“This is Almost an Identity for Me”:
Disposition, Academic Literacy, and the Experiences of Successful Student Writers

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

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Abstract

Through an ethnographically-oriented, mixed-methods study, this dissertation explores the experiences of student writers employed in a university writing center, focusing on the dispositions—that is, the internalized values, beliefs, and practices—of those student writers. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, I begin theorizing the role of dispositions in relation to academic literacy development. Based on students’ stories about their experiences with academic literacy, I identify a set of dispositional qualities and examine how, when, and why those dispositional qualities influence students’ developing relationships to academic literacy. This dissertation explores how dispositions generate action and shape perception, how dispositions are shaped by experiences, and how dispositions function in relation to context. I argue that a dispositional framework offers a productive way to further our understanding of how students learn to write in the academy that is inclusive of students’ voices and students’ experiences with academic literacy.
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Chapter 1:
Reconsidering Frameworks: A Case for Disposition

Introduction

During the 2012-2013 academic year, I worked on an assessment project for the University of Nevada, Reno’s Core Writing Program. The focus of the project was a three-course combination, ENG 100i/105/106,¹ that was originally designed to serve as a bridge course between basic writing and first-year composition. The combination of courses, which students took concurrently, included a three-unit genre-based academic writing course (ENG 100i), a one-unit critical reading course (ENG 105), and a one-unit editing for style course (ENG 106). After the assessment team developed and piloted a rubric, collected portfolios from students, and recruited readers, we began norming sessions with those readers to develop a common understanding of the rubric and scoring consistency among the readers. In those conversations, it quickly became clear that readers were searching for evidence that skills taught in one course were being applied to essays from the other two courses. For example, they wanted to see evidence of “Rhetorical Reading,” a focus in ENG 105, in the essays written for ENG 100i and ENG 106, and they wanted to reserve the highest score on the rubric for the portfolios that demonstrated “Rhetorical Reading” across essays from all three courses.

While the readers didn’t identify it as such, what these readers were looking for was knowledge transfer, a concept used to describe the ways in which knowledge can be transferred from one context to another. And from a surface level understanding of

¹ This combination of courses has since been combined as ENG 100j.
knowledge transfer and the goals of these courses, the assumption that knowledge transfer should have been demonstrated in those student portfolios makes sense. The three composition courses are designed to function together, and from an administrative and instructor standpoint, the three courses do function together. The contexts and assignments have enough similarities that students should have seen the parallels in the writing they were doing and applied knowledge learned in each course across all three courses. And the assessment readers—all instructors of First-Year Composition (FYC)—wanted to see evidence that students were learning in these courses.

The assessment team and its readers, however, didn’t find as much evidence as they had hoped for. These findings were not surprising to me. The assessment project wasn’t designed to look explicitly for transfer but to assess a set of learning outcomes designed for the combination of courses. At the same time, I found that much of the research on knowledge transfer in composition studies shows a similar lack of evidence. As an instructor, I understand the desire to find evidence of student learning. That is, after all, why most of us teach; we want students to learn. We want them to learn how to communicate effectively in multiple contexts and to develop a sense of academic literacy. As a scholar, I began to think more critically about the implications of the apparently consistent “lack of evidence” when looking for knowledge transfer—especially considering many of us know, intuitively and anecdotally, that students do learn in our classes. The more I looked at knowledge transfer research, the more unsatisfied I became with using “knowledge transfer” to represent student learning.

Typically, studies on knowledge transfer focus on isolating a specific “knowledge” (e.g., a skill like writing a thesis statement) as well as the contexts that that
knowledge is meant to move from and to (e.g. between a FYC course and another course). When studies find evidence of that isolated “knowledge” missing from the send context, they call it a failure. However, this model’s isolation of “knowledge” means removing that knowledge from any sociocultural influences, including any preconceptions a student might have about writing or any influencing factors from the classroom context, institution, or community. At the same time, this model overlooks the learner’s role in the learning process. It does not acknowledge how students might perceive the literacy tasks they are engaged with or the decisions students make in responding to those literacy tasks. Knowledge transfer, then, presents learning as a decontextualized and passive process—which contradicts much of what composition scholars believe about writing.

Despite the valuable work of knowledge transfer scholars focused on examining the application of “knowledge” in academic literacy, I see a need to shift our focus to a alternative metaphor for learning that is more inclusive of students’ experiences with academic literacy. One such framework is disposition, a broad construct that includes the perceptions, practices, and values that both influence and are influenced by students’ experiences. The perceptions students have, the practices they embody, and the decisions they make all play a critical role in their academic literacy development.

My study explores this concept with a focus on student writers' experiences with academic literacy across disciplines and explores the role that dispositions play in those experiences. More specifically, I demonstrate that not only do the dispositions students bring with them to college influence how they interact with academic literacy but that both experiences and the contexts of those experiences in turn shape those dispositions.
Through this work, I argue that the concept of disposition complicates how we think about academic literacy development in ways that are more inclusive of both the student and context. I contend that dispositions provide a valuable and productive framework for studying how students learn to write in the academy, furthering the field’s understanding of academic literacy development.

**A Brief History of Knowledge Transfer Research**

Knowledge transfer can be defined as the transfer of knowledge from one context to another. The earliest cited research on knowledge transfer, conducted by psychologist Edward Thorndike in 1901, suggests that knowledge transfer only occurs if identical elements are present in both contexts, but that claim was quickly challenged by fellow psychologist Charles Judd who argued that an abstract general principle can also be transferred (Haskell). This second model has been at the heart of most composition scholars’ conversations about knowledge transfer. In an early contribution to the field of composition, W. Ross Winterowd defines transferable knowledge as the “‘basics’ of writing: syntactic fluency, control of diction, sense of audience, organizational ability, ‘mechanics’ such as punctuation and spelling” and separates these skills from “local skills,” such as those related to genres or specific disciplines (1). This distinction between generalizable knowledge and local knowledge dates back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in which he argues for both *koina topoi* and *idia topoi* (Nowacek 13). While Aristotle values both, the belief that abstract generalizable knowledge is valued for its transferability over other kinds of knowledge is an idea that has persisted.

Early research in composition looking for evidence of generalizable knowledge transferring from our FYC courses to other contexts has not been particularly promising.
Lucille McCarthy’s frequently cited 1987 article, “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing across the Curriculum,” is one example of this disappointing view of what our student do (or don’t do) with what they learn in our FYC courses. McCarthy followed “Dave” over the course of three semesters; she observed, interviewed, collected composing-aloud protocols, and analyzed sample essays with instructor feedback on them. Despite McCarthy’s ability to see the similarities between different assignments Dave faced in his three courses, Dave believed each new assignment he was asked to write “was totally unlike anything he had done before” (234). He was essentially unable to apply the writing knowledge that McCarthy was looking for (e.g., thesis/subpoint organization, coherence at paragraph and sentence level). Three years later, Barbara Walvoord and McCarthy again looked for evidence of transfer in students from four different college courses. They claim that their research shows evidence of knowledge (thesis and subpoints again) being transferred, but more recent scholars reviewing their study note that Walvrood and McCarthy “cite example after example of students who try to apply knowledge and experience that is inappropriate or in ways that are not helpful” (Smit 129). The lack of conclusive evidence in these two studies is not unusual for studies of knowledge transfer. In fact, across disciplines, more research shows how students fail to transfer than anything else (McKeough et al.). However, knowledge transfer has remained a ubiquitous, assumed goal for educators.

Many composition scholars interested in knowledge transfer have built on D.N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon argument that knowledge transfer is not a goal that can be achieved without effort. In their seminal article, “Teaching for Transfer,” Perkins and Salomon focus not on the “knowledge” but on the process of “transfer” itself, identifying
two types of transfer: “high road” transfer, which relies on “deliberate mindful abstraction,” and “low road” transfer, which relies on superficial stimuli (25). They make a case that both types of transfer are important—and that knowledge transfer is something that needs to be taught explicitly. They propose specific strategies for how to teach for transfer, such as providing cues for low road transfer and helping students understand general principles behind skills for high road transfer. The strategies that Perkins and Salomon propose to teach for transfer represent an important shift in thinking about knowledge transfer, calling on educators to consider their role in conveying the knowledge they want to see transferred.

Building on Perkins and Salomon’s argument for explicitly teaching for transfer, composition scholars have made arguments for “cueing” knowledge transfer with specific, in-class strategies (Ford), utilizing “third spaces” or environments alternative to the FYC classroom (Frazier), emphasizing metacognition and self-reflection (Wardle, “Understanding Transfer”), and considering the role of students’ prior knowledge (Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi). Other scholars have focused instead on theorizing when and why the process of transfer might be interrupted—whether through students’ tendency to compartmentalize courses and the content of those courses (Nelms and Dively), FYC programs’ reliance on decontextualized genres (Wardle, “Mutt Genres”) or students’ preconceptions of the writing done in FYC as being personal and expressive and therefore too dissimilar from the writing they expect to do elsewhere (Bergman and Zepernick). While each of these studies adds a new perspective to our

2 This compartmentalization is what McCarthy’s “Dave” describes.
understanding of knowledge transfer, they also highlight that “knowledge transfer” is a limiting framework that rarely accounts for influential factors such as students’ perceptions and beliefs about writing or students’ roles in the learning process.

Rebecca Nowacek reframes knowledge transfer with the goal of considering students’ active roles the learning process. She proposes looking at knowledge transfer as a rhetorical act in which students are “agents of integration.” Agents of integration, she describes, work to perceive and to convey effectively the connection between contexts (38). By understanding students as agents we can redirect attention from isolated “knowledge” to students’ agency in moments of transfer. She articulates a framework that understands transfer on a matrix with two axes—two spectra—with “integration” suggesting transfer that is both intentional and successful. A key point on the matrix is what Nowacek calls “frustrated integration”: where students see connections between two contexts but don’t actively work to incorporate those connections, which she calls “selling” the connections (41). In the more traditional view of knowledge transfer, these moments would be dismissed as failure, but Nowacek’s framework acknowledges these moments as valuable, which not only demonstrates a more complex view of knowledge transfer but also emphasizes what the students are doing with their knowledge when they are “transferring” (or not “transferring”). In other words, Nowacek’s framework makes students role in the process of knowledge transfer active rather than passive.

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3 Smit would likely consider “frustrated integration” as an attempt to apply knowledge in ways that are “inappropriate” and “not helpful,” much like his critique of Walvrood and McCarthy’s study.
Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak’s recent work also suggests that traditional view of knowledge transfer is insufficient for studying the ongoing and complex process of academic literacy development. Yancey et al., like Nowacek, propose a more active definition of knowledge transfer, which they described as a “dynamic activity through which students, like all composers, actively make use of prior knowledge as they respond to new writing tasks” (103). From their research, they identify three practices that students enact: the process of reworking or “remixing” prior knowledge and practice for new tasks successfully; the process of drawing on prior knowledge and practice but adding a limited number of new concepts, which they see as unsuccessful; and the process of creating new knowledge after a failed effort or “critical incident” (104). These “critical incidents” are built around a student’s “failure” to apply prior knowledge to a new context, but Yancey and her coauthors go on to describe the ways in which these “failures” can led to new understandings of writing demonstrated in later writing tasks. These “critical incidents,” then point to a slower development process than the typical knowledge transfer framework allows for.

Michelle Navarre Cleary’s research also complicates the process that knowledge transfer is meant to capture, considering the impact of students’ identities beyond any academic identities. Cleary’s research is focused specifically on adult learners and how their experiences writing in contexts outside of the academy (work, community groups, etc.) influence how students write for school. In one example, Cleary describes the disconnect one student, Tiffany, feels about her sense of self and her writing for school. Cleary states that Tiffany’s dislike of grammar “may involve not only her sense of competence but also her sense of identity as an African American woman” (674). The
literacy practices of the academy, which are borne from the professionalization practices of experts, represent a formal culture associated with white, male, middle-class scholars (Geisler; Lillis). It is, in short, a literacy that conflicts with Tiffany’s home literacy and identity. Cleary goes on to describe how Tiffany resisted her scholarly identity by giving up on an assignment that met the length requirement even though she hadn’t said all she wanted to say (674). Though some scholars might see this as a failure of transfer, Cleary does not identify it as such. Instead she acknowledges that this conflict between Tiffany’s existing literacy practices and values and those of the academy influences her relationship to academic writing and, as such, her development as a writer.

Tiffany’s story resonates with the story Nowacek tells of Kelly—both of which demonstrate relationships to academic literacy that are more complex than the traditional knowledge transfer framework can truly address. Kelly intentionally didn’t work to her full potential because she made a decision to “worry less about her academic work” and instead “immerse herself in things other than books” (46-47). In Kelly’s case, she sees connections but does not “sell” them in her writing (47-48) because she has decided to focus more of her time and energy on other pursuits. Cleary similarly notes that Tiffany makes connections between non-academic experience she has with visual thinking and the writing process (679), but by giving up on the assignment, she makes no effort to “sell” those connections. While Cleary doesn’t address how Tiffany’s writing was evaluated, Nowacek does note that Kelly received a low grade on her assignment. And, as Nowacek explains, many scholars would categorize this a “failure” of transfer.

Dismissing either of these instances as “failure,” however, neglects what connections were seen by these two students—as well as the deliberate decisions both
students made in those moments and what those decisions might say about those students’ relationships to academic literacy. If we rely solely on the knowledge transfer framework to assess learning, we do students like Kelly and Tiffany a disservice; knowledge transfer is, at best, a limited view of what students do when learning to write in the academy and at worst, it is reductionist, ignoring the ways in which students actively participate in their own learning processes the influences of existing literacy practices, perceptions, and beliefs that influence academic literacy development.

**What Knowledge Transfer Leaves Out**

One key issue at play here is that knowledge transfer does not equal learning; it is one of many metaphors used to describe learning. Education scholars Paul Hagar and Phil Hodkinson break down the underlying assumptions of the metaphor as such: knowledge is represented as a product independent of the learner, learning involves movement of that product from place to place, and knowledge is separate from the context in which it was learned (622). Breaking down the metaphor in this way draws uncomfortable attention to how the knowledge transfer metaphor neglects crucial elements of students’ learning and development: by focusing entirely on what is learned, a knowledge transfer framework ignores the role of the student in the learning process; by focusing entirely on static moments, a knowledge transfer framework limits our view of the ongoing development process; and by relying on decontextualized “knowledge,” a knowledge transfer framework fails to address the relationship between students and the academic context in which they are working.

This critique echoes composition studies’ “social turn” of the 1980s when scholars began turning their attention away from the cognitive processes of writers,
exemplified by the work of Linda Flower and John Hayes, and to the importance of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which students learn and develop literacy. Scholars like Patricia Bizzell, Linda Brodkey, and Kenneth Bruffee break down the romantic image of “writer-writes-alone” and argue instead for viewing writing as a social artifact situated within and maintained by communities of knowledgeable peers. One such community is the academy. The writing that represents the academic community is shaped by decades of professionalization and publication practices in/by the academy (Brodkey; Geisler), and those practices are influenced by the sociocultural and political ideologies held by the academy. Understanding how students learn to write in the academy or develop sense of academic literacy then requires addressing those ideologies and their relation to the social act of writing within that community.

This social turn also draws attention to importance of the diverse communities that students belong to and existing practices and values they embody in how students engage with academic writing. In How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School, the National Research Council acknowledges that students bring preconceptions to the classroom that need to be addressed. Those preconceptions include the “prior knowledge” about writing that other knowledge transfer scholars, like Yancey and her coauthors, are concerned with. But students also bring existing literacy practices (Brodkey; Geisler) and distinctive ways of valuing and interacting with various tools and technologies, including writing (Gee). Students like Nowacek’s Kelly and Cleary’s Tiffany demonstrate how a student’s existing values or practices can come in conflict with those of the academy—and how a traditional knowledge transfer framework would dismiss these students’ experiences as moments of “failure.”
From Hagar and Hodkinson’s view, the knowledge transfer metaphor overlooks the sociocultural and political factors that influence learning and the preconceptions and existing practices that come out of students’ diverse backgrounds. Their perspective of knowledge transfer echoes what Paolo Freire calls a “banking theory and practice,” which resists dialogue and conceals certain aspects of how people exist in the world as well as “fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings” (84). Freire argues for a type of education that “affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (84). Similarly, Hagar and Hodkinson argue for a view of learning in which “learning consists of a relational web in a process of ongoing change” (631). Studying knowledge transfer requires identifying static moments—the points that knowledge is meant to travel from/to. Such end points, however, are “simplifications” and “arbitrary stages” (Hagar and Hodkinson 633). Most studies on knowledge transfer in composition identify these arbitrary stages as FYC and some subsequent course, but we know that learning to write does not start or stop with FYC.

Moving past the arbitrary stages that knowledge transfer focuses on and viewing students as “beings in the process of becoming” allows us to acknowledge the ongoing nature of learning and, specifically, of developing academic literacy. Longitudinal studies, like the work of Lee Ann Carroll, Anne Harrington and Marcia Curtis, and Marilyn Sternglass have unraveled this “process of becoming” as students develop academic literacy. Sternglass’s work emphasizes that development happens slowly over time; Carroll builds on this and argues that development is neither constant nor linear and that students in courses like FYC “learn to write differently” though not necessarily “better” or closer to an “idealized version of the academic writing” (60). Yancey et al.’s
work on knowledge transfer illustrates this kind of development; they describe one of their participants, Rick, who demonstrates development after what they call a “critical incident.” In this critical incident, Rick’s “prior knowledge and motivation” were insufficient to demonstrate knowledge transfer in the way the researchers (and Rick’s instructor) were looking for (122), yet Rick demonstrated a new understanding of writing later in the term that allowed him to navigate other literacy tasks. This navigation of other literacy tasks, which largely fell outside of Yancey et al.’s knowledge transfer framework, suggests the type of ongoing, nonlinear, and idiosyncratic development process that Carroll describes. And a framework for understanding the learning process that accepts that students are unfinished and in a constant state of transformation presents a way to look at Rick’s “critical incident” in a way that more accurately represents how and in what ways students develop academic literacy.

When we accept this broader view of the development process, we further complicate the process that knowledge transfer is meant to represent by opening up conversations about the connections between intellectual development and personal, social, and emotional development. Herrington and Curtis represent the process of students’ development as writers trying “to make sense of what they were asked to learn in light of their personal histories, perceived identities, values, and goals” (354). They argue that this process is “interdependent” with students’ personal development (357), a concept that resonates with scholars in other disciplines focused on student development more broadly. Citing research from cognitive, developmental, and social psychology as well as education and anthropology, Susan Ambrose and her coauthors explain that students’ intellectual development is intricately linked with students’ social and
emotional development. They note that students between the ages of 17 and 22 (i.e., traditionally aged college students) are undergoing significant changes such as learning to live independently and negotiate new social networks in addition to the intellectual demands of college (158-159). While some instructors may want their classrooms to be separate from students’ personal lives, as Ambrose et al. put it, “students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door” (169-170). Nowacek’s discussion of Kelly and Cleary’s discussion of Tiffany both represent examples of how students’ lives outside of the classroom can influence their academic work, again suggesting that the knowledge transfer metaphor is unsatisfactory for understanding how students develop as academic writers.

While studying knowledge transfer has some value for looking at content and curriculum, I argue that it is necessary to consider students more holistically when trying to understand how they develop academic literacy. Stories like those of Kelly, Tiffany, and Rick show us that the framework knowledge transfer provides does not allow us to properly address the integral roles that students’ identities, values, and perceptions play in how they interact with literacy tasks and new writing contexts. All three stories describe experiences with academic writing that Smit would likely consider “not helpful” and that the traditional knowledge transfer framework would classify as “failures.” But calling these moments “failures” dismisses the development that is happening for these students—and, as Cleary, Nowacek, and Yancey et al.’s research demonstrates, leaves scholars with a limited view to understand this development.

My goal with this project is to explore an alternative framework for looking at the ongoing and complex process of academic literacy development. Hagar and Hodkinson
remind us that “knowledge transfer” is just a metaphor for learning. In their proposal for an alternative metaphor of learning as a changing “relational web” (631), they offer the concept of disposition as one way for scholars to analyze students’ experiences within this web. Some composition scholars have come to a similar conclusion to Hagar and Hodkinson; though they are not necessarily abandoning the knowledge transfer metaphor completely, they have begun to theorize the relationship between disposition and knowledge transfer. Specifically, they have identified “problem-exploring” dispositions (Wardle, “Creative Repurposing”), emotional dispositions (Jarratt et al.), and dispositional qualities such as self-efficacy (Driscoll and Wells) as key in facilitating knowledge transfer. My own work takes up the concept of disposition but moves away from the knowledge transfer metaphor and instead situates disposition within a metaphor of learning as a “process of becoming,” creating space to address key influencing factors, such as students’ existing values, students’ ongoing process of development, and the contexts in which they are engaged as they learn to write in the academy.

Understanding Disposition

A common use of the term disposition is to describe a characteristic or personality trait—such as being compassionate, brave, or indecisive. These are qualities that, with a little observation and consideration, we can identify in others. In these commonplace examples of disposition, we can see how such qualities might influence how a person responds to a situation. For example, someone who is indecisive is likely to struggle when presented with multiple options, perhaps deferring to someone else to avoid making a decision altogether; in the context of academic writing, a student who is indecisive may struggle when assigned to "write an argument about anything," perhaps procrastinating
on the assignment to avoid making a decision about a topic as long as possible. Scholars in education, psychology, and philosophy have explored the role of dispositions in relation to behavior, personality, and attitude, and scholars interested in studying critical thinking have published numerous taxonomies identifying dispositions or “habits of mind” believed to promote critical thinking. These taxonomies include common qualities like open-mindedness, persistence, creativity, and metacognition (Costa and Kallick; Perkins et al., “Intelligence”).

When the conversation about disposition is focused on writing education specifically, those taxonomies change little. Piazza and Siebert point out that, in the past, writers and writing educators often presented dispositions as maxims or generalized writing advice. They cite accounts that espouse values such as thinking “outside of the box” and showing commitment and perseverance (275-276). Similar dispositions have also been incorporated into formal learning outcomes for K-12 students. For example, the 1996 Standards for the English Language Arts published by National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) frames students as needing to become “knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities” (qtd. in Piazza and Siebert 276). Similarly, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), National Writing Project (NWP), and NCTE published the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing in 2011, which outlines eight “habits of mind” that will/should prepare students to face the writing challenges at the college level. The Framework’s habits of mind include creativity, persistence, and metacognition—not only aligning with repeated maxims about successful writers as well as the taxonomies proposed by critical thinking scholars.
In more recent, albeit limited, research in composition, similar dispositions have been identified as important in influencing knowledge transfer and students’ approach to writing. In a 2012 special issue of Composition Forum on “Writing and Transfer,” Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells make a case for considering the role of dispositions within the context of knowledge transfer. Summarizing key theories from education and psychology, they identify four dispositions that impact students’ writing-related knowledge transfer, one of which is a “positive value of writing.” The impact of a positive value of writing has been documented by composition scholars before. Susan Jarratt and her colleagues describe the role that “emotional dispositions” play in knowledge transfer and argue that students’ positive memories of writing courses lead to positive instances of transfer. And, although they don’t explicitly call it disposition, Bergman and Zepernick highlight the importance of students holding a positive value of writing, demonstrating how students’ perceptions of FYC influence how they approach writing in other courses.

Like Driscoll and Wells, Wardle considers the role disposition plays in the context of knowledge transfer and makes a case for what she calls a “problem-exploring” disposition ("Creative Repurposing"). Her definition of this disposition, which includes qualities like curiosity, reflection, and a willingness to engage in trial and error, again echoes the taxonomies promoted by education scholars. Though their research is not focused on disposition, Sommers and Saltz’s report on the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing posits that the students who make the most significant development as writers are those who view themselves as “novices.” They describe this construct as representing an “open attitude,” a “willingness to experiment,” and a faith
that meeting new expectations is possible (298). Sommers and Saltz’s definition uses similar language and shares some similar traits with Wardle’s “problem-exploring” disposition (e.g., the willingness to experiment and the willingness to engage in trial and error)—as well as to traits represented in taxonomies from education scholars.

In an effort to move beyond these taxonomies and their frequent link to knowledge transfer, I turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* can be defined as a system of dispositions, which shape and are shaped by our lived experiences, internalized values and beliefs, and everyday practices. This definition can be broken into two parts: dispositions shape our experiences, and dispositions are shaped by our experiences.

The first part, that dispositions shape our experiences, suggests that dispositions function as an organizing structure for our actions, perceptions, and values. As Bourdieu explains it, they become the “basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience” (Logic 78). In other words, dispositions determine what available means of response we have and which actions we are most likely to respond with in a given situation. For a student learning to write in the academy, this means that their existing literacy practices and perceptions of writing will shape their responses to a given literacy task. We can see this play out in stories like that of Tiffany, whose anxiety about academic writing often manifests in the form of procrastination (Cleary).

The second part of the definition acknowledges that, while dispositions shape our experiences, those experiences also shape our dispositions. *Habitus*, Bourdieu argues, is “history turned into nature” (Logic 78). The experiences that make up that history are embodied, but that embodied history does not create a fixed set of personality traits or
immutable characteristics that solidify in early childhood. Rather, our dispositions are made up of multiple qualities which are socially-situated and constantly being influenced by our experiences. This means, in part, that students’ dispositions can—and do—shift as they experience new types of writing and new contexts throughout their lives, including in college. Bourdieu’s definition of disposition, then, encompasses the metaphor of students as “beings in the process of becoming,” making it a useful framework for analyzing the complex and ongoing processes of academic literacy development.

While knowledge transfer scholars have begun to address disposition and acknowledge that dispositions “are a critical foundation upon which learning is built and potentially transferred” (Driscoll and Wells), they are still relying on the limited view of learning that the knowledge transfer metaphor gives us. In order to advance our understanding of academic literacy development, I propose shifting our attention to a metaphor for learning that frames students as “beings in the process of becoming.” To that end, I look to dispositions as a means for exploring academic literacy development as an ongoing, multifaceted process. While I acknowledge the limitations of knowledge transfer, I see dispositions not as a replacement for but as a complement to knowledge transfer.

I approached this study with the following questions in mind:

- What are the key dispositions embodied by successful student writers?
- How do students enact these dispositions when approaching literacy tasks?

I explore these questions through a descriptive, mixed-methods study of writing consultants employed at UNR’s University Writing Center (UWC). I use this data to begin theorizing the role of dispositions within the context of academic literacy.
development. I argue that disposition, as an alternative to knowledge transfer, offers a productive way to further our understanding of how students learn to writing in the academy that is inclusive of students’ voices and students’ experiences with academic literacy.

**Research Context**

The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) is a land grant institution founded in 1874. Approximately 21,000 students are enrolled at UNR, with 18,000 undergraduate students and 3,000 graduate students. UNR offers more than 145 degrees from nine degree-granting colleges; however 75% of students are enrolled in the following five colleges: College of Liberal Arts, College of Business, Division of Health Sciences, College of Engineering, or College of Science ([Demographic, Population & Proximity Data](#)). Regardless of major, all UNR students must take a minimum of 24 credits of General Education courses. Included in these required courses is a 3-credit course from the Core Writing Program, English 102. While English 102 is the course the meets the General Education requirements, approximately 70% of students place into English 101, the prerequisite for English 102 (Nicolas). These students typically take English 101 in their first semester and English 102 in their second semester.

The UWC, founded in 2009, is a student-fee funded campus program that provides writing support not only to students in those Core Writing Program courses but to all writers within the UNR community. The UWC employs 35-40 writing consultants each semester, all of whom are undergraduate or graduate students—and since the UWC serves students from all disciplines, they hire students from all disciplines. In addition to conducting over 6,100 one-on-one consultations with writers across campus each year,
these writing consultants also provide workshops, resources, and events for both students and faculty at UNR. Central to the UWC’s mission is creating “an academic community of strong and confident writers” (Core Values and Mission), and the writing consultants employed at the UWC are the foundation for creating that community.

Methodology

As a teacher-scholar, I work in the tradition of feminist scholarship, challenging traditional narratives of how students learn to write in the academy and how the academy assesses that learning. Feminist inquiry “enables researchers to be introspective, to analyze the research process in response to participants, and to adjust and refine their research goals as they learn more about those they study” (Kirsch 3). One step in this process is identifying my own research stance. Jeffrey Grabill defines a research stance as “a position or a set of beliefs and obligations that shape how one acts as a researcher” and argues that stance is “the single most important issue to consider when researching in or with communities” (211). My research stance includes three central beliefs:

- Writing is a social artifact, shaped by the contexts and communities in which it is situated
- Literacy development is an ongoing, multifaceted, and complex process
- Student writers have agency within that process, making critical and deliberate decisions about their interactions with literacy tasks

My research questions and approach to answering those questions are grounded in this stance; in designing this project, I sought methods that would allow me to be responsive to the multiple literacies and discourse communities of the academy and methods of analysis that highlight students’ individual experiences, voices, and agencies.
It made sense, then, that I turned to ethnography, or more specifically to ethnographically-oriented methods. Beverly Moss describes ethnography as “allow[ing] a researcher to gain a comprehensive view of the social interactions, behaviors, and beliefs of a community or social group” (155). Similarly, Linda Brodkey argues that ethnography is called for when studying “relations among writers, writing, and written texts” (83). My research questions are focused on students’ values and practices and their developing relationships to academic literacy, and ethnographically-oriented methods generate comprehensive data necessary to answer those questions. Though true ethnography was not an option for me, given the scope and limitations of this project, I knew that relying on ethnographically-oriented methods was the best option for answering my research question(s) while fairly attending to my research stance. While there are drawbacks of ethnographic methods—such as a small sample size and an inability to generalize claims— the goal of this study is not to present any sort of representative or generalizable illustration of the student population at UNR or even of the UWC. My aim with this research is instead to provide a detailed picture of these student writers’ experiences with academic literacy and how they make connections with those experiences.

In an effort to acknowledge the agency that student writers have, particularly in light of my critique of knowledge transfer, I wanted to keep student writers’ voices central in my study. As such, I chose to conduct a series of in-depth interviews. Irvin Seidman explains that “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (9). Though scholars have debated the reliability of interviews, noting inaccuracies,
forgetfulness, and exaggerations in writers’ accounts of past experiences with writing, Susan Jarratt et al. make the case that these retrospective interviews generate as much knowledge as they retrieve. In responding to questions, participants choose the stories they want to tell and how they want to tell them. Through these interviews, participants actively construct their own narratives of academic literacy development, and this construction—the choices they make regarding which stories to tell and which words to use—provides as much insight into the students’ experiences as the stories themselves. In other words, the fact that they choose a particular response to a question is in itself significant.

Another key aspect of feminist inquiry is articulating my underlying assumptions. It is therefore important to note my own experience working in writing centers and how this experience influences my research. My first real experience with teaching college level writers was as a peer consultant during my undergraduate career. I continued working in and with writing centers in multiple capacities over the course of 16 years, and while I did not work in the UWC at the time I was collecting data, I had worked there in previous semesters and therefore was already familiar with the hiring, training, and day-to-day practices and processes of the UWC. I approached this project, and this community, with existing beliefs about writing consultants and the work they do, particularly in the UWC.

4 Though some may argue that working as a writing consultant or “tutor” is not the same as teaching, I believe that writing consultants function in a liminal space where they are neither student nor teacher but draw on both roles simultaneously. In addition, my teaching philosophy is heavily influenced by the student-centered pedagogies common to writing centers.
One such belief is that writing consultants can be considered “successful writers”—by meeting the strict hiring requirements and/or participating in the ongoing training. Students interested in working as a writing consultant go through a formal application and hiring process, which includes submitting a cover letter, resume, academic writing sample, and academic or professional references as well as unofficial transcripts to demonstrate completion of English 102 and a minimum 3.0 GPA (Employment). Students whose application materials meet the Director’s hiring criteria are invited for an interview—in which the Director looks for qualities including interpersonal communication and audience awareness—before being hired. All UWC employees, regardless of position, participate in ongoing training and mentoring activities, focused primarily on writing-related topics and ways to talk about writing. By meeting the requirements and expectations of the UWC’s employment policies, participants in my study meet a set of standards identifying them as “successful” student writers.

My decision to focus on “successful” student writers rather than students who “fail” or who struggle with academic literacy development is also motivated by my desire to avoid finding fault in any particular student population or curriculum. Carroll makes a case for focusing our attention on our “least successful” students, those who arrive at college underprepared, but she also argues that there is value in studying the students who consider themselves “good writers” and “who fill many of the seats in our classrooms” (143). Though not all of students in my study came to college with the belief that they are “good writers” (and some admit to only sometimes seeing themselves that way), through their work in the UWC, they demonstrate enough confidence in their writing and
understanding of academic literacy to talk to other students about their writing. Studying the “successful” student writers employed by the UWC allows me to orient my research to productive elements of academic literacy development in students’ experiences.

Another belief that comes from my experience working in writing centers is that, despite representing multiple majors and disciplines across campus, students employed in a writing center tend to have a common language for talking about writing. While the university is a community in itself, it is also made up of multiple, smaller discourse communities. And as multiple scholars in composition have noted (Bazerman; Melzer; and Thaiss and Zawacki, to name a few), the language we use to talk about writing differs from one discipline to another. The UWC provides a unique research setting in that it represents a community of student writers who, by the nature of their employee training, have a shared language for talking about academic writing while also representing a diverse group of students. Of the approximately 40 students employed in the UWC, all nine of UNR’s academic colleges and a variety of majors within those colleges are represented, including psychology, political science, nursing, engineering, and business.

In addition to a two-day, pre-semester orientation, UWC employees are required to attend four workshops each semester. These workshops focus on understanding the goals and values of the UWC as well as learning a range of strategies for working with writers from across disciplines at any stage of the writing process. It is also through these workshops that UWC employees begin to learn a “common language” of working with a variety of writers. This common language, a product of the UWC community (and the larger writing center community) is a necessity for the work UWC employees participate in. This means that both Carlton, an English major, and Katie, an Atmospheric Science
major—both of whom are participants in my study—are capable of talking about their writing process in some depth and with similar, if not identical, terms because they have been trained in how to talk about writing processes. This common language removes a small amount of “translation” when it comes to analyzing and accurately representing participants accounts of their experiences with literacy tasks.

**Methods and Participants**

In order to explore the dispositions of these successful student writers, I conducted a modified Explanatory Mixed Methods model, a two-phase project in which quantitative data is collected and analyzed first and then used to shape the qualitative phase (Cresswell 224). After a brief presentation about my project at one of the UWC’s mid-semester workshops, I collected surveys from 31 UWC employees. This survey asked participants to respond to a series of statements using interval measures on a 10-point scale; statements were based on common values in the field of composition and current research on disposition such as writing as a process, working with multiple drafts, seeking feedback from others, etc. (the complete survey can be found in Appendix B). Survey data was calculated using descriptive statistics and analyzed for patterns of common perceptions, beliefs, and practices.

Of the 31 survey participants, 11 expressed interest in further participation and contacted me to schedule interviews. Interview questions were developed with the goal of eliciting stories from participants that would highlight their habits and practices when it comes to academic literacy tasks (e.g., Can you walk me through your writing process for a typical academic assignment?) as well as their beliefs and values about writing (e.g., How would you define a writer?). Some of these questions were developed based on
patterns found in the survey data, including questions about drafting and feedback (the full set of interview questions and related forms can be found in Appendices C-F). The first two semi-structured interviews, conducted during the Fall of 2015, were transcribed and coded using an open coding approach, loosely focused on emotion and value coding (Saldaña). After several iterations of coding and memoing, I wrote thick, descriptive profiles of each participant and identified 3-4 key values or beliefs for each (abbreviated profiles of each participant can be found in Appendix G).

A third interview was scheduled in the Spring of 2016 with nine of the 11 participants. These final interviews were shaped significantly by the themes that had emerged from survey data and my initial coding and analysis. As part of these interviews, I also asked participants to complete what I call an “Identity Inventory” (Appendix F). This document asked participants to list “identities or aspects of” their identity and was used as a prompt for a question near the end of the interview about the aspects of their identities they value (e.g., being a political enthusiast, free-spirited, a writer, etc.). This final interview also included questions to cross-check interpretations of values and beliefs for each participant, and participants’ responses to these questions helped clarify my analysis.

As I continued coding and refining themes, I continuously checked my interpretations with colleagues. I also continued reading recent research on disposition. As the project progressed, so too did my understanding of dispositions and how they function within the process of academic literacy development. In that respect, my definition of disposition grew out of these interviews as much as it came from drawing on existing research. And the dispositional qualities I have identified through this research
resonate with existing taxonomies of dispositions thought to aid in a students’ academic success, but they are ultimately distinctive to these 11 student writers and their experiences.

In the following chapters, I take up the critiques of knowledge transfer discussed earlier and present a case for considering dispositions as part of an alternative metaphor for learning, one that is inclusive of the students and contexts involved in the ongoing, multifaceted processes of academic literacy development. In Chapter 2, I examine how dispositions generate action and thought, shaping how students respond to literacy tasks. Focusing on three specific dispositional qualities (valuing agency, curiosity, and goal-oriented), I demonstrate how those dispositional qualities influence students’ interactions with literacy tasks as well as how students make sense of those interactions. This chapter sets a foundation for understanding the influence of students’ existing perceptions, values, and practices on the learning process. Chapter 3 considers the ways in which dispositions are dynamic, developing cumulatively as students engage with more experiences. In this chapter, I identify three additional dispositional qualities (valuing writing, critical self-reflection, and creativity) and explore how students’ individual histories and experiences in new contexts shape those emerging dispositions. Exploring these stories complicates the notion of linear development and static moments of learning, emphasizing that students are always “in the process of becoming.”

Dispositions always function in relation to the context in which they are operating, and Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between students’ dispositions and the academic context. I examine moments of “transformation” as students work to harmonize with or resist the dispositions embodied by the academic context. This chapter
unravels some of the complexities of students’ relationship to the academic context and, subsequently, to academic literacy. Chapter 5 functions as the conclusion to the dissertation, in which I address the central themes that emerged from this research and point to recommendations for instructors, administrators, and researchers interested in further exploring and/or supporting students’ academic literacy development in ways that are more inclusive of both the student and context.

A Note to Readers

Throughout the following chapters, each of the above dispositional qualities (valuing agency, curiosity, goal-oriented, valuing writing, critical self-reflection, and creativity) have been italicized as a way to designate them as key words. For the sake of clarity and concision, these dispositional qualities are presented as nouns, regardless of their common syntactic functions. To protect students’ identities, pseudonyms are used throughout the project. These pseudonyms were chosen by participants during their initial interviews. Additionally, the interview passages quoted in the following analysis reflect transcripts as closely as possible, with minor edits to make them more readable.
Chapter 2:

Practices, Perceptions, and the Generative Nature of Disposition

Katie, an Atmospheric Science major, refers to herself as the "scientist of [her] family," but she also identifies as a writer. Katie’s typical writing process begins with analyzing the assignment sheet and/or rubric and includes prewriting strategies involving sticky notes and outlines as well as revising her draft multiple times before turning it in. However, when it comes to responding to an assignment that forces her to write about a topic she has no interest in, she procrastinates. Katie described those situations like this:

“Ask me to write about the Communist Manifesto and how that relates to modern society or Europe? I don’t care. And I’m dragging my feet, and I know it’s due. I know I have to do it…And you know my mom’s like, “Have you started your paper yet?’ ‘Nope.’ ‘Why?’ ‘I don’t want to. I don’t like the topic.’”

Katie contrasted this literacy task with an example in which she was given control over picking her topic and was able to choose something relevant to her. While taking a class for her Communication Studies minor, she linked her 8-12 page final paper to her Atmospheric Science major and chose to research science communication. Unlike the Communist Manifesto example she described, Katie’s writing process for this assignment matched her typical process, which includes multiple elements that composition scholars consider “good” practices, such as starting early, incorporating prewriting activities, and working through multiple drafts. She said, “That went by so fast. I was so into it…If you like what you’re writing about, and you can tailor that, a hundred percent I’m going to do that assignment before time and with a ton of enthusiasm.”

Katie’s responses to literacy tasks do not always include the same prewriting and revision practices, and at least in comparing these two literacy tasks, whether or not she
applies those practices is influenced by whether or not she “likes” what she is writing about. A knowledge transfer framework, one that is focused solely on the application of knowledge in an isolated moment, might consider her approach to the Communist Manifesto assignment a failure to apply her knowledge of the writing process and the skills associated with it. Nowacek might call it "frustrated integration," and Smit might identify it as an example of an applying knowledge or experience in a way that is “inappropriate” or “not helpful.” This isolated moment, however, is not representative of Katie’s normal writing process, her ability as an academic writer, or what she has or has not learned about academic literacy. What the difference between her approach to the Communist Manifesto assignment and the Communication Studies assignment does demonstrate is one way that a student’s disposition influences her practices. Katie’s disposition, which in this case includes a perception of having the agency to choose a topic and “tailor” an assignment to her interests, influences which literacy practices she uses—and when she uses them.

Dispositions function as an organizing structure for our actions and thoughts. Bourdieu argues that dispositions, as part of the habitus, orient us to the goals and practices that are in accordance with our individual histories and contexts. He explains that our responses are defined in relation to the system of dispositions we embody, filtering out any improbable responses and determining “things to do or not do, to say or not say” (Logic 76). Bourdieu goes on to describe the actions produced by dispositions as containing an “objective intention” (Logic 79). That is, according to Bourdieu, because our actions are produced by an embodied system that we have little conscious control over (the habitus), we have little control over those actions. For Katie, her disposition...
filters out responses she would deem improbable and generates a set of practices aligned with both the system of dispositions she embodies as well as the circumstances and context to which she is responding; her disposition “leads” her to dismiss the idea of not completing the Communist Manifesto assignment but to spend as little time as possible on it (hence the procrastination).5

In addition to organizing the available responses, dispositions are also tied to motivation. Definitions from critical thinking scholars generally present dispositions as a system of qualities that shape how a person makes use of their abilities and subsequently how they respond to or engage in learning activities (Driscoll and Wells; Facione et al.; Piazza and Siebert). Perkins et al. define disposition as a construct made up of three components: ability, which they define as the capacity to follow through with a behavior; inclination, which includes the motivation to use a behavior; and sensitivity, which they describe as the likelihood to notice when to respond with a behavior ("Beyond Abilities" 4). They argue that it is ultimately the combination of these three components that generates behavior. In other words, just because Katie has the ability to outline her essays in advance does not mean she will automatically engage in that behavior; that behavior is generated when she both recognizes the occasion to outline and has the motivation to develop an outline.

In this chapter, I argue that students’ existing dispositions shape their responses to literacy tasks as well as how students make sense of those responses. Focusing on three

5 Katie explained why not completing the assignment was not an option for her: "I'm not willing to forfeit the points or even the brownie points with the professor, and I'd rather still have them think highly of me, even if I hated writing for them."
specific dispositional qualities—valuing agency, curiosity, and goal-oriented—I explore the generative nature of disposition and the ways in which these dispositional qualities shape students’ experiences with academic writing. Understanding the generative nature of dispositions in this way complicates stories of how and when students make use of “knowledge” and highlights the influence of students’ existing perceptions, values, and practices on the learning process.

**Valuing Agency**

“You have the agency to do what you, like, want, what you think works best for your paper. And I think when you’re put in that situation, I just think it’s more you. It’s entirely you.” – Frank

Katie is a successful student writer, who has aspirations of going on to graduate school and cares about her grades. Katie also demonstrates a thoughtful and deliberate writing process that involves pre-writing strategies and multiple drafts—except in contexts where she perceives her agency to be limited. *Valuing agency* is a dispositional quality that multiple participants in my study embody and that can have significant influence over when and how students respond to academic literacy tasks, regardless of their abilities as writers. My use of the term "agency" here comes directly from my participants and, as such, relies on their understanding of the term. While scholars across disciplines, including in composition studies, have debated various aspects of agency, my participants generally refer to agency as having some sense of “free will” or control over decisions and ideas. With this definition from my participants in mind, *valuing agency* means valuing the ability to make decisions and/or act independently.

It is also important to make a distinction between *valuing agency* and embodying agency. Some scholars argue that there is no such thing as a pure agent or true free will
and that agency is always influenced by the cultural and social contexts in which it exists, among other constraints (Cooper; Miller). Even with the simplified definition of agency my participants use, they don’t necessarily have true free will when it comes to their literacy tasks (particularly when those literacy tasks are assigned by an instructor who will be applying a grade to the final product). However, agency—or at least the perception of agency—is something these students value. As a dispositional quality, valuing agency encompasses participants’ perception of having or not having agency (not necessarily on actually having or not having agency). And valuing agency influences these students’ responses to literacy tasks as well as their perceptions of writing and academic writing, which can have far-reaching implications for how we understand their interactions with academic literacy tasks.

Though she didn’t use the word agency, Katie expressed a preference for having opportunities to make decisions about how to best respond to an assignment. She gave multiple examples across all of her interviews of assignments for which she was able to choose a topic relevant to either her major (e.g., writing about "the gender gap in STEM fields" because she is aware of her role as a female in the sciences) or some aspect of her personal identity (e.g., writing about "how gender stereotyping develops in children with same sex parents" because she is the child of same sex parents). And, as she described in the example of the Communist Manifesto assignment, her responses to literacy tasks that limit her choice in topic differ significantly from her responses to literacy tasks where she perceives having more agency. Her usual writing process begins by carefully reading the assignment sheet and includes building outlines, revising her thesis statement as she develops her ideas, and paying particular attention to concision as
she revises—all of which she stretches out over multiple weeks, when circumstances allow. But when Katie's *valuing agency* interacts with a conditions in which she perceives a lack of agency, this careful planning, drafting, and revising is all but abandoned.

Katie's response to the *Communist Manifesto* assignment is defined in relation to her *valuing agency*. While Bourdieu does not completely dismiss the idea of agency and conscious or strategic decision-making, he does explain that responses to a given situation are “defined first in relation to a system of objective probabilities”—probabilities that come from our socially constituted system of dispositions and which “engender aspirations and practices” (*Logic* 76-77). Arguably, Katie does have agency in the context of the *Communist Manifesto* assignment; even in regard to her writing process, she has control over when she starts and whether or not she develops an outline. However, she perceives a lack of agency in this literacy task, and her response is defined first in relation to her *valuing agency*, which excludes practices like starting early and therefore devoting multiple weeks of careful drafting and revising on a topic she doesn't like and doesn't care about.

Katie is not the only participant whose writing process is influenced in significant ways by *valuing agency*. Emily, a graduate student working toward a Master's degree in Cultural Anthropology, says that writing as an important aspect of her discipline and describes how the academic writing she does is focused on telling stories "in a meaningful way" and connecting those stories to "larger discourses." Her writing process reflects this level of engagement and encompasses multiple stages. Most of the time, Emily's approach to writing assignments includes identifying the "conversation [she's] a
part of," "picking out which pieces of information" she wants to focus on, building an outline, and working through multiple drafts (initially with "pencil and paper").

As part of learning to write in her discipline, Emily says she has been “trained out of summaries.” Yet at the time of her interviews, she was enrolled in a class that asked her to summarize her readings each week. She expressed frustration with these summaries and described struggling to find ways to “critically engage” with the readings. It is this distinction, between summarizing and making broader connections through her writing, that valuing agency comes into play for Emily. While Katie seeks agency in the context of being able to choose her topic and "tailor" her assignments, Emily perceives agency as the ability to engage critically with texts in the way that she has become accustomed to in other graduate-level courses. And when that agency is removed, as she feels it is with these summary assignments, she abandons her usual writing process. She said:

“I was so frustrated by the initial prompt and material that I just waited ‘til the last minute to write it and wrote it in one sitting. So I didn’t do any of that…going through my sources and finding my building blocks, and I didn’t do any of the, like, prewriting, early writing on paper, because I just did not give an F.”

Emily still has as much agency as any student writer has in this context, but her response to the summary assignment is defined in relation to valuing agency and her belief that summarizing readings limits that agency by removing her ability to critically engage with those readings.

Dispositions function as part of a “system of cognitive and motivating structures” (Bourdieu, Outline 53), and in both Emily’s and Katie’s stories, motivation is a key factor in how valuing agency influences their behavior. In the knowledge transfer conversation,
motivation is also key factor; Nelms and Dively identify motivation as one “roadblock” that prevents the transfer of knowledge, stating that “if we are not motivated to learn, we won’t learn” (226). A dispositional framework, however, identifies motivation (i.e., “inclination”) as a key component of the dispositions that shape behavior (Perkins et al., “Beyond Abilities”).

With this in mind, Emily’s lack of motivation can be seen as a sign of what she has learned, not something that is preventing her from learning. Emily’s account of her academic writing includes being “trained out of summaries,” which suggests that Emily sees herself as being past a point in her academic life where summarizing texts is sufficient. Her sense of agency as an academic writer is grounded in her ability to critically engage with texts and, ultimately, to tell stories "in a meaningful way." Valuing agency and her belief that summarizing strips away her ability to truly engage with the ideas at hand generates Emily’s “I don’t give an F” response—and the subsequent procrastination and lack of drafting and revision.

Frank and Sarah similarly associate negative emotions with assignments that strip away agency via an inability to analyze/engage with ideas. Rather than being asked to summarize texts in an advance course, the stories they recall are about experiences with writing early in their academic lives. Frank, an International Affairs major, and Sarah, enrolled in UNR’s Pre-Nursing program, both identify experiences with formulaic writing in high school and their first year of college as some of their "worst" experiences with writing.

Frank explained that high school was his worst experience with writing because, rather than analyzing texts, he was "just shoving things into the format." Frank said the
lack of analysis he actually got to do in high school made him "feel uncomfortable." He went on to say, “It’s a problem, like, ‘bing, bang, bong’ format, or it’s like you have a thesis that has three points...and then they would basically give you what you should write about for your thesis anyway…it was like regurgitating.” And Frank associates these same negative memories with his English 101 class. About that class, he said, “It was like high school again because the teacher shunned all these ideas. And I’m not going to name drop, but definitely a lot of formulaic ‘this is what you should do.’”

This perception of being told what to do in writing classes was at the heart of Sarah's experiences with English 101 as well. Similar to Frank's story, Sarah described being given a formula for a three-pronged thesis, explaining that her instructor would provide the class with a fill-in-the-blank thesis statement. She said:

“He would write this on the board: ‘I would discuss [blank] using blank lens for blank, blank, and blank.’ And he’s like, ‘Do this. Don’t write anything else. This is what I want to see.’ And I was like okay this is a really lame way of writing an essay but that’s what he wanted, so that’s what I did.”

These memories of being told what to do and of "shoving things into the format" present a picture of writers with very little agency in how to respond to their assignments.

Acknowledging that valuing agency influences their ability to remember much about those courses suggests that Frank and Sarah had, as first-year students, already developed a sense of academic literacy that encompasses a level of critical engagement closer to what Emily, as a graduate student, describes. That is, both Frank and Sarah were looking for opportunities to engage in their writing and to have agency in how they engage. Aside from lamenting the formulaic writing they were asked to participate in, neither Frank nor Sarah recalled much about their high school or English 101 classes. In
investigating students’ memories of learning about writing and the role of what they call “pedagogical memory,” Jarratt et al. extend the work of Bergman and Zepernick and Thaiss and Zawacki and argue that students with predominantly negative memories of writing courses have difficulty both recalling and articulating what they learned in those courses. They go on to point out that students’ difficulties in recalling what they learned “lend[s] credence” to arguments that knowledge transfer “may in fact be the wrong question” (65) and explore multiple ways to re-envision students’ pedagogical memory.

Considering disposition as a generative structure reveals the role that valuing agency has in Frank’s and Sarah’s negative memories of these courses—and their inability to recall much else about the courses. Fortunately, three-pronged theses and formulas were not the only experiences that Frank and Sarah had with academic writing, and they both countered these stories with other, significantly more positive experiences.⁶

Each of these four student writers tell stories that are imbued with strong negative emotions. If these literacy tasks are viewed as isolated moments, it seems that all four students fail to demonstrate the application of writing practices and processes that instructors generally want students to learn. However, a dispositional framework illustrates how Katie, Emily, Frank, and Sarah value not only agency but a type of agency that allows for making connections, analyzing texts, expressing their ideas through their

⁶ For Sarah, it was a class in junior high, which she recalls as focusing on assignments in which she was able to express her thoughts freely “and it didn’t matter if there was a right or wrong answer.” Frank’s most positive experience with writing came after FYC; he described spending a summer working as a freelance writer for an eSports organization, interviewing professional gamers and commentators. He said, "I was transcribing and making articles with that, and I thought that was really cool ‘cause I was like, “See, I made it.”
writing. Understanding *valuing agency* as a generative scheme and considering its role in these students’ responses to these literacy tasks reveals a more comprehensive picture of their relationship to academic literacy and their development as academic writers. What looks like failed knowledge transfer is actually a belief that critical thinking and analysis are important to academic writing—which is not something many writing instructors would consider “failure.”

**Curiosity**

“I think that writing is basically just a big investigation. Like you’re writing something to figure something out, and you know that curiosity is helpful for, you know, making your writing engaging. ‘Cause I think that if you’re not curious about a specific topic, it’s going to be reflected in your writing.” – Bart

Curiosity is frequently cited as an important disposition in discussions of students’ academic success. It is a common disposition in early scholarship about intelligence (Perkins et al., "Intelligence") and is included in taxonomies focused on critical thinking like Costa and Kallick’s. When the conversation is focused specifically on writing, curiosity continues to show up as an important dispositional quality: it is the first habit of mind listed in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* and is an element the “problem-exploring” disposition that Wardle argues for (“Creative Repurposing”). For participants in my study, curiosity is also a common dispositional quality, one that participants both identify as important to them and demonstrate in a variety of contexts. *Curiosity*, as it is defined by my participants, reflects their desire to learn more about the world around them, and this dispositional quality functions as a key organizing structure for these student writers' practices and perceptions.
In her final interview, Skippy named *curiosity* as central to her identity—and to her approach to learning in general. Skippy is a non-traditional student, who took "classes here and there" while raising two children and only enrolled as a full-time student after her sons grew up and moved out. In explaining her "sporadic" classes over the years, she said, "there's spaces of time where I didn't have classes, but there was never a time that school wasn't a priority for me." At the heart of this ongoing desire to attend school is *curiosity*. She said, “I think it’s really important in school because if you’re not curious you’re not gonna learn anything...you have to enjoy wanting, enjoy learning.”

For Skippy, *curiosity* plays a significant role in her academic literacy. Not only does it drive her ongoing interest in taking classes and going to school, but it also shapes her reading practices, a connection she made explicit in her interviews. She explains that, for her, *curiosity* and reading go “hand-in-hand” and said, "being curious keeps me researching things and keeps me looking for things." She acknowledged that this approach to reading can be a “double-edged sword,” leading her on “tangents all around the world.” Despite this risk of getting "overwhelmed" by information, Skippy continues to read, and values reading as part of learning process.\(^7\) As Bourdieu says, dispositions "engender aspirations and practices objectively compatible" with themselves (*Logic* 77), and Skippy's *curiosity* engenders reading practices that may lead her to feel overwhelmed, but ultimately that *curiosity* perpetuates itself through those practices.

\(^7\) Skippy associates *curiosity* with being an older student and says she doesn’t believe that *curiosity*, particularly as it relates to the learning process, is something that “19-year-olds necessarily appreciate.”
For Kennedy, a junior majoring in Political Science, curiosity also engenders reading practices. She describes her desire to learn via reading, not as something that feeds back into her school work like Skippy, but as something that functions outside of what she is learning in school. Kennedy said she “always really, really liked reading, even from an early age” but claimed that, as a college student, she doesn’t read for “fun” anymore. She went on to describe reading articles and journals, most of which are on “topics…that, like, I’ll read for school, and maybe if I’m still interested, I’ll go and research it on my own.” She gave an example of taking a class on “Terrorism,” which emphasized the role of religion. Though they addressed multiple religions in the class, Kennedy said, “I didn’t realize how little I knew about Islam until, like, that class…so for a couple of weeks [I] tried reading, like, the Koran in, like, English.” Though she does not align reading the Koran as reading for "fun," it is reading that she choses to engage in on her own time.

Kennedy framed her decision to read the Koran as coming from a desire understand more about something she didn’t understand—and that desire, while originating in an specific class, extends beyond that class. One reason she gave for wanting to understand Islam better was in case she needed to “defend [her] answer that Islam isn’t a bad thing.” Curiosity is, as multiple scholars have established, and important disposition when it comes to generating successful literacy practices. The reading practices that both Skippy and Kennedy describe align with practices outlined in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, such as using inquiry as a process and seeking relevant authoritative information (4). Kennedy’s story, however, emphasizes the
ways in which a dispositional quality like *curiosity* can extend beyond an individual assignment or class, influencing practices more broadly.

Dwayne’s stories emphasize how *curiosity* engenders not only reading and research practices but also broader ways of thinking about the world. Throughout his first two interviews, Dwayne consistently referred to the idea of looking at things "holistically," and I asked him about this pattern in his final interview. In his response, he linked thinking about "the arc" of things to a "desire to understand all of everything forever.” The first example he gave was in relation to building a computer:

“There was this one thing where I was like, ‘Maybe I could build a computer.’ And then that was like, ‘Boom. Floodgates.’ Like, let me understand everything. So I, like, read all these different accounts of people building computers, and I, like, scoured the subreddit and looked at a bunch of builds and looked at countless pictures. And I read all these different like guides and stuff. And I read so much because I was so interested in understanding this thing as a whole, right?”

Dwayne's interest in "understanding this thing [building a computer] as a whole” echoed his earlier interview responses about academic writing.

In recalling what he learned from an entry-level literature class, he described learning to do close reading as “looking at passages within the work and trying to see how those passages are indicative of the larger thematic content of the work.” For Dwayne, *curiosity*—which he frames as the desire to understand things holistically—produces reading and research practices that can be seen in tangible tasks, like building a computer and analyzing literature. It also informs the way Dwayne makes meaning of the world.

How Dwayne understands close reading, i.e., the idea of looking for how passages relate to broader themes, may have come from his entry-level literature course, but that
approach is not just a “reading skill” he practiced in that course. He also described looking for connections between small events in his life and what he called “the arc” of things. He said:

“I’m never thinking about, like, the small events right? So, like, I might fail at something, right? I might not get a good grade. But I think I’m always thinking about…what’s, like, the arc of all of this, right? Like what is the take-away from everything? Because I think that like for me personally it, I move past failures and stuff really quickly because of this right? It’s helped me move past a bunch of things in my life that have not gone great.”

Understanding how curiosity functions for Dwayne highlights that academic literacy development is more complex than looking at an isolated skill applied in a new context. Curiosity is an organizing structure for how Dwayne engages in analyzing literature, but it also functions as an organizing structure for how he makes meaning. In fact, Dwayne’s curiosity is a pattern, demonstrated throughout his interviews and across multiple contexts. His academic literacy practices are intricately linked to his broader meaning making, including how he approaches everyday tasks, and it is through understanding the role that curiosity plays for Dwayne that we can see beyond that isolated skill of “close reading.” While “close reading” may be demonstrated in his writing, suggesting the successful application of “knowledge” gained in a literature course, a dispositional framework reveals that this practice is generated by an embodied dispositional quality and not simply something taught in a course.

Skippy, Kennedy, and Dwayne all demonstrate how curiosity engenders the practices and perceptions they bring to their experiences with reading and writing as well as to how they make meaning of the world around them. Their embodied curiosity can be linked to the idea of adopting the role of “novice” as Sommers and Saltz address it. In
their longitudinal study of college writers at Harvard, Sommers and Saltz found that students who took on the role of “novice” were the most successful in terms of writing development. Being a novice, according to Sommers and Saltz, includes adopting “an open attitude to instruction and feedback” and “a willingness to experiment” (298) as well as “being encouraged to believe that following their own interests is important to their success as students” (307). The practices and beliefs that Skippy, Kennedy, and Dwayne describe, engendered by curiosity, echo this definition. And these stories, which highlight relationships between existing dispositional qualities and academic literacy practices, emphasize the complexities surrounding what counts as “knowledge” when it comes to academic literacy.

**Goal-Oriented**

“It’s important to show my boys that, even though I took some detours along the way, you can still kind of, follow what you want to do…it means some shuffling and a lot of weekends not doing much, but that’s a priority that I put on myself, and it’s an expectancy I have of myself.” – Skippy

Words and phrases like “driven,” “committed,” and “constantly moving onwards” were used by multiple participants in multiple contexts throughout their interviews. Taken together, this language implies a focus on end results—a goal—and the tasks necessary to achieve those results. The goals that participants identified ranged from small-scale goals (e.g., getting a good grade on a specific assignment) to more long-term goals (e.g., graduate school and/or a career), and the participants who embody goal-oriented as part of their disposition typically told stories and articulated decisions they had made in relation to those goals. Conversations about student success also emphasize students' focus on achieving goals through language like tenacity, persistence, and follow through
(Costa and Kallick; Framework; Piazza and Siebert). Despite the differences in wording, these sources emphasize a focus on the end results and the tasks necessary to achieve those results.

Like the other dispositional qualities described in this chapter, goal-oriented functions as part of a system of motivating structures—a system that works in conjunction with students’ goals and influences behaviors as well as how students understand and articulate those behaviors. In its most simple form, goal-oriented, functioning alongside a goal such as getting a good grade, can generate high levels of motivation and positive memories of courses and assignments. But goal-oriented also allows us to look beyond when and why some students are motivated to engage with specific academic literacy tasks. As my participants demonstrate, considering how goal-oriented influences both practices and perceptions can reveal much about the relationships they have with academic literacy.

For Sarah, goal-oriented is a powerful dispositional quality, which she demonstrated by framing most of her stories about both writing and her education more broadly around her goal of a career in nursing. Sarah described always being so focused on getting to her career that she never took a “fun” class—at least, not until her father convinced her to take at least one class for fun. She chose a Human Sexuality class and said, “I cringed when I signed up for it ‘cause I’m like…‘I could be in a Biology class. I could be in a science class. I could be doing something else more important.’” In this moment, we can see goal-oriented functioning in two ways. The first is that Sarah’s story

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8 However, as we have already seen with students like Katie and Emily, this motivation can still vary depending on other dispositional qualities and contexts.
demonstrates how goal-oriented, working in conjunction with her goal of a career in nursing, influences decisions she makes about choosing what classes to take; with only a few exceptions (such as this Human Sexuality course), goal-oriented filtered out classes that were not immediately furthering her career as improbable choices. The second is that goal-oriented shaped her perception that classes like Biology and science classes—which are part of the Nursing program—are “more important.” In Bourdieu’s words, Sarah’s story demonstrates how dispositions can “incline agents…to refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable” (Logic 77). The “inevitable” for Sarah and her goal-oriented disposition is anything that will get her one step closer to her goal, including the belief that her goal is outside of her current context and therefore more valuable.

How Sarah perceives the writing she does in the academy is always defined in relation to goal-oriented and the perception that her goal of becoming a nurse lies beyond the academic context. She defines college as a “stepping stone to [her] career.” She spoke at length about her need to make connections between what she’s learning in “this bubble of education” and something else that is “more important” in order for it to have value. More often than not, this “more important” thing that she makes connections to is her goal of becoming a nurse. Connections she referenced ranged from choosing paper topics related to Nursing (e.g., concussions in her required English 102, nurses in World War II for a required history class) to valuing certain aspects of writing (e.g., clarity and grammar correctness, because “even the smallest mistake…could mean life or death for a patient”). On one hand, these moments demonstrate how goal-oriented generates the kind of motivation and engagement with her writing that many instructors would be pleased to see; on the other hand, they also highlight Sarah’s perception of a boundary between the
academy and the “real word” that many scholars lament. And this metaphoric boundary plays a critical role in Sarah’s academic life.

*Goal-oriented* influences Sarah’s sense of academic literacy and the ways in which she values writing partly because she identifies her goal as something that is separate from and "more important" than the academy. This kind of college/real world or academic/nonacademic binary is a recurring theme in conversations about academic literacy (Brodkey; Chiseri-Strater; Lillis). Cheryl Geisler describes this boundary as a “great divide with experts on one side…and laypersons on the other side facing what seems like a choice between buying into the formal culture of schools or remaining loyal to their indigenous home cultures” (89-90). She goes on to argue that students unwilling to trade their “home” culture for the “formal culture of books” will not cross that boundary. Often, expertise is aligned with that “formal culture of books,” and it appears that this is the perception of college that Sarah holds. Because she sees college as a “stepping stone” to her career, she does “buy into the formal culture of books.” And as motivating structure, *goal-oriented* helps her with that process; *goal-oriented* generates value in courses and assignments, in the expertise she gains through those experiences, and in the aspects of her writing (e.g., clarity) that she focuses her attention on.

Carlton’s and Skippy’s stories also demonstrate how understanding a students’ individual goals and *goal-oriented* dispositions can reveal students’ developing relationships to academic literacy. Carlton is a transfer student majoring in English, is hoping to teach some day, and is considering various paths to reach that goal. Skippy,
who is majoring in General Studies, is a non-traditional student whose primary goal is to complete her Bachelor’s degree. Unlike Carlton, she has a permanent job and a home established in the area, so the degree is not necessarily a “step” she needs to move on to career. While Carlton’s goal is not as concrete as Sarah’s and Skippy’s goal is not oriented around a career at all, they both still identify a border between the academic community and the nonacademic community. Scholars often consider this insider/outsider dichotomy as prohibitive. As Nedra Reynolds explains in her book *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*, border metaphors like this one have consequences, one of which is an exclusionary power where some people are considered “insiders” and others are “outsiders.” But Reynolds also argues that these metaphors can be empowering, and that empowerment comes from “the ability to navigate and move skillfully, recognizing the risks and costs of boundary crossing” (43). For Carlton and Skippy, both of whom identify as “outsiders,” the ability to recognize the risks of crossing the boundary and to navigate that crossing is generated by the *goal-oriented* dispositional quality.

Carlton said in his second interview that he does not identify as a writer but rather as someone who is “striving to become a writer.” To him, being a writer means being part of a particular community of experts. He described this community as a “gated community”—and one that he is trying to gain access to:

“[You must have some sort of qualification to make an active contribution to this community], right? I see myself as the kid who’s trying to get in, right? That stereotypical kid who is like, ‘Oh, hey look, an R-rated movie, let’s sneak into that jam.’ Or, ‘Oh, hey. You know, there’s this nice country club I want to get

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9 General Studies at UNR is an interdisciplinary degree program that facilitates study across the academic disciplines and professional fields (*General Studies*).
into. I hear their croissants are bomb, you know? Let’s get in there,’ right? So I’m trying to get myself into the community you know this gated writing…community with people who have puffed up chests and designer clothing, and I’m just sitting there in rag-tag college wear. Like, ‘Oh snap. I want to become part of that,’ right?”

Carlton envisions himself as outside of a highly restricted community of academic writers; his goals of going to graduate school and becoming a teacher, however, are on the other side, firmly associated with the “formal culture of books” and academic expertise. In other words, his goals involve crossing that great divide.

As someone who embodies the goal-oriented dispositional quality, Carlton is proactive in working towards his goal of joining the academic community. Multiple times across all of his interviews, he described going to professors to ask questions and get feedback on his writing and reading academic texts (theory, textbooks, etc.) in his spare time. For Carlton, these practices are defined in relation to goal-oriented. He believes them to be the type of practices that will help him navigate the boundary between where he sees himself and the academic community—what Reynolds might call a way to “imitate insider discourse” (37). And because of this belief, influenced by the goal-oriented dispositional quality, Carlton adopts these practices as his own. These practices are reinforced for Carlton through positive feedback from professors. He shared a story of one particular paper that an admired professor called “exemplary” and how he hung it on his apartment wall. He said, “That paper just hanging there on top of the door is proof that I can do it, too.” That paper is a physical reminder of his goal and of the practices that allow him to get one step closer to accessing that “gated community.”

Skippy, like Carlton, identifies as an “outsider” to the academic community. She made a clear distinction between the kind of writing she does on a daily basis for her job
and the kind of writing she does for her classes. When it comes to that “everyday”
writing, she is confident, but she says she struggles with her academic writing. And when
asked if she identified as a writer, she said:

“In an everyday context, then yes, I’m a writer. In the context of the university, I
have a harder time. I’m not confident, and I don’t—part of it could be the
surroundings that I work in. Being at the [UWC] and being around a lot of
writers, and then being a nontraditional student and trying to figure out where
you, kind of, fit in that process makes me feel really less confident about my
writing because I’m not sure that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be…So yeah.
So yes. Everyday I’m a writer, but in the terms of college writing, I don’t feel like
I am.”

Skippy articulates a clear boundary between academic writing and “everyday” writing
and places herself on the side of “everyday” writing.

Where Carlton and Skippy differ is in their interest in crossing that boundary and
joining the academic community. Skippy's goal lies, not on the side of the academic
community, but with herself and with her family. She says, “I just want to finish to say I
have a Bachelor’s…It’s important to show my boys that even though I took some detours
along the way, you can still…follow what you want to do.” She does not need any sort of
academic expertise to meet her goal in the way that Carlton does. Geisler acknowledges
that formal academic culture is one that many students may not want to enter, and Skippy
represents that type of student. While it may seem easy to write off Skippy’s experience
as that of student who isn’t engaged in her education or in developing as an academic
writer, Skippy still demonstrates practices and beliefs that align with those of the
academic community.10

10 Skippy's *curiosity* also plays a role in shaping those practices, but the way she
articulates her approach the academic writing in her interviews is tied to her desire to
Skippy described a writing process that includes prewriting and seeking feedback and shared stories of sacrificing time with her family to write papers and study. She also said that, despite having no desire to join the academic community, her academic writing and the assignments she does for school are “very important to [her].” While Sarah attributes value to the academic writing tasks she can link to her career goals, Skippy attributes value to her assignments equally, as she sees each assignment as fundamental to achieving her goal. She said, “I like to know that I can do it. And at least I know, if I put my effort into it then I can’t blame anyone else along the way.” Her stories demonstrate how goal-oriented generates an awareness of the practices necessary to engage successfully with academic writing and the inclination to engage in those practices—despite identifying as an “outsider.” This is not to say that there are no negative implications of Skippy’s perceived “outsider” status but that her goal-oriented dispositional quality can function as an empowering structure, allowing Skippy to navigate the academic community.

Sarah, Carlton, and Skippy all hold perceptions of a boundary between academic contexts and nonacademic contexts, but they each have different relationships to that boundary. As Reynolds explains, it is students’ ability to “navigate and move skillfully” in relation to a boundary that is empowering, and goal-oriented engenders abilities that allow for successful movement. Goal-oriented works in conjunction with each students’ individual goals to influence their behaviors and decisions, shaping which classes Sarah enrolls in, what Carlton reads outside of his coursework, and when Skippy chooses to succeed as a student and graduate. I address distinctions about this articulation at the end of the chapter.
work on assignments versus when she spends time with her family. But *goal-oriented*, like the other dispositional qualities in this chapter, also generates values and perceptions about the academic writing they are engaging in—and what that academic writing represents.

**Discussion**

According to Bourdieu the *habitus* and its associated dispositions function as “the organizing principle of [our] actions” and informs “all thought and action (including thought about action)” (Outline 18). Dispositions are not just a construct that generate students’ responses to a literacy tasks (action); they also shape students’ narratives about their experiences with academic literacy (thought about action). The stories discussed throughout this chapter highlight the importance of the generative nature of dispositions in understanding students’ academic literacy development. We could read Katie’s story of procrastinating as moment of failure to make use of otherwise “good” writing practices just as we could read Skippy’s perception of herself as an “outsider” as a failure to “buy into” the academic community. But reading these stories through a dispositional framework, one that that includes *valuing agency* and *goal-oriented*, presents a different narrative for both students; these narratives move beyond the success/failure dichotomy or isolated moments of “learning” that frameworks such as knowledge transfer rely on.

Even when looking at students’ responses to an assigned literacy task, considering the role of disposition reveals the motivations behind those responses—and that these motivations that are not necessarily linked to any particular “knowledge.” Kennedy and Carlton both shared stories about reading academic texts in their spare time. For Kennedy, this practice and the story about it is shaped by *curiosity*, a desire to find out
more about topics she is “interested” in. Carlton, on the other hand, described his reading practices as part of his desire to join the academic community and therefore influenced by goal-oriented. Carlton may very well embody curiosity, but the way he constructed the story of reading academic texts in his spare time was framed in the context of his goal. Jarratt et al. remind us that interviews generate knowledge as much as they retrieve it (49). And the narrative that Carlton constructs about his reading practices—how he situates himself in the story of his reading practices—reveals his perceptions of those practices. In other words, the way he tells the story reveals, to use Bourdieu’s words, his “thought about [the] action.”

Inquiry and reading beyond required coursework is an academic literacy practice that educators value (and one that some instructors would be happy to see “transfer”). However, to only acknowledge the practice, isolated from the Kennedy’s and Carlton’s motivations for engaging the practice, is insufficient for understanding either students’ academic literacy development. Considering the role of disposition reveals a more complete picture of how both Kennedy and Carlton are developing—as students who demonstrate “good” practices but for whom those practices mean very different things.

The meaning that participants attribute to their practices, and the way participants make sense of academic literacy, also reveals narratives that are generated by multiple dispositional qualities. This further highlights the complex nature of academic literacy development. Facione et al. describe dispositions as a “constellation” of qualities (1), and Perkins et al. describe a pattern among scholars to identify either a “set” of values or an “overarching disposition” that “bundle[s]” several values and traits together (“Intelligence” 286-287). Similarly, Bourdieu frequently addresses dispositions as part of
a “system.” From this chapter, we can see multiple dispositional qualities contributing the development of multiple participants.

Sarah, for example, embodies both valuing agency and goal-oriented, and each quality engenders practices and perceptions that contribute to her academic literacy development. The narrative Sarah constructs demonstrates a negative perception of the academic writing assigned in her first semester writing course that is engendered by valuing agency. That same narrative demonstrates how Sarah perceives value in academic writing tasks that she can connect to her goal of becoming a nurse—a perception that is engendered by goal-oriented. We can see development in Sarah’s shifting perceptions of academic writing, but that development is not necessarily linear—nor would it be visible in a study focused on an isolated moment of “transfer” between FYC and a second (or third) semester. As Carroll notes, "Students' writing abilities do not develop in a neat linear progression from assignments in general education courses, including FYC, on to major projects in upper division classes" (51). The generative nature of both valuing agency and goal-oriented shape how Sarah interacts with academic literacy tasks, and a dispositional framework that addresses the influence of these dispositional qualities reveals both Sarah's overall relationship to academic literacy and the complex and non-linear processes of her individual academic literacy development.

Among participants in this study, dispositional qualities influence concrete actions, like outlining a paper before writing it or choosing a topic, as well as how students construct narratives about those actions. A knowledge transfer framework, which only asks if “knowledge” is transferred, does not allow for those narratives—but it
is those narratives that demonstrate how a student like Sarah attributes value to some literacy tasks and not others and when a student like Katie chooses to make use of her “good” writing process versus when she doesn’t. These narratives complicate our understanding of how and in what ways student respond to literacy tasks, highlighting the role of students’ existing beliefs, values, and practices in those responses. However, even understanding the generative nature of dispositions only tells us one side of the story. Embedded in these students’ narratives are also moments of development, of emerging dispositional qualities, of student writers in the process of “recomposing” themselves toward their futures (Herrington and Curtis 354). In the next chapter, I turn to this aspect of students’ narratives and explore the ways in which dispositions are dynamic, developing cumulatively as students engage with more experiences. More specifically, I consider how students’ individual histories and experiences in new contexts continually influence their emerging dispositions.
Chapter 3:

**Embodied Histories, New Experiences, and the Dynamic Nature of Disposition**

Bart grew up in a single-parent home, just him and his mother. His mom is an avid reader and read to him at night when he was younger. She also made up stories for him about a dragon named Mildred. In fourth grade, Bart and his mom stopped at a bookstore on the way to a concert at the Catholic school he was attending. While she was getting a book for herself, he picked up a copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. She bought him the book, and he started reading it on the drive from the bookstore to his school. He continued reading through the concert, on the drive home, and ended up sitting in the car in their garage for over an hour, still reading, until his mom came and asked him to come inside. Prior to that, Bart mostly played video games in his spare time. But after reading *Harry Potter*, he started reading the fantasy books his mom had stacked in their basement. Bart, now in his mid-twenties and working on an MFA in poetry, credits his mom for his love of storytelling, his “creative spirit,” and his identity as a writer.

In some ways, Bart’s story is clichéd. Reading aloud to a child is widely accepted as a crucial step in literacy development (in getting a child to love reading/writing), and in my 15 years of teaching and tutoring college writers, I have read dozens of literacy narratives from first-year students about “that one book” that changed a student’s mind about reading and writing. And while Bart’s story can be read as a success story of early literacy development—and as an example of how dispositions can generate decisions about major and career—it isn’t that simple. Rather than following a straightforward or linear path, Bart took a few detours on his path to his MFA program and to calling
himself a “writer.” He entered college as a Spanish major—but even his interest there was not in the language itself, as one might suspect, but in the culture. He switched to English after positive experiences in both FYC and a creative writing course—but initially specialized in literature, not writing. And it wasn’t until four years after graduating with his Bachelor’s in Creative Writing that he decided to pursue an MFA. Bart’s relationship with literacy, and with writing specifically, was shaped by his mom and by reading *Harry Potter*. It was also shaped by academic experiences like his FYC course, the Spanish courses he took after that, and the work he did after graduating from college. It was likely also influenced by dozens of other experiences he did not bring up during his interviews. Even from the few stories he did share, we get a glimpse of the ways in which both academic and nonacademic experiences can influence the complex, non-linear literacy development that scholars that Carroll, Curtis and Herrington, and Sternglass describe. And considering the role of Bart’s disposition in his developing relationship to academic literacy reveals complexities of that process.

Despite a common understanding of dispositions as innate personality traits, they are, much like academic literacy development, part of a messy and ongoing development process influenced by a variety of experiences. Bourdieu argues that *habitus*, and the system of dispositions that makes up the *habitus*, is “constituted in the course of individual history” (*Outline* 56-57). The experiences that make up that history are embodied, but that embodied history does not create a fixed set of personality traits or immutable characteristics that solidify in early childhood. Rather, the dispositions we develop are part of an ongoing, dynamic process—a process that is linked not only to individual history but to the relationships between our embodied history and the objective
structures of the contexts and communities in which we interact. As we continue interacting with those contexts and communities, we continue engaging in experiences, and those experiences create new history, which feeds back into our emerging dispositions. In other words, as our dispositions shape our experiences, our experiences are simultaneously shaping our dispositions—and this process is ongoing as we are always engaging in new experiences. Though Bourdieu argues that dispositions are slow to change and that our earliest experiences are privileged (Outline 54), those early experiences are not absolute, and dispositions are always in process.

Piazza and Seibert explain that much of the literature on writing related disposition shows up in the form of maxims or advice from professional writers or as traits included as learning outcomes in official documents. Experts in both education and composition also tend to present dispositions in a prescriptive manner, identifying the dispositions or “habits of mind” necessary for learning, critical thinking, and/or student success. In all of these taxonomies, whether based on anecdotal evidence or empirical research (though many are not research-based), the dispositions identified as foundational are generally based in common Western values (e.g., creativity, independent learning, etc.) (Perkins et al. “Intelligence”). These taxonomies also rarely illustrate dispositions through student experience or treat them as part of an ongoing process. Though useful as tools for considering the goals of courses and programs and informing curricular decisions, these taxonomies tell us little about what dispositions look like or

11 For example, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing was a collaborative effort, developed by a committee of writing experts and teachers from all levels “with input from interested others” (O'Neill et al. 521), but did not include any student data.
how we might see signs of learning—of development—in either disposition or academic literacy relation to disposition.

Dispositions are influenced by early experiences, as Bourdieu argues and Bart’s story demonstrates, but they continue to be influenced by new experiences through a process that is both cumulative and recursive. This chapter explores that process and argues that academic literacy development can be seen, at least in part, by understanding students’ dispositions as dynamic. I examine participants’ narratives through three dispositional qualities—valuing writing, creativity, and critical self-reflection—focusing on the ways in which these dispositional qualities are shaped by experiences with literacy in various contexts. These stories complicate the notions of linear development and static moments of learning that knowledge transfer frameworks rely on, instead emphasizing that students are always in process.

**Valuing Writing**

“‘Cause I’m around the science people, they don’t understand why writing’s important…well, if you find something important, how are you going to share it? ‘Cause what good is finding the next solution to cancer if you can’t tell the, you know, the business or, you know, the government or just the people what you found?” – Katie

Attributing value to writing—to the communication of and/or expression of ideas via the written word—is not a quality that is explicitly addressed by scholars interested in disposition. Composition scholars acknowledge that implicit beliefs, perceptions, and confidence correlate with engagement and quality of writing (e.g., Bergman and Zepernick; Jarratt et al.; Reiff and Bawarshi; White and Bruning), but when it comes to discussions of student success, writing and literacy are typically only considered in
relation to skills or ability (e.g., grammar skills or vocabulary levels). For example, Costa and Kallick’s *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind*, identifies “Thinking and Communicating with Clarity and Precision” as one of 16 “essential” habits of mind. In describing this habit of mind, Costa and Kallick emphasize the connection between language and critical thinking, but they only provide examples of using precise language, which suggests a skill rather than an implicit belief or embodied value. Participants in my study, however, demonstrate that attributing value to writing, not just having confidence or ability, plays an important role in their academic literacy development.

As a dispositional quality, I define *valuing writing* as assigning value to words and/or language as a core aspect of self and as fundamental to communication and expression. How writing (and literacy more broadly) is valued and how that value is enacted can shift significantly, especially as students are exposed to new experiences with academic literacy. Nearly all of my participants identified as a writer, reader, storyteller, or some combination of those literacy-centric identities, but only a few held that identity prior to coming to college. And while some have arguably romanticized ideas of writing (like Omari who described writing as “an extension of yourself that becomes immortal”) they all acknowledged the importance of writing and demonstrated, in a variety of ways, a value of writing. As with all other dispositional qualities, *valuing writing* influences students’ actions and responses to literacy tasks, and as my participants’ stories demonstrate, it shifts as they engage with new and different experiences.

The stories Katie, an Atmospheric Science major, shared in her interviews demonstrate shifts in her *valuing writing* that have been influenced by multiple
experiences with literacy. When Katie was in elementary school, her mom hired a writing tutor for her sister, who was struggling with writing in school. Because they are twins, Katie had to participate as well, and she remembers this tutor giving them practice essays. She described rushing through those essays and said, “I hated doing those ‘cause it was summer, and I didn’t want to write essays…they were stupid ‘cause [they weren’t] required for class.” While Katie was young at the time, it is a sentiment that many students carry with them through college. It is not uncommon for students to believe that the writing they do in required classes (like FYC) has no relevance beyond that requirement (Bergman and Zepernick), and students majoring in the sciences, engineering, or even business sometimes claim that they won’t need to write once they are done with school. Katie has since developed an entirely different value of writing.

Known as the “scientist of the family,” Katie initially came to college with the intention of going on to graduate school, becoming a researcher, and studying climate change. At the time of her interviews, she was a year away from completing her degree and looking into graduate programs—but no longer in Atmospheric Science. She says she is still interested in studying climate change, but her approach to researching climate change has taken a new direction altogether:

“I want to do science writing or science communication… I want to talk between either policy or business people or the public and the actual scientist. ‘Cause I understand what the scientist is saying, and I know what the public is not understanding, and I want to bridge that gap because it’s frustrating. ‘Cause it’s so clear to me or I know to ask the right questions to make it clear…I think that’s where I fit.”

This change represents more than a change in her career goals and graduate school plans; it also represents a shift in Katie’s valuing writing. She no longer sees writing only as
something required for school but as having an important role in communicating ideas—for academic purposes, for nonacademic purposes, and for herself. The stories Katie told throughout her interviews shed light on at least some of the experiences that influenced these changes.

Three important things happened for Katie in her first few years of college: her writing practices changed, her perception of writing changed, and her perception of herself in relation to writing changed. Like most of the participants in my study, she identifies her work in the UWC as being influential to her writing practices, making her more aware of both her writing process and how much she writes or engages with writing. She also linked her writing center experience to her developing identity as a writer. She described watching classmates in her discipline “struggle through” lab reports and contrasted this with beginning to see herself as “more writing motivated than [her] science friends.” She still identifies as a scientist, but she also identifies as a writer, citing the time and energy she spends thinking about “what words should follow what order to get [the] point across.” And while her experiences watching and working with peers in her major revealed differences in her approach to writing, her coursework revealed what she called a “gap” in communication between scientists and the public—and she sees writing as an important tool to bridging that gap. Katie’s valuing writing, and her relationship to academic writing, has been influenced by multiple experiences that have built on one another in a cumulative process. It was neither working in the UWC nor a specific course in science communication that shifted her valuing writing, but all of these experiences interacting with one another and with her existing dispositional qualities, demonstrating a cumulative process of development.
Like Katie, Carlton’s *valuing writing* shifted significantly during his time in college, and like Katie, this shift is marked by a change in his major and career goals (from Computer Science to English). Aside from that change, however, Carlton’s and Katie’s stories have little in common. Katie came to UNR right after high school with good grades, high test scores, and generally “good” student habits; Carlton’s path to UNR was quite a bit different. The shifts in *valuing writing* that Carlton describes are arguably more significant that Katie’s and are intricately linked to Carlton’s personal and broader academic development.

Carlton described struggling with communication when he was young, not speaking until he was nearly six and being delayed with both reading and writing. His mother, who raised him alone and was busy with both work and her own schooling, left Carlton largely on his own when it came to schoolwork. He never put much value in his schoolwork—especially not his high school English classes, which he described as “by far” his worst experiences with writing. For those high school classes, he just “skimmed” books and “pushed out” papers the night before they were due. He explained, “I knew I was going to fail anyway, so I didn’t really apply myself to it” and said he “had to take summer school twice just to keep up.” He did catch up with his peers and graduated from high school, and being 18, he was “kicked out” of his mother’s home. He moved, got a job at a drug store, and enrolled in classes at a local community college, including English 098, the non-credit bearing developmental writing class he was placed into.

Carlton’s experiences with writing in the new context that English 098 presented him with were powerful enough to significantly shift his *valuing writing* and the practices and habits generated by that dispositional quality. When Carlton described his high
school experiences, he said, “We had a lot of teachers and educators who really weren’t invested in student success. I mean, essentially, we were all just numbers. Push this block through. Get to the next one.” He carried his history—and his negative perceptions of writing and of himself as a writer—with him to English 098. That writing course marked the first experience with a new academic context for Carlton, and his description of English 098 took a completely different tone from that of his high school classes:

“You know, like, here I am at this academic institution. The professors seem to think this stuff is actually pretty dope. Maybe it is pretty dope. You know, it might be important. So I saw how they valued it, and I thought to myself, ‘Huh. I want to know why they value it.’ So you know, I put in a little more work, opened up the books, wrote a few more papers, really got more of it involved when I saw that like, oh hey that stuff isn’t happening in a vacuum. This stuff is actually very closely related to the outside world that I’m dealing with. Who’d a thunk, right?”

Having instructors who he saw as invested in the material they were teaching (and in the students in their classes) was a new experience for Carlton—and one that prompted him to reconsider the value of that material to himself. This experience was significant in influencing how Carlton sees academic writing connect to the “outside world,” but it was only one experience in an ongoing, cumulative process.

By the time he got to English 102, his third writing course at the community college, he was also making connections between the reading and writing he was doing in his class to himself, engaging with the material in a way that likely would seem foreign to his high school self. He described being assigned to read Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and said:

“I really looked closely at that one because I felt like it was actually engaging me. ‘Cause a lot of the books that I had seen before, especially in, like middle school, elementary, back then, I didn’t have any interest in reading those…but with Kerouac, that one in particular, that was one that I was like, ‘Oh, hey. There’s actually some really cool stuff going on in here. I kind of want to read some
In some ways, Carlton’s story mirrors Bart’s story about reading *Harry Potter* for the first time; it could be seen as the quintessential narrative about the power of “that one book.” What makes this experience so influential for Carlton, however, is not the book itself but the way that his experience with that book interacts with his prior experiences with literacy. Even in the way he tells the story, comparing this book to the kinds of books he remembered being assigned in elementary and middle school, we can see this experience being framed in relation to his history.

Carlton’s experiences in high school, in English 098, and in his subsequent writing courses build on one another to create the way that he currently embodies *valuing writing*. Jarratt et al. argues that emotional attachments to writing experiences can influence how and what a student remembers from those experiences. Based on the negative memories Carlton holds from his early experiences with literacy, it makes sense that he came to his first required FYC class with low expectations for his instructor, the material, and what he would gain from participating in the course. As Carroll says, students “‘normal’ ways of reading and writing...are challenged as they move into a new setting” (119). Because of Carlton’s “normal” low expectations, he was surprised to find an instructor who appeared interested in their course material—an arguably unremarkable FYC experience for many students. As he became more interested and engaged in his writing courses, he began to develop drafting and revising practices as well as stronger reading habits—ultimately embodying a new history with academic writing. By the time he transferred to UNR, he had changed his major to English, and at the time of his interviews with me, he named both being a Writing Consultant and being an English
major as central to his identity—a significant difference from his high school perception of writing. It was not simply his experience in an individual class or even the new setting that influenced Carlton’s *valuing writing*, but the dialectical relationship between his individual history and those new experiences. This relationship and Carlton’s ongoing development is not something that a traditional knowledge transfer framework and its emphasis on small, static moments could capture.

As a dispositional quality, *valuing writing* encompasses more than just perception of academic writing. It is an embodied value of words and/or language as a core aspect of self—an identity for both Carlton and Katie (and most of my participants). While Carlton and Katie both represent a rather drastic shift in *valuing writing* marked by changes in major—from STEM fields to writing-intensive disciplines—and career goals, shifts in *valuing writing* are often more subtle in other students. Not everyone changes their major. But it is through this identifiable change in the role of writing in Katie’s and Carlton’s lives that allows us to clearly see the process of that shift. And for both, that shift comes, not as the result of a single experience or event, but through an accumulation of experiences that interact with each other and with students’ individual histories. The cumulative nature of those new experiences and interactions create new history for Katie and Carlton, and their dispositions are remade, continuing the process. The stories both students tell reveal the importance of *valuing writing* as a dispositional quality in relation to developing academic literacy and of the dynamic nature of that dispositional quality. They also point to complications with assessing student writers only in small, isolated moments in the way that a traditional knowledge transfer framework does. A single
snapshot of Carlton’s “move” from English 098 to English 101, for example, would tell us little about his overall development.

Creativity

“It allows me to see things that maybe I wouldn’t, that someone who’s very black and white in their thinking wouldn’t necessarily see. And [it] allows me to, kind of, test the waters a little bit and, kind of, go, ‘Oh, I always thought this, but, you know, it’s okay to, kind of, go this way or that way.” – Skippy

“Creativity” often refers to some sort of artistic endeavor, and the “creative spirit” that Bart mentions in the introduction to this chapter is closely aligned with his poetry and this common definition of the word. But Bart, like many of my participants, also demonstrates a type of creativity that encompasses innovation and problem-solving. For the purposes of this research, I define the dispositional quality of creativity as the ability to move past traditional and/or formulaic approaches and ideas. Creativity in this sense is often considered a quality beneficial to writers; taking risks and thinking outside the box are practices that professional writers advise (Piazza and Siebert). Creativity is also cited as important to student success more broadly. The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing identifies creativity as an important habit of mind that is fostered when writers “take risks” and “use methods that are new to them” (4-5). Similarly, the “problem-solving disposition” that Wardle argues is necessary for successful knowledge transfer incorporates an ability to find new approaches to representing and/or solving problems (“Creative Repurposing”). Though these practices are often identified as important, the specific ways that students enact creativity can vary significantly from student to student and from context to context. As with all dispositional qualities,
creativity is influenced by an individual’s embodied history as well as by other qualities (e.g., valuing writing) and the organizing structures of a given context.

As we have seen, Carlton’s history plays a significant role in the development of his valuing writing, and this history plays an equally important role in how his creativity develops. More specifically, Carlton’s history as it relates to creativity remains durable, making change slow. One of the outcomes of Carlton’s mother working to put herself through college when he was young is that Carlton learned to become self-reliant—to solve problems independently. When he described his struggles with reading and writing as a child, he told the story of the first time he successfully wrote his name. He was learning the alphabet in school, but his mom had been “freaking out” about the fact that he still couldn’t write his name and had been trying to teach him. It was while she was away at a meeting that he managed to write his name correctly for the first time—on the wall of the apartment they were renting. When he showed her his accomplishment, she scolded him for writing on the wall. But what made this experience significant for him was that he had successfully written his name, “albeit sloppily,” on his own. As he phrased it in his interview, “I did it, didn’t I?”

While Carlton’s creativity shifted as he engaged in new experiences in college, the need to accomplish tasks and solve problems independently was reinforced throughout Carlton’s childhood and teenage years. Because his mom had a lot on her plate and was often away from home for both work and her own classes, Carlton said, “it was mostly on me, you know, to take care of my own academic things while she was out doing her things.” He explained that his mom would ask him how his day was at school
over dinner but said grades were not emphasized. And, as we have seen, Carlton’s high school experience left him feeling apathetic about his “academic things.” After he moved out and started attending classes at the community college, his valuing writing started to shift, and with it, his interest in his own education also shifted. Carlton started believing that his coursework was “pretty dope” and wanting to “put in a little more work,” but he found himself facing situations where he didn’t always know how to accomplish the tasks he was assigned.

By the time he transferred to UNR, Carlton had completely changed his writing process (or more accurately, developed a writing process) but his creativity has been slower to change. Rather than skimming books and pushing out papers the night before, he now describes his writing process as starting as soon as he gets the prompt. He says, “The sooner I have it, the sooner I can begin the work associated with completing the required assignment, getting it out there, doing the revision work and so forth.” But even with these developments, as a junior majoring in English, he still sometimes struggles with “interpreting the professor’s wishes” in writing assignments. He described asking the professor clarifying questions as the first step of his writing process, but he also acknowledged that some professors aren’t always able to answer his questions. He said:

“I may ask the professor a couple questions and if the professor can’t quite address those questions, I’m like, ‘Okay. Well, you probably should be addressing those questions because you just dropped this on my desk.’ But you know, sometimes you’ve just got to take two and two and make yourself a thermonuclear reactor.”

It is in these moments—moments when a professor can’t (or doesn’t) answer questions to his satisfaction that Carlton’s creativity—that the self-reliant approach to problem-solving that he has embodied is most visible.
Carlton has more resources now when it comes to asking for help than he did in high school, but he still primarily approaches challenging writing situations independently. Bourdieu argues that our dispositions represent “a present past that tends to perpetuate itself,” privileging early experiences (Outline 54). Carlton’s story demonstrates how, despite more recent experiences, his past does tend to perpetuate itself. He can—and does—take drafts to classmates, his UWC co-workers, or professors (when they are “willing to give it a quick skim”). However, rather than seeking feedback as an opportunity to help him work through difficult aspects of an assignment, he says, “I seek feedback, right, because I need to know what I need to fix.” And he does the “fixing” on his own—much like he figured out how to write his name or take care of his earlier “academic things” on his own.

Multiple aspects of Carlton’s academic life have changed since his childhood, but his childhood experiences tend to perpetuate themselves. As his experiences in college interact with his history and with his other dispositional qualities (such as valuing writing) his creativity and the writing processes and practices generated from his creativity have been reshaped. Asking questions of his professors is one practice that is new to him, and this new practice demonstrates a shift in his approach to problem solving and therefore his creativity. However when those questions aren’t answered to his satisfaction, he is quick to return to that self-reliant creativity shaped by his early experiences rather than turning to other resources he has. And when he seeks feedback during his writing process, he treats that feedback as a step to identify problems, which he then figures out how to solve on his own.
Despite those early experiences being given “disproportionate weight,” as Bourdieu says, more recent experiences also become a part of Carlton’s individual history and continue to influence the ongoing process of developing creativity. Carlton’s early experiences with literacy are powerful. They have significant influence on how he enacts creativity, and the practices that creativity engenders do not consistently demonstrate the development that other practices demonstrate. Carlton’s development, as it is seen through creativity, may be too slow to see if a moment is disconnected from the rest of Carlton’s narrative, as it would be in a knowledge transfer framework. But Carlton’s creativity is still in process—and it will continue to shift as Carlton continues to interact with literacy in various ways.

While Carlton’s creativity is easiest to see in his efforts at problem-solving, Bart’s are best illustrated through risk-taking in his writing. As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, Bart’s early experiences had significant influence on his relationship with literacy. Schirato and Webb point out that the importance of Bourdieu’s work on disposition is his emphasis on the relationship between our past and our context (541), and like Carlton, Bart’s creativity has been influenced by the relationship between his accumulated experiences and new contexts—namely, his first year in an MFA program.

When Bart moved across the country to start the MFA program at UNR, he brought with him childhood experiences with reading and his undergraduate degree in English but also the four years he spent between completing his undergraduate and deciding to pursue an advanced degree. That four years played a significant role in shaping his valuing writing, which he articulated as his “identity” as a writer. He explained, “My [Bachelor’s] degree was in creative writing, but I [didn’t] consider
myself as a writer because I didn’t really understand what I was writing.” After graduating, Bart continued to write poetry when he felt “inspired,” but he described feeling like he was “writing in a vacuum” and wanting to find an audience for his writing—and a community to participate in. The new desire for an audience is representative of a shift in his valuing writing, which in turn motivated him to apply for MFA programs. And it is this new context that has had significant impact on reshaping his creativity.

Entering an academic context four years after his undergraduate degree presented Bart with a handful of challenges, including facing new academic genres. In his first semester of his MFA program, he was assigned a book review in one of his classes, and he described approaching this new genre not only as challenging but “agonizing.” It was the first time he had been assigned that particular genre, and despite discussing it in class, he said he felt “kind of in the dark.” He has a history of writing in various genres, describing his FYC class as a “genre writing class” and, from that history, had a specific strategy for writing in a new genre. The current context, however, pushed against that history, forcing him to reconsider his strategy and enact his creativity in a new way. He explained:

“I can go online and look at book reviews, but you know at that point, it’s just like a lot of imitation, which doesn’t sit right with me anymore. I think when I was a beginning writer, imitation was great because I’d be like, ‘Oh, this is how they’re doing it…I’m totally going to do that.’ But because I feel like I have my own voice in my writing, having only those author reviews to look at to sort of imitate was really challenging for me.”

Though using imitation when facing a new genre is a practice that been successful for him in the past, he felt uncomfortable with that practice in light of his more recent
experiences with his writing. These newer experiences, the history that he embodied after completing his Bachelor’s degree, and the “voice” he developed along with those experiences influenced the way he enacts creativity —and led him to try a writing process that was “completely different” than what he was used to.

Changing his process and testing out his new “voice” with this new genre was a risk for Bart—a risk that may not have been successful but that still became part of his cumulative process of development. At the time of this interview, he was still waiting to receive feedback on the draft he turned in, and he said he still felt like he didn’t know what he was doing. Carroll argues that students in FYC learn to write differently but not necessarily better, that development is not a linear process (60), and Bart’s story suggests that this non-linear development is not exclusive to FYC or even to writers new to academic contexts. Based on Bart’s history, he has all the elements needed to be a successful writer: he identifies as a writer and has developed a “voice” he is confident in; he has experience in and knows strategies for tackling new genres, including academic genres; and he is motivated to improve his writing and is willing to take risks. However, that history and the context in which he faced the book review assignment pushed against each other in a way that was ultimately unproductive for Bart—at least in terms of that specific writing task. Regarding his disposition, however, the small shift in his creativity and the experience of taking a risk is now a part of Bart’s history that will inform how he engages with new genres in the future.

While early experiences are powerful, dispositions are part of an ongoing and cumulative process. And that process includes new contexts and new experiences within those contexts. Carlton’s and Bart’s stories both demonstrate that dynamic process—not
only how dispositional qualities are shaped by experiences and by the interactions between past and present but also how changes to dispositions can be slow and non-linear. Seeing this process reveals elements of academic literacy development as well. From Carlton’s story, we can see that early experiences can be particularly powerful in shaping a student’s understanding of academic literacy, making it difficult to see any significant, positive change in a single semester of FYC. And from Bart’s story, we can see that academic literacy doesn’t develop linearly and that even strong writers struggle with assignments that are similar to assignments they have succeeded at before—a “scene” that would be interpreted as “failure” in most studies relying on the knowledge transfer framework. Knowledge transfer relies on static moments, often but not always looking for “knowledge” from FYC being applied to the writing produced in a subsequent semester; this small moment in time presents a limited view of the learning process that students are engaged in. Without fully understanding these students’ narratives, especially their individual history and what factors influence their responses to specific writing tasks, we are unable to truly see the development that is in process.

**Critical Self-Reflection**

“Because the way that I’m constantly thinking about things is like, I’m never thinking about, like, the small events, right? So, like, I might fail at something, right? I might not get a good grade. But I think I’m always thinking about, like, okay what’s, like, the arc of all of this, right? Like what is the, what is the takeaway from everything?” – Dwayne

Reflection, which encompasses more specific concepts like metacognition, is generally accepted as an important part of the learning process; reflection and/or metacognition are identified as important processes or habits in scholarship about knowledge transfer and writing development (e.g., Frazier; Foertsch; Jarratt et al.; Nelms and Dively) as well as
in literature about critical thinking and learning (e.g., Costa and Kallick; Perkins et al.). The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing includes metacognition as a key habit of mind, defining it as the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking. Through analysis of my participants’ interviews what I found was not just reflection or “thinking about thinking,” as metacognition is often defined, but thinking critically about thought and action with the purpose of meaning making. More specifically, as a dispositional quality, I define critical self-reflection as the contemplation of one’s experiences, actions, and motivations within a broad context and with the purpose of making meaning. While some reflection is to be expected as part of the interview process, there was a trend among participants of sharing stories in which they had engaged in this kind of deliberate reflection.

Sarah’s critical self-reflection was shaped through experiences in FYC as well as working in the UWC, but this dispositional quality was also influenced by how she was raised. Sarah was raised believing that education—and grades—were important. She described her parents pushing her and her younger brother, saying, “[They] made it very clear…‘In high school, you’re gonna do well.’” She doesn’t remember her parents ever reminding them to do their homework because “it just kind of, like, known” that homework needed to be done. And she brought this attitude about grades and homework with her to college. While she talked about occasionally struggling with classes like Microbiology, she described getting good grades in English classes throughout high school and her required FYC courses. She admitted, though, that the majority of those papers were written at the last minute.
As a grade-motivated student, she rarely took time to consider what she was writing about or why she was writing it in her early years of college. One story she shared was of a Holocaust, Genocide, and Peace Studies class for which 50% of her grade was a single assignment. The essay was the longest she had written, and she struggled with the length of it. She said she got to a point where she felt like the paper was “pretty good,” but then realized it still wasn’t meeting the length requirement. Despite feeling like there was “nothing else to say,” she forced herself to keep writing. She said, “It was 50% of my grade, and I didn’t really have much of a choice but to just, like, fill in.” She earned a B- on the assignment, and then said, “But, I mean, I got an A in the class so it ended up being fine.” Everything she described about that assignment was focused on that length requirement—not her writing process or the content of the assignment. She wrote with nothing but required the word count and her final grade in mind.

Sarah experiences in the UWC shaped her developing critical self-reflection. She was initially hired to work at the front desk of the UWC, greeting students, scheduling appointments, and other clerical duties. It was after her first semester that she was recruited to work as a consultant. It was during her time in the UWC that she started to “slow [her] writing process down,” taking the time to outline and to “collaborate with others” rather than writing at the last minute. And along with these changes in her practices, she also began to think about why she was writing and looking for meaning in her writing assignments. She said:

“Up until I started working as a consultant here…I would just like write a paper last minute and just turn it in. And I realized, like, ‘Yes, I’m like getting a good grade, but am I really taking anything away from the assignment by doing that?’ Not really. I mean if I just write it at the last minute and forget what I even wrote
Looking for something to “take away” from her assignments as a means to make meaning of the work she was doing is one way that Sarah enacted her *critical self-reflection* — and an approach to her academic writing that differs significantly to the essay from her Holocaust, Genocide, and Peace Studies class. And while she credits the UWC with influencing this *critical self-reflection*, this experience is not the only one that influenced this dispositional quality.

While she identified her experiences in the UWC as influencing her desire to find significance in the writing she was doing, based on the stories she told, it was English 102 that initially provided her with the language she still uses to describe her thinking process. When asked about her experiences with FYC, Sarah recalled her English 102 instructor emphasizing the concept of looking for “significance” in order to develop analysis and argument. Sarah’s response here stood out for a couple of reasons: almost everyone else in my study responded to this same question by talking about research methods or learning MLA style. The language Sarah used, finding “significance,” became a common theme through the rest of her interviews. She used this same language when she described looking for purpose in the work she was doing—not just in her writing assignments but in her education as a whole. In her final interview, she spoke at length about how she makes sense of her college experience:

“For me to create an importance in something, I need to find the significance. So for something to be important to me, I need to make a connection to something else. Because if it’s something that I’m learning in just a, like, this bubble of education or bubble of anything really, and it doesn’t apply to anything else in my life, why do I care? So until I can find a connection to other things that might be more important or come up later on in life, to me it holds no value.”
The way that she described looking for connections is her way of making meaning of her experiences, and the way she talks about making meaning—finding “significance”—relates back to her experiences in English 102. This is not to say that Sarah was not a thoughtful or reflective student prior to these experiences but that when and how she enacts her critical self-reflection has shifted; her desire for meaning making as a junior, especially when it comes to her academic writing and education, is both deliberate and focused in a way that can’t be seen in her stories about high school or her first-year of college. And it was the combination of experiences building on one another and interacting with her individual history that ultimately reshaped her critical self-reflection and redefined her relationship to academic literacy.

The relationship to academic literacy that Sarah initially brought with her to college was similar to Rat’s relationship to academic literacy in that he got by in high school with little effort. He described his high school English classes as being about the five-paragraph essay, which he says he “probably just free-wrote [him]self through,” and “all the other busy work you do in those kind of courses, like grammar quizzes or vocabulary quizzes or whatever.” During those classes, he thought of himself as a good writer, as someone who could “just write.” Rat, unlike Sarah, did not have grades as a motivating factor. Rat initially came to college as a traditionally aged student, but he ended up quitting after that first year. It took him five years and a few attempts at classes before he came back as a full-time student and persisted. He was in his late twenties when he finished his BA in English with a minor in Journalism and has been taking graduate-level English classes while he figures out what he wants to do next.
Rat described the shift he had to make moving from high school to college as being, at least in part, about realizing that he wasn’t as good as he thought he was. He said:

“[High] school in general, I guess after a certain point, it wasn’t…it just wasn’t hard. I didn’t try, didn’t spend any time on anything. So I didn’t, if I got As? Who cares? Or, you know, I got…less than stellar grades ‘cause I was like, ‘Ah, I don’t give a shit.’ And I think that really framed how I came to college where I had to try, ‘cause I was exceedingly mediocre. I didn’t realize that.”

This mindset influenced his first year—and first attempt—at college. In some ways, he was in a similar position to Carlton in his first year of college. Though their circumstances were different, Rat also reached a point where he wanted to take his education more seriously but found himself without the practices that someone like Sarah had already embodied. He explained what it was like for him coming back to college: “I had no prewriting ‘cause I was writing everything last minute anyway. And then I came back, and I was like, ‘No, you’ve gotta prewrite. You’ve gotta think about it.’” This awareness was a first step in shifting his critical self-reflection, but as with any dispositional quality, change can be slow and messy. And questions of how to work harder and how to be more productive plagued Rat’s college experience.

Rat may not have developed the practices to back up his desire to work harder and be more productive, but the desire and the time and energy he spends wondering how he can work harder suggests deliberate thought about his actions and, at least the beginnings of, attempts to make meaning of himself as a writer through those actions. Even after graduating and spending a few semesters taking graduate courses, Rat still identifies “procrastinator” as central to his identity, and he constantly referred to various time-
management strategies and efforts to manage his “workflow” better.\textsuperscript{12} At the beginning of his final interview, which took place just a few weeks before the end of the semester, he described the assignments he was working on: “I gotta read, like, all of Robert Beck’s books this weekend and then write a draft of a twenty-five page [essay]…I gotta read some theory stuff and…unfortunately I read [the professor’s] email and promptly forgot the content of it, which I tend to do with emails.” He went on to explain how missing that email meant missing out on a chance to get feedback and make revisions on a project proposal and said, “I’m feeling the crunch of two seminars. I don’t know how people [do it].” While he still, obviously, struggles with time-management and figuring out how to work better, his awareness of those questions, and the frequency of which they come up when talking about his writing, demonstrates how his \textit{critical self-reflection} has been influenced by those early struggles with college.

While Rat’s \textit{critical self-reflection} may not have impacted his time-management habits, it has impacted how he thinks about those habits. It also has influenced how he thinks about what he is doing with his writing and how he sees himself in relation to that writing. One constant in how Rat described his experiences with writing was references to various scholars and writers. In describing the different genres he has written during his time in school, he referenced Mary Soliday’s work in genre theory. When talking about his career goals, which he said include an eventual MFA, he referenced prolific historical romance novelist Emma Prince and debated briefly whether or not he would

\textsuperscript{12} Just like Sarah’s language for talking about her work comes from English 102, Rat’s language here (e.g., “workflow”) is likely influenced by his Journalism minor and working for the local newspaper.
want to write romance novels for the sake of a paycheck. This frequent citing of authors in conversation is representative of what he considers a strength in his academic writing: the ability to make connections across “a lot of disparate resources.” Drawing on outside sources, even in everyday conversation (something he said has been “confounding to girlfriends in the past”) is one way that he enacts critical self-reflection. Rather than asking “How do I work harder?” in some situations, his question has become “How do I work in relation to this existing work?” The more he reads, the more he seeks to understand himself in relation to what he is reading. In this way, Rat’s continued experiences with writing have shaped his critical self-reflection to include efforts to make sense of his place in the world as a writer.

For both Sarah and Rat, critical self-reflection shapes how they think about their writing and the literacy tasks they engage with, and for both, critical self-reflection is a dispositional quality that is in process. Through the stories they tell, we can see the influences of early experiences lingering for both Sarah and Rat, even as newer experiences have started to reshape their disposition, but more importantly we can see the shifts in how they think about their experiences with literacy. And these shifts, this ongoing process that critical self-reflection is undergoing for them both, provides insight into their individual processes of academic literacy development. In listing ways to foster metacognition, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing focuses specifically on how students should think about processes, texts, and projects, but as we can see from both Sarah and Rat, critical self-reflection has a much broader reach, particularly as students seek meaning in and for their academic lives.
Discussion

Though dispositions are often included as maxims or advice for writers or built into learning outcomes (Piazza and Siebert), they are not static characteristics or even behaviors to be inculcated. They are part of an ongoing process, always emergent through the interactions between individual history and current contexts. Bourdieu reminds us that early experiences are privileged in this process, creating dispositions that are durable and work to reinforce themselves, and this durability can be seen in the slow shifts in Carlton’s creativity and Rat’s critical self-reflection. Early experiences like these “have particular weight because the habitus [and its dispositions] tends to ensure its own consistency” (Bourdieu, Outline 60). Those earliest experiences create a foundation and, what Horner calls “dispositional sedimentation” (90), but as Carlton’s and Rat’s stories demonstrate, early experiences are not all-powerful and the dispositions they shape are not permanent. Even with the impact Carlton’s and Rat’s early experiences had, those dispositional qualities have still been influenced by more recent experiences and interactions with new contexts.

College is an especially important period to consider because students are in the midst of multiple ongoing processes and transitions. As Herrington and Curtis explain, college is “a time of transition and initial instability, moving from high school to college and from a home environment to a new one away from most friends and family” (354). Traditional college students like Sarah and Katie, who both moved away from home after high school, are in the midst of this transition and instability; not only are they engaging with new ideas and in new contexts both academically and socially, they are learning how to be independent and facing the new social contexts that go along with that
independence. Even students like Rat who have taken less than traditional routes through college are facing new experiences and creating new history for themselves—and therefore are always “in process.”

It is partly this constant state of “in process” that makes understanding disposition a critical part of understanding academic literacy development. Hagar and Hodkinson argue that the knowledge transfer metaphor represents knowledge as a product independent of the learner (622). Focusing on a “snapshot” or a frozen moment in time, like knowledge transfer does, removes both what came before and what comes next—and this presents researchers with an incomplete picture of development. If we were to look specifically at Bart’s first attempt at writing a book review, we can see a new graduate student struggling with a new academic genre. If we isolate the ability to write a book review (or any other academic genre) from Bart as a learner, we would no longer see the important decisions he made while struggling with that writing task (i.e., avoiding imitation) or why he made those decisions (i.e., practicing his own “voice” as a writer). But by looking beyond that specific moment in time and considering both his individual history with literacy and his goals as a writer, we get a more complete picture of him as a learner—including insight into the complexities of his academic literacy development.

Bourdieu states that early experiences are privileged, but he also explains that the habitus, and as such the dispositions that make up the habitus, “produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history” (Outline 54). As stories like those from Bart and Rat demonstrate, new experiences and interactions with new contexts reshape our dispositions in important ways. And, as explained in Chapter 2, those dispositions in turn generate new practices,
influence decisions, and organize responses to new experiences and tasks. In this way, dispositions and our experiences function like a feedback loop: while experiences influence our dispositions, dispositions influence generate actions and perceptions—and those actions and perceptions become part of our embodied history. But this feedback loop, this ongoing and recursive process of disposition and experience, does not exist in a vacuum any more than the “knowledge” that knowledge transfer tries to isolate does; and it is questions about contexts, more specifically how students’ embodied dispositions interact with the dispositions of the academic context, that I take up in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: 
Harmonization, Resistance, and Dispositions in Context

When Omari sits down to work on an essay, he has to have a hard copy of the prompt and “copious amounts of coffee.” He is particular about the space he works in, needing a quiet space—and that coffee. He says he doesn't brainstorm but focuses his attention first on finding the evidence he needs to make his argument as strong as possible. Argument is, according to Omari, one of the most important things about academic writing. He said, “That’s the thing that I’ve noticed about college. You learn how to…make good arguments. I feel like most academic writing in college, or at least at least in my experience…have been arguments.”

Omari was 20 at the time of his interview—a junior majoring in Criminal Justice with aspirations of law school. He had scored well on his Advanced Placement (AP) exams in high school, and because of those scores, he didn’t have to take any FYC classes. Because he didn’t take those composition course, the writing he has done has primarily been for UNR’s required Core Humanities courses. Omari lamented the lack of writing asked of him in courses for his Criminal Justice major, describing a reliance instead on multiple choice and “fact regurgitation.” He finds value in writing as a way to “examin[e] different viewpoints” and “understand something new” about himself, and he wants to write more. He says he hopes the graduate program will be more focused on writing.

When it comes to the writing he does, as well as to his work helping other students in the UWC, Omari identifies argument as a strength. But even as he expressed confidence with writing arguments, he acknowledged that this would only get him so far:
“What’s most challenging for me is that there are lots of ways to write, and I feel like I’ve written a certain way for a while. So that may be hard to break. If I’m going to continue to develop as a writer…I’ll need to be open to change my writing style ‘cause there are so many ways to write. And probably just being open and willing to change my ways is probably going to be difficult for me, but I’ll have to.”

He is confident with writing arguments, but he knows that that “academic writing” consists of other “ways” of writing—other genres and literacy tasks he has not yet experienced but that will challenge his existing practices. The future that Omari is anticipating describes one reality students face as they move through the academic context and experience new genres and new forms of academic writing—and moments when their existing dispositions are no longer aligned with the academic context.

The term “academic writing” is typically used “imprecisely” (Thaiss and Zawacki 4), and multiple communities can be found within the broader academic community, often delineated by discipline. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will be looking at the concept of academic literacy broadly. Composition scholars identify “academic literacy” as a system of structures determined by the discourses of the academy and the professionalization of disciplines (see Brodkey; Chiseri-Strater; Geisler). Students entering the academic community have to learn the genres and conventions of the academy (Bizzell) and continue learning different conventions and conversations as they continue to advance through the academic community (Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman). Mapping Bourdieu’s concept of habitus onto this process, we can see that academic literacy is made up of its own system of dispositions; genres, conventions, and conversations are all practices embodied by the academic
context, shaped over time by the discourses and professionalization practices of the academic community.

Just as individual dispositional qualities are generative, so too are the dispositions of the academic context. Values and beliefs are codified in mission statements, bylaws, and strategic plans, and embodied practices are passed down through institutional history. The system of dispositions embodied by the academy makes up what Diane Reay calls an “institutional habitus.” Liz Thomas expands on Reay’s work and explains, “institutional habitus should be understood as more than the culture of the educational institution; it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice” (431). That is, decisions made by individuals functioning within that academic context are defined in relation to values, beliefs, and practices embodied by the academic context. This system of dispositions also influences students’ practices and perceptions as they engage in the academic context, such as their identity as a student and/or as a writer.

As newcomers, students inevitably face dispositions embodied by the academic context that do not always align with students’ existing dispositions. This misalignment can span a variety of factors (e.g. race, class, gender, religion, etc.), but it is also what Omari is alluding to when he describes anticipating difficulty when facing a different “way” of writing than what he is confident in. Members of the academic community—those who have been engaged in the academic context over an extended period of time—

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13 The work of Diane Reay, Liz Thomas, and Wolfgang Lehmann, cited elsewhere in this chapter, explore questions of race, gender, and class in relation to the concept of “institutional habitus.”
are able to harmonize their individual values and practices with the values and practices of the community. Focusing on issues related to student retention, Thomas argues that “the fit between the individual’s and the institution’s characteristics strongly influence” the student’s commitments to both their academic goals and to the institution (427); this “fit” includes how the student perceives of their position within the academic community and to what extent they feel prepared and valued by the institution. Wolfgang Lehmann similarly argues that conflict in the relationship between a students’ habitus and the collective habitus of the community can be a significant factor in student success. Lehmann points out that moving into the context of higher education involves a “transformation” from an “old” habitus to a “new” one and draws attention to the potential for confusion and conflict in this transformation as students move away from their backgrounds. Omari’s belief that he will have to change his writing style when he is faced with a new “way” of writing alludes to this transformation and the need to shift from an “old” set of dispositions to a “new” one. And the conflict and confusion Lehmann describes resonates with the difficulty Omari anticipates. It also describes a scenario that we have seen time and time again in accounts of first-year students navigating the “gap” between high school writing and college-level writing as well as between FYC and disciplinary courses.

Understanding how students “fit” and how they transform to “fit” is a necessary aspect of understanding the academic literacy development process. Moments of conflict and confusion often show up in stories of knowledge transfer as moments of failure— moments of “frustrated integration” (Nowacek), “critical incidents” (Yancey et al.), or “inappropriate” applications of knowledge (Smit). However, these stories of failed
knowledge transfer rarely, if ever, address the academic context and the ways in which students’ dispositions may or may not “fit” with the dispositions of the academic context. Lillis argues that “in the gaps between what student-writers’ texts seem to mean and their talk about these texts, we catch glimpses of their individual desires for meaning making, which both converge with and diverge from [academic literacy] practice” (162). As students continue to engage with the academic context, as they face moments of conflict and confusion, they make decisions about how to “fit” with the academic context; they make efforts to harmonize their practices and values with those of the academic community, to resist those practices and values (and to protect their own existing dispositions), or to harmonize with some and resist others. And it is through these efforts, in these moments of “meaning making” between the student and the academic context, that students’ academic literacy is developed.

In this chapter, I argue that dispositions always function in relation to the context in which students are operating, and as students interact with that context, they engage in moments of harmonization and of resistance. A dispositional framework demonstrates how students navigate the academic context, uncovering moments of "transformation" as students either work to harmonize with the academic context or resist the dispositions of the academic context. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on two representative elements of the academic context: instructors and the resources they provide.

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14 As with any binary construct, there is a danger in depicting harmonizing and resisting as the only two options and/or as options in opposition of one another. I believe students have multiple, nuanced responses available to them, but for the purposes of simplifying this discussion, I have chosen to focus on these two responses.
Instructors as Representatives of the Academic Context

“But I remember when I was in English 303... and [my professor] was looking at some of my stuff. He said, ‘Hey, this is actually pretty sharp. Nice job.’ And I was like, ‘Wait, I did that? You think it’s sharp?’ Like... that was, I’d have to say, a pretty key moment ‘cause since then it’s been, ‘Oh hey, I can actually write. This is almost an identity for me. I’m gonna start calling myself that sometimes.’” – Carlton

It is partly the position of authority instructors are in that leads students to view instructors as representatives of the academic community—and of academic literacy. Instructors are the ones who both distribute and evaluate the literacy tasks of the academy, and, as such, instructors are largely responsible for enacting and maintaining the dispositions of the academic community. In this way, instructors are one of the most visible representations of the academic context that students have. Students often look to instructors as guides or models for how to harmonize their own dispositions with those of the academic context, but students also make decisions that resist the values and practices instructors embody and/or demonstrate to students. In either interaction, whether making efforts to achieve “fit” or to protect existing dispositions, the relationship between students’ dispositions and the dispositions of the academic context plays a significant role in how students develop as writers within that context.

Dwayne described a series of experiences in one course tracing a moment of misalignment and conflict he experienced and his subsequent efforts to harmonize with the academic context by looking to one of his instructors as a guide. Dwayne, like Omari, scored high enough on his AP exams to “test out” of both English 101 and English 102. Knowing he wanted to major in English, he started taking introductory literature courses in his first semester. By the time he reached his sophomore year and upper-division
literature courses, he was confident in his writing. One assignment, however, shook that confidence significantly. Dwayne explained:

“It was a really cool class, but the first essay I that wrote in that class…I spent a bunch of time on it, and I was like, ‘Yeah, I think I got this. Whoa. I’m great.’ I didn’t do much revising, and I turned it in. And I got like a D- or something. Like just a smack-down. And I was like, ‘Oh man, I can’t believe that I got this terrible grade on this assignment. I thought I was good at writing.’”

In this moment, Dwayne’s practices were ill-adapted to the specific conditions of that assignment—an assignment for an upper-division course that was likely looking for something a bit different in terms of the final product than the introductory courses or AP exams he had experience with. This moment could, perhaps, be identified as a moment of failed knowledge transfer or what Yancey et al. might classify as a “critical incident.” It could also be seen as simply a moment of over-confidence generated by a history of success with literacy tasks. In this isolated moment, we can see one type of conflict that can arise when the students’ dispositions and the dispositions of the academic context do not “fit,” but we can also see how the dialectic relationship between Dwayne’s existing dispositions and those of the academic context inform his self-perception and developing identity as a writer. And it is Dwayne’s response to this moment that demonstrates how this conflict is only part of the process of his academic literacy development.

Upon receiving his D-, Dwayne met with his professor, explaining, “she had some comments on the paper itself but I needed to know why.” The decision to meet with her was generated, at least in part, by his critical self-reflection—the “need to know why” echoing his overall desire to “understand all of everything forever” (Chapter 2). And, in reflecting on that conversation with the professor, he said, “That was the first moment at which I sort of realized that, like, yes I was good at writing, but that doesn’t mean that
I’m…just perfect, right? There’s no plateau of that…but at least I knew at that point that I had work to do, whereas previously I was kind of just like, ‘Man, whatever. I got it.’”

This new perception of himself represents an awareness of his transformation, but his practices, like any other aspect of his habitus, privilege early experiences, making change slow. Dwayne acknowledged that the improvement in his writing was not “instant.” The very next assignment he faced was one he described as his most challenging.

The story he tells about this second assignment demonstrates both how Dwayne interpreted the feedback from his instructor as necessary to harmonize with the academic context as well as the additional conflict that often comes along with efforts to harmonize. He said:

“So the next essay I wrote after that was one I struggled with because I was having trouble implementing everything that she wanted me to think about…And maybe that’s why I struggled the most…because I was attempting to put in changes as I was writing, right? So I wasn’t thinking about, like, ‘Okay, let’s write like we normally would and then apply her criticism afterwards.’ I was thinking about her criticism the entire time that I was writing, and so in doing that, I started to, like, destabilize my own process. So I struggled not only with the assignment, but with, like, making the assignment better than the previous assignment.”

In this moment, Dwayne describes how incorporating feedback from his instructor destabilized a process that he had embodied, a process that was adapted to previous conditions (high school and AP exams)—but not the current conditions (an upper-division Literature course).

Dwayne’s experience demonstrates the confusion and conflict that students—even students who are “prepared” for college-level writing—can face as their dispositions transform. It also highlights the ongoing, and sometimes messy, process of academic literacy development. His efforts to harmonize—and the challenges he describes facing
when trying to incorporate his instructor’s feedback—echo Smit’s description of knowledge transfer research in which he sees “students who try to apply knowledge and experience that is inappropriate or in ways that are not helpful” (129). A dispositional framework, however, provides a more productive interpretation of this moment. Rather than a situation in which Dwayne is failing to make use of the feedback he was given or the apply “knowledge” he has learned, a dispositional framework emphasizes that this moment is part of an ongoing process of transformation. Dwayne’s efforts to harmonize “old” practices with the new context he is engaging with are bound to come with moments of conflict like this, and as dispositions tend to reproduce themselves (Bourdieu, Outline 54), transformation is slow.

While some students rely on instructors to guide harmonization with the academic context, other students engage in acts of resistance—which can be just as transformative in students’ academic literacy development. Kennedy referenced fairness and unbiased writing throughout her interviews, including commenting on how in her own writing she “never want[s] to be considered biased,” suggesting fairness is a dispositional quality she embodies. Therefore, instructors she perceives as being biased or treating students unfairly represent values that don’t “fit” with her existing dispositions. She described one professor in the Political Science program as being “very, very biased” in how he taught. She said, “[His class] was so out there, and it was, like, if you didn’t agree with it, he would just, kind of like, call you out.” She shared two examples from this class in which

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15 In her final interview, Kennedy confirmed that fairness is a value for her not just in school but “in life,” citing multiple childhood stories of her parents encouraging her to treat others fairly.
the professor appeared unwilling to entertain students’ views on the topics at hand, and said, “Even…the kids who identified as either party were like, ‘This guy’s crazy.’” She went on to explain how this lack of “equal respect” impacted her approach to the class:

“So I didn’t really like his class. I never…took it that seriously ‘cause I was like, ‘He’s crazy.’ And I remember we had to write a final paper on the Affordable Care Act, and me being like the rebellious kid that I am, stupidly decided to write how I was against it…I was just being like, ‘I hate this guy, so I’m gonna, like, do completely the opposite ideas of him.’”

She immediately countered this example by sharing stories of two professors who have motivated her to work harder in their classes. About one, she said, “[I] always tried really hard in that class just because he was, like, really smart, so I kind of want to, like, make him proud.” The second professor, similarly, is “so smart” that she tries to do well on papers.

Ultimately, Kennedy’s act of rebellion impacted her grade on the assignment, but it also is a way that she makes meaning of her own academic literacy in relation to the academic context. While she framed these other instructors as “smart,” the fact that she used them both to counter the story of the first professor implies that she associates “smart” with fairness, which echoes numerous comments she made drawing a correlation between research-based writing and unbiased writing. Kennedy’s response, writing a paper that intentionally argues something the professor disagrees with, is one way that Kennedy resists dispositions she doesn’t want to harmonize with. By identifying this act as “rebellious,” she is acknowledging that opinion—in this case the professor’s opinion—doesn’t align with her understanding of academic literacy.

Katie shared a similar story in which she perceived an instructor embodying dispositions that she was uninterested in harmonizing with. Throughout her interviews,
Katie almost always named the instructor when telling stories about writing. When I asked about this pattern in her final interview, she acknowledged that she puts more effort into classes when she “likes” the instructor. She initially used the word “engaging” in describing instructors whose classes she enjoys, explaining that she can tell when the instructor “like[s] their subject matter” and “want[s] to be there.” But she went on to describe a specific instructor who assigns too little work in the class. She said:

“I should be happy in a class that has no homework, that all you have to do is go to lecture. I just memorize the words he gives me for the test, and that’s it. I, like, it should be great, but I sit there frustrated because I’ve expected more. Like, I like the subject matter, and he just annoys me. I don’t respect [him]. I don’t like how he’s teaching the course.”

She went on to explain how her effort changes for some professors, saying:

“If they’re ridiculous, they’re rude, and they expect way too much…then it’s very, very pointed effort. And you know…I’ve written papers out of spite before just because [the professor] made it, you know, like sitting there the whole time angry. Like, ‘This is what you want. I’m going to give you exactly what you want.’ And it’s a good paper because it meets their requirements, but I’m not happy doing it.”

As a student who is close to graduation and considering graduate school, Katie has developed a relatively strong identity as an academic writer and, subsequently, a set of expectations related to academic literacy. Any time she believes an instructor is deviating from those expectations—either by assigning too little work or by being “rude”—she responds by adjusting how she approaches assignments for that instructor.

Despite these stories appearing to be moments where Kennedy and Katie are both making inappropriate moves with their writing, these moments reveal as much, if not more, about their academic literacy as a “successful” moment of knowledge transfer would. These are acts of resistance, acts that (at least in Kennedy’s case) impact their
grades, and acts that don’t necessarily demonstrate “knowledge” in the ways we might want to see or expect to see. But when we consider the dispositional qualities Katie and Kennedy are “protecting,” what we see is how both students perceive academic literacy. Lillis says, “We need to acknowledge that in making meaning, student-writers are making conscious and unconscious choices about who they are, who they want to be and don’t want to be, in their texts” (165). Katie’s and Kennedy’s acts of resistance are key in constructing their identities as writers within the academy, complete with dispositions that don’t always “fit.”

**Resources as Representative of the Academic Context**

“In [one] class, I didn’t value a lot of those assignments, like, very much because there was not a lot of structure built into the assignments themselves. It was like…‘Hey, do this thing. Hey, do this thing.’ And I was like, ‘Okay, I’ll do that thing.’ But there wasn’t any expectation during the semester.” –Bart

Because students view instructors as representatives of the academic context, students’ understanding of academic literacy is developed in part by their perceptions of the instructors—and the resources an instructor provides, whether feedback on an essay, a rubric, or an assignment sheet, also inform students’ perceptions of academic literacy. These resources, when seen as an extension of the instructor, function as representatives of the academic context. Even official documents like syllabi provide information about expectations and the “tone” of the course (Slattery and Carlson), which allows students to see values of both the class itself and the academic context more broadly. Students’ perception of academic literacy, and their identity as writers within the academy, is shaped by how they make meaning of their experiences within the academic context—including how they articulate moments of resistance to the resources they perceive as
representing the academic context. My participants shared stories in which they adopted those resources as guides and used them to work towards harmonization as well as stories in which they resisted the dispositions being represented by those resources.

Rat, whose interviews were some of the longest of all my participants, frequently referenced using a rubric he received from the professor of an Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism course he took. Each time Rat mentioned the rubric in his interviews, he includes the professor’s name, identifying the rubric as a product of that instructor. And through the frequent stories featuring this rubric, Rat describes how the rubric has been instrumental in changing how he approaches his academic writing and how he thinks about his writing. Prior to getting the rubric from his instructor, Rat described his writing as “free flowing” and said, “You know, I was driving toward an argument, but I think I was doing it in kind of an odd way. Like, I wasn’t quite as direct, and I think I’m more precise now.”

Rat described the rubric as being “laid out in a specific way,” and he found value in how it enabled him to reconsider the “slap-dash” approach to writing he had prior to that class. He said, “That rubric just helped me, you know, think about my writing in a way that I hadn’t thought about my writing yet. So I liked that, you know, being able to chart my progress…through that rubric.” After Rat was out of that professor’s class, he “imported that rubric and then modified it” as he moved on to other courses and other literacy tasks. As a student whose first attempts at college were unsuccessful, Rat sees the rubric as a valuable resource to help him harmonize with the academic context he had difficulties with initially.
Rat also talked about the first moment when he realized that the rubric was no longer useful, and though Dwayne did not explicitly address a similar moment after his D-, it is clear in his interviews that he has reached a point in his transformation where he is confident in his identity as an academic writer. In a study of new academic professionals, Jeff Jawitz argues that signs of growing confidence signal “the development of an academic habitus that ‘fitted’” into the new community (613). He argues this confidence can be a sign of either increased engagement with the community or an increased sense of understanding how to “play the game” and that either interpretation indicates the “maturing of the newcomer’s academic habitus and its growing harmonization with the collective habitus” (613). As students, like Dwayne and Rat, continue to engage in the academic context and look to instructors and instructors’ resources as guides for harmonizing with that academic context, their dispositions undergo a transformation.

Rat’s story highlights one way that the resources provided by instructor can be used in conscious efforts to harmonize with the dispositions of the academic context. Part of Rat’s transformation involved identifying this particular resource as a productive representation of the academic context and using that resource as a model to reconstitute his practices—with the goal of better harmonization as he moves through academic context. Making use of resources in this way is not always successful, as Dwayne’s story

16 Jawitz’s use of “play the game” here refers to Bourdieu’s frequently used sports metaphor, indicating a set of “rules,” “strategies,” and “stakes” necessary when interacting with a “field” or social space.
of his instructors’ feedback destabilizing his writing process shows, and not all resources of the academic context are as tangible as the rubric Rat describes.

One such resource that multiple participants described is the notion of an “ideal” writing process. The writing process can be seen as a construct of the academic context, created by what we teach about writing, how we teach writing, and how we talk about writing. Understanding writing as a process has been an accepted belief of the academic community since the 1970s (see Emig, Elbow, Murray). We often identify “stages” of the process such as prewriting, drafting, revision—language I have used throughout this dissertation—but most composition scholars and writing instructors would likely acknowledge that there is no ubiquitous, step-by-step process but rather a variety of activities and practices that make up a recursive process aimed at development and revision. At the same time, the perception of an “ideal” process, one that follows specific steps in a specific order, is common among students, especially students new to the academic community.

Students see the writing process as a linear set of steps because this is often how the writing process is presented to them. Courses that emphasize writing as a process often sequence assignments in a specific order, such as asking students to submit a topic proposal, then an outline, then a rough draft. The writing process is also often illustrated as a flow chart or a set of steps; even in the UWC, posters show the writing process as separate boxes, with “Prewriting” at the top and “Editing and Proofreading” at the bottom. There are no arrows to indicate movement in any particular direction, but it’s easy to see how a student would assume both movement from top to bottom and that each
step is distinct from the other. It is this version of the writing process, a linear sequence of stages, that participants’ stories suggest is an “ideal” writing process.

Sarah’s and Frank’s stories reveal they view this ideal writing process as representative of the academic context and situate their own writing process, practices that are embodied as part of their system of dispositions, as different than the dispositions of the academic context. The act of defining themselves as different from the academic context is one way that they resist harmonization and protect their own, existing dispositions.

When asked to describe his writing process, Frank started off by saying that his process is “weird and different from everyone.” Frank explained that, rather than developing an outline and then a rough draft, he will “typically go in one go.” If he doesn’t like what he wrote, he’ll copy and paste whatever sections he does like into another document, and then he starts over. He repeats this process until he has a draft that he is satisfied with. He said:

“It’s kind of like phoenix crafting. Burn it. Try again. But that’s the only way that works best for me. I just never found, like, rough drafts per se and outlining to be too effective. Just ‘cause by the time I’m writing, I already have an idea of where I want to go and, like my words to my fingers are pretty coherent with each other.”

In Frank’s interpretation of his writing process, he does not identify what he writes “in one go” as prewriting or what he produces in that initial “phoenix crafting” as a draft.

Frank sees his process as different than the discrete tasks of the ideal writing process, and by maintaining what “works” for him, he chooses to resist the dispositions represented by that resource. Frank identifies his process as more “effective” than the stages of the ideal writing process. His description here also implies a sense of efficiency
as he describes a “coherence” between his ideas and what he types. He puts this in opposition to the rough drafts and outlining of the ideal writing process, defining his own writing process as more effective and more efficient than the ideal writing process he has been presented with.

Where Rat uses the rubric as a resource to transform his practices, making intentional efforts to “fit” with the academic context, Frank rejects the perceived ideal writing process with its discrete, linear steps as being ineffective and inefficient. And in this act of resistance, we can Frank protecting particular dispositions and resisting others tied to the academic context. This resistance also demonstrates a level of confidence in his existing practices. He believes those practices to be effective and efficient. They “work” for him. And while he is actively resisting a construct of the academic context, this confidence implies what Jawtiz calls a “maturing academic habitus”—but it is not necessarily implying a “growing harmonization” (613). Instead, by rejecting the ideal writing process in this way, Frank is constructing his own sense of academic literacy in relation to but not in harmonization with the academic context.

Sarah similarly defines her writing process in opposition to the ideal writing process, although Sarah identifies her process as “bad practice.” She says:

“So honestly it’s bad practice, and I never…I make sure that I don’t tell, like, students [in the UWC] this because it really is not that great…I feel like what I do works for me. But I don’t think that it’s good for everyone else.”

Sarah went on to describe the first step of her writing process as “dump[ing] all the information out.” Her next step is to “literally copy and paste it into different places until it’s organized.” After describing these practices, Sarah again repeats that she never tells the students she works with in the writing center to do things the way she does them. She
says, “I don’t necessarily think that that’s the best method, and there’s probably a better way to go about it than what I do. But it’s always worked for me.”

Like Frank, Sarah’s perception of her writing process is defined in relation to the perceived ideal writing process created by the academic context—except Sarah associated that ideal writing process with “good practices.” Frank and Sarah have similar practices; both start with an initial “dump” of information and both follow up by copying and pasting sections of that information. While it can be argued that Sarah’s and Frank’s writing processes do, in fact, “fit” with practices commonly taught as part of academic literacy (e.g., freewriting and organizing), they share the perception that what "works” for them is different than what is taught or what is expected of them. Through these self-perceptions, both construct an identity that is set apart from the academy, an identity that is embodied as part of their dispositions and therefore intricately linked to their developing academic literacy.

The relationship between Sarah’s dispositions and the dispositions of the academic context shapes how she engages with the literacy tasks of that context and how she perceives of herself as a writer within the academic community. By defining herself in relation to the academic context and believing her writing process doesn’t “fit,” Sarah develops a perception of having “bad practices,” and this perception becomes a part of her identity as a writer within the academic context. At the same time that her goal-oriented disposition generates values and motivation for certain types of classes and certain aspects of writing (Chapter 2), the perception that her practices are “bad” is, in part, what makes her hesitant to claim the label of “good writer” throughout her
interviews, particularly in relation to writing anything not linked to her major/career goals.

Sarah's sense of academic literacy is further complicated by her mixed response to the dispositions represented by the idea writing process. Despite labeling her practices as "bad," Sarah maintains those practices, pointing out that they "work" for her. At the same time, she avoids telling students in the UWC about her practices, implying that she tells students about "good" writing practices that make up the ideal writing process. Through these two different roles, as a writer and as a UWC employee, she is both resisting the ideal writing process by protecting her existing practices and reifying the ideal writing process by presenting it as a resource for other students.

Identifying what “works” as different than the ideal writing process illustrates a perception than multiple participants have of their own writing processes and a perception that plays a key role in students' understanding of academic literacy. Carlton, Emily, and Kennedy all describe their writing processes and practices in terms of what "works" for them. For these students, as with Frank and Sarah, what "works" is framed as separate or unique in relation to the ideal writing process. The frequency of these comparisons, of students identifying their practices as different than the perceived practices of the academic context, highlights that the ideal writing process does not match the reality of how students write. Looking at students' perception of the ideal writing process is necessary in order to see how students perceive and develop academic literacy. By defining what "works" for them and making decisions to maintain what "works," these students are defining their practices as well as their perceptions of both themselves
and of the academic context. These practices and perceptions are embodied as part of their systems of dispositions and as part of their individual sense of academic literacy.

**Discussion**

Sternglass argues that we must consider “academic preparation, personal life factors…instructional settings and approaches, and the nature of instructional tasks interact as students respond to the writing demands placed on them” in order to “present the true complexity of writing development” (27). I contend that one way to view these factors, to consider the role of students’ individual histories, their developing values and beliefs, and the decisions they make in response to different contexts, is to consider students’ academic literacy development through a dispositional framework. Students’ dispositions shape their actions, their thoughts, and their responses to literacy tasks as well as to the academic context more broadly. At the same time, the experiences students engage in, those actions and responses, influence students’ dispositions. Katie’s valuing agency engenders procrastination when certain conditions are met, as described in Chapter 2, at the same time that her valuing writing is being influenced by her work as a writing consultant and experiences as a student in both science classes (for her major) and communications classes (for her minor), as described in Chapter 3. But this process is not happening in a vacuum; these experiences are always embedded in the academic context—and as Katie continues to interact with that context, she continues to make decisions about her identity, her practices, and how and when she makes efforts to “fit” with that context.

Most studies focused on knowledge transfer rely on isolated concepts of “knowledge” or skills—concepts like genre knowledge or thesis statements—and present
learning as a largely passive and decontextualized process, a process in which
“knowledge” is moved from one point to another with little attention to the context in
which that process is happening. In this framework, Dwayne is failing to transfer
“knowledge” imparted to him by his literature professor, and Kennedy is failing to apply
what she knows about writing a thesis-driven argument. Rat, on the other hand, is
successfully applying the “knowledge” of his professor’s rubric to other contexts—but it
took him years of “failure” to be able to make that move. These stories, however, show
moments of transformation, of decisions students are making to protect existing values
and practices, and the slow development process of academic literacy. These stories
demonstrate a development process that is more complex than knowledge transfer
frameworks are capable of addressing. And these stories complicate the role of context in
students’ learning.

The academic context is not a neutral space. It encompasses the people and texts
that shape the context as well as the systems of dispositions embodied by the institution
and represented by those people and texts. The academic context also includes
boundaries (some of which are more material than others) between faculty and students,
between the Sciences and the Liberal Arts, between FYC and Core Humanities and
Engineering 301. Even within FYC, there is a boundary between English 101 and English
102, with 101 being “like high school again” and 102 being the “fun” one with the
themes, according to my participants. Whenever there are boundaries, there are also
hierarchies, restricted areas, and notions of insider versus outsider (Reynolds)—none of
which are neutral concepts and all of which shape students’ perceptions of the academic
context.
Students’ habitus, their individual histories and the systems of dispositions they embody, always function in relation to the academic context and, as such, in relation to the people, texts, and dispositions within that context. The “fit” between a student’s dispositions and the dispositions embodied by the academic context plays a significant role in shaping students’ allegiances (Thomas; Lehmann) and how they define themselves within that context. Based on the stories included in the previous chapters, we can see that Katie’s system of dispositions includes valuing writing, valuing agency, a set of thoughtful writing practices, and an orientation towards getting good grades. In this chapter, Katie’s story suggests she also values a certain amount of rigor in her writing assignments. In all of these stories, we see glimpses of Katie as a student and as a writer—but we also see how Katie understands academic literacy and how she develops her own sense of academic literacy as she interacts with the academic context.

The academic context plays an important role in shaping how students develop academic literacy. It is a role that is equally important to—and intricately linked with—students’ existing dispositions and the ways in which they shape and are shaped by experiences with academic writing. For a student like Omari, there will be moments when his existing dispositions “fit,” when his confidence in writing good arguments will be well placed, but there will also be moments when his dispositions are mismatched or out of alignment. Eventually, he will face a literacy task that differs from the arguments he is used to, and when he does, he may very well face a moment of destabilization like the one Dwayne describes—his very first D-. Omari knows this moment will be difficult for him and that he will “need to be open to change” his writing practices. And maybe he will. Maybe he will look to an instructor or a resource as a guide and make an effort to
achieve a better “fit” with the academic context. But maybe he will decide to protect his exiting practices and instead engage in an act of resistance. He could, of course, find some other choice to make, some other response guided by his individual history and past experiences with academic writing and influenced by the academic context. Regardless of the decision he makes in that situation, that decision is part of his learning process—because that decision is part of how Omari will construct his academic literacy.
Chapter 5:

Implications and Applications

“We witness the inner workings of minds at one of the great transitional moments of life. We watch as writers discover that their parents’ divorce actually improved their lives, that the religion they grew up with doesn’t work for them anymore, that the gun control debate has two rational sides, that they really are as smart as ‘kids’ half their age. We’re bystanders, and sometimes coaches, as students plan for their futures and make sense of the lives they’ve led…It’s a time of rapid, radical change, and comp teachers get to sit in the bleachers, cheer, and sometimes affect this tumultuous race toward maturity.”

– Brock Dethier

Dethier’s observation comes in the first chapter of his book, First Time Up: An Insider’s Guide for New Composition Teachers, as part of his list of reasons why teaching composition is fun. I begin with Dethier here because, in this passage, he emphasizes one of the most important elements of my research: the development process that students are engaged in is multi-faceted. The students in our writing classes are never just learning the genre conventions of an academic research paper or only practicing how to write a thesis-driven argument; they are trying to make use of that writing-related knowledge while also inventing and reinventing themselves as writers, as students, and as human beings with pasts as rich with experience as their futures will be. All of the participants I interviewed are, to borrow Freire’s words, “beings in the process of becoming.”

An underlying goal of my research was to find a way to examine students’ academic literacy development in a way that is inclusive of students’ voices and of students as “beings in the process of becoming.” To that end, I turned to students’ stories about writing and to how they articulate their experiences with writing in the academy and explored patterns in students’ stories using a set of dispositional qualities as analytic tools. By exploring dispositions as part of an alternative metaphor for learning, I argue
that dispositions provide a valuable framework for studying how students learn to write in the academy, one that is inclusive of the students and contexts involved in the ongoing, multifaceted processes of academic literacy development.

Participants’ stories consistently demonstrated an influential relationship between their experiences and their developing dispositions. Chapter 2 addressed one “side” of this relationship, focusing on the ways in which students’ experiences with academic literacy are shaped by their existing dispositions. The stories shared in this chapter emphasized how embodied dispositional qualities complicate when and to what extent students make use of their writing practices and knowledge. Students’ responses to literacy tasks are defined in relation to their dispositions, influencing both students’ actions and how they understand those actions. The resulting responses to literacy tasks do not always reflect students’ knowledge or capabilities when it comes to academic writing. The stories participants shared about their responses to literacy tasks, however, highlighted the role of students’ existing values, practices, and perceptions in their academic literacy development.

At the same time that dispositions shape students’ experiences, those experiences in turn shape students’ dispositions, and Chapter 3 explored this “side” of the relationship between experience and disposition. Students’ experiences with literacy tasks build on one another in a cumulative process becoming part of their embodied history. While earlier experiences are privileged, new experiences can and do play a role in reshaping students’ dispositions; dispositions change slowly, but as the stories in this chapter demonstrated, dispositions are dynamic, shifting over time as students continue to engage in more and new experiences. And as dispositions shape students’ responses to literacy
tasks, the dynamic nature of those dispositions highlights students’ as always “in the process of becoming.”

Chapter 4 took a step back from the ways in which dispositions shape and are shaped by students’ experiences and examined how students’ dispositions function in relation to the system of dispositions embodied by the academic context. As students new to the academic context face moments of conflict—moments when their existing dispositions are misaligned or ill-adapted to the dispositions of the academic context—they make decisions about how to “fit” with that context. This chapter explored two potential responses to these moments: one, students’ efforts to harmonize with the academic context, resulting in a transformation of their existing dispositions; and two, students’ efforts to resist the dispositions of the academic context, protecting students’ existing dispositions. The stories in this chapter emphasized the decisions students make as they interact with the academic context, complicating the role of context in students’ academic literacy development. These stories also drew attention to the positions we are in, as instructors and program administrators, to shape the academic context and the experiences students engage in within this context.

This final chapter has several objectives. I begin with a brief discussion of some central themes that emerged from this research, putting these findings in conversation with existing scholarship in composition studies. Using these findings as a foundation, I consider the role we have in shaping students’ experiences with academic literacy and offer a series of recommendations for both instructors and program administrators. Additionally, I identify several questions for future research that I hope will further
theorize dispositions in relation to academic literacy. I conclude with a short reflection on the project, considering my own development as a writer and researcher.

**Themes**

Each of my 11 participants have distinctive histories with schooling and with literacy, but as my study progressed, I began to see patterns in the stories they shared. Even as our conversations remained focused on writing, reading, and school, students’ stories revealed academic literacy processes that are inextricably linked to discoveries about the academy and their place in it. Three broad themes emerged from my analysis of these patterns. These themes illustrate how a dispositional framework, as an alternative to knowledge transfer, uncovers complexities of student’s academic literacy development.

One central theme that emerged through this research is the limitation of the success/failure paradigm. Knowledge transfer studies traditionally rely on a success/failure paradigm; students either demonstrate the transfer of knowledge from one context to another or they don't. And when they don't, it is typically considered a "failure." As with any binary, however, this success/failure paradigm creates a situation in which students are either one or the other—and not all moments identified as “failure” accurately represent the work students are doing. We can see this in the discussion of Cleary’s Tiffany in Chapter 1 or of Katie and Emily in Chapter 2, all of whom make choices to not demonstrate what they know and/or can do regarding academic writing. Similarly, Dwayne’s efforts to incorporate his instructor’s feedback, described in Chapter 4, demonstrates a moment that doesn’t quite fit a success/failure binary as his moment of
“failure” is part of an ongoing process in which he makes efforts to harmonize with the academic context.

Though scholars like Nowacek and Yancey et al. have begun to develop alternative ways to address “failure” in knowledge transfer, the paradigm is still reductive. Dwayne’s “failure” would likely fall into the category of “critical incident” in Yancey et al.’s taxonomy, a moment where Dwayne faced an obstacle or a setback. And while this does give us another label for Dwayne’s experience, it is still grounded in the notion of a lack of (or minimal) success. Nowacek provides a similar term, “frustrated integration,” to describe moments when students identify a connection across contexts but “fail to sell it” (41). Katie’s and Emily’s stories could fall under this label, but “frustrated integration” also relies on the notion of failure, which ignores the implications of these writer’s decisions. Both Nowacek and Yancey et al. are still identifying these moments as “failure;” their categories simply add nuance to the type of failure.

The goal of a dispositional framework is, in part, looking for ways to understand stories like Dwayne’s not as moments of failure but as moments of engagement with academic literacy and of decision-making tied to who they are and who they want to be as writers. Many of the stories my participants shared demonstrate that moments of “failure” are often not failure at all but either a deliberate choice on the students’ part to not engage in a way that demonstrates “success” (Katie and Emily) or a moment of confusion as they work to harmonize with the academic context (Dwayne). Focusing only on “failure” in these moments leaves these aspects of student’s ongoing development out of the conversation and therefore leaves us with little insight into how they are learning and developing as writers. A dispositional framework shifts the focus from those
moments of “failure” to moments of development and provides us with a way to rethink how we can both support and assess that development.

A second theme speaks to the weight that students’ experiences have in the academic literacy development process. Students do not “learn to write” in any one class or through any one assignment but by engaging in a variety of experiences, experiences that encompass those classes and assignments but also students’ decisions and responses to those assignments and the context in which those responses are situated. While knowledge transfer frameworks tend to rely solely on decontextualized “knowledge,” the previous chapters demonstrate the importance of individual history, self-perception, and future goals (factors which reach beyond the “knowledge” at hand) in shaping how students like Carlton and Sarah respond to literacy tasks and subsequently shaping their identities as writers within the academy.

Stories like those of Carlton and Sarah emphasize the limitations of knowledge transfer for seeing academic literacy develop. As a metaphor for learning, knowledge transfer puts all of the weight on the movement of decontextualized knowledge (Hagar and Hodkinson), but scholars have long argued that writing is “socially circumstanced” (Brodkey 83) and that students should be acknowledged as “historical beings” (Freire 84). As discussed in Chapter 2, Sarah and Carlton embody very different histories and dispositions when they arrive at their first FYC courses, and as those dispositions generate their responses to literacy tasks in those courses, they have vastly different experiences with academic writing in their first semesters of college. The focus on decontextualized knowledge does little to address how Carlton’s negative experiences with writing in high school and with schooling more broadly influence his perceptions of
academic writing in FYC or Sarah’s negative reaction to the literacy tasks she is presented with in FYC. Even notions of prior knowledge in knowledge transfer research (Rounsaville; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi; Yancey et al.) are insufficient to address the decisions Carlton and Sarah make regarding when and to what extent they engage with the literacy tasks of FYC.

A dispositional framework lets us look past decontextualized knowledge and isolated moments to see the complexities of students’ experiences and to acknowledge students as engaged in an ongoing process of development that is inextricably linked to how they experience academic literacy. While some scholars have called for considering the role of disposition in the context of knowledge transfer (Driscoll and Wells; Wardle, “Creative Repurposing”), there is still a disproportionate weight on the movement of “knowledge” in the metaphor that knowledge transfer is built on. Driscoll and Wells, for example, point to questions about how dispositions might facilitate or inhibit transfer, but even these questions do not give us a way to address the stories shared in Chapter 3 about Carlton’s and Sarah’s similar self-perception as “outsiders” to the academy or how that self-perception influences their interactions with academic writing. Understanding those self-perceptions as part of their developing dispositions—as shaping and being shaped by experiences and not just “knowledge”—allows us to consider stories of academic literacy development that reflect students’ histories and identities within the academy.

A third theme has to do with academic literacy development as an interdisciplinary endeavor. FYC, a common focus of knowledge transfer studies within the field of composition, can build a foundation for students’ continued engagement with academic writing, and certain assignments common to FYC do present students with
opportunities to practice writing-related knowledge and skills (e.g., an annotated bibliography asks students to practice creating citations and crafting critical summaries of texts). But the teaching of writing is not just the work of FYC instructors. Participants stories demonstrated again and again that experiences with writing in disciplinary courses influenced their understanding of academic literacy, often more than experiences in FYC alone. Katie is one such participant whose academic literacy developed via her experiences everywhere but FYC, which she never took due to her AP scores.

FYC is a common focus of knowledge transfer research, but composition research suggests that FYC should not be treated as a “final destination” (Carroll 123) or students who complete FYC as “finished writers” (Sternglass 296). Thaiss and Zawacki’s research on academic writing across disciplines indicates that academic literacy is developed over time through ongoing experiences with writing and reading, coursework, and conversations with peers, classmates, and instructors. Katie’s academic literacy is heavily informed by her understanding of writing within her discipline, and this understanding is built cumulatively through multiple experiences: writing in her science courses and working as a writing consultant majoring in the sciences, as discussed in Chapter 3 and decisions to procrastinate or engage in other forms of resistance, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 respectively. Through each of these experiences, Katie continues to invent and reinvent herself as an academic writer in ways that FYC would have little to no impact. The same can be said of a student like Carlton, who did take a sequence of FYC courses, but demonstrated continued development as a writer beyond those courses.

One goal of a dispositional framework is to find ways to address academic literacy development as an ongoing process that encompasses literacy tasks outside of/in
addition to traditional writing classes like FYC. When considering learning as an ongoing process and students as always in process, FYC is simply an “arbitrary stage” (Hagar and Hodkinson 633). FYC is one experience of many and therefore should not be treated as a course in which students will learn to write—full stop. One benefit of a dispositional framework is that it moves away from these arbitrary stages and the myth of FYC as a “final destination.” This is not to say that FYC should be abandoned but that understanding dispositions as always developing allows us to complicate the notion of FYC as a static moment of learning and to consider the role of experiences with writing across disciplines as well as experiences both in and out of the classroom, all of which the stories in this study suggest have value.

**Implications for Practitioners**

*Purpose matters.* Participants responses to literacy tasks were often shaped by their perceptions of those literacy tasks and how those perceptions interact with existing dispositional qualities. This observation suggests that part of students’ experience with academic literacy is related to their understanding of purpose—of why they are doing the work they are doing. If we are able to communicate the goals of a particular assignment or clarify why the conventions of a disciplinary genre are the way they are, we might be able to affect students’ perceptions of those literacy tasks. Breaking down purpose in these ways may help students see past length requirements, formulas, and the “mysterious” genres of the academy. Even without knowing individual students’ dispositions, we can explore ways to articulate purpose as a means to affect students’ perceptions and, subsequently, their experiences with academic literacy.
Feedback matters. Feedback from instructors frequently influenced participants’ developing dispositions and perceptions of self. In stories like those of Carlton and Dwayne, feedback on assignments reached beyond addressing a grade, affirming ability (Carlton) and enabling further engagement (Dwayne). As a field, we already know that feedback is important to students’ development as writers, but this finding may help us rethink when and how we provide feedback. We might frame written feedback on assignments in ways that acknowledge the assignment as only one of many literacy tasks students will encounter and explicitly link comments to potential future literacy tasks. We might also invite students to participate in the feedback process, incorporating self-assessments, inviting revisions, or holding conferences during the drafting process; participation in this way, when we know that feedback is part of the experience, may create more opportunity to shape students’ experiences with academic literacy in productive ways.

Practice matters. As students engage in more experiences with academic literacy (and literacy more broadly) their dispositions related to academic literacy continue to shift. Participants repeatedly shared stories about the influence of experiences with disciplinary writing as well as non-classroom writing activities, such as writing/editing for school publications, writing for a student organization, and self-sponsored/out of school writing (journaling, letters, etc.). The more literacy tasks students engage in—beyond required FYC courses or passing related exams—and the more experiences they have with academic literacy, the more opportunities there are for development. This raises the possibility that we may be able to influence students’ ongoing development by deliberately creating meaningful experiences with academic literacy beyond required
FYC courses. Rather than relying on ad hoc literacy tasks, we may be able to promote additional experiences by formalizing writing in the disciplines through required upper-division and/or disciplinary writing courses. We may also encourage experiences with writing outside of the academic context by developing writing-focused internships or service learning opportunities.

**Directions for Further Research**

As with any research project, the claims this project can make are subject to certain limitations. Some limitations of this study stem from my population; not only was my sample size small but they represent a unique community of student writers. As employees in the UWC, my participants can be considered successful writers who have a common language for talking about writing. They are articulate about their writing in ways that are not necessarily representative of the “average student.” Additionally, this project is limited by the scope of the dissertation. My research only narrates some of the experiences of these student writers, and as such only scratches the surface of what there is to know about students’ dispositions. While this project does not provide a fully developed theory of disposition, it does offer a useful foundation for theorizing disposition. Linda Brodkey argues, "If anything, one needs more, not fewer, ways to narrate experience, for the value of ethnography inheres in neither analysis nor interpretation, but in the decision to examine the lived experience of others" (90). With this in mind, I identify three issues that stand out as important for furthering our understanding of disposition in relation to academic literacy development.

*Sociocultural influences.* One limitation of this research is the lack of emphasis on sociocultural factors in shaping students’ existing dispositions and interacting with the
academic context. I did not collect demographic data related to race, class, gender, religion, etc. or investigate the culture(s) of UNR as a community. Without this breadth of data, I was only able to consider the role of these influences for participants who identified themselves in particular ways in their interviews. Even then, I found it uncomfortable to draw any conclusions from a passing remark about the "stereotype of...Asian parents” or about “being Mexican American.” At the same time, there is plenty of scholarship that acknowledges the academic community is borne out of and, in many ways, still tied to constructs of “Anglo-Protestant elitist culture” (Geisler) and that students from backgrounds that differ from this culture face a different and more complicated set of challenges when joining the academic community. Exploring these challenges in a focused and deliberate way could reveal how we understand students’ individual backgrounds and existing dispositions in relation to their ongoing development.

*The role of writing center work.* While students’ ability to meet the strict hiring requirements of the UWC allowed me to identify participants as “successful writers,” it is impossible to ignore the influence that working in the UWC—and the experiences of being trained to talk to other writers about writing—have on these students’ individual academic literacy. Though not a central focus of the interviews, it was still clear that participants’ beliefs about writing had been shaped by their work in the UWC; some even referenced training activities and tutoring sessions without any prompting from me. After noticing this pattern, I included a question about the UWC in my final interviews. I was unsurprised to find similar responses from all participants about how their training and work in the UWC influenced their writing, and these stories echoed my own reflections.
on working in writing centers. These stories emphasize that students’ interactions with and conversations about writing outside of the classroom can also play a significant role in shaping academic literacy—and that writing centers may be a rich research context both for considering the work of writing center employees in shaping their own dispositions as well as for exploring the experiences of student writers who visit in a writing center for feedback/support.

**Disciplinary identities.** Academic disciplines are often considered their own unique communities within the broader academic community. These disciplinary communities are shaped by discipline-specific genres and practices, some of which can differ significantly to those of other disciplines. Some of my participants held perceptions of very clear boundaries between disciplines, such as Sarah who frequently addressed the writing she does as a "science person" being different from writing in the humanities, while others described their writing in more broad terms, like Dwayne who believes that anyone who creates any form of communication is "writer." Anne Ruggles Gere et al. suggest that there may be a middle ground that neither commits to rigid borders between disciplines nor abandons disciplinary expertise. One way of furthering our understanding of dispositions and academic literacy development may be exploring discipline-specific dispositional qualities (i.e., *disciplinary identity* as a dispositional quality) and/or considering the ways in which students interact with disciplinary boundaries and perceptions of expertise as they develop a disciplinary-specific sense of academic literacy.
Upon Reflection

Just as participants in my study are engaged in an ongoing, multi-faceted development process, so am I. Even as someone who has been a part of the academic context for years, I know that I am constantly learning and reinventing myself. This project has been significant in that process as it included a multitude of new experiences related to a very specific type of academic writing: listening to stories told by smart, thoughtful student writers; figuring out how to analyze and share those stories; and practicing many of the same types of “knowledge” I try to teach in FYC, like synthesis and revision strategies. Through these experiences, I have made decisions, negotiating my own values and what “works” for me with the guidance of my mentors and colleagues, which of course are informed by their values and practices. As much as a dissertation is a “final destination” (the last paper I will write as a student, according to one mentor), I know that my own development as a writer and as a researcher will continue to shift as I advance through my career and continue to engage in various contexts.

I began this study with a story of an assessment project and my initial concerns about what we mean when we say we are looking for evidence of learning. I can now acknowledge that my decisions as I moved from that experience to the final stages of this project have been informed by my own curiosity, critical self-reflection, and valuing writing as well as qualities I might identify as valuing student voices and disciplinary identity, and that my experiences with that assessment project and with every stage of this research and writing process has reshaped many of those same dispositional qualities. The next time I am involved in a similar assessment project, the decisions I make will
likely be quite different because my embodied history and my identity as a writer within
the academy will no longer be the same as they were then. My concerns about how we
look for evidence of learning in relation to academic literacy has also developed. I see
dispositions as a way “in” to that conversation, a way that is inclusive of students and
context, but I also know that the ideas about disposition I discuss here are only scratching
the surface of one potential answer. There is, as always, still work to be done.
Appendix A: Consent Information Script

Consent Information Script
My name is Erin Goldin, and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of English. My advisor is Dr. Jane Detweiler, and we are conducting a research study to learn about the perceptions, beliefs, and practices of successful student writers.

If you volunteer to be in this study, you will be asked to respond to a paper survey asking you to rank your perceptions, beliefs, and practices in relation to writing. These surveys will be anonymous and confidential. Once I hand out the survey today, I will leave the room. You can leave either a completed survey, or if you choose to not participate, a blank survey in the envelope at the front.

Regardless of your participation today, you will receive an email from me next week inviting you to participate in the second portion of this study, which consists of a series of three or four 30-60 minute interviews over the Fall and Spring semester. If you volunteer to participate in this portion of the study, these interviews will take place with me and will be scheduled on campus at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and all related notes and files will be kept confidential. These interviews will be about your experiences with academic writing, your writing process, and your beliefs about writing.

Your participation for the survey should take about fifteen minutes and for the interview an additional 3-4 hours over the course of the academic year.

This study is considered to be minimal risk of harm. This means the risks of your participation in the research are similar in type or intensity to what you encounter during your daily activities.

Benefits of doing research are not definite; but we hope to understand the perceptions, beliefs, and practices embodied by successful student-writers and how these may be encouraged or supported by writing instructors and program administrators. There are no direct benefits to you in this study activity, however some people find talking about their own writing helpful.

The researchers and the University of Nevada, will treat your identity and the information collected about you with professional standards of confidentiality and protect it to the extent allowed by law. You will not be personally identified in any reports or publications that may result from this study. The US Department of Health and Human Services, the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office, and the Institutional Review Board may look at your study records.

You may ask questions of the researchers at any time. The contact email addresses are egoldin@unr.edu and jad@unr.edu, or you can call me at 760-473-7350 or Dr. Detweiler at 775-785-6155.
You may ask about your rights as a research participant. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this research, you may report them (anonymously if you so choose) by calling the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office at 775.327.2368 (IRB Project Title: [794406-1] Disposition of Successful Student Writers).

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time. Declining to participate or stopping your participation will not have any negative effects on your standing at the University Writing Center.

Thank you for your participation in this study!
## Survey: Perceptions, Beliefs, and Practices of Student Writers

University Writing Center | University of Nevada, Reno | Fall 2015

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

- **Age:**
- **Year in school:**
- **Gender:**
- **# of semesters working in UWC:**
- **Major:**
- **Minor:**
- **Are you a first generation college student?**

### COMPLETED COMPOSITION COURSES (check all that apply):

- [ ] English 098
- [ ] English 105
- [ ] English 100
- [ ] English 106
- [ ] English 101
- [ ] English 102
- [ ] Other:

### PERCEPTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT</th>
<th>VERY IMPORTANT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning ahead/Managing time</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing multiple drafts</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting feedback from others</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my audience and how to write for them</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being aware of my own strengths and challenges</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### BELIEFS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am a writer.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy writing.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find writing easy.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing is an important part of my academic life.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing is an important part of my identity.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am capable of being successful with most academic writing.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am aware of my own strengths with writing.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to apply my strengths in most academic writing situations.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am aware of my own writing challenges.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to overcome my writing challenges.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRACTICES</td>
<td>STRONGLY DISAGREE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get feedback on my writing from the UWC or other peers.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get feedback on my writing from professors, advisors or mentors.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write multiple drafts for typical academic papers in my major.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write multiple drafts for typical academic papers in other courses.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan time for drafting and revising.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I write for non-academic purposes.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Appendix C: Interview Information Sheet (Fall)

### Interview Information Sheet

#### Interview #1 | Fall 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>Gender:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>Minor(s):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major(s):</td>
<td>Year in School:</td>
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<tr>
<td>First/Native Language:</td>
<td>Institution:</td>
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<td>First Year Composition/AP Exams:</td>
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</table>
Appendix D: Student Interview Guide (Fall)

The following questions will not be asked in every interview. Instead, I will space them out over the two interviews during the semester. I will move in this order, though, always starting with background questions and moving through the types of questions. As well, it is important to note that these interviews will be semi-structured. So while I will begin with these questions, we will have a conversation that will always be about writing and reading, but may include follow-up questions not on this list.

Demographic Information Sheet

- Pseudonym
- Year in school
- Gender
- First generation student
- First language

Background questions:

- What are some of your best memories of writing? What are some of your worst?
- Tell me a bit about your high school English classes.
- What was one of your most memorable high school writing assignments?
- What writing classes have you taken in college?
- What do you see yourself doing after graduation?

Experience and value questions:

- What do you remember from English 102?
- What kind of writing do you do most for your major?
- How have you been able to apply what you learned in English 102 to those writing assignments?
- How have you been able to apply what you learned in English 102 to other writing you do?
- How important do you think writing is?
- How important do you think writing is for your major?
- What do you think of the writing requirement at UNR?
- What do you think of the writing requirement for your major?

Writing Process Questions:

- Can you walk me through your writing process for a typical academic assignment?
• Think about a writing assignment you had that was important or high stakes. What was your writing process for that assignment like? How was it different than what you normally do?
• Think about a writing assignment you struggled with. What was your writing process for that assignment like? Where in that process did you struggle most? What made that assignment challenging? How did you handle that?
• If you get feedback on your writing, when in the writing process do you usually do that? Who do you go to?
• One part of the writing process is drafting, and everyone has a different approach to drafting. What do your drafts look like? How many do you typically work with?

Identity and Self-perception Questions:

• How would you define a writer?
• Do you think of yourself as a writer? Why or why not?
• What do you think your strengths are when it comes to academic writing?
• What do you think is most challenging for you when it comes to writing?
• How do you work around or manage those challenges?
• Do you do any writing outside of what you do for school? What kind?

Survey-based questions:
The questions in this area are dependent on patterns found in the survey. The following is a model of what these questions will look like, but correlations will vary depending on the survey results.

• On the survey, there seemed to be a connection between “I find writing easy” and “I am aware of my own challenges.” Are those two ideas related for you? Why or why not?
• On the survey, I noticed that most people responded positively to “I am capable of being successful with most academic writing projects.” Is this belief important to you? Why or why not?
Appendix E: Student Interview Guide (Spring)

Warm-up
- How is your semester going? What kind of writing are you doing this semester?

Memories
- In the first interview, we talked about your best and worst memories of writing. Today, I’d like to start off with your earliest memory of writing.
- Do you have any “watershed” moments for you where you thought, “I am a writer” or “Hey, I’m good at this”?
- A lot of people in the first interviews talked about reading as well. What are your earliest memories of reading?
- Any moments with reading where you felt a sense of “I’m good at this” or “This matters to me”?
- How do you see the relationship between reading and writing? And how do you see this relationship particularly when it comes to the writing you do in school?
- What kinds of things from growing up, either in school or with your family or friends, have influenced how you approach school now? Is there anything that stands out to you that you think shaped how you write or how you view writing in school?

Goals
- What are you long term goals? Career plans, etc.
- How do you see writing fitting in with those goals? Does it?
- Why did you join the Writing Center?
- How long have you worked there?
- How has your time working as a writing consultant changed or influenced your beliefs about writing, your writing process, or about yourself?

Values & Identity
- “Expectancy Value Theory” says that we the amount of effort we put into things depends on a combination of how successful we think we’ll be and how much we value the task—do you think this is true for you? When it comes to writing assignments in particular, how do you decide which assignments are more valuable or more important? When do you put in more effort with your writing versus times when you might put in less?
- **Identity Inventory**: Pick 2 or 3 “identities” that stand out to you as important in shaping how you approach school and, writing for school. Why are these important? How do they influence you? What role do they have in your life as a student?
• **Cross-checking**: One of the first things I was looking for in reading through the transcripts of those first interviews was trying to identify things that people value. So I’ve pulled a few that came up pretty frequently for you, and I’d like to hear your thoughts on those values. First, if you think that each one is actually something you value, and then if you have any thoughts on how/where you developed them or how/when they became important to you?
Appendix F: Interview Information Sheet (Spring)

Interview Information Sheet
Interview #2 | Spring 2016

Pseudonym: Date: Time:

Identity Inventory:
Please list 10 (or as close to 10 as you can) identities or aspects of your identity that you associate with yourself.

1. __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________

3. __________________________________________

4. __________________________________________

5. __________________________________________

6. __________________________________________

7. __________________________________________

8. __________________________________________

9. __________________________________________

10. _________________________________________
Appendix G: Participant Biographies

Bart

Bart is in his first year of the MFA program, focusing on poetry. Growing up in a single-parent home, he credits his mom for his love of reading, language, and creativity. He spent four years working in a bookstore after completing his Bachelor’s degree at a small, private school on the East Coast, where he majored in English (with a double concentration in Literature and Creative Writing) and minored in Spanish. Though he wrote poetry during those four years, he didn’t consider himself a writer. He talks about his decision to go back to school for an MFA as one that correlated with his desire to have an audience for his writing—to participate in a community. When he speaks of his writing and his approach to school, he demonstrates a keen awareness of his own development and the differences between his undergraduate self and his current self, between his academic writing and his creative writing.

Carlton

Carlton transferred to UNR from the local community college. An English major and History minor, Carlton is studying for the GRE and planning on applying for graduate programs, with the ultimate goal of teaching. He struggled with speaking, reading, and writing at a young age, got low grades in high school, and didn’t value school, and writing in particular, until he took a developmental writing course in community college. He credits his instructors from community college—and their level of passion for the material they were teaching—for helping him value his writing and, ultimately, changing his path from majoring in the sciences to studying English. Now, he considers working as a writing consultant and being an English major significant parts
of his identity, even though he still sees himself as an outsider to academia, trying to break into what he calls a “gated community.”

Dwayne

At the time of our first interview, Dwayne had finished his bachelor’s degree in English and was taking courses as a “graduate special student”—a designation for students who are taking graduate level classes but aren’t officially enrolled in a graduate program. He describes himself as a daydreamer who wants to learn as much as he can about everything. He was a confident writer in high school, scored high enough on the AP exams to meet the General Education writing requirement, and came to UNR knowing that he wanted to major in English. He is articulate and thoughtful when talking about his experiences with writing, able to name specific instructors and assignments that were pivotal in his progression as a writer. Though his immediate plan is to teach English overseas, he expressed a long-term goal of participating in a publication that would allow him to work with both writing and visual mediums, a goal that was borne, in part, from drawing and writing his own webcomic.

Emily

Emily is a second year Master’s student Cultural Anthropology. She completed her undergraduate degree at UNR as well, but did not take any of the required Core Writing courses because of her AP scores. She is relatively critical of the education system as a whole and of the ways in which writing is taught in particular. Based on what she’s heard from friends and peers, she doesn’t think she missed out on anything by not taking those courses. When speaking about the writing she does for her major, Emily emphasized storytelling and says she feels more comfortable connecting Anthropology to
the humanities rather than the sciences. Aside from the writing she does for her coursework, she spoke of participating in an off-campus creative writing club, again with an emphasis on her desire to tell stories.

Frank

Frank was 19 at the time of our first interview. A sophomore, he’s double majoring in International Affairs and History and spoke of aspirations of working for a government agency, more specifically in counter-terrorism. While he acknowledges that his parents taught him many of the strategies he uses that make him a good student, he said it wasn’t until college that he started caring about his grades. He believes this motivation developed after coming to college and realizing that he was on his own and without the financial support of his family. He self-identifies as pragmatic and efficient, both characteristics that show up in his daily life as well as his writing. When it comes to his writing, Frank knows how fast he types (70 or 75 WPM) and what works best for him (not outlining) and is generally confident in his writing—as long as he understands the topic he is working with and isn’t forced to put it into a specific formula.

Katie

Katie is a junior, majoring in Physics, specifically in Atmospheric Science, with a double-minor in Mathematics and Communication. She identifies as a scientist, but she is also aware of where she differs from her peers in the Physics department—noting that she is sometimes the only female in a class and often the only one who values writing. The gap she sees between the sciences and writing is what has led her to look into graduate programs in Science Communication, specifically pointing to the need scientists have to communicate with the public. Outside of the lab reports that make up the bulk of the
writing for her major, she deliberately works to make writing assignments meaningful to her, often by choosing topics that relate to key aspects of her identity.

**Kennedy**

Kennedy is a junior majoring in Political Science with a minor in Philosophy. She refers to herself as a “political enthusiast” and values her ability to consider multiple perspectives and remain unbiased in her writing. She has plans to go on to law school after she graduates and hope to become a judge in the future. Kennedy’s family plays an integral role in her academic life. Neither of her parents attended college until after she was born, and she says that her motivation to do well in school comes from knowing the efforts they both made. She spoke often of her family during her interviews—from describing her father helping her study for spelling tests in elementary school to reading papers over the phone to her mom as part of her current writing process. Kennedy says she always enjoyed writing, and wrote poetry and stories when she was younger, but she didn’t consider “writer” to be part of her identity until college.

**Omari**

Omari, a junior at the time of our interview, has aspirations of being a lawyer and a legal scholar and expressed disappointment in the lack of writing in classes for his Criminal Justice major. He spoke at length about the importance of writing and language in law. His AP scores allowed him to skip English 101 and 102, and he believes he missed out by not taking those classes. He is a confident writer, particularly when it comes to writing arguments, and said that feedback from instructors has one of the most important influences on his development. When talking about his writing process, he
emphasized the importance of careful reading and of finding a suitable space for writing—and acknowledged his lack of experience with different styles and genres.

Sarah

Sarah was a junior in the Pre-Nursing program at the time of our first interview. By the last interview, however, she spoke candidly about the possibility of not getting accepted to the Nursing program and having to look for other paths to reach her goal of working in a hospital setting. She self-identifies as competitive and stubborn and says she has always been career-driven, something she learned from her parents. When it comes to her writing, she views herself firmly on the side of the sciences and described having to learn to adapt her writing for her non-science classes. Though she is not always confident in her abilities as a writer, she enjoys writing when she is able to write about topics of her choice and she sees writing as invaluable, particularly in the health care setting in which she envisions herself working.

Skippy

Skippy is the only participant who is not a writing consultant but instead works in the UWC in an administrative capacity. She is majoring in General Studies, an interdisciplinary degree program in which she is focusing on Business and Sociology. As a non-traditional student with two adult children, her goals for her degree are simply about the finishing the degree she has been working towards for years. She talks about the “detours” she took in the process as positives—experiences that have helped her shape her education. She is able to draw on experiences and interests for her writing that she wouldn’t have been able to use when she was younger, and she appreciates the learning process in a way she believes traditionally-aged students don’t always. Skippy is
confident in her writing abilities when it comes to technical or business writing but less so with academic writing, particularly when she compares herself to other students working in the UWC.

Rat

Of all of the participants, Rat has worked at the UWC the longest—three years. He has an undergraduate degree in English, with a Journalism minor, and has taken enough classes as a “grad special” to be only four courses shy of completing an MA in English. His goal, however, is an MFA and a career either writing or working as an editor, and at the time of our last interview, he was researching programs. Rat self-identifies as a procrastinator and speaks at length about struggling with deadlines and time management. When it comes to his writing, he describes starting his undergraduate career off by writing everything last minute with little to time to devote to the writing process. After leaving school for a couple years, returning and completing his undergraduate degree, he articulates two distinctly different processes—one for his academic writing and one for his creative work.
Works Cited


*Core Values and Mission*. University Writing Center, University of Nevada, Reno, https://www.unr.edu/writing-center/about/values.


