such apprehension becomes critically salient” (166) and the instructor’s low teacher
efficacy negatively impacts his behavior, emotional well-being, and teaching performance (166-8).

**What Does Teaching Anxiety Trigger?**

As previous research suggests, anxiety-sufferers often experience both physiological and
psychological duress. Nervous public speakers often report “palpitations, sweating,
gastrointestinal discomfort, diarrhea, muscle tension, and confusion” both before and during a
public speaking act (Harris et al. 544). Likewise, anxiety-stricken teachers frequently experience
stomach cramps (Ameen et al. 17), heartburn, sleeplessness, sweating (Hong 76-77), and
trembling (Gardner and Leak 28). Dreams also plague many anxious teachers, and are one of the
most common manifestations of teaching anxiety (Bobrick). Michael Berube describes “the
‘psychic landscape’ of teaching dreams in terms of mysterious buildings, phantom students,
surreal classrooms, and an overwhelming aura of sheer suffocating terror” (Battaglia 2), as if at any moment, the rug might be pulled out from beneath the instructor’s feet. “The house of knowledge in which [the instructor] normally dwells,” Bobrick explains, “still has its custom bookcases, ceramic-tile fireplace and recessed lighting fixtures, but the floors are gone, the pipes have burst and the walls weren’t wired according to code.” Teaching becomes a nightmare scenario for the anxiety-sufferer; despite his best efforts, he feels doomed to failure, and so adopts communication behaviors and teaching strategies which enable him to avoid such anxiety-inducing stimuli.

Not surprisingly, most anxious instructors usually procrastinate on teaching tasks, particularly grading and lesson preparation (Roach 169). Like an apprehensive writer, the instructor clings to “a number of unrealistic attitudes that promote needless delay and lead to obstructive feelings, notably performance anxiety, low frustration tolerance, and resentment” (Bakunas 52). The teacher convinces herself that the task at hand is not only hard, but too hard, yet believes if she doesn’t do a good job, she is a failure. The only viable option is to put it off until it is no longer possible to devote the necessary time to complete the task sufficiently. Concerned less with what she is doing than simply getting it done (Selfe 88), the instructor throws together a half-congealed lesson plan or grades papers the night before returning them without giving much thought to comments or suggestions. These practices are almost certain to fail, but the procrastinator can at least attribute such failure to situational factors (i.e., an impossible task, insufficient time) rather than her own personal inadequacies.

Conversely, some anxious instructors spend exorbitant amounts of time on teaching tasks, usually because they are uncertain as to how to complete such tasks effectively in less time. Some writing instructors, for instance, have no practical strategies for handling an
especially difficult batch of essays except to spend 40 or 50 minutes per paper highlighting every single flaw. Without any sense of how to construct or deliver purposeful, innovative lesson plans, anxious instructors may spend hours developing any number of classroom materials (most of which are discarded without any explanation as to why) or reciting lectures over and over again. These tactics, too, are destined to fail. Roach observes that anxious instructors “engage in lesson preparation that actually hinders the effectiveness of lesson presentation”; though they often spend “more time on lesson preparation,” they enjoy “less success on lesson delivery/results” (170). An instructor who spends hours drafting and reciting lesson plans or grading papers with little reward for her efforts is bound to feel frustrated, confused, and condemned to failure. Once these behaviors become habitual, however, the teacher is reluctant to discard them, even if they further exacerbate classroom dissent, which they often do.

Instead, the teacher clings to those few strategies that make it possible for him to continue functioning (at least temporarily) in a situation that causes him such angst. In an effort to distance himself from students, the anxious instructor might create a classroom persona wholly different from his own, though in most cases, Dethier observes, this usually exacerbates his anxiety: “[I]t takes energy to hold a mask on, and eventually that strain turns into anxiety” (63). The instructor may also schedule office hours at inconvenient times for her students to evade them (Ameen et al. 16); or remain behind her desk during class time; or rely heavily upon teacher-centered instructional methods to reduce the amount of communication amongst her students and/or between herself and her students. The instructor’s apparent unwillingness to communicate may cause students to perceive him as cold and aloof and to avoid social situations with him, which often exacerbates his anxiety (Daly 23; Wolcowitz 14; Andersen 46). As such, instructors with high anxiety levels are “likely to foster negative student impressions” and be
“seen as less competent” (Roach 171); their students in turn generally learn less, describe their learning experiences as unpleasant or unproductive, and may even become anxious themselves (Roach 171-2).

**Writing Apprehension Revisited**

It has already been suggested that teaching anxiety closely parallels writing apprehension in terms of its causes and symptoms. Further investigation, however, may reveal writing apprehension as a significant component of teaching anxiety as it pertains to our field. Because they must foster student writing through constructive and evaluative feedback, composition instructors likely write more (both in quantity and frequency) than instructors in other disciplines. During one semester, a first-year composition instructor might require students to complete five major essays, as well as any number of additional drafts and prewriting exercises for each assignment. Every time she responds to a piece of student writing, she must assess the writing’s quality, communicate its strengths and weaknesses to the student, and provide suggestions for further revision and fine-tuning (Dethier 60), thus enabling the student to think more “deeply and diligently” about his work (Ryder et al. 45). Responding to student writing, therefore, is a near-constant and formidable task, especially considering that the manner in which we “read” and respond to our students’ work has significant impact on their development as writers (Tobin 74; Williams, *Preparing to Teach Writing* 255); our comments “offer an opportunity to make the key concepts of the class more meaningful to students and enable us to give substance to the claims we make about their roles as writers, our roles as teachers, and the work of writing” (Straub 356). Many instructors, however, are apprehensive about responding to student writing, perhaps because they “haven’t yet evolved their own way to read papers efficiently” (Dethier 77), or because they possess a “limited repertoire” of response strategies
(Selfe 91), or because they run across a paper so plagued with problems that they simply don’t know where to begin. When faced with uncertainty, teachers may fall back on inappropriate response techniques (Rose, *Writer’s Block* 5; Duffelmeyer 298) or rely too heavily upon one or two grading practices, many of which aren’t suited to the kinds of papers students might produce.

It is also possible that some teachers respond ineffectively to student writing because our role in this endeavor has been somewhat misunderstood. “While we have begun to understand how students compose and to develop a more comprehensive and flexible view of the unconscious forces which shape their composing,” Lad Tobin argues, “we continue to oversimplify the teacher’s reading or interpretative processes” (74), especially in terms of how we interact with students. We recognize the necessity of becoming intimately involved with our students if we are to help them become independent writers, yet fear the possible complications of such intimacy: “Carnicelli, Zelnick, Murray, and others seem to admit that there is role-modeling, sexual tension, even transference in the teaching of writing and the teacher-student relationship, but because these things make them uncomfortable (which they should) they deny their significance and suggest that we focus on the writing process and product as if it existed in a de-contextualized situation and relationship” (Tobin 79). In our efforts to de-contextualize the writing process, however, we inadvertently reduce composition to a mechanical process and ourselves to mere overseers of the whole operation: “By remaining detached in this way, by refusing to misread essays in personal and playful ways, we make composition an unpleasant duty—for our students *and* for ourselves” (Tobin 78). Even if we don’t find this “detached” approach to teaching writing pleasant, it seems more practical—safer, at least—to keep our students’ personal lives, fears, and desires at bay.
No where else do we try to remain more objective and aloof than at the critical moment when we must calculate the merits and flaws of a piece of writing and assign it a grade (Fischer, “Handling the Confrontative Conference” 433), perhaps “the only concrete, as well as the most valuable, cultural capital that our teaching creates” (Hindman 404) and the chief source of motivation for most students. Many teachers, even the inexperienced, are aware of how difficult this evaluative process can be, knowing full well that the student writer is likely to internalize a grade not only as a reflection of his writing abilities but as a reflection of himself as a student and a successful participant in academic discourse (Kountz; Dethier 60). Composition teachers, especially GTAs, are reluctant to give low or failing grades (except perhaps in cases of plagiarism or apathy) at the risk of deterring students’ efforts: “[Though] teachers [might] anticipate students’ distress we still may not be able to defuse it with a few encouraging words” (Kountz). Even veteran instructors are sometimes apprehensive about exposing students to their eccentricities and personal biases, of handing out grades based upon subjective stances (Dethier 57). And because composition students aren’t taking tests that can be objectively graded or scored, they must somehow figure out what we think is essential to good writing, what we consider to be the qualities of a strong academic performance. This, too, makes us reticent, even resistant graders. Although we don’t want to mystify the writing process for students, we don’t necessarily want to be figured out, either. We want our students to become better writers, not better at pleasing us.

But we often find ourselves contending with at least twelve years of writing instruction prostitution, of students catering to the whims and idiosyncrasies of former teachers without really understanding what they were doing or why. “Long before students get to college,” Dethier explains, “their language training has been affected by a host of psychological and
cultural factors—varieties of intelligences, cultural definitions of ‘good writing,’ scars and beliefs from years of English classes” (66). Like the ambitious neophyte instructor (Duffelmeyer 296), the comp 101 student enters the writing classroom with certain expectations—that she’s already guaranteed success and that, though she’s not exactly passionate about writing per se, she’ll have this writing instructor figured out before too long (Fischer, “Handling the Confrontative Conference” 433). In most cases, the honeymoon period between student and teacher definitively ends when the teacher asks the student to do something for which she is unprepared (Rose, Writer’s Block 6)—to analyze instead of summarize, to argue instead of inform: “FYC students, who may have been very successful with the writing assignments they completed in high school, are now engaging in reading, writing, and thinking that demands more sophistication, analysis, and critical distance on issues and on their own beliefs than has been asked of them before” (Duffelmeyer 296). The instructor’s goal becomes one of helping the student move beyond the sort of data-dumping and book-reporting she’s done before, but to do that, his comments must prompt some sort of action—e.g., critical reflection, revision, editing, etc. (Hodges 73)—and many students are reluctant to reexamine their own work, “preferring instead that [the teacher] comment[s] on ‘everything that’s wrong’ so they can ‘correct’ it all in one shot” (Moneyhun 328). If they really must sit down and rework a paper, they usually do so under the premise that this second or third go-around is going to earn them a much, much higher grade: “Students […] are more and more these days construed as customers, and, as in any potential ‘purchase’ […], the customer ultimately controls what matters most: money” (Kameen 216). Responding to student writing thus becomes a game of quid pro quo, with the student often holding all the cards: *If you can’t guarantee me what I want, I don’t see the point to all this.*
At this point, however, I can only speculate as to how certain aspects of writing instruction—e.g., our own puzzling identities, the fragmentation of our teaching duties, and the cultural, social, and intellectual baggage students bring with them—effect anxiety because the teaching stories we usually read or hear about recount success and brilliance, not failure or confusion. “There is an emotional turbulence and a frequency of failure in my own teaching,” Thomas Newkirk admits, “that I do not see reflected in many accounts, including ones I have written or edited myself” (3). What our lore does reflect, however, are several misconceptions that we have about teaching anxiety—namely, that teaching anxiety is ephemeral, limited to certain teaching groups (specifically, the inexperienced and the incompetent), and alleviated through classroom exposure.

**The Myths of Anxiety**

Some writing instruction literature has falsely mistaken teaching anxiety for “first-day jitters,” the emotional “turbulence and agitation” many instructors experience when they must ready themselves to “attach to yet another set of students” (Bobrick). In their popular teaching manual *The New St. Martin’s Guide for Teaching Writing*, Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn briefly address teaching anxiety in the second chapter, entitled “The First Few Days of Classes.” The opening paragraph indicates that the initial point of contact between writing instructor and student can be harrowing, especially for the inexperienced or unprepared: “There is nothing like the prospect of teaching your first college class to make you wonder about your own image and how you are perceived by others” (28). Connors and Glenn suggest that new instructors feel incredible pressure to perform competently in so many different (and often conflicting) roles with which they have had little experience: “The teaching act is a performance in the full sense of that word; the teacher is instructor, coordinator, actor, facilitator, announcer, pedagogue,
ringmaster” (28). No doubt many new instructors find this list of responsibilities daunting and anxiety-provoking. But Connors and Glenn assure readers that their feelings of nervousness are perfectly normal. Every beginning teacher, they contend, experiences some apprehension when greeting a new class, a new teaching situation, and a new set of responsibilities. At the close of the chapter, however, they insist that by the end of the week, “you’re an experienced teacher by now and starting to get used to the role” (35). This is an encouraging statement but quite misleading. A teacher who has taught a grand total of two or three class sessions is not “experienced,” nor is she necessarily ready to slip into the role of instructor. Yet no where else in The New St. Martin’s Guide do Connors and Glenn directly address any triggers or symptoms associated with teaching anxiety. It is assumed, therefore, that as the instructor becomes familiar with the rhetorical act of teaching, her apprehensions decrease and her teaching effectiveness improves. Through trial and error, she learns which lesson plans and course materials are effective and which must be refined or abandoned altogether and how to balance her teaching duties with other facets of her life (i.e., graduate work, administrative work, and/or critical inquiry).

The New St. Martin’s Guide is a well-used training instrument and thus representative of other writing instruction manuals. More importantly, however, it reflects our field’s perception of teaching anxiety as striking hardest just before the start of a new semester, and it is not alone in this regard. In his handbook The Composition Instructor’s Survival Guide, Dethier, a twenty-three-year veteran, admits to experiencing “so many moments of first-day jitters” that he can hardly remember them all, although he later explains that, after two decades of teaching, “first-day stress has transformed into the pleasant, energetic high of taking the stage once again, searching a roomful of new faces, wondering what they have in store for me” (57). Perhaps
some apprehension (for both students and the teacher) resurfaces when the instructor returns that first batch of graded papers or a lesson plan flops. But these occasional bouts of anxiety are normal, Dethier contends, and usually not nearly as intimidating as that first day when the teacher must embark on the unknown. According to the “first-day jitters” myth, therefore, teaching anxiety is lessened through experience; gradually, the apprehension dissipates, to be replaced with a sense of euphoria rather than dread, confidence rather than doubt.

There are two possible reasons as to why the comparison between “first-day jitters” and teaching anxiety continues to pervade teaching manuals and professional literature. First, this connection renders teaching anxiety treatable through simple immersion. Like a hydrophobic patient who reduces her fear of water by gradually submerging herself in a tank, the instructor must only immerse herself in the teaching situation in order to confront, alleviate, and ultimately control her apprehension. Secondly, the alleged transitory nature of teaching anxiety gives inexperienced instructors a much needed sense of hope. First-time teachers want so desperately to believe that their feelings of self-doubt and exposure are not only normal but short-lived, that they will never again have to go through the experience of being “one small deer in a headlight factory” (Heimer 11). As Roach’s study has shown, however, teaching anxiety is aggravated or sustained by maladaptive teaching techniques, a lack of communication between teacher and students (which frequently results in poor or strained classroom dynamics), and an unwillingness on the instructor’s part to disclose fears or failures to colleagues or administrators (Roach 178; Ameen et al. 16). Teaching anxiety is a continuous cycle of despondency, malaise, ineffective coping strategies, and constant feelings of isolation and bewilderment. It cannot be alleviated with experience alone.
Unfortunately, because of the prevalence of the “first-day jitters” myth, many instructors assume that teaching anxiety is unique to beginning or incompetent teachers, that good, experienced instructors are simply too confident, too collected, and too efficient for moments of uncertainty (Newkirk 3). Consequently, many instructors (both new and experienced) are less willing to challenge prevailing notions of teaching anxiety, and thus less comfortable discussing their apprehensions or failures with others. “To admit these feelings, to tell a different narrative,” argues Newkirk, “is to risk being thought weird, perverted, not a good teacher” (1). This is not to say that some instructors have not shared with fellow practitioners those moments when they, too, felt pangs of confusion and doubt—Richard H. Haswell and Min-Zhan Lu’s *Comp Tales* is a remarkable compilation of both teacher triumphs and tribulations—but most practitioner lore is saturated with “the mythologies of the creative and unruffled” (Heimer 13), the stories of classrooms where everything seems to work perfectly, where the teacher “never shows signs of despondency, frustration, anger, impatience, or disappointment” (Newkirk 3). What we get, essentially, is an edited version of our professional narrative. And many teachers, especially those new to the profession, may not possess the prowess to discern fact from fiction, to recognize that success stories are usually edited and sugar-coated and thus do not accurately reflect the goings-on of the typical classroom (Duffelmeyer 297; Newkirk 3; Heimer 12-13). To admit one’s incompetence or failure is, in the minds of those stricken with anxiety, equivalent to confessing one is a deviant, a defective, a fraud. Silence, therefore, seems the better strategy.

Because the narratives of anxiety-sufferers are left unspoken, practitioners are instead bombarded with “consistently upbeat stories” (Newkirk 3) of innovative, energetic, nurturing teachers, of eager-to-learn and well-behaved students. Though these stories fail to capture the
emotional turbulence of teaching (Battaglia 3), the story-telling conventions of our practitioner
lore remain so powerful and pervasive that they influence not only how we should approach our
teaching duties but also how we should regard our students, our profession, and ourselves.

“These conventions define what is said and what is unsaid,” explains Newkirk. “They determine
the appropriate kinds of responses to certain situations—and they indicate reactions or feelings
that are inappropriate” (1). Even to feel anxious, uncertain, or dismayed is to deviate from such
conventions and thus from the professional narrative itself. It is safer and more acceptable to at
least try to match the ideal of our practitioner lore rather than challenge it.

On those rare occasions when we do discover “‘the single right answer’ to [a]
pedagogical challenge” (Bishop qtd. in Duffelmeyer 303), we soar on our accomplishments. We
feel an incredible sense of self-affirmation, so certain are we that we really belong now, that we
have somehow made it. Unfortunately, moments like these are infrequent, especially if we wind
up with a roomful of “students from hell” (Hong 31), or a frighteningly apathetic class, or
unreliable lab equipment (Duffelmeyer 297). Despite our best efforts, something always disrupts
the learning process (Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 66-67). Sometimes we don’t
feel at the top of our game, though we often fake our enthusiasm (Newkirk 3). Sometimes we
don’t know the answer. Sometimes students’ challenges to our authority or sudden changes in
classroom dynamics paralyze us (Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 67). And
sometimes we are simply left wondering why we decided to become teachers in the first place.
Perhaps we see other teachers who appear to have total control of the learning moment, and
criticize ourselves when we don’t match that ideal (Heimer 12-13; Bobrick). We are always
trying to achieve that ideal, and when it seems like we have, when we experience those euphoric
moments, we want them to last forever. They never do, of course. “No matter how good
[teachers] are,” Jane Tompkins laments, “it’s impossible not to get shot down’” (qtd. in Battaglia 3). But we cling so tightly to visions of success that we have come to dread conflict. We equate it to incompetence and laziness, to fraudulence and failure (Battaglia 3). And those of us who are stricken with anxiety will often do anything, even develop coping strategies that ultimately prove destructive, to avoid such conflict (Ameen et al. 16-17).

What happens to such teachers, however, is largely unknown because the fate of long-term anxiety sufferers is not generally discussed in our lore. Teaching anxiety seems to be the unfortunate destiny of the “novice”—i.e., the newcomer, the beginner—because she lacks the skills and strategies needed to resolve challenging or stressful situations (Duffelmeyer 296). “Many TA instructors have very little experience or training in instructional communication,” Roach observes (167), so it is understandable that new teachers are anxious about suddenly finding themselves in an incredibly demanding and difficult job for which their previous experiences have not prepared them (Duffelmeyer 295-6). Manuals like The New St. Martin’s Guide even cater to “novice” instructors by reassuring them that the mysterious and unknown will eventually become tangible and clear if they can just endure this rite of passage into the profession. Less sympathy is extended to instructors who feel awkward or bumbling long after losing their “novice” status. A first-year teaching assistant might very well sweat profusely before her first class (Heimer 11) or find herself in desperate need of a pacemaker to control her pounding heart (Hong 77). Yet we are genuinely baffled when we hear stories of renowned professors who spend as much time in the bathroom as they do preparing class materials or refuse prestigious appointments because they suddenly find themselves devoid of “basic information” (Bobrick). Such behavior isn’t understandable or expected. It’s bizarre, freakish, in fact. Like brilliant writers stricken with writer’s block, the anxiety of the veteran is perceived
as “a mysterious, amorphous emotional difficulty” (Rose, *Writer’s Block* 2) with no recognizable source or remedy.

What we sometimes forget, however, is that teaching is “a genuinely scary business” of “showmanship” (Bobrick), one that no one ever really masters. “It’s difficult to envision the intricate layers of teaching,” Anne Bramblett and Alison Knoblauch argue, “when we simply don’t know what to expect” (9). Every teaching situation not only elicits different emotions and behaviors, but is constantly evolving or being redefined according to the instructor’s perceptions of and responses to it. Teaching is a dynamic, living thing, not something one merely gets used to; instructors who encounter teaching situations with which they are unfamiliar are themselves novices, even if they have been teaching for five, ten, or twenty years. Practitioner lore that relies upon or reflects the myth that teaching anxiety only afflicts “novices,” therefore, ignores the concerns, anxieties, and communication problems of instructors who don’t neatly fit into the “novice” category, including those who are new to a particular university or program (Bramblett and Knoblauch 9), new to a country or culture, new to a curriculum or group of students (Bobrick), or simply unfamiliar with a specific teaching situation.

To mark the incredible absence of literature geared towards the anxieties of more experienced instructors, most practitioner lore purports the super teacher, a pedagogical wonder who flawlessly, efficiently, and successfully executes all of her teaching duties without ever feeling tired, despondent, or resentful (Newkirk 3). Super teachers facilitate productive class discussions, draft course materials and lesson plans, conference with students outside of class, grade papers, and quell classroom dissent—all with incredible diligence, cleverness, and energy. They are charismatic speakers who are able to “connect in a profound and personal but professional way with each student” (Heimer 13). They write quite frequently, though they
always make time to respond to their students’ papers with thoughtful, constructive feedback (Connors and Glenn 292). They don’t mind giving up their evenings or weekends to read dozens of student papers; they actually enjoy it. Super teachers are always willing to meet with struggling students. They are patient, wise, understanding, sympathetic, firm, and friendly (Newkirk 3). They mesmerize students with innovative teaching techniques. Every day they are greeted by the enthusiastic smiles of students already sitting expectantly in their classrooms. And for their efforts, super teachers are beloved by their students, admired by colleagues, revered by administrators.

Super teachers aren’t just successful, however. They are selfless, the quintessential caregivers, always thinking “in terms of students’ overall writing goals” and needs (Neman 103). Even the language of teaching manuals like Beth S. Neman’s Teaching Students to Write reinforces this notion. Good teachers “diagnose” students’ writing problems and promptly “remediate” them (Neman 164). They “facilitate” student learning; they “help” writers; they “encourage” their progress. Instructional resources like Teaching Students, however, pay less attention to those forces which often rip apart the learning process and thus render the super teacher mortal. Neman, for instance, provides transcripts of writing instructors’ class discussions and teacher-student conferences to illustrate how different pedagogical practices work in real-life situations. Nothing in these transcripts hints at anything that interrupts the learning process; every class session is a buzzing hive of learning and critical thinking, every conference session a psychological breakthrough. A student raises an excellent point that another student promptly questions or expands on (Neman 60-61); a confused writer suddenly realizes why her paper’s central premise is flawed, thanks in part to the brilliant conferencing strategies of her savvy and patient teacher (Neman 168-169). Nothing seems to go wrong in such lore.
But what happens when things do go wrong? What if the students refuse to talk during class? What if a student sits sullenly during a conference, voicing nothing except perhaps a complaint or two about the teacher’s subjective (and thus debatable) grading practices? What if a teacher wades through a batch of papers only to discover one riddled with obscenities (Anson et al. 91)? These are moments of teaching, too. When they don’t appear in the lore, however, teachers who experience such problems often feel terrified, inadequate, and isolated. “If I must imagine myself alone with this problem,” Newkirk writes, “my very competence as a teacher is called into doubt” (3). GTAs are especially susceptible to the super teacher myth because they have no previous teaching experiences with which to ground their expectations. When their actual experiences do not “measure up to what they have heard” (Duffelmeyer 297), GTAs feel frustrated and confused, desperately wanting someone more experienced, someone resembling the super teacher, to tell them what to do (Duffelmeyer 296). What they usually find, however, is “fantastic, inspiring, utterly intimidating rumor of the easy banter so and so has with her class, or the legend of the way the most dynamic professor opened his class session” (Heimer 12). GTAs’ own humble experiences cannot possibly “measure up” to this sort of teacher lore. Not wanting to appear imperfect, however, most GTAs avoid openly discussing their feelings of bewilderment and frustration, except perhaps with a trusted colleague or two. Instead, they tell edited versions of their teaching “successes,” thus reinforcing the super teacher construct (Heimer 12). If they do not recognize and confront the fallaciousness of this myth, therefore, GTAs never speak up about their teaching failures and are much more likely to interpret them as personal inadequacies. Likewise, veteran instructors, who are expected to embody the characteristics of the super teacher because they already have the experience and thus the necessary skills to perform their teaching duties successfully (Newkirk 3), might also feel
uncomfortable reporting feelings of frustration, isolation, and/or inadequacy because they find no safe place or sympathetic audience with which to do so.

**Challenging the Dominant Narrative**

To believe that our harrowing experiences are unique to us, to think that we are the only instructors whose students interrupt our teaching or challenge our authority, is simply unbearable. Yet because the predominant teaching narrative suggests that anxiety-sufferers are a few unfortunate neophytes, any sufferer is liable to think that her anxiety, however long it lasts, is unique to her, that she is alone in her suffering (Kirk and Walter 147). And without intervention from experienced or sympathetic colleagues, anxiety-sufferers may “sacrifice ideals for more traditional practices” (Stanulis et al. 72), opting for convenience, comfort, and practicality over innovation and effectiveness in their teaching strategies.

What anxious teachers need, therefore, is a supportive community where they might “explore the issues the success stories leave out” (Newkirk 6). While glancing through the compilation of instructors’ success and failure stories in *Comp Tales*, I discovered a wealth of information in these pages about the vexing, grueling experiences that often trigger or result from teaching anxiety. Contributing authors candidly recall their encounters with disruptive or uninterested students; their inabilities to quell classroom dissent; their hasty, sometimes shoddy grading practices; and their unwillingness to share these stories with other colleagues—until now, that is. “Telling these misadventures later, of course,” notes Haswell, “turns them into learning moments” (Haswell and Lu 11). This compilation of “learning moments” is, at least to some extent, an open forum, a call for stories, both good and bad, that challenges the prevailing teaching narrative. Might we be able to take this further? I wondered. Might we be able to provide a forum that not only offers incredible insights into the minds of participants, but also
enables us to engage in dialogue with them, to see how they negotiate difficult teaching moments, to understand how they support each other? *Comp Tales* is certainly a step in the right direction, but it is only a simulation of a teacher forum. Although the contributors publicly purged themselves of their worst and most embarrassing teaching moments, they could not respond to each other’s stories or offer advice. What I required was something that enabled teachers to share their stories and receive feedback and suggestions from others—a teaching group, so to speak.

The teaching group system is essentially a “collaborative undertaking by the teachers themselves” (Raymond 27), “a mutual aid group […], a therapeutic vehicle designed at one end of the intervention spectrum to assist people in crises and at the other end, to prevent maladaptive responses” (Kirk and Walter 147-8). The teaching group has two major benefits: it provides a safe, open forum where teachers can share their triumphs and failures, and it encourages anxiety-sufferers to replace unproductive coping strategies with more successful ones, thus engendering the belief that conflict can strengthen teachers’ pedagogical goals and practices (Hodges 72). Group members who reinterpret conflict in this manner may also experience or report less communication apprehension and generally more positive attitudes towards teaching (Andersen 46); they may also improve their self-efficacy through “compelling feedback that forcefully disrupts the preexisting disbelief in one’s capabilities” (Bandura qtd. in Henson). Talking with fellow instructors, therefore, might just be the boost of confidence anxiety-sufferers need.

I like to think of the teaching group as an extended invitation to instructors to participate in, challenge, and ultimately shape practitioner lore rather than be shaped by it. Stories of failure and absurdity need to be a part of our professional dialogue because they “keep us sane and
humble” and help us “celebrate the unpredictability of teaching” (Newkirk 7). More importantly, they remind us that our fears and insecurities are not unique, that there are other teachers who feel exactly as we do and are themselves struggling to understand why some things work and others don’t (Brown; Raymond 29). When we share our mishaps and apprehensions with each other, therefore, we both externalize and normalize them, making what was once secretive and unspoken a known and valuable part of our lore.

Before delving into the sorts of challenges and concerns participants disclosed to one another in group sessions, however, I must first orient readers to the participants themselves. Bramblett and Knoblauch suggest that in order to understand our uncertainties as educators we should “start with what we know: ourselves” (9). In Chapter Three: “The Participants,” therefore, I provide a detailed case study of each participant summarizing his or her educational and teaching backgrounds, current work responsibilities, and pedagogical beliefs and techniques so as to establish any possible links between these characteristics and the individual’s behavior towards other participants.
CHAPTER THREE: THE PARTICIPANTS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to examine each participant’s instructional approach, practices, and concerns in order to a) better understand his or her communicative behaviors towards colleagues and students, and b) isolate potential triggers or manifestations of teaching anxiety which the participant described or demonstrated. Data collected from participants’ survey and interview responses as well as their contributions to group sessions was subsequently utilized to construct case studies for each participant. Although nine instructors took part in the pilot study, I have composed case studies for only five (two males and three females), each of whom attended at least three teaching group meetings and facilitated all or part of one. Two such participants are full-time instructors who have taught at this particular university for over a decade. Another instructor has been with the writing program for several years as well, though she has just recently become a full-time faculty member. A fourth instructor, a graduate assistant, had, before this study began, taught only two sections of first-year composition. The fifth participant, a full-time teacher, had taught extensively at other institutions before joining the program last autumn. They are, therefore, a heterogeneous mix in terms of age, teaching experience, familiarity with the program, and current teacher status, which will enable me to identify correlative and/or causal relationships between such variables and possible triggers or manifestations of teaching anxiety. Verbal fillers, miscues, repeated phrases, and other “disfluencies in verbal presentation” have not been removed from any interview or group meeting transcripts, as these may indicate the degree to which a participant harbors anxiety towards a particular concept, issue, event, or person (McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective” 35).
Because these participants frequently reference specific aspects of the program during interview and group sessions, however, I must first discuss in greater detail the context in which they work—namely, the writing program’s student placement processes, core curriculum, learning outcomes assessment procedures, and instructional resources and training/mentoring programs. The remainder of this chapter offers a summary and analysis of each participant’s a) educational and teaching backgrounds, b) general teaching philosophy, c) current job responsibilities and practices, and e) teacher-related concerns.

The Writing Program
Placement Process

According to the writing program’s Instructors’ Handbook (which has been referenced anonymously so as to protect the participants’ identities), the program services over four thousand first-year students as well as any upperclassmen who have not yet completed the university’s prerequisite for graduation, Composition II (9). Prior to fall enrollment, each incoming first-year student must submit an online placement essay that is reviewed by two trained program instructors (and in some cases, by the program director as well) who, based upon program-stipulated criteria (e.g., audience awareness, structure and organization, development, syntax, vocabulary, and grammar), place the student in either Comp II (Varieties of Writing), Comp I (Introductory Writing), or Comp I-Basic (Developmental Writing) (Instructors’ Handbook 28-29).

Students placed in Comp II generally demonstrate a strong grasp of logical organization and coherence, syntactical variety, and appropriate word choice (Instructors’ Handbook 30-1); their writing is well-developed, sophisticated, and contains few grammatical and mechanical flaws. Approximately 12-15% of all first-year students are placed in Comp II every fall.
Students who place in Comp I adhere to some sort of overall structure, offer supporting details, and demonstrate “at least a moderate degree of control” of syntax and grammar usage, but their writing is simplistic and shows little critical thinking (Instructors’ Handbook 30). Most first-year students (about 70-76%) are placed in Comp I. Students are placed in Comp I-Basic if their writing exhibits little or no audience awareness, organization or coherence, development, syntactical variety, and/or familiarity with standard grammar usage (Instructors’ Handbook 29-30). About 12-15% of all first-year students place in Comp I-Basic each fall.

**Program Courses**

Comp I-Basic and Comp I are designed to familiarize students with the conventions of and processes for composing college-level argumentative and expository prose, including thesis construction, logical organization, topic development, and audience awareness (Instructors’ Handbook 32-33). Students enrolled in either of these courses typically complete five major assignments, four of which are graded. Though the purpose and nature of each assignment varies according to the individual instructor’s objectives, all Comp I-Basic and Comp I instructors generally require at least one argumentative or expository paper and one critique or evaluative essay, as well as any combination of other possible assignments, such as the causal argument, the concept essay, the personal narrative, or the observation essay. Each student’s final draft is evaluated as either “Passing” (P), “Almost Passing” (AP), or “No Pass” (NP) rather than assigned an actual letter grade; students who receive AP or NP evaluations are usually encouraged to revise and resubmit their work. To be eligible for portfolio review, each student must compose at least two “Passing” essays and adhere to the instructor’s attendance, homework, and participation policies specified in her achievement requirements. In terms of general course layout, therefore, Comp I-Basic and Comp I are essentially the same. Comp I-
Basic students, however, receive additional instruction in sentence-level and paragraph-level construction, word usage, and grammar, and meet five hours per week rather than three hours, as Comp I students do. Comp I-Basic classes are also smaller (18-20 students) than Comp I or Comp II classes (21-23 students), and are usually taught by seasoned instructors who provide students “individual assistance regarding their specific areas of difficulty, with the goal of helping them develop into independent writers” (Instructors’ Handbook 32). Regardless, students who pass either Comp I-Basic or Comp I are automatically enrolled in Comp II.

The purpose of Comp II is “to prepare students for the types of writing they will be expected to do [sic] in college” (Instructors’ Handbook 34) by locating, analyzing and evaluating scholarly source material and utilizing such material in their own writing. Unlike Comp I-Basic or Comp I students, Comp II students’ papers are assigned letter grades (A, B, C, or “No Pass”). They generally complete one scholarly critique, two multiple-source essays, and one longer researched essay project. To be eligible for portfolio assessment, Comp II students must pass the final researched essay project with a grade of “C” or higher, earn an overall course grade of “C” or higher, and meet their instructor’s achievement requirements. Several honors or theme-based Comp II sections are also offered each term to students who have been accepted into the university honors program and placed in Comp II. Each honors section “is individually designed by an instructor especially qualified to meet the needs of Honor Students” (Instructors’ Handbook 35). The instructor’s honors course proposal must be submitted to the writing program and honors program for approval, and is typically available for student review.

Student Evaluation and Portfolio Review

All instructors utilize the program rubric to evaluate student writing and “provide detailed analysis in support of [their] holistic evaluation[s]” (Instructors’ Handbook 41). The rubric
features six categories or “perspectives”—i.e., audience, organization and structure, development, syntax, word choice, and grammar/usage/mechanics—which the student must pass in order to receive either a “Passing” evaluation or a letter grade of A, B, or C on her work. If the student’s paper fails to pass one or more of these categories, the paper itself cannot pass.

At the semester’s end, every student enrolled in Comp I-Basic, Comp I, or Comp II must submit all required papers to his instructor in a writing folder purchased at the university bookstore. The writing folder contains two pockets for the student’s writing, a set of rubrics, a student self-assessment essay prompt (which must be completed before portfolio review), and an instructor evaluation sheet indicating whether the student’s work is being submitted as “Clearly Passing,” “Passing,” or “Borderline.” After collecting students’ folders, the instructor turns them in to the writing program office, where they are redistributed among one or more instructors who read through and evaluate each student’s work according to the program’s learning outcomes. A Comp I-Basic or Comp I student whose writing is deemed passing by the evaluator will receive an “S” (for “Satisfactory) on his transcript for the course and be placed in Comp II. If his work does not pass, however, he will receive an evaluation of “No Record” (or NR). No notation of the course will be made on the student’s transcript, and his grade-point average will not be affected, though he must re-enroll in Comp I. A student whose work passes at the Comp II level will receive an A, B, or C for the course, which will be calculated into the student’s grade-point average; if her work does not pass, however, she will receive an NR for the course, and must re-take Comp II (Instructors’ Handbook 55).

Students who have failed to meet the instructor’s achievement requirements, produce two passing essays (for Comp I-Basic or Comp I), or earn a “C” or higher on the final researched essay or for the course (for Comp II) will not have their final work submitted for portfolio review.
but will instead receive an NR. It is also possible, however, for a student to fail Comp I-Basic, Comp I, or Comp II if she stops “attending class without following official university procedures for dropping the class” (55). In such circumstances, the student receives a “Withdrawal Fail” (or WF) for the course, which is calculated into her GPA as an F.

Teacher Training and Resources

Program orientation is offered to all new instructors and graduate assistants prior to the start of the fall semester, the purpose of which is “to explain teaching duties, prepare new instructors for the first weeks of teaching, and provide instructional materials” (Instructors’ Handbook 19). Training and pedagogical development continue throughout most of the academic year in a weekly teaching seminar. New teachers also regularly meet with a mentor (usually an experienced instructor or graduate assistant) to “discuss assignment plans, evaluations, and interaction with students, as well as any other student-instructor matters that may arise” (Instructors’ Handbook 20). All essential program and teaching materials—e.g., sample syllabi and achievement requirements, instructor and portfolio assessment manuals—are distributed to faculty members and graduate assistants each year, and online versions of these documents are posted on the university’s online course management system portal. The portal itself also features a course shell where instructors can post electronic documents, collect students’ work via digital drop box, and create discussion forums for instructional purposes. In fact, one of the administrative duties of the first participant, Elizabeth, is this portal’s maintenance and accessibility.
Participant Case Studies

Elizabeth

Elizabeth currently teaches three sections of Comp II per semester, and is responsible for creating and revising online course management materials and familiarizing new instructors with the pedagogical applications of the online course management system. Since joining the program in 1994, Elizabeth has taught Comp I-Basic, Comp I, and Comp II in both traditional and computerized classrooms. For the past three years, however, she has taught Comp II exclusively, usually in one of the campus’s computer labs. During the 2005 Fall semester, for instance, Elizabeth taught all three of her Comp II classes in a ‘wireless’ (or laptop) lab, which, she explains, “I’ve done [...] before” and “will continue to do.”

Unlike some other participants, who have taught or are teaching composition in order to pursue other professional ambitions, Elizabeth was drawn to teaching at an early age: “I’m the oldest of eight kids and I think I always had that teacher role and that’s what influenced me.” Her own educational experiences were, for the most part, “very positive” and “easy” for her; she attended a small high school where no special classes were offered “so we all ran through the same basic stuff.” Although she developed a “great respect for teachers,” Elizabeth was initially reluctant to become one herself, believing she was in the minority of those who appreciated how hard teachers worked or how much they affected students’ lives. “I tried not to become a teacher,” she admits, “because I always felt that, uh, they were never as respected as they should be.” As an undergraduate, Elizabeth dabbled in journalism and broadcasting, which she later realized was a vain attempt to avoid a profession where so few were “respected as they should be.” Though it was never made clear how, why, or to what extent Elizabeth reconciled this perspective, it eventually became apparent to her that “teaching was the thing that I was gonna
do.” She completed her Bachelor of Science in English Education in 1992 and, after teaching middle-school students for a short time at a small Catholic school (and discovering that she “hated it”), returned to higher education to work on her Master of Arts and teach first-year college writing. After finishing her graduate studies, Elizabeth became a full-time instructor and has remained with the writing program since then.

Neither of Elizabeth’s parents was college-educated; she describes them as “very blue-collar.” Both, however, “always really encouraged, uh, education, always encouraged us to think and to, you know, think before we did things, uh, very contemplative, I guess, of everything,” which has evidently had considerable impact on Elizabeth’s teaching philosophy and pedagogical goals. She contends that knowledge—specifically the knowledge to think, write, and communicate effectively—is the most valuable currency one can possess:

I think just knowing that, um, knowledge was a big deal in my family, especially that that was something that was to be valued and something that wasn’t just confined to the walls of a classroom. It was something that really, oh, you know, once you had it, they couldn’t take it away from you. I think that was, I sort of what I try to give to my students now.

Co-constructing knowledge with students is Elizabeth’s chief purpose. “When we support our writing students,” Bishop observes, we “make meaning, engage minds, improve practices, tap deep and meaningful rituals, inculcate life-changing habits of thinking and persuading, reflect, and revise” (“Because Teaching Composition” 69), and we invariably instill a sense of confidence in students; we empower them. As Elizabeth points out, “It’s all about gaining power. It’s all about figuring out how to say stuff that means something in a way it’s taken seriously and that, that’s something they can’t take away from you once you gain that. It’s
yours. So I think that’s, for me that’s the, that’s the goal.” To know something, then, is to have ownership of it, to possess a “power” so pervasive and durable that it cannot be nullified, suppressed, or stolen. And the knowledge to persuade, to inform, to communicate clearly and distinctly in various media is exceptionally powerful because it permeates every facet of the student’s life. What Elizabeth teaches her students “is not memorized things that they’ll forget” but “real stuff that is useful, um, on many levels.” It seems that Elizabeth characterizes herself as a nurturer, a “mid-wife teacher” who, in much the same way that her parents did, “coaches, guides, questions, and works with the student to co-construct dynamic, subjective truths” (Ryder et al. 41), and who assumes the responsibility of educational, professional, and moral guidance in order to foster student development and empowerment: “A lot of times that’s what [students] need, and I, I fill that motherly role.”

Though several of the study’s participants have taught or are teaching courses outside the writing program—e.g., literature, fiction, poetry—Elizabeth has solely taught first-year composition since her arrival nearly twelve years ago, which she enjoys doing not only because she has “always loved writing” but also because she views composition instruction as “something that’s meaningful and, um, people need and that they benefit from in a very real world sort of way.” Although she occasionally finds teaching the same material tedious—“like when I have to do MLA, it’s really tricky to make that interesting”—Elizabeth senses a greater opportunity to cultivate students’ critical thinking and communication skills in Comp II. “I like being able to show [students] why things matter,” she explains, “and I like making them question all sorts of stuff. And I think that’s why I like [Comp II], is because it does force them to think about, you know, ‘Why do I act this way? Why do people do things?’” As I previously mentioned, students enrolled in Comp II are required to locate and sort through material from
scholarly sources and integrate it into their own writing to construct argumentative texts that address topical issues (Instructor’s Handbook 34). The emphasis here is not on mastering a particular set of genres or structural components, as is the case with Comp I-Basic and Comp I, but successfully utilizing such rhetorical devices for social and/or academic commentary, which is apparently why Elizabeth teaches Comp II. Here, she reasons, is where she can do the most good.

During the sixteen-week pilot study, Elizabeth taught three sections of Comp II: two ‘regular’ or traditional sections and one honors section. ‘Regular’ Fall Comp II courses are generally comprised of students who have tested into Comp II through the placement exam process and those who have previously failed Comp II; most, if not all, Comp II honors students, however, are first-year students who have tested into Comp II. ‘Regular’ Comp II sections also adhere to the standard or ‘sample’ syllabus available to all program instructors, whereas honors sections focus upon specific course themes (e.g., fashion, entertainment, media, art, education, etc.) and the students who take them are required to complete lengthier and more complex assignments than their ‘regular’ Comp II counterparts. Before deciding which section to enroll in, honors students are encouraged to review the instructors’ course proposals. So in essence, Elizabeth’s honors students chose her section for some reason, perhaps because they found her proposal or the course themes intriguing. Her ‘regular’ Comp II students, by contrast, have been placed in her classes—in some cases, because they had failed Comp II the previous summer or spring.

It seems logical, then, that because Elizabeth is teaching two unique student audiences, her course objectives, methods, and classroom materials for each section would likewise differ (Fischer, “Students as Audience” 63-64). When asked about her pre-semester preparation, for
instance, she recounted, “For the two regular [Comp II’s] it was a matter of reviewing the materials; there were some new articles that weren’t in the textbook that I was using, so we reviewed all that stuff, integrated it into the course.” In essence, Elizabeth recycles materials from previous semesters for these ‘regular’ sections, which is not surprising, considering that she has probably developed a sizeable Comp II teaching repertoire over the last several years. What is surprising, however, is that Elizabeth employs a similar yet more involved course planning strategy for her honors section: “There’s a whole different set of readings that we’re looking at, um, exploring some different technologies that we’ve used, um, basically taking the, the, the basic bones of the classes that I already had and adding new ancillary materials to those.” Although she has created a new set of readings and assignments relevant to the course’s central theme (technological applications and implications), Elizabeth is reusing the general Comp II course layout and design—the “basic bones”—for this section, too. Perhaps she is merely reluctant to alter or replace what she doesn’t perceive as faulty. It may also be that this practice of recycling is, or at least appears to be, a time-saving measure which allows Elizabeth to attend to specific, immediate matters (such as grading, conferencing, and handling student conflict) as they arise during the semester.

Time, it seems, is regarded as a precious commodity by the study’s participants, and Elizabeth is no exception; her time management strategies shape not only her course planning and preparation but teaching persona and methods as well. “I tried to be very much all business with the classes,” she says. Elizabeth and her students spend the first week of the semester “talking about requirements,” especially “the first essay the, you know, the second day of class and we roll right into […] writing and critique.” By skipping ice-breakers or personal introductions (which she considers “fluffy” and “a waste of time”), Elizabeth allots students and
herself more class time for the first major Comp II project, the critique. Yet it also seems that she finds the process of learning something personal about each student on the first day of class artificial and largely ineffective for building classroom rapport. Instead, Elizabeth insists, “We’re gonna get to that […] through the course of the semester.” To her way of thinking, then, establishing teacher-student immediacy should be naturally intertwined with writing instruction (Tobin 79-80), not something which is arbitrarily addressed during the first class session and then perhaps never attended to again. Every class activity should reinforce positive classroom communication and teacher-student immediacy through interaction and collaboration, which Elizabeth accomplishes with student-centered activities such as large-group discussions and peer response workshops.

One technique Elizabeth uses to encourage collaboration is student-directed conversation. Before class, she jots down a tentative agenda—usually “three or four or five, whatever, how many things that, um, I feel we need to go over for the day”—and a set of prompts “to get the discussion going,” although she and her students occasionally deviate from these talking points. “If the discussion moves in a different way,” she explains, “and I can see that it’s gonna be productive and it’s gonna get us ultimately to the point that we need to be, um, you know, certainly let it go with that.” Her approach to classroom communication seems quite flexible, almost organic; student input is welcomed, even utilized. “I love letting them sort of guide it,” she muses. “Certainly, there’s times when you gotta take control back, but usually they, they manage to guide me right where I wanted them to go. So it’s a real interesting give and take, um, very subtle.” Her “subtle” practice of “give and take” not only engages and empowers students (Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 68-69) but enables Elizabeth to establish and reinforce positive classroom communication (Andersen 45; Norton 36), reduce student
communication apprehension (Roach 171-2), and become more intimately connected with students (Tobin 81). As a result, her students are more willing to ask questions, take control of a discussion, and direct the class towards a common set of objectives.

At times, however, eliciting student collaboration is not quite as easy as Elizabeth would like, especially with her honors section. These students, she observes, are “very, um, studious. They come in, they want to do, they want to do the class work, there’s no chit-chatting, it’s all about let’s get to business, you know, and they are very happy to let me talk the whole, the whole class period which bugs me. Um, it’s really like pulling teeth to get them to talk to me.” To some degree, Elizabeth ascribes students’ unwillingness to communicate to classroom conditioning—that is, they have been conditioned to remain quiet, attentive, and “studious” to expedite the learning process (Duffelmeyer 301-302). They have thrived under straight-forward, transmission-oriented instruction, and now expect (and probably want) more of the same. What they usually don’t want, however, is to be meddled with, to have their academic and personal lives intruded upon. Elizabeth, on the other hand, expects students not only to actively participate in their own learning but to become more conscientious of those academic, social, and personal factors which shape their writing processes. “By attempting to edit feelings, unconscious associations, and personal problems out of a writing course,” Tobin argues, “we are fooling ourselves and shortchanging our students […]. In my writing courses, I want to meddle with my students’ emotional lives, and I want their writing to meddle with mine” (81). Like Tobin, Elizabeth wants students to recognize “how all of this is fitting together with a real situation” and “how it really applies to so many more aspects of their lives.” To accomplish this, however, she must establish teacher-student intimacy, something these students are likely to be unfamiliar with and thus suspicious of.
Elizabeth’s two ‘regular’ Comp II classes are generally more talkative. “For my other sections I’ve got a wide range,” she notes. “I’ve got international students in both sections. I’ve got repeaters. I’ve got folks who tested in, um, you know, they’re very, they’re very personable.” It may be that Elizabeth, having come from a high school where students of varying academic abilities were lumped together, more easily identifies with heterogeneous groups of students. But even she seems baffled as to why some classes are more responsive than others. “It’s funny,” she admits, “because the different classes have very different chemistries and it, I think, I think I could be exactly the same in every regard for each class and I would get a different response from them.” One possible explanation is that Elizabeth’s ‘regular’ Comp II students—specifically, her “repeaters”—want to succeed where they might have previously failed, or sense somehow that if they don’t speak up they will likely repeat the course again. “They’re asking questions, um, they’re asking for clarification,” Elizabeth observes, “and just, you know, sort of being real with each other and, you know, talking about goofy stuff that is somehow related to the class but that you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t bring up with the teacher.” It also seems that these students, unlike their honors counterparts, want to be meddled with. They have become so comfortable with Elizabeth and each other that they openly discuss aspects of their lives—quite personal ones, in fact—that they might not ordinarily share with others and certainly not with an instructor (Tobin 81). Something about her teacher persona, Elizabeth reasons, has disarmed these students: “Once they figured out that they can goof around with me and we can talk and, um, you know, it’s a lot of fun and they’re, it frees them up.”

Elizabeth’s teaching effectiveness, therefore, hinges on student engagement, interaction, and collaboration. “A successful class,” she explains, “is one where we’ve all managed to get something and give something in that class. And that’s tricky, but when you’ve had a really
good class, that’s what it is, is everyone’s been there mentally, all interactive and they come away with something that’s helpful.” Elizabeth interprets students’ willingness to interact as a willingness to learn, which she gratifies by providing her students with something “useful to them and their writing,” some piece of knowledge which enables them to understand more fully what they are writing about, how they write, and why (Ryder et al. 45). “It’s not just about […] teaching them to write,” Elizabeth contends. “It’s so they can figure it out themselves.” This collaborative effort to co-construct knowledge allows Elizabeth to work “with a student dialogically rather than hierarchically so that the two may develop a synergy” (Ryder et al. 46). In doing so, she and her students are likelier to feel as though they have done something worthwhile, that both parties have, in fact, gotten something from the class session which each considers beneficial—hence, the “give and take.”

What often disrupts the “give and take” process, however, is students’ failure or refusal to take part in it. Students who do not complete the assigned reading or homework, for instance, probably cannot or will not contribute anything meaningful to a discussion or activity on that particular assignment, so to some extent, their unwillingness to communicate can be attributed to inadequate preparation, to not “taking the class seriously” (Hong 77). Silent or passive behavior may also be indicative of students’ disinterest, confusion, or hostility (Ameen et al. 18; Roach 172; Dethier 95), which means Elizabeth sometimes finds herself in the unenviable position of ferreting out possible causes for such silence while simultaneously filling the communicative void:

The unsuccessful [classes] are the ones where no one, no one is helping. Where everybody is sitting there waiting for me to like, be the great, you know, composition know-it-all and I have to somehow carry this whole class and, you
know, I can’t. It’s just, it’s awful because it’s not fun, it’s not interesting [...] And I hate those classes where it’s so hard to engage them. Those, those are the yucky classes. They don’t happen often. When I have, when I have to carry the whole thing, yuck.

The prospect of having to “carry the whole thing” herself (in what would ideally be a collaborative effort between student and teacher) literally disgusts Elizabeth because it forces her to do something which feels counterintuitive (Dethier 67; Park 355): transfer knowledge rather than co-construct it. These silent, “unsuccessful” sessions are therefore strained, mechanical, and generally unpleasant for both Elizabeth and her students—in short, “awful.” Moreover, if her students refuse to talk, Elizabeth cannot readily address their concerns (Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 67) or gauge their receptivity to or comprehension of a particular lesson (Roach 171-2). She may even interpret their unwillingness to communicate as some sort of failure on her part. “If you want to see a composition teacher turn into quivering jelly in a matter of minutes,” Dethier claims, “convince everyone in class to remain silent despite the instructor’s prompts and pleas” because student silence “calls into question our value, our efficacy” (95).

Playing the part of the “composition know-it-all” is something Elizabeth feels neither comfortable with nor capable of doing; she doesn’t just hate talking the entire time while her students idle, she simply can’t do so. “Abandoning the ‘filling the student with knowledge’ model,” Dethier observes, “makes clear the limits of our role” (67). Unfortunately, this transmission-oriented instructional model is what many composition students have come to expect (Duffelmeyer 302). The teacher lectures, students listen. She explicates what students must do, and they do it, usually without questioning it so long as it is clear and relevant to their coursework and enables them to achieve some sort of extrinsic reward, which, in most cases, is a
good grade (Fischer, “Students as Audience” 64-5). Passive learning behavior may thus be indicative of a larger issue: student assessment taking precedence over critical learning and teacher-student collaboration. “You see your class as an opportunity for them to develop as writers,” argues Ruth Overman Fischer, but “they may see it as a required course that highlights the fact that they did not learn to write in high school” (“Students as Audience” 64). Even Elizabeth herself has expressed concern that her students are (or will become) so focused on passing the portfolio assessment that they give little or no consideration for what they are learning, why they are learning it, or how it might impact their future academic or professional endeavors: “They’ll get through [the portfolio assessment] and it’ll just be about the grade. You know, that it’ll be about, ‘Yeah, I don’t have to think anymore.’” In essence, students who are fixated on or primarily motivated by extrinsic rewards (e.g., grades, assessment results, verbal praise) are likelier to view the course content as a series of skills or rules which must be mastered in order to satisfy the whims of their instructor or portfolio evaluators; for them, the course is simply a means to an end, something with a definite beginning and conclusion, and which has little, if any, bearing on other academic pursuits. In such cases, then, teacher-student communication could quickly degenerate into some sort of quid pro quo arrangement, with students holding instructors “accountable to clarity of expectations in their own confessions of ignorance or requests to please explain ‘what we want’ in an assignment” (Anson and Dannels 387), and which Elizabeth clearly doesn’t want to take part in.

What she does want is for students to see beyond the immediate gratifications of grades or portfolio evaluations and instead concentrate on “seeing bigger pictures” and “learning stuff” which both sustains and augments their critical thinking and writing skills:
I think I would like, just individually, have them all, even if they don’t all pass, I think I would like them all to leave that class knowing something else about what they’re capable of doing, whether it’s about writing or thinking or whatever. That somehow them having gone through that sixteen weeks and those other twenty kids, that they figured something out.

What this ‘something’ might actually be, however, is of less importance to Elizabeth than what it represents—knowledge which is not only pervasive and sustainable but ultimately life-changing. This self-revelation hints at a deeper underlying concern here. Elizabeth wants her place within the university legitimized; she doesn’t want to be perceived as a gate-keeper or “composition know-it-all,” nor does she want her impact on students’ development to be ephemeral:

I can show [students] that, you know, college isn’t just about going and getting a degree and going to get a job, and it’s really, it is about gaining a bunch of skills that are going to follow you around and are going to be very influential and make you believable and make you strong and make you a good citizen and all that happy stuff. My god, that’s perfect, what more could you ask for? I mean, nobody’s getting rich here and nobody’s becoming famous, but I am, I’m making a difference and that’s cool.

In other words, Elizabeth assesses her teaching effectiveness in terms of how successfully and to what extent she affects students’ academic, social, and professional development: “The commitment to teach calls for hope. Often it requires placing personally relevant and optimistic beliefs above ‘the facts’” (Kansanen et al. 161). Believing that she is, in fact, “making a difference” reaffirms Elizabeth’s professional identity. It gives her hope that she is not only enabling students to become better writers, but “influential,” “believable,” and “strong”
citizens—in short, better people. Echoing Quintilian’s premise that an effective rhetorician must be “a good man skilled in speaking” (412-413), Elizabeth would likely characterize an effective writer as a good person skilled in writing, someone whom she not only hopes to create but whose existence sustains her dedication to teaching.

James

James currently teaches four sections of first-year writing each semester; during the 2005 Fall semester, for instance, he taught three Comp I sections and one Comp II. Unlike Elizabeth, who has been with the writing program since 1994, James is a relative newcomer, having joined the full-time faculty the previous autumn. He is not a newcomer to the teaching profession, however. For several years, James taught composition and literature courses at both a community college and a mid-sized state university: “I got to teach a lot of variety and, uh, analytical writing, um, on just a sophomore, junior level, technical writing, um, literature actually for, uh, English majors.” In this sense, James is unique among the participants: he is experienced as a college-level instructor yet inexperienced with this particular university and writing program.

James became interested in teaching while still an undergraduate primarily because, unlike Elizabeth, whose educational experiences were “easy” and “positive,” he struggled, especially during his first year of college. James had so much difficulty, in fact, that he transferred to a community college for his sophomore year, where the faculty there successfully managed to “reach out to me and bring me into where I needed to be, sort of worked with me.” It was this group of instructors who “inspired” him to teach:

I really, um, enjoyed the way that they reached out to me and, and have always tried to be a good, um, listener in social situations and tried to give advice to
people when I thought, since I love to write and read so much, it’s hard to make a living, um, doing that, that I could combine my love of writing and reading with my love of sort of reaching out and, and discussing things with people and helping people out and stuff like that.

Like Elizabeth, James contemplated the possibility of becoming a professional writer before deciding at some point that he would teach instead, though in his case, he seems to have chosen the latter for a more practical purpose—to secure a steady income. His decision also reflects a profound admiration for the profession, however. As a writing instructor, James believes he provides students “the gift that I thought some teachers gave to me, that power of language.” Similar to Elizabeth, James recognizes the significance of teaching students how to communicate effectively and even uses terms like Elizabeth’s (such as ‘gift’ and ‘power’) to characterize the knowledge he shares with students.

James’s parents, like Elizabeth’s, weren’t college-educated, though comparatively speaking they seemed more aloof to their son’s education than Elizabeth’s parents were to hers. “My mom and dad don’t read at all, I don’t think,” he recollects, laughing. “I don’t even recall owning a children’s book or being read to, you know.” At an early age, however, James began using his weekly allowance to purchase books, and developed a passion for language which his high school and college instructors would later cultivate. He attended a small school where graduating classes averaged fifty students. It was “not the greatest school,” he admits, and had “few good teachers that stood out.” Those who did stand out were James’s literature and composition instructors, and they instilled in him not only a sense of pride in his writing but a desire to learn: “When I got to writing, I really enjoyed that, had some really good lit and comp teachers in, um, high school. Those classes really stood out for me.”
After graduating from high school, James entered the military. “That’s sort of the route my dad and grandpa and those, all of those people went,” he explains. “Sort of into the military and then into the, uh, sort of working class force, you know, steel workers, mechanics.” This “route” may have been commonplace in his family, but it wasn’t the kind of life James envisioned for himself. After two years of military service, he enrolled at a mid-sized urban university. Although he started off with promise—“actually winning first place in a [writing] contest” and having his essay “published in one of these little readers”—James soon found himself wandering aimlessly about in an academic landscape that seemed as daunting to him as the prospect of entering the workforce: “My first year […] at a big campus after being from a really tiny town with fifty people in my graduating class […] was kind of tough. […] It seemed like, you know, kind of got As and Bs the first semester, Cs, or quarter, it was quarter, Cs […] second quarter, really struggled third quarter.” That year, James’s academic career reached what Roach would refer to as a “critically salient” point (166). He was left with two choices: to re-enroll, try harder, and hopefully do better, or to cut his losses and drop out of college altogether. James finally concluded that neither option was viable; he desperately wanted a college education, yet recognized that his own educational experiences had not adequately prepared him for academic or social success at the university level. The following year, he attended classes at a community college affiliated with the university and conveniently located near his hometown. In one single move, James had managed to bridge together two seemingly opposed worlds—the familiar, comforting atmosphere of his hometown and the rigorous and foreign realm of academia. In this smaller, less pressurized setting, James blossomed: “That year, being in the smaller classes and with teachers I could meet with more often one-on-one, I, um, sort of learned how to study and that helped me out a lot.”
His study skills honed and self-assurance temporarily restored, James returned to the university his junior year, though he continued to struggle in some of his courses, including literature, something he had enjoyed immensely as a high school student. “With my first few lit classes,” he recalls, “I, um, really struggled to articulate what I was trying to say and again I had one teacher for example who would sort of shut me up and move on to the next person and that really, um, you know, hurt me and I think I got a D in his class.” James’s struggle to articulate his ideas could be attributed to any number of sources (e.g., communication apprehension, an unwillingness to communicate with professors or students, undeveloped speaking skills, unfamiliarity with academic language, etc.), but his professor’s behavior clearly took a toll on James’s confidence. He was not only “hurt” by his teacher’s attempts to silence him, but rendered voiceless as well. It would take a more nurturing professor, someone who exercised patience and understanding, to coax James from his shell. And luckily, he encountered such a person that same year: “I had this other […] professor who would try to draw the things out of me that she knew I was trying to say and, um, and those things really helped me succeed, so by the, you know, end of my junior year and my senior year I was getting straight-As and, um, graduated with a pretty good grade-point average.” James attributes his remarkable turn-around in part to this professor, who, like his community college instructors, somehow managed to draw from him what she sensed was already there:

The only reason I was able to succeed and do so well the undergrad and to do so well in grad school and beyond have been those teachers who, um, you know, just don’t shut you up when you, when you’re not able to express yourself, but actually try to help you, you know, pull it out and, and that’s really shaped me. I try to remember that a lot of the students that I teach come from small towns and
don’t read a lot and maybe don’t write a lot […]. I know that they can do it, if they just, uh, sort of are encouraged and, um, are willing to put their effort into it. James thinks most first-year students have cultural identities and backgrounds similar to his own, and perhaps he has generally found this to be the case. It is also likely, however, that he gears his classroom persona and teaching techniques towards at-risk or marginalized student populations—specifically, those who have had few positive writing experiences, or who consider themselves ill-prepared for college, or who struggle to become socially and/or academically acclimatized (Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* 167-77)—because these students, perhaps more than anyone else, require a sympathetic, nurturing instructor to find their voices. James approaches his classes the same way his former teachers approached him, by “trying to really praise them and push them, uh, like some of my teachers did, be very aware not to, uh, shut up their voice.” He views the student ego as a fragile thing which must be handled carefully (Kountz) and nourished with a delicate mixture of “praise” and “push.” So although James, like Elizabeth, seeks to empower students by co-constructing knowledge with them (Ryder et al. 45-6), he attempts this enterprise more gingerly in order “to reach out and try to discover what [students’] particular strengths are and what their lack of confidence is all about.”

On the very first day of class, James is already trying to learn something about his students which might provide some indication as to what their “particular strengths” and areas of vulnerability are. For the first session, he “came in ready to, uh, get to know them right away, so I, I sort of looked at their names first, got my course list together, um, I don’t usually do a get-to-know-you thing, but I, uh, go around and have them talk and tell about themselves, just around the circle.” Although he doesn’t consider this kind of activity involved or elaborate, it accomplishes what James sets out to do—to “get to know” his students and begin building a
rapport with them “right away.” Not only is the circle itself more conducive to social interaction than rows, it also implies an absence of the traditional teacher-student hierarchy (Ryder et al. 47), with James positioning himself among his students rather than apart from them. Even something as subtle as classroom arrangement, therefore, conveys the idea that James is both a “facilitator” of and participant in the process of co-constructing knowledge with students (Ryder et al. 45).

Immediately afterwards, he asked the students to write “about their writing experiences and what they expected from the class,” which, like the personal introductions and circular classroom arrangement, reinforces the dialogical teacher-student relationship James is attempting here. It suggests that he is keenly interested in what his students have to say as well as what they want (and need) from a writing course like his (Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 67; Tobin 75). James has even allowed his Comp II students to choose the specific readings for the first major assignment by “having them look through the book and tell me what sounded interesting” so he could create “the rest of my, um, [Comp II] syllabus according to what they thought they’d like to read.” Like Elizabeth, James welcomes and utilizes student input—in this particular case, for the purposes of tailoring the course towards students’ interests—and thus impresses upon his students the need for and purpose of teacher-student collaboration: to give them a “voice” and a sense of control over their own learning.

James may have an ulterior motive for doing this, however; he seems wholly concerned with how he represents himself in explicit contracts. Though Elizabeth has already considerably reworked the major course documents (i.e., syllabi, achievement requirements) to fit her pedagogical goals, James is still striving to achieve some sort of balance between his own individualized approach to writing instruction and that which the program purportedly advocates:
The first year here at [...] was a huge, um, change, you know, in the way things are approached and so I really kind of made sure that I read through the new portfolio material and sort of looked back on some things that have worked and not worked last year and I revised my syllabus by adding a lot of me in there. First couple pages is just me talking to the students about, in my voice, about why I think writing is important and how, uh, we’re gonna work together to succeed in the course. I really tried to tailor my course description to be in my voice this year.

It appears that there is some conflict between what James envisions for his classes and what the program stipulates (Mountford 43). Though he is conscientious of his professional obligations to the program (as evidenced by his efforts to review the portfolio materials and syllabi), James considers the generic course documents insufficient for his teaching purposes, and has rewritten them in his “voice” so that they now include “a lot of me in there [...], about why I think writing is important.” The goal here is not necessarily re-familiarization, as it may have been for Elizabeth, but rather transformation, as if to change something is to both author and gain authority over it. James may think students would respond better to a teacher’s “voice”—his “voice”—than a more abstract administrative “voice,” or that he could more easily uphold explicit contracts which embody his teaching philosophy (Wolcowitz 12). It could be something more deeply rooted, however. In his attempts to “tailor my course description to be in my voice,” James may, in fact, be deemphasizing the writing program’s role in student learning and development. “One of the ways in which the ground for professional authority is prepared,” Paul Kameen observes, “is by disestablishing the authority of others” (220). Whether he realizes it or not, James may have elevated his own “professional authority” by preventing an external
authority—i.e., the program and its proponents—from intruding upon his private classroom space (Mountford 43-5).

Perhaps more than any other participant, James often sees himself in direct opposition to the program, its administrators, and those instructors who subscribe to or teach formulaic writing because he believes “formulated teaching is, is not wanting to do work.” Having taught at other institutions, James has developed an approach to writing instruction which at times seems ill-suited to this specific program. Other instructors have apparently managed some way of cohabiting with or negotiating the program more successfully (or more peacefully, at least) than he: “They think that that basic structure will work for them in other classes, and that’s where I’m a little unsure.” James, however, has found that even something as seemingly insignificant as an assignment’s due date interferes with his teaching process:

I wish that it didn’t have to start so full throttle with portfolio explanation and, and getting the first essay done so that there’s time to do them all. Um, I’d rather have a week, or at least a solid week, um, if not into the second week of just being more free to, uh, get to know them and discuss and sort of, I don’t, talk about writing and language and I don’t know. I’ve just done that in the past, sort of spent more time in general talking about, um, where I’ve come from and where they’ve come from and why we’re here and why writing’s important, but it seems that there’s so much to, uh, get them prepared for […] the portfolio and all that that, you know, I’m just racing and I guess that’s what I don’t like.

James wants to spend additional time discussing the rhetorical value of writing, yet is compelled to meet specified deadlines and explain the portfolio assessment process to students. In effect, he doesn’t feel “free” to teach the way he wants to but must instead subvert his own teaching
goals and methods in order to fulfill his contractual obligations to the program, which is likely causing him considerable angst (Marso and Pigge; Dethier 58). What appears to be at the epicenter of this conflict is the incompatibility of James’s anti-formulaic approach with the program’s portfolio assessment procedures. In the past, he explains, “I have been so anti-typical structure in all my classes. Like the first thing I tell [students], I used to tell them was, ‘Um, throw away the five-paragraph essay.’” During his first year with the program, James learned that this “anti-typical structure” approach wasn’t necessarily preparing students for portfolio review:

Last year I found that I can’t tell them all that, uh, or they’re gonna be by the end of [Comp I] really kind of floundering around because they’re in this nice learning curve of how to get out of that formula, but they’re in that, they’re in the midst of that, and, and that’s a tough place to leave them at the end of [Comp I].

Uh, and I think that’s why several of my students went borderline.

Evidently, James wants students to “realize […] no single formula is going to work for all writing situations” and that “a good deal of writing takes the form of generalization and support” (Hesse 43-44), but the portfolio assessment process (as he sees it) prevents him from doing so. If he teaches “anti-typical structure,” he jeopardizes his students’ chances of passing because portfolio evaluators are generally looking for, and expecting, the sort of highly structured, formulaic prose James abhors—“a three-point thesis, reason one, reason two, reason three, counterargument.” If he instead teaches basic writing conventions, however, James feels as though he’s not only stifling student creativity and innovation but oversimplifying (and thus misrepresenting) the writing process (Tobin 74; Hesse 42). He and his colleagues, therefore, are faced with a paradoxical situation. “Some teachers,” he observes, “are getting to the point where
they feel they’ve gotta teach formulas to help the students pass this course,” which is “a big problem that needs to be, um, outed.” James even accuses some instructors of teaching “to the lowest common denominator”—a phrase which several participants have used during group meetings (Chapter Four: “The Teaching Group” provides more information on this topic) and which has come to symbolize the most rudimentary writing forms and formulas one can teach—“so that they can get through the portfolio.” What James is suggesting here is that instructors who teach “to the lowest common denominator” are in effect ‘dumbing down’ their teaching methods in order to make the course material more pertinent to the program’s learning outcomes. “I just, just think that some of us,” he argues, “might be oversimplifying things just to meet the basic minimum,” and doing an incredible disservice to students in the process.

James associates formulaic writing with formulated instruction—that is, teaching “stock” (Hesse 42) forms or formulas rather than showing students how to effectively address context, purpose, and audience. Instructors who impress upon students one-size-fits-all techniques (Rose, Writer’s Block 90)—e.g., “always put your counterarguments in the second to last paragraph”—often do so without explaining how such techniques might be altered or manipulated to better suit a particular writing situation; consequently, their students substitute “formula for careful thought” (Hesse 42) by partitioning topics into subtopics which bear no meaning towards each other or the writing situation itself. “What such writing might gain in organization and clarity for its readers,” Doug Hesse notes, “it may lose in vitality and interest, at its worst suggesting that the writer really hasn’t dealt with the topic at hand; instead, he or she has simply applied a formula” (42). James himself has read numerous papers which “look like they’re supposed to work but they don’t when you actually read them” because the writer’s “three points don’t freaking fit together at all, at all.” Such sloppy, oversimplified student writing, he argues, is
indicative of a larger problem: sloppy, oversimplified instruction, which occurs when “someone has simply taught [students] the formula without the why or without […] the underlying things to go with it.”

To clarify “the why” of a form or formula, James encourages students to concentrate on the objectives of a specific writing situation, and he does so through individualized, student-centered instruction. “The guidance I give,” he explains, is “on a one-on-one level, uh, as opposed to sort of giv[ing] them some sort of blanket formula.” What works for one student doesn’t necessarily work for another, or even for that same student in a different context, and so it is not only counterintuitive but counterproductive to force students to stick to “stock” formulas that aren’t always appropriate to the kinds of writing they might do: “I’ve just found that I just don’t believe that when I give everything to them it’s, it’s just as effective as when they ask me for what they need and when they give each other what they need.” This is not to suggest that James doesn’t think writing conventions or genres have pedagogical value. “It’s like music,” he offered during the first group session. “You gotta learn sort of the formats and the rules before you can start to, you know, improvise.” On the other hand, James recognizes the necessity of “let[ting] our students know that these are just conventions for different genres and that there’s a lot of different options according to audience, purpose. I mean, we gotta constantly be, I think, showing that. I think that’s like a crucial part of this.”

Exactly how instructors teach (or should teach) students to “improvise” is another matter, however. James seems confident that he is accomplishing this because his students have produced argumentative prose which “almost sounds like at least senior-level writing and beyond.” So his self-efficacy is relatively high in this regard (Henson; Li and Zhang). But James’s general teacher efficacy, his belief that other instructors are doing the same, is much
lower: “I know at least, at least a few other teachers who have admittedly told me that’s what they do, they teach to the lowest common, the lowest to get by,” which “worries me. Like now I feel like I’ve got this big mission, but I’m like the new guy.” It sounds as if James considers himself a crusader who, if he had seniority on his side, would promptly remediate the program’s curriculum and learning outcomes assessment practices so that both might facilitate the sort of contextualized instruction students require to write more complex and sophisticated papers (Hesse 43; Bishop, “Writing Is/And Therapy”). Yet because he is “the new guy,” James thinks he must, at least for now, coexist with the program, if for no other reason than to ensure his students’ chances of successfully passing the portfolio review. “I want to see,” he explains, “how to resolve […] the issue of actually having to write this paper that’s supposed to instill in it the stuff that portfolio assessors want to see on a paper.” To what extent James can realistically impart change at the program level is questionable, therefore; he almost seems resigned to the prospect of adjusting to the program rather than adjusting it. And perhaps this is the best James can hope for right now, to find some sort of middle-ground between “freeing the students up and getting them to write […] unique papers” and “combin[ing] that with [the] clarity and thesis and structure and transitions” portfolio evaluators have come to expect. But he also hopes some instructors are following his lead: “I hope people are doing it, like I hope they’re, while they’re teaching them structure and saying, ‘This will get you by […],’ I hope they’re also saying, ‘Look at all these other things you can do.’ That’s what I hope.” If he cannot change the prevailing system, James can at least offer his colleagues a pedagogical and rhetorical model—himself—which might encourage them to re-envision writing instruction as “a career-long process of self-renewal” (Bishop, “Because Teaching Composition” 69).
Stephen

Stephen has been teaching with this writing program since 1995, and became a full-time instructor after completing his doctorate in literature. Unlike Elizabeth and James, Stephen frequently teaches courses other than first-year composition; during the fall semester, for instance, he was responsible for two honors Comp II sections and two Comp I sections as well as a sophomore-level literature class, Introduction to Genres. Of the five instructors involved in this study, therefore, Stephen’s teaching load is quite possibly the heaviest, though, he contends, not unreasonable: “I’ve been teaching [Comp I] and [Comp II] for so long that I know exactly what to expect.”

Stephen’s educational background is remarkably similar to Elizabeth’s and James’s, however. He grew up in a small town where his parents and grandparents primarily worked “nine-to-five” or “swing shift” factory positions. “There wasn’t a real separation between work and their other life,” he observes. “And […] I saw how hard they worked and little they got from it and I knew I didn’t want a nine-to-five job.” Stephen attended a rural high school “where boys were boys and girls were girls.” He had trouble fitting in, though, and found the only people whom he could identify with or confide in were his teachers: “They made me feel good about myself because I was always an overachiever, and when they would praise me for doing something, I was overachieving more.” As an “overachiever,” Stephen thrived academically. He majored in communications at a small liberal arts college with hopes of becoming a big-city reporter, but quickly discovered that “journalism is […] just really a kind of bland form of writing that I wasn’t into and I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life doing.” Stephen later changed his course of study to a double-major in English and communications with a focus in secondary education, although it wasn’t long before he became disenchanted with this line of
work, too; he simply couldn’t imagine “deal[ing] with the urchins in elementary school or middle school.” Teaching college students seemed to be his only viable option, especially since doing so “meant […] staying in school a little longer where I could, you know, excel and be praised.”

For the next several years, Stephen taught courses in literature, women’s studies, critical theory, and contemporary drama as well as first-year composition. Ultimately, however, he decided not to take a tenure-track position after finishing his graduate studies because “it really is a kind of shark-infested profession where people are out to just get you […] and I think it’s a really awful profession to be a part of for that reason.” Stephen chose instead to remain with the program, where the “emphasis really is on the kids that we teach and the learning and the educational process and we are regarded first and foremost as teachers.” Ideally, he contends, our scholarly enterprises should enhance our understanding of how students learn and how best to teach them, but when the former takes precedence over the latter, we often lose sight of “the knowledge that we’re supposed to be producing or the learning that we’re supposed to be doing” in our attempts to “attain some star status symbol.” What educators should be chiefly concerned with is teaching students to write, read, and think more critically, which, Stephen claims, “is what I got into this profession to do.”

To accomplish this himself, Stephen utilizes both visual-model and student-centered teaching techniques. “I try to model,” he explains, “whatever concept it is that I do. Whether it’s audience or thesis or whatever, um, I try to model it through how I organize the document or how I develop it.” To familiarize his Comp I students with the concept essay, for instance, Stephen showed them a documentary of a young woman studying to become a mortician—what he characterizes as “a concept or a report essay in video form”—and provided students a series
of questions and prompts with which to analyze the video. Such an activity, he argues, is not only “fun” and “engaging,” but effectively acquaints students with the rhetorical features of the concept essay and source documentation (or “framing,” as he refers to it). Stephen employed a similar, albeit simpler strategy to introduce the critique assignment to his Comp II honors classes: “We just systematically go through the essay based on the criteria that they come up with and along the way, it’s a matter of sort of schooling them in what a thesis is and, um, what makes an attractive organizational plan.” In both cases, however, Stephen uses student input to “systematically” break down a writing task into its essential components and processes, which he regards as one of his teaching strengths. “I think I’m much more capable of speaking to students now,” he says, “and explaining even the most basic concepts to them, um, clearly, probably because I have been doing this for so long.”

His approach certainly seems successful. Stephen’s students “usually go through the portfolio process without fail” and are generally appreciative of the explicit dissection of an assignment’s major elements. “I’m really big into let’s go into detail, let’s figure this out step by step,” he offers, because “there is so much writing in these classes and if students could have one less paragraph that they have to write by themselves […], you’re that much closer to being done and they’re happy.” James, however, has frequently criticized Stephen’s instructional methods as simplistic during group meetings, which Stephen finds baffling and even hypocritical at times: “He [James] believes in creating unique individual writers and, you know, if, if that’s what he wants to do, good for him. Um, it’s not my life’s goal.” Stephen sees nothing faulty or counterintuitive in teaching to the “lowest common denominator,” and has actually found that doing so efficiently prepares students for the portfolio review as well as their other coursework. Moreover, he argues, it is simply impossible for an instructor to teach first-year writing without
rlying upon forms or formulas to some extent. When, during one group session, James suggested that composition instructors should teach organizational layouts as options rather than absolutes, Stephen immediately pointed out, “But that’s still a formula. I mean, I, I teach that option, too.” It almost seems, therefore, as if Stephen considers himself to be James’s opposite, especially in terms of how he conceptualizes formulaic writing, his students’ learning processes, and his role as a composition instructor. “I think it’s our job to teach them the basics of academic writing,” he explains, “and if they want to push themselves beyond those things, that’s great for them, but if they don’t, the basics are enough to make me smile.”

Brenda

Brenda has taught first-year composition since her arrival here in 2002 as a Master of Fine Arts student, and is currently in her second year as a full-time faculty member. Although she has taught Comp I-Basic, Comp I and Comp II in the past, Brenda now teaches Comp I-Basic exclusively (usually three sections) during the fall semester; in fact, she is the only instructor in the study teaching Comp I-Basic. Brenda is also unique among participants in that, though she is more experienced with the program than James, she is still grappling with the responsibilities of full-time teaching. “In particular, um, I found grading this semester to be a struggle,” she admits. “And I don’t know exactly why. It’s just I feel like I might have ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]. I just can’t seem to focus.”

Like her counterparts, however, Brenda grew up in a rural community and attended a small, localized school system where she and her family frequently interacted with instructors: “I had a lot of teachers then that I liked quite a bit throughout my entire educational, you know, experience, um, a lot of teachers that even now, stay in touch with my parents. Um, I have a fifth grade teacher who still stops over and gives them tomatoes every once in a while from the
garden.” And interestingly enough, Brenda’s personal and academic ambitions were, like Stephen’s, fueled by instructor praise. “I guess the interaction that I had with those instructors early on,” she recalls, “um, I always thought of it more like on a personal level like trying to, um, sort of seeking their encouragement and their, their interests and, um, knowing, you know, wanting them to like me, you know, be the good student they liked and once I got that I was sort of, um, satisfied.” In order to feel “satisfied,” therefore, Brenda did whatever was necessary to incur such encouragement, usually without too much difficulty. But these early educational experiences felt somewhat hollow to her, as if the focus wasn’t on what she was doing so much as her teachers’ reactions to it. “I got my grades,” she explains, “but it really didn’t feel challenging.” It wasn’t until she attended a liberal arts college that, for the first time, Brenda took into consideration what she herself might benefit from: “It was definitely much more interesting for me once I got there, and, um, was able to sort of choose what I wanted to study, that shift to be able to say, ‘Oh, I’m interested in this, I’ll take this class, I’ll take that class.’” Personal betterment, it seems, had replaced instructor approval as her new motivation.

After finishing her undergraduate work, Brenda pursued an advanced degree in creative writing. She hadn’t specifically set out to teach, and was initially “just, you know, focused on myself.” While working on her MFA, however, Brenda taught one or two sections of first-year composition each semester, and soon found herself almost instinctively drawn to this new role. “I felt like I was good at it,” she says, “and I felt like, well, I liked it. I guess I just liked it and so the influence was really just, um, not so much an outside influence, just experiencing it myself.” She eventually abandoned her plans to write professionally and, upon graduation, took a full-time instructor position with the program: “Once I, I was in the classroom and I experienced it, I think that was actually when I first said, ‘Okay, I can see doing this long-term as a career.’”
The transition from graduate to full-time teaching hasn’t been an easy one for Brenda, though. “It is difficult, a difficult job,” she acknowledges, one that requires diligence and patience as well as a constant awareness of one’s responsibilities to first-year students:

I feel like every time you teach a class, you know, you start to forget what you’ve already covered or you have already covered because you’ve, you’ve taught it so many times, you can, you can make these little and, and think, “Oh, well, they should get this. Shouldn’t they get this?” you know, “No, they shouldn’t get it. They just, this is the first time they’ve ever taken this class,” so, you know, being patient, um, is something I have to, not just patient, but also just reminding myself that these are new students and I have to go over every little thing again.

Reminding oneself “to go over every little thing again” is particularly crucial for addressing the needs of Comp I-Basic students, as they are generally less experienced or effective writers than their Comp I counterparts and require additional instruction in paragraph- and sentence-level organization before making what Brenda refers to as the “harsh jump” from Comp I-Basic to Comp II. It is this “jump,” in fact, which she finds so daunting. “I feel weird teaching [Comp I-Basic] sometimes,” she explains, “and I know they probably feel strange moving from [Comp I-Basic], especially [Comp I-Basic], um, to [Comp II] because you do, you know, sort of teach it a different way. You have such different objectives and demands on what they do.” Brenda is well aware of her role in preparing students to meet Comp II requirements (e.g., evaluating scholarly texts, synthesizing source material), yet senses that neither her instructional methods nor the Comp I-Basic curricular components are necessarily sufficient in this regard: “I think I do really well with structure and the basics and fundamentals […] but at the same time, they are, when they leave [Comp I-Basic], so tied to that, that I fear that [Comp II] instructor because they’re
gonna be asking them to do, not just longer papers, but synthesis doesn’t seem to just sort of naturally emerge from what we cover in [Comp I-Basic].” She also seems far more preoccupied with this particular teaching concern—that is, “bridg[ing] the, that gap between [Comp I-Basic] and [Comp II]”—than the other participants, which, I suspect, is largely due to the kinds of students she works with. First-time Comp I-Basic students are vulnerable, easily discouraged, and in desperate need of student-centered instruction to produce the sophisticated, college-level prose expected of them in Comp II. Brenda’s goal, therefore, has become one of bracing her students for the “jump” by first providing and then carefully removing her instructional scaffold—or “cut[ting] the apron strings,” as she puts it—to allow them to develop as independent writers. “I feel like in a lot of ways,” she argues, “[Comp I-Basic] and [Comp I] is high school writing and somewhere towards the end of the semester, you’ve got to start transitioning to college-level, you know, and that’s, that’s my, my end goal this semester.”

**Jessica**

Jessica is the sole teaching assistant in the study and presently working on her MA in literature. What distinguishes her from the other participants is not only her relative inexperience as an instructor—prior to the 2005 Fall semester, she had taught only one section of Comp I and Comp II—but her age as well; Jessica is considerably younger than any of her colleagues. Unlike James, who spent several years in the military before returning to school, or Elizabeth, who taught middle-school students before embarking on her graduate studies, Jessica went “straight from” high school to college to graduate school. She was a remarkable student and writer—even enrolled in “a gifted and talented English class” her seventh and eighth grade years—and easily progressed through the myriad stages of her academic career. “All of them,” she recalls, referring to her educational experiences, “were pretty positive.”
As an undergraduate, Jessica worked part-time as a writing consultant at her university’s writing center, where her interest in college-level instruction was piqued. “I kinda knew I didn’t want to go into secondary teaching […] for various reasons,” she explains, “and, but I became interested in working with students more and more when I started working at the writing center on campus, where I worked one-on-one with students and I got a lot of satisfaction out of helping them […], so I knew I would probably be interested in working with higher level students.” To some extent, Jessica’s tutor training has shaped her current approach to teacher-student conferences, particularly in terms of how she encourages students to become more aware of and assume responsibility for their writing: “I do my conference a lot like a writing center session as possible. So […] when they come in, I always tell them to come in with questions, always come in with something to work on.” Jessica first asks the student to read all or parts of the text aloud, and then offers comments, suggestions, and questions about the text following the read-aloud. “I let them guide as much as possible,” she says. “Obviously, some people come in and they don’t say much and so then I’ll just try to ask them questions to get them going, you know, ‘Do you think it’s this? Are you worried about this? Well, maybe we can go through this invention sheet together.’” This minimalist approach is one that Jessica seems comfortable with and considers pedagogically sound—she has already embraced the idea that students, not instructors, are the experts of their own writing and therefore capable of cultivating their strengths and identifying flaws within their work—so she conferences frequently, and confidently: “I do a lot of conferencing, a lot, a lot of conferencing. I tell them, you know, you can conference a million times on a paper if you want, you know, as long as we can both find time for it.”

She is less secure, however, in how she prepares for and assesses her classroom performance and evaluates student work, especially since taking on an additional section of
Comp I this semester. Last year, when she was teaching only one section of either Comp I or Comp II, Jessica was able to write detailed comments on her students’ rough and final drafts—“Sometimes I think I write too much,” she laughs—and regularly utilize office hours for systematic teacher planning. “What I typically do,” she explains, “is like, after my class session ends for the day, I like to go back to my office, um, correct the homework, record the attendance, and then I’ll look, what are we doing next class? Get the materials ready for that, either making up a worksheet, getting things copied.” Now responsible for two classes instead of one, Jessica has discovered her usual routine no longer works, which has clearly affected her self-efficacy: “I don’t think I did as well as I have in the past, um, in terms of planning and things like that because […] my other classes I’ve had time right after my class, um, to kind of sit down and do my teacher’s log, kind of do planning for next time and this time I have to, I had to go to class right after and I think that it hurt me.” Jessica seems to have reconciled herself to the possibility that, in order to reach a greater quantity of students, she must sacrifice something in the quality of her teaching—“I just can’t give them as much as I could before,” she admits—yet is reluctant to do so because she doesn’t want to jeopardize her students’ chances of passing the portfolio review: “I don’t want anyone to get lost in the shuffle.”

What Jessica wants and expects from the group sessions, therefore, is professional advice about how she might handle added teaching responsibilities more effectively and “without having to drive myself nuts”—especialy since, at this juncture in her career, she is seriously contemplating taking a full-time position: “I have to kind of think about what I might do in those situations if I go on as this as a profession and end up teaching that many courses. I have to decide how I’m going to change my philosophies a little bit.” It almost sounds as if Jessica wants to somehow lessen the shock of teaching a full load—something Brenda, a full-time
instructor herself, is still struggling with—and considers the group sessions an appropriate venue for doing that, or, at least, for receiving “more input […] from colleagues and things like that as to what works and what doesn’t work.” Yet she remains optimistic about making the transition from part-time to full-time instruction, contending that, without the distraction of graduate coursework, she will be able to fully devote herself to teaching. “Once I’m no longer a student,” she predicts, “I would ideally like to put more effort into planning things for class, into searching for more text to use in class, more original things, more original assignments, things like that which right now, I simply don’t have the time when I’m working on a thesis.” Jessica has hope, then, that once she graduates, she can teach multiple sections without sacrificing quality for quantity. “I found I had less confidence in this semester than my past,” she said during our final interview, but “I think I could be more effective if it was just my full-time occupation as a teacher.”

Discussion

So what does this all mean in terms of how participants might interact with one another? For one, it appears that although these five instructors teach in the same program and thus negotiate the same constituents (e.g., the grading system, portfolio assessment, etc.) their individual concerns vary considerably. What a participant might identify as a potential obstacle to her teaching success as well as how she attempts to address or cope with it seem influenced to some extent by the situational and/or personal constraints of that individual. Jessica, for example, is concerned that a heavier teaching load, coupled with her responsibilities as a second-year graduate student, could prevent her from conferencing with students as frequently or grading papers as thoroughly as she has done in the past, and that, as a result, both the quality of her instruction and students’ writing may suffer. Because she cannot eliminate or renegotiate
such professional and academic responsibilities, however, Jessica believes she has no choice but to adjust to a more hectic schedule, which might mean spending less time with individual students as well as rethinking her entire instructional approach. “It’s crazy,” she remarked in her first interview. “You know, like I’m, have like seven hours of conferences or something today. […] If I’m teaching four courses, […] it would be really difficult to do that.” Evidently, Jessica has reached a point where she must abandon or modify some of her teaching practices in order to accommodate a greater number of students, and so has chosen to adapt to her professional and academic circumstances rather than attempt to change them. “There’s only so much to help that,” she said.

Jessica seems to attribute any ineffectiveness on her part to external constraints (e.g., finishing her graduate studies, working on her thesis, teaching two classes instead of one, etc.) which are largely unchangeable. So she may feel less responsible for problems that arise during the semester than someone like Brenda, who ascribes her pedagogical woes to personal rather than situational constraints and might therefore believe she has greater control over them. Brenda is worried she isn’t consistently providing students adequate instruction because she often forgets that they may not be familiar with concepts like argumentative structure or thesis development. It isn’t necessarily a lack of time that is her biggest concern but rather what she does with that time. She wants to make sure her students are well-prepared for Comp II, yet realizes she can’t do so if she doesn’t sufficiently explain how to write a thesis statement or properly integrate source material. When lapses in teacher-student communication occur or when “it just seems like everybody dropped the ball at once,” Brenda assumes the fault must be hers, that she hasn’t given her students enough direction or support. “Every once in a while,” she said, “you have like a rough draft or a certain paper that you get and […] and you’ve got a two-
page rough draft, you know, from like eighteen people and you’re like, ‘What, did I not say something in this class?’” To prevent or address such lapses, Brenda tries to remind herself “that these are new students and I have to go over every little thing again.” In doing so, however, she might become overly self-conscious about her communicative behaviors towards students, or at least, much more so than someone like Elizabeth, who considers her skillfulness in “tak[ing] the stuff that I know about how to make this writing matter and […] relay[ing] that to the students” her forte.

Yet Elizabeth, too, has pedagogical concerns which, like those of Jessica and Brenda, seem closely connected with her instructional approach. Elizabeth describes herself as “all business,” even to the point of skipping ‘ice-breaker’ activities or personal introductions on the first day of class in order to maximize the amount of time she can spend on each required project for Comp II. She thus expects students to approach their learning with the same businesslike attitude, especially since she depends upon them to make the learning process work. The best classes, Elizabeth explained, are those “where we’ve all managed to get something and give something in that class,” when students appear “interactive” and “there mentally.” When students aren’t talking or seem unprepared, however, Elizabeth must take on the burden of communication herself. And she “hate[s] those classes where it’s so hard to engage them,” not only because she must play the part of the “composition know-it-all” but because, like Jessica’s scheduling demands, Elizabeth’s students’ refusal to take part in or assume responsibility for their education is, for the most part, beyond her control. She can’t force students to talk during class or do the assigned reading, and though she usually manages to keep them on pace regardless of what they do, Elizabeth resents the idea that students don’t always live up to their end of the bargain.
It seems, therefore, that participants often become disillusioned by teaching obstacles they cannot control and apprehensive of those they can, a trend which both James’s and Stephen’s concerns reaffirm. James has made evident his qualms with the portfolio assessment system, alleging that it forces instructors to teach “to the lowest common denominator” and suppresses teacher autonomy. Though he wants his students to write lengthier and more complex papers than those which the portfolio evaluators might expect, James believes if he teaches writing as a contextualized response to a rhetorical situation, his students will be penalized for it. Most portfolio evaluators, he argued, are merely looking for the “three-point thesis, reason one, reason two, reason three, counterargument” setup. If the evaluator can’t easily find this structure in a student’s portfolio, she may be inclined to fail that student even if her writing far exceeds the portfolio assessment criteria. This is a paradox James insists other instructors are wrestling with as well and who, like him, have had to compromise their instructional approaches in order to prepare students for portfolio review. And because he has no immediate solution for it (short of revamping the entire portfolio review system, that is), James has become increasingly resentful of instructors who perpetuate this flawed assessment process by “oversimplifying things just to meet the basic minimum.”

Stephen, however, seems to think instructors like James have ignored the possibility that teaching basic forms and formulas can enable students to become better writers:

You’re always going to have people who spout off about rhetoric and I’m never sure if they actually believe it. Like, someone like [James] believes in it. He believes in creating unique individual writers and, you know, if, if that’s what he wants to do, good for him. Um, it’s not my life’s goal. It’s certainly not my life’s work, but other people, I’m not always sure that’s exactly what they believe or if
it’s just something that’s been pounded into them for so long that they feel like they have to say it in a public forum.

His concern, therefore, lies with the sort of “rhetoric” James and other program naysayers are supposedly spreading around. Stephen seems aware of the likelihood that, although James doesn’t have as much clout as someone like Elizabeth, he could still prejudice other instructors against formulated instruction and those who practice it. Yet he recognizes, too, that preventing such a situation is beyond his control because the “anti-formula” doctrine James “spout[s] off” may have been “pounded into [him] for so long” that any attempt Stephen might make to change James’s mindset would be futile. As a result, Stephen may harbor some resentment towards his co-worker, especially if he believes James undermines Stephen’s professional credibility whenever openly criticizing his instructional approach.

Considering the differences between their individual teaching concerns, therefore, it would be interesting to see how these five instructors behaved in a small-group setting. How did James, for instance, make a case against formulaic writing to someone like Stephen, a staunch advocate for and practitioner of formulated instruction? How did Jessica, who is teaching fewer courses than anyone else, explain to full-time instructors like Brenda and Elizabeth that she doesn’t have enough time to work with individual students as much as she would like? These and other similar-type questions are subsequently addressed in Chapter Four: “The Teaching Group,” in which I examine how this eclectic group of instructors interacted with one another during sessions as well as what teacher-related issues they raised and how they defined them.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE TEACHING GROUP

Overview

In the preceding chapter, I established each participant’s educational and teaching backgrounds as well as his or her current pedagogical objectives and concerns. The goal of this chapter is to investigate a) how these participants discussed and responded to each other’s objectives and concerns in actual teaching group sessions, and b) how and to what extent their views of and/or strategies for handling such concerns were influenced by small-group interaction. Again, as in Chapter Three, the transcript materials presented here have not been edited for verbal fillers, repeated phrases, or other miscues.

Over the space of twelve weeks, the participants and I met a total of five times. Although I had originally intended for them to choose the number of meetings we would have at the conclusion of our first session, it soon became evident that this was too ambitious on my part, considering that none of us had any sense yet of what these meetings might entail. Instead, during each session we decided upon several tentative dates and times for the next session—which was as far ahead as most participants could plan—and this became part of our regular routine. Another aspect of the teaching group that was never fully realized was the “brags and drags” ice-breaker Brown suggests. Though instructors frequently shared their personal experiences, they almost always did so in relation to that meeting’s facilitation topic, which was perhaps a more organic and less time-consuming way for participants to update each other on their successes or failures than if we had set aside five minutes at the beginning of each meeting to do so.

In most other aspects, however, the meetings proceeded in accordance with the teaching group agenda stipulated in Chapter One, with one or two instructors volunteering to facilitate on
teacher-related issues of the participants’ choosing. The designated facilitator would usually talk for ten or fifteen minutes before opening up the floor to other participants, who then shared experiences with and/or suggestions for successfully resolving the issue at hand. To supplement his or her presentation, every facilitator brought something tangible (e.g., article excerpts, samples of student writing, course documents, etc.), and I would later send digital copies of these materials to those instructors who could not attend, which, as it turns out, was a common occurrence. Due to scheduling conflicts, one participant was unable to attend any meetings at all, and two others just attended one each. Without their additional input, group discussions were occasionally monopolized by one or two participants. This became especially apparent during the fourth and fifth meetings when James insisted upon criticizing certain aspects of the writing program (e.g., curricular features, portfolio assessment procedures, etc.) even though other participants seemed visibly uncomfortable with or uninterested in such issues.

While reviewing each meeting’s transcript, I noticed, too, that participants’ dialogues from the first three meetings appeared more collaborative and inclusive than those from the fourth and fifth meetings. In fact, it was only after James introduced the issue of formulaic writing during the second half of the third session that participants’ behaviors towards one another changed. I decided, therefore, to arrange the five session narratives into three sections: a) meeting one, b) meetings two and three, and c) meetings four and five. The first meeting, which served as an introduction to the teaching group system and as an opportunity for brainstorming topics for further consideration, had no pre-determined issue or facilitator and was thus treated separately from the other sessions. The second and third meetings were more focused and self-guided, as participants seemed to have developed some sense of what they wanted to discuss and how they might utilize group conversations to define and/or resolve
potential or recurring problems. During such meetings, they investigated a wide range of topics—e.g., deterring student absenteeism, setting aside time for teacher-student conferences, preparing Comp I-Basic and Comp I students for Comp II—and were generally receptive of each other’s ideas for handling these and other teacher-related tasks. By contrast, the two final meetings were largely dominated by a single, broader issue—formulaic writing—and one speaker, James, who alleged that “if you teach [students] this then […] they’re just taking away the basic, this is what it is at all costs.” Stephen apparently took exception to James’s allegations that writing formulas impair students’ abilities to think and analyze. “I think if you teach them the basics,” he told his co-worker during the fourth meeting, “what you teach them is that every time they write something beneath some form of thesis statement.” While these two sparred over such matters, other participants like Jessica and Brenda remained aloof and passive. Though I hadn’t prepared for this shift in group dynamics, I did not intervene at any point. I wasn’t certain that what was happening was altogether uncommon, and I was concerned about disrupting or altering the conversational thread. My role as the principle investigator was not to control or steer the discussion towards a specific goal but to record what I observed, though at times it was more complex than that.

At the outset of the first meeting, I was both a full participant and an authority, as I was responsible for providing participants with a description of the teaching group system and prompting them about issues they were interested in. Once they had begun talking amongst themselves about their problems and concerns, my role shifted to that of an observer, and I began taking field notes on participants’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors as well as the topics they discussed. These field notes were later processed and used as descriptive filler when I constructed the group narratives. At the conclusion of the first meeting, when I asked for
volunteers to facilitate the next session, I resumed my role as a participant, though I continued taking notes on who would facilitate, what they planned to present, and when the instructors could meet again, as this would allow me to schedule and prepare for the next meeting.

In subsequent sessions, I relegated myself to the background after turning on the tape recorders and signaling to participants that we were about to begin. While they talked, I observed, taking down as much information as I possibly could about what they were saying, how they were saying it, and how they were interacting with each other. I would do this until the conclusion of each meeting, when the participants and I would discuss possible dates and times for our next encounter.

When I began processing the transcript materials and field notes from each group session, I followed the procedures for data analysis outlined in Carl F. Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein’s Qualitative Data. First, I would re-familiarize myself with my research questions. I wanted to keep in mind what it was that I was looking for and why, which enabled me to separate “relevant text”—that is, text which bore any relevance to my research questions—from raw data (Auerbach and Silverstein 37). I then scanned these excerpts for what Auerbach and Silverstein refer to as “repeated ideas,” ideas that are mentioned at least twice by a participant and/or by two or more participants, as this would allow me to recognize any potential themes (70). For example, while processing the second group session transcript, I noticed that the phrase “student accountability” was spoken by at least three different participants (Jessica, Elizabeth, and James) and that other words or phrases like “attendance,” “homework,” and “responsibility” were frequently mentioned with it. This gave me some idea as to how participants might define student accountability and the kinds of student behaviors they associated with it—namely, that “student accountability” refers to the idea of a student taking
“responsibility” for her learning by attending classes regularly and completing all homework in a timely fashion. From such themes emerged a group of “theoretical constructs,” or what Auerbach and Silverstein define as “abstract concept[s] that organize […] group[s] of themes by fitting them into a theoretical framework” (67). While reading through my list of themes, I realized that certain ones like “promoting student accountability,” “maintaining student interest,” and “extrinsic and intrinsic motivation” could all possibly be grouped under the theoretical construct of “teacher control” (which I had chosen as a construct because both Duffelmeyer’s and Ameen et al.’s studies point to the absence of control as an anxiety trigger). Most participants seemed to think they could sustain student interest and/or promote accountability to a certain point; an explicit teacher-student contract like the achievement requirements would, at the very least, communicate to students what their responsibilities for their learning might entail. But participants also believed their control was hampered by their inability to offer students any extrinsic reward (e.g., grades, points, etc.) for attending class or turning in homework on time, and that many students just weren’t intrinsically motivated enough to attend or participate in class without such enticements—hence, the limited amount of control over matters of student accountability and interest.

These and other theoretical constructs thus allowed me to build a theoretical framework for interpreting and retelling the events of each session in a way that would reflect the unique concerns and demands of practitioners in our discipline. In these retellings, I have tried to frame them as composition instructors’ stories, stories which may contribute not only to our burgeoning professional narrative but also to our understanding of how our stories are shaped to some extent by the people we tell them to. At some points in the discussion, therefore, I have added commentary to draw connections between ideas or events from a particular meeting with other
collected data (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes, etc.) and/or relevant literature, and provided my own explanations to make the discussion more understandable for readers.

**Group Meeting One**

The first meeting took place on September 15, 2005, from 12:45 to 1:30 p.m. in the program lounge. Six participants were in attendance: Stephen, James, Elizabeth, Brenda, Jessica, and Janice (another graduate assistant whom I later decided not to include in the study because she had not facilitated any sessions). The lounge furniture, two couches and four chairs, had been arranged in a circle around two small tables, and on top of each of these I had positioned a tape recorder.

I began the meeting by asking the participants to introduce themselves. “Just tell us a little bit about yourself,” I said to break the ice, “like how long you’ve been with [the program], maybe some silly fact that most people don’t know.”

Short, awkward responses followed. “Well, I’ve been with [the program] since ’95 when I was a grad student.” “This is my second year in [the program].” “I’ve been here one year.”

Then silence.

“Um, let’s see, that pretty much takes care of introductions,” I said, and tried a different route. “Um, what would you like to get out of the group meetings? What would you like to do? Is there any way in particular you would like to structure them?”

Another silence ensued, this one lasting almost ten seconds. The participants stared at me, at each other, at the floor, and I was wondering if the question was too vague. Suddenly, Elizabeth burst out laughing.

“I—… It’s way too serious!” she gasped, still giggling. “No, I think, I think open structure is good, like you know, throw out a question and we can, we can chat.”
Though amused, Elizabeth seemed to have recognized that the stilted, “serious” manner in which the meeting was unfolding clashed with her expectations, and felt compelled to intervene before the session became too seminar-like. (I would later wonder whether in doing so Elizabeth had elevated her status within the group.) “I hope to like swipe ideas,” she explained, a little calmer. “That’s my goal because, you know, you get to a point where you’ve like done a lot of different things and it all feels the same, so something new would be great.”

The effect of Elizabeth’s observation was immediately felt, as others joined in. “I just kinda wanted to get to know some more people, uh, in the program,” Janice said. “Teaching, doing whatever.”

“Yeah, so getting to know people better and swipe ideas,” added James.

I nodded, having realized that getting participants to converse with one another might not be so difficult after all. On the contrary, they seemed almost aching to talk.

I moved quickly through the description of the teaching group system’s structure and objectives discussed in Chapter One, which I had also included in a handout for the participants. (For a copy of this handout, refer to “Appendix D: Teaching Group Materials.”) I was nearly out of breath when I finally asked, “What kind of topics or issues would you like to discuss?”

There was another lengthy pause, though it seemed like a more pensive one, and after a few seconds, James spoke.

“I’ll tell you something that’s been on my mind lately since I got here,” he began. “Um, and after reading a lot of portfolios and trying to adjust, um, what I’ve taught in all these other schools to, uh, meet the requirements of the portfolio system. […]. Something that bothers me both in [Comp I] and [Comp II] is, uh, seeing portfolios that just look like formulas. […] I see the benefit in the, uh, that basic structure, but it is so limited to them.”
The primary issue—“how to, to teach for complications but still meet the rubric,” as he later put it—is one James still hasn’t resolved himself, so he might have been hoping other instructors knew some strategy for adhering to program standards without relying too heavily on “basic” formulas. Yet he also suggested that program features such as the rubric and portfolio assessment invariably promote formulated teaching—meaning that in order to “meet the requirements of the portfolio system,” instructors are forced to teach formula and form over complexity and context. It is likely, therefore, that James wanted others to listen to and even share or adopt his views on formulaic writing and portfolio assessment.

Janice was the first to respond, though she approached the topic from a slightly different angle: “Yeah, I think this kinda goes along with [James], too, um, because of the fact that so many of the teachers are, um, graduate students. How does the training to get through [the program], you know, what’s good about that and can be improved? […] I mean, how to create more thoughtful essays and not just kind of like the grad student has to teach, you know, two sections of [Comp I].” Janice seems to think most graduate assistants cannot teach students to “create more thoughtful essays” because they aren’t trained or experienced enough to do so. “Last semester,” she recounted, “was my first semester teaching [Comp II] and, um, I didn’t have any background in it.” So although she, like James, associates formulaic writing with formulated instruction—specifically, that teachers who teach formulaic writing “don’t always teach students why they might use such a formula” or when or how certain formulas work (Hashimoto 12)—Janice appears more interested in the latter’s underlying causes (e.g., inexperience, inadequate teacher preparation) than its effects on student writing.

“Tied in with that,” Elizabeth offered, “is the students, too, because you have students of such varied capabilities and such varied, you know, abilities to improve […] Some of them
have such issues [...] it takes them so long to get an idea developed that there’s no way to get it
complex, you know, and I’m teaching [Comp II] this semester like, and I’m looking at the
students going, ‘How did you ever get out of [Comp I]?’” As she sees it, the real problem lies
with the students, not teachers: “It’s just like there is no way we’re ever gonna get past sort of,
here’s a thesis, give me, you know, a, you know, as much development as you can and we’ll see
if it hits the, the level that it needs to hit, so there’s certainly a frustration there.” Even an
experienced instructor like herself simply can’t teach every student to write college-level prose—at
least, not without first paring down the course material into its simplest elements. So it seems
that for Elizabeth, formulated instruction is necessary, perpetuated not by portfolio assessment or
teacher training but by students’ limited capabilities.

“Along with that, too,” Brenda added, “I think the fact that we don’t have [students]
through [Comp I-Basic], [Comp I] and [Comp II], we send them off to another instructor who
has different, you know, ways of teaching.”

Despite their use of transitional cues like “along with that” and “tied in with that,” the
participants weren’t actually responding to each other’s ideas. Brenda, for instance, seems to
have ignored Elizabeth’s observations about formulated instruction and directed the conversation
back to the issue of overall teaching effectiveness, though she doesn’t address or challenge
Janice’s point about training. What she is concerned with is the apparent lack of teacher
uniformity within the program. “It’s very strange as an instructor,” she continued, “to teach so
different, like, I mean, class. I understand the material you go over, you know, but the end
result, kind of like the way you want to it to go over and try to teach should be the same.”
Because of this, Brenda would rather have her Comp I-Basic students enroll in her Comp II
sections than be taught by other instructors whose methods and objectives differ from her own; it
seems, therefore, that she trusts herself with the task of acclimatizing her students to Comp II but not necessarily her colleagues.

“See!” James said suddenly. “And, and synthesis is such a more complex thing than just, make sure you have two sources in each paragraph and […] there are teachers teaching that and it’s, when I read these portfolios I’m like, ‘God, they’re not doing analytical writing.’”

Evidently, James doesn’t think instructors who teach basic heuristics or formulaic devices are helping their students very much. “When [the students] get to some other classes,” he added, “I just don’t think it’s serving them to learn how to plug in the synthesis. It’s not really synthesis.”

A strange pattern was emerging here. It appeared that as an instructor’s self-efficacy rose, her general efficacy dropped…considerably, in fact. James sounded very confident of his students’ writing—“Last semester,” he said, “there were one hundred percent of my students who passed”—yet was bothered by his fellow instructors’ supposedly slip-shod teaching practices. And Brenda apparently doesn’t want other teachers meddling with her students, not without the existence of some sort of uniform or standard instructional model.

For several more minutes, the discussion moved along these argumentative threads. Janice, Brenda, and Elizabeth would occasionally volunteer other topics (e.g., teacher incompetence, portfolio assessment, student writing anxiety), but the conversation always returned to that central issue—formulaic writing and its possible sources—with James as its principle driving force. “I have students,” he remarked, “come to my office all the time going, ‘Okay, now you, you said I could do this and my thesis can come in the seventh paragraph, you know, of a twenty-one paragraph paper, whatever. Is that okay for the portfolio?’” To which Elizabeth nodded, as if to suggest that she, too, is often bewildered by the unpredictable and subjective aspects of portfolio assessment. “It is frustrating,” she added, “especially when you
have students who just have aspirations for, for creating something great and it’s like, ‘Well, if, if the portfolio reader doesn’t get it, then how is it this poor student gets punished for?’” Both she and James seem to think, as Fischer contends, that composition instructors often fail to remember that “what makes a piece of writing ‘good’ […] is highly contextual” and thus difficult to recognize at times (“What Makes Writing ‘Good’?” 401).

And should a student’s portfolio fail, might it have more to do with the quality of the teacher’s instruction than her writing? “Putting two sources in,” Janice said, referring to James’s earlier observation about synthesis instruction, “was what I was teaching my students, not because that was all I wanted to teach, but because that was all I knew how to teach them.” So it is not a lack of desire or concern on her part but rather Janice’s unfamiliarity with the material which has hindered her teaching effectiveness. In both cases, therefore, the fundamental issue is control, or rather a lack of control and the “feelings of helplessness” educators associate with problems they consider “unaddressable”—e.g., not having enough time to teach everything, having little or no input in how students are evaluated, etc. (Lindley 89-90). Janice feels she has no control over her own teaching because she doesn’t know what she should be doing or how to do it. “You’re just sink or swim,” she said simply. Similarly, Elizabeth and James believe they have little control over how their students are evaluated. “I dipped into my portfolios,” James recalled, “and was going, ‘Oh my gosh, these students are doing all this stuff, but some of these essays don’t look anything like the portfolio assessor’s going to want to see.’”

Except to make a token observation or verbal nod, Stephen and Jessica had been silent throughout most of the discussion. I sensed that both wanted to get in on the conversation somehow yet also redirect it, which I assumed was because neither was interested in the whole business of formulaic writing or any of its tertiary issues. Stephen soon made it evident,
however, why he hadn’t spoken before now. The other participants—James, Brenda, Elizabeth, and Janice—all seemed to share a set of beliefs about formulated instruction which he apparently didn’t.

“I teach from the formula,” Stephen said, “and if my students choose to go beyond that, that’s great, but I know that if they write a formulated paper with three counter, or three arguments […] and they have just basic topic sentences with synthesis in there, I’m not just gonna agree disagree that they have to acknowledge what contribution source was made. If it’s a formula paper, I know it’s gonna pass through.” Unlike James, whose own teaching objectives seem incompatible with formulated instruction, Stephen prefers this approach, as it not only prepares students for portfolio assessment but is far less intimidating to them than “when you say […] there are so many ways you can do that”—that is, to organize and develop one’s ideas.

James insisted that he didn’t consider Stephen’s approach lackadaisical or inappropriate. “I know you get them thinking in more complicated ways,” he said, and then, to illustrate one of the problems associated with formulated instruction, added, “One issue, for example, is counterarguments. I get so, and no offense to anyone who does this, but to me there’s no sense in telling students, ‘Always put your counterarguments in the second to last paragraph.’ It makes no sense […] and I know for a fact that some people say, ‘Always do this,’ and I think that’s just damaging to say that.”

Stephen didn’t find such practices “damaging” or illogical at all, and suggested that most students would struggle without such heuristics because, as Irvin Y. Hashimoto points out, they seem to provide “a structure for students when they find themselves drifting without a plan” (11). “They’re wandering in a wilderness,” Stephen contended, “like blind people.” What he thinks is counterintuitive is the complete absence of structure and instructional guidance. “You know,
I’m talking about,” he continued, “those other kinds of teachers who like go in there and don’t want to do work and just say, ‘Do whatever you want, do what you think is right.’”

“But conversely,” James countered, “I think formulated teaching is, is not wanting to do work, too, because you can say, ‘They have this here, this here and this here,’ you know, instead of working on the each individual, uh, aspect.”

James and Stephen were now deadlocked over what constitutes the best instructional approach, and neither seemed willing to acknowledge the merits of his counterpart’s viewpoints or to consider the possibility that, because students aren’t identical, “what helps one person learn a given thing more efficiently may not help another as much” (Joyce and Calhoun 19). It was as if both were trying to distance themselves as much as possible from each other’s pedagogical stances—and all to the exclusion of the other instructors.

Jessica finally interceded. “I think part of what we’re kind of circulating around,” she spoke, “is that some students are ready for this and some aren’t, so how to teach a class to one and not to the other and this relates to a concern I had that maybe I could bring up. It’s something I’ve been realizing as I’ve taken on another class, which, you know, two classes probably doesn’t seem like a lot when some of you are teaching four, but you’re taking classes as well.” Jessica had somehow managed to bridge several issues by introducing a new one—how the instructor’s professional and personal responsibilities affect her pedagogical choices and practices. “The struggle that I’m having,” she explained, “you know, is when you take on more students and more time, I’m finding that it’s really hard to do all that kind of stuff, so how you kind of balance where you can kind of meet some of those needs without having to meet with everyone one-on-one all the time.” Jessica seemed to have hit on something here. She had not
only piqued her colleagues’ interest but also unearthed one of the profession’s inescapable hazards: self-doubt.

“I think we have [the] same similar time management issues,” Stephen said.

“I think I make myself almost too available,” Brenda admitted. “But […] I feel bad a little bit because I’m not as available, which sounds horrible.”

The mounting tension had dissipated. With the issue of formulated instruction temporarily abandoned, conversation drifted towards more immediate and practical matters, and in particular, student accountability. Because instructors cannot assign grades or point values for attendance, class participation, or homework (other than the required essays) (Instructors’ Handbook 55), some feel uncertain as to how to enforce homework or attendance policies. “I think if I could get every student to just do the stuff that they’re supposed to do,” Elizabeth said, “it would eliminate, you know, almost every problem that I have ’cause, you know, I believe I could, I could teach just about anybody, but it’s a matter of, you know, you’ve gotta, you’ve gotta be there, you gotta have your stuff done. I don’t know if there’s a way to make that happen, but that would be great.”

“And part of that’s part of the system, too,” Jessica pointed out, “that I think all of us are struggling with […]. I had a student the second week of class and usually they realize this, but not until later, and he raises his hand in front of the whole class. He says, ‘Why do we have to do this homework? How does it count towards our grade?’” Again, the issue here is one of control; instructors like Jessica and Elizabeth may feel powerless to get students to do their homework or come prepared to class because they cannot use any sort of reward-punishment system, given the requirements of the writing program in which they teach. But extrinsic motivation, argued James, is all that some students respond to. “Like the other day,” he added,
“I asked them, ‘Did you all do the audience questions you were supposed to do today?’ How many people did it? Not one hand went up.”

As the discussion came to a close, I reiterated those issues participants had raised and asked which ones they would like to discuss at the next meeting. “Since it’s early in the semester,” James said, “it would be nice to talk about time management, accomplishing stuff first, or something like that, you know. Get the writing issues later.” Jessica volunteered to speak on student accountability, Elizabeth on time management and conferencing. “I have a trick,” she promised, “I’ll facilitate,” and, after deciding upon some possible dates and times, the meeting was adjourned.

The conversational ebb and flow, which had felt so forced in the first few minutes of the session, now seemed genuine and organic, so much so that I no longer thought it necessary or prudent to facilitate or take part in future discussions. The participants were in control now, and I was merely an observer. I felt a wonderful positive vibe from the instructors, as if they now had a much clearer sense of how the sessions might work for them and each other, and were looking forward to their next encounter together. “I think that is incredibly valuable,” Elizabeth would later remark in her final interview, “that we’re all in this together. We’re all, we’re all doing the same things.”

Already, the qualitative data provided some indication as to what sources of anxiety or tension participants had identified and how they might respond to them. Except for Stephen, every participant voiced dissatisfaction with program features which either seemed incompatible with their educational values or hampered teacher success. Elizabeth, for example, was certain that if the grading system was reconfigured to include point values for attendance and homework, “it would eliminate, you know, almost every problem that I have.” Brenda likewise
felt she wouldn’t be so unnerved at the prospect of handing over her students to another Comp II instructor if she knew the instructor would teach them exactly as she had. Janice, too, insisted that she could do a better job if only she’d received more training. What they all seemed to be looking for was what Bishop refers to as “‘a single right answer’ to pedagogical challenges” (qtd. in Duffelmeyer 303). Of particular significance is that Elizabeth, who is neither a novice to the profession nor to the program, was seeking out “‘a single right answer’” just as Brenda and Janice were, a behavioral pattern Duffelmeyer ascribes to beginning teachers (303) rather than veterans. Nor was she alone in this regard. James, an experienced instructor himself, felt that if he could just prevent the portfolio assessment process from impacting his teacher autonomy, he and his students would greatly benefit from it. What this might indicate, therefore, is that if searching for “‘a single right answer’ to pedagogical challenges” is a manifestation of teaching anxiety, which, according to Ameen et al. (16) and Stanulis et al. (72), it is, then the myth that anxiety predominantly affects novice instructors has been refuted here.

But why did participants like Elizabeth and James focus on “right answers” which necessitate changes to or the removal of program constituents and are thus unlikely to happen? Perhaps, as Daniel A. Lindley suggests, such thinking stems from our reluctance to accept the things we cannot change. “Our domain,” she explains, “is our own classroom. What other teachers do or don’t do can only be addressed if one of those other people asks us something. Otherwise, it’s not up to us to take it on” (89). But the value in recognizing our limitations as educators, Lindley continues, is that it allows us to turn to another for advice and support when we come across problems that seem “unaddressable” because in doing so, we learn “to make do with what we have” (89). Moreover, an instructor who discovers a “right answer” which addresses her “pedagogical challenges” and is something she can realistically impart might
alleviate any frustration or tension she is experiencing as a result of such challenges (Duffelmeyer 308; Kirk and Walter 147-8). “We stress less,” Dethier observes, “if we remember that twenty or thirty colleagues probably have solutions to the seemingly insoluble student problem of the moment” (73). Jessica, for instance, appeared visibly intrigued by Elizabeth’s promise to show participants a “trick” for conferencing with students without spending an exorbitant amount of time doing so. Jessica can’t cut back on her teaching load, but if her counterpart’s “trick” proves to be something she herself could do, she might feel more capable of giving her students sufficient individual instruction regardless of how many classes she teaches. Similarly, James sounded hopeful that other participants who were more familiar with the program than he could offer him some practical suggestions on how “to teach for complications but still meet the rubric.” It seemed, therefore, that participants shared a belief that, through small-group interaction, they might find, if not the “single right answer” to their pedagogical woes, something close enough, something which would enable them to function within program constraints without having to compromise their own pedagogical beliefs or practices too much—and which might subsequently reduce any anxiety triggered by these constraints as well.

**Group Meetings Two and Three**

**Meeting Two**

The second group meeting was held on October 5 from 12:45 to 2:20 p.m. in the lounge. This time, however, only four instructors were present—Elizabeth, Jessica, James, and Brenda—even though they seemed unperturbed by the small turnout and required no additional prompting or guidance from me once they were assembled.

“Let’s all start,” Jessica spoke.
“Okay,” said Elizabeth, who had already volunteered to facilitate part of the discussion. “Let’s first talk about conferencing.”

She took out a set of materials and distributed them to the others. “The only thing that I do to keep my sanity,” Elizabeth began, “is a long time ago I realized that […] I had to do a lot of conferences. […] And I wasn’t going to take up my family time to do the conferences […]. So, what ended up happening, instead of, you know, working harder, I worked smarter.”

Here she paused for a moment and looked around at the other participants. “So my big secret,” she continued, “the only thing I do that is tragically different than what anyone else does is I do Friday classes online and it’s a big difference.” It sounded as though Elizabeth generally thrives on more commonly used and canonical instructional methods but has come to rely on this “tragically different” practice, as it allows her to work “smarter,” not “harder.” Indeed, because of her professional and personal responsibilities, she really has no choice but to use it. “I’m not gonna come in on a Tuesday or Thursday [for conferences], you know, and have my kids go to a babysitter,” she said.

Elizabeth went on to explain that, in lieu of holding Friday classes, she posts discussion prompts or assignments on her online course management shell for students to respond to before Monday: “You’ve always got something referring to an assignment or whatever, it’s a reading, whatever and […] then there’s a requirement that they have to respond to someone else and some of the, some of the, um, prompts that I figured, usually they just have to give meaningful responses.” Which they don’t have any trouble doing, apparently. In fact, most of her students actually prefer online discussions to the face-to-face variety because, according to Elizabeth, they can “organize their stuff better [and] […] contemplate their responses before committing to
them,” something they cannot readily do in a classroom forum where, Kameen argues, “spoken discourse can be so evanescent” and “provisional in nature” (222).

Elizabeth then uses the extra class time to conference with individual students. “Normally, when I would be in my classroom for three hours on Fridays,” she said, “I spend all of my six, six and a half hours here for conferencing so that is how I can get all of my kids into one big one as many times a semester.” On average, Elizabeth’s conference sessions last fifteen minutes each, so in a six-hour block of time she might meet with as many as twenty-four students: “Usually, it’s plum full, and, um, you know, it’s awesome.”

It was unlikely that the other instructors had heard anything like this before—Elizabeth later admitted that few people aside from the program director knew anything about her online Friday classes. I also got the sense from the way Elizabeth had broached the topic—first by creating a need for something that could save her time and then insisting her students appreciated it—that she was anticipating a confused or even hostile reaction.

She was wrong, though. Brenda, James, and Jessica all responded with open-mindedness and professional curiosity rather than suspicion or shock.

“Do you read them all [the students’ postings]?”

“Do you ever find that you can’t cover what you need to cover online?”

“And it works well with [Comp I] as well?”

“I’d like them to do this kind of thing […] but it’s just hard to. […]. Got some ideas for that?”

It was as if they were mentally working through the kinks of online class sessions, and trying to figure out for themselves, Could I do something like this? Could I make this work? To them, Elizabeth’s conferencing marathons and online sessions seemed like innovative strategies
for not only addressing individual students’ needs but also avoiding teacher burnout and “psychological exhaustion” through pacing and prioritizing (Marso and Pigge)—and they could certainly see the merit in that.

“It will come in handy,” James said.

Brenda added, “It just allows [students] to sort of answer their own questions and see how other people are dealing with the, the paper or the topic or whatever.”

Elizabeth seemed relieved, and as the discussion came to an end, remarked, “It’s good to just get that out, you know. This is what I do and I’m not afraid to tell you.” It was as if she had purged herself of some horrible and well-guarded secret. Like teachers who confess to hating peer review workshops or whole class discussions (Newkirk 8), Elizabeth had revealed the “crack” in her teacher façade (Newkirk 3)—that she just couldn’t manage a career and family without giving up something—and the other participants appreciated her willingness to do so.

In fact, Jessica began her talk by complimenting Elizabeth on hers. “Well, mine’s not nearly as inventive as yours,” she laughed as she passed out copies of her achievement requirements. “I think I absolutely put too much on here that we’ll probably even be able to cover.” She patted her handout. “What I have first is a sample of my achievement requirements from, the first one is from when I started teaching [Comp I] so it’s very, um, you know, [seminar]ish and the second one is what I’ve been doing this year.”

Jessica then described several differences between the two samples, the most notable of which was her attendance policy. The first document, which is largely based upon the generic achievement requirements provided to all first-time instructors during orientation and training, fails to specify how many classes students are allowed to miss before they are no longer eligible for portfolio assessment. “There’s no set number,” she said, pointing to the corresponding
paragraph. “It’s just basically, ‘Attendance is integral, but we know when something comes up, participation is mandatory, blah blah blah,’ but there’s no accountability there.” Jessica had found that without a “set number” of allotted absences, adhering to this part of her achievement requirements was difficult, if not impossible: “Because I had no policies that said, ‘Well, this is too much,’ I couldn’t really say at the end of the semester, ‘Well, you missed too many classes, I’m not gonna submit you,’ because I didn’t have any numbers.” As a result, there may have been some discrepancy between Jessica’s explicit teacher-student contract and her actual behavior towards students (or implicit contract), which, according to Jeffrey Wolcowitz, causes “many of the problems that arise between instructors and their classes later in the term” (15) such as absenteeism and tardiness.

Since then, Jessica has renegotiated her explicit contract. “The second attendance policy,” she continued, “is a lot more strict [and] detailed now than it was before. So, so, um, I have the new policies that absences in excess of three result in not submitting your portfolio.” Her new strategy for promoting student accountability is, as Elizabeth phrased it, to “talk big” early in the semester. “What I have found,” Jessica explained, “is that this number does help attendance a ton. You know, I don’t have people missing like ten classes like I did before. They’re, and they’re worried about it, they know.” Providing something tangible and absolute is enough to deter most students from skipping too many classes. And for those few who miss more than the allotted number, Jessica usually manages to side-step the “attendance issue” by focusing instead on the quality of the student’s work: “Someone can miss like five [classes] […] and they can come in and just work with them up to where he needs to be so didn’t become an attendance issue, it became a, you know, your work’s not cut out to where it needs to be, okay.”
But there is something Jessica hasn’t yet figured out: what to do if students continuously violate all or parts of the explicit contract. “I don’t know what I would do,” she said, “if, you know, some student decides to come up against me and not turn it in all semester and then I don’t know. I’ve never had that happen.” Jessica seems reluctant to employ what some program instructors refer to as the ‘nuclear option’—i.e., refusing to submit a student’s portfolio because he hasn’t met one or more of the teacher’s achievement requirements. If a student’s writing truly merits a passing grade, Jessica is not about to fail him simply because he missed more classes than the allotted number or turned in a few assignments late: “I’ve never not passed someone, like in [Comp II], I never had someone have four absences and said, ‘I can’t pass you just based on your absences.’” Jessica was curious about whether there was another option besides outright failing the student. “Can the point system […] be used to encourage good attendance?” she asked the other participants. “I know some people that will like, reward, you know, like, say, like if you miss no classes then you’ll get this point or something, an extra point or whatever and then take it away if it gets past a certain point.”

Elizabeth was already doing something similar for her Comp II classes. Yes, she answered, using points can make things easier: “I think kids already know they’re done, [when they lose] five points, they’ve missed so many classes,” and so are less surprised or angered to learn their portfolios will not be submitted for review. But above all, Elizabeth insisted, the instructor must be clear about her policies—and stick with them. “Here’s, here’s where we stand,” she said, “and this is what, and even with the accountability stuff, this is what I expect and if you don’t meet that expectation, this is how it’s gonna affect you.”

James added, “I often throw this, this, this phrase around, you know. ‘It’s time for you to take responsibility for your own learning.’” Neither he nor Elizabeth seems to think there is
some fool-proof method for getting every student to attend class or turn in assignments on time. Learning requires a joint effort between teacher and student, and the student must recognize and assume responsibility for her part in the process if she is to learn anything at all. “You can always learn something, you know,” James remarked, “Responsibility for your own learning, you know, your papers.”

“There is a point,” Elizabeth said, “where you say, ‘There is a penalty, sorry, but I, you know. I want to be punitive or maybe not, but you know what? You’re acting like a big idiot and so, guess what, you didn’t pass. There you go.’”

The issue of student accountability was never quite resolved in this discussion—at least, not in the sense that Jessica now knew how to handle uncooperative or apathetic students—but perhaps it had been more thoroughly defined, and Jessica seemed satisfied with that.

“Probably most of it I shouldn’t be doing according to [the teaching seminar] stuff,” she laughed.

As the meeting drew to a close, it was decided that Brenda and James, the only group members present who hadn’t yet facilitated, would be in charge of the next session. Brenda agreed to examine “what [students] need to learn in a [Comp I-Basic] class and then what they need to learn in [Comp II].” James would discuss how instructors might encourage students to move beyond formulaic writing. “I might get passionate about this,” he told us. Compared to the first meeting, the second seemed more productive and participant-directed, perhaps because of the focus on a problem to solve, an issue to untangle. And the participants were looking forward to more of the same. “This will be fun,” James predicted for the next session. “This’ll be fun.”
In addition, Elizabeth’s conference strategy seemed to have demonstrated to other participants how to utilize administrative assistance in order to handle “unaddressable” situations more appropriately. As part of her facilitation, Elizabeth explained that before putting her plan into action, she had first sought approval from the program director: “[The director] knows I do this. Nobody has managed to, uh, squelch it yet, um, but I think it, it worked incredibly well.” What such behavior might convey to other participants is that administrators can, and should be, part of any strategies instructors come up with to work within or around program constraints.

Jessica’s inquiry as to whether the grading scale could be modified to discourage absenteeism, however, intimated that she was contemplating making these changes without the administrators’ knowledge—which would likely create serious problems for both her and her students if such changes backfired or were otherwise made known. Elizabeth, evidently aware of this possibility, had encouraged Jessica to reconsider her implicit teacher-student contract (that is, her behavior towards students) before further revising her explicit contract. What you must remember, she’d told her colleague, is to be firm with students, “talk big” when problems arise; otherwise, policy changes won’t matter very much. It wasn’t perhaps the answer Jessica was looking for, but Elizabeth’s advice in this instance may have prevented her from using inappropriate or “maladaptive responses” (Kirk and Walter 148) to deter absenteeism or tardiness.

Meeting Three

The third meeting, which took place on October 31 from 12:40 to 2:00 p.m., began in much the same manner as the second one had, with little fanfare or small talk. On this occasion, though, seven participants attended: Stephen, Brenda, Janice, Jessica, Elizabeth, James, and Anita (a veteran full-time instructor who was later dropped from the study because she was not present at any other group sessions). The two facilitators, Brenda and James, were already
discussing how they might introduce their materials to the rest of the group before I had even

turned on the tape recorders, though I did manage to catch a small snippet of their conversation.

“That’s good though,” James was saying, “because I only brought a list of questions

which will get people talking. It’s probably better.”

“Yes,” Brenda agreed. “I have, I have like all these notes so I’m like, ‘Wait a minute,

now. Do I just like read this thing?’ I don’t know.”

It was the first time I’d heard anything hinting at what participants might be experiencing

before facilitating sessions, which none of the scholarship on mentoring communities or teaching
groups had mentioned. In this instance, it sounded as though Brenda and James weren’t exactly

sure how to engage the others. Could this be a symptom or manifestation of communication

apprehension? I wondered. Were Brenda and James worried about how other group members

might perceive them? And did they think if they “came off” the wrong way (as James later put

it) that their ideas would be challenged or dismissed? This was a potential drawback of the

teaching group system I hadn’t yet considered—a self-imposed pressure to sound intelligent,

engaging, organized, and knowledgeable in the presence of colleagues—and one that would

invariably affect how this and subsequent meetings would unfold.

Brenda elected to facilitate the first half of the session. “I put together this handout

before,” she said as she passed out copies to the other participants, “but I kinda realized as I was

thinking about it that I posed it as a question because I don’t really know the answer.” Her

approach here seemed different from Elizabeth’s. Brenda didn’t have a “trick” for preparing

Comp I-Basic students for the rigors of Comp II. Instead, she had chosen to facilitate on this

topic in order to learn more about it. “How do you take that out a little bit and, um, make it
easier on yourself and on that student,” she added. “So that’s, that’s what I’ve been dealing with.”

Featured in the handout were several possible strategies for familiarizing Comp I-Basic students with Comp II course requirements (e.g., evaluating and synthesizing scholarly source material, composing argumentative responses to topical issues, etc.). “In my mind,” Brenda explained, “I’m thinking, ‘Okay, do this very, very slowly. Start with the basics, and then as the semester goes on, progress to, um, more options to work with’”—i.e., additional structural and rhetorical components students might incorporate into their writing—and “‘begin to emphasize common ideas, topics instead of specific structures.’” What Brenda hopes her students will learn through this process, therefore, is how to use such structural and rhetorical elements to address the contextual features of a particular writing task. “So that when they get to [Comp II],” she continued, “they’re not like, ‘Wait a minute, which structure are we working with?’ You know, it’s more about ideas and giving the reader that.”

One of Brenda’s methods for achieving this (which she now uses on a limited basis) is to provide less commentary on students’ papers towards the end of the semester. “I’ve been starting to do that in [Comp I-Basic], [Comp I],” she recalled, “and tell them, ‘You know, this last, you know, these last two papers I’m not going to comment as much on your drafts. You’ve gotta recognize where your weaknesses and your strengths are and start to make those adjustments yourself.’” Once weaned from their teacher’s feedback, students should gradually learn to decipher for themselves what “adjustments” need to be made to their work, which, according to Brenda, is precisely what is expected of them in Comp II. Most Comp II instructors write fewer comments on students’ papers than Comp I-Basic instructors do because, she argued, “[The students] should know certain things. […] I shouldn’t have to write, you know, you do
need to have a counterargument in this paper or something like that.” By familiarizing her Comp I-Basic students with this minimal or “pared-down” response style so that her comments are “only one of the forces that help create [student] texts” (Moneyhun 326-7), Brenda is preparing them to function in a learning environment where they must do more with less instructional support. “I think that helps them start looking ahead to [Comp II],” she offered. “Um, cut the apron strings.”

“I think your, uh, your idea about emphasizing common ideas as topics is really important,” Anita remarked.

Elizabeth concurred. “I like that idea of, you know, the last paper or second to last paper saying, ‘Okay, […] here’s how it’s gonna go in [Comp II]. You pick your structure, but you’re gonna write a sort of argument based on that.’”

Both she and Anita could see the logic behind Brenda’s overall strategy—familiarizing students with the curricular demands of Comp II by simulating those demands in Comp I-Basic. Anita even suggested taking this a step further. “I think in [Comp I-Basic] you also can give evaluation essays,” she argued. “Our goal is to teach the critique of an article in [Comp II]. […] I pick a real simple article, something that’s easy, something that’s controversial, something that they easily connect to, um, and […] that helps bridge the gap, too.”

Stephen already does something like this for his Comp I classes. “I’ve always taught two evaluations,” he said, “because I found that the evaluation, especially for [Comp I] students, is very difficult so if you can ease them in […] then the critique one is actually easier.”

“It gives them a good frame of reference,” Anita added.

The underlying assumption here is that any skills developed or honed through simulation can be readily transferred to similar ‘real-life’ situations, which Bernstein et al. (9), Harris et al.
(543), and Davis and Kring (46) all found in their studies on simulated learning exercises and/or virtual reality therapy. So once a student learns to write an evaluation essay for Comp I-Basic or Comp I, she should be able to write a critique for Comp II because she now possesses “a good frame of reference” for doing so. I was wondering, too, whether students who knew the papers they wrote for Comp I-Basic or Comp I were comparable to those assigned in Comp II felt more confident in their writing abilities. “They need to, to know where they’re going as they’re getting there,” Brenda had said of her Comp I-Basic students. If they do, in fact, “know where they’re going,” however, would such students feel less apprehensive about making the “harsh transition” from Comp I-Basic to Comp II? Brenda seems to think so. “By the time they got to [Comp II],” she recounted, “it wasn’t like […] you know, freaky.” In her efforts to familiarize them with Comp II requirements, therefore, Brenda might also be alleviating any stress or tension her students experienced in anticipation of this transition.

“They must have some kind of confidence,” Janice insisted. Indeed, and perhaps by requiring students to do Comp II-level work, teachers like Brenda and Anita are giving them just that.

The participants spent another half hour or so devising various methods for acclimatizing students to Comp II—e.g., introducing students to synthesis, teaching them to properly annotate and summarize texts, etc. “That I think,” Anita surmised, “is a good [Comp II] strategy, start doing it in [Comp I-Basic]. It carries over.”

When Janice asked for the time, James seemed to take this as a cue that he would need to postpone his facilitation until the following session. “Should I do mine next time because I don’t have my s--- together anyway?” he asked me. “There’s more I can do with it.”

I told him that would be perfectly fine.
“That’s good,” he said. “It’ll give me time to refine it.”

As it turned out, James’s refusal to facilitate had less to do with the limited amount of time remaining—we still spent another fifteen minutes discussing formulaic writing—than his presentation’s apparent lack of focus. “I was frustrated,” he later said during our final interview, “because I just couldn’t get my, my ideas together and I still don’t think I have it completely.” Moreover, James had felt inadequate next to Brenda: “I take that on my shoulders because I thought [Brenda]’s stuff was really, really well done. So I think I screwed that one up.” His own “stuff,” he felt, was so poorly conceived by comparison that he just couldn’t share it with co-workers—at least, not without substantially revising it.

The conversation had stalled by this point. James asked the others, “What if I gave my questions to consider out?”

The participants and I all agreed this would be helpful. I then asked if anyone else would like to facilitate with James at the next meeting.

James answered, “I would love to hear [Stephen]’s, um, synthesis thing.” This was unprecedented—one participant volunteering another to facilitate—so I wasn’t sure how Stephen would respond or whether he would even accept such a request.

“I have a synthesis thing now?” Stephen inquired. That he didn’t give an immediate ‘yes’ or ‘no’ seemed to suggest that he first wanted to learn more about his counterpart’s intentions.

James scanned his list of questions. “Well, on the question that says, ‘Is there a formula for synthesis? What is it, or why not?’” It was as if James was trying to bait Stephen in order to find out how and to what extent he taught formulaic writing—to which Stephen obliged.

“[James], there’s a formula for everything in my world,” he said.
“I would love to see some of the things that you do,” James continued. “Especially about getting your students to sort of, you know, complicate their ideas, but at the same time, giving them these, uh, formulas. Right?”

“No,” Stephen said. “No, I mean, it’s just, I don’t think I ever push them. If they want to complicate it, it’s great, but if all they want to do is learn that formula and master it, good for them, move on. So, I mean—”

“You abide by that,” James interrupted, though it sounded more like a question than an observation. It was as if James had realized that Stephen, whom he seemed to regard as one of the program’s most prolific instructors, was (by his own admission) both a practitioner of and advocate for the kind of formulated instruction James was so adamantly against.

Stephen looked at me. “Can we bring a big boxing glove?” Though he was still managing to keep the conversational tone light and humorous, it seemed as though Stephen was already resigning himself to the inevitability that any discussion he and James might have on formulaic writing would more closely resemble a boxing match than a professional dialogue—and perhaps that was what James had in mind.

“I really want the counterargument,” James insisted, later adding, “I still want you, [Stephen], especially, yeah, the synthesis stuff.”

“You only want me for my synthesis,” Stephen said. “Okay. […]. Thanks for volunteering me.”

Interestingly enough, they had each looked to me at one point in the discussion. James had asked if it would be alright for him to postpone his talk, and Stephen was inquiring about bringing a boxing glove, so it seemed like both participants were trying to get me to say something about whether or not James should facilitate or if Stephen should join him. In the
end, I chose not to intervene, as my job was only to schedule the next meeting. It would be up to them to sort out who was going to facilitate and on what.

“There’s so many different things I wanted to talk about,” James explained. “I don’t know. I’ve got to find some kind of focus.” Perhaps James was hoping Stephen would provide the “kind of focus” he was looking for, though he now seemed so emotionally vested in this topic that he might simply disregard any views which opposed or challenged his. “These are the issues that I want to talk about because I get too passionate about it,” he told the others.

Clearly something in the group dynamics had shifted. Although the first two meetings and a great deal of the third had been characterized by the sort of story-telling and problem-solving collaboration Routman associates with teacher groups (Raymond 27), Stephen and James’s conversation here appeared much more combative, as if each was trying to discredit the other’s instructional approach.

“I feel like my duty is to constantly discuss the whys,” James said.

“If it passes the portfolio session,” Stephen countered, “it’s working for them.”

It seemed likely, therefore, as we concluded our third meeting, that any conversation about formulaic writing which might ensue in subsequent sessions would be of a similar nature, not unlike the kind of struggle Kountz often sees between beginning writers and professionals in which the “beginning writer must fight the predecessor [...] or else become silenced by the power of the author’s word”—only in this case, it would be the relative newcomer, James, attempting to outdo Stephen, the program veteran. But the struggle between novice and professional writers, argues Harold Bloom, is itself anxiety-provoking “because it stifles the weak, because it represses even the strong” (qtd. in Kountz). Clearly, James was “passionate” about the issue of formulated instruction, and seemed eager to prove himself in front of an
audience of peers. But if Stephen were to successfully challenge or subvert his arguments, James might feel even more frustrated with the issue than he is already. Kountz has found that inexperienced writers who fall victim to the “anxiety of influence”—that is, the anxiety associated with attempting to outdo professional or revered authors—often “feel an inability to write” because they become wrapped up in their “overweening desire[s]” to distinguish themselves from other writers. Similarly, James had been unable to speak on this occasion because his presentation seemed disorganized and undeveloped compared to Brenda’s, and might therefore have chosen to postpone his facilitation in order to prevent other participants from making a direct comparison between her presentation and his. He did, however, want his facilitation to be compared with Stephen’s so that, after listening to both, participants could draw their own conclusions as to which speaker was more effective—and naturally, James hoped they’d side with him. But it all seemed like a tremendous amount of pressure he was putting himself under—i.e., making a solid case against formulated instruction (as well as any program constituents that seemingly perpetuate its existence) and besting his co-worker in the process. Even James himself admitted, “I’m still a little worried about when I facilitate […]. I’m a little bit freaked about that.” So it is entirely possible that, like the novice writer who “feels an inability to write” because of her desire to surpass her literary predecessors, James was experiencing a heightened state of anxiety associated with this particular speaking situation which might intensify should things not go to his satisfaction.

**Group Meetings Four and Five**

**Meeting Four**

Because James had been unable to facilitate the second half of the third session, his presentation on formulaic writing had been postponed until our fourth group encounter, which
took place on November 14 from 1:45 to 2:25 p.m. Only three other participants—Stephen, Jessica, and Janice (who arrived fifteen minutes late)—were present, which James seemed to find rather disheartening. He later told me during his last interview that he felt he’d missed an opportunity by refusing to facilitate when “everybody was there,” especially Anita, who seemed to share his views on formulated instruction. “I just wish [Anita] had been there not just that one day,” he said. “I wish she had been there the day I actually presented.” As she wasn’t, James would have to reconcile himself to speaking with a much smaller crowd, and a potentially hostile one at that, considering Stephen had made it clear in the previous session that he disagreed with most of James’s opinions on formulaic writing.

James had managed to refine his presentation somewhat in the weeks leading up to this session. “It, it ended up being a big argument against the five- and six-paragraph formulas,” he explained as he passed out copies of his accompanying handout to the other instructors. The handout (which James then began reading aloud) summarizes his experiences with and observations of the impact the five-paragraph formula has had on student writing, all of which are quite negative. In fact, the first contention James made about the formula is that it is usually “forced” upon students. “When I ask students,” he recounted, “to raise their hand the first week […], ‘Who knows the five-paragraph formula?’ usually about seventy-five percent of them raise their hand and say, ‘I’ve been forced to do this for four years.’” The word “forced” seems to connote students’ unwillingness to conform to or emulate what James believes is an idiosyncratic creation of writing instructors. “When I read professional papers,” he pointed out, “I hardly ever read one that says, ‘In this paper I will discuss the following three things.’ […] It’s like toggle analysis […] and that’s what a lot of these papers look like and I don’t understand it.” The five-paragraph theme holds no pedagogical merit for James, therefore. Students don’t like it, he
argues, and writers don’t use it. So why do teachers still teach it? “It’s just structured for structure’s sake,” he said.

James had wasted no time in problematizing this formula, and so far, his complaints seemed justified. A majority of his students have been “forced” to learn it, though they don’t understand it, and it bears no resemblance to any ‘real’ writing they might do. “And all these writers come in,” he continued, “and they’re like bad writers because they’re trying to force things into [...] this five- or six-paragraph structure.” But one question still loomed: Are instructors in this particular program imposing the five-paragraph theme upon first-year students, and if so, to what extent? Before answering, James turned his attention to the kinds of papers he has found in student portfolios. “I don’t know for sure that any, uh, teachers are forcing this,” he said, “but when I see a whole stack [of portfolios] where they all look exactly alike [...] where the counterargument’s always the last, second to last in the paper. It wasn’t always a good counterargument. It’s just that ‘Some may say exact opposite of everything I said.’” Such lackluster writing would indicate that students are indeed being “forced” to follow formulas without learning when or how to use them, yet James is reluctant to place blame solely on teachers. Most instructors, he reasoned, don’t want to teach formulaic writing at all, so something is being “forced” upon them, too. “All kinds of people,” James said, “have admitted to me that feeling that they had to get by in [the teaching seminar]. This is what they needed to teach and feeling like they needed to, to pass [...] the portfolio evaluations, they needed to go ahead and use the formula.” The fault doesn’t lie with them, therefore, but with the prevailing system—i.e., the program—in which instructors must operate.

James had expressed similar sentiments before in both group and interview sessions, but never had he made a criticism about the program so directly in the presence of other participants.
He then suggested that one of the biggest problems of the program (and of our profession, for that matter) is the incredible lack of instructional resources or textbooks offering anything other than the indelible five-paragraph model. “So many students have been taught the five-paragraph formula,” he read from his handout, “because so few texts written by professional writers are observed as models in our textbooks. […] I don’t think that we’re giving them enough tools to adapt to various writing situations.” This sounded like another legitimate observation, but because he now seemed to be openly accusing the program of curtailing instructional freedom and student development with only anecdotal evidence for support, James’s criticisms were immediately challenged—by Stephen.

“If you teach them the basic intro, volume, conclusion structure or problem-solution structure or cause-and-effect structure,” Stephen pointed out, “all of which they get in [Comp I], then they’re going to be able to adapt to any situation that they need to write in because one of those structures is going to work for whatever writing situation that you are involved in.” To his way of thinking, basic forms and formulas are transferable from one situation to another, provided that the student learns how to recognize which forms or formulas to use.

That may very well be, James responded, but many first-year students don’t know when or how to use formulaic structures. And to make matters worse, he added, “A lot of these papers I’ve read […] have what I call clunky metadiscourse […], where everything’s just repeated.”

Stephen doesn’t consider such repetition problematic. “Do you know what I think is great about that repetition, though?” he asked James. “It may be clunky for us to read but at least it teaches them something new about transitions that they grow to love. That’s what makes me happy. So, you know, that’s how it can get repetitive.” Evidently, he sees the logic behind his students’ “clunky” metadiscourse in much the same way that Mina Shaughnessy recognized the
“intelligence of the student’s mistake” (Rose, Lives on the Boundary 172)—that students sometimes repeat themselves in order to show readers how one idea connects with or reaffirms another.

James wasn’t satisfied with his co-worker’s interpretation. The kind of repetition he associates with formulaic writing has no logical purpose. “I tell [students] not to write, ‘In this paper I will.’ To me that’s clunky metadiscourse. That just wasted a whole f---ing line there that I could’ve actually said something, you know.”

So what? Stephen asked. Most students aren’t going to become professional writers, and they don’t expect to either. “They want the lowest common denominator to know how to get through writing in this course,” he said, “but also any other writing classes that they have and I’m okay with giving them that because it’s not my job to say, ‘Here’s the bar that you have to meet.’” Stephen held his hand aloft his head, as if to suggest that James’s expectations for students were far too high. “My job,” he continued, lowering his hand, “is to say, ‘This is what it takes to be proficient in our classes and if you want to go beyond that, that will make me happy, but if you just reach that bar, that makes me happy, too.’”

Up to this point, neither Jessica nor Janice had said much of anything. Now Jessica would attempt to redirect James’s accusations to another possible source: student preparation. “It’s not that I don’t agree with you,” she said, looking at James, “but not all these students coming are ready to write special papers and, you know, we can’t assume that they are right off the bat until we can see that they’re capable of that in the first place.” Jessica had rehashed one of Elizabeth’s arguments from the first group meeting—that because most first-year students haven’t yet mastered basic formulas or forms, they must first be taught them in order to become more proficient writers.
Janice likewise insisted that students cannot be expected to deviate from simpler and more rigid formulas if they aren’t already familiar with them—which, she argued, most students aren’t. “It’s like they don’t even know how to do a five-paragraph essay, so, like [Jessica] said, they don’t even know how to do ‘Firstly,’ ‘Secondly,’ so it’s like you can’t break them of the rules if they don’t know the rules.” If she and Jessica were teaching to the “lowest common denominator,” they weren’t doing so because the program required it, but because their students needed it. “And,” Janice added, “it makes sense to [students].”

“I guess my biggest fear,” James said, “is they’ll come away from our [Comp I] and [Comp II] with this idea, ‘This is what an essay should look like at all costs,’ you know? And like creativity has gone out the window and sophistication and analytical thinking.”

“I don’t think analytical thinking has to go out the window if [we] teach them rigid structure,” Stephen countered, “because I know my students think and I can see it when they interpret their citations.” Teaching formulaic structures isn’t an ‘either-or’ proposition for him because it doesn’t mean the end of “analytical thinking.” On the contrary, he added, it can be the beginning of it. “[Students] give a source, they explain it and that’s where the analytical thinking comes in and they can still follow the formulaic structure.”

“See, and that’s limiting, too,” James responded, as if Stephen had just proved his point.

Stephen lowered his head. “There’s a formula, [James].”

While they were speaking, Jessica and Janice had begun thumbing through Stephen’s handout (a detailed description of the procedures he uses to teach students to incorporate source material into their writing), and now seemed more engrossed in it than the conversation.

“Do your students like ever, do you, what’s the time frame to go through this?” Jessica inquired, her eyes scanning the text.
“Going over it step by step takes about four days,” Stephen answered.

“Let me finish up real quick,” James interjected. “I mean, I think a combination of formula and freedom is sort of helpful.” He then talked about one of his Comp II students, whom he’d asked to find more credible sources to support his unconventional argument that violent video games can be beneficial to children’s social and intellectual growth. “I know this may be pushing them too far or something,” he explained, “but I’m like, ‘I want you to say something new. I want you to argue something new. I don’t want to hear the same old crap [...]’ So, I did, maybe it’s selfish. I don’t want to read a bunch of f---ing crap.”

To which Stephen replied, “As long as the f---ing crap is well-structured. [...] People who are colleagues of ours who are supposed academic scholars can’t even produce new scholarship. So how can I expect an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old to do it?”

“Change your expectations,” James offered.

Stephen smiled. “[James], I’m way too old to change.”

It seemed neither James nor Stephen was willing to concede the point. It wasn’t merely a question of whether first-year students should be taught (or re-taught) the five-paragraph theme. James and Stephen seemed to have very different views on what writing instruction should entail, what they should expect from students, and what their roles as instructors within the program and the university should be, and could not reach a consensus on any of these issues at this point.

James made a final comment to his colleague. “It’s this damn rubric that you’ve gotta pass, that people have got to read quickly and see that structure. I don’t know. That’s what I don’t get. Does that make you mad?”

“Nothing really miffs me,” Stephen answered.
We had again run out of time before the second facilitator had a chance to speak. After James excused himself to conference with a student, Stephen elected to put off his part of the facilitation until the next session.

“I think we should break for the day,” he suggested, to which the other participants agreed.

Just as the meeting was breaking up, however, James gave one last remark: “I wanted somebody to help me with this and it wound, this is totally different.” It seems, then, that he was looking for “help” of some kind, although he hadn’t specified what he wanted “help” with exactly, and Stephen thinks he knows why. What James is fixated on has more to do with how he “fits into this system” than how he teaches. “It’s like beating a dead horse,” Stephen said in his third interview. “I just think someone’s struggling to figure out how he fits into this system and I think he does fit into this system, but I, I think he used these seminars as a way to, you know, sort of stage his own struggle and to figure it out. I mean, it became more of a running monologue than anything else.” What James was “struggling” with, as Stephen saw it, was a personal matter, one that he and the other participants believed they couldn’t (and probably shouldn’t) resolve for him.

James himself seemed more distressed than ever, perhaps because, in addition to finding no “help” from his colleagues, he didn’t feel as though he’d elicited much understanding or support. Neither Jessica nor Janice considered it prudent to abandon the five-paragraph theme when most students couldn’t even write one, and Stephen appeared unmoved by James’s attempts to exorcise “issues that’ve been plaguing me for years.” What seemed to bother him most of all, however, was that James felt he’d been ineffective as a facilitator. Although he’d postponed his talk in order to make it more accessible and persuasive, James wasn’t satisfied
with the final product, particularly in terms of its organizational scheme and content. “It’s still all over the place,” he later remarked. “That thing I wrote, you know, you look at it compared to [Stephen’s] and it’s almost like a document itself. […] Like, mine is like all this almost free writing stuff and his is this bulleted kind of thing. […] So um, I gotta keep working on that.”

This reminded me of the conversation Brenda and James had had just before the start of the third meeting, when both seemed unsure as to how they would facilitate. In James’s case, however, his uncertainty might have had more to do with what he hoped to achieve with his facilitation than how to go about it. Kountz has found in her observations of student writers that “the threat the student feels” to “written or spoken” feedback “is in proportion to her or his aspirations.” “The greater the aspiration,” she explains, “the more intense the reaction.” Perhaps something similar had happened to James here. In his mindset, the facilitation might have seemed like a logical starting point for his “big mission” to rid the program, perhaps even the whole discipline, of teacher incompetence and insipid, lackluster student writing. But if James couldn’t make a case for his “anti-formula” approach in a small-group setting like this, how would he possibly do so with program administrators or in a larger academic forum (e.g., a conference, a journal)? Maybe this was something James had begun to wonder himself, as he appeared to be having serious doubts as to whether or not he could learn “to teach for complications but still meet the rubric” or if he was even on the right track with his “anti-formula” campaign. To be honest, he said in his final interview, “I’m not completely convinced of my side.” It seemed likely, therefore, that whatever tension or frustration James was experiencing because of program instructors teaching “to the lowest common denominator” might have been exacerbated by this latest group encounter, especially if, as Kountz has suggested, “the threat” James felt to his colleagues’ reactions was proportional to his ambitions.
Group Meeting Five

The fifth session took place on December 15 from 10:15 to 11:20 a.m. Because Stephen hadn’t had enough time to present his materials on writing formulas at our last meeting, he would be the final facilitator. James and Jessica were present, as were Elizabeth and Brenda, and there was a newcomer as well, Christine, an experienced instructor who teaches at both this university and a neighboring community college (and whom I later dropped from the study because, like Anita, she could only attend a single meeting).

Stephen had emailed me a digital copy of his facilitation packet, which I had then forwarded to the other participants with instructions to print it out and bring it with them to this last session. Most of the participants had already reviewed its contents, although Stephen took a moment to introduce the packet’s purpose and nature before starting his presentation. “My focus,” he began, “was on practical examples, um, because that’s the way my mind works and so I’m just gonna walk you through how it is that I teach synthesis to prove to you the value of ‘F words’ like ‘formulas.’”

Here he paused and winked at James before continuing. “Some of the critics will charge that these formulas dumb down the material, teaches students rigid rules rather than critical thinking skills […] and so you’re not emphasizing developmental, rhetorical content like audience and purpose.” He was looking right at James as he spoke. “Still others will say there’s too much repetition, and if I ignore you, it’s because you’re sitting right there. It’s not because I’m ignoring you.”

James was actually positioned to Stephen’s immediate right, and although he was not returning his co-worker’s gaze, he was smiling, and had evidently recognized that Stephen was...
recapping some of his complaints about formulaic writing from the fourth meeting. “I’m willing to say all of the above,” James laughed. “I’m glad you got it all there.”

Stephen was laughing, too, and there was an almost tangible mood shift, as if the uncertainty plaguing both participants about how this session might unfold had dissolved. “Okay, facilitator’s going,” Stephen giggled. He then began describing his four-day teaching unit on synthesis and source integration. “This is my conceptual map,” he said, referring to his eighteen-page packet, “and what it is, it’s just four days of a unit I do on synthesis in [Comp II], um, along with a prep day.”

Stephen went on to explain that he introduces students to the concept of synthesis by first providing them a research prompt—ex. “Should the Harry Potter novels be banned from public schools?”—and a set of relevant sources. After he and his students “brainstorm for potential main ideas,” Stephen instructs them to carefully annotate each source by marking specific passages that contribute to and/or support their own responses to the prompt. “Basically, what I tell them to do,” he said, “is go through the source material that I’ve given them and pick a different type of annotation for each of these main ideas and as they’re reading through to mark any passages, maybe, you know, ‘They reflect Pagan, anti-Christian views not shared by every student in the public school system.’” Once students have a sense of what source materials they will use, they are now ready to begin synthesizing them, though they need to understand what synthesis actually is before doing so. “What I tell them first,” Stephen spoke, “is, um, the easy definition of synthesis, which is basically I say, ‘Synthesis means taking two or more different […] sources, combining them in a paragraph to support your own claim.’”

Stephen’s “easy definition” was a near verbatim recitation of what James had found so bothersome about synthesis instruction during the first group session. (“Synthesis is such a more
complex thing than just, make sure you have two sources in each paragraph,” he’d remarked.)
So it may have been that Stephen was attempting to highlight the contrast between his approach
to synthesis instruction and his counterpart’s. What James considers too simplistic and narrowly
focused Stephen finds useful for acquainting students with this tricky concept: “It’s [the]
beginning of this unit [and] they’re constantly making mistakes.” And after all, he added, the
combination of two sources is synthesis in the most fundamental sense.

“We’ll go into a more difficult definition,” Stephen went on, “as well as know is, ‘It
requires you to engage those sources in a conversation,’ and in order to get at that idea of
correspondence, I introduce contribution.” As the other instructors weren’t familiar with the
concept of “contribution,” Stephen offered a more detailed explanation and several examples to
show what he meant by it. “[There] are six basic contributions that every source shares,” he
continued, “which is what I tell my students, um, or contribute to a paragraph and they can
provide an example, provide a definition, explains the problem or issue, provides a cause,
provides an effect for, [and] [...] sequence.” So in essence, a source’s contribution to any given
argument is defined by its purpose and relationship to that argument—e.g., causal, illustrative,

etc.

After reviewing these six contribution types, the student is asked to reexamine her
marked text passages and determine how each contributes to her arguments. Knowing what sort
of contribution the passage makes then enables the student to contextualize it with an appropriate
transitional phrase or cue. “I tell them they have to create this contribution transition to get into
the source,” Stephen explained, “which is the signal to your reader that you’re putting synthesis
in.” If a passage contributes an illustration or example to her argument, the student might
introduce it with a transition such as ‘for example’ or ‘to illustrate this point,’ which not only
establishes the relationship between the passage and the writer’s ideas but demonstrates synthesis as well. “Granted, it’s not the sexiest metadiscourse in the world,” he said, “but I don’t care. It’s clear, it adds coherence to the paragraph, and it clearly signals synthesis.” And that, he added, is enough to satisfy him. Moreover, by taking students through the steps of source integration in this systematic manner, Stephen alleviates any anxiety or writer’s block they might experience. “It just asks them to go step by step in a very plug and chug way making argument rather than sitting down in front of a blank screen and typing out a paragraph in its entirety.”

Elizabeth seemed impressed with Stephen’s approach to synthesis instruction, although she expressed concern that it was a little too methodical for her. “I like it more mixed,” she said, “so if I were to bring this in, into my classroom they would freak out. […] Not that there’s necessarily anything wrong with that, but it’s a totally different style.”

You’re right, Stephen responded. Teachers often get the same results with different approaches. “Your paragraphs from your students look very similar to the paragraphs that my students get.”

“Mine get there, too,” James offered.

“And I bet they look, your paragraphs look very similar to what my students produce,” Stephen told him. “It’s just a different approach. […] There’s some really interesting parallels to what we do even if they’re in some ways radically different.”

With this last sentiment, Stephen may have temporarily put to rest any burgeoning friction between himself and James regarding the issue of formulated instruction. Though he’d characterized James’s anti-formulaic approach as “radically different” from his own, he recognized, too, that James probably achieved similar results.
James mulled over the possibility that a more meticulous approach like Stephen’s might save him time in the long run. “So you think, um, if you give yourself all this work in the beginning and then you don’t have to write quite as much all over their papers?” he asked. “I’m writing s--- all over the place like, ‘Well, this doesn’t make sense here. Shouldn’t you put that source up there?’ I’m doing that all semester, you know, which pushes me right up to the end, um, dealing with all this messy work.”

“They work,” Stephen replied, “yeah.”

James’s interest in Stephen’s approach was short-lived, however. As Stephen was about to conclude his presentation, James launched into another series of protests regarding the program’s outcomes assessment procedures, its alleged perpetuation of formulated instruction, and the unfortunate side-effects such instruction has on student writing.

“I, I like a lot of this stuff, you know,” he remarked, tapping his copy of Stephen’s handout. “This stuff like [Elizabeth] said is not that different except it’s just much more rigid and I have no problem if someone is this meticulous about things and it makes this much sense.” He put down the copy and looked at Stephen. “What I have a problem with is I, I’m just reading so many portfolios that seem like they’re plugged in and at the end, for example, ‘As some may say’ and then, and then it’s not, it’s not, um, it doesn’t make a, not relevant counterargument at all. It’s just plugged in crap.”

“This is where I think we differ the greatest,” Stephen said, “not in terms of the way we teach, but in terms of the emphasis that we place on certain kinds of, certain aspects of writing.” He leaned towards James. “What I care the most about are these beautiful interpretations and I think you like interpretations and structure, and I just, I feel like I’m asking too much, maybe I just feel like I’m not good enough to ask for both.”
Stephen was reiterating his assertion from the fourth meeting that his expectations for students, though lower than James’s, were arguably more realistic. Asking students to do too much too quickly, cautions Clyde Moneyhun, causes them to feel overwhelmed (328), and so if they are to learn to interpret and utilize source material, they must be allowed to do so without having to figure out source order or paragraph organization simultaneously. “Interpretations where they explain their source material,” Stephen mused. “That’s what I want to come out of [Comp II]. Beautiful, brilliant, lovely, stylish, zesty sometimes.” Once students can do this on their own, he continued, they are ready to move on to the more complex and subtle nuances of argumentative prose James was speaking of.

Unconvinced, James turned his attention towards the alleged absence of teacher autonomy within the program. “I’ve been going through the halls this semester and at least five or six people have told me, or seven or eight really smart teachers told me, um, ‘Yeah, I used to be more free with it, but because of this program I want them to pass. I’ve just gone back to the typical three-point thesis and counterargument.’ And not like for good reason, just because it’s easy for them and easy for their students.”

Perhaps the real problem, Christine offered, doesn’t lie with formulaic structures per se, or even with the instructors who teach them. What usually happens is that a student utilizes a formula for a specific writing task and then forgets it afterwards. “Once that assignment’s done, all their critical thinking skills are gone,” she said. “But if they weren’t, if they could apply it to the formula itself, they wouldn’t know what to do with formula. And not use this as, you know, rigid scaffold that they can’t throw out at all, but they don’t, they don’t do that.” Instead, the student discards the formula once its purpose no longer seems immediate or apparent. And that, Christine continued, is “the problem with the application of the formula. It’s not the formula.”
“Yeah,” James nodded. “Right.”

What most students are concerned with, Elizabeth added, is meeting their instructor’s standards. “I mean, that is what you have to, you have to figure that out with your audience. If your audience is a teacher […], you’ve gotta figure that stuff out”—which may explain why a student throws away any heuristics her teacher supplies her with after she finishes an assignment. From the student’s vantage, both the task itself and whatever learning might be involved are already accomplished once she gets the grade she desires.

“They’re always simplifying,” Christine observed, “and that’s not exactly what you’re supposed to be doing. And they gotta go through that, making it more complicated.”

The meeting ended before the participants could delve more deeply into this final topic, though it seemed that perhaps James and Stephen had reached some sort of consensus as to whether or not formulaic structures should be taught and how instructors might encourage students to use formulas in various writing situations and not just for immediate tasks. It appeared, too, that both parties might have gotten a better sense of why some instructors like James frown upon the use of formulas and others like Stephen insist upon it. As Elizabeth pointed out, it all comes down to individual standards and tastes: “We all have different things that we, that come in and we all have our own little thing that bugs us. […] But we, I mean we deal with that.”

Discussion

Elizabeth’s final sentiment also encapsulates what I believe is the essence of the teaching group system. The eight instructors who participated in one or more of these sessions had all revealed to each other “little thing[s] that bug[ged]” them, quite possibly because, as Elizabeth suggested, they wanted to “deal with” such bugaboos more effectively. Elizabeth herself had
disclosed one of her most closely-guarded teaching secrets (i.e., holding extended office hours for teacher-student conferences during scheduled class time), not because she was looking for a more conventional time-saving method but because she wanted to feel comfortable enough with her current approach that she could, if so inclined, discuss it with other program instructors without what Brown refers to as “fear of judgment.” In a similar vein, Jessica and Brenda had recently devised and put into practice strategies for handling problems associated with student accountability and preparation for Comp II, respectively. In response to students’ chronic absenteeism and tardiness, Jessica had substantially revised her course attendance policy; Brenda had begun integrating Comp II course elements into her Comp I-Basic regime so students could make the transition from Comp I-Basic to Comp II more easily. For the most part, their strategies appeared to be working, but neither Jessica nor Brenda seemed entirely satisfied with the results. Both were also aware of their current strategies’ limitations—Jessica, for example, had admitted that she still didn’t know how to deal with students who refused to follow her course guidelines—and may have felt they needed to “avoid jumping in with solutions before taking the time to understand the issue fully” (Brown). So for them, the group functioned as a sounding board where they and their colleagues could brainstorm alternative solutions or improvements to existing ones.

James was perhaps the most unique participant in that he’d become so perturbed by formulaic writing that he spent practically all of the fourth meeting and a good portion of the fifth discussing its prevalence in the program. Perhaps his motivation here was not unlike Brenda’s or Jessica’s, however. James still hadn’t managed to bridge the gap between his own teaching objectives and those which the program allegedly purports, and was therefore hoping the group could provide answers. But he wasn’t at a point yet where he would (or could) accept
his peers’ suggestions, nor did he have a firm grasp on what it was exactly that bothered him so. “I haven’t had time to gather up all these angles and put them together,” he said during the fourth session. “I don’t know.” All James knew for certain was that the writing program must be at fault on some level because he had taught with greater success, and less trepidation, at other institutions. Stephen, who evidently viewed this sort of thinking as counterproductive, attempted to show James how most writing formulas, if properly explained and contextualized, could enable him to achieve the results he was looking for. James didn’t appear completely sold on the idea, however, and remained steadfast in his belief that the real reason most instructors teach basic formulas is because the program forces them to do so. His attempts to exorcise his demons may have ended in failure, but James was grateful for the opportunity to “vent and to commiserate” with other instructors about his own frustrations, and may have gained “some very important insights as to how we can continue the journey of finding out who we are, what we are, and what we are supposed to do” through such social interaction (McIntyer qtd. in Stanulis et al. 79). And, as I will discuss in the following chapter, James’s contributions to these group sessions, like those of his counterparts, have provided me with a clearer sense of why certain features of our discipline often create or intensify bouts of teaching anxiety and how writing instructors attempt to minimize the presence or effects of such anxiety triggers.

Having established case studies for participants and detailed each of the five meetings, I will now turn my attention to the statistical results from participants’ survey responses and the transcript materials and field notes taken during my observations of Elizabeth’s and James’s teaching sessions. I will also provide a synthesis of the interview data collected throughout the study, and finally, reexamine the themes and patterns which emerged from this material.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

In Chapters Three and Four, I presented qualitative data from participants’ interview responses and contributions to group sessions in order to establish how each participant’s educational background and current teaching responsibilities, objectives, and concerns might affect his or her communicative behaviors towards other participants. The purpose of this chapter is to identify the patterns and trends which emerged from the study’s quantitative data (i.e., participants’ survey responses) as well as additional qualitative data not already disclosed in the two previous chapters (e.g., participants’ responses to specific interview questions, field notes recorded during Elizabeth’s and James’s class observations, and transcript materials from the follow-up interviews conducted with each of these participants). Included in the chapter, therefore, are a) a brief overview of the study’s quantitative component, b) a review and analysis of the survey results, c) descriptions of participants’ interview responses, and d) detailed accounts of the classroom observation sessions and participants’ follow-up interviews, all of which were then utilized to answer the following research questions:

a) What are some discipline- and/or program-specific triggers of teaching anxiety?

b) To what extent do these triggers impact participants’ behaviors towards students?

c) What strategies and/or coping mechanisms do these participants utilize in their efforts to minimize anxiety-inducing stimuli and/or related effects?

The first question has been addressed somewhat in Chapter Four. For example, transcript materials and field notes collected from the first and third group sessions point to the portfolio assessment process as a common source of anxiety among participants. James and Elizabeth both stated that they felt they had no control over how their students’ portfolios were evaluated,
and were worried that other instructors might not pass writing that either challenged or deviated from their expectations of ‘good’ writing. Brenda, too, seemed concerned that the portfolio assessment process wasn’t a sufficient indicator as to whether or not students were ready for the rigors of Comp II, and so had begun integrating Comp II curricular elements into her Comp I-Basic teaching regime to better prepare students for this transition. But although the qualitative data from the group sessions seems to have highlighted several possible sources of teaching anxiety, it doesn’t provide much information regarding the extent to which a participant’s reported level of anxiety fluctuates from one teaching task to another or how a participant’s anxiety level compares with those of other participants. As they differ in terms of age, rank, experience, and familiarity with the writing program, it is likely that some participants would experience greater levels of anxiety than others when performing certain kinds of teaching tasks, which the quantitative data verified to some degree.

**Quantitative Data**

The quantitative data collected during the study was quite small in proportion to the qualitative data—a single survey was administered to participants at both the start and conclusion of the study—though it may have yielded statistical results which correlate to some of the major themes or patterns that emerged from the qualitative data. As the sample size was far too narrow to produce valid or reliable results, the survey responses cannot be generalized to any teacher population, even those currently teaching in this writing program. At best, the results would only reveal a) to what extent participants’ total response scores and/or response scores to individual sections of the survey fluctuated from the beginning of the study to the end, and b) any correlative relationships between fixed variables (e.g., age, gender, etc.) and participants’ response scores. Nevertheless, the survey form itself, after it has been considerably modified
and retested, may eventually prove useful to administrators and composition specialists who wish to study the prevalence of teaching anxiety on a larger scale, such as within an entire writing program.

Survey Development

I decided early on to model my survey after McCroskey’s Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for College Students and the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension survey, as these have been extensively tested for reliability and validity. Both surveys use the Likert-type scale (Daly and Miller 244; McCroskey, “Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety” 271), which, according to McCroskey, is “normally […] highly reliable,” so I adopted the self-report scale for the purposes of investigating teaching anxiety. Each survey item was thus composed in this format, with five potential responses indicating the extent to which a participant agreed or disagreed with a particular statement about some aspect of teaching (ex. I look forward to creating lesson plans and materials for my students).

Daly and Miller had “subdivided” their survey items “into a number categories” such as “peer evaluation of writing” and professional writing (245), so I did something similar, and sectionalized the survey items into four basic aspects of writing instruction: classroom performance, classroom preparation, conferencing with students, and responding to and evaluating student work. To avoid weighting one section more heavily than another, I included eight items per section, each with four “positive” or “positively worded” items (ex. I look forward to teaching a class) and four “negative” or “negatively worded” items (ex. When students seem uninterested in the class activities, I feel tense), for a total of 32 items, half “positive” and half “negative.” Again, this setup is comparable to that of the Daly-Miller survey,
which initially featured 26 items, 13 of which were “positively worded” and 13 “negatively worded” (Daly and Miller 245-6).

Before continuing, however, I must acknowledge the survey’s weaknesses in terms of content and subdivision. While it may have been prudent to limit the number of items to 32 so as to avoid overwhelming participants, I neglected other aspects of teaching that might cause or exacerbate anxiety—e.g., small-group interaction (Newkirk 8), computer lab instruction (Duffelmeyer 296), and formal teacher evaluation (Ameen et al. 18), to name a few. Perhaps these could be introduced in a separate survey or added to this one at a later point (though this would mean either reducing the number of items per section or creating a longer survey).

Data Collection and Processing

As I previously mentioned in Chapter One, the survey was submitted to all program instructors who originally volunteered for this study. Those who filled out and returned the survey were then asked to complete the entire sixteen-week study (including three interviews and an undetermined number of small-group sessions). Their responses were typed into a Microsoft Excel file and set aside until the conclusion of the study, when participants were asked to fill out the survey a second time. These results were also typed into a separate Microsoft Excel file, and both sets of raw data were submitted to the statistical processing center (located on campus) for further analysis. It was decided that the most practical method for processing such a small amount of data would be to employ the same formula used by Daly and Miller to calculate respondents’ writing apprehension scores:

\[
\text{Writing Apprehension Score} = 3 \times \text{number of items} + \text{Positive Total} - \text{Negative Total}
\]

So for each participant, the total “positive” score was tallied up by adding together all the participant’s responses to “positively worded” items. The total “negative” score was then
calculated by adding together the participant's responses to all “negatively worded” items. Daly and Miller had multiplied the total number of items on their survey by a factor of three, and so I did the same, and multiplied 32 (the total number of items on my survey) by 3 to get 96. To determine each participant’s total response score, therefore, the negative score was subtracted from the positive score and added to 96:

\[
\text{Total Response Score} = 96 + \text{Positive Total} - \text{Negative Total}
\]

Scores may range from a low of 32 to a high of 160. The mean and standard deviation for all participants’ pre- and post-study total scores were calculated using this data.

There is a key difference between the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension survey and my own, however. Daly and Miller’s Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree) is the opposite of mine (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), which means that while a higher total score on the Daly-Miller survey corresponds to a higher level of writing apprehension (Daly and Miller 245-6), a higher total score on my survey corresponds to a lower teaching anxiety level.

A similar formula was subsequently applied to participants’ responses to each of the four survey sections:

\[
\text{Total Section Score} = 3 \times \text{(number of items per section)} + \text{Positive Section Total} - \text{Negative Section Total}
\]

Again, a participant’s responses to “positive” items from a particular section were added together, as were his or her responses to “negative” items. To calculate the participant’s total score for that section, the “negative” section total was subtracted from the “positive” section total and added to the number of items in the section (eight) multiplied by three, or 24. Scores for each individual section may range from a low of 8 to a high of 40, with higher scores
corresponding to lower levels of anxiety. The mean and standard deviation for all participants’ pre- and post-study scores for each of the four sections were then determined as well.

The survey responses from all participants, including those who were later dropped from the study, were processed in this manner and used in calculating the means and standard deviations of total response scores and sectional scores. Only the statistical results from the five participants included in the study (Brenda, Elizabeth, James, Jessica, and Stephen), however, are presented below.

Results

Featured in Table 1 are participants’ pre- and post-study positive scores, negative scores, and total response scores. Pre-study total response scores ranged from 107 to 133, with a mean score of 121 and a standard deviation of 10.14. Post-study total response scores ranged from 109 to 143, with a mean score of 123.125 and a standard deviation of 12.3686. The greatest increase from pre- to post-study total response scores was Stephen’s, from 127 to 135, an eight-point differential. The greatest decrease from pre- to post-study total response scores was James’s, from 125 to 121, a four-point differential. But otherwise, participants’ total response scores fluctuated little from the beginning to the conclusion of the study. One statistically significant variable relationship was identified, however. There exists a positive correlation between participants’ total response scores and age, with the pre-study Pearson correlation being determined at .683 and the post-study correlation at .663. This would suggest, therefore, that older participants generally reported higher scores, and thus lower levels of anxiety, than younger participants.

Given this information, it is not surprising that the two lowest pre- and post-study total scores are from those participants with the least amount of overall teaching experience, Brenda
and Jessica. Jessica is currently in her second year of teaching, and is therefore the least experienced instructor in the study. Brenda has been teaching with the program for over three years, but has not taught at any other institution (as James has) and is in her second year as a full-time instructor. So although Brenda is arguably more familiar with the writing program than James, she has not been teaching as long. By contrast, the highest pre- and post-study total response scores came from the two participants with the most overall teaching experience and familiarity with the writing program, Stephen and Elizabeth, who also reported the lowest negative scores of any of the participants.

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Study Total Response Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-Study Positive Total</th>
<th>Pre-Study Negative Total</th>
<th>Pre-Study Response Total</th>
<th>Post-Study Positive Total</th>
<th>Post-Study Negative Total</th>
<th>Post-Study Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At a glance, these results indicate a positive correlation between total response scores and overall teaching experience, but James’s response scores, particularly his pre- and post-study negative scores, seem to suggest otherwise. James’s pre- and post-study positive scores were slightly higher than those of Stephen and Elizabeth, and yet his post-study total response score was considerably lower than Stephen’s—by fourteen points, in fact. James’s pre- and post-study negative scores were also significantly higher than Elizabeth’s or Stephen’s and nearly as high as those of Jessica and Brenda.
Table 2: Pre-Study Sectional Response Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-Study Section I Total Score</th>
<th>Pre-Study Section II Total Score</th>
<th>Pre-Study Section III Total Score</th>
<th>Pre-Study Section IV Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>22.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.625</strong></td>
<td><strong>22.25</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Deviation</strong></td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though James is only in his second year with the program, he has far more overall teaching experience than either Jessica or Brenda, so one might assume his negative response totals would be considerably lower than theirs, but they weren’t. This could mean that James feels a greater anxiety towards some aspects of teaching than others, although when I examined his and other participants’ response totals to individual survey sections (Tables 2 and 3), I did not find this to be the case.

What I discovered instead is that James’s pre- and post-study response scores to individual sections are generally higher than those of either Elizabeth or Stephen and consistently higher than the mean score for each section. What is even more baffling is that some of Stephen’s and Elizabeth’s response scores to individual sections are lower than those of Brenda and Jessica, which seems to suggest a possible negative correlation between participants’ total response scores and response scores to individual sections (meaning that as a participant’s overall response score increases, his or her response score to a specific section decreases). Given
the small sample size, it is likely that this unexpected correlation could be attributed to a statistical anomaly, one that would disappear with a larger number of respondents, but at this point, I have no further explanation as to why it occurred, even with a small sample.

Table 3: Post-Study Sectional Response Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Post-Study Section I Total Score</th>
<th>Post-Study Section II Total Score</th>
<th>Post-Study Section III Total Score</th>
<th>Post-Study Section IV Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>24.75</td>
<td>22.875</td>
<td>24.125</td>
<td>23.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Deviation</strong></td>
<td>3.1053</td>
<td>2.53184</td>
<td>3.04432</td>
<td>2.4646</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean scores from each section, however, do provide additional information as to what aspects of teaching participants felt more or less anxious about. On average, participants’ pre- and post-study scores were higher for both Section I (Classroom Performance) and Section III (Conferencing with Students) than Sections II (Classroom Preparation) and IV (Evaluating Student Work), suggesting that, as a group, the participants experience lower levels of anxiety while conducting class or conferencing with students than they do when grading papers or preparing to teach. In fact, pre-study results indicate that participants were most anxious about evaluating student work (Section IV), and the mean score for Section II (Classroom Preparation) was not much higher. What is most intriguing, though, is that the post-study mean score for Section IV was nearly a point higher that the pre-study average. Such a differential could be
attributed to the time when the post-study survey was administered, which coincided with the semester’s end. By this point, participants had or were nearly finished grading students’ papers, and were perhaps feeling satisfied with the progress students seemed to have made in their writing and/or their efforts to prepare students for portfolio assessment—though without qualitative data to substantiate this, any factors which might have caused or contributed to the fluctuation in mean scores cannot be determined at this time.

Data Implications

While a small portion of this data seems to corroborate one common characteristic of teaching anxiety—namely, that it affects younger instructors more frequently and/or intensely than older instructors (Gardner and Leak 30; Fish and Fraser)—most of it is statistically insignificant and cannot offer any valid or reliable results which could be compared with findings from other studies on teaching anxiety. What it may provide, however, is some indication as to the kinds of tasks or teaching situations these five participants are most anxious about. The sectional mean scores suggest that participants experience less anxiety during actual class sessions and/or teacher-student conferences, yet greater anxiety when grading papers and/or preparing for class. One possible explanation for this difference is the amount of social interaction inherent in a teaching task. When a teacher conferences with a student, she becomes socially engaged with that individual—e.g., asking questions, listening, offering suggestions, etc.—in order to guide him towards some clearer understanding of his writing that he may not have arrived at otherwise (Neman 160). This sort of teaching task is a highly sociable one, as its intended effects depend largely upon the ways in which the teacher and student interact with each other (Neman 161-5). The same thing occurs when a teacher addresses a roomful of students; though the audience is much larger in this case, the teacher is again co-constructing
knowledge with students by socially interacting with them (Ryder et al. 46-47). In both contexts, the student audience is present, so the impact of what the instructor says or does, and students’ subsequent reactions to it, are instantly felt. Students’ behavioral responses then enable the instructor to ascertain how much they have understood and whether they are confused, or uninterested, or simply not paying attention (Mottet and Richmond 58-9) so that if need be she can readily address any lapse in communication which might have occurred.

By contrast, a teacher is almost always alone when responding to students’ work or composing materials for the next class session. As her student audience is not immediately available to her, the teacher must invoke them as a writer invokes potential readers (Ede and Lunsford 85; Ong 58); that is, she must imagine how students will react to her commentary on their work or interpret a set of instructions and guidelines to a particular activity or assignment (Chesebro 10). And she cannot know how effectively she has conveyed her ideas until some time later, usually after students have read her feedback or begun working on an activity or assignment. If there is a lapse or breakdown in teacher-student communication, therefore, if students don’t understand the purposes or procedures of an assignment or are baffled by comments on their papers, the teacher is not initially aware of it. Even when she discovers the problem, the damage may have already been done—Kountz, for instance, has found that “a student’s silence or lack of cooperation” is often a “symptom of a teacher-comment gone amiss”—and is usually more difficult to repair than if the problem had been immediately addressed.

What seems to distinguish these solitary tasks from social ones, then, is the way in which the instructor handles teacher-student communication mishaps. In situations where students are present, a teacher can ‘read’ their verbal and nonverbal behaviors to determine if any teacher-
student communication breakdown has occurred and then address the source of the breakdown accordingly (Mottet and Richmond 60). For solitary tasks, often the best strategy for handling communicative breakdowns is to prevent them by being precise, clear, and intelligible in one’s written communication to students. And that can be a tall order to fill, especially for instructors like Jessica and Brenda who haven’t been teaching very long and who may have already become dependent upon students’ behavioral cues for determining how effectively they are communicating.

**Qualitative Data Part One: Interview Responses**

Although the quantitative data allows for comparison between participants’ reported levels of anxiety, it doesn’t provide much information regarding the actual symptoms or manifestations of anxiety participants experienced when performing specific teaching tasks. To find out, I would need to reexamine the qualitative data from participants’ interview responses. Over the course of the 2005 Fall semester, each participant completed three interviews in which he or she was asked to describe his/her pedagogical objectives and practices and assess his/her instructional effectiveness. Because of the sheer enormity of interview transcript material, however, I focused primarily on participants’ responses to questions which would enable me to learn a) how they communicated with students and colleagues, b) what concerns or problems they were having at certain points in the semester, c) what anxiety symptoms they were experiencing, and d) what, if any, coping mechanisms or strategies they used to minimize their anxiety and/or address anxiety-inducing stimuli. Again, as with the group meeting materials, all interview transcripts were processed using the same data analysis procedures outlined in Chapter Four.
Interview One

The first set of interviews was completed during the second and third weeks of the semester—arguably at a time when instructors are adjusting to new sets of students and teaching schedules—and yet for the most part, the participants’ responses here suggested feelings of excitement and optimism rather than worry or doubt, especially in terms of their students’ behaviors towards them and each other. If anything, they appeared to be in some sort of ‘honeymoon phrase’ with their students (Tarkington 108-109; Dethier 94). No one had graded any papers yet, and those teaching Comp I or Comp I-Basic were still in the early stages of getting to know students and their individual writing processes. So it seems that to them, the new school year offered the promise of a fresh start, a clean slate. As James emphatically stated, “I just really enjoy getting to know [students], and every semester is like, ‘Wow! I get to know really well a whole eighty some people again.’”

When I asked participants what their students were like during those first few meetings, most seemed to think they were just as energetic and eager as themselves.

“The [Comp I] students seemed bright-eyed and bushy-tailed right off the bat,” James said.

“They’re asking questions,” Elizabeth told me. “They’re asking for clarification and just, you know, sort of being real with each other.”

Jessica, though she didn’t have as much basis for comparison because of her limited teaching experience, likewise insisted that her students were much more talkative and “outgoing” this semester than last: “I found that, um, some of my students are a little bit more outgoing than what I experienced last year. […] They, um, I would, I probably [would be] overall happy with the level of attention that they seem to have.”
With students appearing so enthusiastic and attentive, it seems likely that instructors would be thrilled by the prospect of working with them for an entire semester (Dethier 57) as well as confident in their abilities to successfully impart learning (Henson; Yetkin).

“Everybody seemed to connect with each other real quickly,” James said, “and talked and stayed on task so, um, um, it seems like, um, you get in there and get going and, um, get them into a rhythm, it feels pretty good.”

Stephen himself had just come from a remarkably productive session with his Comp II honors students, one that he “hadn’t even anticipated.” He smiled as he spoke of their fiery discussion. “I anticipated going in and having a good discussion, but I hadn’t anticipated that moment when they came up with such interesting ideas. [...] So that was great.”

But Brenda’s response here sounded more ominous than her counterparts’. “When it starts out on a high note,” she explained, “I guess a part of you is waiting for the, for the shoe to drop.” Something which has always concerned her early in the semester is that her students will eventually realize that, following the policies set by the writing program, neither homework assignments nor class participation will be used in determining students’ overall course grades. So although her students seem pleasant enough now, Brenda is wondering to what extent their behavior will change once they’ve discovered this “loophole.” “I mean, I am kind of conscious of it now,” she continued, “to see when, I’m trying to figure out when it is that it, at what point in the semester is it when they start to really get tired and it’s pretty early on right now, so I don’t expect it for another week or two but you, I think you do go in each day, um, in a weird way hoping that they, I don’t know, haven’t, haven’t tried to figure out some loophole.” It sounds, therefore, as if Brenda sees these first couple of weeks as the calm before the storm (Bobrick). Yes, things are going well right now, she said, but in a few weeks, students will become bogged
down in coursework and lose their initial drive, and once they discover that they can miss a class or an assignment without serious repercussions, they’ll likely do just that.

Jessica also believes most of her students are not yet fully aware that homework, class participation, and attendance carry no grade value, though they soon will be. And with that incentive gone, with no extrinsic reward to motivate them, Jessica thinks she’ll have no choice but to “hope” her students’ enthusiasm and energy won’t diminish in the coming weeks: “I would hope that they’re, they continue to be interested and they continue to kind of interact with me, you know. I do a lot of discussion in class, so, um, I would hope that they continue to do that and continue to take my statement about knowing why they’re doing each homework piece or everything that we’re doing in class, why they’re, why they’re doing.” The word “hope” here almost seems to suggest a lack of control on Jessica’s part, as if, like Brenda, she isn’t certain how students will respond to a non-traditional grading format (i.e., papers being evaluated as passing or non-passing instead of assigned letter grades) or to the idea that homework and classroom participation have no impact on their final course grades, and most of all, how she might temper students’ reactions should they be less than enthusiastic. Jessica’s previous course evaluations were a bit critical of her teaching methods in this regard. “I got a lot of my, um, evaluations that [students] thought we were doing busy work,” she recalled, “so I guess I would hope that they’re open to asking questions and if they need help come in.” Again, it seems that Jessica is hoping (as she keeps repeating here) that this won’t be the case this semester, that her students will be intrinsically motivated to learn and thus recognize the purpose behind activities or homework assignments that might otherwise be perceived as “busy work.”
I then asked each participant what concerns (if any) they had regarding their teaching this semester. Both Elizabeth and Stephen stated that they had none, actually—or, at least, none they could foresee at this point.

Elizabeth, in fact, was quite succinct in her response: “Teaching for me anymore is very easy.”

Stephen was more elaborate here, though he shared in his colleague’s feeling that no challenge was insurmountable. “It’s not like I think I’m, I’m fantastic by any means,” he explained, “but I don’t really have any concerns. I mean, I feel comfortable enough as a teacher to say pretty much anything that happens I can deal with it. If I can’t, and again, this goes back to why I like teaching in this program so much, if something comes up that I feel like I can’t handle, I know I can go to [the program director] and I can say, ‘[…]’, deal with this for me or help me deal with this.” Stephen is a well-seasoned veteran, and has likely developed an array of strategies for handling conflict. Even so, he’s created a support system for himself so that, should something arise which ultimately proves too difficult, others with more authority or expertise, such as the program director, can readily assist him. And the simple knowledge that this support system is in place instills him with a sense of empowerment (Hodges 74). “I know if anything comes up,” he said, “I can just go down there [to the writing program office] and be like, ‘[…] we need to talk.’ And [the program director will] sit down with me and she’ll work through whatever. Um, so I don’t really have any concerns at the outset.”

Other participants didn’t sound so confident, however. Brenda was worried that she would find herself “skipping things” or “cutting corners” with her Comp I-Basic students. “My biggest concern,” she explained, “and I think it’s just that I’m, I’m reminding myself constantly that these students haven’t already heard this. Um, that they’re new students that, the new
semester and you can, you can lose track of that and I think just making sure that you are explaining everything thoroughly so that they can understand it and not sort of cutting corners and skipping things.”

Jessica, too, seemed concerned that she wouldn’t be able to spend as much time on students’ writing because of her heavier teaching load, especially since she is finishing her thesis and other graduate coursework as well: “My biggest concern is the workload, [...] being able to devote the time that I want to devote to every individual student, um, despite teaching the extra class and despite the fact that, you know, I have a lot of things personally that I’m working on, you know, in terms of my thesis and, of course, my coursework.” With so much to do, therefore, when would she find the time to grade twice as many papers or conference with twice as many students as she did before? Even Jessica herself wasn’t quite sure yet, though she already knew she couldn’t afford to “get lazy with my teaching.”

For both, it seems that time is the enemy. If they only had more time for personal and professional responsibilities, then perhaps neither Brenda nor Jessica would have to make critical choices about which concepts to cover or how much assistance to provide each student. But unfortunately, time is limited, and though these problems don’t seem quite as immediate because it’s early in the semester, and they still have over fourteen weeks to get as much done as possible, both are already struggling to get a sense of how to manage it all. “You know,” Brenda added, “just have a structure of how to visualize what all you need to do in that time frame.”

**Interview Two**

The second set of interviews took place during the eighth, ninth, and tenth weeks of the semester (or around mid-term). By this point, the participants had evaluated at least two major assignments and were currently working on a third. They were also regularly conferencing with
students about their writing, and some, including Elizabeth and Jessica, were holding online office hours and/or responding to students’ inquiries via email. In short, they were all now in the throes of the semester and preparing students for the portfolio review and either the subsequent transition to Comp II or its successful completion.

One of the first questions I asked participants, therefore, was how they responded to and/or evaluated student writing at both the rough and final draft stages. To program veterans like Elizabeth and Stephen, the process seemed almost automatic.

“Since I’ve been doing this a long time,” Elizabeth said, “I sort of have a feel for […] what a good critique generally does and overall what it has to accomplish. It has to, um, you know, give me an overview of the article and then give me, you know, is it effective, is it not effective? And so there, there’s lots of different ways that they can get to that so I zip through it real fast one time, um, try to get the whole feel for it and sometimes if it seems, and you can tell pretty quickly from the structure how the student has set it up.” Because Elizabeth can usually tell at a glance whether the student has incorporated all of the required components into her paper and how well they fit together, she can prioritize her comments fairly easily (Moneyhun 328). “In this case,” she continued, “the critique and so, you know, go through, mark the stuff, usually sticking on a paragraph level to start with, does this work, does this stick together, is it, is it getting me to a thesis, does it have a single idea, is it fully developed? […] When you’ve done it a long time, it’s easy to sort of meld all those things into one reading.”

Stephen’s approach seems similar to his colleague’s in that he gives each paper a holistic read before deciding what he should respond to. In addition to providing written feedback, however, he also composes a supplemental letter referring to and summarizing his in-text commentary for every student: “I’ll go through and write out the comments in text and […] then
I’ll go to the computer and type out, you know, a page of comments for each student. Not a whole page, a half page, a page, um, single-spaced usually and type out the comments.” It may sound more intricate and time-consuming, though in doing so, Stephen not only personalizes his feedback (Kahn 338-339; Moneyhun 327) but also conveys to the student the merits and weaknesses of her paper and what she can do to improve upon or revise them. “So, for example,” he added, “if they have a problem with development, then I’ll go into one of their paragraphs and say, ‘So for example here, what you might do to develop this is x, y, z.”

Responding to student writing isn’t as automatic for other participants, however, especially those who haven’t been with the program very long or who teach inexperienced or basic writers. James, for instance, has since had to readjust his method of responding to rough drafts in order to accommodate the program’s curricular design. “This semester,” he said, “I’ve been writing a lot more on the rough drafts than last year because once I figured out how [the writing program] worked, I realized I had to do that differently.”

Jessica seems to be struggling with some of the more fundamental aspects of teacher-response, particularly the logic behind holistic reading. “I try to do, I try to do one read-through without making any marks,” she said. “I find that very hard, but that, that’s my goal, is try to read through it once without making any marks and then to go back and hit on the key issues in text.” What Elizabeth has a “feel for” seems “very hard” to Jessica at this point. Examining a student paper before actually writing anything down strikes her as counterintuitive and unnatural, something she must will herself to do. “Sometimes I have to mark as I go,” she added, “either ‘cause I, you know, it strikes me and I have to go or I’ll forget if I come back or something, you know. Sometimes I’ll make a check and then make sure I go back and write some sort of comment there.”
Unlike her peers, Brenda does, in fact, comment on students’ papers while she reads through them, though she admits this probably isn’t the best approach with Comp I-Basic students: “I do run into problems sometimes by doing that because I get through the whole essay and then I realize the bigger issue is this and now one of my comments doesn’t apply, so, you know, I realize that it’s problematic at times.” Yet even though Brenda considers her response method “problematic,” she isn’t about to change it anytime soon. “It is just naturally how I read them,” she explained, “and I start to comment, um, at least somewhat on these individual aspects before I read the whole thing.” It may be that Brenda adopted this practice when she first began teaching because it seemed simpler and more efficient than reading papers before marking them. According to Stephen M. North, “New teachers of Composition, like novices in any art, tend to operate timidly, teaching the way they have been taught” and retreating “quickly to whatever formulas they can find” (35). Once the practice became habituated, however, Brenda was reticent to modify or abandon it. Perhaps she was stuck in a pedagogical rut (Hawisher et al. 260) or believed its usefulness and efficiency outweighed its setbacks. After all, it had gotten her this far, and it worked in some sense, so why change it? “I probably do everything wrong,” Brenda conceded, later adding, “I know that’s probably something I have to work on.” But I wasn’t certain whether she was referring to her approach’s alleged defects or the likelihood that she was one of few program instructors who used it. Did she believe she needed to “work on” her response method because it was somehow faulty? Or was she merely criticizing it because she sensed it differed from mine or the other participants’?

A similar pattern emerged when I asked participants about their conference procedures. Most insisted that a conference should be a collaborative effort between student and instructor, with the student in the driver’s seat.
“Usually it’s like, ‘Okay, what are we gonna talk about?’” Elizabeth explained. “And I, I leave that up to the student.” She suspects, however, that most students would be happy to let her talk the whole time, so to break them of this mindset, Elizabeth “make[s] that expectation very apparent to them […] when we start the semester, um, that when they come in, it’s all about what they need.” She cannot know “what they need,” however, unless they talk. “I’m not gonna have some straight agenda because some kids come in and they have nothing and some kids come in and they just need a, you know, a reassurance that this thing is gonna pass and so it’s just a matter of what do you got, what do you need from me.”

James likewise suggested that his students do most of the talking during conferences while he listens and tries “not [to] intrude too much.” A student can only become an independent writer, he argued, if she herself learns to recognize the weaknesses of her work. “I think that if we’re sitting here telling them what to do in conference,” James added, “and the student leaves after fifteen minutes and your voice fills the office the whole time, that’s not [a] good conference, I don’t think. Um, if the student is talking, I find that if I just shut up, the student will figure it out.”

Brenda relies on a more directive approach to conferencing. “I will say that I tend to just sort of take over initially,” she said. “Um, I know a lot of people, you know, they, the student comes in and it’s sort of like, ‘Well, what do you want to talk about? Tell me what your problems are. Tell me what you want to work on.’ And they talk and then you respond, but I, I tend to the opposite. I tend to say, ‘Okay, let me, let me take a look at it,’ and then express myself again what I, my overall sort of comments on the paper are and then they respond. So I think I sort of start the, with my own and which maybe is problematic.”
But what was “problematic” about it, exactly? Did Brenda think her method of conferencing was, like her method of responding to student writing, faulty in some way? Or was it simply that, as she herself suggested, her approach was “the opposite” of what her counterparts did or the program advocated?

Her response here seems to point to another potential trigger of teaching anxiety: the belief that one’s teaching practices are unorthodox, uncommon, and/or unfounded and could thus be readily dismissed by other practitioners as inappropriate or “problematic.” Brenda assumes she is one of a handful of instructors who don’t holistically read papers or allow students to do most of the talking during conferences and that her approaches are “wrong” and must therefore be “work[ed] on” at some point. Whether or not this is the case, it is unlikely that Brenda is willing to share with co-workers any problems she might be having with either of these practices. To do so would mean revealing herself as the ‘odd man out,’ the lone teacher who insists upon doing things her way despite what practitioner lore purports or how other instructors behave.

Newkirk posits the idea that in our profession, there is safety in numbers (3). We take comfort in the idea that what we do has been done before and is theoretically proven, so even when we do fail, we at least know we’re on the beaten path, the right path. We don’t expect to be successful every time, but as long as we’re doing what we think we’re supposed to be doing—e.g., granting our students “ownership” over their writing, evaluating papers holistically before getting too nit-picky, etc.—we don’t necessarily feel as though we have to chalk up our professional woes to personal failure (Newkirk 5). If we feel “anger or frustration,” we can direct it at “external forces” (e.g., program administrators, our working conditions, etc.) (Newkirk 3), and we can talk about our failures with other instructors who teach as we do in
order to find out why a commonly-used method like holistic grading might not have worked for us in a particular situation.

When we stray from the beaten path, however, we make ourselves vulnerable to professional criticism and risk losing any kind of support system available to us. We become afraid to talk about what we do behind closed doors (Mountford 44) because we believe that since we’re doing something differently, “no one else experiences what [we] experience” (Newkirk 3). When we choose to rely upon an unconventional or unproven teaching practice, therefore, we usually do so at our own risk.

I thought back to Elizabeth’s talk during the second meeting and her incredible willingness to disclose her own “tragically different” method for conferencing with students more efficiently. So far, it had been working for her, but until that group meeting, Elizabeth had shared this method with almost no one. For one, it seems highly unlikely that other program instructors did anything remotely comparable to holding conference hours during scheduled class time. Moreover, because this method enables Elizabeth to spend only one day a week conferencing, I would suspect that some instructors, especially those with heavy teaching loads or who conference with students frequently, might resent her for doing something which could easily be misconstrued as an attempt to shirk one’s professional responsibilities. Fortunately, this wasn’t the case in group sessions, but that was a different kind of rhetorical situation, where participants were asked not to disclose to anyone outside the group what was being said. In the hallways or behind closed office doors, it might have been another story.

And if her time management method does fail her at some point, who could Elizabeth possibly tell? Not her co-workers apparently, and probably not instructors outside the writing program either because they wouldn’t necessarily understand why she needed the extra time to
conference with students in the first place. So whom could she confide in? I mentioned earlier that Stephen seems to have developed a good working relationship with the program director and often comes to her for advice or support with teacher-related matters he can’t resolve alone. Perhaps Elizabeth has something like this to fall back on, especially considering that the director is aware of and most likely sympathetic to her situation. But at best, it’s a single-person support system, one that she’s kept hidden from other instructors, and therefore hardly ideal.

Brenda may not even have something like that to rely upon—at least, not when it comes to conferencing with students or grading papers. Because she is doing what she believes is the “opposite” of what everyone else does, she sees herself as being on her own. So if Brenda is having problems with grading or conferencing (which, according to her interview responses, seems to be the case), she probably doesn’t think she could, or should, talk about them with anyone else. During one point in the interview, Brenda remarked, “I’ve found it’s difficult. It’s just been difficult to get through the rough drafts and, in particular, um, I found grading this semester to be a struggle and I don’t know exactly why.” At the time, I was quite surprised to hear this because Brenda hadn’t said anything during the group sessions which might indicate that she was struggling with grading. In retrospect, however, I think I understand why she might have kept silent. If she had said something to the effect of “I found grading this semester to be a struggle,” one of the first questions participants would have asked her is, ‘What’s your usual process for responding to papers?’—which isn’t something Brenda was necessarily prepared or willing to share with other instructors, even in a small-group setting. To her way of thinking, it was just better to keep quiet. Better to trudge along, do the best she could, and perhaps at some point “work on” those teaching practices which had somehow isolated her from her colleagues.
Interview Three

The final set of interviews took place during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth weeks of the semester. By now, the participants were evaluating students’ final projects, tallying up grades, and giving students the general run-down on how the portfolio assessment process worked and where they stood in terms of passing. In some cases, participants were also making last-minute decisions about whether or not to submit portfolios for review. It’s a rather hectic time for students and instructors, Jessica explained, because they’ve reached that crucial point when they are finding out if they’ve done everything they needed to during the past sixteen weeks. “By the end of the semester,” she said, “everyone kind of gets, you know, overwhelmed by the stuff they have to do.”

Something I was interested in, therefore, was how these participants assessed their teaching effectiveness and whether or not they felt they’d achieved their pedagogical objectives this term. What I generally found was that while most participants seemed satisfied with their performances overall, some gauged their effectiveness according to their own teaching behavior, whereas others looked to students’ behavior and/or writing in deciding how successful they had been.

James had been struggling with responding to and returning students’ drafts in a timely fashion. In the past, he’d always written more comments on final drafts than rough drafts, though he’d since discovered that this practice didn’t mesh well with the program’s goals and was time-consuming. James realized that it made more sense to provide feedback on students’ work earlier rather than later in the writing process, as this would enable him to address any serious issues before students began fine-tuning their papers. “I still don’t mess with the, the little, little stuff that much,” he explained. “It’s big stuff I’m looking at.” One of his objectives
this semester, therefore, was to “get through the stack [of papers] quicker” so he and his students would have more time to conference about possible revision strategies, which James managed to do, at least on students’ rough drafts: “I did rough drafts but not final drafts. But I think that’s good ‘cause those are the ones that are important so that you can finalize.” He also commented more on rough drafts than he’d done previously, which subsequently meant writing “less on the final drafts.” In doing so, James felt he could adhere to the course timeline more easily, especially near the end of the semester. Because his turnaround time on rough drafts was shorter, he was able to collect students’ final projects and portfolios a full week earlier than necessary, thereby allotting himself plenty of time to grade and review them before the portfolio submission deadline. “I got all of the final papers back instead of getting them next week,” he said, “and having to do that and the, in fact, I’ve got a stack of portfolios now. Um, they’re already that high that I’m ready to evaluate one weekend before, way before time is up.” So in terms of what he’d hoped to accomplish this semester—i.e., providing students more feedback earlier in the writing process and thus more time to revise—it had been a successful teaching experience for James, at least “as far as time management on the big picture, as far as being able to get stuff to [the writing program].”

Like James, Elizabeth based her assessment of her teaching performance on her accessibility to students and overall course management. “I did what I needed to do to give them the opportunity to be successful,” Elizabeth said, “and I was there and I was fair and I was honest and, um, consistently […] telling them exactly what I thought in terms of exactly what they needed to be doing and, um, you know, for good or bad they met it or they didn’t.” What she sets out to do every semester, therefore, is to make herself available to students and communicate her expectations as clearly and effectively as possible, but she doesn’t define her success in such
ventures by the quality of her students’ writing—quite the contrary, in fact. Regardless of whether or not students pass, Elizabeth explained, she is content in knowing that she was “there to help them through,” and “if they don’t want to go there, that’s their problem.” This reminded me of something Elizabeth and James had told Jessica during the second group meeting, that students must being willing to meet their instructors half-way in the learning process or else learning can’t take place. There’s only so much an instructor can do to make the learning process happen. So even though some of Elizabeth’s students “just didn’t have it in them this semester,” she doesn’t view their failure as some sort of reflection on her effectiveness as an instructor. As long as she believes she has done everything possible for her students to succeed, whatever the end result may be, Elizabeth feels as though she has achieved her objectives. “That’s all I can aspire to do.”

Stephen’s response sounded a bit more mixed, however. Although he was pleased with his overall performance and believed he had done a sufficient job preparing students for portfolio assessment, he seemed preoccupied with one Comp I student who, because of his poor writing skills, was unable to produce enough quality writing to pass the course. “He started the class with a lot of writing problems in every area of evaluation,” Stephen recounted. “I mean, lack of focus at the paragraph level, inability to use transitions, basic ones, inability to work with just simple source materials […]. And he just, throughout the semester he hasn’t taken an opportunity to work with me. He hasn’t followed my advice to go find that tutor in the writing center, and in the end he’s not going to pass the class.” And it’s those kinds of situations, he later explained, that make teaching so frustrating at times: “There are always students like that that you wish you could’ve done something else.” So it seems that for Stephen, the point where his responsibility to the learning process ends and the student’s responsibility begins isn’t quite as clear as it is for
Elizabeth. He insisted that he’d taken every feasible step to ensure this student’s success—e.g., offering to conference with him, recommending a tutor, etc.—and the student had refused: “He never came to see me.” And yet Stephen wishes he could have “done something else,” that perhaps if he’d tried another route, the student might have eventually come around. Either way, he wasn’t satisfied with the outcome. “It’s just such a disappointment to me,” Stephen said, adding, “There are students like that who I wish it could have turned out differently for them.”

Perhaps more so than Stephen or Elizabeth, Brenda’s teaching objectives are largely determined by the unique needs of her classes. As a full-time Comp I-Basic instructor, she often handles students like the one Stephen described—students whose writing skills are undernourished, who have little cognizance of what it means to write for an audience other than a teacher, and who lack self-confidence and the motivation to write. “Until that point,” she explained, “they don’t think of themselves as somebody who is capable of writing anything that other people would want to read.” One of her main teaching objectives, then, is to give her students a sense of purpose about their writing by “really address[ing] the fact that there’s so many people out there who are going to be reading this.” To assess her effectiveness in this regard, Brenda looks to her students’ papers for signs of improvement, to see if they have begun writing more “logical and convincing” arguments and addressing potential readers’ objections and concerns. “I focused a lot on this idea of, you know, what makes your argument logical and convincing,” she continued. “That other person out there who’s reading this paper and the attention to what their demands are. That’s, that’s where, you know, your argument becomes convincing.” And at the semester’s end, Brenda could see substantial changes in her students’ writing, which she seems to attribute in part to her teaching prowess. “I think I’ve achieved those […] goals,” she said. “Um, I looked at their last papers compared to their first papers, you
know. Definitely I could see a difference. [...] I think there’s some progress.” It seems, then, that unlike Elizabeth, Brenda assesses her teaching performance through her students’ performances. If they appear to be getting it, she said, I must be doing something right.

Jessica seems to evaluate her teaching in much the same way, though she focuses not only on her students’ writing but also on their reactions to specific activities and assignments. “I had quite a few people,” she explained, “like in journals and things like that. They say, ‘You know, hey, I want to do some more of that invention stuff,’ and, you know, that’s kinda cool to me. [...] That showed me that they really were kind of like exploring the writing process and things like that.” To some extent as well, Jessica relies upon students’ mid-term feedback and end-of-semester course evaluations in gauging their receptivity to her instruction. “Obviously, I haven’t seen my final eval[uation]s,” she said, “but my mid term eval[uation]s showed the same sort of [...] response as in past semesters, that even though I have more students, [...] I think I was still able to kind of connect with them individually.” In her first interview, Jessica expressed concern that because she was teaching two Comp I sections instead of one, she might not be able to provide students as much individual instruction as she had in the past. Her mid-term feedback scores suggested otherwise, which she took as a strong indicator that, despite the heavier teaching load, she had indeed managed to “connect with” each student. It seems, therefore, that Jessica is more dependent on student feedback in assessing her performance than either Elizabeth or James, quite possibly because she doesn’t yet trust herself with the task of deciding whether or not she is doing her job well. It may also be that because Jessica is not much older than her students, she wants to be liked by them or believes that a good instructor is one who is “cool on all levels” (Steinmetz 84). There is a need, Kristi Steinmetz argues, for young instructors to appear “as hip and carefree as [the] students” (84). Perhaps Jessica, too, feels a certain pressure
to be as “hip and carefree” as her students while maintaining control, and thinks she is accomplishing both when students write favorable evaluations of her or respond enthusiastically to a particular assignment. But this could also mean that Jessica’s perception of her teaching fluctuates wildly from day to day, as it is predominantly shaped by students’ responses to her behavior. “Teaching is never boring,” Wayne Booth once remarked, “but it is a profession that can seem, on a bad day, after a bad class, quite simply intolerable” (qtd. in Showalter 20).

In addition to learning how participants evaluated themselves, I also wanted to find out how they viewed the teaching group system. One of the final questions I asked them, therefore, was whether they would recommend the teaching group to other instructors, and if so, to whom, specifically.

Most participants felt they had benefited professionally and/or socially from meeting with co-workers in a small-group setting and thought other instructors would as well. Jessica, for instance, had thoroughly enjoyed working with veterans like Stephen and Elizabeth and found they had much to share. “Everyone else is full-time teachers basically except for me and [Janice],” she recalled, “and so I thought that was, that was really beneficial in terms of professional development and in terms of getting ideas, I think, and just get a sense of what else is going on in your department.” As she sees it, the teaching group enabled her to exchange ideas with others and learn how more experienced instructors dealt with common problems like student absenteeism and tardiness.

James also believed newcomers to the program would enjoy interacting with colleagues in small groups. “I think people, um, new in the department should do it through the year,” he said, adding, “I think I would have benefited from this last year.” Moreover, he seemed to think the teaching group could offer veteran program instructors opportunities for professional
And Elizabeth apparently relished the opportunity to talk freely amongst her peers. “I think it’s nice just to have, just to have some place to go,” she said, “and there’s no administration, where nobody’s saying, ‘You’re wrong, you’re doing this badly.’” Being able to share her ideas and teaching practices without any “fear of judgment” (Brown) was quite therapeutic for her. “We’re all the same,” she added. “We all cut the same corners. […] And I think that is incredibly valuable, that we’re all in this together, we’re all, we’re all doing the same things, and like I said, regardless of what the powers that be tell us we’re supposed to be doing, we’re all just fine.” In Elizabeth’s case, perhaps it wasn’t as much about exchanging information as it was hearing that other instructors were cutting the “same corners” she was. Learning how co-workers were managing the pressures associated with teaching seems to have boosted her self-efficacy. “I don’t have any great insecurities about what I’m doing,” she continued, “so for me, it was nice just to have that confirmed.”

Stephen didn’t know who might benefit from the teaching group system, nor did he think he “got too much out of it in terms of ideas.” Still, he said, “it was interesting to get to know people and to hear what they had to say.” If nothing else, he appreciated the social aspects of the teaching group system, adding, “I’ve become more and more interested in what other people are doing.”

While Brenda, like Stephen, enjoyed interacting with co-workers in a small-group setting, she felt that too much time was spent on “just complaints […] where people start to go, ‘Ahh!’” Certainly, she added, both new and veteran instructors could benefit from small group interaction, though perhaps the meetings would be more productive if they were split into two
types: a) “therapy” or “bitch” sessions, where participants merely talked about any problems they might be having, and b) “constructive” sessions, in which participants actually attempted to resolve such problems. Otherwise, she pointed out, group members are likely to get side-tracked: “I think that’s, that’s good as long as it’s focused, as long as you have some sort of main objective, um, and then this whole therapy session thing is also beneficial […] but you have to somehow make sure right from the get go that that doesn’t take over.”

Their interview responses seem to suggest, therefore, that participants had gained something of value by taking part in the group sessions, though I cannot verify to what extent (or even if) the teaching group system affected participants’ anxiety levels. Most participants’ survey response scores changed little during the sixteen-week study, and even if they had, such changes couldn’t necessarily be attributed to the teaching group system itself. And although the interview data may have brought to light additional causes and symptoms of teaching anxiety, it could not provide any information as to how participants might handle anxiety-inducing stimuli in actual teaching situations. For that, I would need to reexamine the transcript materials and field notes from the classroom observations and follow-up interviews conducted with Elizabeth and James.

**Qualitative Data Part Two: Classroom Observations**

Elizabeth and James had both volunteered for this final and optional portion of the study. Each participant was observed and videotaped while teaching a class session, and then completed an additional interview in which he or she watched segments from the videotape and described what was being shown. Although I did not collect any transcript materials from the class sessions themselves (as students had not signed consent forms), I recorded field notes during my observations, and later processed these along with the transcripts from participants’ interviews.
Using this data, I have composed a detailed summary and analysis of each participant’s class session and interview responses.

Elizabeth’s classroom observation was conducted on October 24, 2005, from 10:30 to 11:20 a.m. in the computer lab where she currently teaches her Comp II classes. (Her follow-up interview took place several weeks later, on November 7.) This sort of classroom is what university personnel and faculty refer to as a ‘wireless lab’—that is, it is outfitted with laptops (which are stored in cabinets when not in use) rather than desktop monitors. It is a small classroom, with a maximum seating capacity of twenty-four, and consists of three large table rows of student workstations and a teacher station located near the center-right front of the room. The proscenium layout allows students and instructors to move easily enough from one workstation to the next, but because the left side of each row connects to the wall, moving between rows is more cumbersome, which may explain why Elizabeth stood or sat at the front of the room for most of the class period.

When I arrived, I saw that Elizabeth had already written the meeting’s agenda on the board behind the projection screen, and as she formally announced the start of class, she read aloud from and gestured to this list of items. “I guess pedagogically,” she told me, “I had to refresh myself on, okay the assignment was, what the goal of the class was gonna be, that we wanted to just explore some ideas and then, um, at the same time get the students comfortable with this chatting process, that was really my goal.” It seemed that this was part of her usual teaching routine, as it not only succinctly conveys the meeting’s objectives, but also allows Elizabeth to keep herself organized and focused when addressing students (Parker 46). She then logged onto the online course management system from her laptop, displaying the computer’s
images on the projection screen so her students could follow along. “I’m sort of gauging that they’re getting it, they’re looking up, if they’re looking up on the computer screen,” she said. “I take that as a, uh, sign that yeah, they are listening.” As the main purpose of the class session was “to show [students] how the chat room environment worked and […] explore some possible ideas for [the] research essay,” Elizabeth first asked students to familiarize themselves with each other’s topic proposals for the researched essay, which they had posted on the site’s discussion forum the previous week. While they silently scrolled through the postings, Elizabeth stood near her work station, occasionally moving up and down the rows to check students’ progress or answer questions. But on a whole, she explained, her students didn’t require much direction for this particular activity: “We had been to this discussion board before, so that’s why I’m not really, not going into great detail there. They’ve been there before and they’ve done this sort of thing previously.”

When they were finished, Elizabeth segued into the next major activity by reiterating one of the meeting’s objectives: topic exploration and development through peer feedback. To accomplish this, she and the students would participate in a chat room discussion where they could share their paper topics with each other and offer suggestions for improvement. As this was their first experience with the chat room, Elizabeth took her students through the processes of logging on and submitting posts, using projected images from her computer to illustrate these techniques. Once satisfied that they had some sense of what to do—“They’re following along pretty well,” she noted—Elizabeth turned the chat room over to them, though she would be carefully monitoring what and how frequently students were posting.

But it wasn’t all smooth sailing from there. Many instructors who teach in computerized classrooms are plagued by technological mishaps (Duffelmeyer 299), and Elizabeth was no
exception. Just as the chat room session was getting underway, one of her student’s computers inexplicably froze. Not wanting the student to miss out on the discussion, Elizabeth loaned him her laptop while she attempted to figure out what was wrong with his. “Sometimes it is just waiting,” she recounted. “And then I start getting antsy […] so I gave him mine and just sort of going with the flow here.” This could have spelled disaster for a less experienced or technologically-savvy instructor, especially considering that, for those few minutes while Elizabeth worked out the laptop’s kinks, she was unable to keep an eye on the other students or the chat room. Luckily, Elizabeth managed to fix the problem, but not before the discussion had stalled considerably. Some students, in fact, had scarcely posted anything aside from a token ‘Hi!’ or ‘I’ve joined the chat now,’ while others were proposing topic ideas which seemed to show little thought for or relevance to the assignment. A few were even telling jokes. So although her students were becoming more acquainted with the chat room itself, they weren’t actually using it for the purposes she had in mind. “It’s not going well with the chat,” she remarked as she watched the video segment. “It’s trying to get them going verbally. […] At this point I can, I can remember going, ‘Uh, you know, how am I going to jump start this thing?’”

There was some tension in Elizabeth’s voice here, as if she were reliving the moment in which she came to realization that, despite having promptly resolved the issue with her student’s computer, the class had somehow gotten away from her. For a brief instance, Elizabeth admitted, she wasn’t quite sure what to do, how to regain control. Fortunately, years of experience and intuition kicked in, and Elizabeth decided that the best way to “salvage” the fledgling chat room discussion was to turn it into a face-to-face one. She began asking students what topics they were planning to write about and why they were interested in them. “When I feel that the discussion is stalling out,” she said, “that’s when it’s like, ‘Okay, let’s try, let’s try to
salvage this at the end and I’ll interject as much as I can. Maybe we can get some decent ideas flowing here at the end.’” Getting “ideas flowing” in this manner, however, would be a tricky proposition for Elizabeth, as this particular group of students wasn’t accustomed to talking very much. So to keep the conversation going, she relied upon a familiar staple—humor. “I guess usually the topic that I use,” Elizabeth recalled, “is just try to joke them into it, which works pretty well, and that’s just sort of my style. [...] And that’s really the style that really I think helps them get comfortable.” By engaging students in verbal banter, therefore, Elizabeth was subsequently reinforcing the sort of open, friendly teacher-student communication her students would likely respond to (Andersen 47-48; Roach 171). “They’ll joke with me and I can joke with them,” she noted. “That’s the best part [...]. Hoping that they’ll feel comfortable with what I’m saying is also, let’s, you know, that I’m not there to, to mess with them.”

After talking with them for a few more minutes about their topic ideas, Elizabeth decided to postpone the chat room discussion for another class meeting when she and her students could devote more time to it. She wasn’t sure it had done much good on this occasion anyway, since many of the students still didn’t have genuinely argumentative topics. “Hopefully,” she added, “these students see the topics that they want to work with are not inherently argumentative and that they are gonna make a more, they’ve gotta find an angle that’s gonna, that’s gonna work.” Unfortunately, these were issues that couldn’t be resolved during the last moments of class, so Elizabeth instead reviewed the researched essay assignment sheet with students, answered some questions about it, and dismissed them.

When I asked her whether she felt the meeting had been successful, Elizabeth’s response sounded rather ambivalent. “I think that on some levels, ‘yes,’” she spoke slowly. “They did, they did get through the procedure. They did get to see how [the chat room] works. They did
get to experience sort of the chaos of the chat room which is inherently part of it.” But the whole point of the chat room session, she felt, was somehow lost in the confusion of students figuring out how this new medium worked: “I doubt that they gleaned any information about topics they could actually use. So I think part of it was achieved, part of it wasn’t.” Perhaps one reason why the discussion hadn’t gone according to plan is that these students have become increasingly dependent on Elizabeth for direction and support. “That’s the class that, if I feel, if, if any class like is gonna make me stumble, that’s the class that does it, it just is,” she said. “And I’m not sure if it’s me because I think they rely too much on me there.” Elizabeth has noticed that when she stands or moves about the room while offering verbal guidance, her students usually appear on-task, as if acknowledging her teacher presence: “You know, it could be true about the standing-sitting thing. […] That’s a presence thing and […] it is a matter of when I say something and I’m up there wailing around they’re on it.” But when Elizabeth’s attention is diverted, or when she is sitting down (both being the case when she was fiddling with the student’s laptop), they seem less comfortable working on their own and are more prone to off-task behavior. “For the most part,” Elizabeth observed, “they are, they’re not keeping on task. They are goofing around a little bit.” Still, she contended, keeping these students in line requires more than effective classroom management. It’s a matter of weaning them from her instructional scaffold enough so that, should something like a computer malfunction occupy Elizabeth for a few moments, they can move forward without her: “That group of students, we have a, we have an interesting chemistry and maybe it is that they really feed off of me. I hadn’t considered that before. Maybe they do.”
James

James’s observation (which took place on November 17 from 2:30 to 3:45 p.m.) was, like Elizabeth’s, conducted in a computer lab, though not in the classroom where he normally teaches. James informed me a week before the observation that he’d reserved the lab so his students could locate articles for the upcoming critique assignment and begin drafting parts of their papers during class time. In some respects, this classroom’s layout and design were comparable to Elizabeth’s room. The instructor’s work station and a projection screen were located near the front and the students’ desktop monitors were arranged in table rows, with adequate space between them for students and the instructor to pass through. Because desktop monitors take up more space than laptops, however, there were five table rows (each fitted with five monitors) instead of three, and the room itself was larger and more elongated, giving it the appearance of a ‘bowling alley’—an expression Brenda often uses to describe the long, narrow rooms she teaches in.

When I first got there, I noticed that most of the students were sitting in the back of the room, which meant that James, who was standing close to the projector when class began, would have to speak very loudly—almost shout, really—for them to hear him over the whirring computers. He seemed to recognize this early on, and moved from the front of the room to the second row (which was largely unoccupied), thus closing the distance between himself and his students. For the first twenty minutes or so, James talked at length about the critique, and directed students to the online course management system where he had posted an electronic copy of the assignment sheet. “I wanted to clarify the final assignment,” he remarked during his interview (which, because of scheduling difficulties, was not conducted until December 15, well
after students’ portfolios had been submitted). “I just wanted to make sure they understood. That was my main goal—to introduce the final assignment, the critique.”

James then introduced and explained each required element of the critique listed on the sheet. One of the first things he pointed out to students was that, unlike his other assignments sheets, this one included a sample structure so they would have a clearer sense of how to organize and develop their ideas. “I want to explain to them why this assignment sheet looks different from the rest of them,” he said, “why I’ve got more structure even though I have preached against formula to them all semester and told them that I don’t believe in it and suddenly I’m giving them a formula.” James informed me that he was worried some of his students would be confused by the assignment, as it required them to critique a movie review rather than the movie itself: “I know I’m explaining a very slippery part of the assignment where they might slip into doing something they’re not supposed to, so I’m trying to explain again how they could possibly approach that, to be very about it.” To make sure students didn’t misunderstand him or the assignment, James provided them (albeit reluctantly) a few model thesis statements where the author had evaluated an article about a film: “I’m really […] transparent. […] ‘Here’s a three-point thesis example, which I don’t really like, but I put it here for you in case you want to do that.’” Additionally, he wanted students’ papers to be focused and logically sound because, as he later explained to them, this was what portfolio evaluators were looking for—hence, the need for structure and modeling. “This assignment sheet for their last paper,” he recalled, “I decided to rein them in quite a bit and so that the portfolio readers could see, um, that they could accomplish a typical structure.”

For the next hour, James allowed his students to work individually or in pairs to find possible movie reviews or begin drafting their critiques. While they were busily typing or
scrolling through articles, he wandered from row to row, often pausing to chat with individual students or answer questions. Oddly enough, James remained on the left side of the room for most of the class period—something he himself noticed as he watched the videotape—though he managed to visit with each student at least once in order to “get on the student’s level when I’m talking to them about drafts.” This sort of teaching practice not only enables James to monitor students’ progress and deter off-task behavior (Williams, Preparing to Teach Writing 213)—which, as Elizabeth can attest, is a near-constant problem in a computerized classroom where students can easily surf the web or check their email accounts without the instructor’s knowledge—but also reinforces students’ impressions of his willingness to communicate with them (Roach 175; Andersen 46). I was able to catch small snippets of conversations while James moved from one workstation to the next, and though none of it was taped or transcribed, I noticed that James approached every student with a friendly, open-ended question like, ‘And how’s everything going with you?’ or ‘How’s it coming along now?’—to which the student usually responded with a smile or a joke. James would then crouch or sit down next the student—another nonverbal immediacy behavior—and listen attentively while she spoke (Andersen 45; Wolcowitz 14; Norton 36). It was as if by minimizing the physical gap between himself and the student, James was minimizing any sort of psychological gap that might have existed as well (Andersen 45-6; Roach 171-2).

And, like Elizabeth, he occasionally incorporates humor into his teaching routine, especially when attempting to diffuse a potentially embarrassing situation. At one point, James’s cell phone ringer went off (very loudly, I might add), which took most of the students by surprise. For a second, James appeared as though he was going to apologize to the class for not having turned off his phone. “I—uh, oh my,” he started to speak. But then, in what seemed like
an unprecedented move, James began doing what can only be described as a half-hearted jig to the tune of his cell phone ringer. His “little dance” (as he called it) obviously delighted his students, some of whom began laughing hysterically. James would later tell me that he often does things like this to maintain an atmosphere of trust and “openness to otherness,” as Steinmetz puts it (87). “[It’s] a little bit of randomness,” he chuckled. “It [the phone] plays ‘American Idiot’ by Green Day, so I think I’m really cool and they think I’m really stupid.” A few minutes later, when a student’s cell phone rang, James gently chided her by insisting that his cell phone ring was ostensibly ‘cooler.’ Again, the students laughed.

As class began winding down, James asked several students to discuss what they’d been working on. One female student told him she planned to critique a review of the latest Harry Potter installment, though she hadn’t yet seen the film and wouldn’t until she’d finished her rough draft. James felt this was a wise move on her part. “She understands that she wants to write the critique,” he noted, “and so she can be more objective before she sees the movie, then go see the movie and add things if she can.” Another student showed James his note-taking and drafting processes, and again, James was impressed, so much so, in fact, that he shared the student’s strategies with the rest of the class. “I’m noticing,” he said as he watched this segment, “other students listening in on what I’m telling this one student and then they’re chiming in and they’re trying to garner, um, important info from listening to one-on-one work I’m doing with students in their general vicinity, so that’s kinda nice.” With a few minutes remaining, James readdressed some of his students’ earlier questions about the assignment and, after reminding them of the rough draft due date, dismissed the class.

All in all, James concluded, it was an effective class—except, of course, “for the, the cell phone going off.” Faux pas aside, however, James felt he had accomplished exactly what he’d
set out to do. “I felt good about it,” he remarked. “This class, I wanted to spend one class and just make sure they understood the assignment and I think the majority of them did, judging by the drafts I got after this.” Indeed, though his last comment left me to wonder how James would have assessed his classroom performance had his students’ critiques been less than satisfactory. Would he have thought he was at fault in some way, that he should have given them more direction or time to work in class? Fortunately, most students did exactly what they were expected to do for this final assignment—“I was really, really impressed by the critiques,” James beamed—and he attributed their stellar work in part to this particular class session. To his way of thinking, he’d given his students a thorough explanation of the critique and ample amounts of class time to work on it, thereby assuring them of a good “start” to their final project. So yes, he maintained, it was a constructive meeting.

It seems, too, that although this wasn’t James’s usual classroom, he enjoyed teaching in a lab environment where he could talk with individual students while they wrote: “I like to go around in a session like this and before the end of class make sure that I have said something to each and every student like, a lot of them asking questions.” Evidently, this is a pedagogical technique he has used before and is confident in because it works for him. But more importantly, James added, it works for his students. They thrive in a classroom setting where they have almost total control over their writing and are encouraged to ask questions. “The class atmosphere,” he suggested, “I think was set up well where, where they feel comfortable about asking each other how to do a citation or ‘Where’d you find that website?’ or, you know, ‘What do you think of my, my intro here?’ […] I find them doing some real casual, sort of fragmented peer reviewing on their own, or peer helping.” So unlike Elizabeth’s students, who seem to require some sort of instructional scaffold, his students embrace the idea of working
independently, and often rely more on each other than him for guidance and feedback. They know how to use class time to their advantage, James insisted, and what’s more, they recognize how class sessions like this fit into the overall course scheme: “They want to make sure they understand […]. You know, I think they trust me.”

Discussion

From the qualitative data presented in the two preceding sections, we can begin to piece together a more complete picture of the triggers, manifestations, and behavioral responses associated with teaching anxiety. It has already become apparent, however, that this phenomenon, albeit similar to, is far more complex than the “physiological arousal, subjective distress, and behavioral disruption” commonly ascribed to public speaking anxiety (Gardner and Leak 28). What the data seems to suggest instead is that a) general teaching anxiety triggers (that is, triggers found in any discipline and at any level) are often compounded by discipline- and/or program-specific anxiety triggers, and b) instructors’ behavioral responses to such anxiety triggers are influenced by what they consider to be the likeliest and/or most addressable sources of their anxiety.

For instance, Jessica and Brenda sounded rather uneasy about the inevitable shift from the ‘honeymoon period’—i.e., those first few weeks of the semester when students’ energy levels are still high—to the point “when [students] start to really get tired” and are no longer regularly attending class or doing the assigned reading. This isn’t surprising, considering that every instructor, regardless of whom or what she teaches, relies to some extent upon her students’ cooperation in making the learning process work (Neman 20). When students refuse to take part in the process, however, learning stops. The fear that this might happen can easily be characterized as a general anxiety trigger because every educator shares it. Yet it is a more
specific concern of writing instructors, who, because of what and how we teach, depend upon
our students to make class discussions, small-group activities, and peer-response workshops
happen (Dethier 96-7). “Our most successful writing teachers rarely lecture,” Neman points out,
“but rather present instruction through class discussion and by eliciting responses” (22).
Encouraging participation is one task a writing instructor must be especially adept at, so anything
that interferes with her ability to do so subsequently interferes with her ability to teach
effectively—which is precisely what Brenda and Jessica were worried about. They didn’t feel as
though they could maintain students’ interest once it became clear to them that they wouldn’t be
graded on class participation or attendance, and so were becoming increasingly anxious about
how students’ waning enthusiasm would affect the learning process as a whole. This is a case,
therefore, of a program-specific anxiety trigger (the inability to offer students extrinsic reward)
compounding a discipline-specific anxiety trigger (the inability to elicit student participation)
compounding a generic anxiety trigger (the inability to sustain the learning process).

How the instructor responds to and/or attempts to resolve her anxiety is thus determined
by what she believes to be the primary anxiety source. In this instance, both Brenda and Jessica
considered the program’s grading system problematic, but because they could not readily change
it, they reconciled themselves to coexisting with it. Brenda was merely waiting for “the shoe to
drop,” and Jessica “hope[d]” her students would continue to speak up or come to class. Jessica
was perhaps more pro-active than her counterpart, however, in that she asked other participants
whether points or grades could be assigned for course requirements other than major writing
assignments. Nevertheless, her attempts to address the issue are predominantly influenced by
what she perceives as the central problem—the absence of extrinsic motivation. While other
factors may be at work here, Jessica is trying to resolve just one, the one she believes that, if
successfully resolved, will somehow nullify or offset other problems associated with it, such as students’ unwillingness to cooperate or changes or lapses in teacher-student communication.

These are the sorts of intricate relationships that I explore in Chapter Six: “Conclusions and Implications.” In this final chapter, I review the research questions from Chapter One and the limitations of the study and provide a summary of the findings from the four major data sources—i.e., interview transcripts, classroom observation materials, group session transcripts and field notes, and survey responses—in order to highlight the anxiety triggers, symptoms, and coping mechanisms participants reported or exhibited. Finally, after discussing the implications of the research findings for both our discipline and the teaching profession as a whole, I offer possible directions for future investigations into this phenomenon.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the preceding chapter, I examined to some extent how the causes, manifestations, and behavioral responses associated with teaching anxiety are influenced by the anxiety-sufferer’s professional, social, and/or personal constraints. The goal of this final chapter, therefore, is to establish possible correlative or causal relationships between such variables in order to construct a more comprehensive definition of teaching anxiety and its effects on writing instructors’ communicative behaviors and pedagogical practices. The following pages provide a) a brief overview of the study’s principle research questions and limitations, b) summaries and analyses of the anxiety triggers, symptoms, and coping strategies participants reported or exhibited, and c) a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Review of Research Questions

In Chapter One, I posited the idea that anxiety triggers and manifestations are predominately shaped by situational factors—i.e., the disciplinary and program constraints of the anxiety-sufferer. One of my principle research questions, therefore, is, ‘What sorts of situational factors cause or contribute to teaching anxiety in our discipline? And more specifically, what contextual features of this writing program cause or contribute to participants’ anxieties?’ Gardner and Leak, Fish and Fraser, and Ameen et al. have identified generic anxiety triggers and stimuli (e.g., handling hostile students, evaluating student work, speaking before a class, etc.), but none which are discipline- or program-specific. It was this research gap that I was attempting to address. The students, faculty, and administrators these participants interact with, as well as the instructional resources available to them and the physical spaces they occupy, are all different from those of teachers in other disciplines and even those of composition instructors from other programs. So it stands to reason that what causes them to feel anxious and what
symptoms they exhibit or report as a result of such anxiety would likewise be different. This is not to suggest, however, that participants’ experiences cannot tell us anything about what triggers anxiety in other practitioners. On the contrary, how they communicate with each other and attempt to negotiate or resolve teacher-related issues might tell us a great deal about what other writing instructors are concerned with and how such concerns impact their communicative and teaching behaviors. By identifying the situational factors that caused participants anxiety, therefore, we can begin to make some inferences as to what anxiety triggers and symptoms might be attributed to our discipline.

A second and related question, then, is, ‘How do writing instructors (specifically, these five participants) respond to and/or cope with their anxieties?’ This question could not be addressed until I had answered the first because, as I suggested in Chapter Five, an instructor’s behavioral responses to anxiety-inducing stimuli depend upon what she perceives as the source of her anxiety. It seems likely, too, that an instructor’s coping strategies and mechanisms are influenced to some extent by occupational conditions (e.g., program requirements and stipulations, resources, classroom environments, etc.), so in order to learn how participants responded to and/or coped with their anxieties, I had to consider what it was they were responding to and what, if any, specific circumstances affected their response strategies. What I endeavored to do, therefore, was, in addition to identifying possible behavioral responses to anxiety-inducing stimuli, learn why these participants chose to respond as they did, as this would provide me with a clearer sense of how composition instructors cope with and/or attempt to resolve anxiety triggers.

Some research questions, however, were never satisfactorily answered, either because of the insufficient amount of data collected or because I had not targeted them specifically enough.
One such question, which I briefly addressed in Chapter Five, was how and to what extent a mentoring community like the teaching group system impacted participants’ anxiety levels and communicative behaviors towards students and instructors. Unfortunately, this was impossible to determine. The quantitative data sample was too small to produce any definitive results, and I hadn’t afforded myself enough opportunities to observe participants’ behavioral patterns in different teaching situations to see if there were any changes. Perhaps if I were to observe every study participant in a variety of contexts over a longer period of time, I might learn what sorts of communicative patterns he or she establishes with students and colleagues as well as how such patterns change as a result of the teaching group system.

Another question I tried to answer but ultimately could not was how teaching anxiety affected participants’ levels of communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, teacher efficacy, and job satisfaction. Keeping such variables in mind during the data collection and analysis processes allowed me to make inferences about participants’ teaching and communicative behaviors, and I refer to them frequently in Chapters Three and Four. But the survey instrument used to measure participants’ anxiety levels did not target these variables, and I was unable to extrapolate enough information from the qualitative data to demonstrate whether or not participants’ efficacy, willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and job satisfaction levels changed from one point of the study to another. With a revised set of surveys used in conjunction with a longitudinal study, I might be able to establish correlative and/or causal relationships between these variables and an individual’s level of anxiety.

And finally, I must acknowledge, too, that because the instructors who volunteered for the study were perhaps less bogged down by professional, academic, or personal constraints than those who didn’t, the data sample was far from representative of the writing program’s teaching
population. In my efforts to recruit participants who seemed likelier to complete the study, I undoubtedly left out instructors who were more anxious or troubled or who felt weighed down by heavier teaching loads or other responsibilities and whose contributions might have enhanced our understanding of this phenomenon.

**Patterns and Trends**

Despite these limitations, however, the data provided enough information which directly or indirectly addressed the two central research questions that I was able to comprise a list of potential triggers, symptoms, and behavioral responses related to teaching anxiety. Most of the anxiety triggers participants reported or experienced are discipline- or program-specific (e.g., portfolio assessment, the grading system, etc.), though there are a few which every instructor has likely encountered at one time or another and should thus be characterized as general teaching anxiety triggers—one, of course, being those unexpected mishaps which sometimes inhibit our instructional efforts. During both Elizabeth’s and James’s sessions, for instance, something unforeseen happened which temporarily disrupted class activities. One of Elizabeth’s students’ laptops froze while they were participating in a chat room discussion, so she was forced to remove herself from the learning situation in order to attend to this technological problem. James’s circumstances were slightly different; his cell phone went off at a point when students were working quietly among themselves, so their attention was focused on him when it shouldn’t have been. The effect in either case, however, was the same; students stopped doing whatever they were supposed to be doing, and the learning process came to a screeching halt. Such unanticipated interruptions are what Lynna Williams refers to as “teachable moment[s]”—moments “when things go terribly wrong” despite the instructor’s best intentions (qtd. in Bishop,
“Because Teaching Composition” 77) and which often deprive her of any sense of control or self-assurance (Heimer 11).

Another possible general anxiety trigger is the difficulty associated with sustaining students’ interest, which is often exacerbated by a “teachable moment.” While Elizabeth fiddled with the student’s computer, the rest of the class continued submitting chat room posts, though they were no longer following her instructions or posting responses relevant to the assignment. Elizabeth couldn’t deter such off-task behavior and fix a broken laptop simultaneously, so by the time she had figured out what was wrong with the laptop, the online discussion was in disarray. Although an unexpected mishap like a faulty computer might not cause an instructor much angst in and of itself, it prevents her from keeping an eye on what her students are doing, and that, coupled with the belief that students’ attention spans are relatively short, may induce panic.

There may, however, be another reason why some instructors struggle to maintain students’ interest, one that seems intricately connected to the program’s design and might therefore be more appropriately defined as a program-specific trigger of writing teacher anxiety: students’ preoccupation with extrinsic reward. Although participants reportedly enjoyed interacting with students, most seemed to think students aren’t intrinsically motivated to learn and generally won’t bother with homework assignments or attend classes once they realize they aren’t receiving any credit for it. “We have […] known,” argues Neman, “many students of every stripe who, in their eagerness to achieve, value the grade far more than their learning” (520). Indeed, many students have become so fixated on this “cultural capital,” as Jane Hindman refers to it (404), that they do whatever seems necessary to earn a high grade or pass a course without ever wondering what they should have learned. Anything that doesn’t hold a grade value, therefore, is likely to be perceived as “busy work,” to borrow Jessica’s phrase, who herself
said that if her students don’t believe there is any point to what they are doing, they simply won’t
do it or, at the very least, will resent her for making them do it. This brings me to another
potential source of writing teacher anxiety: teacher-student mistrust. “Connection,” Dethier
argues, is “at the heart of teaching writing. We head off many potential disciplinary problems,
motivational problems, attendance problems because we have connected with students” (32).
James, for instance, feels his students “trust” him because “they want to make sure they
understand” what he teaches them and why; they want to believe, therefore, that every class
activity and assignment has a purpose. If, however, students perceive such activities or
assignments as “busy work,” they may come to distrust their instructors, thinking they have been
duped into doing things which aren’t required of them or integral to their success. Over time,
student distrust could manifest into apathy, hostility, and a general unwillingness to cooperate,
all of which could disrupt the learning process and make sustaining students’ interest that much
harder.

But if students are fixated on grades, the participants themselves appeared almost wholly
consumed with another program-specific anxiety trigger: the end-of-semester portfolio review.
This program feature was brought up at least twice at every group and interview session, usually
when a participant was either assessing students’ progress or justifying her instructional
approach. To most participants, the portfolio review seemed like the culmination of sixteen
laborious weeks. Nearly every comment they wrote on students’ papers, every activity or
assignment they planned, every concept they covered was somehow geared towards preparing
students for this process because, as they saw it, they were being assessed right along with their
students—and they wanted to be assessed favorably. A perfect passing rate (in which all of the
instructor’s students passed) was regarded as a symbol of status, the mark of a knowledgeable,
hard-working teacher. So it is not surprising, then, that during group sessions a participant occasionally would, perhaps in an effort to authenticate his or her teacher credibility, slip in a remark that his or her passing rate was “one-hundred percent” or near perfect. Portfolio assessment results were viewed as a measure of instructor success, therefore; the higher the number of passing portfolios, the more competent the instructor.

Inherent in this thinking, however, is the near-constant worry that the instructor might eventually be ‘found out’ as incompetent, especially at this highly exposed stage when other instructors are evaluating her students’ work. Should more than a few of her students fail, it could readily be attributed to her refusal or inability to meet program standards. And the sorts of characteristics participants ascribed to teachers whose portfolios are substandard are quite unflattering. They’re not only incompetent, but lazy, bumbling, uncaring, and witless. They have little sense of how the writing process works, much less how to teach it to first-year students, and as such are a severe hindrance to the program. What’s worst of all, James argued, is that their students suffer for it because they never learn what it means to write for a real academic audience. Naturally, no one wants to be thought of like this and would do almost anything to avoid such stigmas. James himself knew of “a few other teachers who […] teach to the lowest common [denominator] […] to get by.” To most participants, therefore, the portfolio review resembles a gauntlet, a final test to ascertain whether or not they have done everything possible to ensure students’ long-term success. And some of the more experienced instructors in the study (Stephen, in particular) seemed uncertain as to whether or not they had fulfilled such obligations when students failed. So even if other instructors don’t judge them in this manner, they often look to their students’ writing and/or portfolio review results when assessing themselves.
It should be noted, however, that although portfolio review is a common feature of other writing programs, it is rigidly standardized at this institution and not intended for exhibitional purposes. Students’ portfolios are collected, read, and evaluated to determine if they are proficient at the Comp I-Basic, Comp I, or Comp II level and thus able to enroll in the next required course or complete the program sequence (Instructors’ Handbook 56). So the decision as to whether or not a student passes ultimately lies with the portfolio evaluator (either another program instructor or administrator)—not with the student’s teacher. There is something unsettling about the prospect of having other instructors peruse through our students’ work (let alone evaluate it) because we think of grading as a private domain, something we have control over. During portfolio assessment, what was once privatized suddenly becomes very public, and some instructors may feel as though they are relinquishing control to an outsider, someone who hasn’t worked with their students for the past sixteen weeks but is now deciding their fate. Not surprisingly, most participants seemed uncomfortable entrusting other instructors with this task. “It is frustrating,” Elizabeth had said in the first group session, “especially when you have students who just have aspirations for, for creating something great and it’s like, ‘Well, if, if the portfolio reader doesn’t get it, then how is it this poor student gets punished for?’” So they find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. They have their own ideas for what constitutes good writing, but recognize that other instructors, especially those who evaluate their students’ work, may be expecting something entirely different, and so are forced to make a difficult decision as to what to teach students: should they teach them to produce the kinds of writing which they consider more effective or which seem likelier to pass the portfolio review? If they choose the former, participants may end up jeopardizing students’ chances of passing. The latter choice is equally problematic, however, because it means subverting one’s
pedagogical beliefs and objectives for those of the prevailing system, and this, too, Dethier points out, frequently triggers anxiety (59).

Though these issues seemed to weigh heavily on participants’ minds, they rarely showed signs of physiological discomfort when speaking about them in group or interview sessions, perhaps because no anxiety-inducing stimuli were present in such contexts. But one potential anxiety symptom (and coping mechanism) that nearly every participant exhibited was talking. Talking about specific teacher-related stimuli either repeatedly or in myriad situations suggests a preoccupation with these stimuli, a desire to “gripe” when it seems there is little else one can do (Lindley 89-90). James spent nearly all of the fourth meeting and a good portion of the third and fifth describing what he recognized as the most serious flaws of the program (e.g., portfolio assessment, the grading system, etc.) because he was “passionate” and “mad” about them and “wanted somebody to help [him] with this.” He might have felt, too, that talking about a problem would externalize it somehow, made it more manageable and less intimidating (Newkirk 7-8), so even if he didn’t find the “help” he was looking for, James would have at least purged himself of those issues that occupied him.

At the other end of the spectrum lies another possible manifestation of teaching anxiety: not talking at all, or at least not with colleagues. In her second interview session, Brenda admitted to having problems with grading and keeping herself mentally focused, yet never broached either subject in group sessions. It is likely that Brenda kept silent because she feared her grading and conferencing practices would come under scrutiny. Perhaps she sensed that other participants like James or Stephen had a low tolerance for instructors who taught in ways that struck them as counterintuitive or that none of the participants could help her with something which she believed was largely self-inflicted. So there is some connection, therefore,
between what the instructor identifies as the source of anxiety and her subsequent reactions to it.

James directed his “anger and frustration” (Newkirk 3) towards an external force—i.e., the program—so his behavioral responses were likewise externalized. He spoke openly about his concerns in group sessions because, from his vantage, the fault didn’t lie with him but with a “designated ‘bad guy’” (Newkirk 3). By contrast, Brenda’s conflict was internal. She was fighting against her instructional methods, which she knew were “problematic” because they were already beginning to fail her, and so her anxiety was internalized as well. Whatever anguish or confusion Brenda was experiencing, therefore, was kept hidden until she thought it safe to reveal or could no longer suppress it.

What a participant identifies as the central source of her anxiety also affects her behavioral responses to and attempts to resolve and/or cope with it. Talking with peers, for example, is one possible strategy an instructor uses to cope with or address a problem, especially if, as in James’s case, doing so might elicit change. James believed certain aspects of the portfolio assessment process needed to be “outed” because he and his co-workers were being forced to teach “to the lowest common denominator” in order to help students pass. Yet he realized that he couldn’t impart such changes alone, considering he hadn’t been with the program very long and didn’t have as much seniority as someone like Elizabeth or Stephen. “Like now I feel like I’ve got this big mission,” he said, “but I’m like the new guy.” Talking about these problems with other participants, therefore, may have been an attempt on his part to gain support for his “big mission.” But this was the exception rather than the rule; most participants weren’t interested in changing program features. What they were trying to do instead was to devise or improve strategies for coexisting with them more productively in order to fulfill their professional obligations.
To get students ready for the portfolio review, for instance, Elizabeth has streamlined her lesson plans to fit with and address the portfolio assessment criteria. Whatever activities she and her students do, therefore, must relate in some way to one of the four required Comp II papers. On the day I observed her, Elizabeth was showing students how to participate in chat room discussions, the underlying purpose of which, she later explained, was to encourage them to refine their topic proposals for the third major assignment, the researched essay. Similarly, James’s class session was intended to help students locate articles for and begin drafting the final Comp I project, the critique. “For their last paper,” he said, “I decided to rein them in quite a bit and so that the portfolio readers could see, um, that they could accomplish a typical structure.” In each situation, therefore, the fundamental goal was to prepare students for the impending portfolio assessment process. “That’s […] the bare minimum that we need to get in order to achieve proficiency that we need,” Elizabeth remarked. To accomplish this, both participants adjusted their teaching methods to accommodate the program’s learning outcomes, thereby reducing any apprehension they or their students might have experienced because of this program feature. “I can go home at night,” Elizabeth added, “and not worry. […] I have, in fact, actually helped these students see that they can do the things for the class.”

In doing so, James and Elizabeth may have subsequently addressed another possible source of anxiety—student disinterest. Jessica and Brenda were worried students wouldn’t speak up or attend class once they realized they wouldn’t be graded on such behaviors. Jessica even admitted to other participants that although she’d revised her attendance policy, she still had no viable means of motivating students to come to class—short of threatening to fail them, that is. If, however, students believe a class session or homework assignment enables them to earn higher grades on required papers or pass the portfolio review, they take their learning more
seriously because, James pointed out, “they want to understand.” Elizabeth, too, argued, “I think my students have the sense that whenever I am talking it’s something worth listening to because just how I presented everything to them and they know that I’m very no-nonsense and I’m not going to fill it full of garbage.” So although they won’t receive any credit for class participation, students are aware at least that in doing so, they increase their chances of passing the course, and that, according to James and Elizabeth, is usually enough to satisfy extrinsically-driven students as well as maintain teacher-student trust.

And there seems to be another strategy both participants utilized to establish mutual trust and positive teacher-student communication: demonstrating one’s willingness to communicate with students through verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors. When I observed James’s class session, for instance, I noticed that he talked with each student at least once in order to address any questions or problems she might have had. In doing so, James showed a vested interest in what that individual was working on, which thus enabled him to connect with the student on a more personal level (Andersen 46; Wolcowitz 14). Moreover, by crouching next to the student while they spoke, he reduced any psychological space between them as well.

“Reducing spatial barriers,” Janice F. Andersen contends, “create[s] greater student rapport and improve[s] the likelihood of interaction” (47). Though she was perhaps less able to move between rows because of the computer lab’s physical layout, Elizabeth talked with several students about their topic proposals after it seemed apparent that the online discussion was going nowhere. By asking students what they planned to write on, Elizabeth managed to redirect the discussion back towards its original premise, but more importantly, she demonstrated her willingness to communicate with students, who, as a result, became “much more chatty, um, much more willing to engage with me.”
Positive teacher-student communication can also be reinforced with humor, which both instructors effectively used to address “teachable moments.” “Humor,” Steinmetz suggests, “relaxes and establishes honesty and therefore creates an environment of mutual trust” (87), and when utilized frequently can minimize the impact of a “teachable moment.” Elizabeth, for example, began teasing some of her students about their posts when the chat room session stalled. “That’s really the style that really I think helps them get comfortable,” she explained. Likewise, when James’s cell phone unexpectedly went off, he did a “little dance to ‘American Idiot’” to assuage any embarrassment or guilt he might have felt. Evidently, his students had witnessed such behavior before and so were perhaps expecting that, in a situation where everyone had stopped working, James would do something amusing and daring—which he did. As such, they seemed to have picked up on the idea that his was an appropriate response to a disruption like this, so that when another student’s cell phone rang a few minutes later, the incident was again treated humorously rather than with reproach. Any apprehension his students might have felt towards interruptions like these (especially ones they themselves caused) was therefore reduced because of James’s behavioral cues (Norton 36).

**Implications for Writing Instructors and Administrators**

Before discussing the theoretical and practical implications of this data, however, I must first define writing teacher anxiety as a separate (albeit similar) phenomenon from teaching anxiety in general. Anxiety-sufferers from other disciplines have often experienced physical or psychological discomfort when speaking before a class (Ameen et al. 18), “providing inadequate answers to students’ questions” (Gardner and Leak 30), or handling disruptive students (Fish and Fraser), yet none of the five participants exhibited or reported anxiety symptoms in relation to such stimuli. Some of the anxiety triggers they did encounter (e.g., difficulties in sustaining
students’ interest, teacher-student mistrust) were not mentioned in these previous studies, which seems to indicate that because our pedagogical objectives and teacher-student communicative behaviors differ from those of practitioners in other fields, any teacher-related stimuli that create feelings of apprehension or self-doubt are likewise unique. Wendy Bishop characterizes writing as “a process of self-discovery” and the classroom as “a site of such exploration” where we play a crucial part in helping our students come to understand writing as “a useful, personal, and productive activity, perhaps even as part of a therapeutic process of coming of age” (“Writing Is/And Therapy?”). Anything which interferes with this process or calls into question our instructional competence—e.g., “exposing ourselves and our knowledge to constant scrutiny, handling students’ current crises and scars and wounds from the past, passing judgment and handing out grades in a discipline with admittedly subjective stances and answers” (Dethier 57)—could thus trigger writing teacher anxiety.

And the fear that something like this could happen never really goes away, even though the myths of teaching anxiety might suggest otherwise. Contrary to the “first-day jitters” myth, most participants did not experience heightened states of anxiety in the first few weeks of the semester, and, in fact, James’s survey scores and communicative behaviors during group sessions indicated that he became increasingly agitated as the semester wore on. Moreover, Jessica and Brenda, who in their initial interviews described feelings of restlessness and tension in regards to time and classroom management issues, attributed these feelings to problems which loomed ahead rather than ones they were facing at that point. Additionally, the data seems to have refuted the common misconception that writing teacher anxiety affects novice rather than experienced instructors. None of the participants in this study were beginning teachers, though all, at one time or another, expressed feelings of angst, frustration, or confusion associated with
specific teacher-related stimuli. Even program veterans Elizabeth and Stephen seemed bothered by students’ refusals to participate in class or conference with them, especially when they were unsuccessful in their attempts to prod such students. So despite what instructional manuals like *The New St. Martin’s Guide* purport, writing teacher anxiety wasn’t necessarily ameliorated through classroom exposure for these five individuals, nor was it an indication of instructional incompetence, as many anxiety-sufferers are led to believe (Newkirk 1-3). What the data seems to suggest instead is that the participants were anxious or worried because of their concerns for student learning and development.

Not surprisingly, then, the potential sources of anxiety participants reported and/or encountered all appeared to interfere with their abilities to successfully impart student learning. Some anxiety sources were considered non-negotiable, either because they were too closely connected to program constituents (e.g., portfolio assessment, the grading system) or because participants felt they were too complex to handle alone. In such cases, the participant would typically attempt to cope with the anxiety source rather than address it. James and Elizabeth, although not keen on the portfolio assessment process, nevertheless adapted their teaching practices to accommodate this program feature, as did Brenda, who likewise found fault with it. Occasionally, however, a participant would, in her efforts to address a larger problem (e.g., student resistance), change something smaller and more immediate. To motivate students to attend class, Jessica contemplated the idea of assigning point values for attendance, participation, and homework, even though such a practice deviates from the program’s grading policies and procedures. Her behavior here may offer writing program administrators some insight as to how teachers attempt to negotiate program constituents. If the instructor believes a professional, social, or personal constraint is a hindrance to her teaching and one that she can remove or
change without serious repercussions, she will likely do so in order to reduce her anxiety. If she cannot change or negotiate this constraint, however, or is discouraged from doing so, the instructor might instead focus on something she can change, though it may not be the actual anxiety source. In Jessica’s case, the underlying cause of student resistance could be more complicated than the absence of extrinsic motivation—it might be, for instance, that some students feel marginalized or apprehensive of writing—and if so, Jessica would be unable to address the problem or her anxiety with her present strategy.

This is where dialogue between instructors and WPAs becomes critical for resolving problems associated with teaching anxiety. Both parties must work in partnership to find out what potential sources of anxiety exist, whether or not such sources can be addressed, and if so, how. Otherwise, WPAs risk putting program stipulations upon instructors that prevent them from teaching effectively and who in turn utilize inappropriate or ineffectual coping strategies. But before a WPA can decide how she or the instructor should respond to a potential anxiety source, she must first learn to what extent program instructors suffer from anxiety. This is not an easy task, considering that many anxiety-sufferers are reluctant to report feelings of stress or tension (Fish and Fraser; Gardner and Leak 29) and may not exhibit any discernable signs of anxiety. From my investigation, I could identify only two principle manifestations of anxiety—i.e., talking and not talking. When participants were talking, they were talking amongst themselves rather than with an administrator, so it would be nearly impossible for a WPA to ferret out potential sources or manifestations of anxiety from such dialogue. Not talking at all, however, is even more problematic because it sends the signal that nothing is wrong. Instructors who conceal their anxieties often have specific reasons for doing so (Bobrick), some of which might themselves be sources of anxiety. It is probable that Brenda refused to talk about her
grading problems with other group members because she didn’t want them finding out how she graded. So her silence could be indicative of a deeper issue—a fear of scrutiny, criticism, or perhaps even ostracism. But because she was apparently unwilling to seek out help from a colleague or administrator, a WPA might never know that Brenda was anxious at all.

This led me to consider the possibility that a questionnaire similar to the one used in the study could be administered to determine the prevalence of writing teacher anxiety in a specific program and the kinds of teacher-related stimuli that cause or exacerbate it. Teachers like Brenda who feel uncomfortable divulging personal fears or problems to supervisors or co-workers might respond more openly and honestly to questionnaire items when doing so anonymously. But verifying the number of potential anxiety cases is only part of the equation. A WPA must then learn why some instructors experience anxiety and what, if anything, she can do about it.

The next logical stage in this process, therefore, is to get instructors and administrators talking with one another about potential triggers or symptoms of anxiety, though in order to do that, the risks instructors might associate with self-disclosure would need to be minimized. This is easier said than done, argues Louise Wetherbee Phelps, especially for teaching assistants, because “the academy at large socializes grad students to hate administration and distrust administrators” (qtd. in Mountford 43). So perhaps the first step towards counteracting such prejudice is to have instructors interact with each other in a teaching group with the WPA listening in. There are limitations to the teaching group system if it remains solely the enterprise of teachers, however. For one, it might not promote trust between colleagues. During the study it became apparent that although participants generally appeared open-minded and sympathetic to each other’s concerns, some (especially Brenda) didn’t feel secure enough to talk about
problems they were having or were worried other participants might tell outsiders what was being discussed. A greater concern is that instructors who “spend time complaining about the writing program and all the ways it controls their world” (Mountford 43) might shut off communication between themselves and administrators and thus risk losing any support the program has to offer them. Such problems may be avoided, however, if the teaching group system is coordinated with other teacher preparation or professional development programs, something that Routman (Raymond 28) and Brown urge program developers to do, in fact. Under administrative supervision and used in conjunction with other faculty programs, the teaching group system can function as a “supportive environment” where “classroom issues, including curricular planning, discipline concerns, student motivation, and differentiation of instruction ‘[can be] solved sooner’” (Gomez qtd. in Brown), and might therefore enable the WPA to learn what program features cause instructors anxiety and what both parties can do to address them.

Additional research, however, must be conducted on how and to what extent the teaching group system might be used to counteract anxiety triggers and symptoms before it can be recommended it as a supplement to training and/or professional development programs. One possible avenue for further research, then, is to investigate how the teaching group system can be modified to fit a specific writing program’s needs and/or coordinated with other faculty programs. I had closely adhered to Brown’s and Routman’s support system models in creating a teaching group that would allow me to study potential anxiety sources and manifestations, though it may also be used to “cultivate teaching communities” or mentor new faculty (Latterell 153). The general structure and format would require adjustments for such purposes, however, and any modified versions of the teaching group system would need to be examined as well to
determine what effects they might have on instructors’ communicative behaviors towards students, peers, and administrators.

The teaching group system may also prove useful for further investigating teaching anxiety and its related phenomena, though it and its participants need to be studied over a longer period of time (perhaps up to a full academic year) and in different contexts. It would be interesting to see, for example, whether a larger or smaller number of participants or a more homogenized group (e.g., all teaching assistants) might alter the nature or purposes of the teaching group, considering that, as this study has shown, teaching concerns vary according to instructors’ professional and academic responsibilities. In addition, composition specialists should closely examine writing instructors’ communicative behaviors in small-group and classroom settings in order to develop a more comprehensive list of anxiety triggers, manifestations, and coping mechanisms unique to our discipline. Given that pedagogical practices and ideologies differ from one program to another, it seems likely, too, that additional program-specific anxiety triggers and symptoms may emerge from comparative studies on writing programs. And finally, a survey-based quantitative study similar to Gardner and Leak’s and directed at writing instructors from universities across the country may produce more substantial data regarding the prevalence of teaching anxiety in our discipline as a whole.

These findings provide several starting points for a much needed in-depth look at the causes and manifestations of and possible remedies for teaching anxiety. I do sincerely hope, therefore, that composition specialists continue researching this phenomenon, as it poses serious problems for both anxiety-sufferers and students (Roach 169). Because experience alone is often not enough to alleviate teaching anxiety, WPAs should also consider investigating the long-term effects teacher preparation and faculty development programs might have on teaching anxiety.
and job performance. This is not to suggest, however, that anxiety reduction should be the sole motivating force behind such critical inquiry; the real purpose of improving any teacher program is “the sound development of competent […] teachers” (Davis and Kring 50). Yet because WPA scholarship indicates that effective mentoring, training, and professional development programs enhance teacher competence and lower stress (Duffelmeyer 303; Ward and Perry 121; Park 355), WPAs should examine a) how current teacher programs affect instructors’ performances and anxieties, and b) how such programs might be improved to reduce teacher-related stress. In doing so, WPAs can create more efficient and helpful instructional programs and resources that minimize “teacher burnout” (Kirk and Walter 147) and “combat the damaging notion” of “teaching [as] an isolated activity” (Latterell 153).


Behnke, Ralph R. and Chris R. Sawyer. “Public Speaking Anxiety as a Function of Sensitization


Fischer, Ruth Overman. “Handling the Confrontative Conference.” *Strategies for Teaching*


Kountz, Carol. “The Anxiety of Influence and the Influence of Anxiety.” Anxiety of Influence


Marso, Ronald N. and Fred Pigge L. “A Seven-Year Multivariate Longitudinal Study of the Changes in Anxiety about Teaching through Preparation and Early Years of Teaching.” Seven-Year Multivariate Longitudinal Study of the Changes in Anxiety about Teaching through Preparation and Early Years of Teaching [No Volume/Issue] (1998) [No Pagination].


McCroskey, James C. and Michael J. Beatty. “Communication Apprehension and Accumulated


Ryder, Phyllis Mentzell, Valentina M. Abordonado, Barbara Heiffler, and Duane H. Roen. “Multivocal Midwife: The Writing Teacher as Rhetor.” Alternative Rhetorics:


APPENDIX A:
PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER
Participant Consent Form

Ms. Brennan Thomas
1726 Spruce Dr. Apt. 145
Bowling Green Ohio, 43402
(419) 352-8161
bmthoma@bgnet.bgsu.edu

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study on composition instructors’ communicative strategies and behaviors towards first-year composition students and other instructors. As part of my graduate work for the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, I am conducting a study of instructors (including full-time instructors, part-time instructors, adjuncts, and teaching assistants) who are currently employed by the writing program and teach first-year composition.

This research project is part of my dissertation work on composition instructors’ behaviors and communicative strategies towards students and fellow practitioners. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to determine how instructors communicate with and behave towards students and other instructors. Specifically, I will be examining how instructors discuss teacher-related issues with other instructors; how teachers might work together to negotiate or handle such teacher-related issues; and how teachers conceptualize their own teaching strategies.

This study will require you to participate in a teaching group, which will meet periodically (between five and seven times) for sixteen weeks (or the duration of the 2005 Fall semester); you and the other participants will decide upon the total number of meetings at the conclusion of the first teaching group meeting. The initial meeting will take place the fourth week of the 2005 Fall semester and last approximately 60 minutes. All subsequent meetings will last approximately 60 minutes each.

Your participation will also involve completing three interview sessions. Your first interview will take place during the second week of the 2005 Fall semester and last approximately 60 minutes; you will also complete one survey (which will take approximately 10-15 minutes). Your second interview will take place the eighth or ninth week of the semester and last approximately 60 minutes. Your final meeting will take place the sixteenth week of the semester and also last approximately 60 minutes. Your participation in this final meeting will also involve completing one survey (which will take approximately 10-15 minutes). The estimated total amount of time for your participation is approximately 8-10 hours.

As an optional (not required) part of the study, please indicate whether or not you are also willing to have one of your classroom sessions videotaped and observed by the researcher and complete an additional 60-minute interview regarding this taped classroom session. Please check one.

    ______ Yes, I would like to have one of my class sessions observed and videotaped, and complete an additional interview on this taped classroom session.

    ______ No, I do not want to have one of my class sessions observed and videotaped.
This study may enable me to understand how you communicate with students and other instructors. For your participation, you will have opportunities to discuss, develop, and refine your teaching and communication strategies with me and/or other participants during teaching group meetings and interview sessions. You will also receive a letter of recommendation from me that describes your participation in the teaching group meetings and my observations of your teaching techniques. You will also be given the opportunity to discuss your participation in this study as part of an academic conference presentation. Finally, you will receive a $25 gift certificate to the university bookstore.

Your confidentiality as a participant and your contributions during group meetings and interview sessions will be protected throughout the study and publication of study results. Your identity will not be revealed in any published results unless you specifically request identification.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any or all questions without penalty or explanation. You are free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time. Your decision to participate or not will not impact your teaching status or assignment or relationship to the institution in any way.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at (419) 352-8161 or email me at bmthoma@bgnet.bgsu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Sue Carter, my dissertation chair, at (419) 372-8107 or email her at carters@bgnet.bgsu.edu. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the university's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

By signing and returning this form, you are indicating your consent to participate in this project.

Your signature: ____________________________ Date: __________

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Brennan Thomas
APPENDIX B:
SURVEY FORM
Teacher Survey

Directions: Please complete the following information.

1.) Age (write in the blank): ________

2.) Gender (circle one): Female Male

3.) Teaching Position (circle one):
   Teaching Assistant Part-Time Faculty Full-Time Faculty Adjunct

4.) How many semesters (not including the current semester) have you previously taught one or more college-level writing courses? (circle one)
   None One-Two Three-Four Five-Six Seven or More

Directions: Below is a list of statements that teachers occasionally make about their work and roles as teachers. Please indicate whether or not you believe each statement applies to your teaching experiences by marking whether you:

Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5

Write the numerical value of your response in the blank provided (ex. 1 for “Strongly Disagree”).

Section I: Classroom Performance

_____ 1.) I look forward to teaching a class.

_____ 2.) I feel tense when a student asks a question I do not know the answer to.

_____ 3.) I have no fear of teaching a class.

_____ 4.) Although I am nervous just before teaching a class, I soon settle down after starting and feel calm and comfortable.

_____ 5.) When students seem uninterested in the class activities, I feel tense.

_____ 6.) When I make a mistake while teaching, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.

_____ 7.) Right after teaching a class, I feel that I have had a pleasant experience.
8.) When another teacher is observing me while I teach, I feel very nervous.

Section II: Classroom Preparation

1.) I look forward to creating lesson plans and materials for my students.

2.) I’m worried my students won’t like my lesson plans or classroom activities.

3.) I’m afraid of drafting lesson plans and materials when I know they will be read or evaluated by other instructors and/or students.

4.) It’s easy for me to create fun lesson plans and handouts.

5.) I like to have other instructors look over my classroom materials and lesson plans.

6.) I avoid drafting lesson plans and materials for the classes that I teach.

7.) Students seem to enjoy the class activities and handouts I prepare.

8.) I worry that I will forget what I have prepared when I teach.

Section III: Conferencing with Students

1.) I look forward to meeting with individual students.

2.) I feel tense when a student asks me to justify a grade on his/her paper.

3.) Although I am initially nervous when a student comes to my office for a conference, I soon settle down after starting the conference and feel comfortable.

4.) When I am trying to help a student with a paper, I sometimes feel unsure how to proceed.

5.) I feel completely prepared to meet with students and offer helpful feedback on their work.

6.) I feel anxious when the student with whom I am conferencing seems uninterested or confused during our meeting.
7.) If no other instructor is present in the office while I am conferencing with a student, I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me.

8.) Right after conferencing with a student, I feel that I have had an enjoyable experience.

Section IV: Responding to and Evaluating Student Work

1.) I look forward to responding to my students’ work.

2.) I am afraid of grading essays when I know other instructors will look at my grades and comments.

3.) Writing comments on students’ drafts seems to be a waste of time.

4.) I never seem to be able to clearly write down my responses to students’ work.

5.) Students seem to enjoy what I write on their papers.

6.) I like to have my students read what I have written on their papers.

7.) I feel confident in my ability to write clear, constructive comments on students’ papers.

8.) I don’t think I grade students’ work as effectively as other instructors.

This survey is adapted from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for College Students (PRCA-College) and Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension survey.

Works Cited


APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview Questions: First Session

1. What influenced you to become a teacher?
2. What were your own educational experiences like?
3. How did your educational experiences shape your attitudes and beliefs about the teaching profession?
4. How long have you been a teacher?
5. What courses, if any, have you previously taught?
6. How did you prepare for your first few class sessions this semester?
7. What did you do during these first few class meetings?
8. What did you notice about your students during these first few meetings?
9. How did you feel as each meeting progressed?
10. What did you enjoy about these first few class sessions?
11. What did you dislike about these first few class sessions?
12. What do you think comprises a successful class meeting?
13. What do you think comprises an unsuccessful class meeting?
14. What aspects of teaching do you think will be easiest for you this semester?
15. What aspects of teaching do you think will be hardest for you this semester?
16. What would you like to achieve with your students this semester?
17. What are your biggest concerns about teaching this semester?
18. How do you think you will do as a teacher this semester?
19. What are your expectations for the teaching group?
20. What would you like to gain from participating in the teaching group meetings?
Interview Questions: Second Session

1. How do you prepare for a class session?
2. Describe how you initiate a typical class meeting.
3. What sorts of activities do you and your students do during a typical class meeting?
4. How do you usually end a class meeting?
5. Describe your process when you respond to and/or grade students’ a) rough drafts, b) final drafts, and c) revisions.
6. Describe your process when you conference with a student. How do you and the student begin the conference? How do you interact with the student during the conference?
7. How do you end the conference?
8. What do you think are your strengths as a teacher?
9. What do you think are your weaknesses as a teacher?
10. Do you like teaching? Why or why not?
11. What aspects of teaching are easiest for you? Why?
12. What aspects of teaching are hardest for you? Why?
13. How do your actual teaching experiences compare to and/or contrast with your pre-semester expectations and attitudes toward teaching?
14. How do your teaching group experiences compare to and/or contrast with your pre-semester expectations and attitudes towards the teaching group meetings?
15. What aspects of the teaching group do you find most beneficial? Why?
16. What would you like to improve about the teaching group? Explain.
Interview Questions: Third Session

1. What teaching techniques or strategies worked well in your classroom?

2. What teaching techniques or strategies failed in your classroom?

3. What were your most successful class sessions? Why?

4. What made such meetings successful?

5. What seemed to be your least successful class sessions? Why?

6. What sorts of problems did you and/or your students encounter as the semester progressed?

7. How did you handle such problems?

8. Do you think you handled such problems effectively? Why or why not?

9. Consider your initial goals and expectations for yourself and for your students this semester. Do you think you achieved your teaching goals? Why or why not?

10. Do you think your students met your expectations? Explain your response.

11. Do you think your students enjoyed the course? Why or why not?

12. Do you think your students consider you an effective teacher? Explain your response.

13. Do you consider yourself an effective teacher? Explain your response.

14. What did you think was the most helpful aspect of the teaching group meetings?

15. Which meeting was the most helpful?

16. What did you think was the least helpful aspect of the teaching group meetings?

17. Which meeting was the least helpful?

18. Would you recommend the teaching group to other teachers? If so, why, and to whom?
   If not, why not?
**Classroom Observation: Optional Interview Session**

(Start videotape of participant’s classroom session.) As you watch the tape, describe to me (the researcher) what is happening in your classroom, and answer the following questions:

1. How did you prepare for this particular class meeting?
2. What did you want to accomplish during this particular meeting?
3. What do you notice about your behavior?
4. What do you notice about your students’ behavior?
5. What is going through your mind as you are conducting class?
6. What do you think your students are thinking? Explain your response.
7. What did you see from your teacher’s perspective as you were conducting class?
8. What do you see as you watch this tape of the class session that you did not notice while you were teaching?
9. Do you think it was a successful classroom session? Why or why not?
APPENDIX D:
TEACHING GROUP MATERIALS
**Agenda: Meeting One**

1. Welcome and introductions.

2. Provide an overview of the teaching group’s general structure (see “General Structure” handout).

3. Ask participants what they would like to gain from the meetings.

4. Have participants select a topic/issue for the next meeting’s discussion.

5. Select one or two members to facilitate the next meeting’s discussion.

6. Discuss the tentative agenda for the next meeting as well as the kinds of resources participants might bring (e.g., articles and other reading material, handouts or classroom material, student work, etc.).

7. Decide upon times and dates for the next meeting.

8. Address any final questions and conclude the meeting.
General Structure for Teaching Group Meetings

- Instructors will begin the meeting by sharing their teaching experiences and updates on concerns they might have or successes they have enjoyed.

- The facilitator(s) will present resource material (such as articles, materials from class, student work, etc.) to the other instructors on the chosen topic or issue for that meeting.

- The other instructors will offer questions, suggestions, and/or additional resources to define the topic/issue more clearly.

- The instructors will then discuss possible ideas for successfully resolving and/or negotiating the topic/issue.

- The instructors will select a new topic/issue to be discussed at the following meeting, and one or two participants will be chosen as the next meeting’s facilitator(s).

- The tentative time and date will also be chosen for the next meeting.

Topic/Issue for the Next Meeting: ______________________________________________

____________________________________________

Facilitator(s) for the Next Meeting: ______________________________________________

____________________________________________

Time and Date for the Next Meeting: ______________________________________________