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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND STUDENT PROGRESSION IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND STUDENT PROGRESSION
IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

An Essay Submitted to the
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By
Ellie C. Rafoth
2018

The essay of Ellie C. Rafoth is hereby accepted:

_____   _____
Advisor – Thomas Pace   Date

I certify that this is the original document

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Author – Ellie C. Rafoth   Date

> "While these students, then, are quite ordinary,
> what they are doing, through reflection, is
> extraordinary."
>
> —Kathleen Blake Yancey

In the fall semester of 2017, I met Becca, a nervous freshman in my EN 125 course. Her wide, brown eyes scanned the classroom anxiously as she wrung her hands and dug the toe of her boot into the carpet. She introduced herself in a timid voice and stuttered through multiple questions about our first assignment of the term: a Writer's Report. Adapted from writing scholar, Peter Elbow, the Writer's Report encourages students to evaluate themselves in the first week of the semester in four structured sections: how they see themselves as writers, their writing background, their writing strengths and weaknesses, and their writing goals for the course. In her Writer's Report, Becca addressed her uneasiness with writing as a first semester freshman and revealed her high school writing experiences. In her section that outlined how she views herself as a writer, Becca admits the following when prompted to evaluate her past writing career to her current point as a first semester freshman:

> Today, when I think of myself as a writer, the word unprepared comes to mind. I do not believe I am terrible, especially when I am very passionate about what I'm writing, I can be decent. In the past, I have written a few good papers I can say I am proud of. Unfortunately, I do not feel like I have had the best English teachers in the past to have prepared me to write amazing college papers.

Here, she recounts her writing past and continues to discuss her background as a writer throughout the remainder of the report. She admits that she struggles with citing sources

and explains that her inability to cite "is unfortunate for a college student." Continuing, Becca concedes to her weakness of feeling extremely unprepared to write in general, but specifically to compose effective introductions and conclusions. In her final writing goals portion of the Writer's Report, Becca acknowledges that, "In the next 18 weeks, I hope to become a better and more confident writer. I would like to be able to write papers that flow and are structured properly. My goals are: 1) Learn how to structure a college paper properly 2) Learn how to create an intriguing introduction and 3) Learn how to create a conclusion that doesn't sound repetitive." On the one hand, many first-year students, like Becca, admit to feeling nervous and unprepared when they enter their first semester of college writing. On the other hand, some students praise their high school experiences and other writing backgrounds, labeling themselves as "ready" or "excited" to write in college. Regardless, whether a student feels apprehensive about entering the college writing classroom, like Becca, or feels excited about the challenges ahead, the act of reflecting on their writing leads writing teachers to learn about their past, their present, and their future writerly selves.

My interest in the role of reflection in the first-year composition classroom stems from the Writer's Report, which acts as a springboard to develop reflective habits necessary to progress as a college writer. In order to instill reflective practice in the classroom, I use a three-pronged sequence of assignments: a Writer's Report, a reflective blog, and a Portfolio Cover Letter. In doing so, I traced my students' reflections through these three assignments and researched major scholarship on reflection in relationship to the writing classroom. Drawing from the work of Donald Schön, I follow in his line of thinking, and I define reflection as the act of contemplating one's experiences in order to

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and explains that her inability to cite "is unfortunate for a college student." Continuing, Becca concedes to her weakness of feeling extremely unprepared to write in general, but specifically to compose effective introductions and conclusions. In her final writing goals portion of the Writer's Report, Becca acknowledges that, "In the next 18 weeks, I hope to become a better and more confident writer. I would like to be able to write papers that flow and are structured properly. My goals are: 1) Learn how to structure a college paper properly 2) Learn how to create an intriguing introduction and 3) Learn how to create a conclusion that doesn't sound repetitive." On the one hand, many first-year students, like Becca, admit to feeling nervous and unprepared when they enter their first semester of college writing. On the other hand, some students praise their high school experiences and other writing backgrounds, labeling themselves as "ready" or "excited" to write in college. Regardless, whether a student feels apprehensive about entering the college writing classroom, like Becca, or feels excited about the challenges ahead, the act of reflecting on their writing leads writing teachers to learn about their past, their present, and their future writerly selves.

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continuously learn. In his book *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön refers to the person

engaging in reflective practice as the practitioner and explains:

> The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or
>
> confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on
>
> the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have
>
> been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves
>
> to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in
>
> the situation. (68)

Here, Schön alludes to reflective practice as a continuous exercise that allows the

practitioner to contemplate his actions in order to understand his process. My students,

much like Schön's practitioner, also experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion by

reflecting overtly on their writing practices and how they learn to write. Students like

mine in EN 125 are able to examine and know their process through reflection. To

incorporate reflection into my writing course, I researched how scholars in writing

studies built reflection in their writing classrooms and what instilling reflective practice

does to improve students' writing skills. In their work, "Generating, Deepening, and

Documenting Learning: The Power of Critical Reflection in Applied Learning," Sarah

Ash and Patti Clayton provide pivotal research regarding the effectiveness of reflection as

an educational tool. Similarly, Kathleen Blake Yancey specifically speaks about

reflection within the composition classroom in her book *Reflection in the Writing*

Classroom. Additionally, in her article "Technologies for Transcending a Focus on Error:

Blogs and Democratic Aspirations in First-Year Composition," Cheryl Smith discusses

how blogging induces reflection in the writing classroom. Finally, in their book *Writing*

Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and the Sites of Writing, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak discuss reflective transfer. Overall, these scholars argue that reflective practice is essential in developing metacognitive skills and is beneficial to learning. However, I suggest that incorporating a progressive mode of reflection allows students to know their writing process fully and transfer their skills effectively to other writing situations. I define progressive in two ways: first, my method is progressive in the sense that each assignment builds on one another throughout the semester, and second, my method is progressive because the students continuously reflect in the classroom to progressively become better writers through the use of a three-pronged sequence of assignments. Thus far, research touches on the importance of reflection and on each of these assignments individually in the writing classroom, but I am filling a gap in research by suggesting a progressive reflection sequence threaded throughout the course in order to stimulate positive reflection and transfer.

In this essay, I argue that this three-pronged sequence of the Writer's Report, the reflective blog, and the Portfolio Cover Letter act as an effective method of producing reflective writers in ways that build on Ash and Clayton, Yancey, and Smith's concepts. These assignments are effective in helping student writers, because they allow them the ability to transfer their writing skills to other situations outside of the writing classroom. By following this three-pronged sequence, student writers have the opportunity to examine their writing process and learn who they are as writers. Creating a space for students to continuously reflect on their writing processes and products throughout the semester cultivates students who are more self-aware and are able to transfer their writing knowledge and write with more confidence in other writing situations. In order to show

that this model can be successful in producing better writers across the curriculum, I will draw upon scholars such as Ash and Clayton, Yancey, and Smith who all address the importance of reflection in producing stronger student writers. Through discussing each of the three assignments, their purpose, and student writing, I show that a progressive reflective practice creates insightful writers with the astute ability to transfer their writing skills across the curriculum.

How Do We Know What We Know? : A Literature Review

Recent scholarship in the field acknowledges reflection, its role in the writing classroom, its processes, reflective blogging, and transfer. I will call upon scholars such as Ash and Clayton, Yancey, Smith, and Yancey et al to understand how compositionists perceive and utilize reflection currently in writing classrooms.

To understand reflection more fully, it is important to examine Ash and Clayton's pivotal work regarding reflective practice as a productive learning tool. In their 2009 study, "Generating, Deepening, and Documenting Learning: The Power of Critical Reflection in Applied Learning," Ash and Clayton study the power of reflection in applied learning situations. Studying a group of students participating in service-learning, Ash and Clayton help to define reflection while acknowledging its positive attributes as an educational tool. Asking their students to reflect on different service-learning projects, Ash and Clayton confirm that "Learning and understanding learning processes—does not happen maximally through experience alone but rather as a result of thinking about— reflecting on it" (27). Throughout their study, Ash and Clayton determine that reflection maximizes the learning opportunities and evokes metacognition. Additionally, Ash and

Clayton encourage designed reflection; the instructor must set expectations and goals in order for students to achieve the full benefit of reflection. They contend,

> Effectively designing critical reflection involves making a series of choices that are informed by desired learning outcomes…These choices produce an overall reflection strategy or over-arching structure that may combine various reflection activities or mechanisms—such as journal entries, online chat sessions, poster presentations, worksheets, or discussion sessions. (Ash and Clayton 34)

Therefore, reflection must be guided and planned by the instructor in order to foster productive reflection. Finally, Ash and Clayton assert that reflection "can contribute to advancing the academy's understanding of both how our students think and how we can support them in learning to think more deeply and with greater capacity for self-directed learning" (46). Ash and Clayton's findings and revelations regarding reflection prove it to be an effective educational tool to help students and instructors understand how we learn, which directly applies to the writing process and writing classroom.

While Ash and Clayton apply reflection to their service-learning study, perhaps the most complete and in-depth examination of reflection in a composition classroom derives from Yancey's 1998 book, *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Although Yancey's study is 20 years old, it remains one of the most thorough examinations of reflection and is worth referencing and building upon in my project. Yancey explores the philosophy of reflection through philosopher, Donald Schön, and begins her line of thinking by wondering how students learn to write. Yancey's inquiry of students' learning processes leads to her definition of reflection: "To ask students to participate

with us, not as objects of our study, but as agents of their own learning, in a process that is becoming known, quite simply, as reflection" (5). For Yancey, self-evaluation, revision strategies, analysis, and goal setting can all be forms of productive reflection in the writing classroom. Therefore, "Reflection, then, is the dialectal process by which we develop and achieve, first specific goals for learning; second for reaching those goals; and third, means of determining whether or not we have met those goals or other goals" (Yancey 6). According to Yancey, reflection in the writing classroom allows instructors to know how their students learn—promoting a new type of teaching which produces interactive, agency-driven students.

A portion of Yancey's book is dedicated to her development of three concepts: reflection-in-action, constructive reflection, and reflection-in-presentation. Yancey develops reflection-in-action: "Its purpose is to understand the single composing event in progress and to make sense of it," while constructive reflection "is private, often is unarticulated, the result of multiple composing events that themselves shape a writer" (14). For Yancey, reflection-in-action, refers to single assignment reflections like that of a Writer's Memo, and constructive reflection takes place in a reflective essay that looks back at what has been accomplished thus far by the student. Finally, Yancey develops reflection-in-presentation as reflection that takes place in the form of a cover letter, which assesses the student's goals and accomplishments in the writing classroom toward the end of the semester. Yancey begins to see "reflection as a component not only threaded through, but woven into the curriculum" (15). Therefore, Yancey determines that reflection is not an isolated educational act; rather she determines that it must be interlaced in the writing classroom in order to prove productive. Yancey concludes:

When reflection 'works,' it raises as many questions as it answers, perhaps

more. It works from particular to general without ever leaving the

particular. It works by asking that we articulate the tacit, that we frame our

observations multiply, that we look for a coherence that patterns without

disguising or discoloring or misrepresenting. This means that we don't

look only at the students who've done well; it means that we learn, and

perhaps we learn the most from those who don't succeed in our courses. It

means we learn together. Through reflection we learn that we know now,

and we begin to understand what we need to learn next. (143)

Yancey determines that instructors and students can use reflection as an educational tool

to examine where student writers are in the classroom and what they hope to accomplish

next.

However, Yancey's study ends with the unanswered and presiding question of

"how conducive an electronic environment would be for student reflection and what

difference a more public arena would make in fostering reflection" (Jensen 40). Since

Yancey's pivotal study of reflection in 1998, electronic platforms have changed higher

education and writing classrooms. In her article, "Technologies for Transcending a Focus

on Error: Blogs and Democratic Aspirations in First-Year Composition," Cheryl Smith

examines the recent trends regarding how the current generation of students write. She

contends,

As a result of the widespread use and influence of these 2.0 Web

platforms, reading and writing practices are changing, especially for the

younger generation. Students today write more, but in less conventionally

academic ways, than students only a decade ago, and they arrive on our

campuses with entirely new skills sets and a new relationship to

composition and expression. (Smith 36)

Like many other scholars in higher education and composition specifically, Smith

recognizes that technology is changing students and how they learn, and she

acknowledges that students are coming to college with "complicated writing histories

marked by quick connections and the potential for invention" (36). Therefore, Smith

introduces blogging as a Web 2.0 medium that invites students to express themselves

through a familiar platform they use in their personal lives. Today's students, familiar

with technology, feel comfortable and sometimes more confident in their writing through

personal Web 2.0 technologies than formal academic writing. Educators have begun to

see blogging

as flexible, familiar platforms. Blogs lend power to the author and may

especially empower inexperienced writers who often feel uncomfortable

with academic discourse but more at home with internet writing. At the

same time, the open-forum quality of blogs defines them as especially

democratic, connecting authors with larger audiences engaged in vibrant,

outgoing conversations. (Smith 40)

Blogging's flexible and open-forum creates low stakes writing which allows students to

engage with the material, the class, the instructor, and their classmates building positive

academic relationships through technology. Instead of isolating students because they no

longer write in the traditional, academic way, blogging allows students to bring their

generational knowledge to the classroom and enrich the classroom structure. Smith shares,

> Blogging enables my students to develop new trains of thought that they might not have considered their own. It also helped them think about how they communicate in different arenas and to various audiences. My students may have been living on the edge of their college experience, struggling to make the difficult transition into new modes of knowing and communicating, but they were not alone. (45)

Smith recognizes that coming into an academic setting for the first time is challenging and scary for students to adjust, nonetheless produce good academic writing. Therefore, Smith realizes that through blogging, students can participate in the academy in a way that makes them comfortable and familiar.

In addition to Smith's argument about blogging, another way students participate in the academy is through transfer. This focus on transfer comes from Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak in their book *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Yancey et al explore how composition courses can successfully support the transfer of knowledge in writing. Through their Teaching for Transfer (TFT) curriculum, the authors argue for their curriculum, which includes reflective practice and generates transfer. Posing their research question, Yancey et al ask,

> We wondered, then, what difference, if any, it could make if we asked students to engage in a reiterative reflective practice, based both in their own experience and in reflective curriculum, where the goal isn't to

document writing processes or argue that program outcomes have been

met, but rather to develop a theory of writing that can be used to frame

writing tasks both in the FYC course and in other areas of writing. (4)

Therefore Yancey et al do not take interest in reflection for the purpose of the course, but

take interest in how reflective practice benefits students by allowing them to develop

their own approach to writing. Yancey et al describe their theory and provide a relevant

history of composition studies in relationship to the concept of transfer.

The work of these scholars provides crucial background knowledge regarding the

role of reflection in education and the improvement of student writing. Beginning with

Donald Schön and Ash and Clayton's initial interest in reflection, Yancey expands these

philosophies and applies reflection to the composition classroom. Like Yancey, Smith

finds a particular niche, reflective blogging, and contributes significant findings to the

benefits of blogging. Lastly, Yancey et al present the idea of transfer and students'

abilities to transfer writing knowledge across the curriculum. Together, these sources

weave a complex background regarding reflection, which greatly influences my argument

that the three-pronged reflective sequence creates self-aware student writers with the

ability to transfer their writing knowledge to other writing situations.

Methodology

In the fall of 2017 at John Carroll University, I taught a first-year composition

course in which I incorporated reflection through a three-pronged assignment sequence.

On the first day of class, my EN-125 students were asked to complete the first stage: a

Writer's Report. I developed a Writer's Report, which includes four sections: the

situation, background, strengths and weaknesses, and goals. In the situation section, the

students described themselves as the writer they are today in the first week of my composition course. They were asked to think of this section as a general overview of themselves as writers, and they were reminded to not be too critical of themselves. In the background section, I invited the students to provide me with some context or background of who they were before my composition course. I asked them the following questions:

- What types of papers have you written so far in your writing career?
- How many pages are most of your papers?
- What is your familiarity with citing sources?
- What is your writing process?
- Where do you like to write?
- What paper have you written are you most proud of?

The students were asked to answer these questions and provide me with an idea of their writing background. Next, in the strengths and weaknesses section, the students were asked to define their strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Finally, in the last section, the students created three goals for the semester. They were informed that these goals could be big or small, and they must reflect on where they see themselves as writers at the end of our 18 weeks together.

Drawing from the work of Peter Elbow in his article, "The War Between Reading and Writing and How to End It," I shortened Elbow's writing case study assignment. In his graduate classes, Elbow asks his students to compose a case study where they detail their writing identity and extensive writing background. As graduate students, these case

studies range from seven to eight pages due to these advanced students many experiences. I wanted to design an assignment not as extensive as Elbow's case study, but an assignment that asked my students to report on their writerly identities and backgrounds through a more condensed version of Elbow's method in hopes to get to know my first-year composition students better. My purpose of the Writer's Report was to know where my students have been and where they would like to go in their writing career. Additionally, I hoped to create what Pat Belanoff calls "dis-ease" in her 2001 article, "Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching." Interested in cultivating metacognitive skills, Belanoff argues that "educational settings have to create some level of dis-ease, some disruption of student and teacher expectations: ways to disrupt our students' routines and cause them some discomfort, which is undoubtedly going to cause discomfort also" (420). Therefore, this one page Writer's Report in the first week of class creates a productive dis-ease and a conducive space in the classroom through the first reflective assignment.

Keeping Yancey's suggestion that reflection must be "woven into the curriculum" (15) in mind, I included blogging as the second part of my three-pronged reflective sequence in EN-125. In order to incorporate blogging into my composition classroom, I asked my students to create a public classroom blog through our university-wide interface, Canvas. On their home page, the students shared personal information about themselves. Most of the students resorted to their first-day introduction of their name, grade, major, and hometown. However, I encouraged the students to be more creative and share something memorable in order to give their blog personality. Students shared their aspirations, the reason they selected John Carroll, and even their favorite color. Despite

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these personal differences, I asked my students to make their blog their own and by giving them creative liberty, I found it encouraged them to openly reflect in their own, expressive way.

I asked my students to reflect on many aspects of the class on their blogs, but mainly I transferred the Writer's Memo concept to the online platform. In his article, "Problematizing Reflection: Conflicted Motives in the Writer's Memo," Jeffery Sommers defines the memo as a precursor document of reflection about students' final drafts. However, Sommers remains displeased with the Writer's Memo because it is "inconsistent" and "lacks metacognition" (272), because the Writer's Memo is only completed when a draft is due making it an every few week occurrence. Therefore, I suggest a reinvention of the Writer's Memo through transferring it to the blogosphere as a portion of a student-designed blog in order to promote continuous reflection through a familiar, technological medium.

In order to promote reflection and reinvent the Writer's Memo, I asked my students to reflect on their writing for our major assignments on their blogs. For example, after completing the semester's first essay, I asked my students to take time in class to reflect on their essay. In EN-125, my students reflected on four major essays in our first-year composition sequence. However, I also utilized the blog as a space for students to ask questions, workshop thesis statements and paragraphs, and provide overall feedback regarding the course. By reinventing the Writer's Memo and utilizing the blog for many different types of reflection, blogging invites reflection into the classroom and encourages beneficial metacognition.

After students reflect in their Writer's Report and on their blogs, the third and final stage of the three-stage progressive model is the Portfolio Cover Letter. In the last few weeks of the semester, a composition class often requires students to revisit their writing, revise it, and accompany their revised essays with a personal letter from the student to the teacher. In this letter, students address the essay (s) they selected for revision, what they realized, and why they made the changes that they did in the portfolio. Additionally, students are often asked to reflect holistically on themselves as writers. While cover letters serve as a traditional aspect of a composition classroom, I conducted my Portfolio Cover Letters as a piece of the three-stage reflective progression I have suggested, and I used it as an opportunity for students to review the Writer's Report and their blogs over the course of the semester. Like many other composition instructors, I incorporated a Portfolio Cover Letter at the end of my Portfolio Unit, which included the revision of two essays and a letter addressed directly to me. However, instead of allowing my students to simply reflect on their experience throughout the semester, I asked them to revisit their Writer's Report and reflect upon the three goals they intended to accomplish during our course. This method bridges all of the reflective assignments together and requires the student to revisit the beginning of the semester by examining the Writer's Report.

Through this methodology, I developed a three-pronged reflective sequence, which spans the entire class in order to promote reflective practice. Using this progressive model last fall, I traced my students' reflections throughout the semester and found their responses honest and insightful.

Student Results

During the fall semester of 2017, fifteen students enrolled in my EN-125 course at John Carroll University. All 15 of the students were traditional, first-year college students with varying writing experiences and writing backgrounds. The class met twice a week for 75 minutes throughout the semester, and I had the opportunity to get to know my students and learn from them through structured reflection.

Stage One: Creating Dis-ease through the Writer's Report

When I passed out the Writer's Report for the first time, I explained all of the components incorporated in the report and gave my students reassurance that this assignment might be strange and make them feel uncomfortable, because they have never been asked to reflect on themselves before. They stared at me in terror in their first week of college, or like Becca, they asked a multitude of questions out of nervousness. Nonetheless, the Writer's Report created Belanoff's concept of dis-ease through reflection by asking students to report on themselves as writers. Most likely, as first-year students in a college writing classroom, they have little-to-no experience with reflecting on their writing pasts and histories. The Writer's Report evoked a slight discomfort for the students who were asked to write about their writing, and as a result, they produced fruitful reflection to begin the course.

Like Becca, who described her unpreparedness and insecurities regarding writing, other students also expressed some dis-ease in their writing abilities. For example, Matt, an ESL student from Honduras and eager to meet new people and fit in, expressed his discomfort with his language barrier as an international student. In his situation, he writes,

I consider myself an average writer. I've lived my whole life in a Spanish

speaking country named Honduras so English is not my first language.

This is my greatest weakness, I don't have an extensive vocabulary and it

is hard for me to find the words I want to use to describe what I want to

say.

Matt begins to open the door for communication with me about his writing and his use of

English as a second language. Throughout the semester, he expressed his discomfort

writing papers because he "didn't sound like everyone else." Because of his initial

disclosure of his language barrier in his Writer's Report, we were able to build an open

relationship and discuss strategies to improve his vocabulary—a goal he set in his

Writer's Report.

While Becca and Matt disclosed insecurities regarding writing, other students

expressed confidence in their ability throughout their Writer's Report, like Paul.

Considering himself a "good, but not great writer," Paul reflected on a literary writing

background. He explains,

In high school, I wrote a lot of papers responding to or analyzing

literature. These were usually about three or four pages long…My favorite

paper that I have written is an analysis of the themes in *Fight Club*, which

is six or seven pages in length…During my senior year of high school, I

wrote a short story for my English class that I am very proud of, which

was thematically inspired by Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants.' I

really enjoyed the process of making a story, constructing characters from

nothing but my imagination, and then putting them down on a page.

Beyond academic writing, I consider myself a singer-songwriter, so I spend a lot of time each day jotting down lyrics. It is just a fun thing I like to do.

In his Writer's Report, Paul reflects on his experience writing about literature, expressing his confidence in reading a text and then discussing it. Additionally, Paul shares that he writes creatively and outside of the classroom. While Paul exudes a subtle confidence regarding his background, Ben began his Writer's Report puzzled and unsure how to speak about his own writing. He explains,

My writing process is hard to describe because it changes all of the time. I cannot stay focused for long enough to write a paper in one sitting. When I do write a paper, I cannot write in silence. Whether it be the television on in the background or music, I need something because I will start to daydream…I am also a big procrastinator when it comes to writing. When I wrote my senior paper, I was up until 4:30 in the morning just to barely finish. Hopefully, now I will be able to write a paper easier because I am in a different setting and can focus much more.

Ben's evaluation of his writing begins much differently than the previous students. Ben seems to find himself and his process through being asked to reflect on himself rather than already knowing his strengths and weaknesses like the other students. Yancey explains, "Some students seem to know their processes, can mark them in a way that teaches. Others begin more tentatively. They do now know how to talk about their own work, or perhaps they are only beginning to know it" (27). Yancey recognizes that some students understand their writing identity and process well before entering a writing

classroom, while other students must work to discover themselves as writers. Therefore, Ben's background is not better or worse than Paul's background, whose is not better or worse than Becca or Matt's situation presented in their Writer's Report. Rather, the Writer's Report exposes the complicated writing histories of our students through self-reflection. Our composition classrooms are not necessarily an equal playing field where each student comes with the same baseline knowledge from their previous schooling. The writing classroom is a melting pot of varying situations, backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, and goals.

Finally, in the last section of their Writer's Report, I ask my students to set goals for the semester. Yancey's observes, "We can ask for constructive reflection in many ways. One early on, is simply to ask for a writer's goals" (53). By asking for our students' goals, we establish a contract between student and instructor. This contract tells the teacher that this is what the student hopes to accomplish, and the teacher can adapt the course based on these intentions. Like the varying histories of the students, their goals range from small concerns to large concerns, and all must be valued. Matt expressed a want to learn bigger, more impressive words, and Ben hoped to develop a better process for writing a paper. Paul, one of the more experienced writer's in the class, expressed that teachers write "awk" and "syntax error" on his paper often, and he admitted that he had "no idea what syntax error is" and his major goal for the semester was to "find out what Syntax error is and then avoid it." Finally, Becca, our timid, shy student who was gravely insecure with her writing, confesses her biggest goal for the semester: "I hope to become a more confident writer." Like their varying histories, each student established unique goals for the semester, proving that our composition classes are not "one-size fits all."

Rather, our classes should be individualized and molded to our students' needs, and the method that provides this avenue is reflection.

To that end, in my suggested three-stages of reflective progression, the Writer's Report begins the course as the gateway to reflection. Creating Belanoff's initial dis-ease in students helps them start thinking about how they write and instills the value and expectation of reflection throughout the rest of the course. However, I also argue that the Writer's Report is more valuable and helpful for the instructor to get to know her students than a Diagnostic Essay. John Carroll's first-year writing program includes four major writing sequences in EN-125. Before the first sequence commences, the students must complete a Diagnostic Essay to be turned in for completion and uploaded to our university interface for assessment purposes. Of course, assessment serves a pivotal role in higher education, and the Diagnostic Essay is used to compare the students' writing improvements over their collegiate career, but I argue that the Writer's Report would be much more useful and realistically help composition instructors understand the students in their writing classroom. Instead of the teacher diagnosing the students' issues and needs in composition, the students present their situation, background, strengths, weaknesses, and goals through an evaluative form of self-reflection. Ultimately, the Writer's Report acts as a portal into these students' writing histories and lets the instructor know where each student begins and where each student hopes to go.

Stage Two: Reinventing the Writer's Memo by Entering the Blogosphere

After completing the Writer's Report in the first week of class, the students created their personal, public blogs that we continuously utilized throughout the semester.

After the Diagnostic essay, Allie, a wide-eyed and cautious student, reflects on her process through an online version of a Writer's Memo:

> I began to prepare for this essay by first, reading the short article 'Don't Blame the Eater,' then by reflecting on how I felt about the subject matter presented by David Zinczenko. After I finish preparing for my essay, I first write a very rough draft of what I would like to say. I don't concern myself with complete sentences, grammar, or spelling, but instead, I focus on getting all my thoughts down on the page. I then continue by rereading what I wrote and turning those random phrases into chronological, well written sentences. I conclude my writing process by rereading once more, specifically looking at grammar, spelling, and correct punctuation. When I am writing any paper, I have an extremely hard time getting something down on the page. I used to carefully select each word before typing it in the computer, but I realized that process does not work for me. Although my new method works very well, I still have trouble getting myself to begin writing. I feel very confident that I got my opinions and views across to the reader. In addition, I feel that I was able to portray my writing style clearly throughout this essay.

Posed with the questions "How did you write this first essay and what are you most confident in?" Allie presents insight on her process and concerns with her writing. Her blog is quoted in its entirety because she expresses her process specifically discussing a multiple draft strategy. She also reflects on a change in her writing process. At first, she struggled with selecting words and starting her essay, so she admits to changing her

process to an academic version of free writing which requires going back multiple times to revise. However, what remains particularly interesting is that Allie could have provided a fairly simple response to my questions regarding how she composed the paper and what she is confident in. Although this is a possibility and often seen in the composition of a Writer's Memo, Allie expresses herself and her process more freely, therefore, learning more about herself as a writer through reflection on a digital medium.

Like Allie in her reflection on the first essay, Paul, our confident and experienced writer, expressed his process for the second essay. Asked to pick an article and to compose a commentary response to the argumentative piece, Paul writes,

> [My process] was similar to my start of Essay #1, but it lacked confidence. I tried to set a context in the beginning of my topic of sexism by addressing the Weinstein scandal, and then proceeded to narrow in on a thesis that agrees with a difference. From there, I proceeded to my academic summary, and then to my evidence based on body paragraphs…While I do not think Essay #2 is a terrible essay, I would hesitate to say it is good because of the awkwardness I felt writing an opinion that was disagreeing with popularized feminism.

Despite his initial confidence, Paul struggled with the second essay in EN-125. However, his struggle is not the most important aspect of this example; what is most important is that Paul feels comfortable sharing his writing experience on his blog. Previous to this particular blog, I met with Paul in the university writing center. Together, we worked on his paper, but he never explicitly spoke with me about his struggles composing the essay. In fact, I perceived that he felt particularly confident in his essay. Despite my

interpretation of his confidence, Paul resorted to a comfortable space—an online platform—to discuss his true writing experience. During face-to-face interaction in the classroom and in the Writing Center, Paul did not permit himself to discuss his writing process, but through reflection on his blog, he felt comfortable discussing his difficulties composing his essay.

While Paul reflected openly on an ebb in confidence, Becca found some much needed confidence through reflecting on the second essay on her blog. Instead of expressing her constant concern of being unprepared, Becca indicated enjoyment about writing her essay. She says, "I really enjoyed having freedom to choose our own article for this commentary. I believe it made it a little bit easier to write about, because inserting my opinion in papers is difficult for me…I feel more confident in Essay #2, because the topic is something I am passionate about, and I spent more time on it." Through reflection, Becca recognizes an aspect of writing she struggles with—inserting her opinion. A common struggle in first-year composition classes, Becca asserts this difficulty in reflection and by claiming this struggle, Becca and I worked together to improve inserting her opinion into her writing during the semester. Additionally, Becca acknowledges an aspect of the assignment that helps to determine her writing successes. Becca was allowed to pick an article herself for the second essay instead of responding to a pre-selected article for the first essay. Writing about the benefits of practicing a vegan diet in her second essay, Becca expresses confidence in writing on a topic she possesses specific interest in. Through this, Becca begins to recognize the difference between assignments and the impacts these differences in assignments have on her writing so she knows how to approach them in the future.

In addition to reflecting on the writing process, this online platform can be used for students to reflect on the writing goals they set for themselves. Yancey expresses, "Through reflection, we can circle back, return to earlier notes, to earlier understandings and observations, to re-think them from time present (as opposed to time past), to think how things will look to time future" (24). In order to incorporate Yancey's concept of "circling back," I asked my students to revisit their Writer's Report and its goals at the halfway point of our semester. On their blogs, I asked the students to read through their Writer's Report and examine their goals after completing and receiving grades for the first two essays of the course. In her mid-semester blog, Becca offers some compelling and insightful reflection about her writing thus far:

> The beginning of the year seems as if it were last week, when in reality it was a little over two months ago. At the start, I felt very unprepared for college and writing papers. In high school, I did not feel educated about the structure of a paper, and all the parts that make it up…Therefore, at the start of this year, I came into this class wanting to learn more about how to write a correct, college-level structured paper, how to write an intriguing introduction, and how to create a conclusion that does not repeat itself. Now that it is halfway through the semester and I have reflected back to the start compared to now, I believe I have started to make way on accomplishing my goals.

After this excerpt, Becca revisits her specific goals and therefore, recognizes her growth as a writer. For her, college writing is no longer a scary perplexity, but something she can grasp and tackle in the remaining weeks of the semester. Additionally, Becca takes her

time to chart her growth and accomplishments of the semester. By recognizing these successes, Becca opens herself up for more learning and growth in the composition classroom. Most importantly, Becca reflects on where she wants to go next. She still wants to become a more confident writer and hopes to compose successful introductions and conclusions. Through her mid-semester reflection, Becca shares where she is in the writing process, which not only helps her realize her vast accomplishments, but allows me to know which skills she has cultivated and what she aims to accomplish next.

While blogging provides beneficial results for reflection in the composition classroom, Timothy O'Connell and Jane Dyment show that some net generation students are uncomfortable using technology in the classroom. In their article, "'I'm Just Not That Comfortable with Technology': Student Perceptions of and Preferences for Web 2.0 Technologies in Reflective Journals," O'Connell and Dyment argue that educators are turning too quickly towards technology, because they assume their students, who are members of the Net Generation, are comfortable and familiar with technology (393). Despite the common assumption that today's student function solely using technology, O'Connell and Dyment suggest that these students are not as connected to technology as first assumed. In their 2014 study, they assert, "For example, more than 70% had never kept their own blog, more than 80% had never created a podcast, and more than 50% had never used a social networking site" (O'Connell and Dyment 397). Like O'Connell and Dyment, I have noticed in my own classroom that some students greatly oppose technology while others present no issues embracing it. That is why my three-staged reflective progression only includes one online component—the reflective blog. Allowing the Writer's Report and Portfolio Cover Letter to be composed traditionally on paper, the

medium of reflection remains balanced in the classroom for student preferences. My students participate in online blogging, which I find fosters an open, low stakes writing environment, but I am cognizant that some students are not as technologically savvy as expected. Therefore, culminating the use of the Web and paper for reflection creates a stabilized learning environment attentive to students' preferences.

In addition to providing reflection on students' writing processes, blogs can also provide an avenue for feedback. Like Becca at the end of her mid-semester review, I often ask my students to reflect on what they would still like to accomplish during our semester. For example, before the research paper, Paul let me know a few aspects of writing he would like to examine more closely for the next essay. He explains, "I would like to examine how wide we should set a context in the beginning of the [research] paper. I think that I may have set the context too wide in the beginning [of the second essay]…I would also like to examine the use of other sources." Here, Paul expresses two concerns he has for our research paper: developing an appropriate topic and integrating sources. However, what is important to recognize is that Paul reflects on his previous essay in order to adapt for the next essay. He is learning from his struggles with developing his topic in the second essay and wants to make sure that he accomplishes a thoroughly explained and researched essay in the future. Through reflection, Paul adapts his writing process, and I argue that if our students are adapting, so should we as their instructors. Upon reading Paul's reflection of what he would like to learn in the next unit, I can adapt my lessons and plans for the course and make sure I am catering to the needs of my students, within reason. Through blogging, my class becomes an open forum, where students can express their struggles, concerns, and hopes, and I can provide

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appropriate feedback, lessons, and comments. Blogging makes my class much like customer surveys and reviews; my students reflect on their product, let me know how the product worked, and then provide reflections and comments on the product in hopes of a response. As their trusty customer service representative, I take all of the responses into account because no customer is more important than another.

Overall, blogging allows for reflection to be continually built into the course. By incorporating blogging, students always have an outlet to express themselves and their writing process. This online platform is an easily attainable tool, which allows for instant reflection anywhere and at anytime. Through blogging, instructors can replace the complicated Writer's Memo and easily transfer it to an online blog. Instructors and students can revisit this page and use it to look back and move forward. Additionally, students can provide feedback and create an open dialogue between instructors, students, and peers. However, blogging does provide challenges; perhaps students are not as technologically inclined as O'Connell and Dyment suggest. While this may be true, blogging does not have to be the sole tool used to invoke reflection. Blogging can be one aspect of the three-staged reflection progression creating a safe space for students to reflect and share their writing experiences.

Stage Three: "Cover letters help teachers understand students' fears"

While blogging acts as a continuous method of reflection throughout the course, the Portfolio Cover Letter serves as the final, culminating piece of reflection for the progressive reflective model. After instilling reflection through the Writer's Report and blogging, the Writer's Report asks the students to reach back to the beginning of the class and reflect on their goals. For example, Gia writes:

I am composing this letter to examine and reflect on my academic writing

past, present, and future. At the time of my Writer's Report, I was already

very familiar and comfortable with papers and had been forced to write

several research essays in high school. A clear strength included critical

analysis, even though I did not include this skill in my writer's report. I

was very used to writing in the 'five-paragraph essay' format. During this

period, my greatest weakness was definitely having no idea how to even

begin to include my opinion within an academic piece. The thought of

expressing my own thoughts and beliefs scared and intimidated me. I was

so afraid of my opinions being views as unacceptable or wrong in the eyes

of the professor.

In this excerpt, Gia sets her intention for the Portfolio Cover Letter through reflecting on

her past, present, and future while addressing her initial goals of the semester. She

explains her previous strengths and weaknesses, but also acknowledges an extremely real

fear—incorporating her opinion in an essay. In her article, "Letter Writing in the College

Classroom," Elaine Fredericksen explains, "Cover letters help teachers understand

students' fears" (282). In reviewing my students' Portfolio Cover Letters, I realized that

through progressive reflection beginning at the start the semester, students feel confident

enough to finally reflect on their fears and struggles regarding writing in the Portfolio

Cover Letter. For example, Ben expresses, "Before this class, I was not a confident writer

at all. I was always the worst writer in the class. I constantly worried about if I was

plagiarizing and if my transitions were strong enough." Unlike Becca, who expressed her

concerns immediately in her Writer's Report, Ben previously called himself "decent."

However, through constantly reflecting and finding his process during the class, Ben finally understands himself as a writer and feels comfortable expressing his fears of writing and moving forward with his accomplishments.

Like Gia and Ben, Becca also expresses her fears in her Portfolio Cover Letter:

Coming into this semester, I started off feeling very unprepared…I can truly say I have come a long way, and have grown as a writer because of this class…After reading my Writer's Report and Diagnostic Essay from the beginning of the year I was appalled by my writing…The beginning of the year does not seem to have been that long ago, so I was very surprised to have seen different my writing has changed and grown within only a couple of months. Before this class, one of my biggest struggles was writing intriguing introductions. Fast forward a couple of months and now I have just written one of my best introductions yet…Though I have grown very much in the last couple of months, there are still weaknesses I struggle with…One thing I have learned though, is that your writing can always improve and it is never considered 'bad' because it is your voice and your opinion.

Beginning the semester eighteen weeks ago, Becca divulged her unpreparedness and her uneasiness with her writing. Now, after a semester of continuous reflection, Becca can write a poignant Portfolio Cover Letter that addresses her past, present, future, goals, and fears regarding writing. She now has the language to discuss her struggles with introductions, conclusions, and being more creative in her writing. She possesses the insight to appropriately and beneficially self-evaluate her skills in order to know herself

as a writer and move forward in her writing career. Most of all, through continuous reflection, Becca has grown, and she had the opportunity to watch herself grow through the Writer's Report, the reflective blog, and the Portfolio Cover Letter.

Outside the Composition Classroom: Inciting Transfer through Reflection

Completing the suggested three-staged reflective progression method remains no easy task. It requires a great deal of commitment to continuously incorporate reflection into the course. All of the pieces suggested, the Writer's Report, the reflective blog, and the Portfolio Cover Letter, must be planned and woven into the course to successfully produce reflection in the first-year composition classroom. But the question remains, what is the outcome of this progression, besides reflective students? I argue that through reflection and specifically through the suggested three-stage model, students will be able to transfer their writing knowledge and process to other courses and writing situations making the model beneficial to utilize.

To suggest transfer as a benefit of the three-staged reflective progression, it remains imperative to include Yancey et al's definition of transfer. They explain the concept of transfer as: "What we mean by transfer, and how much—if any—transfer of writing knowledge might be possible as a subject of contention in higher education" (Yancey et al 4). Concerned with the possibility of transfer Yancey et al set out to understand what aspects of writing courses students transfer across the curriculum. Through their discussion of transfer, Yancey et al recognize the importance of portfolios and cover letters as reflective texts that allow teachers insight on the exact transfer that will occur for students.

In order to incite transfer through reflection in my classroom, I specifically asked my students to include what they will take with them from our writing class in their Portfolio Cover Letter. While this strategy is a bit blatant, it allowed students to reflect on what they will specifically transfer and allowed me to know what aspects of the course will successfully transfer to other writing situations. In her Portfolio Cover Letter, Gia specifically discussed her future outside of our class and how she has used her newfound writing skills in other classes. Originally afraid to state her own opinion and make an argument, Gia reflects,

> Regarding my future as a writer, the skills that I had learned in EN-125 are carrying to my other courses. Unsure how to incorporate my opinion within my United States Politics paper, I employed the commentary format to clearly analyze the author's points and state my opinion. I even included a clarifying paragraph, which ultimately enhanced my paper as a whole…Regarding my strengths and weaknesses, I have improved in numerous ways upon finishing the course. This class helped me realize my passion for writing and expressing my ideas, inspiring me to even apply to work at the writing center next semester. I have even considered minoring in English.

Gia provides an insightful Portfolio Cover Letter that allows me to understand what exactly will and has transferred from our course. Already in her political science class, Gia utilizes our structure for the second essay and confidently moved away from the common five-paragraph essay. Additionally, Gia recognizes how to successfully incorporate her opinion in papers and will continue to do so throughout her academic

career. In her Portfolio Cover Letter, she reexamined her Writer's Report in order to answer the transfer question by addressing her strengths, weaknesses, and current mindset regarding writing.

Like Gia, Becca also provides a perceptive Portfolio Cover Letter allowing me to understand what specifically will transfer from our EN-125 course to other writing situations. Becca, who began the semester feeling extremely unprepared, declares her newfound confidence. She writes,

> One thing I have learned though, is that your writing can always improve and it is never considered bad for it is your voice and your opinion. That is what I will take with me into the future—my opinion. It was never taught to me that incorporating my opinion in the papers I write was something that is acceptable. I know in the future I will have to be able to write an extraordinary essay to get into a decent Physician Assistant school, and now I have the confidence to do so.

Becca singles out the exact skill she will be transferring to other writing situations—making an argument and incorporating her opinion. She also explicitly names another situation where she will employ her writing skills allowing me the privilege of knowing the situation outside of the writing classroom. Becca reflects on a common aspect of writing in which many first-year writing students reflect on—her confidence. Initially opening up about her fears and unpreparedness in her Writer's Report, Becca built foundational writing skills and then recognized them through reflection during the semester. In her Portfolio Cover Letter, Becca came full circle by recognizing her original uneasiness, her newfound confidence, and the skills she will take with her in her

future writing career. The most important aspect of these realizations is that this information can only be known through the avenue of reflection.

Conclusion: "Think Before You Draw a Conclusion"

After researching the role of reflection in composition classrooms and drawing on the work of Schön, Ash and Clayton, Yancey, Sommers, and Smith, the three progressive assignments—the Writer's Report, the reflective blog, and the Portfolio Cover Letter—produce successful student reflections and incite transfer. As Laurel Bower explains in her essay "Student Reflection and Critical Thinking: A Rhetorical Analysis of 88 Portfolio Cover Letters," "Metacognition is a complex skill…reflection must be integrated into the classroom from beginning to end, progressing from simple to more complex problem-solving questions" (64). The suggested reflective progression sequence follows Bower's line of thinking by asking students to conquer the dis-ease of the Writer's Report and analyzing themselves as writers. After reflecting on their starting point, the students continuously reflected on their writing process throughout the remainder of the semester through blogging. Reinventing the Writer's Memo on an online platform, technology-centered students felt comfortable opening up and providing meaningful reflection about their writing and connecting with peers in order to induce productive feedback. Lastly, by composing a culminating Portfolio Cover Letter the students gradually moved from simple to complex reflection where they had the opportunity to look back at all of their writing experiences and evaluate where they are today. By completing the Portfolio Cover Letter, students drew upon a semester of reflection and decided where they will go from the composition classroom and what skills they will take with them. Ultimately, the students moved from trying to understand

themselves as writers at the beginning of the semester to knowing themselves by the end and transferring these foundational writing skills to other writing situations. Reflection allows students to connect their process through this progression, and we as instructors witness first-year students progress as writers. By carefully planning progressive reflection throughout the composition classroom, instructors will have the unique opportunity to read extraordinary reflections and watch students grow into cognizant and confident writers.

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