Writing in My Language: Students' Perceptions of Informal Writing in the Composition Classroom

by

Allison Query

July, 2011

Director of Thesis: Dr. Will Banks

Department of English

This classroom study examines students' perceptions of informal writing in a first-year composition classroom. Informal writing, as defined in this study, includes any in-class exercises that provide students the freedom to communicate on paper using their own, familiar discourses. These assignments allow students to be creative, as they can write, draw, map, doodle, etc during these exercises. An analysis of student work, including informal writings, essays, and reflective cover letters, and anonymous surveys suggests that students were able to make meaning in these sometimes dismissed informal exercises.

Writing in My Language: Students' Perceptions of Informal Writing in the Composition Classroom

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

by

Allison Query

July, 2011

©Allison Query, 2011

WRITING IN MY LANGUAGE: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INFORMAL WRITING

IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

Allison Query

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: ______________________________

Will Banks, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: ______________________________

Slobodanka Dimova, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: ______________________________

Dana Harrington, PhD

CHAIR OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH: ______________________________

Jeffrey Johnson, PhD

DEAN OF THE
GRADUATE SCHOOL: ______________________________

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

// ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for their support and patience. I would especially like to thank Will Banks for welcoming and answering my numerous questions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ii

TABLE OF CONTENTS iii

CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTUALIZING INFORMAL WRITING: THEORIES AND METHODS 1

Theories and Methods 3

Critiques 10

CHAPTER 2: RETHINKING INFORMAL WRITING 14

Defining Authentic Voice 14

Informal Writing 19

Conclusion 24

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY 27

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION 37

Visual Interest 39

Benefits and Impact of Informal Writing 44

What's the Point? 50

Flaws and Limitations 53

Closing Thoughts 54

CONCLUSION 56

Relationship Between Verbal and Visual Literacies 57

A Class Without Informals 58

Closing Thoughts 60

WORKS CITED 62

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL 67

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF CONSENT 68

APPENDIX C: BEGINNING OF THE SEMESTER SURVEY 69

APPENDIX D: COVER LETTER QUESTIONS 70

APPENDIX E: END OF THE SEMESTER SURVEY..71

APPENDIX F: SPSS RESULT TABLES 73

CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTUALIZING INFORMAL WRITING: THEORIES AND METHODS

Informal writing in a composition classroom is certainly not a new concept, nor is the debate surrounding how to utilize informal writing in a classroom (if at all); furthermore, the discussion questioning if instructors should implement a process-oriented teaching approach or a product-oriented approach is also nothing new. However, this leaves an ongoing question for composition instructors, *what is more important, the process or the product?* Should the emphasis be on the final product alone, where the student uses his or her academic prose to construct a "teacher-oriented" essay—or an essay to prove the student is part of the academic community—or should there be an emphasis placed on the process that leads the student to the final product, but allows for more "freedom" and informal writing through this process? The notion of writing for the academy (implementing a formal, academic prose) versus writing in a more informal prose (think Peter Elbow's "freewrites") has long been through a tug-of-war battle; in his preface to an article in the collection *Teaching Composition*, T.R. Johnson introduces David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" by claiming that "Bartholomae argues, in what is now considered to be a classic statement about the overall aims of the composition classroom, that we must, above all, enable our students to participate in the discourses of the academy" (2). Or, as John Schilb notes, this same article is "perhaps the most often cited and discussed essay in composition studies" (260). On the other hand, in what appears to be a direct contrast to Bartholomae's "classic statement," Elbow proposes students should not only write "for the academy," but they should also write using their own, familiar prose ("Interchanges" 505-06).

For a composition instructor a primary goal, of course, would be for students to write for the academy, much like Bartholomae suggests, and join the academic conversation. Yet I

question whether there is any harm in also playing on Elbow's ideas in letting students write informally, primarily as a vehicle to improve their thinking, and, perhaps, their academic writing? As Elbow himself questions, why not allow for a "both/and" approach to instruction, rather than an "either/or" ("Voice in Writing" 13-14). It seems to me that a compromise between the two propositions could, in turn, provide successful academic writing from first-year composition students, as students are given the opportunity to put down on paper their (potentially) jumbled thoughts via informal writing assignments and revise this writing to meet formal, academic standards. By informal writing assignments, I am not reducing this idea to "freewrites" or journal entries; I am referencing any informal student work that is not graded based on content, grammar, spelling, completed ideas, etc—it may, however, be graded for completion. Furthermore, I'm not suggesting that instructors like Bartholomae, who privilege academic discourses over informal discourses, dismiss the use of informal (or at least invention) practices in the classroom; I'm merely suggesting a pedagogical approach for a greater emphasis on the invention stages and the writing process itself via the use of informal writing practices, which may, in turn, produce effective, academic essays.

I recognize, of course, that tracing the direct impact of students' informal writing is a difficult task in and of itself, which may be why the research is limited. Given the scope of this project, I have chosen to investigate one element of this complex problem: the role of student perceptions of informal writing in a first-year writing course. More specifically, this thesis seeks to address the question, "what are students' perceptions of the role of informal writing in an introductory college writing course?" As part of that question, I also explore two related questions: 1) do students' perceptions of informal writing have an impact on their performance in the classroom? and 2) through the use of informal writings, are students able to recognize and

understand their own composing processes as writers? This project goes beyond the instructor's analysis of student writing and provides students a chance to speak for themselves.

Theories and Methods

There are several teaching theories readily available for composition instructors to adopt into their own classroom, ranging from traditional to expressivism—which appear to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. Expressivism, though often critiqued and dismissed by many, implies a unique, individualized approach towards teaching. Unfortunately, due to the "freedom" associated with informal writing, this type of writing is often dismissed as well, as it is typically linked to expressivism—assuming this naive, free-spirit connotation. However, I am not here to defend the expressivist theory; rather, I want to rescue the use of informal writing in the classroom; I want to disconnect informal writing from the automatic association with expressivism to demonstrate that while it does allow for a more individualized approach, it can, in fact, be a useful tool, and it can be utilized to help students transform their informal prose—where it gets linked to expressivism—into formal, academic prose.

Due to the individualistic essence of informal writing, it is often assumed to be a tool utilized exclusively in an expressivists' classroom; furthermore, due to the nature of this theory, process-pedagogy is often assumed to fall under expressivism. However, I do not believe that this is necessarily the case. Providing students a significant amount of "freedom" in their writing is often referred to as a characteristic of expressivism. While informal writing also enables students this sense of freedom, students' liberty within their writing is restricted to informal exercises (at least in my classroom); this sense of freedom that stands out as a leading characteristic of informal writing may be a leading factor to the misconception that informal writing and expressivism must be a bundled package. Rather, these informal exercises can be

implemented as part of a process in any classroom (traditional to expressivist). While I recognize that informal writing incorporates some expressivist characteristics, it should not be dismissed as a useful tool based on this assumption. Informal exercises can be put into practice in various classrooms; it is not, by any means, restricted to expressivist classrooms. Unfortunately, it's not difficult to see where the separation gets blurry, as they share similar principles.

Tom Orange briefly summarizes expressivism and implies that towards the end of the 1960s, the "focus of writing instruction shifted towards the student writer as a person: through attention to the writing process over the written product, the discovery and cultivation of the writer's self or voice through written expression would help liberate [the student] from the authority of rules and conventions" (115). This individualized approach not only puts a large emphasis on the process of writing, giving students the opportunity to write using their "voice," but it also puts a large emphasis on the students as an individual. With this "freedom" associated with expressivism, it's easy to see why informal writing may automatically be assumed to be a pedagogical tool placed under the expressivism umbrella—as this writing also allows students more "freedom;" however, within informal writing (in my classroom) this "freedom" is strictly limited to only these informal assignments. The writing post-informal assignments should be formal, academic writing, with close attention to the "rules and conventions," straying away from expressivism. Within expressivism, Adler-Kassner suggests that students are encouraged to learn through their own experiences, and a common ideal associated with expressivism is that of building a sense of community, whether it is a cultural, social, or academic community that reflects individualistic culture (or the individual); furthermore, this approach encourages self-expression and understanding of the self. Adler-Kassner calls attention to this notion of building

a sense of community by suggesting “expressivists framed composition as a medium that could help preserve and build community” (217).

Linking the ideas of community and another significant ideal within expressivism is the notion of the author’s ownership of a text. Ownership examines the use of self-expression utilized within writing and what entails a piece of writing to allow the authors to call it their “own.” Adler-Kassner explains:

> Ownership of ideas, of expression, and of the product produced at the end of the writing process was thus the most important goal of writing. In fact, here the entire writing process—from prewriting, to articulation of ideas, to final product—was designed to defeat the emergence of a sort of ‘false’ consciousness in favor of the production of genuinely owned ideas expressed in an ‘authentic voice’[…]Once students developed their ownership, predicated on greater self-understanding, it was assumed that they would then ‘connect’ with others in a community sharing the greater self-knowledge and self-awareness. (218)

The community sharing that Adler-Kassner refers to may be seen in the social community that students build through the use of their “own,” less academic language within their informal writing exercises. What allows students—or any writer—to “own” an idea or text proves to hold skepticism, but she suggests that a final step in the writing process is the “creation of a product owned by the writer” (223). Adler-Kassner points to one scholarly point-of-view which argues that “students should be granted ownership so that writing could move them toward a more thorough understanding of themselves, thus facilitating more genuine self-expression” (215). She cautions, however, that instructors must be careful not to take over students’ “ownership” of their own work. She explains that at a lecture she attended, the speaker called attention to how when a

student asks if a paper is what the teacher wanted, then the teacher has, unfortunately, taken ownership of the student's writing (224). Donald Jones acknowledges this notion of community as he references Elbow's different uses of community building. Elbow claims that the principle of community may actually be much more complex; he suggests that there are several "overlapping speech communities" (qtd. in Jones 271).

Adler-Kassner not only understands the emphasis of the individual, but also the complexity of the differing speech communities. She emphasizes how an often assumed part of expressivism is the thought of the authentic voice; however, she notes that the "counter argument here, of course, is that using one's 'own' words isn't really possible—any language, all words, reflect and refract different communities, and those communities are brought together and defined by their shared interpretation and use of language" (221). Though writing using one's "own" words cannot truly be done, this "authentic" writing within expressivism can be another misleading factor regarding the automatic assumption that giving students a space to engage in such practices may only be implemented within an expressivists' classroom.

While expressivism seems to acknowledge the varying discourse communities, this teaching approach is often criticized for dismissing any form of audience. Lad Tobin points out that while Donald Murray and Elbow are often deemed "expressivists" by others, and that they do, in fact, adopt an "expressivist sense of the agency of the individual writer or the power of voice," these scholars also "pay careful attention to audience and to the ways in which response shapes revision as well as invention" (10). Jones emphasizes this same idea in suggesting that Elbow should not be considered an "expressivist" because he also focuses on the importance of invention and audience (273). With audience often being "dismissed" within expressivism, yet a commonly referred to "expressivist" does pay close attention to audience and invention within

his classroom, the line begins to blur. It is evident that a special emphasis on audience and invention can be part of a pedagogical approach which implements informal writing, but should not necessarily be trapped under expressivist ideologies.

One common teaching approach that often automatically falls under the expressivism theory is that of process-pedagogy. While process-pedagogy and expressivism are not the same thing, they are often assumed to follow similar paths. In fact, Tobin suggests that "it was not unusual to hear 'process' and 'expressivism' used almost interchangeably, as if expressivism were the only kind of process and process teachers were only expressivist" (9). A process approach may be implemented by more than just an expressivist, however; for instance, a social-epistemic or a cognitivist may use process within the classroom as well. Much like Tobin, I am not advocating, by any means, that if one adopts a process-oriented approach, then he must be an expressivist. Instead, it is my intention to examine the larger purposes and goals of process-pedagogy outside of expressivism.

Tobin emphasizes the differentiating factors between process and product oriented teachers in the 70s and 80s. He suggests that a process oriented instructor would argue for "student choice of topics and forms; the necessity of authentic voice; writing as a messy, organic, recursive form of discovery, growth, and personal expression." (This seems to echo components of expressivism, which may be where another misleading automatic connection between process-pedagogy and expressivism originated.) Or, the instructor believed that it was necessary to "resist process' attack on rules, conventions, standards, quality, and rigor"—perhaps a more traditional outlook (4). Furthermore, Lynn Bloom asserts that process-pedagogy's initial focus was on the "individual writer and the writer's private views of the world" (35). Again, this was the "initial focus" of process, causing it to be correlated as part of an expressivist approach. She

suggests that though the interpretations of the process paradigm have shifted throughout the decades, there are still essential principles that remain in effect. She borrows from Gary Olson to suggest that the following characteristics are critical to the process paradigm, which may easily be implemented beyond that of expressivism: "Writing is an activity, an act composed of a variety of activities … the act of writing can be a means of learning and discovery … experienced writers spend considerable time on invention and revision … effective writing instruction allows students to practice these activities … [and] successful composition instruction entails finding appropriate occasions to intervene in each student's writing process" (qtd. in Bloom 32-33).

Whether viewing the process paradigm or process-pedagogy in its original focus as highly valuing authentic voice, going hand-in-hand with an expressivist outlook, or, much like the term suggests, a means of going through a (maybe messy) process via stages of invention and revision (as suggested by Olson), Murray seems to meet expectations within both characterizations. Murray suggests that there are three stages in the writing process: prewriting (all writing before the first draft), writing (composing the first draft), and rewriting (revision) ("Teach Writing" 4). Murray also asserts in "Write before Writing" that few teachers allow for "adequate time for prewriting, that essential stage in the writing process which proceeds a completed first draft. And even the curricula plans and textbooks which attempt to deal with prewriting usually pass over it rather quickly, referring only to the techniques of outlining, note-taking, or journal-making, not reveling the complicated process writers work through to get to the first draft" (375). Allotting a significant amount of time for prewriting in the classroom, in turn, seems to be a necessary element for process-pedagogy—whether this prewriting

assignments are exercises allowing students to write using their "authentic" voice or formally outlining an upcoming essay.

In addition to process-pedagogy, in its original functions, often falling under the "expressivism umbrella," there are other pedagogical approaches that are most suited for providing students that individualistic approach and for providing students a chance to feel a personal investment in writing projects, such as student-centered and writing-based-teaching methods. Donna Kain suggests that in a student-centered approach, there is a higher investment and engagement in learning activities, and such an approach allows students to write from their own perspectives (104). Furthermore, Tim McMahon and Geraldine O'Neill provide synonyms for "student-centered" learning such as "flexible learning," "experimental learning," and "self-directed learning" (27). Similarly, in *Writing-Based Teaching,* editor Teresa Vilardi emphasizes the importance of what she calls "writing-based-teaching," which essentially creates opportunities for students to learn or come to terms with course material via writing. She asserts that "students need opportunities for thinking through writing, for experiencing what Elbow has described as an economy of plenty, rather than one of scarcity" (4). Encouraging students to utilize writing activities to develop ideas or find meaning through writing is a critical part of this approach; furthermore, Vilardi acknowledges the criticisms associated with writing-based-teaching, but insists that through the arguments the authors present within her collection, this teaching approach does employ "valuable tools for fostering critical reading, inquiry, and reasoning" (3). While some scholars recognize the value of such process-oriented approaches, others continue to criticize the methods.

Critiques

An accepted problem of informal writing is its automatic association with expressivism due to its informal nature; however, I would not, by any means, consider one who implements informal writing in the classroom to be labeled an "expressivist" without first considering to what end the informal writing is being used. While yes, these assignments may allot more "freedom" within classroom writing, they do not necessarily provide students more "freedom" in their academic writing. Informal writing may be used to help students develop ideas and build their formal writings, but we should not assume that informal writing is being substituted for formal, academic writing. My interpretation of informal writing aside, it is easy to see why informal writing could often be associated with expressivism. A paramount criticism of expressivism is that it is too individualized—which may be a principle contributor to the misleading assumption that informal writing and expressivism go hand-in-hand; it doesn't give the students any further political or social awareness. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch thoroughly critique this commonly referred to "flaw" of expressivism in their book, *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*. They suggest that this method does not allow for "any broader awareness, let alone reconstituting, of school life in the context of other social formations" (128). These authors further their criticism by using terms such as "serendipity," "romantic," "naive," "ineffectual," and "superficial" to describe expressivism—terms that composition instructors probably do not want to hear about their method. Perhaps Brannon and Knoblauch use these terms to express their "frustrations" about the "idealized revolutionary ambitions of expressivist teaching," a commonly shared aggravation among several scholars (126).

Tobin further discusses this criticism of expressivism being too individualized to allow for any greater awareness in suggesting that "by focusing so much on individual writers, expressivists are faulted for not focusing on the factors that shape composing"—factors such as Bartholomae's introduction to the "mastery of academic discourse" (12). Jones also recognizes that critics often dismiss expressivism for its large focus on privileging the student writer's "voice" (265). Furthermore, though a commonly referred to principle of expressivism as Adler-Kassner notes, is the notion of students "owning" their work; as expressivist critics point out, it is not really possible to "own" words (223). While it is not possible to "own" words or language, is it not possible for students to write their own, individual thoughts? Informal writing assignments provide students the chance to play with their "language" and thoughts.

In addition to the criticisms focusing on the too individualistic and socially unaware aspects of expressivism are James Berlin's criticisms. As Adler-Kassner points out, he views expressivism as an "isolated activity" (221). Berlin suggests that expressivist textbooks "emphasize writing as a 'personal' activity, as an expression of one's unique voice" (772). He references Ken Macrorie and his notion of "Telling Truths," where Macrorie emphasizes the importance for the writer to stay "true to the feeling of his experience" and thus must speak in his "authentic voice," placing the "self at the center of communication" (772). Berlin further asserts that arrangement (writing) and style (rewriting) are not important elements to consider within expressivism (776). Murray—commonly referred to as an "expressivist"—on the other hand, specifically addresses the importance of arrangement and style within the writing process, as prewriting, writing (arrangement), and rewriting (style) are the three stages of his writing process ("Writing as a Process" 4).

This writing process, or process-pedagogy writ large, also has its fair share of criticisms—several similar to the critiques of expressivism. Trimbur suggests that a common critique of process-pedagogy is that it is "inadequate," and it may come off as too easy (109), which echoes Brannon and Knoblauch's critique of expressivism. Tobin also acknowledges common critiques, such as the process method is "irresponsible" because it fails "to teach basic and necessary skills and conventions," or process-pedagogy is "too soft, too touchy-feely, too student directed to do its job: teach students how to write" (11). Furthermore, much like the criticism that expressivism puts too much emphasis on the student writer, Tobin recognizes the common critique of process-pedagogy in that with the focus on the "individual writer," this approach "fails to recognize the role of significance and context" (12). A problem here, however, is that these process-pedagogy critiques only view process as a tool to be implemented in an expressivist classroom, which is not the reality of a process approach.

While expressivism and process-pedagogy alike have battled their fair share of criticisms, I would argue that the criticisms have fallen short by not adequately addressing the value of informal writing during the invention stage. Critics of expressivism are quick to dismiss "freewriting" or other informal writing practices as they are often automatically associated with expressivism; furthermore, it often goes unrecognized that informal writing can be implemented into a classroom that does, in fact, put an emphasis on the final product as well. These expressivist pedagogical theories or approaches do offer some—not all—useful approaches to adopt into a writing course—such as giving students the opportunity to write using more comfortable discourses and allowing them to temporarily (emphasis on the temporarily) ignore the pressure of writing for the academy. Again, I'm not here to defend expressivism; I'm here to suggest that informal writing that is all too often linked with expressivism—and therefore

dismissed—can be beneficial during the invention stage of the writing process. Informal writings can give students a chance to feel like they have something valid and authentic to write (even though that may sound very "expressivist-like" of me). I will say that the criticisms of expressivism make some incredibly valid points; if a composition instructor applied an expressivist outlook to *every* single assignment, including formal assignments, then yes, the classroom atmosphere would be too individualized, too naive, too irresponsible; the students would not have any broader awareness of the world around them; students would not be writing for the academy, as they would not be exposed to such writing. But, using informal writing in the classroom as part of the writing process may be beneficial for the student writers as it gives them the opportunity to write utilizing a more "authentic voice."

CHAPTER 2: RETHINKING INFORMAL WRITING

As the expressivist approach—when viewed at-large—suggests, though often critiqued, it's essential to provide students the opportunity to express themselves authentically, even in their "own language." (This same authenticity is also seen in process-pedagogy.) Though allowing students to write in their "own language" is often associated with expressivism and an expressivist-like process-pedagogy, I believe it can be implemented into other process-centered classrooms via informal writings.

Defining Authentic Voice

This notion of enabling students to use their "own language" or "voice" (though a complex concept) may be defined as Orange explains the characteristics of "voice" by borrowing from scholars' statements in the 1960s and 1970s, "when the real foundation of voicist pedagogy was being laid" (117). Orange acknowledges that "voice" may be established through "writing sincerely" (as Elbow puts it), or "voice" may be established when the writer is "deeply committed to what he is saying," as stated by Hammalin (117). In "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries," Elbow further elaborates on his characteristics for the term "voice." He suggests that there are two primary kinds of voice: that of "sincerity," "allowing his or her sincere self to show," as Orange referenced, or "resonance" explained as "pieces of added weight, richness, or presence—even if they are bits of irony, play, metaphor, or even silliness (175-76). It is important to note that while he provides these definitions, he is not suggesting that utilizing "voice" always equates to "good" writing.

In addition to these explanations, Kathleen Yancey provides a definition for what she terms "native language." Yancey's definition is precisely what I mean when I use the phrase "one's own language" or "authentic voice"; she explains that native language is the "language in

which [students] think, a product of the multiple discourses in which [students] participate, the idiolect native to that speaker and writer. With this language, [students] talk about writing, necessarily bringing to that talk their own experiences, their own assumptions, their own discourses" (56). Furthermore, she suggests that such discourses are a "primary means of inventing oneself as writer" (56). These discourses are a great starting point during invention; they allow students to ease into academic writing because the students do not feel the pressure to write using academic prose, as they are just beginning to develop ideas.

While it is evident that a formal paper should use academic discourse—and allow students to participate in the "academic community"—informal exercises that allow students to use their "own language" is a fair place, I believe, to allow such discourses. Scholars such as Bartholomae, however, would most likely not find this to be a logical class exercise, as these exercises do not privilege academic discourses; that's not to say these traditional scholars would not give room for prewriting and invention exercises within the classroom, of course. In "Interchanges: Responses to Bartholomae and Elbow," Bartholomae counters Elbow by arguing that in his (Bartholomae's) courses, during particular assignments, he begins by "not granting the writer her 'own' presence in that paper," where Elbow would, "by denying the paper's status as a record of or a route to her own thoughts and feelings" –though, again, this is in reference to particular assignments (502). Furthermore, Bartholomae brings up a valid point in asserting that the absence of "voice" within writing allows students to have the ability "to negotiate the ways they are figured in relationship to the official forms of knowledge valued in the academy"; he wants his students "to be prepared to write themselves out of a rhetorical situation in which their roles are already prepared, where they are figured as simple-minded or not-yet-ready-for serious

discussion" (503). In other words, he denies them their "own" presence in the essay to prepare them, to help them establish and build credibility within the academy.

This notion of writing using academic discourse or "writing for the academy," can, of course be very intimidating for first-year students. When they are introduced to this type of academic writing for the first time, these students may suddenly feel as though they have nothing worthwhile to say. They suddenly feel as if they are thrown into a foreign language classroom without prior experience; the mere suggestion for students to avoid conversational prose when turning in formal essays can give the students an anxiety rush. In "Successful Writing Assignments," the author suggests that a problem is that instructors and "experienced" students have a tendency to take this academic discourse "for granted." They assert that discourses of the academia are "the water in which [experienced students and instructors] swim. But for new college students, this community can often seem threatening or mysterious—the deepest end of the ocean. It is important that our assignments provide them with a life jacket, a way of using their personal experience and ability to keep them afloat as they gain new information, knowledge, and ability" (86).

Allowing students to use their personal experience and ability as a means to ease them into more formal, academic writing can logically be placed within the invention stage of writing—a stage important for many teaching theories, including process-pedagogy. This stage bridges the gap between the scary, intimidating, academic prose and the students' comfort zone within the academy; it builds confidence in first-year writers; it allows them to feel as though they have something to say. Without this informal stage utilized to ease students into academic discourses, students could potentially feel alienated and uncomfortable. Tobin is sure to note, however, that it would be a "mistake" or misleading "to idealize the process movement and to

pretend that process teachers invented invention or rhetoric or writing instruction," but he insists that he "bristle[s] at the suggestion that the process approach was just a slightly different version of what came before" (7).

While it's evident that original process-pedagogy practitioners were not, by any means, the ones who established prewriting or invention, these stages remain valuable for students as they build and practice using language to eventually shift into that of academic discourse. Janice Lauer discusses the complexity of the term *invention*, its many different connotations, and the evolution of the term throughout the centuries, ranging from the classic Greek and Roman views of the term, to a more "diversified" invention (116). Lauer explains that through the different purposes associated with invention, it can widely be assumed that invention, in general, "provides guidance in how to begin writing, to explore for ideas and arguments, to frame insights, and to examine the writing situation" (1). Invention, therefore, can be correlated with the process-stage of writing. It is within this stage that students can play with their own familiar discourses before transforming this "native" language into academic prose. Orange suggests that the "voice of the university itself," as expressed in academic discourse, challenges students' "unchanging individuality" (118). Though writing in academic prose may initially "challenge" students' natural abilities, and force them to enter into an unfamiliar community or culture, it is still a necessary skill within the academy.

John Trimbur notes Patricia Bizzell's active role in discussing students' difficulty with writing in academic prose due to the "cultural unfamiliarity" (117). Trimbur suggests Bizzell has been "instrumental in leading writing teachers and theorists to see that the difficulties students—and especially basic writers—experience in writing academic prose are matters of not developmental stage or cognitive or linguistic deficit but rather of cultural unfamiliarity with the

registers and practices of a particularly privileged discourse community, the academy" (117). Trimbur goes on to defend Bizzell in suggesting that she was not, though accused of it, "'advocating the imposition of academic discourse on all students at all costs' (27), since her hope was instead that students could 'learn to work comfortably within the academic world view without abandoning home perspectives or becoming deracinated'" (117). Allowing students to "work comfortably" in the academic community without having to neglect any and all individuality is a logical way to ease first-year students into academic discourse. Orange, however, believes that requiring students to write for the academy—after reviewing Bartholomae's suggestion that students should "speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom" (qtd. in Orange 118)—can be compared to asking "students, in certain kinds of academic writing, to be unscripted ventriloquists" (118). Orange's critique of Bartholomae seems to be a bit harsh and misunderstood, though he may just be emphasizing the point that academic discourse can be challenging for students. Furthermore, this notion of academic prose, or writing for the academy, draws speculation within a composition course. One obvious question is why exactly should first-year students be taught (or turned into "unscripted ventriloquists," as Orange puts it) strictly to use academic discourse? While this is helpful as students continue through their college careers, it may not be the type of writing that is done outside of the academy or once students are professionals within their field. Limiting students only to academic prose within a classroom may be problematic post-college. I would argue that exposing students to a variety of writing styles and discourses may be beneficial, or more so, than limiting them only to academic discourse.

In my experience, I've discovered that students often find themselves struggling with academic writing because they write like they "speak," or rather, they write in ways more similar

to their speaking practices than formal texts. For instance, they may write in the same language which they would use to speak to or write a note to a friend. With phrases used within formal writing projects such as “like,” “so basically,” and “I mean,” it is quite clear that students sometimes do have a tendency to use a conversational prose in formal assignments. It’s understandable that this could occur in student papers as naturally, for many people, speaking comes easier than writing. Not only is speaking much quicker than writing, but speaking permits sentence syntax (to some degree) to be temporarily ignored. Mina P. Shaughnessy argues that writing may even be seen as a hard task for many individuals. She notes, “For most people, speech is easy and writing is difficult; the one is inevitable, and the other acquired, generally under conditions that seem to violate rather than use natural learning abilities of people” (150). Furthermore, Janet Emig elaborates on these differences between writing and speaking and suggests that writing is a “learned behavior,” while talking is “natural”; writing tends to be slower than talking; and, writing is “a more responsible and committed act than talking” (123-24). Emig is sure to note, however, that though talking may be a “valuable form of pre-writing,” that is not suggesting that “writing is talk recorded, an inaccuracy appearing in far too many composition texts,” as writing and speaking serve two different “language functions” (123).

Informal Writing

If writing may be viewed as “difficult” and speaking as “easy,” then assignments that encourage students to simply write whatever comes to mind while temporarily ignoring the audience—essentially allowing them to use their “voice”—seem appropriate during a prewriting or invention phase in the composing process. It is my goal that through informal prewriting exercises, students are able to brainstorm ideas, gain practice in writing techniques that are specific to a project, and translate their informal thoughts and ideas into formal, academic

language. In addition, informal exercises are not graded (for content or quality), allowing students to feel a stronger sense of freedom and ability to stay true to the self. It should be noted that my definition of informal exercises include just that: writing activities that allow students to write informally, ignore an intended audience (though they may share these pieces with classmates or the instructor), and use their own voice while writing, in a style more similar to their speaking practices than formal writing; moreover, students should understand that these assignments are not graded under any circumstances for content or quality. In my classroom the informal activities range from actually writing on a focused prompt, to developing messy outlines (which will later turn into formal outlines), to bubble or cluster maps, to reflective writing, to drawing. All of these assignments allow students to be creative and write (or draw) in the ways in which they think. These informal assignments are designed to move students beyond basic "freewrites" to include epistemic, social, and rhetorical writing. Furthermore, all of these activities are assigned at the beginning of class, and though I will eventually see it, never graded for accuracy.

Scholars suggest different forms of informal writing exercises within the composition classroom, predominantly including freewrites and journals, as that is what informal writing is often automatically associated with. Freewrites essentially are a form of personal, informal writing with the audience of the self. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow provides instructions for the freewriting exercise. In part he suggests, "The idea is simply to write for ten minutes […] Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use or to think about what you are doing" (3). I understand that Elbow's instructions could be a very intense and intimidating assignment for first-year students, and Elbow himself asserts that this exercise

certainly takes practice; my informal prompts assignments that borrow from Elbow's instructions simply encourage students to continuously write (or doodle) using their own voice (that is writing down on paper the sincere thoughts forming in their minds, even if it is *I'm not sure what to write*), while ignoring grammar, spelling, and other syntax rules. Instead of ten minutes of writing as Elbow suggests, I set aside only five minutes due to the time frame. Elbow acknowledges, nevertheless, that freewriting is not really "free," like the term may suggest; it's not free from the teacher's authority, nor from the "forces of culture and language"; it creates freedom, however, in "certain crucial ways. It frees the writer from planning, from meeting the needs of readers, and from any requirements as to what she should write about or how her writing should end up" ("Interchanges" 506).

Most commonly I use "freewrites" or other informal writing practices as a brainstorming technique to help students generate ideas. In other words, I'll read to them a prompt that correlates with an upcoming project to help them discover new ideas. Nicole Wallack uses the term "focused freewrites" to explain these guided freewrites. In short, Wallack defines focused freewrites as "very short assignments that students complete during class to a prompt or a question, typically posed by the teacher" (28). Moreover, in the research study "Exploring the Use of Focused Freewriting in Developing Academic Writing," Linda Li explores the problem regarding students' notions of academic writing and uses focused freewrites to explore students' ideals with prompts on academic writing itself. After an analysis of students' freewrites, she concludes that focused freewriting may be utilized "as a useful pedagogical tool in the context of academic skills development" (51). In a sense, these guided informal writing assignments alter the "free-spirit" attitude associated with expressivism to adopt a more focused approach.

While focused freewrites allow students to use their own language as they develop ideas, it may also be effective to allow students to write on their topic of choice, without providing them any sort of prompt, that neither their classmates nor their instructor will see. This would not be helpful as a brainstorming technique per se, but in giving them such freedom, it could potentially lead them to make connections between what's on their mind and what's going on in the classroom. In "A Case for Private Freewriting in the Classroom," Sharon Marshall argues that private freewrites use the "stream-of-consciousness" technique where the writer continuously writes, knowing that the writing is solely for the writer's eyes. Marshall also suggests that private freewriting encourages students to discover and/or express their feelings, explore possibilities, and develop confidence that is transferable to other disciplines or activities. Exposing students to this type of non-prompted informal writing might be most helpful as a transferrable skill for other courses. If students choose to adopt this brainstorming technique on their own for other course work, they would not have a specific, focused prompt from the instructor, so it would be helpful for them to gain experience in such assignments. However, Marshall argues that most importantly these private freewrites provide "an opportunity for students to feel like writers and write whatever they want to write, without ever having to show it to a teacher" (20). Whether it be a focused or private freewrite, authors Dannelle Stevens and Joanne Cooper argue that freewrites may be one of the "most powerful" writing exercises that teachers can assign (77) in their book, *Journal Keeping: How to Use Reflective Writing for Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight, and Positive Change.*

Stevens and Cooper also highly encourage the use of journals, another form of informal writing, which teachers may utilize in the classroom. They suggest journals may be utilized for various purposes including "making sense of what we know," reflecting on an experience, or

exploring our own feelings (33). Furthermore, journals may be used as a drawing board for brainstorming techniques, or students may use journals to gather thoughts, gain insights, or jot down quotations or other useful resources (50). Similarly, Murray defines a journal as "a written dialog between the writer and the subject" ("Write before Writing" 377). Rebecca O'Rourke suggests that a classroom journal is beneficial as it "allows access to aspects of the student's personality, beliefs, values and tastes" which instructors typically do not see in academic writing (410). Furthermore, a "daybook," as Lil Brannon et al. call it in *Thinking Out Loud on Paper: The Student Daybook as a Tool to Foster Learning,* serves as an effective classroom tool, regardless of the age group. The authors suggest that the daybook serves as a mode for "thinking, writing, and reflecting" (4). They suggest this tool goes beyond that of a journal, as a daybook includes more than just personal, private thoughts; it visually captures students' thinking (12-13).

Similar to the reflective nature of a journal as Stevens and Cooper mention, and of a daybook, is reflective writing as a whole. Yancey defines reflection as "the process by which we know what we have accomplished and by which we articulate our accomplishment" (6). She recommends the use of a "writer's memo" in the classroom to allow students to reflect and recognize their own writing processes (26). Moreover, James Zebroski asserts that a "primary objective" for a composition course should be "to encourage students through a variety of experiences and by means of reflecting writing assignments, to arrive at a more explicit and conscious 'theory' of writing that can guide them to understand their own writing process" (17). Essentially, reflective writing practices allow students to recognize and understand their own, unique writing processes; these reflective assignments push them to consider how they reached their final products. Yancey explains that a benefit of adopting such a practice in a composition course aids in bridging the gap between wanting a student-centered pedagogy and actually

getting the student "into the center." She suggests, "reflection—because it's theorized in a coherent way, and because it assumes an agency and authority—responds to that dilemma in a systematic, generative way" (20). Students are in the "center," as they are writing about their own processes and thinking.

Conclusion

When considering informal writing in a classroom it is often assumed that it would be implemented into an expressivist-like process classroom; however, this is not always the case. Elbow himself suggests that when considering this process verses product, "either/or" thinking, there should be an alternative. He questions why he must choose between the role of a writer—the role that touches more, as I see it, on the individual—versus the role of an academic ("Being a Writer" 489). He claims that because he has frequently been "cited as representing a whole 'school' in composition studies," he believes that "this kind of misreading somehow got ingrained and that it has effected how many people understand the landscape of composition studies—tending to see it as a site for either/or, zero-sum conflict between positions" ("Voice in Writing" 5). He suggests that the "representation" of his work "has often been based on an inability to imagine" his "carving out a both/and analysis in making arguments that embrace contraries," and he provides the example of when he argues "strongly for unplanned, uncensored freewriting, people often ignore" his "stated commitments to careful, planned, skeptical revising" ("Voice in Writing" 5). In his "conversation" with Bartholomae, Elbow argues for "'both/and' thinking" and tries "to show the problems with 'either/or' thinking—showing how [instructors] can validly maintain opposites in various realms of theory and practice" ("Interchanges" 505).

This notion of using a "both/and" approach as opposed to an "either/or" approach may also be noted by Tobin as he suggests that it's really not possible to only focus on the product *or*

the process. Tobin asserts, "of course, these critics are right in suggesting that 'process versus product' is in some ways a misleading slogan: even the most process-oriented teachers acknowledge that a meaningful process ought to lead eventually to some sort of written product, and even the most product-oriented teacher accepts the fact that writing occurs in series of steps and stages" (7). So, as Tobin suggests, it is inevitable that classrooms are going to use a "both/and" approach; both the process and the product are always a part of writing. But as Murray proposes, there are too few teachers who allow for "adequate" time during the invention or prewriting phases ("Write before Writing" 375). While informal writing has been around for quite some time, my informal activities encompass more than Elbow's "freewrites"; it broadens to include drawing, clustering, listing, doodling, etc (again, not to imply that this is an original idea). The informal activities implement what some may think of as an "expressivist" approach, since I encourage my students to use their "own" language and not worry about what I—the instructor—am going to think. This "expressivist" way of thinking shifts, however, as students are required to move beyond their informal activities to develop a formal essay utilizing academic prose. The informal exercises provide the students a "life jacket," to borrow from the metaphor as used in "Successful Writing Assignments," before jumping into the unfamiliar waters. The informal activities, in turn, are used as a means of invention, of brainstorming, and sometimes of reflecting.

While critics have done an excellent job in critiquing expressivism—and associating it with informal writing—and process-pedagogy approaches, rarely have the critiques included conversations with the students to question the effectiveness of some aspects within the "expressivist" approach in helping them produce texts. There have been criticisms pointing to the flaws of expressivism and process-pedagogy, and expressivists and process practitioners have

pointed to the positive aspects of these theories, but there has been little proof that examines how students understand these teaching methods. Elbow continuously makes claims that students can learn to "enjoy" writing while using their voice ("Voice in Writing" 9), yet he fails to show any form of evidence to support his claim. This project looks at the connection between informal and formal writing not only from my perspective, but from the students' perspectives as well, in order to examine claims and assumptions about informal writing through empirical evidence. Are student writers able to make a connection between informal writing and formal exercises? Are they able to understand the purposes of invention strategies? Do they see these activities as effective tools to help them develop their projects, or do students simply view such exercises as "busy work" to fill class time? Through analyzing student work myself, assigning reflective writing assignments, and distributing anonymous surveys, I hope to gain an understanding of how students view such work.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In order to understand how students perceive informal writing in a first-year composition classroom, I conducted a classroom study where, through a variety of methods, I examined the work of and received opinions about different types of informal writing from students in my English 1200 course. By exploring how students understand informal activities and their effectiveness in the classroom, this study gives students a chance to speak for themselves about their opinions regarding informal writing, rather than my simply analyzing their work and speaking for them. Through student surveys and a reflective analysis of student work, I designed this study in an effort for me to recognize whether students find informal writing prompts beneficial to their development as writers. As an early-career teacher, my primary goal is to improve instruction in the classroom; therefore, I went into this study assuming (and hoping) that these informal writing assignments would be beneficial for the students in developing formal projects. Of course I realize that every student is unique in his or her own learning and writing processes, so I did not expect one type of informal writing to have a "magical" effect on all of the students' success. I developed multiple forms of informal activities in hopes that each student could identify at least one type of activity that was most beneficial and worked well for him or her. My goal is to learn what worked well—or didn't—and why from the students.

Teacher research is typically done through qualitative, rather than quantitative, studies. These research projects are often conducted in a narrative style via a collection and analysis of student work or case studies. Often times teacher research is criticized because it lacks the ability to make any broad generalizations; however, teacher research is primarily conducted for a teacher to answer her own question, rather than make generalizations for all classrooms. Such classroom-based research conducted by teachers "offers the opportunity to answer questions for

ourselves [as instructors] about our classrooms, our curriculum, and our students' learning" (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein xvii). It allows us to learn from our students as they learn from us. Furthermore, as case studies are often utilized as a means to conduct teacher research, Bissex suggests that these types of studies are utilized as a "way of learning, not a method for proving" (qtd. in Bishop 156). In other words, regardless of the method implemented to conduct teacher research, the outcome is not intended to prove anything via broad generalizations; it is intended to teach us something for ourselves, to fulfill our own curiosity by examining a small set of data that has immediate impact on our practice.

I was curious to explore the question, "what are students' perceptions of the role of informal writing in an introductory college writing course?" More specifically, I wanted to know: 1) do students' perceptions of informal writing have an impact on their performance in the classroom? and 2) through the use of informal writings, are students able to recognize and understand their own composing processes as writers? To answer my own questions, I collected a variety of data, ranging from surveys to students' actual work. Going into this study without knowing fully what to expect, I adopted a grounded theory approach, which suggests the "discovery of theory" stems "from data" (qtd. in Neff 125). In collecting my data, I worked to establish early on what I meant by "informal writing" with my students in an effort to avoid any confusion for the students. I explained to the students in the first class meeting that within every class meeting—given there was time available—they would be assigned an "informal" writing assignment which they should keep in a specific folder, and I explained that these assignments would range from "freewrites," to bubble maps, to outlines, to drawings, to reflective writing. I further explained that these were not graded for quality or content, and that they should feel free to write (or draw) however they please, as they can disregard me, their instructor, as their

audience. I encouraged them to ignore spelling and grammar errors within these informal assignments. Once the ground rules were established, in a general sense, I used a variety of methods to give students a chance to voice their opinions about the usefulness of these informal writing exercises, ranging from surveys, to cover letters, to reflective assignments. To understand the data from my own perspective, on the other hand, I analyzed the students' cover letters, informal writings, and open-ended surveys.

I explained the goals and purposes of the study to my students within the first week of class. Once I had IRB approval (see Appendix A), I gave the students an informed consent letter, asking for their permission to use their identified work (see Appendix B). Out of twenty-four initial students enrolled in the course, I ended up using twenty students' identified work by the end of the semester. The students in the course consisted of eight males and sixteen females. Of the eight male students, one of them did not grant me permission to use his work and another male seldom attended class; therefore, he was rarely able to participate in the informal writing assignments. Of the sixteen female students, two of them stopped attending the class by the end of the semester, leaving a total of six males and fourteen females participating in the study. From these twenty students, I consistently made copies of and analyzed six students' projects who frequently attended class—all of whom happened to be females, though that was not planned. There were four essential artifacts utilized as data: 1) an anonymous, open-ended survey questioning assumptions, 2) four post-project, anonymous questionnaires, 3) four cover letters and informal writing collections, and 4) an end-of-the-semester reflection.

At the beginning of the semester, I distributed a survey which questioned the experience students had had in the past with informal writing, whether it was in high school or in previous college courses, and what assumptions they currently had regarding these types of assignments.

For example, one of the questions asked *how do you perceive informal writing assignments in the composition classroom?* The survey was anonymous and had five open-ended questions (see Appendix C); I operated under the assumption that the anonymity within the survey would encourage students to be honest without worrying how I may "judge" them individually based on their responses. The purpose of this survey was to gain an understanding of students' preconceived notions of informal writing. I wanted to know if and how they thought informal writings could possibly be helpful; it was a tool utilized to measure students' attitudes on the subject before they had experience with informal writing inside my classroom—that's not to suggest informal writing was a new concept for them overall, just that the way they would experience it in my classroom might be different from previous experiences, if for no other reason than the context of the experience would be different.

Furthermore, I assigned a cover letter which asked specific questions with every project the students submitted (see Appendix D). These cover letters were designed for students to address questions regarding their experiences and opinions with the informal assignments. For instance, they were asked which informal assignments leading to the projects were most helpful and why; these cover letters also got them to consider and reflect their own processes as student writers. I assigned these in an effort to give students a chance to look through their assignments and take time, without rushing, to reflect on their process. The goal of the cover letters was to encourage students to recognize and justify what types of writing assignments work well for them and which ones do not. The students turned in the cover letter in the same folder as their final project, drafts, and all informal assignments. For the first project, I coded fourteen students' cover letters, and for the second, third, and fourth projects, I coded ten students' cover letters each—making a total of forty-four cover letters.

One limitation that the cover letters introduce is that the students might not be as direct or truthful in this space because they knew I would be reading and evaluating these texts. Students may fear that if they write negative thoughts towards the assignments, it will hamper their grade, though I worked to assure them that this would not happen. Or, students may feel pressure to compliment or speak fondly of the informal assignments because they were concerned about hurting my feelings. In order to guard against this limitation and to contextualize their cover letter responses, I thought it was necessary to develop and distribute an anonymous questionnaire on the due dates of each assignment (and, consequently, the same day the cover letters were due). These surveys were typically short, ranging from five to ten statements with a Likert type scale used for the responses. The responses typically ranged from "1" as "strongly disagree," "2" as "disagree," "3" as "neither agree nor disagree," "4" as "agree," to "5" as "strongly agree." I chose to use a Likert type scale as opposed to open-ended questions because it establishes more constructed responses, and it enables students to measure their attitudes towards the statement, rather than a basic "yes" or "no" response. Some questions on the survey, however, were assigned numbers for different assignments, rather than as a measurement of agreeing or disagreeing. For example, one of the statements asked which informal assignment was the most helpful with "1" being the outline, "2" an informal writing prompt, "3" the thesis building workshop, etc. These surveys were utilized as a tool to understand students' perceptions of informal writing in an anonymous, quantitative fashion. Every student who attended class the day a project was collected took the survey, typically ranging from twenty to twenty-three students (some students opted to submit projects early because they knew they would not be attending class the day a project was due).

The last artifact I used to analyze the opinions of the students was an end-of-the-semester reflection assignment (See Appendix E). This assignment required students to reflect on their own work throughout the semester; this activity was assigned during the last week of regular class. The students brought all of their previous work to class, including final projects, cover letters, and all informal writing. During class—or for homework if they did not finish—students reviewed and reflected on the trends they noticed within their own writing; they also were required to identify and justify what types of informal writing throughout the semester were most beneficial for developing their final projects. The assignment was intended to push them to think about their own writing processes and development as student writers. This reflection encouraged them to go beyond basic assumptions, as it required students to make observations and draw conclusions based on their own experiences with informal writing. This assignment was intended to challenge them to consider what types of assignments—if any—they could implement into other classroom settings. Or in other words, this question challenged students to consider what learning experiences they could transfer to other courses. I assigned this reflective assignment with the intent for students to recognize their own processes and what does and does not work well for them; it was a chance for students to "witness their own learning" (Yancey 8). Furthermore, this end-of-the-semester assignment provided a space for students to voice their overall opinions of informal writing over the course of a semester. It gave them the opportunity to draw conclusions on the overall experience, rather than discussing one project at a time, as the cover letters and quantitative surveys require. All of the students were required to complete this assignment (as it was an established course requirement), and all responses from the twenty students who granted me permission to use their work were coded.

Once all of the data regarding students' opinions was collected, I applied a variety of methods for interpreting the data. Triangulation, or gathering multiple sources to justify a similar theory or phenomenon (Yin 114-16), was implemented as a means to interpret the data. Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein suggest that "analyzing multiple sources and employing varieties of research methods make a study more persuasive, 'thick' with detail, texture and information" (116). In order to establish a form of triangulation, I used my own analysis of students' informal writing, an analysis of their cover letters and questionnaires, and quantitative figures. As many teacher research cases go, one vehicle used for interpretation was for me to analyze the data myself. In my own analysis, I examined both the informal writing in students' projects and the responses in their cover letters and open-ended surveys. I read through and made photocopies of their informal assignments leading up to a project and their cover letters for the particular project. Instead of photocopying all of the students' work, I made copies of materials only for those students who attended class frequently. Each time I made copies, I would use between ten to fifteen students' projects. I included both students who seemed to favor informal writings and those who claimed not to understand the purpose; there were also students included whose responses in the cover letters tended to fluctuate. It was important to photocopy a variety of opinions within their cover letters to provide a richer set of findings. The purpose of having my own copies of the students' actual informal writing assignments was to analyze and interpret it for myself; I wanted to see what patterns or themes I saw emerging from their work. Furthermore, I wanted to compare what students claimed was or was not working well with what I saw. For instance, I was curious to see if a student may claim the informal outlines were not helpful, yet he followed that same outline in his actual paper.

In addition to an analysis of my students' actual informal writing entries, I also closely examined their cover letters and open-ended surveys/reflection assignments. As with the informal writing assignments themselves, I wanted to see what trends I noticed in the cover letters and the survey/reflection responses. I chose to utilize Neff's explanation of grounded theory to make meaning out of the students' writing. I began "coding" by reading through the collection of each assignment—for example, I would read through all of the cover letters for Project I in one sitting—to "get an overview" of what the students were writing. Once I had a general idea, I began "open coding," where I developed a "code list" by identifying concepts that seemed to emerge from data itself (Neff 129). For instance, I noticed that a major "concept" within the cover letters was students' use of the words "visualize," "see," or "map out," to suggest the bubble maps and outlines were helpful in organizing the paper; therefore, on the code list, one of the categories under "helpful" was "visual." Under visual, then, would be quotes pulled or paraphrases from their cover letters to support that the "visual" informal assignments were "helpful." (If they were suggesting it was not helpful, however, it would go under a different concept examining the "pointless" nature of the assignments.)

This code list was updated for each project's cover letter, and by the end of the semester, the code list included two at-large categories: "helpful" and "not helpful." Under *helpful* were four sub-categories that grouped together several reemerging themes brought up in the cover letters, including: "visuals," "brainstorm/warm-up," "self realizations," and "rhetorical awareness." For instance, under the "helpful" category, "rhetorical awareness" sub-category, I placed a student response which suggested "the role playing" informal prompts helped the student consider the audience. The "not helpful" category did not have any sub-categories because the responses were too few to develop themes a sophisticated taxonomy. Once all of the

responses from the cover letters were coded, there were seventeen posts under "visual," twelve posts under "brainstorm/warm-up," seven posts under "self realizations," and four posts under "rhetorical awareness," putting forty posts under the "helpful" category; the "not helpful" category had a total of six posts at the end of the semester. In addition to the code list crated for the cover letters, the survey/reflective assignment code list executed the same pattern. I used a concept list (or code list) to keep track of students' claims and establish themes from their own words and writing, rather than my writing what I *think* they meant. Through this level of interpretation and use of grounded theory, I report the findings based on my analysis of the data in the next chapter (Neff 126).

An analysis of the students' writing is one useful way to interpret that data; however, in an effort to help justify these findings, a quantitative method was used in addition to qualitative findings. The quantitative data was comprised of the surveys that anonymously questioned the students' opinion on the informal writing using a Likert scale. Once the surveys were collected, the data was inserted into a statistical software program, SPSS. I measured the frequencies of the responses to obtain a table displaying the percentages of the students' responses (see Appendix F). For instance, a table may demonstrate that 45% of the participants "agreed" that the informal, thesis-building assignment helped them develop their final, formal thesis. Though "number crunching" is not necessarily a common tool within teacher research, in addition to guarding against obvious limitations as previously mentioned, I wanted to use it in order to compare the students' anonymous surveys alongside their known or identified cover letters and reflective assignments because it provided students a chance to be open and honest.

I used both qualitative and quantitative methods to measure the data in the hope that the data could accurately be reported. Of course, as any teacher research study goes, there are some

limitations to this type of research, a frequent criticism being that "narratives" cannot prove anything as they are too "subjective" and "unreliable" ("Knowing Our Knowledge" 25). However, I did not conduct this research as a way to "prove" a theory that could be applied to any and all classrooms; I conducted this research simply as a preliminary study to answer my own queries, not to make any large generalizations. I realize this study would be more successful and useful if it were applied to a larger sample size, perhaps several first-year courses within a university, rather than just my own. This study is not set out to falsify or prove a phenomenon on a large scale, but instead, it is "dialogic" ("Knowing Our Knowledge" 26); it is an "open and ongoing" study that could be conducted multiple times in the future (Neff). I think Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein say it best when they write of teacher research, "Your goal is not to change the world or even to change the school but to help you understand yourself, your own teaching, and your classroom" (147). My study has provided me several new insights into how my Spring 2011 writing class understood informal writing, particularly the value they placed on it as an element of the composition classroom. Chapter Four explores their responses in depth in order to provide a look into student perceptions of informal writing.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Informal writing techniques in the classroom have often been reduced to activities that resemble freewrites, associating it with that "care-free" attitude frequently correlated with an expressivists' pedagogy. It's evident, however, that this is a misconception and such writing activities can be implemented into several different classrooms. Additionally, informal writing can certainly encompass more than just freewrites or journal entries; it can include any style of written communication that is done without considering the instructor's judgment. While many studies have examined informal writing in the classroom—namely freewrites and journal entries—from the instructor's view, rarely do we see studies that examine the students' perceptions of such pedagogical practices. This study gave me the opportunity to not only analyze student work myself, but it also gave students the opportunity to "speak" for themselves.

After examining all of the artifacts at the completion of the semester, I was able to make several observations regarding students' opinions of informal writing. While every student offered his or her own, unique opinion regarding these assignments, there were a few common themes I discovered worth noting. The evolution of students' perceptions of what informal writing could be defined as, the strong interest of visuals as a tool for learning as claimed by the students, the benefits students noticed from informal writing and its impact on formal assignments, and the informal assignments that students could not find meaning in are all significant findings I discovered through this classroom study via surveys, cover letters, and an analysis of student work.

It was interesting to examine how students' assumptions of informal writing as seen in their open-ended survey distributed at the beginning of the semester compared to their thoughts about informal writing at the end of the semester. The beginning-of-the-semester survey revealed

that when I used the term “informal writing” and established the rules of what I meant by the term, the majority of the students correlated the term with “freewrites” or “journals.” Of the twenty-two students who had experienced a form of informal writing in the past, seven referred to past informal writing experiences as “freewrites,” while ten termed it “journals,” and one coined it “reflective writing.” All of their previous instructions were similar—write five to ten minutes non-stop on either an assigned topic or a topic of their choice. I also implemented these types of assignments or “informal prompts”—essentially a freewrite with an assigned topic, or what Wallack calls a “focused freewrite.” It should be noted, however, that students may not have thought beyond a “freewrite” or “journal” because those were examples posed in the question. I am uncertain of this, though, as one student went beyond and used the term “reflective writing,” and why these terms were used was not questioned any further. By the end of the semester, however, they were able to move outside the box, beyond that of a “freewrite,” to recognize that informal writing can encompass more than prompted paragraph-style writing. Students were able to identify informal writing as not only an informal prompt (or freewrite), but also as a tool to begin drafting and as an organizational/visual tool. In fact, on the end-of-the semester survey, fifteen students indicated that the organizational/visual informals (these two terms remain grouped together because of the visual nature of the assignments that were utilized as a tool to aid organization) were the most beneficial in their writing processes. These fifteen students suggested the visual, organizational informal writings that asked them to make lists, outlines, bubble maps, etc were the most helpful type of informal writing for them. Lastly, while in the beginning of the semester only thirteen students believed informal writing could be an effective tool, by the end of the semester, every student believed he or she would transfer

informal writing techniques into his or her future courses as a means to structure papers, brainstorm ideas, or even study for tests.

Visual Interest

While all of the students claimed to recognize a purpose in informal writing by the end of the semester, a large portion of the students highly favored the organizational/visual informal writings throughout the entire semester. Again, the terms *visual* and *organizational* are linked here because of the way the organizational informal prompts were designed. They often asked students to develop a rough outline of a future paper, list questions or concerns they want to make sure they address about the assignment, group together similar ideas or themes, etc. Furthermore, students often used visual language, so to speak, to suggest why certain informal activities were helpful. In fact, students often grouped the terms together themselves while addressing the activities in their cover letters. For instance, some common responses from students included comments like the following: one prompt "helped me choose exactly what I wanted to *focus* on"; "I especially found the bubble map helpful because it allowed me to *look* at different issues"; one activity "gave me the push I needed to *look* into what" needed to be done; one informal prompt "*showed* me a good way to get my ideas and topic out of my head and on to paper"; "the assignments kept getting more specific until I was able to clearly *identify* a problem"; one of the prompts "helped me *visualize"* what needed to be done for improvement. All of these forms of writing, mapping, outlining, listing, grouping, etc helped students structure, identify, or visualize components of their projects. While I use the terms *outline*, *list*, and *group* here, I explained to students that there is no one right way to go about it. For example, they had the freedom to "outline" in the form of a list, roman numerals (like a formal outline), bubble or web maps, drawings, or whatever else they thought of; similarly, they could group ideas or

themes via lists, drawings, maps, etc. Perhaps it was the freedom and allotted creativity that caused students to favor these types of assignments; however, because my study was exploratory, I could not account for this specific finding. In the future, I would be interested to add to my study by discovering what it was (or is) about visual organizers that the students found so useful.

In the code list from the four cover letters, the majority of the "helpful" informals fell under the "visual" category. Seventeen responses indicated that the visuals were the most helpful, while twelve responses under "warm-up" came in second. Furthermore, in the open-ended survey distributed at the end of the semester, fifteen out of twenty-two students (68%) suggested that the organization and visual activities were the most beneficial out of all of the informal assignments. Results from the various Likert scale surveys help contextualize this information with numbers. For instance, with the first major project, an eight-page research paper, I assigned a mapping exercise and an informal outline, which students later converted into a formal outline for me to approve. The mapping exercise required students to cluster similar arguments together (however they pleased) to help them organize their argumentative research paper. The SPSS results showed that all of the twenty-three students who took the survey either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that this exercise was helpful for them. Furthermore, the informal outline was used as a vehicle for students to begin thinking about a logical organization for their large paper; it was assigned after the map exercise, so students could reference the clustered arguments to help with developing organization. As usual, the students had freedom to develop the outline in any way they chose, but they would later reference it to transform it into a formal outline. When the survey asked if they found the informal outline exercise to be helpful, none of the students disagreed, 19% "neither agreed nor disagreed," 33.3% "agreed," and 47.6%

"strongly agreed." Lastly, this same survey asked which informal assignment was the most beneficial overall, where 60% of the students suggested it was the outline and 20% claimed it was the mapping exercise, showing that 80% of the students favored the visual/organizational activities. As another example, with the second project, the students did a "themes exercise" where they were to group together (however they pleased) similar ideas to develop themes; the anonymous survey questioned the usefulness of this assignment by asking students to measure the degree of agreeing to this statement: "I found the informal exercise where we mapped out our different 'themes' for this paper to be useful." None of the students "strongly disagreed," nor "disagreed" with this statement; 9.5% marked "neither agree nor disagree," 57.1% "agreed," and 33.3% "strongly agreed," suggesting that over 90% of the students found this particular visual exercise to be useful.

While the numbers were there from the SPSS results, it was important for me to go through their informal writing assignments to see the degree of "visual" writing that the students strongly favored. To distinguish between "visual" writing and standard writing, I noted that "visual" writing would include writing that is not in paragraph-style or writing of the like. In the first collection, eight out of the fourteen samples (57%) of student writing used some form of visual communication; the second collection housed eight out of ten (80%) samples of visual writing, while the third collection demonstrated that ten out of the ten (100%) samples demonstrated at least some form of visual communication. It's difficult to ignore the steady increase of the number of students who utilized visual writing as the projects progressed: perhaps this was due to the language or the way prompts were worded; perhaps it was a comfort issue—students may not have initially felt comfortable or felt that it was acceptable to "draw" in an

English course; or perhaps it was due to the sample I happened to have had. Exploring this trend in future composition courses might provide more data to help explain this phenomenon.

An example of a visual sample I collected comes from the "themes" exercise previously mentioned. The actual formal paper assignment required students to identify and explain themes of writing that are typically used in their future career (for instance, themes for an elementary education major may be "student-centered," "parent-centered," and "colleague-centered" writing). The informal exercise I assigned to get the students thinking about "themes" asked them to write down the different types of writing and group similar types together; from there, the students were instructed to develop "themes" and to put under each "theme umbrella" the different types of writing, accordingly. From the sample of ten students, two students actually drew umbrellas with the themes inside the umbrella, two developed charts, five made lists, and one was missing (I assume the student was absent that day). Furthermore, out of the ten cover letters, four students mentioned that exercise specifically as being the most helpful in developing the final project. Moreover, by the end of the course, the questionnaire indicated that the majority of the students would transfer the visual/organizational informals to other courses—fourteen out of twenty-one responses (66.7%). The survey questioned if they thought they may use any of the informal exercises in future courses, producing the following responses:

> "I would use maps and outlines because it's a way of organization"
>
> "I definitely could see myself mapping out ideas for other courses or future English courses"
>
> "before I do any project, for any class, I think I definitely would want to use the visual informals we did in class because it helped me see what I would mostly be

> writing about and better formulate my thesis and paper structure for a better flow."

The observation that students actually drew umbrellas for the "themes" exercise is worth noting; this demonstrates that the students visualized my metaphor, suggesting further evidence that these students may, in fact, be inclined to think visually.

In an effort to dig deeper into the students' visual interest, I chose one student to focus on, "Sarah." Sarah was a student who frequently attended and participated in class. In the end survey, one of the questions asked, "what types of writings do you believe helped you the most throughout the entire semester? Justify your response." She wrote, "I thought the drawings and bubble maps were the most helpful because I could better visualize what my options for writing were and which topic I felt more strongly about or [which topic] I wanted to learn more about." I assume from this response that she is referencing the prompts that were given near the beginning of new projects that were utilized to help students begin brainstorming ideas. Sarah also frequently mentioned the benefits of visual activities in her cover letters. In the cover letter for the first research paper she wrote, "The specific activity where we grouped together the main ideas of our sources and drew pictures helped me figure out what most of my sources talked about. That was my favorite activity because it also was really useful when writing my outline for my paper and when I actually did write my [paper,] it helped me further focus on what I thought of as [the] big problem." Sarah's responses serve as an example of a student who both "spoke visually" and favored the actual visual activities, as she suggested an assignment helped her *visualize* her options, and she suggested the grouping and drawing activity was her "favorite." When I looked through her informal activities, I can see that she set this particular assignment up in a very visual fashion. She created a map to group together different parts of the

“problem” at large and added in drawings to recognize the different topics. For instance, one of her main topics is “patients,” and she drew a picture of what appears to be an ill patient. Similarly, in another cover letter she wrote, “I think the most helpful informal writing done was when we grouped together the main writing types and what type of writing was internal, external or anything else. Being able to group together everything I wanted to talk about made it easier to look at what I could write about.” Sarah is referring to the “themes” activity here; her informal writing happens to be one of the two previously mentioned students who drew actual umbrellas for this assignment, where she developed three major writing themes: internal writing, external writing, and forms. Under these umbrellas, she created a bulleted list of samples of writing that fall under the appropriate themes. Sarah’s responses in her end survey and cover letters, and Sarah’s informals, demonstrate how students both think visually and utilize and benefit from informal writing when it is applied in a visual sense.

Benefits and Impact of Informal Writing

The visual aspect of informal writing seems to have left a significant impression on students; however, this was not the only benefit students claimed to reap from these exercises. Several students believed these assignments helped them with developing their formal projects. The end-of-the-semester survey asked the students what connections they noticed between their informal writing and their formal assignments. Out of the twenty-four coded responses to this question—the survey itself had twenty students’ responses coded, but when students noted more than one response to the same question, their responses were placed accordingly on the code sheet; in other words, one student could count for multiple responses to the same question—twelve students (50%) suggested that the greatest connection they saw was how the informal

assignments later developed into elements of the formal assignments. Student comments from the survey included the following:

> "I always used the thesis statements from [the informal activities in] class in my final paper"
>
> "for paper 2, all my questions were developed in a pre-writing exercise … small thoughts were put on paper to later be more thoroughly developed"
>
> "when we had to write about different perspectives, it helped me on my first formal paper [because] it allowed me to think of those different perspectives that I would use in my paper"
>
> "I found the beginning tasks of the informal writing to be a great source of developing ideas for the future project."

Comments about the evolution of the informal thesis to a formal thesis statement, however, were the most common among the students. In fact, of the twelve responses, five students specifically noted the similarities between their informal and formal thesis statements. The anonymous survey results linked this idea as 57.1% of the students "agreed" and 19% of them "strongly agreed" with the statement "I used a final thesis statement very similar to the one I informally developed on 3/25," as a sample from one of the surveys following a project. A combined total of 23.8% of the students indicated that they either "disagreed" or "neither agreed or disagreed" with the statement.

Further SPSS results indicated that students noted the assistance informals provided them in developing formal projects. For instance, in one project the students were required to interview a professional in their intended field; as an informal assignment, I had students jot down any and all questions they thought they could possibly use for the interview after we had

discussed the assignment in-depth as a class, so the assignment was still fresh in their minds. The survey questioned if these interview questions led them to develop some of their formal questions (that had to be peer reviewed and submitted). Surprisingly, the results showed that not a single student disagreed with this statement; all of the students either "agreed" (38.1%) or "strongly agreed" (61.9%) that the informal questions led them to their formal interview questions. Similarly, as previously mentioned, for one of the papers the students had to turn in a formal outline; again, they were assigned an informal where they were to group and/or outline however they pleased similar ideas before the formal outline was due. The survey asked the students if they used the informal exercise to help them develop their formal outline. The results showed that 42.9% "agreed," 28.6 "strongly agreed," and another 28.6% "neither agreed nor disagreed" that the informal served as an aid. To demonstrate this connection, I would point to one of the informal prompts (that typically result in students writing non-stop in paragraph style form) which asked students to consider a possible "solution" for their "problem" and write as if they were having a conversation with a colleague in their future field. This formal paper had students investigate and address an issue/problem in their future field and develop a possible solution as part of the conclusion. The survey asked the students if they ended up using the same solution from their informal writing in their formal paper. A total of 85.7% of the students either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they used the same solution. Furthermore, one of the students indicated on the end-of-the-semester survey that "some of the things I stated in 'addressing your solution to a co-worker' is used word for word in my final paper." This statement not only demonstrates that students were able to use informal writing as a tool for developing formal projects, but they were also able to hone in on rhetorical awareness and recognize the audience.

Since that particular prompt was addressed to a colleague, the language used was—I would assume—more professional than, say, a friend.

Students gave further examples of how they implemented rhetorical awareness in their various cover letters. This finding was most significant as seen in their first research paper. When considering the problem or issue in their field, I assigned them informal prompts beyond the grouping and mapping that asked them to "role play," so to speak. A prompt one day would ask them to present one side of the argument to their "boss," while another day's prompt would ask them to present another side of the argument, but they would address it to a different audience, such as a good friend or a "know-it-all" co-worker. In the cover letters for this particular project, a couple of comments were made about these informal prompts. For instance, one student suggested that writing to the boss made her "write more formally." I went through her packet to look at her claim for myself; she begins "talking" to her boss with the following: "Hello Mr. Billybob, I would like to bring to your attention the immediate need for funding for public elementary schools. The lack of funding is not only affecting school conditions but also student performance." An excerpt from her conversation with her know-it-all co-worker, however, is as follows: "Without funding, your 'wonderfully genius' daughter won't get the best education possible," demonstrating her obvious shift in tone and formality as she suggested in her cover letter. Another student drew similar conclusions in her cover letter, though she dug a little deeper. She suggested writing to the boss "forced [her] to remain extremely professional" and "stick only to the facts." She suggested that talking to the "stubborn" co-worker, on the other hand, enabled her "to explore the biased information more and really decipher what information was factual and what was just opinion." While these students were able to make meaning and execute rhetorical awareness in the situation, other students were not able to find a purpose for

these assignments; in fact, two students specifically clarified in their cover letters that they found these "role playing" or hypothetical situation exercises to be pointless. Additionally, the SPSS results indicated that 9.5% of the students did not find these assignments helpful (perhaps the same students that suggested they were pointless in the cover letter), while 61.9% were able to find the "role playing" informals to be helpful.

As a teacher, I was encouraged to see that these students were able to find meaning in informal writing in one form or another—whether as a visual, organizational tool, or a step in recognizing different audiences—but as a researcher, I also found it significant to note the amount of attention from the students drawn to how these assignments can serve as a useful class "warm-up" or vehicle for brainstorming new ideas and/or developing thoughts on areas of improvement. In the beginning of the semester when the students were distributed an anonymous questionnaire about their assumptions of informal writing, several of them (thirteen out of nineteen responses or 68.4%) believed that the main purpose of informal writing would be to serve as a warm-up or brainstorming tool. Students suggested that they believed informal writing helps "get thoughts and ideas written down for later use," has "a positive effect because they let us get out what we were thinking and clear our minds so we can concentrate," "helps me to just throw ideas on paper when I am writing," puts me "in the right mindset," or "helps you focus on areas you need to improve on." Once the informal writing exercises were assigned for my class, students still were able to find the assignments to be useful as warm-up and brainstorming tools; some students were able to take their general assumptions about the informal writing and bring them to a more specific focus in their cover letters as they had more exposure to the various types, while others still simply noted that they were a fine way to begin a class session. Students suggested that informal writings could help them "decide on a topic," "choose a specific focus"

within a topic, and "dig past the surface." One student even suggested she was "struggling," so the assignments were helpful in putting "ideas on paper." Other students, on the other hand, still simply noted the usefulness of them in that they serve as a nice class warm-up. Students suggested in the cover letters that informal writing serves as a "good way to start class," a way to "get the mind thinking," a vehicle to "put [students] in the zone," or an exercise to "really [make students] think." Additionally, students noted that some of the informals gave them that extra "push" they needed as they brainstormed ideas—or the lack of ideas when it came to a brainstorming activity served as that "push." In the cover letters, students made comments suggesting a prompt made a student realize she did not know the answer to the question, so she needed to do more research; the informal assignments "gave that extra push" to consider topics; a "vent your frustrations" prompt brought to a student's attention that she needed to focus and stop putting the paper "on the back burner"; an informal assignment forced a student to "contemplate" what needed to be done to improve the paper. It should be noted that the "vent your frustrations" prompt mentioned was one assigned for every project; it was a chance for students to think critically about their own writing and write down their concerns, frustrations, and/or areas they wanted to improve.

Whether students were suggesting informal assignments were useful for a warm-up, a brainstorming tool, or a way to provide that extra "push" in their cover letters, they continued to comment on the subject matter in the questionnaire given at the end of the semester. For instance, some students suggested that "freewrites" were the most helpful informal prompts with claims such as these: "freewrites helped me get ideas out of my brain," and "freewrites pertaining to the paper topic … made it easy to get my thoughts onto paper, and I could just flow instead of stressing wording and structure." The end survey, however, showed a greater interest

in informal assignments that required students to think critically about their own writing projects. Students made several claims worth acknowledging regarding their thinking about their own work: some students noted that informal prompts "helped me think through my paper and sometimes look deeper into my paper"; "listing my frustrations towards the end of other assignments would be very beneficial for me because it requires me to think more in depth about where my work is lacking"; "getting out your frustrations will help clear your train of thought, thus making you focus more on the subject at hand"; listing frustrations is helpful "because it creates a sort of to-do list so by the end of the paper, I can look back and see how I overcame those frustrations." Some of these comments were in response to the question asking about the transferability of the informal writing, so students are even considering this critical approach to be significant in recognizing weaknesses and areas within an assignment that still need work in order to be complete.

What's the Point?

It's evident that most of the students understood the informal writing in the composition classroom as serving a purpose to some degree. There were a select few indications in the cover letters and in the anonymous surveys, however, that a minute percentage of the students found informals to be pointless. After the first project was submitted, only one student agreed to any degree with the statement "I did not see any purpose for the informal writing activities"; furthermore, one student suggested in her cover letter that the topics were "too random and scattered" to make meaning. Interestingly, by the third project, none of the students indicated on the anonymous survey that the informals served no purpose. With the same statement, "I did not see any purpose for the informal writing activities," 95.2% of the students either "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed," while 4.8% "neither agreed nor disagreed," but on the last survey, one

student indicated that one informal prompt (the hypothetical situation prompt) was a "waste of time." The cover letter comments suggesting that informals served no purpose were few and far between; additional comments suggested that some of the informal exercises "did not relate," or the student "wished" some of the exercises were "done sooner." Of course, due to the nature of the cover letters, some students may have chosen not to say anything negative regarding the informal writing assignments to guard against "hurting my feelings." In addition to the anonymous surveys, I asked students what they would change about the informal writing exercises in the end-of-the-semester survey. This question was utilized in an effort to push them to think about what types of informal exercises did not work well for them.

While coding these responses, the two major themes I noticed were students would do away with some of the informal prompts, and they would suggest a larger variety. Students suggested that some of the informal exercises used in project one were not needed or not helpful, with a focus on the prompts previously discussed regarding hypothetical conversations with bosses and co-workers. Students suggested that some informal exercises were either not helpful, as they could not find a useful purpose, or students found them to be more of a "busy work" assignment: according to some students, the conversation prompts were "un-useful" because "we had not started our research process and it was hard to come up with an argument instead of an opinion on the subject"; "the ones that are about our frustrations or weaknesses … I felt as if we should have turned those in right away so [the teacher] would talk to us individually to make us overcome out shortcomings"; some informals were not helpful "because they didn't pertain to the actual project." Students advocated that some of the informal exercises were "busy-work" like with claims suggesting that some assignments were "a complete waste of time … I feel they should be a part of your paper because you actually did sit down and take time to write them,"

or, the prompts on writing arguments with your boss were "more creative than helpful." As these students had a hard time finding a purpose for some of the prompts, others simply implied a preference for more of a variety:

> "I would choose different questions…some questions were a little too vague"
>
> "there could be informal writings that help develop different sections of the paper such as the intro, conclusion, and body paragraphs"
>
> "I would have more drawing freewrites. I enjoy drawing and I think it helps one come up with ideas"
>
> "[I'd ensure] each project [had] an outline informal writing"
>
> "[the exercises] could be made better by having more depth"
>
> "I think more brainstorming exercises would be a good addition"
>
> "I think more outlining would help me. Maybe a freewriting exercise or outline for each source would really help me keep all my information focused and organized"
>
> "I like having all my thoughts out so I can look and remember them when I write my paper. I think more visual writings like drawing out maps of what we could talk about, grouping together themes, and bubble diagrams would help me the most"
>
> "the only thing I would add on … would be to write down the thoughts the students had each day about the paper. This would include areas of concern or improvement or just any specific thoughts they had that day about their future paper."

Again, here the students show a strong interest with visual exercises, as many of them would prefer informal exercises that frequently incorporate visual communication.

Flaws and Limitations

Once I sat down and began to map out all of my data (noting trends, grouping themes, etc), I became further aware of the possible flaws within this study. For one, I ended up coding primarily female students' cover letters. I did not do this on purpose; I didn't even notice this until the semester was coming to a close. The majority of the students, however, were females in the course, so that could be a leading factor to this limitation. In a future study, I would strive to include both males and females. Furthermore, had I had more time, I would have liked to have asked the students what it was about the visual activities that sparked an interest. The data suggests the students had an interest in these activities, but I failed to ask more specific questions. Moving beyond the fact that several students liked the outlines, maps, etc because they could *see* the organization, what was it that made these exercises so beneficial? This study would also have benefited from additional "why" questions. While the students would make a claim, there was not always a *well why do you think this* question to follow-up. These questions may have provided a deeper look into students' perceptions. Lastly, another leading flaw in this study, as previously mentioned, was the nature of the cover letters. Since the cover letters had the student's name on them, the student very easily could have "fluffed" his or her responses to avoid upsetting me. An anonymous cover letter turned in separately form the project may have provided a more accurate depiction of students' thoughts, though I continuously encouraged them to be honest.

Closing Thoughts

As the semester progressed and I continued to analyze my data, I ended up being surprised by the students' responses in the last cover letter. Regular class meetings were over by the time I read through these particular projects, but in their last project cover letters, they voiced strong opinions about the lack of informal writing prompts for the final project. The last project had only a couple of informal prompts due to the time frame; we spent two days in the library, where informals were not assigned, and two days were dedicated to presentations, where again, informals were not assigned due to the time crunch. A few students were sure to note how this affected their progress in their paper within their cover letters. One student expressed how she was upset that there were not as many; as she wrote, "I was just used to more and enjoyed them because they forced me to think about my paper and how I was going to write it." Another student advocated that she "struggled" without having the informals:

> When it came to completing my papers in the past I felt like the informal writings that we were asked to complete in class really helped me when it came to finding out what I really wanted to write about and it helped me form ideas that I would be able to use in my paper. But I did not find the informal writings that we completed to be helpful at all when it came to this paper … it seemed like we did not complete as many informal writings for this paper as we had in the past on previous papers and with that I felt like I struggled with this paper some.

Lastly, a student claimed that while we did not spend as much time on the informals as we usually did, it did not stop her from using what she learned from class in her own writing process. She wrote, "We didn't do a lot of informal writing as a class but I did do an outline on my own time. I felt like this would help guide my paper better than going into it with no

direction." These comments offer additional perspective how some students came to value informal writing.

Through an analysis of student work, anonymous surveys, and cover letters, I was able to interpret students' thoughts on informal writing in the composition classroom. The analysis of student work from my own perspective provided me the chance to see how students were applying their informal writing, as seen in the case of Sarah. The anonymous surveys enabled students to be honest about their opinions without the worry of impacting their grade or hurting my feelings. The cover letters and end-of-the semester questionnaire gave students the chance to voice their opinions, and I would like to hope their writing in these assignments was sincere. The strong interest in visual and organization exercises serves as one of the more significant findings, as it gives me a glimpse into what works well in the minds of these particular students.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Going into this study, I was not sure what to expect from the students. I certainly hoped that they would be able to find informal writing useful in a composition classroom, but I was not certain which assignments, if any, they would find meaningful or why. The artifacts collected for this classroom study, student work, cover letters, and surveys, allowed to me to analyze and interpret students' opinions about informal writing. Through the cover letters and surveys, I provided students various spaces to express their thoughts regarding informal writing. When I reflect on my original query - "what are students' perceptions of the role of informal writing in an introductory college course?" - the data suggests that students had various opinions, depending on the type of assignment; I do believe, however, that the students were able to place at least some degree of value on the informal assignments. According to these students, informal writing assignments that put an emphasis on visual activities were highly valued, whereas other informal assignments were "too random" for some students to make meaning.

My original questions also wondered if students' perceptions of informal writing had an impact on their performance in the classroom, and if the students were able to understand their own writing processes. While I'm unable to answer from my study if the students' perceptions had an impact on their performance individually, I would suggest that the students, as a whole, were able to recognize that the in-class assignments provided them a space to develop their formal projects in steps. These assignments gave students the opportunity to brainstorm, outline, etc their upcoming projects, creating a space for students to "comfortably" (that is to write in their "native language") make progress in their projects. It's also worth noting that "Sarah," the student with a strong interest in the visual informals, ended up with an "A" in the course. It would not be fair for me to suggest she made an "A" because of her enthusiasm towards the

visual informals; however, I do believe she used these informal assignments to guide her in developing her formal essays, as her essays reflected her informals.

Additionally, I originally asked if students were able to recognize their own writing processes. While I'm unable to make a general assumption as to what degree the students recognized their writing process, I do believe that since several of the students indicated that they placed a value on the informal assignments as a vehicle for brainstorming ideas, and they indicated that they would transfer these informal assignments (particularly the visual ones such as outlines and bubble maps) to other courses, these students recognized that the informal prompts served as a critical step (at least in my classroom) in their writing process. Coding their cover letter responses about their writing process may have been a useful way to look deeper into this question; however, as the study progressed, I became increasingly interested in the students' perceptions of the informal assignments themselves.

Relationship between Verbal and Visual Literacies

One of the most significant findings from this study, as previously mentioned, was the students' strong interest in visual assignments. Interestingly, I was not able to answer fully one of my original questions, but this finding provided me an answer to a question that I had not necessarily asked. This finding certainly was not one I anticipated, and it probably would not have crossed my mind, had the students not brought their strong interest to my attention in their cover letters. It's interesting to note that students would listen to the prompt I would give them and turn it into a visual assignment. For instance, if I read to them a prompt asking them to group together similar ideas as a means of organization, they would often go about it visually. Instead of simply writing out similar ideas, they would map themes or draw pictures. Additionally, if I told them to note their fears, areas they still wanted to improve, or frustrations regarding an

upcoming project, while some students would do this in paragraph form, several students would set it up visually via lists or tables. Regardless of how they formatted their informals, later, in their cover letters, students would "speak visually" as they would note how informal assignments would help them *visualize, focus on* or *see* how to organize their papers or where they still needed to work for improvement.

As the data analysis demonstrated, the students expressed that the organizational informals—no matter how they set up their informal writing—helped them *visualize* or *see* elements of their paper. It's certainly worth noting that these students tended to think visually, either as how they claimed to use informals (e.g. "It helped me *visualize* my paper"), or how they set up their informals visually (drawing a bubble map as opposed to paragraph style writing). The example of the "theme" exercise (where the prompt asked students to put the appropriate type of writing under the correct "theme" umbrella) was really useful in demonstrating how these students think visually. I used a metaphor as I read the prompt that day, but some students visualized my metaphor and literally drew umbrellas. Though this study did not dig any further into this particular phenomenon, it is from examples like this that suggest verbal and visual literacies intersect, at least for these students. As I spoke (read the informal prompt), students tended to visually interpret what I was saying. Future research needs to be done on how we might explore this use of the visual in students composing processes.

A Class Without Informals

While I cannot speak for all students and all classrooms, the majority of students in my course claimed to appreciate the value of informal writing, if for nothing more than a brainstorming tool or a vehicle that guards against procrastinating. The students expressed in their cover letters and end questionnaire that the informal assignments served as a good way to

brainstorm ideas for upcoming projects, and the assignments decreased their chances of putting off beginning their papers. Creating a space for students to generate ideas for upcoming projects during class time is a logical way to push them to make progress in their papers. That is not to suggest, by any means, that a course that does not assign informal assignments would be full of procrastinators, but giving these assignments require students not only to begin thinking about their projects, but it also requires them to get their thoughts and ideas on paper. It provides a space for students to begin thinking about their topic, organization, strengths, weaknesses, etc. Of course, some students can (and will) still wait until the last minute to begin writing their papers, but with informals, they are able to reference already developed ideas. As a student wrote in her cover letter, these exercises prevent students from putting their formal papers "on the back burner."

One student suggested in her final cover letter that she struggled with the last assignment because of the lack of informal writing. This was the opinion of only one student, so of course I will not make any broad generalizations, but this student's claim seems to go hand-in-hand with the notion that the informals aid in students' development of ideas and writing progression. While this student struggled, another student wrote in her cover letter that she followed the past informal assignments (such as the outline) on her own time. She even suggested in her cover letter that she did this so she would have a sense of direction. Of course, students are always able to do these types of assignments on their own time, but as instructors, we have no way of ensuring students do, unless, of course, we take it up for a grade. Collecting these assignments for a grade, however, creates a conflict, as one of the primary goals for informal writing is to give students the freedom to disregard the instructor's judgment; it provides students a space to write in their own, comfortable language, or draw, doodle, or create lists to communicate ideas.

For me, allotting five minutes in class meetings for informal writing seems to be the most practical compromise. This gives students the opportunity to communicate ideas on paper, while they can temporarily ignore the instructor as the audience, and, this helps students to take a step-by-step approach to completing projects as an in-class activity. (Otherwise, this step-by-step process may not occur.) Furthermore, the informals give students a chance to ease into the formal, academic writing, no matter what the course. I believe informal writing could be implemented into any writing intensive course, even upper division courses. It should be noted, however, that upper division students probably would not crave or need this sort of direction, as they have more experience in college-level writing. Yet, these assignments do hold value as they provide a space for students to stay focused on assignments and upcoming projects.

Closing Thoughts

Though this study lost sight of one of the original questions I set out to answer, and, instead, provided me with unexpected findings, I was able to draw some preliminary conclusions regarding students' perceptions about informal writing. I know all students do not think in the same ways as this particular set of students thought, but this research has encouraged me to continue to implement informal writing in my future courses, as these students claimed that they were undoubtedly able to find meaning within these assignments. While I certainly value the final product of student work, I also value the process that leads students to that final product. I discovered from these students that informals are valued as a visual/organizational tool and are a great way to keep students on the right track. Students are provided a space to write in ways in which they think, while simultaneously making progress towards the final project. It's a way of adopting Elbow's "both/and" instead of "either/or" thinking. There can be value placed on both the informal writings as steps in the invention stage or writing process, *and* there can be just as

much of, if not a larger, value on the final, formal essay itself. Through this classroom study, students were, I believe, able to place value on both the informal assignments and the final projects (that were graded) themselves.

While I was able to come across some valuable findings, there are plenty of areas where additional research should be conducted. For starters, it would be beneficial if this study were done with a larger sample size. If the methods for collecting data were replicated in several classrooms, it could lead to more generalized findings. Additionally, in a future study, I would like to dig deeper into students' visual interest. I would like to answer the question, "Why do students express such an interest towards visually directed informal writing assignments?" Or, "Why, and to what degree, do students think visually?" A further look into the intersection of verbal and visual literacies would be worth studying. Even when students did not visually set up an informal assignment, the use of "visual language" was still present in several cover letters. A study that uses similar methods to this study (a teacher analysis, cover letters, and surveys) may help answer this question. If the opportunity arises, to grow from this initial study, I would certainly like to answer these questions.

WORKS CITED

Adler-Kassner, Linda. "Ownership Revisited: an Exploration in Progressive Era and Expressivist Composition Scholarship." *College Composition and Communication*. 49.2 (1998): 208-233. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Oct. 2010.

Bartholomae, David, and John Schilb. "Reconsiderations: "Inventing the University" at 25: An Interview with David Bartholomae." *College English* 73.3 (2011): 260-82. *College English Online*. Jan. 2011. Web. 07 Jan. 2011.

Bartholomae, David, and Peter Elbow. "Interchanges: Responses to Bartholomae and Elbow." 1995. *Cross-talk in Comp Theory : a Reader*. By Victor Villanueva. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1997. 501-09. Print.

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Teaching Composition: Background Readings*. Ed. T. R. Johnson. Vol. 3. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008. 2-30. Print.

Berlin, James A. "Contemporary Composition: the Major Pedagogical Theories." *College English*. 44.8 (1982): 765-777. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Mar. 2011.

Bishop, Wendy. "I-witnessing in Composition: Turning Ethnographic Data into Narratives." *Rhetoric Review*. 11.1 (1992): 147-58. *JSTOR.* Web. 02 Apr. 2011

Bloom, Lynn Z, Donald A. Daiker, and Edward M. White. *Composition Studies in the New Millennium: Rereading the Past, Rewriting the Future*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. Print.

Brannon, Lil, Sally Griffin, Karen Haag, Tony Iannone, Cynthia Urbanski, and Shana Woodward. *Thinking Out Loud on Paper: The Student Daybook As a Tool to Foster Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth, and Bonnie S. Sunstein. *What Works?: A Practical Guide for Teacher Research*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006. Print.

Elbow, Peter. "Being a Writer Vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals." *College Composition and Communication* 46.1 (1995): 72-83. Rpt. in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*. Urbana: NCTE. 489-500. Print.

Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *Teaching Composition: Background Readings*. Ed. T. R. Johnson. Vol. 3. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008. 172-92. Print.

Elbow, Peter. "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries." *English Department Faculty Publication Series* (2007): 1-17. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers.* New York: Oxford UP, 1973. Print.

Emig, Janet. "Writing As a Mode of Learning." *College Composition and Communication*. 28.2 (1977): 122-128. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Mar. 2011.

Jones, Donald C. "John Dewey and Peter Elbow: a Pragmatist Revision of Social Theory and Practice." *Rhetoric Review*. 21.3 (2002): 264-281. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Mar. 2011.

Kain, Donna J. "Teacher-centered Versus Student-Centered: Balancing Constraint and Theory in the Composition Classroom." *Pedagogy*. 3.1 (2003): 104-108. Print. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Sept. 2010.

Knoblauch, C H, and Lil Brannon. *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993. Print.

Knoblauch, C. H., and Lil Brannon. "Knowing Our Knowledge." *Audits of Meaning*. Ed. Louise Z. Smith. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1988. 17-28. Print.

Lauer, Janice M. *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition*. Fort Collins, Colo: WAC Clearinghouse, 2004.

Li, Linda Y. "Exploring the Use of Focused Freewriting in Developing Academic Writing." *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* (2007): 41-53. *JSTOR*. Web. 09 Oct. 2010.

Marshall, Sharon, and Mary Chang. "A Case for Private Freewriting in the Classroom." *Writing-based Teaching: Essential Practices and Enduring Questions*. Ed. Teresa Vilardi. Albany: State University of New York, 2009. 7-23. Print.

McMahon, Tim, and Geraldine O'Neill. "Student-Centered Learning: What Does It Mean for Students and Lecturers?" *Emerging Issues in the Practice of University Learning and Teaching*. Ed. B. McMullin, S. Moore, and G. O'Neill. Dublin: AISHE, 2005. 2005. Web. 15 Nov. 2010.

Murray, Donald M. "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *Cross-talk in Comp Theory : a Reader*. Ed. Victor Villanueva. 2nd ed. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003. 3-6. Print.

Murray, Donald M. "Write Before Writing." *Composition and Communication* 29.4 (1978): 375-381. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Apr. 2010.

Neff, Joyce M. "Grounded Theory: A Critical Research Methodology." *Under Construction : Working at the Intersections of Composition Theory, Research, and Practice*. Ed. Christine Farris and Christopher M. Anson. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998. 124-35. Print.

Orange, Tom. "Performing Authority: Gysin, Bergvall, and the Critique of Expressivist Pedagogy." *Esc: English Studies in Canada*. 33.4 (2009): 115-126. Print.

O'Rourke, Rebecca. "The Learning Journal: from Chaos to Coherence." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 23.4 (1998): 403-413. Print.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. "Some New Approaches Toward Teaching." 1970. *Composition in Four Keys: Inquiring into the Field : Art, Nature, Science, Politics*. Ed. Mark Wiley, Barbara Gleason, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Pub., 1996. 149-56. Print.

Stevens, Dannelle D, and Joanne E. Cooper. *Journal Keeping: How to Use Reflective Writing for Effective Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight, and Positive Change*. Sterling, Va: Stylus Pub, 2009. Print.

"Successful Writing Assignments." *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*. Ed. Cheryl Glenn, Melissa A. Goldthwaite, and Robert Connors. 5th ed. New York: St. Martin's, 2003. 84-105. Print.

Tobin, Lad. "Process Pedagogy." (2001): 1-18. *Suu.edu*. Web. 07 Mar. 2011.

Trimbur, John. "Review: Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process." *College Composition and Communication* 45.1 (1994): 108-18. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Feb. 2011.

Vilardi, Teresa, and Mary Chang. *Writing-based Teaching: Essential Practices and Enduring Questions*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. Print.

Wallack, Nicole B., and Mary Chang. "Focused Freewriting: How to Do Things with Writing Prompts." *Writing-based Teaching: Essential Practices and Enduring Questions*. Ed. Teresa Vilardi. Albany: State University of New York, 2009. 25-52. Print.

Yancey, Kathleen B. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1998. Print.

Yin, Robert K. "Collecting Case Study Evidence." *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Vol. 5. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009. 99-124. Print.

Zebroski, James T. "Creating the Introductory College Composition Course." *Thinking through Theory : Vygotskian Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994. 15-30. Print.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
1L-09 Brody Medical Sciences Building• 600 Moye Boulevard • Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 • Fax 252-744-2284 • www.ecu.edu/irb

Date: October 14, 2010

Principal Investigator: Allison Query
Dept./Ctr./Institute: Department of English
Mailstop or Address: 2210 Bate Building

RE: **Exempt Certification**
UMCIRB# **10-0545**
Funding Source: Unfunded

Title: "First-Year Composition Students' Attitudes towards Prewriting Exercises"

Dear Ms. Query:

On 10/13/2010, the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) determined that your research meets ECU requirements and federal exemption criterion #1 which includes research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as: research on regular and special education instructional strategies.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your Internal Processing Form and Protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

The UMCIRB Office will hold your exemption application for a period of five years from the date of this letter. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit an Exemption Certification Request at least 30 days before the end of the five year period.

Sincerely, KWB

Chairperson, University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board

Attachment

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF CONSENT

English 1100/1200 (Circle the course that applies)

First-Year Composition Students' Attitudes towards Prewriting Exercise

Participating in this study is completely voluntarily; you are not required to participate in this study, nor will it affect your grade in any way. I am requesting your permission to use your pre-writing exercises (such as freewrites and journal entries) as samples in my research project. You may select which writing items you do/do not feel comfortable sharing for the study. Your name will NOT be attached to the work, and I will keep your writing samples in safe storage. The purpose of this project is to discover effective teaching methods in the composition classroom. Please feel free to contact me with any questions regarding this study.

I, ______________________________, (print name) understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntarily. I understand that my writing samples will be anonymous if used within the project, and that my grades will NOT be affected by my willingness to participate. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, if I so choose.

I understand that I may contact Allison Query (querya05@students.ecu.edu) if I have any questions or concerns.

I grant Allison Query permission to use the following types of pre-writing activities from English 1100/1200 (Circle the course that applies).

Check all that apply

____ Freewrites ___Essay Drafts

____Reflective writing ____Journal Entries

Thank you for your time and participation,

Allison Query

By signing below, I grant Ms. Allison Query permission to use the indicated (as checked above) items in her study.

____

Student Signature Date

UMCIRB
APPROVED
FROM 10/13/10
TO no expiration date

APPPENDIX C: BEGINNING OF THE SEMESTER SURVEY

Pre-writing Practices Survey

Directions: Please thoroughly answer the following questions; there is no need to put your name on this.

1- Have you previously been assigned informal writing (this could be anything from freewrites to required journal writing) in former courses, whether it be in high school or college? If yes, what course? If you answer "no" to this question, please jump to question 3.

2- If you have previously been exposed to informal writing as a class assignment, please briefly explain these writing assignments. What did your instructor call these assignments, and what type of writing did you do?

3- How do you perceive informal writing assignments in the composition classroom? If you have had previous exposure to such activities, please justify your response. If you do not have previous experience with informal writing in the classroom, how do you suspect it will influence your formal writing?

4- Do you believe informal writing assignments have a positive effect on more formal writing assignments? Why or why not?

5- Briefly explain your current writing process. What do you do to prepare for a formal writing project? Please include your brainstorming techniques, drafting stage, editing, etc.

APPENDIX D: COVER LETTER QUESTIONS

Please address these questions as you write your cover letters for projects 1, 2, and 3 (unless otherwise noted).

1- Which, if any, informal writing activities from class helped you to think about your paper topic or to get your thinking going for your essay? How did it/they do that?

2-Describe the process you went to in order to write this essay: how did you start? What feedback did you get from peers? How did you use that feedback? What was the most helpful comment you received during peer review or from me? How did you revise based on that comment? Please also provide names of peer reviewers as you answer this.

3- If you had more time for revision, what would you do next with your paper?

APPENDIX E: END OF THE SEMESTER SURVEY

English 1200: Portfolio Reflection Assignment

Look back through all of your previous informal writings in this class, and then answer the following questions. This is **not** limited to the informal prompts (or "freewrites"). This includes *all of the work* we have done to lead up to your final projects—the same assignments you discuss in your project cover letters. This includes but is not limited to:

*Informal prompts
*Thesis building workshops
*Reflective writings
*Bubble Maps
*Outlines
*Lists
*Drawings , etc.

What patterns do you notice in your informal writing activities? (i.e. what do you notice as a frequent theme, occurrence, etc.)

What types of writings do you believe helped you the most throughout the entire semester? Justify your response. There may be more than one response. For example, *I found the outlines throughout the semester to be most beneficial because….*

Look at your informal writing in relation to your final papers. What connections do you see? For example, you may notice that you used the research question you developed in an informal back in January for your annotated bibliography RQ. Or, you may notice that you used your same thesis statements—or a similar one—from informal writings. Or, you may

notice that you addressed your "frustrations" in your final paper that you listed in an informal prompt. These are just examples; please list *all* that apply.

What would you change about the informal exercises? How could the assignments be altered to be most helpful for *you* as a writer. (Think about yourself and your writing process.)

Do you think any of the activities we have done could be useful in another course? (i.e. is this transferrable?) For example, could you see yourself using bubble maps or listing your frustrations in other courses before tackling a project? Please explain.

APPENDIX F: SPSS RESULT TABLES

Anno Bib 1

Useful Brainstorm

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	8.0	9.5	9.5
	Neither	5	20.0	23.8	33.3
	Agree	13	52.0	61.9	95.2
	Strongly Agree	1	4.0	4.8	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Develop RQ

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	5	20.0	23.8	23.8
	Neither	8	32.0	38.1	61.9
	Agree	6	24.0	28.6	90.5
	Strongly Agree	2	8.0	9.5	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

New Ideas

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	3	12.0	14.3	14.3
	Neither	5	20.0	23.8	38.1
	Agree	12	48.0	57.1	95.2
	Strongly Agree	1	4.0	4.8	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Guide Formal

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	4.0	4.8	4.8
	Neither	4	16.0	19.0	23.8
	Agree	14	56.0	66.7	90.5
	Strongly Agree	2	8.0	9.5	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Connection

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	4.0	4.8	4.8
	Neither	6	24.0	28.6	33.3
	Agree	12	48.0	57.1	90.5
	Strongly Agree	2	8.0	9.5	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

No Purpose

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	6	24.0	28.6	28.6
	Disagree	11	44.0	52.4	81.0
	Neither	3	12.0	14.3	95.2
	Agree	1	4.0	4.8	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Output 2 Issues Investigation

Cluster Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	13	56.5	61.9	61.9
	Strongly Agree	8	34.8	38.1	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Develop Outline

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither	6	26.1	28.6	28.6
	Agree	9	39.1	42.9	71.4
	Strongly Agree	6	26.1	28.6	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Outline Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither	4	17.4	19.0	19.0
	Agree	7	30.4	33.3	52.4
	Strongly Agree	10	43.5	47.6	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Thesis Building

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	4.3	4.8	4.8
	Disagree	4	17.4	19.0	23.8
	Neither	5	21.7	23.8	47.6
	Agree	4	17.4	19.0	66.7
	Strongly Agree	2	8.7	9.5	76.2
	No Answer	5	21.7	23.8	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Perspective Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	8.7	9.5	9.5
	Neither	6	26.1	28.6	38.1
	Agree	9	39.1	42.9	81.0
	Strongly Agree	4	17.4	19.0	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Solution Used

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	4.3	4.8	4.8
	Agree	11	47.8	52.4	57.1
	Strongly Agree	7	30.4	33.3	90.5
	Don't remember	2	8.7	9.5	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Frustrations Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	17.4	19.0	19.0
	Disagree	4	17.4	19.0	38.1
	Neither	1	4.3	4.8	42.9
	Agree	8	34.8	38.1	81.0
	Strongly Agree	3	13.0	14.3	95.2
	No Answer	1	4.3	4.8	100.0
	Total	21	91.3	100.0	
Missing	System	2	8.7		
Total		23	100.0		

Most Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Outline	12	52.2	60.0	60.0
	Thesis	1	4.3	5.0	65.0
	Web map	4	17.4	20.0	85.0
	Peer review	3	13.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	87.0	100.0	
Missing	System	3	13.0		
Total		23	100.0		

Output 3 writing in the field

Sample Questions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	8	32.0	38.1	38.1
	Strongly Agree	13	52.0	61.9	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Frustrations

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	4.0	4.8	4.8
	Disagree	3	12.0	14.3	19.0
	Neither	8	32.0	38.1	57.1
	Agree	6	24.0	28.6	85.7
	Strongly Agree	3	12.0	14.3	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Themes Useful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither	2	8.0	9.5	9.5
	Agree	12	48.0	57.1	66.7
	Strongly Agree	7	28.0	33.3	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Final Thesis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	4.0	4.8	4.8
	Neither	4	16.0	19.0	23.8
	Agree	12	48.0	57.1	81.0
	Strongly Agree	4	16.0	19.0	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Connection

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither	3	12.0	14.3	14.3
	Agree	9	36.0	42.9	57.1
	Strongly Agree	9	36.0	42.9	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

No Purpose

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	7	28.0	33.3	33.3
	Disagree	13	52.0	61.9	95.2
	Neither	1	4.0	4.8	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Own Process

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	8.0	9.5	9.5
	Neither	4	16.0	19.0	28.6
	Agree	10	40.0	47.6	76.2
	Strongly Agree	5	20.0	23.8	100.0
	Total	21	84.0	100.0	
Missing	System	4	16.0		
Total		25	100.0		

Output 4 Artifact Results

Orientation Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	6	27.3	28.6	28.6
	Neither	4	18.2	19.0	47.6
	Agree	7	31.8	33.3	81.0
	Strongly agree	3	13.6	14.3	95.2
	Absent	1	4.5	4.8	100.0
	Total	21	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	1	4.5		
Total		22	100.0		

Research Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither	2	9.1	9.5	9.5
	Agree	4	18.2	19.0	28.6
	Strongly agree	13	59.1	61.9	90.5
	Absent	2	9.1	9.5	100.0
	Total	21	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	1	4.5		
Total		22	100.0		

Artifact Helpful

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	5	22.7	23.8	23.8
	Disagree	7	31.8	33.3	57.1
	Neither	3	13.6	14.3	71.4
	Agree	3	13.6	14.3	85.7
	Absent	3	13.6	14.3	100.0
	Total	21	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	1	4.5		
Total		22	100.0		

Informal Prompt

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	waste of time	1	4.5	5.0	5.0
	interesting to get into "zone"	4	18.2	20.0	25.0
	good warmup	3	13.6	15.0	40.0
	got me thinking	5	22.7	25.0	65.0
	don't remember	6	27.3	30.0	95.0
	6	1	4.5	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	90.9	100.0	
Missing	System	2	9.1		
Total		22	100.0		

Cluster Ideas

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither	1	4.5	4.8	4.8
	Agree	9	40.9	42.9	47.6
	Strongly agree	11	50.0	52.4	100.0
	Total	21	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	1	4.5		
Total		22	100.0		