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IMPLICATIONS OF PERSON-CENTERED  
THEORY FOR STUDENT-TEACHER  
RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING

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WORKING ALLIANCES: THE IMPLICATIONS OF PERSON-CENTERED THEORY FOR  
STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING

BY

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DISSERTATION

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in

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## ABSTRACT

WORKING ALLIANCES: THE IMPLICATIONS OF PERSON-CENTERED THEORY FOR  
STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING

by

Adam Cogbill

University of New Hampshire, May, 2018

In this dissertation project, I interview four therapists and four writing teachers to learn if there were similarities or differences in their approaches to dyadic relationships with students and clients. I was guided in my investigation by the core concepts of person-centered theory, which have heavily influenced the work of clinical therapists for the past half-century or more. These concepts are congruence, or whether one's behaviors and speech match what one is feeling; empathy, the process of entering and becoming familiar with another's private, perceptual world; and positive regard, or demonstrating that one accepts and values others, including their feelings, opinions, and selves. I found that teachers and therapists both faced challenges in developing, managing, and repairing relationships, and espoused similar values about relating to others. However, therapists were able to draw on clinical theories and tools for relating for which no parallels exist in writing pedagogy. For example, in the many teaching manuals I surveyed, I found hardly any page space devoted to the challenge of teacher-student relationships. Results from my study include conceptualizations of how person-centered intellectual tools might be synthesized with current writing pedagogy both in theory and in training. Furthermore, I hope to draw more attention to the nuances of dyadic relationships, and the unfortunate scarcity of tools that writing pedagogy currently has for working in them.



## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN WRITING PEDAGOGY

In winter in New England, the students in your writing classes have to make some significant procedural choice about sitting when they come to your office for conferences. Some students spend a full minute taking off hats and jackets and hoodies, all of which are then hung carefully on the back of the chair in a game of reverse Jenga. Others just leave everything on, as if they've dropped by to return some Tupperware but can't stay.

Robby was of the latter school. He greeted me and plopped down in the chair without removing backpack or black puffer coat. He sat awkwardly, like a stuffed animal beginning to pitch over. I'm always uncomfortable when students choose to be uncomfortable, but I was even more uncomfortable because of Robby's essay. "So," I said, and stopped. Where to begin?

Some context: for the second essay of the semester, students had written rhetorical analyses of one of three essays we'd read together. Robby had chosen Thomas de Zengotita's "The Numbing of the American Mind," which critiqued several aspects of contemporary television. His essay, titled, "Your [*sic*] Wrong, Zengotita," was, as its title suggested, a vitriolic letter to the author. It was divided into five sections, each of which corresponded to one of de Zengotita's. Each section comprised the following structure:

1. Reference main point of corresponding section in de Zengotita's essay
2. Explain that de Zengotita's claim did not match his (Robby's) personal experience
3. Ad hominem attack re: de Zengotita's general intelligence

The conference, which ran nearly an hour, did not go well. At one point, I contended that Robby's personal evidence alone wasn't enough to refute de Zengotita's claims. Robby responded that de Zengotita's essay was itself composed almost entirely of personal observations. I suggested that Robby's tone was so irate as to endanger his credibility. Robby observed that de Zengotita was pretty angry himself. At the end of the conference, Robby said, "So you're saying he gets to say whatever he wants because he's an expert, but because I'm a college student, what I think doesn't matter?" I don't remember having said this. I do remember thinking that I wanted him to *get it*—it being the assignment—and feeling that he was being intractably intractable.

It's been about eight years since that conference, and I've thought a lot about the circumstances under which Robby could have "gotten" my assignment. Because, in a way, he did. He had a methodology, as described above, that allowed him to produce a text of an appropriate length. To borrow a word from fiction writer Ron Carlson, he had "survived" the assignment. More than that, though, his methodology had been inspired by his thinking about the text. He'd certainly done the reading, had some feelings about it, and had produced an essay that reflected those feelings. He'd done the work.

Given all this, what did it mean for me to say, essentially, that his draft was unacceptable? The draft had been produced according to a plan that seemed reasonable to him, and therefore a critique of the draft was also a critique of that plan. I was not simply telling Robby, "Your text doesn't look right." I was also saying, "You were wrong about what you thought it was OK to do."

The question that this anecdote raises for me is, how do students like Robby make sense of writing situations? That is, what were the assumptions he had about writing on which he relied

to produce this essay? We could break this into more specific questions—what does Robby believe rhetorical analysis is, what does Robby believe about writing in school, and so on—but the point is that Robby, like most students I’ve had, did not start entirely from scratch. He had some existing beliefs about writing that guided him through his writing process.

And it seems to me that to teach Robby, I need to know something about those beliefs. I’ve always considered student thinking to be the content of any writing class, themed or not. It is not the *text* I am working with, after all, but the *who* and *why* that produced it. As Paul Prior (1998) puts it, focusing exclusively on the text tells us as much about the writer as a spray of white water tell us about a river. Of course, to suggest that students are like rivers, and to suggest that writing teachers learn about those rivers, is to enter some fairly murky waters.

This dissertation project is about teacher-student relationships. It explores this subject through the interviews with writing teachers and therapists about how they approach their *dyadic* relationships with students and clients. I say dyad and not 1-on-1 because I focus on the interaction *between*: on what participants know about interacting with students and clients, what guides them, and what experiences and beliefs have shaped their practices. Throughout this dissertation, I use the refrain “dyadic” instead of 1-on-1 to emphasize the importance of these collisions, and the interpersonal dynamics that they imply. For teachers, this mostly means discussion about writing conferences with individual students, but several also reflected on how interactions with students played out in class, and about their general, over-the-semester experience with students and writing.

There are many subdomains of teaching—teaching generally, not just teaching writing—where knowledge about how to relate to students is important: teachers variously explain, administrate, discipline, encourage, and challenge students, all of which entail some interaction

with other people. But I have always felt that teacher-student relationships were particularly important for writing classes. Writing teachers are called upon more than other teachers to help students clarify their thinking, and to articulate it for an audience. Students in writing classes often choose material that is fraught, or with which they have an intimate relationship. Writing teachers often find themselves, prepared or not, working with students on charged material, regardless if it is vulnerable-making, impassioning, etc. This is not exclusive to the personal essay, either. Consider the anecdote about Robby with which this chapter opens. Robby's reaction to Thomas de Zengotita's essay manifested in his response essay, which was bitter and resentful. It's still not clear to me if it was de Zengotita's argument in particular, or some larger bitterness toward English classes or school in general or leftist cultural critiques, that shaped his response. I do know that my pedagogical training did not account for this charged response, and I was unprepared to work through it with Robby. A broader question to ask, then, is how often does a lack of preparation for "working through it" prevent or hamper learning?

As I will describe in the forthcoming material, to date, there has been little accounting for teacher-student relationships in writing pedagogy. In this project, I draw on what clinical therapists know about dyadic relationships, though not because I think that students need healing, or that rigorous self-exploration is the key to education. Rather, I believe clinical therapists know a great deal about *being with others*, and I wanted to explore how their intellectual tools for being with others might apply to writing teachers. I was surprised by the extent to which what they know mirrors what writing teacher participants feel. That is, writing teachers allude to many of the same concepts, even if their pedagogical training has not given them a technical vocabulary with which to characterize relationships. I found that juxtaposing the perspectives of writing teachers and therapists about relationships produced fruitful observations

about the teacher-student relationships. Ultimately, this study seeks to clarify the importance of accounting for dyadic relationships in pedagogy.

### **Situating the Study: Overview of the Reviewed Literatures**

This project draws extensively from person-centered theory, a psychological theory of learning and interrelating initiated by American clinical psychologist Carl Rogers. The problem I hope to address, covered in depth in the subsequent section, is that composition studies has not accounted adequately for the role of teacher-student relationships in its conceptions of writing pedagogy. This is most visible when we examine its teacher training manuals, the most thorough articulations of composition pedagogy available. Pedagogy scholars have previously tried to solve the problem of how to relate with students through the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Freud and Lacan were drive theorists; however, critics identified numerous problems with drive theory as a solution to student-teacher relationships. It should be noted that in clinical psychology, drive theory had been subsumed and supplanted as a paradigm by the time that composition was considering it.

I propose that person-centered theory might form a more stable base from which to approach student-teacher relationships. Rogers (1951, 1981) framed person-centered theory as a theory of the conditions that best facilitate change, including, crucially, learning. I give a brief overview of the theory, including how it has informed therapeutic practices, and how I believe it might be adopted and adapted to inform composition. During this section, I will distinguish between the differing *ends* of therapy and composition. That is, I do not believe the goals of composition and therapy are equivalent. I am not advocating for writing teachers to treat the emotionally distressed. However, I do posit that what person-centered says about the importance

of *relationships* and *communication* in learning pairs—e.g. a teacher-student dyad—is as relevant for composition as it has been for therapy.

Finally, because a limitation of Rogers’s work is that it does not attend significantly to sociocultural context, I describe how its tools work in unison with *multicultural and social justice competence* (MSJC), a psychological framework for relating to others whose backgrounds or identities differ from one’s own. Fortunately, much of what Rogers recommends is applicable to MSJC, and since composition has dedicated energy to studying how pedagogy might account for race, gender, and culture, I anticipate that MSJC will square with composition readers’ prior knowledge.

### **Limited Coverage: Teacher-student Relationships in Writing Pedagogy Training Materials**

In this section, I describe how writing pedagogy training materials cover, or fail to cover, the subject of teacher-student communication. The topic comes up tangentially, and sometimes not at all. When it does appear, it is almost always in the form of practical guidance: what to do and what order to do it in. For comparison, a hypothetical text that takes teacher-student communication more seriously might ground readers in a theory of communication, and define some of that theory’s key terms. It would also describe the implications of teacher-student communication for pedagogy, and it might offer suggestions for further reading for those who want to study it further. However, such sections do not exist.

The first teaching manual I wish to examine is Irene Clark’s (2003) *Concepts in Composition*, which describes the evolution of composition pedagogy, as well as its most established practices. For example, it contains chapters on the importance of revision, as well as various methods for revising; on audience, and the scholarly debate that “audience” has

generated “over the past 25 years” (141); and on assignment design and assessments. However, it mentions writing conferences only in passing, and does not touch on the teacher-student dyad at all. It certainly does not include any coverage of how teachers establish rapport, trust, or working relationships with students.

Teacher-student communication is similarly rarely at the forefront of Roen et al’s (2002) *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. It comes in the form of practical advice in sections that deal with dyadic conferences, e.g. that “fifteen minutes per student” is enough, and that “students [should] know in advance what to expect and how to prepare” (215). In the more detailed moments, the text generalizes the conference to an extent that elides the intellectual labor entailed by working individually with students. For example, Stancliff’s one-and-a-half-page summary of why conferences are important states that “individual conferences...give students a chance to discuss any classroom issues they deem important,” and acknowledges the “incredibly important feedback about my teaching” that comes from those conferences. However, he does not expand upon these statements, and there certainly is no exploration of what they might mean or what their theoretical implications might be (366-367).

The closest *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition* comes to addressing the challenges of teacher-student communication is Fischer’s description of the confrontational conference. It is composed of generic instructions for how teachers should “handle confrontative conferences” that revolve around grades. Fischer writes that teachers should expect that students might respond to lower-than-expected grades with a “range of emotions,” and offers 5 steps to addressing these emotions. These include setting a “positive tone” for the conference, and “validat[ing] whatever feelings pour out” (433-434). Fischer’s section is practical and generalizable--which is perhaps exactly what a guide for teachers should be. On the other hand,

as I demonstrate throughout this project, teacher-student conversation is more complicated than can be captured in a few procedural steps. I would challenge the notion that this sort of communication is natural or unproblematic enough that it does not need to be addressed. As Black's (1998) text on conferences (discussed below) notes, teacher-student conferences entail a power asymmetry that we should not dismiss or omit.

In Lunsford and O'Brien's *Instructor's Notes* (2011, 2003), teachers are advised to conference with students who might be disadvantaged according to their relationship to traditional academic learning: students who are differently abled and/or who have academic anxiety. For example, if the teacher believes that a student has anxiety about an essay test, it might be a good idea to "set up a conference" so that "you can approach the subject directly" and reassure the student (445). Their chapter "Developing Paragraphs" is epigraphed, "Learning is fundamentally about relationships" (Richard Rodriguez), but the relationships they focus on are between sentences and paragraphs.

Dayton's (2015) *Assessing the Teaching of Writing: Twenty-First Century Trends and Technologies* is not a teaching manual, but it does focus on how teachers might be evaluated. Thus, we might expect to find some mention of how well teachers communicate or manage student relationships. The text covers a number of perspectives and ways to measure and assess teaching writing. For example, Meredith Decosta and Duane Roen recommend a teaching portfolio whose purpose is to make pedagogical work more visible; it includes a teaching philosophy, "annotated syllabi and lesson plans," "synthesized and contextualized student evaluations," and supervisor summaries of class visits (26). Nelms recommends the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis, or SGID, which Dayton characterizes as a formal version of Peter Elbow's "mid-semester assessment" (6). Chris Anson suggests "opening up" the usually private



space of the classroom by publishing teacher practice and reflection on the internet. He argues that this would help teachers take a more “productive, critical stance” toward their work (100).

As these examples show, this collection focuses on teacher self-assessment and student-generated feedback. There is an opportunity here to address teacher-student communication, since it is implied by so many of these metrics: synthesized and contextualized evaluations, for example, might serve to reconstruct how teachers and students have interacted, as well as what the results of those interactions have been. Similarly, SGIDs would surely produce feedback on teacher-student communication. However, the text does not explore these sorts of implications, as it is focused on deliverables: what materials can teachers produce to make their classroom labor visible. This is surely a worthy pursuit. However, as I discuss in this introduction, this is an example of how writing scholars might explore the experiences of classroom participants—teachers and students—without focusing on the dynamics of those participants’ interaction.

One text that does seem to focus more directly on teacher-student communication is *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference*, by Laurel Black (1998). Black argues that there seems to be a “widespread disciplinary assumption” that conferences are “casual, comfortable” conversations about writing, or “a form of individualized teaching, sensitive to the needs of the student” (12). These are potentially harmful assumptions because they elide the disparity in power between the teacher and student roles. For example, Black is skeptical of the “theoretically” nondirective approach characterized by, for instance, Donald Murray. The teacher might think a conference is a casual conversation, while the student still believes they are being taught. I would add my concerns to Black’s here. How exactly would a writing teacher shrug off the socially ritualized, institutionally imbued role of evaluator and writing expert so that students believe dyadic conversations are casual?

The question Black's work implies for me is, how might teachers become more cognizant of the role they occupy relative to students, and how does their talk affirm or deny that role? Additionally, how can they listen to student talk to understand how students experience teacher-student talk? A deeper, more rigorous exploration of teacher-student communication would help teachers have the frank conversations about these issues that Black calls for. At the very least, teachers need more than procedures to follow when it comes to teacher-student communication. What students think and say does not always fit neatly into procedures and standardized methods.

### **Composition's Conflicted Relationship with Freud, Lacan, and Drive Theory**

In her 1978 CCC article "Psychotherapy and Composition: Effective Teaching beyond Method," Karen Spear reported on a metastudy of psychotherapeutic treatment methods whose conclusion was provocative: while innovative methods proliferated throughout the field—the field of therapy, to be clear—none was more successful than any other. Rather, it seemed that it was the quality of the therapist in each case that determined whether any particular method worked. The "successful therapist," the study determined, was one whose communication was marked by three qualities: empathy, self-awareness, and acceptance of the patient (373).

Spear suggests that the same is true of writing instruction. She begins by noticing some of the intellectual similarities between the disciplines. For example, just as with psychotherapy, quite a lot of literature had been produced in composition on techniques for practitioners, all of which seem "intellectually respectable" and successful for those who recommend them (372). Furthermore, she sees composition and therapy as being interested in similar things: "an increase in students' abilities to discover, verbalize, and communicate ideas" (373). Accordingly, she wonders if writing instruction, like psychotherapy, is successful not according to method, but

according to how well teachers communicate with students. In her conclusion, she recommends that writing teacher training incorporate some degree of counseling training.

The studies Spear alludes to almost certainly refer to aspects of *person-centered theory*, since, as we will see “empathy, self-awareness, and acceptance of the patient” (373) reflect bedrock principles of that orientation to therapy. However, as I show below, the subsequent conversation in composition over whether or not psychotherapeutic knowledge should be applied to pedagogy has mostly been about a different psychotherapeutic orientation—the drive theory-based, psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. This is perhaps because composition is literature-adjacent, and in literature, psychoanalytic criticism has long been associated with Freud and Lacan, and has not evolved alongside the discipline of psychoanalysis itself. However, it is important to acknowledge at the outset of this review that a discussion of Freud and Lacan is to clinical psychotherapy as a discussion of Flower and Hayes is to composition. Both pairs represent important moments in their respective fields, and aren’t representative of overall knowledge, let alone the current state of scholarly conversation.

### **Flirting with Freud: Drive Theory and Writing Pedagogy**

We can learn something of why composition rejected the possibility of applying clinical knowledge to pedagogy by investigating this debate. The most obvious place to begin is the 1987 double issue of *College English*, whose subject was Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy. Guest editor Robert Con Davis, whose introduction is epigraphed with quotes from both Freud and Lacan, writes that these articles have in common that they engage with what Freud’s concept of resistance means for pedagogy, what Freud’s account of the subject “means for student/teacher interaction,” and what “Freudian ‘discourse’” means for discussion (621). And indeed, articles

within the double issue draw almost exclusively on the drive theory-based psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan.

It's not hard to see why writing scholars of the time found drive theory psychoanalysis attractive. Drive theory holds that people are motivated by intrinsic, unconscious impulses within the self that, when left ungratified, produce conflicts. Drive theory-informed psychoanalysis emphasizes the patient's discovery and exploration of these behaviors and their underlying causes (Berzhoff, Flanagan, and Hertz 2013). Thus, if one believes that writing is an act of self-discovery and self-exploration, then drive theory psychoanalysis can potentially inform the writing process.

A good example of an argument based on this premise is Judith Harris's (2001) "Re-writing the Subject: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Creative Writing and Composition Pedagogy." Harris observes that Freud had encouraged patients to "air mental distress" and repressed thoughts through narrative and free association. She sees this as useful to creative writing because the goal of creative writing classes is to get students to "open up" to unconscious material and "fantasies" (182). Composition too, she writes, could adopt Freudian psychoanalytic theory to "get to the hearts of students' writing" and to discover what their writing-related hang-ups are. Similarly, Wendy Bishop (1991) draws on Freud's concept of transference and countertransference to inform her understanding of teacher-student relationships. "Transference," she writes, "may involve teachers and students in emotional relationships...and may have to be dealt with for a therapy or pedagogy to succeed" (508). She also writes that as a writing program administrator, she has often had to "explore and participate in forms of 'the talking cure' [Freud's term for therapy] on multiple levels and from multiple perspectives" (512). If teachers

and administrators must play counselor every so often, she argues, they should have some training in therapeutic techniques.

Among the most-cited call for a link between composition and psychoanalysis is Robert Brooke's (1987) "Lacan, Transference, and Pedagogy." In it, Brooke argues that Lacan's theory of transference can explain why "response teaching," a model of teaching first described in Donald Murray's (1982) *Learn by Teaching*, is an effective way to teach writing. Response teaching's hallmark is teacher-student interactions in which the teacher asks open-ended questions that provoke the student to articulate and expand upon her text. Brooke doesn't give examples, but presumably he means non-directive forms of feedback such as, "What do you mean by this here?" and, "Can you tell me more about the point you're making in your conclusion?" These sorts of questions work in the same fashion as drive theory-informed psychoanalysis: they are meant to help students plumb the unconscious depths—or, in Donald Murray's words, to "write to find out what they have to say."

Notably, however, Donald Murray did not draw on Freud, or psychoanalysis, in his pedagogical writing. In the next section, I describe why drive theory did not make a significant change on writing instruction.

### **Composition-Based Criticisms of Drive Theory**

One of the problems of adapting drive theory for composition is it is designed for a psychoanalytic context that does not neatly analogize to a teaching context. In classical Freudian analysis, the analyst engages the analysand in an extremely intense dyadic relationship; for example, Freud often worked with patients six days a week. During this time, conflicts arise and are worked through in the context of a safe, confidential relationship that proceeds at the analysand's preferred pace. Furthermore, analysands decide when to enter and when to terminate

therapy, and have some say in what constitutes the “goal” of therapy. Students choose to enroll only if the course is not required, have no choice about when a course ends, and are evaluated according to standards determined by an institutional representative. These differences in what clinical therapists would call the “frame” of therapy and writing pedagogy were never addressed by those who wanted to adapt psychoanalysis for composition.

Consider the questions implied in Brooke’s article about response teaching, the examples of which I proposed would be “What do you mean by this here?” and “Can you tell me more about the point you’re making in your conclusion?” We might observe that while these questions are non-directive in that they don’t tell the student what they<sup>1</sup> should have written, they are implicitly directive questions in that they literally direct the student’s attention to the parts of the essay that the teacher believes are worth attending to. Herein we can glimpse the rather thorny issue of authority within drive theory psychoanalysis, and we can begin to imagine what the objections to such an alliance might be. Importantly, Lacan’s theory of transference holds that when the analyst asks an open-ended question, the patient is encouraged to imagine what the analyst wants to hear. Over time, the patient gets better at anticipating what the analyst expects. If we transfer this model to the writing classroom, the writing instructor is the one “who knows” about writing (681), and their open-ended questions encourage the student to adopt this “expert” way of knowing. Another implication is that the writing teacher, like the drive theory analyst, is a neutral, objective interpreter of the student’s text: the focus is on why the student might have produced the text, rather than on why the teacher’s attention was drawn to a particular passage or moment.

---

<sup>1</sup> This dissertation uses singular “they” in cases where the antecedent’s gender is ambiguous.

In “Transference and Resistance in the Basic Writing Classroom: Problematics and Praxis,” Ann Murphy (1989) warns that power asymmetries exist in writing classrooms, and especially in basic writing classrooms. She argues that writing teachers operate as “figures of power” positioned above students in institutional hierarchies. When teachers engage students, their work is “inescapably coercive” and controlling (178). This is especially clear if we consider that an essay assignment whose topic is up to the student still requires the student to produce an essay and submit it to an authority for evaluation. The student’s autonomy, then, has serious limits.

A more recent sign of skepticism appears in Ilene Crawford’s review essay of two books that draw on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory: Mark Bracher’s *Radical Pedagogy* and Robert Samuel’s *Teaching the Rhetoric of Resistance*. Crawford observes that neither author accounts for gender, race, class, ethnicity, or sexuality in their description of teacher-student relationships (829), and asserts that they practice a “pedagogy of the reveal.” That is, that they already know what students need to know, and their pedagogies are designed to reveal this (832). Crawford’s criticism shows us why drive theory psychoanalysis has drawn criticism from postmodernist perspectives: in denying the analyst’s subjectivity, drive theory psychoanalysis uncomfortably brushes aside power dynamics between therapist and patient—and by association, between teachers and students.

The other primary critique leveled against those who advocate an alliance with psychoanalysis is less about flaws with drive theory and more about practicality. It too is cogently articulated by Anne Murphy. Writing teachers, she says, often come to their roles “diagonally, via romantic poetry or medieval drama,” and they therefore do not have the training to deal with the personal in highly-fraught personal writing. In other words, writing teachers

aren't trained to heal the highly distressed. The focus of a writing class, Murphy argues, should not be "exploring student psyches," but teaching a particular method of written communication (178).

At this point, I would like to refer to Lad Tobin's argument in *Writing Relationships*, since it crystalizes for me an important fact about the preceding debate: the critiques of drive theory are persuasive, but this does not obviate the need for attending to teacher-student relationships. To the objection, "but we're writing teachers, not therapists," Tobin responds, "what does it mean to be a writing teacher, anyway?" (15). He argues that composition should pay more attention to how relationships—teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher—affect writing instruction. In fact, he sees such relationships as the most important aspect of pedagogy.

Here, I note an alignment between Tobin and Spear. Both Spear and Tobin think of psychotherapy as relevant not because it can help writing teachers construct assignments that encourage self-exploration, but because they believe learning is a function of good relationships. Tobin's book is full of anecdotes of interactions with students which are meant to spotlight the role of relationships in learning, and to demonstrate how pervasively they shape outcomes. For example, he describes a series of conferences in which a student, Evan, revises an essay about a fight he had with a friend in high school. During these conferences, Tobin becomes frustrated with the way in which his feedback is taken up. Evan becomes increasingly confident in the revisions he makes not because they "have an impact on his thinking," but because they reflect what Tobin wants to see. Tobin writes of feeling conflicted: he's happy that Evan is happy—Evan reports that he is feeling "much better about [his] writing...I have a lot more ideas about how to organize stuff"—but he also believes he has somehow hijacked Evan's writing process.



When he reviews his tapes of the conferences, he notices that at one point, his anxiety over Evan's lack of progress "compelled" him to offer direct advice, which Evan seized upon. Tobin concludes that this misstep was a function of him trying to control his own unease.

What's at stake for Tobin, then, is that learning might be a function of teacher-student communication, as fraught and complex and replete with social transaction as that communication might be. To focus on technique is to overlook the ways in which a teacher's technique might be a vehicle for certain kinds of social interaction. Importantly, Tobin focuses in this anecdote on the communicative pairing: the teacher-student dyad. The drive theory which Lacan and Freud employed is, again, focused on the patient or student's self—hence its moniker in modern psychoanalytic literature as "one-person therapy." It is therefore less useful, then, in accounting for the dynamics intrinsic to dyads.

As I wrote at the outset, the usefulness of *dyad* as a concept is that it implies that relationships entail something more sociologically complex than two individuals talking. That's why this study approaches this issue by exploring how teachers and therapists understand their relationships. Since the relationship is central to therapy, it is plausible that the way therapists think about maintaining, developing, and repairing relationships can inform the way writing teachers think about maintaining, developing, and repairing relationships.

To explore Tobin's assertion, that relationships are the center of learning in the writing classroom, we need a learning theory that accounts for both halves. It is also important to keep in mind that Tobin is not interested in psychoanalysis for how it might help teachers heal students. Rather, echoing Spear, he hopes psychoanalysis can tell composition something about the role of communication in learning. Significantly, Tobin claims that he is not interested in equating composition and therapy. Rather, he is interested in the "subtle dynamics of dyad relationships,"

and that it makes “no sense” (29) to ignore a field—psychotherapy—which is dedicated to studying and analyzing such relationships.

I agree with Tobin here. However, it also seems clear that drive theory does not provide the right tools for conceptualizing teacher-student relationships. As the critiques I’ve alluded to argue, drive theory seems not to acknowledge power dynamics, and writing teachers are not trained to deal with highly fraught personal materials.

Had composition scholars begun from the principles that Karen Spear laid out in 1968—that successful communication is marked by three qualities: empathy, self-awareness, and acceptance of the client—then subsequent scholars would have landed not on drive theory psychoanalysis, but on person-centered theory, which arose in part as a rejection of psychoanalysis.

Accordingly, in this dissertation project, I demonstrate that person-centered theory offers tools for the challenges teachers face in thinking about their relationships with students. My interviews with teacher participants illustrate that teacher-student relationships are crucial to how they think about teaching, but that thus far, their pedagogical preparation has not included substantive training in how to relate to others. Where drive theory is designed specifically for a psychoanalytic context, however, person-centered theory is much easier to generalize; its progenitor even conceptualized it as a relevant for teachers. In the next section, I summarize person-centered theory and describe how it avoids some of the pitfalls of drive theory for composition.

### **Person-Centered Theory: A Humanist Approach to Working with Others**

Person-centered theory was initiated by American psychologist Carl Rogers in the 1940s and 1950s as a part of the humanist perspective in psychology, which arose in response to Freudian psychoanalysis, and to the behaviorist approach associated with B.F. Skinner and John Watson. Rogers was influenced by the work of mid-twentieth century thinkers such as psychologist Abraham Maslow, best known for Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and by philosopher Martin Buber, who is remembered for his analysis of how different types of communication reflect different overall relationships between the communicators. Though Rogers himself died in 1987, person-centered theory has had an enormous influence on clinical therapy throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, and its core tenants continue to be the subject of debate and practice today. By way of example, he is liberally cited in each of the clinical therapy manuals I consulted during this project. Teyber (2006) calls him a "seminal thinker in the interpersonal field" (8), and Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2016) still use his definitions for positive regard, congruence, and empathy, as the starting point for discussion.

We can summarize person-centered theory as describing the ideal conditions under which change occurs, as well as how those conditions can be facilitated—by a therapist for example. Given that Rogers was a psychologist, "change" here means moving toward health: healthier relationships, healthier self-image, and so on. A key assumption of person-centered theory is that the client knows what is best for the client; the therapist's role is to facilitate the conditions under which the client feels it is safe to consider and implement resolutions, whatever those might be. This requires that practitioners assume that the client has the capacity for change and will know, with effort, what is best for themselves. This is one fundamental way in which person-centered theory differs from psychoanalytic theory: in the former, the therapist is not the authority on the client. The client is. A practitioner who does not believe that human beings know what's best for

themselves, or who believes that people are intrinsically flawed or evil, will probably not be able to practice from a person-centered theory.

The three essential conditions for change according to person-centered theory are *congruence*, *positive regard*, and *empathy*. I describe these in depth later in the dissertation, but for now I offer the following casual definitions:

- Congruence: the therapist's behaviors and feelings match. Similarly, *incongruence* is when the therapist's actions or words betray a disparity between how they seem to feel and what they say and do.
- Positive regard: demonstrating acceptance of and valuing the client, including their feelings, opinions, and self. Rogers initially called for "unconditional positive regard," but he acknowledged later in his career that this was an ideal, and not humanly possible.
- Empathy: process of entering and becoming familiar with another's private, perceptual world.

Clearly, these essential conditions characterize communication between client and therapist. This was Rogers's primary focus: how could the therapist communicate with the client in such a way that the latter experienced the therapist as genuine, accepting, and empathetic? In practice, this takes a great deal of skill and self-knowledge, especially when a client reports feelings or behaviors that are abhorrent to the therapist. Roger's description (1951) of the person-centered therapist's attitude toward clients still seems relevant in illustrating the approach's philosophy, and is worth quoting at length:

The primary point of importance here is the attitude held by the counselor toward the worth and significance of the individual. How do we look upon others? Do we see each person as having worth and dignity in his own right? If we do hold this point of view at

the verbal level, to what extent is it operationally evident at the behavioral level? Do we tend to treat individuals as persons of worth, or do we subtly devalue them by our attitudes and behavior?...Do we respect [the individual's] capacity for self-direction, or do we basically believe that his life would be best guided by us? To what extent do we have a need and a desire to dominate others? Are we willing for the individual to select and choose his own values, or are our actions guided by the conviction (usually unspoken) that he would be happiest if he permitted us to select for him his values and standards and goals? (p. 20)

I hope that this definition suggests that the person-centered orientation is, at a theoretical level, potentially useful for composition pedagogy. The following tenants seem to me applicable to teaching:

- Teachers should view students as having worth and dignity.
- It is important not only to view students this way, but to treat them accordingly in our responses to their thinking and contributions.
- It is important for teachers to empower students to make their own choices, and not to their role to dominate them intellectually (or otherwise).
- It is important for students to take ownership of their education, not to passively follow the teacher's directions.

These attributes seem to reflect basic pedagogical tenants that already exist within composition. However, there does not exist in composition a robust discussion of how to implement them. For example, Tobin's *Writing Relationships* is made up of stories: "stories about actual situations from my classes that evoked powerful responses from me and my students," and his stated purpose is to "start an academic conversation" about the relationships

that go on in a classroom (16-17). Similarly, in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Tom Newkirk (1997) argues for the continued inclusion of student-centered writing and perspectives in writing classes. While this does imply that student voices should be important in the classroom, it is not an exploration of the role of student-teacher relationships in writing pedagogy.

As I've said, this dissertation project examines through interviews what teachers know about working with students. It explores how they approach dyadic relationships, and what knowledge underwrites, or does not underwrite, those approaches. As a result of this interviews, I argue that student-teacher relationships should be more fully conceptualized and operationalized within writing pedagogy. Person-centered theory provides highly useful tools to do all of this.

However, person-centered theory has an important limitation that must be not only acknowledged but addressed: it does not take up the question of how identity shapes dyads. That is, it does not analyze how perceptions of race, gender, and other sociocultural factors affect the way individuals view, think about, and treat one another. For this reason, I also draw on and thread throughout this dissertation *multicultural and social justice competence* (MSJC), a framework that helps clinical practitioners operationalize the knowledge that identity is intersectional and complex in their work with clients. The ideas underwriting MSJC are similar to those that inform intersectionality, a term coined by critical racist theorist Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) that describes identity as multifaceted, interwoven, and inseparable, and which I believe will be more familiar to composition readers. However, MSJC was developed in the context of dyadic work: how therapists should account for identity when working with clients. Thus, it pairs more harmoniously with person-centered theory.

### **MSJC: A Brief Background**

A rich body of scholarship in composition acknowledges and explores the role of identity in pedagogy. However, a challenge of operationalizing knowledge about identity categorically is that it is clearly problematic to assume that a student's experience hinges on or is dictated by a particular culture or identity category. A writing teacher who works with a student who is black, or Korean, or female should not assume that the student has some essential experience of Koreanness or blackness or femininity that underwrites their decisions and views.

The same challenge exists for clinical therapists: how to acknowledge a client's identity without fetishizing or exoticizing it? The framework of *multicultural and social justice competence (MSJC)* was constructed to address this challenge. It was originally formulated as cultural competence by Derald Wing Sue, Patricia Arredondo, and Roderick J. Davis in 1992, and focused specifically on the attitudes that therapists needed to work with minority clients. MSCJC, developed by Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, and McCullough in 2015, broadened this framework in the interest of acknowledging the "truly endless" number of intersections between therapist and client identity, including minority therapists working with majority clients.

Throughout this dissertation, I cite scholars who draw on this framework at different points in its development. For example, in the next paragraph, I cite a psychotherapist who has worked to make space within the field of psychoanalysis for "cultural competence"—that is, for the role that gender, sexuality, class, culture, and religion play in shaping dyads. While her focus would technically fall within the purview of the initial framework—cultural competence rather than MSJC—I find it nevertheless useful for composition. Currently, no such framework for working in dyads exists. While composition has certainly absorbed the work thinkers who have

acknowledged the role identity plays in our social experiences—Butler and Bourdieu, for example—it has not theorized a framework through which practitioners can do dyadic work. I therefore treat cultural competence and MSJC research whose entire body might be worth drawing on. For simplicity, I refer to the framework as MSJC, rather than switching back and forth between the earlier cultural competence and the newer multicultural and social justice competence.

Psychotherapist Pratyusha Tummala-Narra (2015) writes that cultural competence was a framework developed in the 70s, 80s, and 90s in response to a “neglect” for the sociological and cultural context in which clients live. This framework was developed to help “explain minority and majority group identities as rooted in the context of particular social (gendered and racialized) interactions” (276-277). This turn might sound familiar to composition readers, since composition’s own social turn was powered by a need to include culture and identity in analyses of writing.

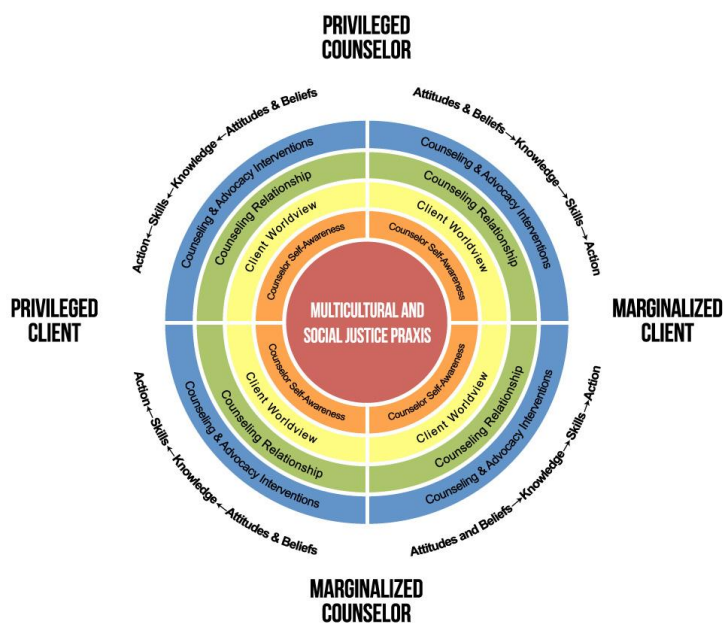
MSJC in clinical psychology does not entail a specific set of practices or methods. Sue (1998) argues that it involves resisting assumptions, particularly in interactions with clients who are different from them. Furthermore, individualizing a client’s experience can help cut through stereotypes that might obscure the therapist’s ability to see the client’s full humanity. He also writes that it is helpful for therapists to have some expertise in the client’s specific culture—though I imagine that if one works with enough clients, one will eventually encounter a culture context that one happens not to know much about.

This last point would be exponentially truer for writing teachers, since so many different students take writing classes. However, the former observations do not require knowledge of specific cultures; they require sensitivity toward difference, a willingness to withhold



assumptions, and, as Tummala-Narra (2016) writes, a “resistance to universalizing one’s own experience”: to work from the premise that others do not hold the same beliefs, experiences, and conclusions that you do.

The more recent work in MSJC is broadly framed around privilege, and acknowledges that privileged clients sometimes work with underprivileged counselors. Within the framework, counselors must be self-aware of their own worldviews, including how these might shape how they view and think about clients. They must also work to understand the client’s worldview, subsequently how their worldview interacts with the client’s in the dyadic relationship. Finally, these factors help determine what intervention or action they might take to help the client move in a healthful direction. The figure below represents the framework’s several layers:



Importantly, the tools of person-centered theory can help writing teachers progress through the framework’s layers. As we will see in the coming chapters, person-centered theory is concerned with practitioners’ sense of self-awareness, and with their ability to see others, and the

perspectives of others, as valuable and dignified. This makes sense, since cultural competence was developed in a context that Rogers himself has influenced—and continues to influence now. Thus, while this dissertation focuses on person-centered theory, I will thread MSJC throughout. I hope readers will agree with me that the former is not only harmonious with but enhanced by the latter.

### **Person-Centered Theory, Therapy, and the Writing Classroom**

To date, the composition literature has not focused on the role that attributes associated with interpersonal relating—e.g. congruence, empathy, and positive regard—have in teacher-student relationships. Clinical therapy, on the other hand, is a field whose research has been shaped by the study of dyadic relationships. As I mentioned before, a key premise of therapy is that healthful change happens within the context of a safe, trusting relationship, and therefore it is crucial for therapist to know how to curate, maintain, and repair relationships.

In this project, I interviewed therapists to learn what they know about relationships—about how they develop, maintain, and repair them, and about any theories or practices that help them do this. I juxtapose what I learn from therapists with what teacher participants know about their student-teacher relationships. My reasons were practical: I wanted to know what therapists knew about what one might call psychophysics, or perhaps psychodynamics—the space created by two minds working with and against one another. I treat what I learned from these interviews with therapists as *intellectual tools*, or mental applications of techniques and processes. Tools assist us by simplifying complex parts of complicated tasks: calculators help us easily multiply, stoves make applying heat to food as simple as turning a dial, and writing makes it much easier for communication to transcend time and space. The intellectual tools of person-centered theory help

teachers accomplish the tasks of understanding what students lived experiences are, and to adapt how they respond to those experiences.

This is an abstract goal, and I will be more specific about how this would help teachers in a moment. Committing to theorizing the teacher-student relationship would fit with a humanistic approach to writing pedagogy. Conversely, undertheorizing teacher-student relationships risks a behaviorist stance, since teachers and scholars might attend mostly to the surface-level results of these relationships.

To clarify this binary: I assume that as humanists, writing scholars view people as complex, and that understanding their lived experience requires more than casual social ability. On the one hand, this is obvious, since psychology is built on the challenges of understanding how people think and feel and behave. On the other hand, the challenges of student-teacher relating communication is not well represented in the composition literature. Tobin's *Writing Relationships* is one of the few such scholarly explorations I am aware of. Person-centered theory's intellectual tools would help address this lacuna.

By the same token, I assume a behaviorist pedagogy would ignore student's relationships to writing or school, but focuses on the behaviors that those relationships produce. A pure behaviorist pedagogy does not concern itself with how students produce writing, only what the text ultimately looks like. This orientation toward teaching runs counter to what composition has tried to do over the past seventy years or so. Scholars of writing pedagogy have encouraged teachers to take student writing seriously, to focus on the process by which it's produced, and to see writing as socially situated.

By way of illustration, I return to my opening anecdote, where I asked how my student, Robby, "made sense" of my assignment. As I mentioned, we disagreed over if the draft he had

produced was an appropriate way to satisfy the requirements of the rhetorical analysis assignment. On the one hand, I am focused on the writing process, here: Robby is not receiving a grade, and we are discussing ways for him to improve the paper. On the other hand, I was still taking a fairly behaviorist stance: our discussion was about aspects of his draft that seemed poor to me, which implied that it should have looked another way. We did not discuss his underlying understanding of rhetorical analysis or academic writing, or how he felt about the essay and why it had bothered him so much. It is possible that one of these was a more important source of writing knowledge than any feedback I could've given.

In the interviews on which this project is based, I heard teacher practitioners place similar weight on the importance of teacher-student relationships. In my conversations with therapist participants, I learned about intellectual tools that therapists use to address such ruptures or miscues in relationships. Had I known about them at the time, these tools would have helped me gain greater insight into how and why students like Robby experience what they do, and to respond in terms that make sense to them. Person-centered theory offers a way of thinking about effective interpersonal communication that would help writing teachers address these challenges in conferences. In this project, I hope to juxtapose what therapists know about their dyadic relationships—their challenges and their solutions—with what writing teachers know about dyadic relationships. These interviews provide a space to imagine a writing pedagogy that assumes that student-teacher relationships highly shape learning—or lack thereof, and a space to imagine a pedagogy that accounts for student-teacher relationships in its conceptualization. In my study, I seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the significant similarities in how therapists and writing teachers report interrelating with clients and students respectively in dyadic settings?
2. How are writing teachers already using the intellectual tools of person-centered theory (empathy, congruence, and positive regard) in writing conferences (even if they don't use the terms)?
3. How would intellectual tools for relating with others benefit teachers in their teacher-student relationships?
4. How might training in congruence, empathy, and positive regard inform how we train writing teachers to relate to students?
5. If writing teachers do report employing these intellectual tools, how do they alter them to fit writing-teacher specific needs?

In this first chapter, I have summarized the alchemy of interests that underwrite this project: the role of student-teacher relationships in learning, their absence or gap in existing writing pedagogy literature, the failure of drive theory psychoanalysis as a solution to this gap, and the possibility that person-centered theory, executed through a MSJC framework, might be a better solution. In the second chapter, I describe the method by which I recruited participants, conducted interviews, and analyzed data. The subsequent three chapters explore dyadic relationships through the lenses of the three core components of person-centered theory. Chapter three focuses around how participants experience, or do not experience, *congruence*, or the level of symmetry between how they feel about and act toward those they work with. Chapter four considers *empathy*, including its lack of theoretical underpinning in composition and the potentially surprising way that clinical therapist participants conceptualize it. Chapter five is

focused around *positive regard*, or the extent to which participants feel able to value those they work with. And finally, in the concluding chapter, I imagine a writing pedagogy that includes the theoretical depth and intellectual tools necessary for teachers to develop, maintain, and repair student-teacher relationships.

## CHAPTER II.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

This project is an interview-based qualitative study. I interview writing teachers and therapists to learn how they think about and approaches dyadic relationships with students and clients. I term these interviews *comparative life-history* interviews, which is a synthesis of two approaches that have been relevant for composition studies in the past, life-history interviewing and comparative interviewing. While I mostly took a semi-structured approach, the interviews were also shaped by my aim of learning the extent to which person-centered principles are present in participants' practices. For reference, here again are the research questions that drove my study:

1. What are the significant similarities in how therapists and writing teachers report interrelating with clients and students respectively in dyadic settings?
2. How are writing teachers already using the intellectual tools of person-centered theory (empathy, congruence, and positive regard) in writing conferences (even if they don't use the terms)?
3. How would intellectual tools for relating with others benefit teachers in their teacher-student relationships?
4. How might training in congruence, empathy, and positive regard inform how we train writing teachers to relate to students?
5. If writing teachers do report employing these intellectual tools, how do they alter them to fit writing-teacher specific needs?

#### **Comparative Life-History Interviews**

The life-history interview is a form of interviewing in which researchers learn about subjects through the life stories that they recount. According to anthropologist Robert Atkinson (2002), stories “render a cosmology” of subjects’ worlds (122); that is, they help researchers understand how worldviews arise, how people accumulate values and beliefs, and how they make sense of the world. Atkinson credits Freud’s mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic case studies as the first time the form was officially used for academic research, and it has been widely used since then to obtain a rich perception of subjects’ experiences. Importantly, life-history interviewing can also teach researchers about the communities that shape people.

Many life-history interview-based studies have also used the method to learn about the person-in-context. Examples relevant to my purpose here tend to focus on how people learn to work in a particular occupation or profession. For instance, in *Good Work* (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon 2001), the authors interview biologists and journalists to learn about how members of those professions conceptualize and approach their jobs. Both communities are rich and complex; however, the interviewers were able to identify values that seem to hold true for the majority of practitioners—values that seem to come along with the territory of belonging to these professions. Biologists, for example, generally articulated an enchantment with “scientific inquiry,” and the “belief that science foregrounds a certain kind of rational thinking” (73, 75). Similarly, in *The Mind at Work* (Rose 2013), the author interviews waitresses, hairdressers, carpenters, and plumbers to find out what they need to know in order to do their jobs. Rose’s inquiry reveals kinds of cognitive processes that must be developed and enriched in order for his subjects to do their work. For instance, he notes that hairdressers must learn to interpret clients’ abstract descriptions of what they want their hair to look like, e.g. “springy [like the season].” Other relevant important examples include Edwin Hutchins’s



*Cognition in the Wild* (1995), a study of how navy sailors learn to navigate, and Paul Prior's *Writing/Disciplinarity* (1998), which investigates the complex process of learning to write in an academic discipline. These examples suggest that life-history interviewing can be useful for understanding a particular domain of a person's life—how she does her job, for example—rather than her entire history.

The second aspect of my study's interviews is that they are *comparative*. By comparative, I refer to a tradition of research in composition studies in which researchers interview participants in order to learn about the differences in their approaches to composing and teaching. Examples of comparative interview studies include Nancy Sommers's (1980) "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," in which the author compares what student writers know to do when they sit down to write to what professional writers know to do, and Mike Rose's (1980) "Rigid Expectations, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language," in which Rose compares the writing processes of a range of students to learn about the differing approaches to composing of (for example) those who experience writers block and those who do not.

Similarly, my study seeks to make a comparison between the epistemologies of writing teachers and therapists with respect to how they approach their dyadic relationships. I wanted to learn about how both groups' training had prepared them to work with students and clients, and what theories and practices guided their interrelating. Additionally, I hoped to learn how therapists used concepts articulated by person-centered theory to curate dyadic relationships, and if teachers—even without recognizing it—worked from principles that would fit within person-centered theory.

### **Study Site**

This study took place in the English Department of a university in the northeast of the United States. The English Department offers writing classes taught by faculty, lecturers, and graduate students with a wide range of teaching experience. These courses are populated by a students of varied majors, educational backgrounds, and motivations. Thus, those who teach them must to some extent generalize their pedagogy to meet the range of interests students bring to the classroom. Additionally, writing conferences have long been standard practice in this English Department's writing courses. Thus, participants drawn from this pool have had some experience working dyadically with students.

I recruited therapists via snowball sampling in the Boston area. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Boston-Cambridge-Newton area has among the highest percentage of therapists per 1000 jobs of any region in the United States, and many of these work in settings that serve the community as a whole, i.e. rather than focusing on a specific population. For example, the Cambridge Health Alliance offers outpatient "evaluation, counseling, and therapy for all ages" and is able to address "concerns ranging from mild anxiety and depression to learning disabilities, relationship problems, addictions, and chronic or acute mental illness."

### **Study Participants**

I recruited two sets of four therapist and four writing teachers (for a total of eight research subjects). I recruited teacher participants mostly via word of mouth, after failing to get responses through a recruiting email. The text of this email can be found in this prospectus's appendix. I recruited therapists by asking acquaintances I know to ask their acquaintances.

### Writing Teacher Participants

OPAL, 33, has been teaching for ten years and is currently employed as an assistant professor at a community college in the northeast of the United States. Her education includes an MA in literature and a PhD in composition, and she teaches both writing and public speaking courses. In her current role, she encounters a high population of multilingual and non-traditional students, but she has also taught at institutions with a more homogenous student body. She identifies as female and white.

HARRIS, 31, has taught for two years at a large university in the northeast while earning his MFA in poetry. He did not have any classroom teaching experience prior to this; however, he drew upon his military experience, where he was responsible for specialty skills to those in his squad. While working on his MFA, he taught both first-year writing and creative nonfiction courses. He identifies as male and white.

BERNADETTE, 36, has been teaching for seven years and is currently a PhD student at a large northeastern university. Before beginning her PhD, she earned an MA in Literature, and she taught at both a community college and a large private university. She has experience working with high school students as well. Most of her experience is in teaching academic writing. She identifies as female and white.

VIOLET, 38, has three years of experience teaching college writing courses and is currently a doctoral candidate at a large university in the northeast. However, she also taught for 15 years in other capacities. She has a MA in education, and she has at the taught middle school, high

school, college, and post-graduate levels. She has worked extensively with ESL students. She identifies as female and Chinese.

### **Therapist Participants**

GENEVIEVE, 31, has been a practicing therapist for 5 years. She has an M.A. in social work and is a LCSW. She practices long term psychotherapy with a diverse population of adults with a range of issues. She has worked in a halfway house for men with substance abuse issues, a community mental health clinic, a hospital, and private practice settings. She identifies as female, white, and Jewish.

WILBERT, 27, has been a practicing therapist for 6 years. He has an M.A. in social work and is a LCSW, and he is currently a PhD student in social work. He has worked in a number of capacities as a practitioner, including in a residential mental health treatment facility, a community mental health clinic, programs for teenage girls with complex trauma issues, and in private practice. While he has worked with patients with a range of issues, he currently specializes in Cluster B personality disorders, a category that includes Antisocial Personality Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder. He identifies as male and Afghan.

ROSIA, 30, has been a practicing therapist for 3 years. She has an M.A. in social work and is a LCSW. She practices long term psychotherapy with both children and adults from a range of cultures. Issues she specializes in include anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, family dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. She works primarily out community health centers. She identifies as female and multiracial.

LYDIA, 58, has been a practicing art therapist for more approximately 30 years. Her education includes an M.A. in expressive therapy and a Psy.D in Clinical psychology. She is currently an Assistant Professor at a small private university in the northeast. She also sees patients in private practice. She has worked in a large number of contexts over the course of her career such as in residential schools and state institutions, with adolescents and adults, on trauma and issues around sexuality. She identifies as female, cisgender, and Irish and German.

## **Data Collection**

### **Interviews**

From November through January 2017, I conducted a comparative life-history interview series (described below) composed of 3 interviews, which I recorded on an iPhone using the app Voice Record Pro. I transcribed as soon as possible following each interview. Each interview series incorporated two video stimuli during sessions 2 and 3 (also described below).

The comparative life-history interviews proceeded mostly along the 3-part, hour-long structure recommended by Seidman (2012). One difference was that the second two interviews sometimes lasted slightly more than an hour, though never more than an hour and ten minutes, owing to the video stimuli.

I devoted the first interview to gathering historical data on how the participant came to their work, how they approached it, what values they brought to it, what purpose they believed it served, and their relationship with those they worked with (clients or students). The purpose of this semi-structured interview was both to establish a rapport, and to gather context to inform what I would learn about the subject's work-related epistemology, which would be the subject of

the second two interviews. This helped me address my third research question, about what role person-centered concepts play in training, and set up a foundation for getting answers to my first question, about how participants report interrelating with clients and students. Guiding questions for this interview can be found in appendix A.

The second session generally occurred between one and three days after the initial interview, as Seidman recommends. The one exception was Genevieve, with whom the interviews were spaced as much as two weeks apart, owing to her busy schedule. Second interviews began, after a brief period of settling-in talk, with a video stimulus: writing teachers watched a video of a student writing conference, and therapists watched a portion of Carl Rogers's well-known therapist training video, *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*. The purpose of the stimulus was to cue practitioners to think about the particular subject of this study: student-teacher and therapist-client relationships. The remainder of the interview proceeded in semi-structured fashion (see Appendix A for guiding questions). I hoped to learn about how subjects conceptualize their professional relationships with clients/students, as well as in what ways they develop or manage those relationships. I also hope to learn if, and to what extent, they were aware of the process of relationship building. More specifically, within clinical psychoanalytic research, the relationship between client and therapist, sometimes called the therapeutic or working alliance, has been the subject of emphasis and inquiry, and its proper functioning has been seen as central to successful therapy (Rogers 1951; Teyber 2006; Wallin 2007; Allen 2013). I wanted to find out if the establishment and maintenance of a "working alliance" between student and writing teacher is similarly significant. This interview helped me learn and compare the sense that teachers and therapists have of how relationships with students/clients develop, and what they do to shape those relationships. All four of my research

questions were implicated in the material for this interview, but particularly the first, second, and fourth questions, all of which deal with how practitioners use, or do not use, person-centered theory's intellectual tools to maintain and curate their dyadic relationships.

The final session occurred between one and three days after the second interview--again, with the exception of Genevieve, whose schedule required another 2-week gap. I began with follow-up questions I had from interview two, and then I incorporated the second video stimulus, this time reversing which group watched which video: therapists watched the writing conference, and writing instructors watched the Carl Rogers clip. I introduced these videos via a briefing on the practice depicted in the video. I briefed writing instructors by briefly explaining who Carl Rogers was, what person-centered therapy was, and who Gloria, the participant in the video, was. I briefed therapists on writing conferences by explaining generally what occurred in a conference, and by giving the circumstances under which the particular conference I had recorded took place. I also told participants before watching each clip that I wanted to know what similarities and differences they noticed between the approach depicted in the video and their approach to their own work.

I used the remaining time in the third interview to ask subjects to comment on what, if any, similarities they notice exist between how therapists develop working alliances with clients and writing teachers develop working alliances with students. The data gathered here helped confirm and challenge what I learned in the second sessions. That is, having compared what each group of subjects said about dyadic work in their own fields and having observed similarities and differences between the two, I wanted to hear each group's observations on the other's practices in hopes of discovering if their observations were similar to my own. This interview provided me data to answer my first question, about comparing practices between therapists and teachers, and

also my second and fourth questions, about how practitioners operationalize, or do not, person-centered tools in their dyadic relationships.

### **Writing Conference Video**

To record the writing conference referred to above, I recruited a fifth teacher participant from the same northeastern institution. The teacher announced that I was hoping to tape conferences in a class that I was not present for, and two students volunteered to participate. Before each of their conferences, I explained to them that I would be taping the conference, that the videotape would be shown to other writing teachers, and that they were not being evaluated. I further said that I would not be showing the recording to anybody other than my study's other participants. I also had them sign a consent form that reiterated all of this.

Following the conference, I had each student complete a survey about his (both volunteers were male) experience so that I compare participants' assumptions about students' experiences to students' self-narrated experiences. Ultimately, the surveys did not provide rich enough information to be useful, and I do not refer to them in the proceeding chapters.

The recordings were made with a camera from the northeastern university's media lab, which picked up both video and sound. I then watched both recordings and chose as my stimuli the one that seemed to require less contextual knowledge of composition practices to understand, since I was planning to show it to nonteachers. I also made my selection based on its being 15 minutes long, while the second option was 20. I transferred the selected video recording onto a laptop that I brought with me to interviews to show participants.

### **Summary of Data Collection**



Below, readers will find a table that summarizes my interview procedure, as well as what I hoped to learn during each interview. For brevity, I have slightly edited my research questions. The official versions can be found on page 27.

Table 1: Summary of data collection

Interview Number	Purpose of interview	Research question(s) addressed
1	Emphasis: Gather work history; gather context for participant's current understanding of his/her work. Instruments: Interview protocol #1; participant survey	Would intellectual tools for relating with others benefit teachers? Significant similarities in how therapists and writing teachers report on dyadic relationships? How might the training in congruence, empathy, and positive inform how we train writing teachers to relate to students?
	<i>Time between: 1-3 days</i>	
2	Emphasis: participants' professional epistemologies; how subjects conceptualize and develop their relationships with clients/students Instruments: Interview protocol #2; video stimulus #1	Are writing teachers already using empathy, congruence, and positive regard in writing conferences? If writing teachers do employ these intellectual tools, how do they alter them to fit the writing-teacher specific needs? Significant similarities in how therapists and writing teachers report dyadic relationships?
	<i>Time between: 1-3 days</i>	
3	Emphasis: participants comment on similarities between writing and teaching relationships Instruments: Interview protocol #3; video stimulus #2; summaries of previous interviews	Significant similarities in how therapists and writing teachers report on dyadic relationships? Would intellectual tools for relating with others benefit teachers? How might the training in congruence, empathy, and positive regard inform how we train writing teachers to relate to students? If writing teachers do employ these intellectual tools, how do they alter them to fit the writing-teacher specific needs?

## Data Analysis

### Creating an Initial Coding System

I was guided in drafting my initial coding system by the central tenants of person-centered communication, as laid out by American psychologist Carl Rogers. I took my cues from two of Rogers's works, his (1951) *Client-Centered Therapy* and (1981) *Way of Being*, in which he describes the core principles of his philosophy, how it is implemented in practice, and the contemporary research on which it was based.

My initial coding system included four codes, which corresponded to primary tenets of person-centered communicating: "belief in the value of others," "congruence," "empathy," and "positive regard." While subsequent lists of codes would expand upon these terms, they remained the "supercodes" that organized my work. Given the importance of these terms for the ultimate coding system, it is worth taking the time to briefly define and describe each.

The foremost supercode, *belief in the value of others*, stems from what Rogers characterized in 1951 as the "therapist's hypothesis" toward clients (22). For client-centered therapy to work, he argued, the therapist must view the client as having "worth and dignity in [their] own right" (20) and as having believing "deeply in the strength and potential of the client" (48). He said much the same thing thirty years later, even as he was thinking of his approach as being relevant outside of therapy:

The central hypothesis of this approach can be briefly stated. Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes, and self-directed behavior; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided (115).

The above quote includes the important qualifier that a certain “climate” is a prerequisite for people to tap into their inner resources and realize their potential. This climate, in person-centered theory, is a relationship characterized by *congruence*, *unconditional positive regard*, and *empathy*—my latter three supercodes.

The importance of these qualities has been borne out by numerous empirical studies since Rogers first articulated them. For example, Kolden, Klein, Wang, and Austin’s (2011) meta-analysis of 16 studies and 863 participants linked congruence with positive therapeutic outcomes, though it also acknowledged that it is difficult to say specifically *how* congruence should be used or displayed. Farber and Doolin’s (2011) metastudy of positive regard showed a weak but notable benefit for racially diverse therapeutic relationships. And empathy has been the subject of two metastudies (Greenberg, Watson, Elliot, and Bohart [2001] and Elliot, Bohart, Watson, and Greenberg [2011]) that concluded that it plays a significant role in positive therapeutic outcomes. I do my best below to define and describe them clearly, though readers should be aware that there has been a substantive dialectical discussion about each that continues into the present time.

*Congruence*: what the therapist thinks and feels seems accurately reflected in what they do and say. Rogers was concerned that therapists had enough self-knowledge to understand their relationships to others. For instance, do they tend to see and treat others as having worth? Do they respect individual’s capacities for self-direction, or do they believe others are in need of their guidance? Do they feel compelled to dominate and determine the values of others? (Rogers 1951, 20). One danger of an incongruous relationship might be that the client does not feel they can trust the therapist, and might therefore withhold important information or feelings.

*Unconditional Positive Regard*: demonstrating faith in client's self-knowledge, and about what is best for them. In *Client-Centered Therapy*, Rogers writes:

The counselor chooses to act consistently upon the hypothesis that the individual has a sufficient capacity to deal constructively with all those aspects of [their] life which can potentially come into conscious awareness. This means the creation of an interpersonal situation in which material may come into the client's awareness, and a meaningful demonstration of the counselor's acceptance of the client as a person who is competent to direct [themselves] (24).

Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2014) characterize this quality as more of an ideal than an attainable goal, and that therapists are likely to sometimes feel conditionally positive or negatively about clients—something Rogers himself would admit later in his career. Regardless, the point is that it is salutary for clients to experience warmth and acceptance in their therapeutic relationships.

*Empathy*: In 1980, Rogers defined empathy as “the ability to see completely through the client's eyes, to adopt his frame of reference” (142). To further elucidate this concept, which I find tricky to pin down, I also cite the following passage from *Client-Centered Therapy*: [the therapist's job is to] “assume, in so far as he is able, the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, to lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so, and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client” (29). Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2014) cite a range of recent research that cumulatively describe empathy as comprising mentally

simulating someone else's emotions, trying to take their perspective, and soothing one's own emotions (143). The importance of empathy in therapy probably seems obvious, but suffice it to say that empathy is an important component in the client's feeling heard and understood.

### **Creating Transcripts**

Data analysis occurred between November 2016 and May 2017. I often transcribed interviews as soon as I had recorded them, though in several cases I was not able to finish transcribing before a subsequent interview with that participant. I also kept a research journal about the themes that seemed to be emerging as I transcribed.

When I finished transcribing, I listened to each interview again, reading transcripts as I did, to make sure that they were accurate. In creating these manuscripts, I eliminated most false starts and filler words, as I was primarily interested in the content of what subjects said. However, if a false start or a filler expression seemed meaningful, e.g. it communicated uncertainty or tentativeness, I did not eliminate it. I also eliminated personal anecdotes or identifying references. In total, transcriptions totaled 336 pages and 184,583 words.

### **Revising the Coding System**

I then treated the transcripts as discourse and coded them according to my initial supercoding system. I quickly discovered that I needed to expand my system to account for nuances that emerged. Over two more readings, I developed a revised coding system that expanded each supercode to incorporate the themes I was recording in my research journal. This new system of subcodes still reflected person-centered theory, but in a much more itemized, nuanced way.

I also added a fifth supercode, “Other,” which included important themes in participant testimony that did not fit within the original four supercodes. Some of the subcodes in “Other” reflected an aspect of person-centered communication. For example, several of my participants reported on how they observed growth in clients, and Rogers has stated variously that one reason for person-centered communication’s effectiveness is that organisms are evolutionarily disposed to move toward growth. On the other hand, some emerging themes did not fit in with person-centered theory, but were nevertheless too important not to include. For instance, all my participants discussed their relationship to the power intrinsic to their roles as teachers or therapists, and while Rogers does discuss the importance of clients feeling safe, he does not to my knowledge analyze the consequences of the therapist’s role as socially imbued with authority.

To demonstrate the evolution of this coding system, I have provided the following charts, which describe the expanded supercodes. Table 2 is an overview: it lists the supercodes and their associated subcodes. Table 3 describes the cues that comprise one subcode of empathy, “assuming the other’s frame of reference,” and brief descriptions of each cue. Tables 4 and 5 provide examples from the transcripts containing cues. As a disclaimer, readers should note that owing to the abstract themes at the heart of this study, cues manifested in a variety of ways. For example, an allusion to *required flexibility*, which is a cue for the “assuming the other’s frame of reference” subcode, might take the form of “what I do depends on the client” or “Sometimes I have to talk more. Some clients just need to hear more of your voice than others.”

Table 2: Overview of coding

<b>SUPERCODES</b>	<b>SUBORDINATED CODES</b>
Empathy	Empathic listening; assuming the other's frame of reference; nondirective but nonpassive feedback
Congruence	Authenticity; affect matching; persistence self-monitoring
Positive Regard	Relationships characterized by emotional warmth; relationships characterized by stability; use of authority for stabilizing relationships; safety and risk taking; effects of evaluation
Belief in others' self-worth	Attitude toward clients/students
Other	Implementing attitude toward clients/students; moving toward growth; goals; teacher/therapist as socially powerful roles

Table 3: "Assume the other's frame of reference" subcode and cues

<b>CUES</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Mentalizing	Actively trying to imagine inhabiting some aspect of the other's frame of reference, including why they might speak/act as they do.
Resisting assumptions	Acknowledging and putting aside pre-existing beliefs about the other in favor of understanding their specific frame of reference.
Idiosyncrasy	Acknowledging the unique way in which each person relates, as well as how this way of relating stems from their frame of reference.

Required flexibility	The need for the therapist/client to adjust their practice as a function of the other's unique frame of reference.
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Table 4: Samples of cue for "mentalizing" from transcripts (specific cue bolded)

Mentalizing	LYDIA: "But I mean I even had—I had some kid come in and talking about beating up gay men on the weekends. It's like hmmm..." ayyy...ok, where do we start with that?" And he's gloating about it, and it's like "whoa, wait," y'know. So I feel like it's still about <b>trying to, for me to understand, what are you getting from that?</b> What's that doing for you?
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Table 5: Samples of cue for "idiosyncrasy" (specific cue bolded)

Idiosyncrasy	BERNADETTE: I mean like that being said, if you have a student who, y'know, unlike her, is not as articulate, is not as self-aware, <b>I think it also does depend on the student</b> , there might be some students where they do need a little bit more...encouragement, a little bit more... "You're doing ok!"
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### Limitations of the Study

The clearest limitation of this study is that its sample size is only eight subjects. This is a part of an important tradeoff: a reduced sample size allows me to dedicate more time to understanding each participant's experience. I believe that a project focused on psychodynamic experiences must make space for "deep dives" with each participant in order to build a reasonably nuanced understanding of a part of human sociality that is usually hidden. In clinical psychology, research in this vein typically surveys or interviews participants to try to construct an understanding of what happens. Small sample size studies about interrelating accumulate and are ultimately compiled into metastudies whose authors can take a macro-level view of the



research. I hope to open a space for this sort of tradition in composition, even if the claims I ultimately make are limited in scale.

Relatedly, I tried to recruit participants who represented a range of sociocultural backgrounds and perspectives, and while I feel that my sample is reasonably diverse, my participant pool is not all-inclusive. This study took place only in the northeastern United States, and its pedagogical focus was college-level. It focused specifically on writing courses, as opposed to writing in college courses, and I do not make any claims about teaching relationships *qua* teaching relationships; while I suspect that person-centered theory holds tools for teacher generally, this study's scope is limited to writing teachers teaching writing classes. Subsequent work would further flesh out ranges of important perspectives, and add nuance to those represented here.

One final limitation has to do with the design of the study: in the third interview, I asked teachers and therapists to comment on each other's work. Of the 8 practitioners, only 2 therapist participants also had experience as teachers, and none of the teachers were also therapists. This means that while both groups they could comment on the other's role in a dyad, their commentary was somewhat shaded by (necessarily) faulty assumptions about what it was like to be a therapist or teacher. For example, one therapist participant assumed that a teacher's role was to lecture, and to tell students how to write. Most teachers, I believe, would identify this level of prescriptiveness as stymying for learning.

One last characteristic of this study to which I wish to draw readers' attention is its interdisciplinarity. I hope that readers will see this not as a limitation, but as a worthy challenge. I view this project as tacking back and forth between a number of poles: what is available theory-wise in composition pedagogy; what theories for interrelating exist in clinical psychology; which

theories from the latter are appropriate or sensible for the former; and can I understand enough about doing therapy to think, ask, and write for others about it. I also view this challenge as eminently worthwhile, since interdisciplinary work provides critical perspective into—in this case—humanist work being in parallel domains. My hope is that this effort will open a space for further discussion of how to conceptualize teacher-student relationships in writing pedagogy, and that perspectives different from my own will emerge to complicate, advance, and sharpen this effort.

## CHAPTER III.

AUTHORITY AND TEACHER IDENTITY: MAKING A PLACE FOR CONGRUENCE-  
BASED TOOLS IN WRITING PEDAGOGY

This chapter considers writing teacher-student relationships through the lens of *congruence*, or if what someone thinks and feels seems accurately reflected in what they do and say. As I summarized in Chapter 2, *congruence* is a crucial trait for therapists, and more than one metastudy has borne out its importance in clinical practice. As we will see, one reason for this is that the therapist role is shot through with authority, and congruence helps therapists use this authority ethically.

Composition scholars have made similar observations about the teaching role being one of authority. Many analyses warn teachers about how to use and not use their power, and caution about the damage that unwary teachers can do when they are not self-aware about power asymmetry. However, to date, this literature has not delved into the teacher's mental experience of this power asymmetry. Neither has it offered what I call "intellectual tools" that assist teachers in bringing into focus their mental experiences of others, nor how those experiences shape what they say and do. It is precisely because a teacher's language and behavior are shot through with ethos and authority that they should be more aware than nonteachers of how their feelings toward others shape what they say and do.

This chapter focuses on participants' sense of congruence in their work, especially with respect to how they accept, or do not, the power with which their roles have been imbued. I begin by defining the term "congruence." Then, I review how the composition literature has conceptualized many ways in which teachers can abuse their power, but has not developed a corollary theory of pedagogy that conceptualizes ethical power use. This is apparent in my

interviews with teacher participants, who are considerably less “comfortable,” to use one participant’s term, occupying a role of authority than are therapist participants. Consequently, teachers are more “uncomfortable” with how they relate to students. As we will see, “comfort” is a term that indicates a vague, unarticulated internal conflict, a feeling that something is not quite right—and it shapes teacher-student relationships. Conversely, therapist participants report using congruence-based tools to not only acknowledge such conflict, but to enhance their dyadic work.

### **A Definition of Congruence for Writing Pedagogy**

The purpose of this section is to flesh out what I mean by *congruence*, since I will be using it so frequently throughout this chapter, and because it has not to date been widely written about in the composition literature. Readers should note that, in the clinical therapy literature, different schools of thought would define congruence in different ways; however, as this dissertation situates itself in person-centered theory, I rely on a Rogerian definition.

In person-centered theory, congruence plays an important role in creating a safe environment in which people can take risks. A focus on congruence can help practitioners attend to the implicit meanings and assumptions attached to their words and actions. This is a concept that rhetoricians will be familiar with, since it goes without saying that language has both text-level and subtext-level meanings. The phrase “I’m not sure I understand” can be said in such a way that it communicates, “I would very much like you to keep trying to explain this to me, since it seems important, and I would like to understand it as you do.” However, it can also be said in such a way that it means, “What’s wrong with you?” Naturally, the latter is less conducive to inviting exploration of any kind (i.e. intellectual, emotional, etc.) The kinds of intellectual tool that therapists are trained in, but that writing teachers are not, help practitioners focus on noticing and curating how they act and speak toward others.

Rogers suggests at different times that “realness” and “genuineness” make good substitute terms for congruence, which he called the “fundamental basis for communication” (*A Way of Being*, 15, 160). He also offers the following, more thorough definition: “when my experiencing of this moment is present in my awareness and when what is present in my awareness is present in my communication...I am integrated or whole” (15). Incongruence, conversely, is when there is inconsistency between what one experiences and how one communicates. What we often call “passive aggressive” talk is an example of incongruence: there is a discrepancy between what the speaker is saying and what they obviously feel. Incongruence is not necessarily conscious, and it can be much more subtle than typical passive aggressive speech. Therapists who aren’t self-aware might well betray, via subtle social cues or phrasing, that what they are saying isn’t exactly what they actually feel. As we might imagine, the danger of this is a breach in client-therapist trust.

Such risks might well be exacerbated, or simply harder to avoid, in the context of a dyad comprising participants of different sociocultural backgrounds. One obvious way this might be true is if one member of a dyad holds ambivalent feelings about the others’ humanity. However, sociocultural differences also offer the additional hurdle that people act and speak in culture-bound ways, and without knowledge of others’ cultures, it is easy to miss crucial shadings or meanings of actions or speech. Derald Wing Sue, a psychologist best known for coining the term *microaggression* (2001), observes that certain central tenants of therapy sometimes run counter to client’s culture-bound practices. For example, therapists tend to avoid giving advice, since doing so “fosters dependency,” and yet advice-giving has been identified as a “helping characteristic among many Latino groups” (Comas-Diaz, 1999, cited in Sue, 2001). It is easy to imagine how “mainstream” therapeutic practices might be opaque or seem unhelpful to members

of minority groups. Writing pedagogy faces a similar problem, as exemplified in Victor Villanueva's (1997) critique of Standard Written English as the model variant of English that students are often held to: "When we demand a certain language, a certain dialect, and a certain rhetorical manner in using that dialect and language, we seem to be working counter to the cultural multiplicity we seek" (992).

What does congruence look like in a teaching context? It might feel fraught for teachers to act "real" or "genuine," since they often don't want to be too familiar or personal with students, and because "realness" and "genuineness" seem unstable in an analysis that tries to account for sociocultural differences between dyadic participants. The definition I offer here acknowledges that congruence must function within a frame that acknowledges these constraints.

Congruence in teaching is marked by:

- One's lived experience is not marked by major conflicts between how one feels and what one says or does
- Self-awareness of what one is actually experiencing when relating with or responding to students
  - Including awareness and internal acknowledgement when some facet of the student's identity makes one uncomfortable
- Awareness of whether or not the cause of one's experiencing is useful to communicate with the student about
  - e.g. distinguishing between when one simply doesn't like a student and when one's reaction is because a student has made a serious rhetorical blunder (and making the student aware of that blunder might be a learning opportunity)
- Communicating in a way that accurately represents one's experiencing

- Inviting the student to share their experience of a discussion to see if it reflects one's assumptions—and if not, inviting a subsequent discussion of why not
- Communication is framed in such a way that its subject can be a unit of analysis for the student
  - That is, the communication is about something the student has done or said, and not about the student personally.
  - An obvious cause of incongruence is when the teacher's experiencing is about the student personally, but the teacher attempts to frame their experience as about some specific thing the student has written.

In my study, congruence became especially relevant when related to the subject of a teacher or therapist's authority. This is perhaps because, as we will see, the composition literature includes extensive warnings about how teachers can misuse their authority, but little that helps them operationalize it ethically. I report on four teacher participants' experience coming to terms with their positions of authority: how it has caused them "discomfort," as one participant characterizes it, in how they relate with students, and their varying degrees of success in using overcoming this incongruence.

Then, I turn to therapist participants' conceptions of their roles and authority. I demonstrate that while they too are conscious of the power with which their positions have been imbued, they are markedly less "uncomfortable" with it than writing teacher participants. I demonstrate that this is because of congruence-based clinical knowledge that helps them see their power as, to use one participant's distinction, something one uses *with* and *for* clients, rather than *on* and *over*. To give readers a sense of how congruence can be employed to accomplish ethical power use, I describe how two participants use a practice I call a practice

*metamonitoring*, in which they track how their emotions affect what they say and do during dyadic work, to maintain and develop relationships with clients.

**All the Ways Things Can Go Wrong: Conceptions of Power and Authority in the  
Composition Literature**

The closest the composition literature comes to discussing congruence is in texts that warn about the misuse or abuse of teacher authority. This work generally acknowledges the authority teachers have over students, and provokes reflection as to what it means to treat students, including those whose language backgrounds differ from the teacher's, with respect and dignity. However, this literature is not explicitly about how congruence shapes dyadic relationships, and it does not acquaint teachers with intellectual tools that would help them recognize and understand their own interior experiences, or mediate those experiences. A true focus on congruence in teaching would focus on how teachers acknowledge feelings they have about students, trace how these feelings shape what they say and do, and if necessary, develop ways to address their feelings, actions, or speech

In 1972, the executive committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication adopted the *Students' Rights to Their Own Language* resolution (*SRTOL*), which stated that students had a right to "their own patterns and varieties of language," and that no American English dialect was superior to any other. It also stated that teachers should have the experience and training to "respect diversity" and "uphold" these rights (19). Two years later, the resolution and an extended explication was published in *College Composition and Communication*, stating that "as English teachers, we are responsible for what our teaching does to the self-image and the self-esteem of our students" (22). The primary intention of the resolution and subsequent *CCC* explainer was to disseminate established sociolinguistic



knowledge throughout the field; it provided a survey of how conventions and grammatical structures differ according to a speaker's dialect, and it recommended that teachers learn about such topics as syntax, morphology, and language acquisition (36).

One implication of *SRTOL* is that teachers who focused heavily on “spelling, punctuation, and usage” (30) were not conceiving of students whose language backgrounds differ from the norm as having equally rich subjectivities and experiences as students from more prestigious language backgrounds. Accordingly, *SRTOL* urged teachers to emphasize “content”—to value what students had to say and to be less pedantic about the idiosyncratic ways in which they said it. This is no minor implication, especially for the denizens of a humanist discipline: to reject students who do not speak “standard” or “educated” English is to reject students because of their “racial, social, or cultural origins” (21). In sum, the *SRTOL* resolution functions as a censure and a caution. Teachers have been misusing their classroom authority, and they should, in addition to becoming better-informed, be more careful in the future: the humanity of others is at stake.

Notably, this warning is a response to perceptions of teacher behaviors (or misbehaviors). It addresses the attitudes that inform those behaviors by informing practitioners to become better educated. However, a question to be asked at this point is if further education is all that is needed for practitioners to evaluate their behaviors and feedback toward students with non-prestigious language backgrounds. For some, it probably is. For others, however, the system of judgments associated with non-prestige forms of language, let alone the race and/or genders of those who speak those non-prestige forms, is no doubt too entrenched to be changed exclusively through increased knowledge of linguistics. Such a task would need to involve more self-knowledge, and

perhaps access to a coherent theory of relating that assists practitioners in understanding how they view others, and how those views shape their behaviors.

The idea that teacher behavior could suppress student subjectivity arose from other sources, too. One notable such example is Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers* (1953, 1973, 1998), in which he proposes a teacherless writing class based around students reading and commenting on each other's work. Elbow is not typically associated with the SRTOL resolution, but consider the following from the first chapter of *Writing without Teachers*: Elbow argues that "in your natural way of producing words there is a sound, texture, and rhythm...which is the main source of power in your writing" (7), and that an overemphasis on "'mistakes'" like "spelling and grammar" is what makes us "give up." He seems to see the teacher mostly as a source of such unwanted feedback. Good teachers, he writes, do not "tell people how to [write], since that always ma[kes] things worse" (14). Teachers reading Elbow might well interpret this as a warning to be wary of making any evaluative judgment at all when responding to students, since Elbow equates such judgements with suppressing the writer's voice.

Furthermore, unlike the SRTOL, Elbow does not propose any solution to the possibility of teachers misusing their authority. As the title of his book suggests, he thinks—or at least, did at the time—that the best teachers can do is stay out of the way. Though Elbow's book has continued to sell well since its original release, in practice, surely most teachers do not see their responsibility as to leave students alone. Realistically, then, *Writing without Teachers*' success indicates that readers have found compelling the warning against "taking over" student writing.

From a person-centered perspective (among others), however, an important step is missing. If we read Elbow's book from the perspective of a teacher interested in informing their teaching, than its argument is "behaviorist" in orientation: it inveighs against actions without

examining the underlying mental processes that govern those actions. This seems like a recipe for incongruence: the desire to overcorrect, if unaddressed, will surely seep into a teacher's feedback, even if they have read and agree with Elbow. One can believe that one *is supposed to* act in a particular, widely-accepted way without having developed the requisite self-awareness and self-knowledge to successfully do so. Teaching is a complex social scenario, and access to intellectual tool, such as the concept of *congruence*, that helps monitor and curate the use of self would help practitioners navigate it more effectively.

Another scholar whose work began to find purchase around the time of the SRTOL Resolution is Donald Murray. Murray wrote as much as any composition scholar about the teacher's role in the writing conference. Murray proposed a "response teaching" pedagogy, which begins from the principle that "to be good listeners we have to believe that the person speaking may say something worth hearing" (162). In practice, this means an engaged but reserved role for the teacher: "I encourage [teachers] to be as quiet as possible...and [students] will start speaking of what they have written" (161). The purpose of Murray's conference is not to "evaluate or conclude anything"; in fact, it should be "inconclusive," "vague," "supportive." Just as with Elbow, Murray warns against the overreach of the teacher's authority. In fact, he proposes that the teacher's role is "remarkably close" to the student's peer (148). Put another way, Murray is prescribing how he thinks teachers should *act* toward students.

While describing prescribed actions also implies a mindset that underwrites those actions, it is clearly not the same as a focus on an intellectual tool that would help teachers process or curate their mental experiences of or relationships with students, or of their own roles in the classroom, so that they could successfully act in the way that Murray describes. Congruence is particularly relevant to this domain, since it helps practitioners focus on the relationship between

their mental experience and their actions. It also brings into focus the various factors that might prevent one from acting in the way that Murry describes, e.g. whether the teacher truly feels comfortable acting “remarkably close” to the student’s peer, or if this desire exists in tandem with the conflicting desire to be a strong classroom authority.

The gap I describe above—a focus on behavior without attending to the mental experience that underwrites that behavior—has continued to be present in composition literature over the past decades, and it appears in work spanning the spectrum of composition perspectives. As with the works explored in more detail above, these tell teachers what they should be aware of and what they should avoid, but do not encourage them to vigorously examine their own experience. For example, John Clifford’s (1991) “The Subject in Discourse” uses postmodern “de-centering” theories to warn that composition teachers who teach a traditional academic discourse could well be indoctrinating students with a conservative and elitist ideology, and Tony Silva’s (1997) “On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers,” which cautions teachers to (among other things) respect second language learners and envision what they might need to be successful. More recently, the 2015 *Naming What We Know* compilation of threshold concepts included warnings such as Paul Kei Matsuda’s that teachers must be aware of the “fuzzy boundaries” between error and convention, and a 2015 anthology of essays on *Critical Expressivism*, the editors of which re-affirm in their introduction that student experiences should be at the “forefront” of the classroom, and in which many contributors advocate for teachers and students to see themselves as collaborators in the production and consumption of texts. Also noteworthy is the continued importance to our discipline of education philosophers such as Mike Rose and Paolo Freire, whose works variously affirm the agency and worth of students, and

advise teachers not to view students as receptacles for knowledge (Freire) or as “problems” to be addressed with remedial education and stigmatizing labels (Rose).

In sum, the composition pedagogy literature has focused heavily on what teachers should not do with their authority. These warnings are important, but they do not form the basis for a pedagogy that includes congruence-based tools for monitoring and responding to the underlying emotional forces that shape what teachers do with their authority. It is precisely *because* teachers are in positions of power that we *should* develop intellectual tools that bring into focus their mental experiences.

To better clarify this last point, I begin my data analysis with what therapist participants say about the importance of acknowledging and owning their authority in therapy sessions. Like composition scholars, they acknowledge that being aware of one’s power is important; however, they also emphasized that authority was not just something to be wary of, but a tool for creating a safe environment in which clients could explore and take risks. Participants framed both of these—taking responsibility for their authority and wielding it to create such safe spaces—as being underwritten by an awareness of how they felt toward others, and how those feelings shaped their actions. That is, they framed them as underwritten by congruence.

Then, I turn to teacher participants’ experience with authority in conferences and classrooms. As a group, they experienced markedly more ambivalence about the power that accompanies their role, and have had various levels of success in coming to terms with it. This is in part because they have had to rely on personal resources, and not pedagogical theory, to work through the complex feelings that arise as a function of having power over others. The teacher participant experiences I report on in this chapter highlight the importance of developing a

pedagogy that helps teachers acknowledge and respond to their emotions toward students, as well as trace how those emotions affect their actions and speech.

Finally, to provide a concrete example of how congruence shapes practice, I return to therapist participants. Several therapists reported using a congruence-based intellectual tool that I call *metamonitoring*, which entails watching their own emotions, tracing how those emotions shape actions and speech, and taking action to correct course when necessary. Metamonitoring helps therapists develop and repair their dyadic relationships, and demonstrates how congruence can positively affect dyadic work.

### **“It’s all about power *with* and *for*”: Therapists’ Perceptions of Authority and Congruence**

This section briefly surveys therapist participants’ belief about acknowledging and owning their authority. As with writing teachers, therapists feel that it is crucial to be aware of the power asymmetry in a therapy session; however, they also characterize this relationship as potentially productive so long as the therapist uses authority ethically.

I begin with an excerpt from my conversation with Rosia, a social worker. She had earlier referred to the importance of being aware that therapists’ behavior and feelings are to some extent always visible to clients. This speaks directly to the concept of congruence, since a lack of awareness that one’s feelings are visible in one’s behavior is a prime recipe for behavior and speech that do not seem to match—and this is the kind of social cue that causes dyadic partners to wonder if one is lying, or perhaps afraid to make one’s true feelings known. For reference, when I say “being unaware of that” in the first line below, “that” refers to “how [therapists’] behaviors and feelings are visible to their clients.”

A: What would be the dangers of people being unaware of that [how therapists’ behaviors and feelings are visible to their clients] when they were...as therapists?

ROSIA: Oh yeah. So, a big thing is that you're in a power position, so it's different than when you misunderstand a friend, or someone offends you, and you react to them. Cause you're in power. And you also hold so many of their vulnerabilities. And I mean power, even in some of the theories are say that like a therapeutic relationship, it's another attachment bond in the same way a parental unit or a significant other is an attachment bond. So—and those run so deep into our selves, have such an effect on our beliefs about our selves, the world, others, and like safety and worth, so if you have a reaction that's negative, like if you are irritated toward someone, and...I as a therapist don't repair it because I think that person deserved it, because of my countertransference and I don't get past the countertransference enough to say, "ooh, I was in the wrong, what the heck did I just do." So it's not just that you break the relationship, it's that without the awareness, you're not going to repair the relationship. Cause you can do stuff within countertransference, and then you can go back and repair it, and that can be actually a corrective experience cause likely, whatever that person brought up in you, they often brought that up in other people, and other people probably haven't repaired the relationship, so you have the ability to do that. So that's the power thing. But if you're unaware, then you aren't looking back to repair that. You're just like pushing ahead. So you have probably compounded whatever big hurt this person is having. (second interview)

Rosia keys in here on a facet of the therapeutic dyad that is relevant to the pedagogic dyad: it is a relationship intrinsically marked by an asymmetry in authority. Rosia points out that because of the power dynamic in the therapeutic relationship, the therapist's words and actions are shot through with extra meaning. Accordingly, miscommunications in therapy are "different than when you misunderstand a friend," or when in a less imbalanced social encounter "someone offends you and you react to them." Furthermore, there is often a special bond between therapist and client because the client has shared so "many vulnerabilities." Consequently, it is important for therapists to be aware of their assumptions about other types of people, and about how those assumptions might prevent them from seeing that they have reacted vindictively or maliciously. Rosia gives as an example that her own interior experience of a client might cause her to believe that the client "deserved" some ill that befell them.

Finally, if the therapist does not recognize and acknowledge the misunderstanding, they might "compound" the client's hurt. In the therapeutic context, this might mean unintentionally

confirming negative self-beliefs the client holds, or re-enacting the very pattern of relating that caused the client to come to therapy in the first place. Obviously, these miscommunications might be implicit: the tone of the therapist's voice, their body language, the appropriateness of their response to the client's level of distress, and so on. This is one benefit of integrating congruence into practice: therapists must be able to tell when their interior states are affecting their actions. As I touched upon earlier, it is possible to say, "That's so interesting" in a way that implies, "I would very much like to hear more about your experience," but it is also possible to say it in a way that implies, "I can see that you're expecting a response, and I don't want to be rude, so here's one that seems civil." In normal conversation, it might not matter much to hear the latter response, but in therapy, it might be devastating.

In the interest of confirmation, I also offer the perspective of a second therapist participant on this point. For context, this excerpt, from near the end of my second interview with Genevieve, stems from a general question about what kinds of things cause disasters in therapist-client relationships.

GENEVIEVE: I mean, yeah, don't abuse your power, and...there are like so many terrible, terrible therapists who do terrible things, and can really mess someone up, so.

A: Actually did want to ask you about that...what are the dangers of having the sort of authority that you have in that situation?

GENEVIEVE: The dangers are, well I think it's only a danger if you are not realizing how much power you have, and I think a lot of therapists because of their personality type want to sort of disavow that power, but people take your words very seriously and what you say carries a lot of weight. So I try to always keep that in mind. That you hold a very, you know, significant position in their lives, and like if they see you at the grocery store, that's like...or they see you out drinking, there are things that will affect people. (second interview)

Genevieve echoes Rosia here in saying that she always tries to "keep in mind" that what therapists say "carries a lot of weight." She acknowledges that clients "take your words very



seriously,” and that you “hold a...significant position in their lives.” These awarenesses apply particularly to what she might say if she were careless. Genevieve confirms that an awareness of one’s speech is crucial for therapists. As readers acquainted with rhetorical theory will recognize, this is a matter of word choice, of tone, of an awareness of how a particular audience—the client—will experience one’s speech. We can see, then, how congruence, or an awareness of how emotions shape speech, could be a useful tool for therapists.

However, as I said at the outset, congruence is not purely about being careful. People make mistakes, even when they are constantly wary. One of the key advantages that congruence offers therapists is an awareness of those mistakes—or at least, an awareness of the possibility that a word or action could’ve been interpreted a certain way. Lydia, a social worker, described this best. She also makes an important distinction in the passage below between ethical and unethical power use.

LYDIA: Things happen [in therapy]. You miss the mark, or something happens or whatever else, and people can feel really blown out of the water, they [the ruptures] can become the most phenomenally helpful experiences if they’re held in a way that allows them to be unpacked. So...the hope is that the person can then name it and talk about it, and that you can hear it, not get defensive, allow for it, and at times to say, “I get it. I really missed the mark there. I’m really sorry about that.” ...And—but it’s like you are modeling the fact that you’re not perfect. If you’ve missed the mark, you name it.

A: It almost sounds like...a counterintuitive way to think about authority because the possibility of authority being self-effacing and conciliatory at times maybe doesn’t fit in to what we might think of when we hear that word.

LYDIA: See we have such a Western image of authority, which I hate...we have such a weird, to me, really really weird warped narrow image about authority and power. And that is some of our biggest issues. Cause we don’t know about power *with* and power *for*. It’s all about power *over*. And it’s all clobbering and bulky. (second interview)

A primary difference between how Lydia frames the issue of authority and how I read the composition literature as framing it is that Lydia begins from the premise that “things happen” in the course of dyadic relationships. However, she also points out that such “ruptures” can be “phenomenally helpful” if therapists are able to recognize that they have happened, to not “get defensive” about their role in them, “allow” for a conversation about what has happened to take place, and to apologize. As Lydia characterizes the situation, the authority figure’s role requires a substantial amount of self-awareness, and the ability to acknowledge how one’s actions affect others. Congruence plays a two-pronged role in therapeutic dyadic relationships, then: it helps therapists be more conscientious about how they act toward others, and it helps them repair relationships when they’ve said or done something harmful.

At this point, it is worth noting that person-centered theory is limited in its assessment of power dynamics. While its precepts generally advocate for individuals and blunt the authority of the therapist, it does not acknowledge the various ways in which identity, as social constructed, also contributes to power differentials. This is where a MSJC framework can help. If we acknowledge that, in addition the power differential between therapist and client, other power asymmetries exist in dyads owing to differing degrees of privilege, then we can see how congruence becomes even more widely applicable. A practitioner who is sensitive to the various ways that identity can shape experiences, who is self-aware about how they respond to differing identities, and who is monitoring their thoughts and emotions will be more aware of the various ways to violate a client’s trust or to cause harm. Similarly, a practitioner who is attending to how their emotions shape their actions and words will have an easier time acknowledging how they might have caused harm—and perhaps, in a more general sense, acknowledging their own feelings of ambivalence toward those of different sociocultural backgrounds.

In the next sections, I report on how teacher participants perceive their roles as authorities. As we will see, they are no less aware of it than therapist participants; however, they have had variable levels of success in finding what one participant terms “comfort” with their roles. We will see in their accounts how their feelings about their own authority shapes how comfortable they feel with their teaching identities.

### **Violet’s Bind: Feeling Required to be—and Uncomfortable as—an Expert**

Violet had been teaching for 15 years when I interviewed her, more than any other teacher participant in this study. She has also taught more age groups (middle school, high school, college, and post-graduate), and she has taught in both China and the United States.

However, during our conversations, she articulated a conflicted relationship to her authority as a teacher. Her experience seems not to have included interacting with training or theory that helps in this domain. To sum up this conflict briefly: she feels she must always have the right advice for students about their work, but she often feels that she does not have the right advice. This conflict causes what Violet characterizes as *discomfort* in her relationships with students. *Discomfort* seems to express the notion of an internal conflict that she cannot quite define. Violet does not use the word “incongruent,” but she nevertheless refers to a disparity between how she feels internally and how she is compelled to act when working with students. Her “discomfort” with authority lives at the heart of this disparity.

This issue arose without my explicit prompting or asking about it. Rather, she broached it herself, changing the subject mid-discussion. The below excerpt begins in the middle of a conversation about how important it is for her that students respond positively to her feedback. Violet affirms that they are, but the topic also seems to cue for her another related topic: a conflict with the authority she believes she has as a teacher.

VIOLET: Yeah, sometimes if they [students] say “oh I have never thought about that, that is a good idea, and I’m happy,” yeah.

A: When a student says, “oh that’s new for me!” in a way that makes you feel like they’re learning something, that helps?

VIOLET: Yeah. Oh yeah, ok, I remember what I was thinking about. I’m kind of putting myself in a position of authority. And I just hope—I am looking at students from above. And I just push myself to give suggestions, to show them “I’m better than you at writing, at this topic,” but I’m not really.

A: You don’t always feel like you are.

VIOLET: No I’m not really better than them. So I remember in writing center they talk about like you can learn from students. So sometimes I say, “maybe yeah, I should shift my position from so high to lower position, and that can make me less stressed.” (first interview)

Noteworthy here is the centrality for Violet of language that characterizes her role as looking *down over* students. For example, to respond to student writing, she must “put herself in a position of authority” in which she “look at students from above.” Her work in the writing center is filtered through this lens, too.<sup>2</sup> To learn from students, she must shift from “so high to lower position.” The positions that she refers to are maintained through producing knowledge about writing, and about essays: to know more is to be in a higher position. Thus, as a teacher, she “pushes” herself further to “give suggestions,” the purpose of which are to show that she’s “better” than they are—meaning both a better writer and more knowledgeable about the topic. This is a notably different characterization of authority than what therapist participants

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<sup>2</sup> This project is focused on teacher-student dyadic relationships and therefore does not explore person-centered theory in a writing center context. However, the writing center dyad has a number of characteristics that might make it an even better fit for elements of person-centered therapy: the absence of grades, the tutor not assigning or evaluating assignments, and students coming voluntarily, for example. In the course of research for this project, I encountered writing center theory that was engaged with dyadic work in ways that teacher-focused literature was not (ex: Hall 2017, Mackiewicz and Thompson 2013). While I do not explore this work for the purpose of this project, it presents an intriguing opportunity for further research.

articulated earlier. None of them, for example, felt compelled to prove that they knew more than their clients about how clients' problems could be resolved.

We can see in this excerpt glimpses of a conflict that informs Violet's teaching. Even as she believes that she should know more than students, she also feels that she is "not really" better, and that she is "not really" more knowledgeable than they are. She holds both these positions simultaneously, which presents a conflict. Interestingly, she is able to let go of the former position in her writing center practice, and this is a relief—"makes me less stressed." I would suggest that this is because in the writing center, Violet can relinquish her teaching role, in which she must be "better" and "higher" than students, and always have the correct advice to give them.

It's worth acknowledging here that Violet is the only participant in this study who claimed a non-American identity position—she is from China. I anticipate that composition readers might wonder how differences in culture shape her teaching experience. As we'll see later, Violet does frame her teaching identity as stemming from mentors she knew when she lived in China. However, while there were many opportunities to address cultural differences between education in the U.S. and education in China over the several hours during which we spoke, Violet did not speak directly about this. There are many possible reasons for this. She mentioned mostly teaching Chinese students in second-language learning courses, and so language might not play as big a role in her teaching identity as one might assume. She might also have felt uncomfortable at my thinking of her primarily through this lens. Whatever the case, I have chosen to avoid speculating about how culture, especially language difference, mediates her experience more than she chooses to.

We continued to discuss how Violet feels responsible for knowing more than all her students all the time:

A: Yeah, what do you do in those situations...do you ever say [to students] “I don’t really know what the best thing to do next is. What do you think about this?”

VIOLET: No, I would never say—

A: [both laugh] no, you’d never say, how come?

VIOLET: I just feel I’m teacher. I should give you suggestions, that’s my job. And as a student, I always [show] my weakness before my professors. But as a teacher, I don’t know, I just feel like I’m not supposed to say that. (first interview)

In Violet’s mental experience of teaching, *responsibility* and *authority* and *knowledge* are indelibly knotted. She equates not knowing with “weakness,” which is acceptable for students, but not for teachers. Teachers are never supposed to not know, since this would mean being weak, and abdicating your responsibility.

So far, we have seen that Violet understands the teacher’s authority as meaning to know more than students. This effectively means that she should have to have an encyclopedic knowledge of all possible student essay topics and rhetorical techniques, and an inexhaustible reserve of creativity in deploying them. This understanding is infused with ideas of power: to not know is to be weak, whereas to know implies being powerful. Teachers cannot be weak, which means they must always know.

Violet attributed this understanding to experiences with teachers she remembers as models. Here’s how she described what she has been taught about being a teacher by her own teachers:

VIOLET: I remember when I was in Shanghai, some professors told me that they are in a very bad position. As a professor they cannot show their weakness. I didn’t realize until he told me that. So I was thinking about well, if I don’t talk to my professors, if I don’t ask stupid questions now, maybe after I graduate I will have no opportunity to ask stupid questions again. I dunno, I think I hope I still can ask

the stupid questions, but I'm afraid. Maybe, maybe it's not smart if you do that? People will see you as, "you're not smart. You're not confident. You're not qualified for this job," you know. (second interview)

Violet inherits from her professional models the idea that a lack of power is equivalent to a lack of knowledge: professors can't ask "stupid questions" because they would be showing "their weakness."

Perhaps it is possible here to infer that Violet has inherited a cultural construction of teaching from her mentors in China that does not quite square with the American context in which she now works. However, Violet did not delve deeply into how this might work. Additionally, Violet does not have a monopoly among teacher participants in this study with respect to worrying that students might believe she doesn't know enough. All 4 participants mentioned it in some fashion: Harris and Bernadette both use the term "imposter syndrome," and as we will see in the next section of this chapter, Opal speaks about her early teaching experience as a form of method acting designed to fool students into thinking she knows more than she really does. While it's certainly possible that culturally constructed visions of a teaching identity matter a great deal; however, Violet, in telling her story, did not place a heavy emphasis on cultural difference or collision.

Her fear is that if she asks stupid questions or doesn't "know," other will see her "not smart...not confident...not qualified." This certainly does not fit easily with the literature's warnings about teachers abusing their power that I began this chapter with, and neither does it mesh with what she has learned in the writing center, where "they talk about like you can learn from students." It's easy to imagine that these countervailing forces here—the authoritative, knowledgeable teacher and the power-conscious, collaborative teacher—would result in a certain amount of intellectual reflux.

But how does such reflux manifest in Violet's teaching? As my research questions suggest, particularly those questions that relate to how teachers might benefit from intellectual tools for shaping relationships, this project is interested in interpersonal dynamics, and thus far we have not strayed beyond Violet's internal experience to how she relates with others.

Violet describes moments when she is called upon to respond to student writing as filled with "great pressure." The following exchange picks up after the first excerpt in this chapter, in which Violet had mentioned that her work at the writing center helps her accept the idea that teachers can sometimes learn from students. She describes how she believes students see her when she gives suggestions that don't quite fit their papers—suggestions she seems to know are imperfect, but feels compelled to give nonetheless.

A: It sounds like you're saying, something that actually makes your job harder is feeling like you're supposed to have all the answers.

VIOLET: I think so. I think that puts stress on myself, and also makes the student feel uncomfortable.

A: Oh really, you think, you feel like the student is uncomfortable with—

VIOLET: No, if I'm giving really good suggestions, persuasive suggestions, they will be happy to take it. But sometimes, I don't know it [i.e. what to say], and I try to figure out it, and then I give a suggestion and that suggestion don't really do well with this kind of issue, you know what I mean?

A: Yeah, like they can feel that it's not quite right.

VIOLET: Yeah...they feel like, "do you understand what I'm talking about here?" You know? "Are you with me?" You know? "You are trying to show you are powerful, you are smart, but you are giving irrelevant ideas. Not really can help me with my essay here." So, I just feel like that's not what student wants, and I don't feel comfortable with that.

A: Right, yeah.

VIOLET: So, it's kind of fake authority there. I don't like it. (first interview)



Violet believes that her need to demonstrate that she has the answers, even when she does not, affects how students see her. She is certain enough in her reading of students that she can assume their voice and “speak” for them, explain what she believes they must be feeling toward her: that she is misrepresenting what she knows, that her suggestions don’t help, that she is only pretending to be “powerful” and “smart.” These, again, are the terms that she equates with teachers having knowledge, and consequently authority. Doubtless, some portion of the student voice she invents is a projection—a conflation of her own beliefs about herself—but this is exactly the point. When she relates with students in a way that does not live up to her own standards, she feels guilty, and she experiences herself as a fraud, a “fake authority.”

There are limits to what can be extrapolated from a participant’s perspective of her relationships; I can’t offer readers any direct observations about how Violet works with students. However, focusing on Violet’s perspective allows us to see the problems she perceives, as well as the solutions—or lack thereof—that she employs to fix those problems. In this section’s excerpts, we see that Violet does not “feel comfortable” in her relationships with students, and that an internal conflict about how to exercise her authority is at the root of this. This conflict is a prime example of incongruence: Violet’s self-expectations, unresolved, seep into her dyadic work. She’s aware of this, but is not prepared to resolve it, either. As I discussed in my opening, this is a domain that composition’s teaching manuals do not cover, let alone provide theories or tools for.

### **Opal: A Journey to “Comfort” in Student-Teacher Relationships**

I next turn to Opal’s relationship with her teaching role. Opal, unlike Violet, does “feel comfortable” while relating to students—though this has not been the case for the entirety of her career. Her perspective provides an illustration of a teaching identity that is congruent, more

fully integrated, and characterized by comfortable authority. However, Opal arrives at a more congruent identity diagonally, through personal resources and capability, rather than what writing pedagogy provides. Even as she reports a much less conflicted experience than Violet does, her story is reflective of Violet's in that it helps us see the intellectual labor that teacher-student relationships entail, labor that composition teaching manuals elide. It was also reflective of teacher participants' generally. The experience of feeling conflicted surfaced with all four teacher participants, and in 10 of 12 interviews total.

Throughout this section, I continue to rely on Violet's term *comfort* as a metric that indicates, if imprecisely, whether a teacher feels congruent. My assumption is that teachers who feel comfortable in relating to students experience fewer internal conflicts that would produce incongruent reactions. Conversely, teachers who feel uncomfortable relating with students must do more to cover up their feelings.

In the following excerpt, Opal describes the status of her current classroom persona:

OPAL: Again I do think because I have that PhD behind my name, I feel more confident in having less formal relationships with students, you know, I make jokes. And I literally am at a point now where who I am outside of class is exactly who I am inside of class.

A: Oh that's interesting. You don't feel the need to have this public and private—

OPAL: I no longer feel that I have to put on my acting skills. I did feel that way for a long time teaching. I always thought, "oh, it's just like theater." Because I'd done theater before, so. It's just like, playing this character, and I'm playing this character who knows a lot more than they actually know, and has this authority, and can—now, I pretty much dress the way I dress outside of class, I mean a little bit nicer than I—y'know I don't wear sneakers or anything, but I pretty much dress the way I dress outside of class, I speak pretty similarly—makes sense, inside of class outside of class. I make very similar jokes, I mean they're a little bit more highbrow than I would make outside of class, but. I am my authentic self in the classroom. Because that's all—to me that's the best results I've had teaching, when I am who I am, you know. Cause I think students can see through it when you're not. (first interview)

Opal contrasts her current lived experience as a teacher, which is marked by confidence and comfort, with her earliest experiences, which she recalls as literal acting. In this passage, she monitors the ways in which she might be modifying her outward persona to disguise her inner persona, e.g. she does not feel the need to significantly change the way she dresses or the jokes she makes when she steps into the classroom. Monitoring these behaviors is diagnostic in that it helps her see the parts of her self that she accepts as appropriate for her classroom persona, and the parts that she feels she must *disguise*, so to speak. When Opal declares that she is her “authentic self” in the classroom, we can see this as not needing to disguise important aspects of that self to teach. By contrast, Violet’s lived experience is marked by determinedly hiding that she does not know everything. Both practitioners confirm that the trouble with hiding or disguising is that students recognize the incongruence—they “can see through it.”

Before delving more deeply into what congruence means for Opal, I want to clarify what I mean when I claim that Opal experiences comfort in relationships with students. In particular, I mean that she *experiences herself as comfortable*: her lived experience is not marked by significant conflict between interior and exterior states. In focusing on lived experience, I hope to set aside concerns about identity itself being a performance; while this may be true, we can see already that Violet and Opal live their teaching identity performances at differing levels of comfort.

To return now to my conversations with Opal. When I asked what her first experiences as a teacher were, she remarked that she was, “Horrible. I was horrible, no I was a terrible teacher. I didn’t have any teacher training before I started teaching.” She expanded that she was hired “two weeks before the semester started” and the sum of her preparation was receiving “sample syllabi” (Interview 1). This seems like a clear enough relationship: more training would’ve

helped Opal be a less “horrible” beginning teacher. However, an equally important point, which did not emerge until a little later, was the role that gender and appearance played in her student’s reception of her as a young teacher.

OPAL: Yeah...it’s—I always go back and forth because on the one hand, when I started, I started so young, and then I’m also handicapped in that I look young for my age, so people assume that I’m younger than I am, which is fine. But because our culture has views of young women, and that not meshing with also being intelligent, or having authority, I—oh, at the beginning, I was trying in many ways to assert an authority, and I tried to have a clear distance from students. I mean, humorously my first day of class, some 18-year-old boy asked me if I wanted to get lunch.

A: Oh my good—[laughs] wow.

OPAL: After class, and I said, “no thank you, I’ve no intention of having any type of casual lunch with any of my students.” And I had a very, very clear line between, y’know, student-professor. And so—and then I also, because I started teaching at [a small private undergraduate institution] close after I—I had been hired the next year actually to teach at [a small private undergraduate institution], and even at the time it was 60% male, 40% female, my classes *so* oriented toward males, young males, 18-year-old boys, that I developed early on this sensitivity to that kind of interaction, and it was—at the time I didn’t feel like I had the authority to say, “I don’t know the answer to your question.” And I often found myself caught in this, I’m kind of just BSing my way through this and I know that they know that I don’t know what I’m talking about. (first interview)

This anecdote illustrates the role socially-embedded sexism might play in shaping a teacher’s classroom persona, perhaps in a way that causes her to work incongruently. Opal recalls that she feels compelled to create a “very, very clear line between” herself and her students, a line shaped by a “sensitivity” toward interactions in which male students exhibited a comfort and ease toward her that they probably would not have had she been male. These experiences led her to a position much like the one Violet reports, in which Opal felt unable to acknowledge the limitations of her knowledge, and to repeatedly reaffirm her authority. She does not describe how this plays out in the classroom, but we can imagine conversations in which she consistently feels the need to pretend she knows more than she does, and where her rhetorical

performance becomes focused around appearing more knowledgeable than students rather than exploring an issue with them. Also like Violet, she recalls being aware that she was “BSing her way through,” and that her students were aware of this, too. We can further imagine that a lack of training would exacerbate this situation. By comparison, female therapist participants, while similarly subject to sexism from their clients, receive some training that in how they might approach these interactions.

While Opal’s early teaching experiences are no doubt disheartening, we have seen that she eventually found a teaching identity that felt “authentic,” and that helped her form productive working relationships with students. How did she arrive at the attitude exhibited in the first excerpt? It might be easy enough to summarize her experience as the “fake-it-til-you-make-it” method; her acting metaphor would seem to support this. However, in the spirit of this project’s exploration of what teachers bring to their relationships, I would like to consider more deeply the resources she has brought to bear in constructing her teaching identity, several of which emerged throughout our discussion. The earliest such resource was her acting skills, which she describes in the foremost excerpt, and again here:

OPAL: Because one of the things that I wanted to do the most is pretend I was older and more than I was, and I remember dressing older. I like would wear my hair up a lot and wear very professional clothing. I wanted to give them the sense that I’d been doing this for a long time. So I remember that the most, I remember trying to pretend that I knew what I was doing. (first interview)

Opal’s techniques, wearing “professional clothing,” her “hair up,” and giving off the “sense” that she had been “doing this for a long time,” functioned as important props for her then-teaching identity. To see them as *resources* is to acknowledge that Opal had, over the course of her life, accumulated sartorial and dramaturgical knowledge that she could use to succeed when she became a teacher. Significantly, these resources come from her background,

and not from institutional supports that assisted her in overcoming the challenges of acting congruently in the classroom. Furthermore, valuable as acting appears to have been, it is noteworthy that Opal felt the need to pretend to be another person to survive in the classroom. This seems to indicate the need for an intellectual tool that would help her avoid this feeling.

Two other resources that Opal mentions helped her along the way include getting older and finishing her PhD. She describes these in the following passage, which was prompted by a discussion of her colleagues who cultivate relationships with students that are, she believes, too informal.

OPAL: Yeah, and I think that that's a balance that you always have to strike. I'm lucky in that—and I was saying to this earlier in the semester actually that, I feel like I'm finally at the age gap where—

A: They don't think that you're...[laughs]

OPAL: They don't think I'm within their dating realm, and I'm also not really cool, and that part I was a little upset about [Adam laughs], but like, there's the sense of, "oh, she kind of knows what's going on, but she *doesn't* really know what the cool thing is for an 18-year-old right now is," and I don't. I learned that watching the Macy's Day parade, and I'm like "Who are these people singing, I don't—who are they?!" So I think when there's that age gap, there's less of that worry because I don't think students even see you in a way of—I think they see you in the same way that actually a patient probably sees their therapist, that there is this clear distinction between your position and my position. I also think having the Dr. in front of your name helps too. There's something about—I have stopped letting them call me by my first name, too. Which I used to do more because I wanted to be, y'know, the friendly professor, but it in some ways does undermine, and it can become—you can blur that boundary I think when they start calling you by your first name, coming to see you all the time. (third interview)

Opal finds that as she's gotten older, students are less likely to cultivate inappropriately informal relationships with her. This is illustrated by students perceiving her as "not...cool" in the sense of knowing what's what in youth culture, and by *not* seeing her as a potential romantic interest (i.e. "they don't think I'm within their dating realm"). Relative age, then, creates a productive emotional distance in Opal's student-teacher relationships.

Opal also mentions that finishing her PhD and insisting that students call her “professor” or “Dr.” has helped establish productive student-teacher relationships. Interestingly, she proposes that this is because inviting students to call her by her first name as she once did was harmful, since it “blurred” the teacher-student boundary. Through the lens of congruence, this makes sense: the level of informality implied by eliding the teacher’s professional title belies the real power disparity that exists between teachers and the students who populate their classes. Consider the dissonance of a friend passing on a critical evaluation, imbued with the authority of an important institution, of your work every two weeks.

One final resource is worth mentioning. The following exchange occurred near the end of my third interview with Opal:

A: So you feel to some extent equipped to work on—or to help students articulate their perspective on a subject they care about?

OPAL: Yeah, and even their relationships with friends and things. I’m willing to have those conversations, and I do feel that we can talk about them, and maybe that’s because I’ve been doing so much more with interpersonal communication, so those conversations naturally come up.

A: I was going to say, what do you draw on to...guide yourself in those, is it...just the fact that you are older and more experienced than many of them?

OPAL: Yeah, and also I think more well read on...attachment theories, and communication patterns, and on those kinds of things where I say “ok, well let’s unpack the communication problems in this relationship,” what went wrong, and oftentimes it’s something that we all have some knowledge about, like text messaging, or...y’know?...So I guess it is just more knowledge and being older in that case [laughs]. Those are the {unintelligible}. (third interview)

Opal volunteers that in addition to talking to students about essay topics—what I imply when I say “subjects” above—she is also willing to have certain kinds of personal conversations with them, for example, about their friendships. This suggests that students want to speak with her about such things, which is probably no surprise to compositionist readers; especially at larger

institutions where composition courses are the only ones with small student-teacher ratios, writing teachers often find themselves invited to glimpse students' personal lives.

Opal suggests that she can have these sorts of conversations first because she has been teaching for ten years, and that this experience correlates with wisdom: "being older" means having "more knowledge" and a more nuanced perspective on human relationships. This is probably true, but it also seems relevant that students are more willing to think of advice from someone older than their peers as authentic. One reason her student relationships might have improved, then, is that they operate more often from positions of respect. Opal also mentions being acquainted with several concepts that inform clinical psychotherapeutic literature: "attachment theory" and "communication patterns." She encountered these concepts, which generally provide ways to think about how people interrelate, during her own course of therapy, when her therapist suggested she read about them. Her familiarity with this knowledge could certainly qualify as a resource of its own, given that they are included in professional therapist training. That is, Opal has encountered some of the very concepts that I am advocating for all writing teachers to encounter in this dissertation. However, she encountered these concepts not in training, but on a journey of healing and self-improvement.

To review, resources that have assisted in Opal in finding a comfortable authenticity from which to teach include her knowledge of the signifiers of authority, her background as an actress, an education that culminated in a PhD in composition, becoming older and wiser, teaching experience, and theoretical psychotherapeutic knowledge. These are clearly not representative of the preparation writing teachers receive—or can receive.

By contrast, Violet has not been able to draw on the same personal resources Opal has, and as a result, experiences more conflict in her teaching identity. This contrast is important



because it suggests that we cannot assume that individuals placed in teaching roles will simply figure things out on their own. Even as they accumulate enough knowledge and skill to survive as teachers, that survival may be marked by various emotional and intellectual challenges that cause them conflict and upheaval. These, in turn, can result in incongruent relationships with students.

The final observation I wish to make about Opal's personal resources is simply that she required a lot of them to arrive at a teaching identity that was right for her. This speaks to how difficult relating with students can be, and how much work teachers must do to relate successfully. Both Opal and Violet's experiences clarify the need for a writing pedagogy that provides some of these resources, that helps teachers construct and ease into identities that allow for congruent relating.

### **Harris and Bernadette: Further Evidence for the Importance of a Pedagogy that Addresses Teaching Identity**

Violet and Opal's experiences demonstrate that there is significant labor involved in finding comfort as a teacher. I now turn to Harris and Bernadette's experiences to clarify the consequences of the teacher feeling comfortable in their identity for student-teacher relationships. First, Bernadette's description of teaching-induced anxiety shows how the teaching role generally activates insecurities. Second, the distinctive training that informs how Harris teaches extends what we saw with Opal: writing teachers must often rely on personal resources they happen to have, even if they are not designed for the task, to confront the challenges of relating to students.

In my first interview with Bernadette, she referred to a "teaching instinct" that she observed in some new teachers. Bernadette had recently co-lead a teacher-training seminar for

first-time teaching assistants (TAs) at her institution, and she had noticed that several trainees approached the work with “an instinct...a teaching instinct” in the sense that they seemed like “natural [teacher]s” and “their students loved them.” I wanted to know what a “teaching instinct” meant to her; I assumed she meant by this that some practitioners come to teaching with an intuition for what the most productive attitude to take toward students is.

A: Can you say more about what you mean by the teaching instinct, like what kinds of things did you pick up on?

BERNADETTE: I think it’s partly like just not having any sort of affectation in the classroom, partly just being like a whole person, just an unguarded energy in the classroom that other people respond to. And I think like, for me—I spent a lot of time analyzing my own behavior, but for me I don’t really have a persona but I also don’t—I’m also not like totally unguarded, y’know? So there’s kind of like a trusting—in a few of the TAs, I just saw the way they trusted the students to welcome them. (first interview)

Bernadette equates the “teaching instinct” with “being...a whole person,” and being “unguarded.” She seems to mean that teachers with the “teaching instinct” do not feel the need to hide who they are when they are in their teaching role. This aligns with Opal’s earlier description of feeling like her “authentic” self, in which who she was outside the classroom more or less matched who she was inside. She also suggests that trust plays a certain role—that teachers “trust” students to “welcome them.” I would reinterpret this as Bernadette believing that some teachers feel *confident* that who they are will be acceptable to students, and that they won’t need to hide major parts of who they are. I would also note again that what is most interesting to this project is not if Bernadette is right, but that she notices this characteristic at all: she is identifying something she believes she lacks.

Bernadette expresses the desire for her practice to resemble these first-time teachers’. However, she feels “a little bit too guarded”—she must carefully monitor herself when she teaches for fear that it might be harmful if students see or become aware of certain parts of her

personality. Having to deny parts of herself so that she can teach causes her discomfort and anxiety, which we talked about in our second interview:

A: We had talked a little bit about you feeling nervous, and I wanted to ask you what in particular...is the thing that causes you to feel that way?

BERNADETTE: On teaching? Before I teach? Partly it's performance anxiety, which I've always had. So my nerves get much better after the first week of class. So it's partly that kind of new situation, meeting new people. I've always been super self-critical and insecure, so it's also—it's the basic like, "Are they going to like me? Are they going to respect me? Are they just going to like walk out of the room, like who is this bitch?" So part of it is like, the imposter...part of it is the kind of the imposter thing, like what am I doing here, part of it is just performance, and kind of self—being like too self-aware, I guess. (second interview)

Bernadette's description of the source of her discomfort is instructive both for its similarities and differences to Violet's. Student-teacher interactions are shot through with self-expectation, and thus pressure-filled: Bernadette feels anxious about the need to "perform" in front of students, just as Violet felt anxious about needing to come up with immediate, productive responses to student essays. She and Violet also both worry that that they will be seen as frauds, though Bernadette uses the word "imposter," while Violet uses "fake." One takeaway from these similarities is that teaching is a profession that activates practitioners' anxieties and insecurities. The same is true of therapy, of course, since therapists engage in intense dyadic conversations with clients who expect that therapists will be able to understand and help them. This is why therapist training and theory includes concepts like congruence, which helps practitioners monitor and manage their own internal reactions.

This is not to say that Violet and Bernadette experience identical anxieties, of course. Violet's stem from maintaining an impossible-to-live-up-to model for a teacher's responsibility, while Bernadette's seem to come from her general personality, which she describes, "I've *always* been super self-critical and insecure" (my emphasis), especially in certain kinds of social

encounters, e.g. “that kind of new situation, meeting new people.” Even as the similarities in Violet’s and Bernadette’s experiences affirm the labor involved in finding an integrated teaching identity, the differences illustrate how teaching can activate many different types of insecurities depending on a practitioner’s personality and sense of self.

The formation of Harris’s teaching identity is noteworthy for this chapter, too. As we saw with Opal, Harris depended a great deal on his personal history to fill in gaps left open in his pedagogical training. It became clear that this was the case as soon as I asked Harris to describe his teaching background, and he said that he had “done some very informal teaching” while he was in the military. This entailed having multiple “billets,” or jobs, and being responsible for teaching other squad members about those jobs “in case for instance you had a casualty,” and somebody needed to take your place at a moment’s notice (Interview 1). While Harris did not entirely extrapolate a classroom identity from his identity as a military mentor, it is notable that, as we can see below, it explicitly informed his work when he began to teach writing:

A: So [because you taught informally in the military] did you kind of come in going I kind of a little bit know what to expect?

HARRIS: Uh, I was just as scared the first day, if not more so because there was a different audience. That’s something we talk about all the time in teaching, when I was teaching my squad or anything else, it was people I’d known for forever. I had expectations of them learning, of their learning abilities, and we all have a common reason why we’re learning it, and we need to learn it. So I knew that the very first day, at least in my head I was like, “just don’t yell at the students [both laugh]. You can’t do that, that’s not a teaching method you can apply [both laugh].” And—but ironically certain things from the military did kinda come over, I realized that I do like, I did like working with smaller groups, working with set numbers I felt like, learning was more conducive that way. But yeah, I mean, I was extremely afraid, even just getting out the syllabus. I was like “don’t ask me anything, I don’t know what I’m talking about.” (first interview)

Harris recalls his that when he first stepped into a classroom, his military mentorship was on his mind, albeit as a foil: Harris remembers thinking that he should *not* behave as he had with squad

members he was training (e.g. “yell[ing] at the students” is not an applicable teaching method “here”). He also had a productive awareness of what he did not know: his mentorship experiences had taught him something about the importance that “learning expectations,” or what a syllabus might call “goals” or “outcomes,” play in a teaching encounter, and he was aware that he didn’t know what to expect of students in the writing classroom. Thus, his military experience seems to have helped him become aware that overarching purposes matter for learning.

Later in his career, he adapted some practices from a mentorship to a classroom context, such as “working in small groups.” He also offered the following benefit of his time in the military:

HARRIS: I was able to go into the classroom and be kind of lucky in that I didn’t have to portray myself as some authority figure, or anything else, because I’m not necessarily much older than a lot of the other people that were my peers, but maybe because of my background in the military like I didn’t feel afraid to go in and say, assert my authority, and say “look at me Mr. Older Guy.” If anything I probably did the opposite [laughs], which is also a problem some teachers have, and I was like, “Hey I can relate with you.” (first interview)

In this excerpt, we can see that Harris’s military experience helped him feel at ease as a teacher. He mentions that he wasn’t “afraid to go in” and “assert” his authority, which suggests that he felt comfortable in the role. He also contrasts this experience with the need to “portray” himself that way, as other teachers he knows report experiencing. He feels “lucky” in having had an experience that positioned him to have this relationship to a position of authority. Of course, this is not an experience that all writing teachers can be expected to have, and one could also imagine that some veterans would be less thoughtful about how their former authority transferred to the classroom. Harris’s experiences are unique, and even as they teach us about the conditions that might shape a congruent teaching identity, they are also conditions that can’t be recreated easily.

One further example of this is how Harris’s military mentoring helped him overcome what he elsewhere calls “imposter syndrome.” Harris is the “first on his maternal side” to go to college, and his college experience itself was unusual in that it was disrupted by military service and by the fallout from that service—“I was dealing with, you know, combat-related issues...like combat stress and possibly PTSD, things like that” (Interview 1). He remembers that when he was admitted into his Master’s program, he felt that he had “tricked everyone.” As we saw in Violet’s testimony, feeling like a “fraud” (in her case) can be a source of incongruence. However, Harris’s personal experience seems to have served as a resource to help him feel more comfortable with his classroom teaching.

It is worth noting that Harris’s Master’s program does offer some pedagogical training. Specifically, soon-to-be teachers receive a week-long orientation, and then ongoing training throughout the semester. However, Harris’s testimony suggests that this was not as formative as his military experience:

HARRIS: [CONTINUED FROM ABOVE EXCERPT] But yeah, I mean, I was extremely afraid, even just getting out the syllabus. I was like “don’t ask me anything, I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

A: So ok, so that had something to do with, I’m not sure I have anything to teach you about writing...was that sort of your experience your first couple weeks?

HARRIS: Yeah, it was not being—not feeling like I was, not an expert, but like I was proficient in the field, it’s not that I didn’t write obviously. We all wrote. We all write. But writing and talking about the different structures of writing were totally different things. So to me, it was just not being comfortable yet. Cause you know they kinda just throw you into it [in my program]. (first interview)

Harris describes feeling “extremely afraid” on the first day (i.e. “just getting out the syllabus”). His language choice in remembering that “they kinda just throw you in” is telling, as it speaks to feeling powerless, acted upon; he is the object in this sentence, not the agent. Part of this powerlessness is a lack of knowledge about the “different structures” of academic writing.

However, another part has to do with his “audience”—the students. His earlier recollection that he told himself half-jokingly “just don’t yell at the students” reveals that he worried he would be inappropriately harsh with them, and above, he says he didn’t know what to expect of and from them. I would suggest that these were excellent things to worry about: Harris is already reflecting on how he will navigate student relationships, and he is thinking critically about how his past experiences do and do not apply. It is also notable that he does not refer to pedagogical training in this reflection. When it came to thinking about his audience, it was his military background that provided the most guidance. Again, what Harris learned in the military and how he applied it is specific to him. The takeaway here is a question: what about teachers who do not have Harris’s background and personality?

As a coda, it is worth that although Bernadette had “absolutely no introduction into teaching writing,” she said she was fortunate in having a writing program director who was “really really supportive of adjunct faculty and did a lot of workshops and summits and conferences” (Interview 1). Access to a supportive, capable administrator is, like Harris’s military experience and Opal’s acting background, a facet of an individual’s personal experiences, and, probably not scalable. There is a broader takeaway, however. Opal, Harris, and Bernadette are no doubt differently informed about teaching and relating, since their resources and experiences are idiosyncratic. While some idiosyncrasy in teaching is fine—even productive—it is also true that intrinsic to a discussion of “writing pedagogy” is that we deem some practices and ways of thinking as better than others. For example, writing is a process, revision is helpful, and a language diversity is the norm. Another item on this list could be that it is crucial to find a teaching identity that allows one to relate comfortably to the authority that accompanies the teaching role.

We would not expect practitioners who feel anxious, nervous, conflicted, and insecure to take on a position of authority and relate congruently to others. Therefore, for professions in which relating to others as an authority is central to success, practitioners would benefit from access intellectual tool that help them understand and deal with situations that activate them. All teachers are already navigating relationships with students, and to see *successful relating* as within the purview of a teaching is simply to acknowledge this fact as an important facet of pedagogy.

One clear difference between therapist and writing teacher participants is that the former *do* report having access to theories and tools that help them to do this, and that help them to understand and work on how their identities shape dyadic work. Before ending this chapter, I want to focus on a single example of a practice that therapist practitioners reported using that helped them work more congruently. Participants treated this tool, which I call *metamonitoring*, as a standard part of clinical dyadic work.

### **Rosia and Genevieve: The Practice of Metamonitoring**

I use *metamonitoring* to refer to a practice of watching oneself think and feel, and tracing the relationship between one's internal experience and what one says or does with another person. All four therapist participants referred to this practice, and in this section, I report on how it is integrated into the work Rosia and Genevieve. In Rosia's case, we can also see how learning to metamonitor was a part of her professional training. Ultimately, I argue that metamonitoring is an example of a congruence-based practice that could be easily adapted to writing pedagogy.

Training in self-monitoring served an important role in Rosia's own professionalization. Early in her career, Rosia worked in a residential home for teenage girls who exhibited high-risk behaviors. She recalled that she'd wanted to learn "concrete ways of intervention beyond just



like good will.” This meant learning tools and theories that she could use to intervene with those she worked with. In the following excerpt, I ask her to speak more specifically about what she learned.

A: So when you say [beyond just] good will, can you tell me a little more about what you mean by that, cause I have this vision of somebody who just wants to be nice to somebody else, but obviously that—there’re probably some mental tools that you learn when you learn to be a therapist.

ROSIA: Mmhmm, mmhmm. Yeah, so...thinking things even as simple as like, so in residential care—so I wasn’t living there but the girls were. And...things like when to indulge in things that they—or give into things that they really want, and kinda like what rationale you’re using. Is it rationale based on like, well “I would want this to happen for me,” but in fact I’m not in—I’m coming with a very different set of situations than they are. In which case it may be helpful for me but it’s not helpful for them based on their past history of how they got things, needs met, and whatever. So that’s misguided. Or...that—or things like, yeah, I was really hard on them last time so this time I make up for it, so that’s really about like my own guilt about whatev—it’s not about them or their situation. So it, yeah. Going, getting, theoretical and intervention-based training to sort through like, where is this coming from, what are the kind of goal—what’s the formulation that we’re working under that would give me the indications of how I should make decisions. Also, looking at my own lingo of countertransference and what’s happening for me. As opposed to for them. (first interview)

Rosia’s professional training helps her analyze what she feels about and toward those she works with. Some of this overlaps with knowledge already disseminated in writing pedagogy: the idea that Rosia should consider context, e.g. what it means for her relationships with the girls that she does not live in the facility with them and does not share their sociocultural backgrounds is reminiscent of the warnings in the SRTOL Resolution that writing teachers should be aware that students come from a variety of language backgrounds. However, other ideas are beyond the normal purview of writing pedagogy. For example, Rosia learns to observe and reflect on how her motivations and personality shape her interactions. She cites the possibility that if she was “hard on them [the girls] last time,” she might want to “make up for it”—but this would really be

more about wanting them to see her benignly, rather than wanting what might be best for them. She also mentions looking at “her own lingo of countertransference and what’s happening for me.” This means acknowledging and understanding her own general patterns of relating to others, including the language, or “lingo,” in which she thinks about relationships. To put this in terms of metamonitoring, it means understanding how she has historically tended to relate to others, and looking for those patterns in her current relationships. Part of this journey involves understanding the kinds of people and social encounters that are in some way triggering, learning to predict them, monitor herself while they happen, and respond appropriately. This learning prepares her to work in dyadic relationships with more awareness of her own needs and hang-ups, and with a greater ability to distinguish between when she feels something as a function of her personality, and when she feels something as a function of relating to another person. To my knowledge, this is not a realm into which writing pedagogy wanders, but given that teachers will routinely work with students they strongly dislike (or like too much), it would be helpful ground to explore.

Metamonitoring was also a part of a later conversation with Rosia, one about her current practice as a social worker, where she engages in more traditional dyadic, long-term clinical therapy. We were discussing different expertises that therapists draw on, and Rosia made a distinction that I had not previously considered. While diagnostic reasoning—determining what label to assign a set of symptoms— is useful for therapists, an entirely separate expertise might be termed interrelating expertise, or how to be with and listen to others in a way that they see as supportive and safe for long periods of time. Metamonitoring plays a key role in the latter expertise, since it helps her track her feelings and thinking, even as she attending to her client’s.

A: And do you—so there’s a way in which you have to get really good at being with people who are not having a good time right now? Are there—is that part of the expertise, or is that just getting good at relating to people?

ROSIA: Yeah, which I think maybe is an expertise. In itself.

A: Yeah, sure.

ROSIA: Cause I don’t think it’s expertise so much—there’s probably something about getting good at a certain...theory or straight face or something, but I have found for myself that keeps me still energized, that I’m not putting on fake front, or like a fake calm front or something, and it keeps me energized in some way that there’s this feedback of energy between me and the other person. Is to—we kind of talked about it [last time], like keeping that real relationship happening that I’m with them in the moment, and yet the expertise I think is to not let my own countertransference or whatever be dominating it, and when it does—so like, I tend to more toward internal family systems, language around like “parts,” that when a part is activated for me, knowing how to recognize that it is a part and not the core calm, confident, competent self, to kind of be like, “hey part, you’re not really helpful right now,” or like “You’re coming up for me and that’s making me anxious in this situation, but I don’t really need to be like that, because this is a relationship where I feel actually pretty in control and [etc],” so like, talking myself out of what came up as anxiety or stress of being with someone else. In fact there’s this real, beautiful, moment of like two humans being in a room together that’s kind of amazing [laughs]. (second interview)

Rosia says that “being with people” is both a part of her expertise as a therapist and a part of who she is. With respect to the latter, she reports feeling “energized” by interrelating, and that the presence of this “energy” prevents her from needing to “fake” her portion of the relationship. However, what I want to concentrate mostly on here is the former half of her observation, that being a therapist also means developing an expertise in “not dominating” the interaction. Rosia might be naturally inclined towards participating in relationships, but her training is important for helping her monitor and facilitate her participation so that she is not, for example, “dominating” them. Similarly, metamonitoring helps her keep “that real relationship happening that I’m with them in the moment,” as opposed to allowing the client to become a screen on which she sees her own past experiences playing out.

Rosia distinguishes between a “real” relationship that happens in the moment with a client, as opposed to allowing her countertransference to “dominate” the interaction. In the latter case, Rosia would attend more closely to a fantasy, in which the client is superimposed onto other associations Rosia carries with her. Rosia implies that by monitoring herself, she can maintain a more genuine relationship with clients.

I emphasize here, as earlier, that what counts as “real” or “genuine” in the realm of identity is lived experience. The question I am investigating is if her lived experience of her relationship with a client feels genuine to her. For example, if she noticed that she was conflating her view of a client with her view of her own mother, she would attempt to disentangle her perception of her mother from her perception of the client. She describes exactly this when she alludes to speaking to “parts” of her self. If she knows how to recognize that a “part” is activated, and if she knows that that “part” stems from some historical personal conflict, she will be able to consciously set that “part” aside so that she can continue working. This language of parts, paired with metamonitoring, helps her feel “in control” and able to “talk herself out” of the “anxiety and stress” that can accompany dyadic work. In this way, Rosia’s training helps her work more congruently.

Another therapist participant, Genevieve, offered a very similar description of this same phenomenon:

A: Do you ever find yourself getting really really frustrated with somebody in the moment and having to push it aside...?

GENEVIEVE: Oh yeah. All the time.

A: [laughs] That’s like a normal thing? What do you do in those situations? I mean I guess [unintelligible]

GENEVIEVE: What do you do? You notice it, and you wonder why you’re feeling that way, and just, obviously you try not let it impact your ability to be a good

therapist for the person. But also, pay attention to it. Is that something—is there something that—there are many reasons why you could be feeling frustrated. Maybe the patient’s feeling frustrated, and then you’re feeling frustrated, or they’re not able to feel something, and you’re feeling it for them. (first interview)

Genevieve, like Rosia, describes “noticing” that she is feeling something and then “wondering why” she feels that feeling. The two are also similar in that they use the information they gain from metamonitoring to enhance their practice. Where Rosia described consciously identifying and setting aside an emotion that disrupted her ability to attend to her client, Genevieve suggests that such feelings could lead to insights. Perhaps they reveal that “the patient’s feeling frustrated” and/or that “you’re frustrated.” These might constitute threads to follow at some point, threads that lead to important realizations about the client’s experience, or about the client-therapist relationship.

The final point I wish to make about metamonitoring, and congruence more broadly, is how it contributes to a culturally competent approach to dyadic relationships. Congruence, which has to do with self-awareness, does not directly shape the way therapists and teachers treat others. However, it provides key insights for practitioners as to how they are with others. Therefore, it has the potential to warn practitioners that they hold certain feelings toward others that they should interrogate and address. A reasonable metaphor might be a medical professional monitoring an EKG: learning about one’s normal patterns of relating, and acknowledging sudden upticks in emotion, can reveal fixations, assumptions, expectations, and resentments that practitioners bring to their teacher-student relationships. Metamonitoring, particularly with students whose sociocultural background differs, might help one trace how deeply held perceptions manifest in evaluation and apparently innocent choices of expression.

I don’t claim that the stakes are as high for writing teachers. However, there are relevant analogs. Teachers are in positions of power, their evaluations underwritten by the weight of a

degree-granting institution. Students often feel vulnerable about how teachers receive their work, or about the material they've chosen to write about, and I assume that affirming and discouraging dyadic experiences echo throughout students' educations. Furthermore, writing instruction is intertwined with literacy, and writing teachers often play gatekeeper roles in universities. Presumably writing pedagogy should not add barriers to literacy, and should do all it can to unpack and clarify its relationship to literacy practices that asymmetrically affect students. Practicing metamonitoring would help teachers become more conscientious of their roles as authorities, reduce harmful practices, and better notice and repair harms when they happen.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Can One *Become* Congruent?**

A question I have not addressed in this chapter is how one "becomes" more congruent. That is, can one learn self-awareness? I suggest that writing teachers can draw on the reflective practice already ingrained in writing pedagogy. These practices are typically intended to promote metacognition—which is effectively what metamonitoring is.

Work toward this end involves two pieces: first, consciously monitoring how one responds to students, and second, reviewing and learning from these responses, preferably in the company of a supervisor or peer. There are lots of opportunities for this. Writing teachers are often in the position to respond to students' ideas and their experiences of academic writing. Any of these could be made the subject of discussion or reflection alongside a supervisor or peer, who could offer outside perspective on the writing teacher's tone and apparent orientation toward the student. Watching and reflecting on a recording of a writing conference would provide an even richer view of how the teacher speaks to students. Ideally, this sort of supervision would involve recording, or at least a written account of the interaction under analysis. However, a more

formalized version of the debriefings that writing teachers already do after class would be a good start.

Useful observations would draw connections between a writing teachers internal and external experiences. For example, perhaps a writing teacher notices that they want students to do most of the talking in conferences, but in fact they always end up running the conversation. Observations that might unpack this state of affairs would describe what happens for the teacher emotionally during conferences: when and why do they begin to fill space with their own language, rather than finding ways for students to speak—as they originally intended? Similarly, what underlying attitudes seem to shine through when they speak? Are they bored, impatient, etc.? Reviewing recorded responses can also provide better insights into how students respond to the writing teacher. Perhaps in the moment, it is not clear that a student feels cowed by a teacher’s characterization of their work, but in the video, it seems clear that over the course of the conference, the student resigns ownership of an idea.

A separate-but-related issue from regularly reviewing how one responds to students is also relevant to the other intellectual tools covered in this project: self-knowledge. A prerequisite for using one’s personality as a tool to work with others is understanding oneself. This is no minor issue. Practitioners who don’t recognize the urge to impress or dominate others will struggle to temper those needs. Underlying beliefs about one’s relationship toward others, and desired relationships toward others, shape communication. Practitioners who understand their patterns of relating will be able to anticipate and avoid their own needs shaping student-teacher conversation more often. This is a subject I will discuss more fully in the conclusion. It is also quite relevant to the subject of the next chapter: empathy.

## CHAPTER IV.

### JOINING THE DANCE: EMPATHY AS A PROCESS

This chapter explores empathy and teaching writing. It would not be a groundbreaking claim to assert that empathy is important to learning. Composition scholars frequently affirm the importance of “empathy” as a pedagogical term, often using the word directly. Not surprisingly, then, empathy is unique among the person-centered concepts about which I interviewed teacher participants in this project in that they recognized the term and often named it. However, as we will see, the composition pedagogy literature has not truly engaged with the term, but rather used it in passing, as though its meaning were self-evident. I argue that its definition is not self-evident, and that it should be more fully theorized. The conceptualization offered by person-centered theory offers more depth, and synthesizes nicely with multicultural and social justice competency practices in a way that a more pedestrian understanding of empathy does not.

The participant testimony covered in this chapter illustrates the importance of fully theorizing empathy. Three of four writing teacher participants described it as crucial to teaching. The fourth, Violet, declared that being a “caring teaching” and that “caring about students” was the most important value teachers could have. However, it was also a concept whose meaning participants treated as self-evident. Harris’s characterization, as described in this section, was the most in-depth, and allows us to unpack and consider the term’s possible implications for teachers. Later, I compare Harris’s experience to that of two therapist participants, Lydia and Wilbert.

The main difference between Harris and the therapists is that the former’s understanding of empathy is self-theorized, and framed as a static ability—the ability to understand other’s experience. Conversely, Wilbert and Harris describe a more rigorously theorized and learned



version of empathy that helps them relate to others. They see empathy as a willingness to journey with a client into unfamiliar territory (unfamiliar to the therapist), including continually checking their assumptions and checking in with the clients to make sure they're still together. This notion of empathy also situates practitioners in such a way that they can be more aware of and sensitive to experiences that diverge from their own, such as those of a client with a different sociocultural background. I argue that their version of empathy, if adapted for composition pedagogy, and if teachers were trained in it, would make for a more flexible, useful intellectual tool.

### **Empathy in Composition Literature: An Undertheorized Concept**

The word “empathy” appears frequently in composition literature. It is most frequently used as a composite term for humanist values, especially in articles whose primary intention is to call for a group of stakeholders to be treated with more dignity or justice. Another, smaller subset of articles draws on studies in which empathy is measured in some way. In neither of these sets is empathy theorized, or are existing theories of empathy thoroughly investigated. In a few cases, composition scholars unpack empathy, but these articles are few and far between. If one imagines an alternate version of composition history in which almost nobody theorized “the writing process,” but the phrase was used just as often as it has been, then one has a pretty good model for how the term “empathy” has been employed.

Some examples help illustrate this point. In the conclusion to her article about tools used in UCLA’s Graduate Writing Center, Summers (2016) writes that “as [writing center consultants] reflect on that experience and the writing strategies they used, they will build empathy and practical skills for helping [others]” (140)<sup>3</sup>. The word does not appear elsewhere in

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<sup>3</sup> As this example suggest, this argument applies also to the literature on writing center work. Other examples include Nordlof (2014) and Zimmerelli (2015).

the article: Summers takes it for granted that we will know what it means to “build empathy,” and agree that it is a good thing. Mlynarczyk (2014) writes that a benefit of having an ESL professor attend a Spanish class is that it “increased his empathy for his students’ feelings with academic English in the college classroom” (14). In her exploration of the composition job market, Dadas (2013) reports that one of her interviewees “drew on the notion of empathy to explain how she tried to relate to [job] candidates,” and the interviewee recalls, “What did I learn on the job market? Empathy...I was anxious. I was scared to death” (85). Severino (2013), reflecting on what she learned by taking a Spanish creative writing class, concludes, “I now teach my writing classes and second language students with more humility and empathy” (41). Galante’s (2013) “The Audacity of Empathy: It’s *Still* the Students, Stupid!” uses “empathy” only once in its text—to say that one of the most important jobs an English teacher has is teaching their students empathy. The issues I want to highlight here are that empathy appears too infrequently, and too often only as a stakes-generating term in the conclusion, to truly be a fully developed central value of the writing teacher’s profession.

There is some work that goes further in defining empathy. One that dedicates at least a paragraph of explication is Kristine Johnson’s (2013) article on how those in composition should react to the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. One of many reasons she recommends for adopting the *Framework* is that it could help improve empathy among students. Johnson reports that “social psychologists” have concluded that college students today are less empathic than they were 20 years ago. This conclusion is based on a self-report index that “operationalizes” empathy, i.e. that permits us to measure it. There are a number of responses we might raise here: which social psychologists, since quite a few groups study empathy and differ on what it means; is empathy a measurable phenomenon, and if so, what are the best ways to

measure it; and if we are going to measure it, should we also account for the social context in which that measurement occurs, and how does a pedagogy that values empathy respond. These kinds of questions, however, are black-boxed: empathy is taken as a self-evidence concept portable enough to be taken from one field and redeployed in composition.

Jennifer Ansbach's (2012) *English Journal* article about using nonfiction to help students learn empathy is more nuanced. For instance, she distinguishes between *cognitive empathy* and *affective empathy*, the former meaning to understand what someone is feeling, and the latter meaning to do something to "relieve" the conditions that cause others pain. Ansbach wants to improve *both* of these functions, and so it is helpful to make this distinction. It is worth pointing out, however, that the primary content of her article is a description of one of her classroom practices. She is not contributing—at least not explicitly—to a theoretical discussion of empathy, or to a macro-level solution to the need for students to be more empathic.

One article that goes further in defining empathy is Kristie Fleckenstein's (2007) "Once Again with Feeling: Empathy in Deliberative Discourse." Fleckenstein "forages," to borrow a term from North (1984), in philosophy and psychology: she draws on the work of Margaret Nussbaum and Martin Hoffman to argue that empathy allows us to both identify with others and to "evaluate" their "suffering" (702). Fleckenstein is focused on arguing that our understanding of emotions also include an element of rationality—that is, that we should see empathy as an "amalgamation of feelings and rationality" (714).

One side effect of this focus is that she is not particularly interested in pinning down what empathy is. In her introduction, she says that she prefers the term "empathy" to "compassion," as if the two were interchangeable, and she reprises this conflation in her conclusion, writing "whether we call it empathy, compassion, realistic empathy, critical affirmation, or critical

empathy, the experience of sharing another's suffering is essential to deliberative discourse" (714). A more subtle but equally important point is that, as outlined above, her analysis of empathy constructs it as intertwined with suffering. For example, she argues that it requires rationality to make the leap between one person's specific pain and the understanding that that pain is "endemic" to a much larger social group. This seems true, but also suggests a very specific use of empathy in the classroom. It is possible to try to understand how others feel in situations that do not involve suffering, after all.

The most in-depth assessment of empathy in teaching that I have encountered is certainly Eric Leake's (2016). Leake similarly confirms that empathy hasn't been defined in composition, and suggests that it "connotes caring for others" and understanding divergent views. This is both its blessing and its curse, since such a position seems unopposable, and at the same time undefinable and stubbornly opaque. He describes how, in rhetorical studies, empathy has been characterized as a position one takes toward one's audience that is characterized by sincere listening and understanding, and as an attempt to "enter an argument from the perspective of another" (3). Noteworthy for this project is that Leake connects Rogerian rhetoric with several important teaching concepts: Elbow's "believing game" and Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening. What seems to tie all these together, he points out, is the belief that "To really understand somebody else, we have to attempt to understand where that person is coming from" (4).

Leake argues that what is missing from these conceptions of empathy is a "critical awareness." For example, is it a worthy pursuit to attempt to understand where someone is coming from who holds a degrading view of one's humanity? Or is some other response more appropriate? From this perspective, empathy is a valuable pedagogical tool in that it can form a

lens through which students can interact with texts and with one another. Thus, Leake envisions how a pedagogy of empathy might be put to use in reading, rhetorical analysis, and invention (6-7).

As I hope is clear, thus far, empathy in composition has had the Potter Stewart Treatment: it's not clear what it is, but we seem to know it when we see it. Even Leake's thorough engagement seems content to leave empathy as a diffuse concept; rather than defining it, he admits a number of potentially useful approaches to it. While I find this approach admirable, I would argue that a definition of what empathy means for composition teachers *should* discriminate. Just as other fields have adapted empathy to their particular needs, so should composition.

Later, in this chapter's participant interviews, Harris will describe at length what it means for him to teach with empathy. However, as this literature review suggests, Harris's understanding of empathy is one that he has arrived at himself—not based on theoretical knowledge created by composition pedagogy scholars. Before moving to Harris's testimony, I offer for comparison a brief summary of how empathy is theoretically conceptualized in person-centered theory in the field of clinical therapy. I hope that this will provide a lens through which readers might consider Harris's understanding of empathy, as well as the therapist participants' with which his is juxtaposed.

### **A Person-Centered Definition of Empathy**

The Person-centered theory conceptualization of empathy, which has been important and influential to clinical scholars, is rooted in Carl Rogers's work. An important point to keep in mind is that by the end of his career, Rogers thought of empathy as an important component of conditions for constructive change generally: he believed this was in a clinical and a pedagogical

context. In 1981, he wrote that the research was clear: “[f]rom schizophrenic patients to pupils in ordinary classrooms; from clients of a counseling center to teachers in training,” empathy strongly shapes learning (150).

Rogers’s understanding of empathy evolved during his career. In 1959, he offered a highly technical definition that treated empathy as a “state of being,” in which one “perceive[s] the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if were one were the person, but without losing the ‘as if’ condition” (140). In this early stage, Rogers treats empathy as the ability to experience another person’s experience without losing oneself. He also thought of it as a trait, as “strength” or “intellect” are for a character in a role-playing game.

However, by the 1980s, he had been influenced by Eugene Gendlin’s work on “experiencing,” which posits that there is at all times in people a flow of experience, something like background music that never ceases, and which a person can attend to and consult to learn about and make meanings. Gendlin’s work might be familiar to composition readers, as it has influenced such concepts as Sondra Perl’s “felt sense” (2004). For writers, attending to a flow of experience is potentially useful in helping them get a better sense of what they mean. No wonder, then, that it was useful for scholars interested in helping students uncover inner meaning when so-called expressivist scholarship was in vogue. It was and has been useful for clinical therapists for similar reasons. From Gendlin’s concept, Rogers (1981) defined empathy this way:

- Empathy is the process of entering and becoming familiar with another’s private, perceptual world.
  - Once in that world, you are sensitive to meanings and emotions, even at the edge of the other person’s awareness.

- Empathy includes checking what you believe you are sensing and being guided by feedback.
  - When checking, you lay aside as much as possible your own views and values, being guided instead by your understanding of the other's views and values.

I would also include the following point, which I draw from MSJC theorists (addressed further down):

- Empathy involves suspending one's assumptions about experiences and trying to understand another person's.

As I showed in my summary of the literature, composition has used the word "empathy" a great deal, but has not defined it as a pedagogical concept or operationalized its use in any meaningful way. Two points from the above definition form a good base for the former need. These are, first, resisting the urge to assume shared experience, and two, frequently checking-in to see if the way you are hearing what a student is experiencing is accurate. These guiding values inform a process that allows for serious investigation into another's perspective.

Seeing empathy in this way also better equips therapists to work with people whose backgrounds and experiences differ sharply from their own. Clinical scholars who focus on the role that culture plays in therapy have pointed out that therapists will often have to engage with clients whose cultural identities play critical roles in their experience, but to which the therapist has no real access. In such situations, it is important for the therapist to resist the urge to conflate experiences and pretend that there is no substantial difference between sets of experiences (Tummala-Narra 2015, Benjamin 2011). One solution is—this being therapy—to talk about it: for the therapist to listen to and journey along with the client, even into territory whose differentness might make the therapist anxious. The clinical conceptualization of empathy is

useful here exactly because it more rigorously defines what one must do in order to “enter and become familiar with another’s perceptual world.” Entering—or “joining with,” as Lydia calls it—is not a merely a matter of trying to feel what the client is feeling. It is listening, checking in, continually identifying and pushing aside one’s assumptions, and working to not conflate one’s worldview with another’s.

The remainder of this chapter draws on interview data to juxtapose how Harris, a writing teacher, and Wilbert and Lydia, therapists, use empathy in their work. The unit of analysis is their different understandings of empathy. Harris’s is self-theorized, and one recognizable to most people: empathy is an ability to understand how others are feeling. Wilbert and Lydia, conversely, are informed by an academic discourse on empathy, and treat it much more like Rogers does, as a process of investigation into another’s perspective. Comparing how this difference informs their work highlights the ways in which seeing empathy as a process of investigation can open new ways of working together and learning.

### **“I Know What You Mean”: Empathy as a Practical, and Undertheorized, Pedagogical Tool**

Near the end of my first interview with every teacher participant, I asked them to say what trait or traits they thought were important for writing teachers and why. I intended these questions as invitations for mini-manifestos about what good teachers should be like. Harris’s answer, empathy, provoked a discussion into why empathy is important for teachers. This answer came in the context of an interview that had focused on his history and experiences—not one focused on student relationships, or that began with an explicit comparison between teaching and therapy the way the second and third interviews did.

I asked Harris to say more about why empathy came to mind first. Interestingly, his answer was shaped as a defense against a pedagogical position, we’d talked about earlier and



which he perceived as widely held. He had encountered it articulated in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, which argued that writing teachers should focus on teaching the technical and grammatical aspects of writing, rather than (for example) critical thinking or self-discovery. Instead, writing teachers should “just teach writing.” This is what Harris means by “empathy conflicts with this idea of just teaching writing” below.

HARRIS: Yeah, it’s like, I just realize how much [empathy] conflicts with this idea of just teaching writing, like why should we have empathy when we’re really just talking about writing as a form? But I think it’s because it goes back to...over the course of my career, I hope that I will have had thousands of students come through my class and teach them, and they’re all going to be individual, and they’re all going to be different, and there might be some similarities here and there, and I might run across the same things here and there, and them teaching me how to be a better teacher might influence me down the road, but in the end, they’re all bringing something different to that classroom, and I’m not going to know what that thing is until it just happens, and if I’m not—if I don’t show some sort of empathy, and show that I remember too what it was like? And I remember most importantly that they’re human beings, and that they’re all here for a reason, then I’m failing as a teacher, so I think that has to be the number one thing. Period. (first interview)

Two issues are tied together in Harris’s explanation for why empathy is the most important trait for teachers. First, he points out that teachers will over their careers come into contact with many different students. He repeatedly emphasizes that he anticipates this group will be marked by variation, saying that “over the course of my career, I hope that I will have thousands of students,” and “they’re all going to be individual, and they’re all going to be different...in the end, they’re all bringing something different to the classroom.” In sum, he feels he must be prepared to encounter diversity among future students. Harris seems to see empathy as addressing a practical constraint that teachers face: if one needs to work with many different individuals, one needs the intellectual tool to address each different set of learning needs. This is further confirmed by Harris’s notion that teaching involves flexibility: “I’m not going to know what that thing [that each brings to the classroom] is until it just happens.” For Harris, empathy

is something that helps prepare him to appreciate and respond to each student's classroom contribution and needs. We might say that Harris constructs empathy as an administrative trait.

A second, more humanistic concern also emerges near the end of Harris's explanation. This begins, "if I don't show some sort of empathy, and show that I remember too what it was like?" He is not speaking of being a college student here, since Harris by his own description did not have a traditional college experience: he was the first on his mother's side to go to college, and his education was interrupted by military service. Rather, he is gesturing at something broader. He must remember that they're "human beings, and they're all here for a reason." I understand this moment as Harris foreseeing the potential for teaching to become mechanical and detached, and consequently, to be blind to the unique humanity of each of the thousands of students he hopes to encounter over his career. Given this way of seeing his job, it's no wonder that Harris feels that knowing how to work with people is more important than knowing a lot about writing.

Both points, that empathy is practical for teachers and that it is related to working as a humanist, were further elucidated in subsequent interviews. One anecdote that a discussion of empathy brought up was working with a nontraditional student who reminded him of himself. Harris ultimately believes that he failed this student, since he had to assign a failing grade and because he failed to meet the student's needs as a mentor. The first mention of this student occurred immediately after the above passage, when I asked if Harris meant his definition of empathy to apply specifically to *writing* teachers:

A: Do you think [empathy is] specific to this class, or just teaching as a whole?

HARRIS: I'd like think that's teaching as a whole, but unfortunately, it's not. But for me, that's always going to be number one, and I've gone from, as a little personal example, I've gone from having a student that I don't feel like we had any similar traits to them writing me a letter at the end a course and saying, "thanks for

a great semester,” to having someone that was like a young me, like he was literally a marine reservist in college. He was missing classes, he was all the thing that I was in undergrad, and I had to fail him. And that’s such a weird dichotomy to go from someone that’s nothing like me that I was able to impact to someone that was just like me that as much as I knew how to, and I gave him all the things that I didn’t have when I [unintelligible], so there ya go. (first interview)

In this first foray into this anecdote, Harris does not offer much analysis of what went wrong—he says only that “it was weird” that he was able to work so easily with someone who was very different from him, but difficult to work with someone who seemed like a younger version of him. Indirectly, Harris seems to be giving an answer for why empathy matters to teaching in general, not just teaching writing; he begins this passage by saying, “I’d like to think that’s teaching as a whole,” and he never returns the subject to teaching writing. The two anecdotes make no mention of anything composition-related, but rather have to do with the paradox that he was more successful teaching someone who seemed different than who seemed similar. Harris’s focus here is not on his expertise in writing, but on his ability to relate to differing personalities.

What this emphasizes for me is the possibility that empathy might be a crucial for a humanist philosophy of teaching. The moment one accepts that students are not passive recipients of knowledge, one must also begin asking the question of how to engage with them as active subjects. If one then acknowledges that “student” is a category comprising diverse personalities and backgrounds, then the question of what a teacher needs to know to successfully communicate with all these different students becomes relevant. This seems to be Harris’s position—and his answer, and tool, is empathy.

In our second interview, Harris offered more insight and analysis into what went wrong with this marine reservist student. This discussion was lengthy, and I will present it in chunks.

First, the following was cued during a discussion of how it can harm learning if students see their teachers as friends, or nearly as friends.

HARRIS: I think that's partly speaking of what happened with this...this marine that reminded me a lot of myself was, there's just such...there's some similarities that makes it hard for him to listen to me, cause...if you're like kinda looking in a mirror, you're not seeing that that other thing has years on them, and certain wisdom or whatever you want to call it. (second interview)

Harris's description is an excellent example of the trouble *countertransference* can cause. As a reminder, in a therapeutic context, *countertransference* is the reaction that a therapist has to a client because of who they remind the therapist of. This conflation can result in mistaking one's own emotional configuration with what the client is describing, thus making the client's experience opaque and impossible to empathize with. For reference, here is how Lydia, an art therapist, describes the challenge of working with a woman who is similar to her:

LYDIA: I think what I've noticed at times is when I'm working, if I'm working with a white woman around my age who's also Irish and was raised Catholic and everything else, I make all kinds of assumptions. Cause I think I know that world.

A: So it actually makes it harder because you're not aware that—

LYDIA: I have to remind myself that I don't know their world. I know my world of being raised Irish Catholic and all that stuff, but I have to find out about their world still. So I think very similar can be hard. (first interview)

Just as Harris had identified a “marine reservist” who was a nontraditional, slightly older student, Lydia formulates her description of a similar client using identifying characteristics—“a white woman around my age who's also Irish and was raised Catholic.” These identifying characteristics contribute to the illusion of familiarity. Both Lydia and Harris, speaking from experience, acknowledge that the illusion prevents them from truly knowing, and therefore empathizing with, their respective clients and student: Lydia has to “remind myself that I don't know their world,” while Harris phrases the same experience as, “if you're like kind looking in

the mirror, you're not seeing that other thing has years on them, and certain wisdom or whatever you want to call it." This helps us see that how important it is for empathy to begin from a position of not knowing, or not assuming, about others. While it is easy to imagine this is important in a therapeutic context, perhaps it is difficult to grant the same degree to a teaching one. That Harris and Lydia can offer such similar observations, however, should make us question this.

I next asked Harris what he would do differently, knowing what he knows now.

A: So that's interesting...if you could deal with that student again, would you do anything different looking back in retrospect?

HARRIS: I think I...I don't want to say I would've ignored him. But I would've...maybe not...okay, let me back up. There are parts of me that are always going to give information about myself. It's the type of teacher I am, I think it's what makes me a good teacher, it's cause I can...show associative thinking, and say—show the empathetic thing of like, "Oh, this is what I've been through." So...if I have a student that's having a hard time, and y'know undergrad or my class, I can say "Look, I did too. Here's how to get through it." However, when it comes—came to this particular student, if I had not maybe given so many examples, or if I hadn't used him in class as someone to call on, or I'd kinda been joking with him there like "Hey, where you been," and maybe been a little more authoritative, that would've worked better. And maybe even like if I had thought to myself, "well if he's in that military mindset as I was at that age, then that's the type of...authority figure I needed, someone who's going to be stern with me, because that's what worked."

A: And that's a thing that you sort of—in hindsight it makes more sense?

HARRIS: Yeah. (second interview)

I want to concentrate on Harris's definition of empathy, and why it might not have assisted him with respect to the student he's remembering. First, Harris's understanding of empathy is shown here to be not well-enough theorized to account for his classroom interactions. He says that he can "show the empathetic thing of like, 'Oh, this is what I've been through,'" by which he seems to mean that empathy means using one's own experience as a basis for

understanding what someone else is struggling with. This is further confirmed in his next sentence, that in responding to a student who is “having a hard time,” he might say, “Look, I did too. Here’s how to get through it.” Thus a formulation of Harris’s definition of empathy might be *recognition that one’s lived experience can be used as a basis for understanding another’s*. That is, when Harris hears about another’s experience, he checks to see if it bears any resemblance to his own. This definition has important limitations. First, it risks conflation. Harris might assume that because he shares certain traits with a student, they will experience events in the same way. The opposite might also be true: if a student describes experiencing something in the same way that Harris did, he might assume they have some of the same traits.

A second limitation is that it does not involve the level of what psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1959) called “vicarious introspection” that, for example, Rogers’s definition does. That is, a more fully theorized version of empathy might include more checks on assumptions. Rogers recommends checking in repeatedly with the other person to make sure that one is truly progressing toward an understanding of their experience. The results of Harris’s interaction with this student suggest that this clinical definition of empathy might also apply to a pedagogical conceptualization.

Third, Harris’s definition of empathy might falter in the face of a dyadic relationship with a student whose sociocultural background is distinctly different. Harris says he can “show associative thinking” in order to “show the empathic thing” in which he’s able to say that he understands what the student is going through, and can help them “get through it.” However, from a MSJC perspective, student worldviews are not accessible to through “associative thinking,” and that he may not know how to “get through,” or what getting through means or looks like to them, having had no practice with those experiences from their subject positions

himself. MSJC empathy might mean acknowledging differences rather than assuring that one knows what it's like; the latter comes near collapsing difference in a way that denies epistemological or cultural diversity (Brown 2009).

The person-centered conceptualization of empathy, which is much more focused on exploration, avoids this trap. However, this is another instance in which I want to acknowledge the limits of person-centered theory alone. Rogers's conceptions of empathy do not explicitly acknowledge the role that perceptions of others and differing worldviews can play in dyadic work. This is an instance in which person-centered theory must be combined with MSJC to be effective.

To return to the passage above: Harris imagines in retrospect taking a different course of action. We can see his theory of empathy at work as he re-frames the issue based on his personal experience of being a veteran the same age as the student. The "military mindset" he remembers would've been better off with someone who was "stern," "more authoritative," and "joked around" less. Furthermore, Harris regrets having "used him in class" as someone to call on often. In this last item, it is noteworthy that Harris thinks of the student as someone he "used" to help facilitate conversation. This, in combination with their informal relationship, implies that at times he believes he inadvertently treated the student in the way that he might have a friend or casual acquaintance, and wishes he had not. However, even in wishing that he had worked differently, he still frames the issue in terms of what he thinks would have helped him. That is, his reflection helps him see that he, Harris, would have done better with more structure and authority. Rogers might comment here that in spite of the student's many similarities to Harris, they are not in fact the same—and the only real way to figure out what the student needed would have been to ask, to check one's understanding with the student.

Harris's working theory of empathy is perfectly reasonable for everyday interactions, and is probably characteristic of the theory that many teachers use when they try to understand what works or does not with a given student. As both Lydia and Harris mentioned, teachers working with students who remind them of themselves, or of others they know, can cue teachers to misperceive or assume all sorts of things. One reason therapists work toward enacting a more rigorous theory of empathy is to be more prepared than most for these sorts of challenges.

The dyadic conference is undoubtedly the teaching setting in which the teacher has the best chance to endorse and work from a more complex theory of empathy—one that involves repeated checking in with the student, as well as gathering enough information about their world to understand something of how they perceive and feel. Since Harris had named empathy as the most important aspect of teaching, I later asked him to discuss its role in conferences.

A: What role does [empathy] play in a conference setting, cause I think at the very least you just mentioned the tool of saying, "Hey I know what that's like?"

HARRIS: It's really—empathy is really interesting in the conference setting because you have to have it. You have to use it as a means to begin the conversation. But then you almost have to get away from it. Which is strange, like—what I mean by that is like, ok. [...] [W]hen I talk to students, especially a lot about personal essays for instance, like oh "I had...my grandparent died," or "I lost someone when I was really young," or all these things, I have to be empathetic to say "ok I understand what you're going through, or something similar to what you're going through, and I respect that, however, here's the things you need to do to make it better. And that means putting those feelings to the side for a second. Or even more importantly, making those feelings more real on the page, because I am completely seeing where it's happening here, in your heart, or when we're talking." (third interview)

Harris takes what we might call a functionalist perspective on empathy here. It is useful in the sense that if Harris can show a student that he understands what they feel and what they are going through, they will be prepared to hear his feedback about presenting those feelings and experiences on the page. There is, clearly, skill in saying "ok I understand what you're going



through” in a way that succeeds. To allude to a phenomenon Rogers returns to repeatedly in his work, one can say “I understand” in a way that means “I can see why what happened really affected you, and I totally understand why it caused you to say what you did,” or in a way that means “that’s fine, let’s move on.” Harris’s experience is that if he is successfully empathic, students will then be willing to trust his feedback on their work. It seems to me that this might well be a logical way to think about empathy from a teaching standpoint: one way that teaching writing differs from therapy is that that the former places a heavier emphasis on learning to communicate with others—and Harris’s use of empathy accounts for this. At some point, he must encourage the student to stop self-exploration and begin planning to communicate their experience to an audience.

One final moment from our discussions further illustrates this functionalist use of empathy. A little after the most recent excerpt, Harris arrived at a mid-conversation conclusion about the difference between empathy and sympathy that is instructive:

A: What do you do when you’re faced with a student whose background you maybe don’t know that much about, or you have to guess, or secondhand literacy and other things you’ve heard about?

HARRIS: I think it’s just finding some sort of common connection. Also, just to back up for a second, cause I just thought about this. I think maybe that’s the real difference between sympathy and empathy is that, sympathy says, ok, you have this sad story, that’s a sad thing. Empathy is like, you have this sad story, now let’s find out how to make it better. So it is kinda getting away from just the emotion, and saying, how can we work on the emotion? (third interview)

As technical definitions go, these—of empathy and sympathy—are not rigorous. However, they usefully inform a system of pedagogical values. For Harris, it is not enough for teachers to hear what students are saying, e.g. “You have this sad story, that’s a sad thing.” Rather, it is crucial to “get away,” or perhaps zoom out from, “the emotion” so that the student can figure out how to “work.” The way a therapist might frame this issue is to say that a student embedded in an

experience will have a difficult time talking about the issue in a way that others can understand (Wallin 2014). Harris sees empathy in the conference setting as leading students to contextualize their experiences and beliefs, which is a key step in thinking about how those experiences and beliefs might be made communicable or persuasive to others.

However, it is also another moment in which we can easily imagine that sociocultural differences might require a more complex response than Harris's. The idea that empathy is "just finding some common connection" is indicative of collapsing or conflating differences in the service of finding common experience. Tummala-Narra (2015, 2016) suggests that one reason practitioners look for common experiences is that an awareness of difference can be anxiety-inducing. It's unclear to me based on my interviews whether Harris is motivated to find common cause for this reason, or because he views common ground as a sort of fertilizer for relationships—it certainly seems a natural enough approach to working with others. Regardless, a culturally competent empathy would avoid this search, preferring instead for exploration of another's point of view.

To conclude this exploration of how Harris understands and uses empathy in teaching writing, I want to draw readers' attention to the broader context in which writing conferences happen. While Harris focuses in these passages on using empathy to help students understand and work with their subject matter, his experiences with the veteran student also indicate that empathy might be useful for helping students understand and work with the scene in which writing instruction happens. That is, students are writing in school, in a class marked as a requirement and situated in a particular department. They have past and present relationships with teachers, the activity of writing, English classes, and even kinds of assignments. It's reasonable to think that some students struggle not because their ideas are impoverished, but

because they bring to their writing classes certain baggage and assumptions that trip them up. This is not a new idea, of course; it is much the same as Mike Rose's (1980) thesis in "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language." However, a more rigorous theory of empathy in writing pedagogy could assist teachers in recognizing and responding to these sorts of student problems.

In the next section, I turn to therapist participants Lydia and Wilbert, whose discussion of how empathy matters to their therapy practices should help us glimpse how a more rigorously theorized and learned version of empathy can help one relate to others. Clearly, teachers would not wish to replicate empathy as it is used in a therapeutic context, but these participants testimony nevertheless reveals new possibilities.

#### **"A Radically Different Way of Relating": Empathy as a Tool for Accepting the Unknown**

Just as Harris named empathy the most important characteristic for teachers, Wilbert, a therapist participant, answered "empathy"—among other things—to my generic "what makes a good therapist" question.

A: So I'm wondering if you could say what traits you think might be most important to being a successful therapist.

WILBERT: Yeah. [...] I think...comfort with ambiguity is non-negotiable. I think a...capacity to deal with many different kinds of discomfort, and a high threshold and not turn off from it.

A: Is that what I think people in your field might call being able to hold [somebody]?

WILBERT: Yeah, that's exactly right. And sort of it maps on to distress tolerance and empathy in a lot of different ways. Empathy is a term that gets fiddley. The definition of empathy that I like—to a point—is from Heinz Kohut who started self-psychology. And Heinz Kohut called empathy "vicarious introspection." I really like that, I think "introspection" is a little, like a skoosh too cognitive for what's really going on, but the general premise appeals to me. I think that having a desire to do that is really important. Being...I think being really interested in other people even when they're not being interesting is really important. (first interview)

As with Harris, Wilbert sees empathy as a crucial characteristic in his work. However, Wilbert understands empathy differently than Harris does. Most obviously, he sees it as being an important prerequisite for “comfort with ambiguity,” which is nearly opposite the way Harris defines it. By this I mean that Harris’s version of empathy began from finding common ground, whereas Wilbert describes it as a part of the *lack* of common ground. This will become clearer in a moment, but for now, one way to explain this is that the therapist, in trying to understand another’s world, encounters ambiguity—a set of alien meanings and experiences that do not mesh with the therapist’s own perceptions. For Wilbert, empathy is a component in being able to tolerate this dissonance.

Wilbert also gave an example that helped clarify empathy’s role in tolerating the difference one encounters while exploring another’s perception. The context for the following passage is an early question in our first interview, in which I asked Wilbert if anything that he had learned during his training stood out. By way of response, he tried to help me understand a major mental shift he had to make to relate to his clients.

WILBERT: I think that I...I love words! I want every word. I want all the words.

A: [laughing] Yeah?

WILBERT: That’s my—they’re my friends, armaments, everything. And that has a lot to do with growing up and being kind of periodically in pretty abusive situation where my only solace and self-defense was words. And so, I set a huge amount of store in that. And what I came to realize in doing this job is that, that was initially—and then it became more than this—but that was my response to trauma. That was sort of [my] adaptive mechanism for my ongoing survival and psychological integrity. Was by like, understanding myself through language, and understanding the world through language, and y’know I couldn’t fight back physically, but I had words. And...it didn’t occur to me that that was unusual because when you are a person who does that, you find yourself in the club of people who did that. [...] I think a lot of intellectuals and academics are like this, y’know we were feeble but we had a mouth on us [laughs]. And so we weren’t feeble anymore. And I—so I thought that was normal. (first interview)

An important point to keep track of as we continue in this anecdote is that Wilbert's training and experiences as a therapist helped him better understand himself. For example, Wilbert has himself attended therapy to understand how his own needs manifest in a therapy environment; he practiced under supervision, in which he reviewed sessions with a more senior therapist, in the process of obtaining his LCSW (License in Clinical Social Work); and the training he received as a part of his MSW (Master's in Social Work) degree included important concepts and theories for self-monitoring and self-understanding. The significance of all this training for empathy is that Wilbert has learned to see the peculiarities of his own experience in a way that encourages him to see himself as individual, and his experiences as peculiar to him. "I thought I was normal," he says, implying that with some clinical experience under his belt, he realized what he thought of as normal was not. In learning to distinguish himself from others, he was able to better articulate his identity.

As he continues, we will see why this is important for his work:

WILBERT: And what I've learned through getting to know a lot of people who are very different than I am, in getting to be—y'know, in my practice, and even as a teacher to a lesser extent, just getting really intimately close with a lot of people who just are very different, but alike in the sense of having been traumatized, is that most people don't respond to people that way. For most people, trauma gets them less languaged, not more languaged. [...] Because, and [trauma] has all kinds of psychological effects. [...] And for most people trauma is so disorganizing, and so...that they don't react that way. And so by me trying to meet them in this verbal place, thinking that that's where we could both—I ha found a certain kind of salvation there, and therefore, they would too? I was *wrong*. (first interview)

In this moment, Wilbert describes the lesson he's learned—one which has a great deal to do with his ability to empathize. Again, we can see how different his understanding of empathy is from Harris's. For Wilbert, the goal is *not* to try to find common ground, since what he views as "normal" turns out to be specific to him. Furthermore, the path he took to "salvation," i.e. feeling

secure enough and functioning well enough, looks nothing at all like the path that others need to take. Conflating what worked for you with what will work for others seems like a fairly normal human mistake; however, because part of Wilbert's job is to hear what is working for others even if it would not work for him, he must have a higher standard than most for distinguishing between his needs from those of others. Empathy is an intellectual tool that helps him do this. In this final excerpt from this passage, he articulates this further:

WILBERT: What they're really communicating is a profound feeling, but it's stark and it's simple, and it's—in a certain sense it's impoverished, and I had to learn that—I had to empathically wrap my mind around a radically different way of relating to language in connection with the most elemental parts of life and of one's mind. (first interview)

Wilbert arrives at a summary of empathy use that, interestingly, might form the basis of a composition theory of empathy: “wrapping [one's] mind around a radically different way of relating to language in connection with the most elemental parts of life and of one's mind.” As a starting point, this definition would encourage teachers not to assume common ground with students, but to lay aside as many assumptions as possible in the interest of understanding an alien mind's way of meaning-making. Again, by meaning making, I do not mean only an essay's subject matter, but the other's relationships to school, teachers, the practice of writing, and so on.

#### **“Joining the Dance”: Empathy as a Tool for Letting Clients Lead the Way**

I want to provide corroborating evidence for Wilbert's point of view, as his position on empathy was representative of therapist participants' in my study. Another therapist participant, Lydia, did not frequently use the terms “empathy” or “empathically,” but she did describe “joining” with somebody in a way that reminded me of Rogers's definition, “Empathy is the process of entering and becoming familiar with another's private, perceptual world.” She uses the word “join” to get at this meaning: what does she need to know or do to “join with” a client,

for instance. Something to keep in mind is that Lydia is an art therapist, which means that her therapy sessions are rooted in the making of art at least as much as in conversation. In an interesting parallel to composition, she is often in the position of speaking with someone about how they think about something they are making.

The first passage I would like to present happened in our third interview. Most of our discussion of “joining” focused on what it looks like and what it means for Lydia’s actual practice, but in this moment, Lydia describes her internal experience of “joining” with someone:

LYDIA: [Y]ou have to have a lot of tolerance and...that’s where you have to have control of you. Cause you have to keep thinking, “what’s my goal here? What is my goal, my goal is not to like get them to the right answer. My goal is to help them figure out where they are.” It’s really about helping...them discover and learn and grow and hopefully find more productive ways to meet their needs, I mean all those pieces, so, if I lose my connection with them, and with where they are, I can’t—cause I have to join them there. And there are things that are going to blow me out of the water and make it really hard to like—believe me, yes, it makes it really hard to join them there, but that—I *have* to, alright? I have to at least get close enough, or I have to really be working in that direction, because otherwise, we’re going to—nothing good is going to come of it, y’know? So. (third interview)

Like Wilbert, Lydia emphasizes the importance of distress tolerance and of being able to distinguish between oneself and one’s client. Lydia means “tolerance” here both as living in the ambiguity of someone else’s meanings, and also in the pain that someone’s meanings might cause her. When she says she might hear “things that might blow me out of the water,” she could be referring to examples like one she mentioned earlier, in which a client described enjoying beating up men who are homeless and gay. Part of a therapist’s job, she believes, is to somehow try to stay “joined” with clients like these—or “at least to get close enough...to really be working in that direction.”

Another similarity with Wilbert is how she treats her use of self. Like Wilbert, she describes needing to keep track of herself. Just as Wilbert had mentioned that he had to learn not

to conflate his own “salvation” with what others needed, Lydia has to avoid “get[ting] them to the right answer” in favor of help[ing] them figure out where they are.” If she “loses her connection,” she will not be able to do this. These two metaphors, “joining” and “connecting,” help us understand how Lydia sees her relationship with clients—as bound to them via being able to hear their experience, and trying to understand how *they* understand it. This might also mean understanding how they understand without being able to make sense of it herself. This empathic bond empowers her to speak with them, and perhaps even for them, when a particularly difficult moment arises.

It’s worth mentioning here that joining can be difficult—and fraught. Earlier, I quoted Lydia as talking about the danger of conflating oneself with another when working with a very similar client. However, she also described the challenge of “joining” somebody who is very different:

LYDIA: So I think very similar can be hard, but I also do think very different can be hard, cause even just the pacing of things, there’s so much that’s embedded in culture that’s invisible. And so how do I make a space that’s going to allow and you and—so how do I join if I’m not sure how joining works and looks like in your culture? So I have to [be] even more in tune and more flexible...in how I do that. (second interview)

Lydia does not refer directly to MSJC here, but she articulates a process that would fit within such a framework, particularly in her acknowledgement that she might not know “how joining works and looks like in [another] culture.” As with Wilbert’s, this way of thinking about empathy stands in stark contrast to Harris’s. Lydia begins from the premise that she does not know what means what in another person’s culture or worldview, and that she needs to proceed with caution and attention when working with someone from, for example, another background. As I have touched upon, a culturally competent practice means not assuming universal interpretations of experience (Tummala-Narra 2016, Benjamin 2011). Empathy here serves as an



intellectual tool that discourages Lydia from assuming what she cannot know—and therefore what she must learn in order to work.

A third therapist participant, Rosia, also touched on the importance of non-assumptions with respect to race and culture. In our first interview, I asked if there were any general guidelines she adhered to while doing dyadic work. Here's one of her responses:

ROSIA: I think really getting a sense of what the person sees as the issue. For example, I see a young man who has no insight into his schizophrenia diagnosis. And so I can bring a whole lot of assumptions about like, what's going to make this kid better, some of which are valuable in fact, because he has no insight, and others which are not going to be helpful to *this* [her emphasis] kid in getting him help in an outpatient treatment setting where he has a choice whether to show up or not. So...for him like, the question of race and having this mental illness is super important, and...anyway he bought into it. It's like he's never been in therapy in his life, he's had schizophrenia diagnosis for like 5 years, and here he is showing up to outpatient therapy, like what the heck.

A: Sounds like a brave thing to do.

ROSIA: So...yeah, getting to know the issue on someone's particular terms. That it—does it involve a family or not? Does it involve their work and social life or not? Yeah, getting, cause, yeah. It also addresses like the cultural sensitivity. Cause I think cultural sensitivity is...we often—it often gets used as a shorthand for black or white or Latino, all of which I work with. But even within like the white category, there's like a certain kind of Catholic culture that I'm working with, or that people—that's their word of describing like, where their life is, how their life is defined and how they understand it. Thinking of a couple clients like that. (first interview)

Rosia emphasizes the importance of understanding how her client mentally frames and approaches their subject matter: she says she has to “ge[t] a sense of what the person sees as the issue” and “ge[t] to know the issue on someone's particular terms.” She also provides an active illustration of how empathy pairs with MSJC in that it turns out not to be enough to be sensitive to broad sociocultural categories like “black or white or Latino.” Rather, she must delve deeper, understand the “certain kind of Catholic culture” that she might be working with, or how, in her foremost example, mental illness and race come together for a client. The only way to do this is

to explore, along with the client, the terms on which they view their self and the world with which the self interacts—that is, to empathize.

One shortcoming of this study is that while I can show participants thinking processes, I cannot *show* the actions produced by those processes. The next best thing, then, is when participants themselves try to describe the consequences of their thinking for their practices. Lydia offered several examples of this, of which I will discuss two that relate to empathy—or “joining,” as she puts it—here. The first occurs after we watched the Carl Rogers training video, and I asked her about what sorts of cues she took from her clients to know that some fact or phrase is particularly shot through with meaning.

A: Are there other...narrative techniques in which you've learned to pick up what seems to be important even if people are not directly addressing it?

LYDIA: Well I do try...to listen for how people talk, I mean some people talk a lot in terms of feeling, other people talk a lot about thinking, so when I'm trying to join with somebody, I choose whatever they tend to go to.

A: Like the significance of the mode they're choosing?

LYDIA: Yes. Exactly. (second interview)

Obviously, Lydia does not mean “mode” in the sense that composition scholars might be used to it, e.g. “modes of rhetoric.” Rather, she describes listening to both the words and the subtext of what clients say—a sort of *in situ* rhetorical analysis. For example, she might notice from how they speak that they are concentrating much more on the emotional aspect of their experiences, or perhaps that they are focusing on rationally interpreting them. She uses this mode of listening to guide how she participates with clients, as if they were teaching her a game or a dance, the latter being a metaphor that she uses herself later. This is one way in which we can understand her use of “join”: as one who wants to join a game or a dance.

One further passage from my interviews with Lydia helps further clarify this concept. In it, Lydia describes negotiating her sessions with her clients. Therapy is generally about moving clients toward health, and Lydia must find ways to encourage this movement—even within the confines of a dyadic relationship in which a client refuses to move in an apparently healthy direction. If a client shuts down some path forward—e.g. doesn't want to answer if she asks about feelings—she will find herself at a sort of conversational crossroads: she can accept this response and try a different way, or she can demand that they answer. According to Lydia's guiding value, however, she must only take a path that a client is willing to take.

LYDIA: [continued from above.] So that I try to join them in terms of their perspective and their—what they tend to focus on, but then I'll also use that as a chance then test out well can we get in, if it's all thinking can we get in a little—you know I can I say "I'm just wondering how that—what feelings that brought up for you?" And can they go there at all, is it like total shutdown, is it look *whoosh*, then they're there, or what? So it is a lot about—and you gotta be ready to abandon things, I think, because...if I get to wedded to where I think we need to go, and then it feels like I'm then driving in a way that they're not coming with me, then I don't think that's good therapy personally, I feel like that's going to be one of those sessions I think, "shit. Yeah, I missed the mark on that one." Because I have to find a way to stay with them and that we're moving together, and they keep discovering and unfolding and as much as I can get them discovering and unfolding the better. It's like oh I might have a great insight, but me stating it, is always like an *eh*, versus if they can come to it, then they own it. It reminds me of Piaget, who said "every time you teach a child something, you rob them of the chance to learn—discovering it themselves." (second interview)

Lydia's analysis of how she joins with clients contains insights both familiar and unfamiliar to composition pedagogy. With respect to the former, Lydia emphasizes the importance of the client owning their own learning. Composition scholars will be familiar with Piaget—and with the sentiment expressed in the quote at the passage's end. Student writing and student voices have always had a place in the field, and one reason for this has been valuing student autonomy and taking seriously students' experiences. Additionally, Lydia's warning about if she finds herself "driving" in a way that students are "not coming with me" is one that

many composition teachers would recognize: much has been written about student-centered classrooms, whose prime characteristic is that students are not passive vessels to fill with knowledge but active participants in the learning process.

But there are other aspects of Lydia's description that are not represented in composition pedagogy, but that could perhaps be usefully adapted to it. One to focus on is the degree of negotiation Lydia sees as intrinsic to "joining" with clients. Or perhaps it is better to frame this, as Lydia does, in terms of dancing or journeying. Lydia, after all, fills her description with metaphors having to do with movement: she doesn't want to find that she is "driving" or that clients "aren't coming with her"; she doesn't want to become too attached to where she thinks "she needs to go," lest she "mis[s] the mark"; and she has to find a way to "stay with" her clients so that they are "moving together." We can see these under the banner of a *guiding value*, or one that ultimately rudders her work: regardless of the progress that they might make, she must "stay with them." This means that to a great extent, the client dictates the work. For example, she says that if her clients are speaking completely in terms of "thinking" and not addressing how they feel, she might ask about feelings—but she must also be prepared for clients to refuse this line of inquiry and to "abandon it altogether."

Composition does not have this arrangement, and perhaps does not have the luxury of choosing it. Time is the greatest constraint: courses end, and students must have something to show for them. There are others, too, though: assignments rigidly direct attention and thinking, as do course goals and course policies. Even the assignments we traditionally think of as freeing can serve this function. A student who is mostly motivated by audience reception might well find freewriting pointless or dispiriting. And as always, the specter of assessment hangs over every student-teacher interaction: if a student knows that the teacher will be issuing a grade, there's

only so much the teacher can do persuade the student that they are in charge of their texts and writing processes. I will return to this point in my conclusion. For now, I would like to continue to explore Lydia's understanding of using empathy as a tool to address the challenges of intersubjective work—or what Lydia refers to as a “dance,” and later as “negotiations.”

I particularly like this latter term, since it implies a spectrum of outcomes that can happen when separate parties work together: persuasion, compromise, trade-offs, etc., all in the interest of continued work together. It also accounts for the verbal component of the therapists' work, which “dance” does not—though I would quickly add that Lydia emphasizes how often her negotiations with clients are not explicit or verbal, and she must be prepared to understand a client who cannot tell her directly that some line of discussion makes them uncomfortable. This next excerpt offers an informative description of how she views her role as a negotiator. As a reminder, Lydia is an art therapist, so when she refers to “the making” of “this material,” she is referring to art making and art materials.

LYDIA: My role can be different, some people refer to it as the third hand, sometimes people really need some help in the making, other people don't. Get very comfortable with watching people make things, and how do you do that that makes them comfortable too? I had one kid, he couldn't stand me looking at him. I'd putter around, I'd straighten up the room, it was like ok, I knew what was going on, but he couldn't handle my direct gaze right then. Later, I was able to be at the table. So it's all these negotiations around whatever somebody needs. [...] So I feel like for me it's for everybody, whether it's the most verbal adult, or whether some surly adolescent, whoever it is it's about helping them touch that, and I try to get playing with them (first interview).

Lydia's anecdote about the boy who “couldn't handle my direct gaze” is a good example of how empathy involves negotiation: under what constraints will a client allow her to figuratively “dance”—or “play,” yet another metaphor introduced here—with them? For this client, Lydia's routine procedure of sitting at the same table while he made art was off-limits, or not a path he was willing to go down. It's quite possible that this closed-off path is exactly what

Lydia would like most to be exploring—but under her guiding rationale, she must find other ways to move forward. Accordingly, she “putters around,” cleans the room, and generally finds ways to avoid a form of play that the client finds unacceptable. This isn’t permanent; she says that she is later able to “join him at the table,” perhaps because he has become more comfortable or has learned to trust her more over the course of their sessions.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Empathy as a Tool for Collaborative Investigation**

One goal I have for this project is to explore how teachers and students can collaborate more effectively. If we agree that learning involves two active subjectivities, then what happens between them becomes complex and worthy of analysis. The tension I have tried to highlight in this chapter is that moving forward collaboratively requires more investigation into and attention to another’s experience than the field seems to anticipate, as evidenced by its fairly nonacademic use of “empathy.”

To illustrate this tension further: We saw that Lydia describes her role as “get very comfortable watching people make things.” I wonder how often writing teachers feel “very comfortable watching people make things”? The key words in this phrase as I understand it are “comfortable” and “watching.” In combination, they seem to depict a scenario in which the teacher would calmly stand by and watch the student work, without interference, in whatever way seems most appropriate to the student. Furthermore, for the teacher to feel “comfortable” observing this process suggests that they feel no exigency to intervene, or to make observations that are sharp enough to derail the process. As we saw in Harris’s description, it was important for him to step in eventually and direct the student to begin thinking about audience. His role as a teacher required this of him: eventually, the student was going to need to stop introspecting and begin articulating for others.

As such, under the typical confines of a school context, it is hard to imagine that teachers could get “very comfortable watching”—at least, not without abandoning deadlines and course goals, or at least the belief that some things are important for students to learn even if they are not interested in them. These latter two items might well form in direct opposition to the path a student chooses. Unlike Lydia, teachers do can’t simply abandon their goals because a student strongly dislikes them.

However, an important step in the process of theorizing a person-centered pedagogy is to consider how empathy might work in a dyadic conference, not in a therapy session. I am not interested here in troubling too much the institutional structures of pedagogy—grades, attendance policies, etc. Rather, I am considering how writing pedagogy might work within these constraints, even work to clarify them, make them more navigable. Teachers in a person-centered pedagogy would engage in what I call *empathic negotiation*, or seeing interactions with students as processes in which teachers continuously pushes, acknowledges, and explores the student’s experience of writing.

The idea underwriting empathic negotiation is that while the structure of a writing class may be inflexible, teachers have room to negotiate how students encounter this structure—to figure out how to best to invite them into a situation they dislike, or at least to commiserate with them about the challenges they face. Such negotiation would be best accomplished in dyadic conferences, where the teacher can invite the student to explain their experiences of writing, school, and learning. Additionally, a dyadic space marked by trust might be a safer environment for students to voice certain conflicts they struggle with, especially conflicts to which the teacher might not have any real access points. Empathy, as an intellectual tool informed by person-

centered and culturally competent perspectives, can help in discouraging teachers from assuming shared experience, encouraging checking in and asking questions, and making room for students.

In practice, empathic negotiation involves *checking in* and *checking on*. Teachers would check in with students both formally and informally to learn about how they're experiencing their work and the course. Formal checking need not happen only in dyadic work. It might also involve the sort of reflective assignment that is already common in composition—a reflection turned in along with an assignment, for example. Informal checking in is verbal, and might be especially effective in conference, where the teacher-student relationship isn't complicated by the presence of the rest of the class. Additionally, in both formal and informal checking in, it's critical that the teacher respond empathically. This means trying to hear and respond to what the student most seems to want to say. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this does not mean teachers should accept anything the student says. The person-centered perspective makes a distinction between the person and a particular action or statement they make; it might be valuable for students for teachers to challenge them to engage more actively.

However, teachers must also respond in such a way that students are able to hear them. This is what *checking on* is for. Checking on involves revisiting responses to students to see where one might have missed the mark. An ideal version of this might be a taped conference in which a peer or supervisor provides feedback on how one is relating with students. It might also be useful to have a peer or supervisor read and discuss one's written responses to students. The purpose of checking on is for teachers to get perspective on how they react and hear students, to become more aware of unproductive or harmful patterns of relating, and to improve. Checking on provides a way for teachers to see that they've missed the mark.



Together checking in and checking on provide a heuristic for how empathic negotiation might be implemented in the writing course. They also demonstrate that empathy can be thought of as something learnable. Readers might be used to empathy being paired with the verb “have”—e.g. one should “have empathy” for students to be a teacher. However, as checking in and checking on illustrate, empathy can also be thought of as something one learns and then practices. This distinction requires us to see empathy not as some intrinsic part of a teacher’s emotional quotient, but as an intellectual practice that teachers can learn and put into effect.

As is clear, checking in and checking on also involve a degree of congruence: students will not respond well to teachers who respond in a way that obviously belies how they truly feel. They also involves positive regard, which is the subject of the following chapter. In this way, the strands of person-centered theory are hard to separate. However, it’s also true that empathy would form the foundation of a person-centered pedagogy, and that teachers would need training in empathy to use it as it has been described here. The act of trying to hear students’ experiences would form the root of teacher-student communication.

## CHAPTER V.

## POSITIVE REGARD: HEARING THE WHOLE PERSON

In the following anecdote, Lydia describes a client who seems to resist all attempts to communicate what he wants to do or talk about, and then finds a surprising way to express himself.

LYDIA: I had one kid—oh my God. I got desperate. We ended up making like a pie shape with all these different issues in his life and putting a goddamn spinner on it, and he would spin, because I was trying so much to step out of me being the one who said what he was going to do, because he so wanted that, and I'm like uh-uh, it's not going to work. But he would sit there and say "I dunno," and everything else. So we would say, "Would you like to spin?" cause I was desperate to try to just get him moving...also out of desperation I did a house tree person, like I had him draw a house one day, draw a tree draw a person. Thank God I looked at the art in between [sessions], I'm really looking at his tree, I'm seeing little crosshatches and everything else, so all of a sudden I look it says "Fuck you." It says "fuck you" in the tree! I'm like *that* is gorgeous, that is *gorgeous* [her emphasis], so the next time he comes in everything else I said, "I got your message!" and he looked at me like I was crazy, and he's like looking at the drawing and everything else, I said "that's great! I'm so glad! I feel like our work is now how to help you say that in a more direct clear way that doesn't get you in trouble with other people." Because *that*, this is communication, this is important. We gotta know that part. Still didn't work. [both laugh]. But it was like, my God that was gorgeous. (second interview)

Lydia's response here—"that's great! I'm so glad! I feel like our work is now how to help you say that in a more direct clear way that doesn't get you in trouble with other people"—illustrates the term *positive regard*, which is the subject of this chapter. It also illustrates nicely the distinction between working on a text, and with working with a person who is producing a text. In this anecdote, the text gives Lydia some clue as to how her client is feeling. Though she's not yet sure why he feels like saying "fuck you," or what his anger is truly aimed at, she knows she must find a way to show him that she's heard him—and to help him articulate himself more productively. We can see that it will not be possible to work on this text without also working

with this client's attitudes and feelings. Positive regard can help name and acknowledge those attitudes and feelings.

Positive regard is the third core characteristic of person-centered theory and generally means demonstrating faith in another person's ability to self-determination and self-assessment. I offer a more thorough definition later. I argue that in teaching, positive regard can have a powerful balancing effect on the power teachers wield over students, as the attitude implied by "having faith" in students' ideas and work runs counter to the need to dominate and overcorrect. It works in concert with empathy, since belief in the other person facilitates our ability to hear what they think and feel without the need to qualify or explain their actions. It also harmonizes with congruence, since cultivating faith in students might mean fewer situations in which teachers must work to disguise negative feelings about students. It meshes with a multicultural and social justice competence framework in that demonstrating interest and investment in others' lived experience, worldviews, and language use may have the effect of inviting them to more fully participate in spaces that seem to have been made for people other than them.

While teacher participants did not use the exact term positive regard, codes associated with positive regard did come up more than 60 times, and with each of the four participants. Readers will see examples of these subcodes in the section on how Bernadette uses it for her teaching. I also juxtapose Bernadette's experience with that of a therapist participant, Lydia. Positive regard has mostly been relevant to composition scholars in the context of discussing Rogerian argument, and not in discussions of pedagogy. However, I will demonstrate that it has been widely relevant to disciplines concerned with education that are parallel to composition. This will prepare us to see why positive regard applies to Bernadette's approach to student-teacher relationships, even if it is a term she does not use. Rather, she seems to have come to the

concept diagonally, on her own. Her account suggests that positive regard is a useful tool for creating the conditions for growthful change in student-teacher relationships. I will also juxtapose Bernadette's experience with Lydia's—the therapist who related the opening anecdote. Their approaches to dyadic work are remarkably similar, which suggests that Bernadette is operating under some of the same philosophical assumptions as Lydia.

### **Positive Regard: Prizing, Accepting, and Trusting Learners**

Carl Rogers believed that positive regard could be defined in a teaching context. His richest description of how this works is found in an essay collected in Rogers's (1981) *Way of Being*. Rogers writes that there is an "attitude" characteristic of those who are "successful in facilitating learning," an attitude marked by a "prizing of each learner, a prizing of his or her feelings, opinions, and person" (271). From what we have seen so far of the person-centered orientation, it will make sense that Rogers begins here, from a platform that takes extremely seriously others' lived experience of the world. It is also noteworthy that this platform is an attitude, and not a set of behaviors or practices. Rather, Rogers emphasizes the importance of the views the teacher holds of students. As an aside, this is one reason that therapists often attend therapy themselves; perhaps the best way to understand and change one's attitudes toward others is therapy.

Rogers next writes that this attitude underwrites "a caring for the learner, but a nonpossessive caring," and that it encourages "acceptance of this other individual as a separate person," and as having intrinsic worth. Finally, it is the belief that the student is "fundamentally trustworthy" (1981, 272). This means taking seriously student ideas that seem inane and underdeveloped, and it means resisting the urge to complicate them according to one's own

values or wisdom. As a teacher, I find this one of the more challenging aspects of person-centered theory, as it implies a student-teacher relationship that is much more marked by student autonomy than we traditionally would allow. For example, it's easy to appreciate in theory that the student is "fundamentally trustworthy," but when faced with a particularly underwritten paper, it can be hard to distinguish between our responsibility to challenge and the desire to correct.

Rogers addresses these implications to an extent. He writes that positive regard "shows up in a variety of observable ways," particularly when students deviate from the preferred structure of student behavior. He recommends that teachers try to accept the student's "fear and hesitation" when approaching new material, as well as the student's "satisfaction in achievement" (271). The teacher uses positive regard to accept "the students' occasional apathy, their erratic desires to explore byroads of knowledge, as well as their disciplined efforts to achieve major goals." Still further, the teacher accepts the student's personal feelings that "both disturb and promote learning—rivalry with a sibling, hatred of authority, concern about personal adequacy" (271-272). Acceptance here means just that: accepting the conditions of the student's relationship to learning. It doesn't mean surrendering to or affirming. The teacher's job in the above scenarios, might be to accept and challenge, or to accept and explore. We can see that positive regard and empathy can work quite harmoniously. Positive regard helps a practitioner to accept and trust, while empathy helps with exploration of a different or unknown set of attitudes and experiences.

Composition readers familiar with English education literature may see positive regard as similar to education scholar Nel Noddings's notion of *engrossment*, meaning to attend with intense interest to students (1984). Though engrossment is sometimes likened to a popular

understanding of empathy (as in Brian White's [2003] characterization), I would suggest that empathy is a tool that guides teachers internally, while Noddings characterizes engrossment as being demonstrative, such that students can "recognize caring and respond in some detectable manner." In a 2010 article, Noddings suggests that while engrossment doesn't mean always approving, it does imply responding "as positively as my values and capacities allow" (2010, 2). This aspect of "responding" is what links it, to my mind, to positive regard.

To better operationalize a definition of positive regard, I offer this definition:

- Demonstrating that one accepts and values students, including their feelings, opinions, and selves
- Taking a stance of generosity and investment toward students, student work, and student thinking
- Trying as much as possible to see the good intentions that underwrite students' actions and behavior
  - "Actions and behavior" in a writing class includes a student's rhetorical choices in the texts they produce
- Avoiding conflating a student's behaviors with the reasons for those behaviors

I would argue that the existence of the writing conference as an institution is evidence that Rogers's concept of positive regard is relevant for composition. The conference is a social structure constructed on the premise that in a dyadic setting, teachers can better understand, speak to, and demonstrate interest in individual students' work. These conditions are excellent for positive regard, since they present the opportunity to take a stance of generosity and investment toward a student's work, and to demonstrate that interest to the student. In addition to

strengthening the working alliance between the student and teacher, this demonstration models the sort of intellectual curiosity and metacognition that writing teachers often hope students will come away from their class with. As we will see later, demonstrating interest is already important in teacher participant Bernadette's pedagogy, as it helps her cultivate productive dyadic relationships with students. I argue that naming this practice (i.e. positive regard) and theorizing its place in her work, as well as in composition generally, would help Bernadette and other writing teachers use it more consciously and advantageously.

### **Positive Regard in—and Near—Composition**

As I observed at the outset of this chapter, positive regard has been used fleetingly in composition's literature. Its use falls into two camps: references to Rogerian argument, and the usefulness of positive regard in dyadic interactions, especially in writing center contexts. The literature I will cite in both cases is dated. This does not reflect how positive regard is being used by the humanities more generally, though; I will also show that positive regard is relevant today to an array of disciplines whose interests are quite similar to composition studies'.

The composition scholars who have taken up Rogers to inform their dyadic work with students have often been focused on a writing center context. For example, Lou Kelly's (1980) retrospective of University of Iowa's Writing Lab begins with a Carl Rogers quote about "prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, prizing his opinions, his person" that he says characterizes the Writing Lab's founder's attitude toward students. Though Kelly does not return to Rogers elsewhere, the piece itself emphasizes the student-centeredness of the endeavor. Christina Murphy (1989) takes a different approach, proposing that writing centers model their tutor-student interactions on therapist-client interactions, such as those described by Rogers, and

that the latter's "model holds true for the learning strategies and experiential awarenesses that go on in a writing center environment" (17). This is not dissimilar to the argument I have been making, though I hope one clear distinction is that Murphy suggests imitating therapist-client interactions, whereas I hope to extract the intellectual tools therapists use and redesign them for a pedagogical context.

Positive regard has also been applied, though less frequently, to classroom pedagogy. In 1976, Glenn Matott suggested that Rogers's "positive regard" could be used to inform a philosophical context in which the teacher helps the individual "tap his untapped resources." More recently—though still not recently—Kia Jane Richmond, an English Education scholar writing in the pages of *Composition Studies*, writes (2002) that she has adapted "positive regard," along with "congruence" and "empathetic understanding," into her pedagogy. Her article is concerned with the "affective aspects" of the student-teacher relationship, which she says are important but have been left out of the scholarly conversation. She worries that "psychological theories" are suspect in composition, either because their marginalization in literary studies has bled over, or because a focus on emotion seems "corrupt" in some way (73). Her suspicions seem valid: the work I've cited here is represents a sparse body of literature.

Rogers has also appeared in composition literature because of his eponymous style of argument, which now frequently appears in composition textbooks. Nathaniel Teich (1987), quoting Maxine Hairston, suggests that Rogerian argument is useful because the attitude that Rogers advocates is transferable from one context to another, i.e. from therapy to the classroom. He further notes that the attitude, as we have seen throughout this project, comprises congruence, empathy, and positive regard, though as we have also seen, while Rogerian argument may be a recognizable concept for composition scholars, these core components are not. Hairston (1976)



herself had imagined Rogerian argument as a salve for the sort of rhetorical situation in which one feels “hopeless to convince the other person of our point of view” (373).

If all that I cited here were the dated discussions above, I imagine readers would be skeptical of how positive regard might still be useful today. Composition studies seems to have given this aspect of person-centered theory a chance already, and even to have taken it up in some ways, as evidenced by the presence of Rogerian argument in composition textbooks. However, it is also true that positive regard is *pedagogically* relevant in other disciplines whose interest align with composition’s.

For example, McGrail (2016) writes that positive regard is an important classroom tool in making Digital Humanities accessible to community college students. McCaughn (2015) argues that health science tutors in problem-based learning—characterized by “small group, collaborative, self-directed learning” (58)—should model their work on Carl Rogers’s “nondirective approach,” promoting, among other things, positive regard. Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, and Smith (2014) set out to measure positive regard in Latino/a high school student perceptions of counselors, and include it as one predictor in whether or not they enroll in AP courses. Heim (2012) proposes a model for small group tutorials in the Humanities based on Rogers’s therapeutic model, including the promoting of positive regard. And in a book on the core practices and concepts of qualitative research, Brinkmann (2013) suggests that many current interviewers conceptualize their research as “in line” with Rogers’s “approach.” He also points out that there must be limitations to this form, given that interviewers will sometimes interview those with whom they disagree strongly “(e.g., neo-Nazis)” (154).

This summary suggests that today, positive regard is relevant across the humanities, especially to those interested in pedagogy, or is at least worthy of discussion. I will not speculate

here as to why this has not been true for composition's literature. However, as we will see, positive regard does seem important for composition teachers, even if they don't name the concept directly. I hope that this chapter's exploration of the role of positive regard demonstrates the need to name the concept explicitly, and to theorize about how teachers should develop and use it.

### **Bernadette: Using "Persona" to Effectuate Positive Regard**

Throughout our conversations, Bernadette emphasized that the attitude teachers had toward students had a big effect on the success or failure of their dyadic relationships. This was true for all teacher participants, but she went further toward exploring why this was, and in distinguishing her knowledge about social interaction from her knowledge of writing. I would note here that my focus is on Bernadette's focus: the idea that a teacher's attitude affects students. Throughout his chapter, Bernadette often reaches toward examples from the classroom to illustrate her points. While this work is not about classroom pedagogy, I found her illustrations nevertheless clarifying.

Particularly of interest in this chapter is how teachers use their "persona," to borrow her term, to effectuate good relationships. By persona, she seems to mean the attitude toward students one takes on when one steps into a teaching role, as we'll see. There is an important parallel between this idea of using a person and the widely-accepted notion among therapists that one uses one's personality instrumentally, as a tool, to work with clients. As an illustration of this concept, which is important throughout this chapter, here is how Wilbert explains the use of personality as a tool:

WILBERT: The thing they're getting in the room is *me* [his emphasis]. And when I began doing this, I sort of thought, I'm there to do something with them, if that makes sense. There's a—a kind of—there's this—yes I'm {inaudible} but we're

kind of doing this thing. And the “this thing” is the thing I thought I had to be good at. *And what I’ve come to realize is that what I need to be good at is being with them* [my emphasis]. And truly being receptive to their mind, and to their experience, and to relating to them in that way. (first interview)

Wilbert highlights that a primary ability that therapists need to cultivate is “being with” clients, by which he means “being truly receptive to their mind, and to their experience, and to relating with them in that way [i.e. on those terms].” From this perspective, we can see how Wilbert himself is the tool through which he does his dyadic work.

In this section, we will see that Bernadette seems also to view her teaching personality as a tool for relating with students. It is useful to have the clinical concept of self-as-instrument with which to juxtapose her understanding, since it suggests that Bernadette’s approach to relating is not specific to her. Rather, she has intuitively arrived at some of the same conclusions that therapists have about dyadic work. This isn’t to say that there aren’t flaws, given that she is operating from a pedagogical position that is not fully-theorized pedagogical; however, her intuition that something very much like positive regard can contribute to growthful change in her student relationships is instructive.

In the third chapter, I quoted Bernadette as referring to a “teaching instinct” that she observed in first-time teachers, which had to do with “being a whole person” and having “an unguarded energy” with students, which she perceived as promoting trust. As we’ve seen, that conversation led to a discussion of how Bernadette experienced herself while teaching, but it also led to a broader exploration of the role persona plays in teaching.

To set up this first excerpt: I had observed that a hypothetical nonteacher might be confused at the idea that teaching has something to do with how one uses “persona,” and not with understand the material being taught. I was hoping Bernadette could distinguish between

what teachers need to know about their subject, and what teachers need to know about working with a student. Here's how she responded:

BERNADETTE: I mean I think it's partly a way to kind of like establish some sort of friendly trusting atmosphere in the classroom. I think certain people, like especially people who have been teaching for a long time, who are like just very obviously very good at what they do, they might not have, like, the most open friendly {unintelligible} persona, but they might have that gravitas where like, alright, if you're a student you take that as like a sign of like "I'm going to sit here and pay attention now." And I think sometimes, like, if you don't have gravitas, or that kind of authority or experience, then being able to have a good rapport with students goes a long way. (first interview)

One theme from the above passage that helps us better understand how positive regard works for Bernadette is the idea that the teacher's personality can be used to establish a "friendly, trusting atmosphere in the classroom." She suggests that this can be done in different ways, either by demonstrating "gravitas" or by establishing a good "rapport." She depicts actively using "persona" to shape the "atmosphere" of the room such that students feel secure and trust the teacher. While she is not speaking about dyadic work here, the concept seems to reflect some degree of Wilbert's assertion that what clients get in the room is him. To some extent, what Bernadette's students get is her: whatever she does to establish the atmosphere and good rapport. This is also an example of how Bernadette anchors an answer in a classroom context, though I argue that it also applies to a conference, as establishing a friendly, trusting environment in which to discuss student work would clearly seem to benefit dyadic work.

But how does she do this? How does one use one's personality instrumentally? This is where positive regard is an instructive concept, since it helps define an attitude and approach toward dyadic work. Bernadette is hearing speaking about her work in the classroom, but we can both imagine that she approaches conferences similarly, and that a definition of positive regard for writing pedagogy would have to be expanded such that it was relevant for the classroom, too,

since teacher spend so much time there. The aspects of positive regard that reflect what Bernadette reports here are demonstrating that one accepts and values students, and taking a generous stance of generosity toward students' work student thinking:

BERNADETTE: There's so much...time spent talking about ideas and talking about writing and having them like, y'know maybe be a little risky and share some of their own strengths, some of their thoughts, or whatever that like if I don't have a personality where they feel like for one it's safe for them to talk about their ideas in front of me, y'know. Or if they don't think that I'm interested in them. Or if I'm like super over-corrective and they think I'm just going to shut down all their ideas, then there's some gregariousness that's needed. I need to be open to what they're saying and encouraging and like appropriately critical. (first interview)

Bernadette highlights the importance in teaching of acknowledging the “time [that students] spent talking about ideas” and “risk[ing]” sharing their thoughts and “strengths.” She believes she must take a position relative to students' ideas that convinces them that she is “interested” and “open to what they're saying.” She must muster the appropriate level of “gregariousness” such that they can sense that their work and their ideas are welcome. By the same token, she must avoid being “super over-corrective” to prevent them from believing that she will “shut down” their thinking. This too falls under the banner of demonstrating that she values student thinking, as she might well have to convert dissatisfaction into some more productive stance toward student ideas—curiosity, perhaps. This is a task made easier if her attitude towards students is one of generosity and faith.

Finally, this passage makes clear that how she uses her personality is connected to students' experience of safety: that it is safe for them be who they are and to express their ideas . Bernadette is not using the term positive regard here, but it is nevertheless relevant, as she is describing how she believes that the stance teachers take toward students contribute to their feeling accepted.

An important nuance in this discussion is that positive regard does not mean a blanket acceptance of student ideas, or that the teacher must only take a cheerleading position toward student work. One danger in demonstrating acceptance when you disagree is that you will act incongruously, as discussed in chapter three. Students who notice this incongruence might well feel as though they are not being taken seriously. Bernadette mentions this, too, a little later in our conversation, when she recalled her experience as a student:

BERNADETTE: I think that's something I'm always keeping in mind is like, how do I respond [as a student], or I don't respond to condescension or belittling. And I don't respond to all like saccharine [in syrupy voice] "Great jooob!" Y'know. So. I'm trying to find—or [also I don't respond to teachers] being overly personal. (first interview)

Here, Bernadette cites some of the ways that a teacher can attempt to demonstrate acceptance or generosity but blunder: "condescension," "belittling," being "overly personal," or being exaggeratedly complimentary. These have in common that they seem fraudulent. They fall into the category of betraying, either intentionally or not, actions that are incongruous with feelings. They turn out not to be "demonstrations of generosity," since the student senses that the teacher's position toward them or their ideas is not one of genuine interest or acceptance. Bernadette continued:

BERNADETTE: So you have to make it like, y'know not like...a song and dance, but you have to...partly they're going to do what you ask them to do because you're an authority figure and there's a grade with the course, but like I want them to be engaged too, I don't want them to look like they're suffering every time they say something in class, I want them to feel invested in the course. (first interview)

The phrase "song and dance" speaks again to the theme of demonstration: positive regard means demonstrating that one values students such that they can perceive it. As Bernadette acknowledges, this is part practical, since it helps students "feel invested" and "engaged." Students who believe that their presence and opinions are valued are more likely to be "engaged"

and not to simply “suffer” through a course. Similarly, we should see her earlier concern about not wanting to “shut [them] down” as about more than just treating others with respect. It is also useful getting them invested in what they are writing—to develop stakes other than just the grade. In this passage, she approaches the subject reservedly, characterizes the stakes as “I don’t want them to look like they’re suffering every time they say something.” However, the sum of these passages suggests to me that Bernadette is invested in demonstrating positive regard for students to the extent that they will feel invited, encouraged, and willing to take risks with their writing and thinking.

Furthermore, her emphasis on the importance of persona, and on using one’s personality as an instrument for dyadic work, suggests a need for a pedagogy that accounts for such features of work as a teacher. Like the other participants in this project, Bernadette is largely figuring these experiences out on her own. As she described it our first interview, she had “no training” before she began teaching. Here is what she relied on to learn to teach:

**BERNADETTE:** And I don’t know if I’m really an instinctive teacher, but I think that I was pretty good at trying to think things through, so trying to think about what are the things that I responded to well as a student, and how can I replicate those, and what are things I hated about teachers I had, and how can I avoid doing that. (first interview)

As we have seen throughout this project, teachers often experience learning to be a teachers semiautonomously, as a function of individual philosophies and perhaps based on their experiences as students: “what are the things I responded to well as a student, and how can I replicate those, and what are things I hated about teachers I had, and how can I avoid doing that.” While those experiences surely matter, it’s hard to claim that they form a solid basis for a theoretically sound teaching philosophy.

Additionally, as I observed in chapter one, even when teachers do receive training, it is unlikely that that training will cover dyadic work. In this section, for example, when Bernadette wanted to illustrate some aspect of a teaching relationship, she referred to a hypothetical classroom setting rather than a dyadic conference. It's easy to extrapolate some of her positions to how she approaches conferences, too; for instance, the ideas that she must be "appropriately critical" and find ways to use her personality to engage students also apply in conferencing. However, positive regard looks different in a classroom than in a dyadic setting. Most obviously, in addition to the teacher-student relationship, there are also numerous student-student relationships that affect relating and communicating. This difference demonstrates the importance of pedagogy distinguishing between how teachers approach each situation. While this project concentrates on dyadic work, Bernadette's descriptions here imply that classroom pedagogy might also be well served by incorporating concepts such as positive regard. Demonstrating this fully might be the work of a future project.

#### **Lydia: Assuming that Clients are Always Moving toward Health**

I now turn to how Lydia, the art therapist who was the source for the opening anecdote, uses positive regard. The overarching theme of this section is that Lydia and Bernadette seem to hold similar values and even approaches toward using positive regard in working with others, but that Lydia's education and training focused heavily on it, while Bernadette's did not. As a consequence, Lydia is able to speak about its use from a much sounder and more developed base in clinical theory.

While the term "positive regard" did not come up during our interviews, terms that Rogers uses, like "accept," "care" and "caring," and "valuing [a client]" repeatedly did. We also discussed situations in which the client was challenging to "accept" or to care for—that is,



situations in which it was difficult to muster positive regard. As we saw in the chapter on empathy, Lydia sees being “connected” to the client is a prerequisite for her success:

LYDIA: It’s really about helping...them discover and learn and grow and hopefully find more productive ways to meet their needs, I mean all those pieces, so, if I lose my connection with them, and with where they are, I can’t—cause I have to join them [where they are]. (third interview)

While empathy is certainly an important piece of staying connected to the client, positive regard plays a role, too. As we will see, positive regard seems to pave the way for empathy, to make a collaborative journey possible. After all, if the therapist does not value the client, as well as the client’s opinions, then their willingness to explore or take them seriously is hampered.

The role of positive regard in Lydia’s practice began to emerge early in our interviews when I was hoping to learn more about how Lydia thinks about therapy. Here, she remembers an important guideline from a time where she worked with adolescent boys:

LYDIA: One expression we had—there’s a lot from where I taught, where I was a therapist with the adolescents, is I said “behind every behavior is a positive intent.” Which is actually really important when you have kids doing obnoxious things [laughs], and you think “Ok, so what could the positive intent possibly be,” y’know? [laughs]

A: What are the reasons that this person might be—right, that makes sense.

LYDIA: Exactly. So to really think that way about what is it that they’re trying to get. Cause I feel like people try to fulfill what they need, but sometimes they’re just so off base. So I think that some of that piece about, y’know, trying to create an environment that’s safe enough for people to take risks, to not know, to be able to step back enough to kinda keep the discovering about themselves, and to help them take the lead in fact. (first interview)

The maxim “behind every behavior is a positive intent” is a useful heuristic for employing positive regard in one’s work. Lydia recalls that it was “actually really important” when working with adolescent boys who were sometimes “obnoxious,” since it presumably helped her continue to like them. If she can see deviant behavior as a cypher for some intrinsically human and

valuable cause, such as wanting to feel loved or satisfied, then it is perhaps easier to like—and eventually to empathize—with them.

As was the case with Bernadette, positive regard is also a highly practical tool for Lydia. Here, she characterizes it as helping her find pathways for conversation. Lydia needs to see the client's misbehavior not just as a deviation from the acceptable, but also as part of a larger pattern in his life so that she could more fully understand him. That is, if you assume, as Lydia does—and Carl Rogers, too, for that matter—that “people try to fulfill what they need,” and that misbehavior is a function of this, then misbehavior can also help you understand something crucial about the person. To see it as only as deviant might be to overlook some crucial aspect of the person's self.

Lydia explained this principle further a few minutes later. We were discussing what guides her in her work—what values or goals she holds that shapes her choices with a client. She said that she was willing to work on “issues,” but also that she was focused on “a [client's] whole being”:

LYDIA: So I think for me, sometimes there's—I mean I've certainly worked with people around ok, there's this issue in your life, and we're addressing that, but I also, I'm always thinking of them as a whole being, I'm looking for the...metaphors, the—something about the symbolic part of this problem in their life, I mean I feel like I'm always holding a really big container that's really much more about depth work for me, and about all the layers of people and all of our interconnectedness and it's like, “yeah this is going on for you and like...hello, here's our political environment,” so. I feel like I hold all of that, not everybody like deals {at} all those levels, but even if we're up here, dealing with this, I still hold all of it. Because I feel like that's still a really important piece and does impact this. So even if they're sort of microfocusing, it's like ok, I'm looking at this in a context.

A: Cause who knows when you might need some of that later, it sounds like.

LYDIA: Mmhmm. (first interview)

The metaphors about depth that Lydia uses are so commonly associated with psychology that it might be hard to recognize them as metaphors: that people have “depth,” and that their minds are “layered,” and that therapy is about doing “depth work” in which those layers are carefully pushed aside or peeled back to reveal the deepest, most hidden parts of a self. They’re useful metaphors here, as they assist Lydia in seeing surface-level issues, such as behavior, as stemming from a much deeper and more hidden tectonic-plate level of self. She sees her job as to “hold” all of what she sees, and to see the client “in context,” even if the client is “microfocusing” on a specific issue. As an aside, when Lydia refers to “our current political climate,” she is referring to the discourse comprising the then-recent 2016 presidential election.

What does focusing on a self-in-context rather than surface-level behaviors have to do with positive regard? To focus on self-in-context, one must assume that human beings want to grow and learn and move toward health, and that they act as they act because it’s the best way they have come up with to achieve some ultimate goal. She must be able to see unwanted behavior within the fuller context of another’s humanity, even as contributing to it. Perhaps most importantly, Lydia does not administer or deny care depending on her clients’ behavior. Positive regard is tied not to correct behavior, but to the person as a whole.

We can imagine, of course, that extraordinary behaviors might make this particularly challenging, especially in a therapeutic context, where the point might in fact be to discover what deep-seeded hatred or anger underwrites certain patterns of behavior. This question had weighed on me since I first encountered Rogers. My thinking was that people sometimes do terrible things, and that in those cases, positive regard would be much more challenging, perhaps impossible. In the following excerpt, however, Lydia describes how, upon hearing that a client

has done something terrible, emotional honesty can in fact be an important part of positive regard:

LYDIA: You know what, generally, when you really—even when you—for a brief time, like the last couple years [we] started getting kids who were sex offenders in the program, so that was like really quite interesting and a whole different scenario. But I mean I even had—I had some kid come in and talking about beating up gay men on the weekends. It's like hmmm...”ayyy...ok, where do we start with that?” And he's gloating about it, and it's like “whoa, wait,” y'know. So I feel like it's still about trying to, for me to understand, what are you getting from that? What's that doing for you? But without it being—I do feel like you have to be careful not to slam down. I could say, “I have a hard time with that.” I don't agree with it...I need you to know that edge, but I want to know—I wanna understand it more for you. And so, sometimes I will hold those two at the same time. And sometimes I'll be upfront about it, and sometimes I won't be, I'll just do more exploration, it depends on what it is. And I also think it depends on how strongly I feel, because I know they're going to know it.

A: Right, yeah, it has to do with the not disguising the emotion you're feeling in the moment.

LYDIA: Right. Right. Yes. So, sometimes, I'll own up to it, or I'll even say, “Boy, I really, like—I don't understand this,” even if it's something really kind of funky, and I'm [like], “I don't understand it but I would love to understand more and understand where, y'know, help me understand.” (first interview)

Lydia's analysis of her position toward the client in this situation seems at first glance near-paradoxical: she must “own up to” feeling disgusted and at the same time demonstrate that she is truly interested in the client's experience—“I would love to understand it more [etc.]” One important use of positive regard is that it helps inform a position in which practitioners can hold both at the same time. Lydia does not deny her own disgust at the client's behavior, but she positions it within the greater context of the client's humanity. She must then demonstrate this complex position to the client in her response, perhaps acknowledging that the behavior really bothers her, but also asking “what are you getting from it? What's that doing for you?” She also adds that sometimes she is explicit, or “upfront” about this behavior, and sometimes she'll simply “do more exploration.”

As bad as this is, we can imagine a scenario in which positive regard might be even more difficult: if, for instance, the client expressed feeling violence toward Lydia. Since this chapter has been partly concerned with safety, it is worth touching upon the possibility that therapists might feel frightened, intimidated, or otherwise more uncomfortable than was acceptable. I want to briefly touch on this possibility here based on Lydia's words, and to return to it in the conclusion:

LYDIA: I mean one of the things that I think [I learned working] with adolescent boys is like, [t]he room has to be safe for both of us. Crucial. It's just crucial. And y'know I would name that, too. That's like I have to be safe in here, and you have to be safe in here. That's my job to make those lines, y'know? (first interview)

Lydia gestures toward what seems like a crucial prerequisite of working with clients: the room must be safe “for both” the client and for her. This is both practical and professionally sound. It is practical because if the therapist does not feel safe, it's hard to actually use the mental tools I have been characterizing. For example, it's hard to take a generous stance toward another person if one is sincerely afraid for one's body in their presence. It's professionally sound in that as a therapist—or a teacher, for that matter—one should be able to draw boundaries as to acceptable conditions of labor. Unacceptable conditions might include fear that a client will do physical harm. At the same time, as Lydia mentions, therapists have some control over this: the therapists “make[s] the lines” that the client can't cross. If the client does cross boundaries that the therapist has set, the therapist can and perhaps should discontinue therapy.

In the scenario in which Lydia's client gloated at beating up gay men on the weekends, Lydia seems to hold apparently contradictory positions at the same time. First, she is disgusted at the client's behavior. But she also takes a stance of curiosity, saying she would “love to understand” what this behavior is “doing for” the client. In demonstrating a desire to understand and accept the client's lived experience, Lydia is certainly not looking to affirm the behavior, but

rather to see the behavior as stemming from the context of the client's humanity. By holding these apparently contrasting positions at the same time, she takes an equally complex stance toward the client: she demonstrates an openness and a desire to understand what's going on with him, but she also reflects a very different stance toward his behavior than he seems to have. This allows her to remain honest and congruous, and also to encourage the client to re-see his behavior as bothering somebody who seems to genuinely care for him.

Something we can't know is how Lydia presents her emotional experience of what the client says. As I have alluded to several times throughout, it is possible to say, "What's that doing for you?" in a way that betrays disgust, and it is possible to say it in a way that suggests sincere interest. We can imagine, and nearly hear in Lydia's, "Boy, I really, like—I don't understand this," that a tone communicating interest, concern, and seriousness, might be best, since it invites further exploration but reflects an image of the client back to himself that shows, in this moment, that he has said something seriously concerning. This is another way in which therapy, like teaching, involves serious demonstration. Like Bernadette, who didn't want to "shut [students] down," Lydia doesn't want to "slam down" on clients. Both must be "appropriately critical" (Bernadette's phrase), but must also invite further exploration of issues via being seriously interested. Positive regard serves as a way forward. First, it is a tool for strengthening the working relationship, since Lydia uses it to reflect her position—that she values the client, but that she is concerned by his behavior. It also provides her with a way forward when she encounters behaviors she finds abhorrent: since Lydia is working to maintain trust in the client's whole person, a behavior, even one that disgusts her, becomes a way to better understand that whole person.

### **"Understanding the Whole Person": Positive Regard and MSJC**

Lydia's commentary here also helps us glimpse how positive regard helps therapists work with those whose sociocultural background differs from their own, and with those who identify with a subject position that the therapist does not. For some clients, it may be somewhat salutary even to have parts of their identity or experiences acknowledged as important by a person in a position of power. That said, an important aspect of synthesizing positive regard with MSJC is to not lose sight of the complexity of individual identities. For example, Trawinski (2016) warns against demonstrating extreme positive regard, or overvaluing or fetishizing someone because of a component of their identity. For the practitioner, this involves self-awareness, as one must recognize that this happens—that one carries certain fetishizing notions about a different culture or identity. Furthermore, therapist participants who spoke about this highlighted the importance of not thinking about people in categories, but as complex individuals. Another therapist participant, Rosia, felt that her class on diversity had not taught her as much as “sitting with people” and hearing their “nuanced differences”:

ROSIA: ...the...[diversity] training has to be so, like, they have to do kind of shorthand—by shorthand meaning like, using labels and diagnoses, and in like, the diversity class they have to talk about certain categories of people and make generalizations. And so like, in fact that's maybe just reinforcing assumptions. And re-teaching stereotypes? Even when we try to do it the best way that we can. So it—yeah, I think it comes from the experience of sitting with people. And noticing the nuanced differences among like, among different white Irish Catholics, or...young black men with major mental illnesses. Very different. So, does that...?  
 A: It does, which is I guess—cause I think what's interesting is, it sounds like, in actually sitting with people, it teaches you a certain kind of humility about like, “well, I dunno...”

ROSIA: Yeah. Totally. Yeah, I mean I am...totally blown away by sitting with individuals who then like share their life story with me. It's like, I am sometimes after session driving home like moved to tears at like what a privilege it is to sit with people and that—and how, as I carry their stories with me naturally through my life, they're not any of the assumptions, they're very much individuals. I dunno, it sounds a little cliché, but it's really true, and it's like, the assumptions of like, the categories of how you speak about someone aren't what I most carry with me. (first interview)

I hear in Rosia's acknowledgement of the "privilege...to sit with people and...carry their stories with [her]" a sense of positive regard for the individuals with whom she works, and that each's individuality transcends the categories she learned about in "diversity class." This is certainly not to imply that race, culture, and other categories don't matter; Rosia had in fact identified social justice as one of the motivating factors behind her clinical education. As Rosia pointed out in chapter four, race might be a very important factor in the experience of a client who is black and mentally ill: the intermixing of these social elements highly shapes his experience. A MSJC framework helps therapists appreciate sociocultural factors as important and life-shaping, and to incorporate that appreciation into how they understand the client's story. Thus, MSJC can assist therapists in demonstrating an investment in the client's experience that includes the individual's experience of their identity.

I want to revisit now the anecdote I began with. I will reproduce it here for reference:

LYDIA: I had one kid—oh my God. I got desperate. We ended up making like a pie shape with all these different issues in his life and putting a goddamn spinner on it, and he would spin, because I was trying so much to step out of me being the one who said what he was going to do, because he so wanted that, and I'm like uh-uh, it's not going to work. But he would sit there and say "I dunno," and everything else. So we would say, "Would you like to spin?" cause I was desperate to try to just get him moving...also out of desperation I did a house tree person, like I had him draw a house one day, draw a tree draw a person. Thank God I looked at the art in between [sessions], I'm really looking at his tree, I'm seeing little crosshatches and everything else, so all of a sudden I look it says "Fuck you." It says "fuck you" in the tree! I'm like *that* is gorgeous, that is *gorgeous* [her emphasis], so the next time he comes in everything else I said, "I got your message!" and he looked at me like I was crazy, and he's like looking at the drawing and everything else, I said "that's great! I'm so glad! I feel like our work is now how to help you say that in a more direct clear way that doesn't get you in trouble with other people." Because *that*, this is communication, this is important. We gotta know that part. Still didn't work. [both laugh]. But it was like, my God that was gorgeous. (second interview)



Lydia is able to hear that for this client, “fuck you” means something more like, “this isn’t what I want to do,” and she is able to accept his intentions, which are reasonable, as well as his impoverished expression of those intentions, which is not. This does not mean she tries to see his behavior as acceptable or good. As we have seen, an important nuance of positive regard is that it requires not withdrawing or withholding care because someone does or says something you disagree with. Rather, taking someone seriously could mean expressing that you think they’re wrong in a way that also communicates that you care about them anyway.

In this case, Lydia knows that if the client says, “fuck you” to assert himself, he will both “get in trouble” and fail to make himself heard, since the expression is not a “direct” or “clear” way of communicating his feelings. Part of her job then becomes to work with his intentions, which she seems to believe in and affirm—i.e. “that was gorgeous!”—and then to help him better “communicate” those intentions to others. I see this as an exemplar of positive regard in that Lydia evinces genuine caring for the client even as she knows how much work there is to do before others will be able to hear him—and before he can feel heard.

A crucial conceptual distinction I have tried to isolate during this discussion of positive regard in Lydia’s therapeutic practice is between what a client does and why they did it. Positive regard responds to the former as needed, but treats the latter as primary. From a therapeutic lens, this might be because our behavior and expressed opinions are adaptations to the contexts in which we have lived, but they might not be useful to the world at large. (This contradiction might even be the reason we began therapy in the first place.) This is also one of the major ways in which a person-centered orientation is distinguishable from a behaviorist orientation, as behaviorism treat behavior as primary. To add a parallel that compositionists will be familiar with, responding primarily to the surface features of a student’s essay is a behaviorist approach.

Taking seriously the student's intent and working to better express that intent would be the more humanist pedagogy.

### **A Pragmatic Reason for Positive Regard**

In the preceding sections, I described how positive regard can contribute to a humanist stance toward clients, and how it shapes Lydia's clinical philosophy: it helps her think about how to position herself in relation to her clients, it guides her responses, and demonstrating it helps establish a secure working relationship. One final way in which therapist participants reported using positive regard was that it is a highly pragmatic tool. This use case was most clear in my conversations with Genevieve.

This passage followed a question about what kinds of things Genevieve notices during a first meeting with a client. Obviously, this is a moment in which most of what you can know about another person is based on observations of their behavior, since you have no context for that behavior. Thus, it is also a moment in which the use of positive regard can encourage clinical practitioners to ask questions rather than make judgments.

GENEVIEVE: There's a lot. Like, it's so interesting to me especially in private practice to have sort of a template for, you're in the same office, the same waiting room, with multiple different people. And everyone—like some people—like I have one person who insists on knocking on my office door. Before every session, when I've said, "sit in the waiting room." I don't understand. Every time, I have to say it. But that's telling me a lot. So, I get—like, you were talking about [earlier in the interview], do you get frustrated? I get really annoyed. But I'm like, "Ok. There's something going on here. What is this?"

A: Right, like there's a reason that [she's] behaving this way.

GENEVIEVE: Right, right. And in fact yes, once I find—found out more about her, there are many reasons. But, you know, I still feel annoyed, cause I'm like, "obey the rules [laughs]. [it's like] sit in the chair!"

A: Which I guess is one of the reasons why you're a [long-term practicing] therapist and like you don't do CBT, is because it's not just behaviors, it's like "why are you doing this [laughs]—why are you acting this way?"

GENEVIEVE: Right, right. (first interview)

Genevieve acknowledges the nuance to which I alluded earlier: that positive regard is not equivalent to experiencing only positive emotions toward another. Rather, she gets "frustrated" and "really annoyed" by this client's insistence on knocking on the door. This acknowledgement is also why I include her voice in a section otherwise dedicated to Lydia's experience:

Genevieve's experience suggests that we can view positive regard not exclusively through the lens of "caring" or "prizing," to use Rogers's terms. Rather, for her, positive regard serves as a reminder that a client's behavior might be "telling [her] a lot," and to acknowledge that "there's something going on here" that she needs to understand.

I want to draw readers' attention to the coexistence of frustration and curiosity that Genevieve alludes to. Genevieve must hold both of these in her relationship with her client. And, to borrow one of Bernadette's earlier phrases, there is a bit of "song and dance" that goes into how she does this: she can't pretend the frustration doesn't exist, but neither can she let it overwhelm her sense of her client's humanity. She must be "appropriately critical," but she must also be willing to find out why the client does what she does: "I get really annoyed. But I'm like, 'Ok. There's something going on here. What is this?'" A stance informed by positive regard assumes that client has underlying reasons for her behavior, and that those are worth exploring. This anecdote illustrates the practicality of such a perspective. If Genevieve believes that the way for therapy to be successful is to explore the underlying reasons that people are the way they are, then it would behoove her to explore with them those underlying reasons, and not the surface-level behaviors.

### Concluding Thoughts: Taking a Generous Stance toward Students

It seems clear that for all the participants quoted in this chapter, it is essential to value the humanity of those they work with, and to demonstrate that value to those they work with. Relatedly, they all stress that it is important for students and clients to feel heard and taken seriously.

Their relationships with students and clients must demonstrate investment in their beliefs and ideas, and a willingness to see undesirable behavior as part of their humanity—perhaps even a crucial part. Furthermore, this attitude is a crucial part of working in a humanist way, as the alternative is to focus on behavior, and thus to be behaviorist.

There are two issues to address in this conclusion. First, what are the limits of positive regard? When might teachers not want to hold the complex position of “concerned about a behavior” but “affirming another’s humanity”? That is, are there times when a response informed by positive regard is unproductive? Second, what might a pedagogy informed by positive regard look like? What practices and policies are implied, and how would teachers develop it?

It is not always easy to take a generous stance toward students. Sometimes their lack of effort or investment can seem like a personal affront, and they might evince values that you detest. Which is to say, working with students can be difficult, exhausting work, and one reason to adopt person-centered theory is that it helps surface an aspect of teaching labor that, in my opinion, is somewhat invisible.

However, there is a difference between a scenario in which generosity is hard work and where one has to put aside fear—for one’s body, for example—or the needs of other students to be generous. To recall Lydia’s point, one prerequisite for positive regard is that the teacher feels safe. If the room didn’t feel safe for her to work, she would not have been able to do her job. The

same should apply in teaching: if meeting one-on-one with a student feels unsafe, the teacher should end it, and follow whatever institutional protocols are appropriate. Similarly, if other students in a group conference or in class feel unsafe, teachers should use their authority to make an appropriate administrative decision about the offending student.

This distinction touches on a point that is not central to this dissertation, but which is nevertheless important: the teacher's authority is itself a key tool for setting the boundaries, expectations, and course policies that lead to learning spaces in which everyone feels safe enough to take learning-related risks. This authority mediates relationships—both teacher-student and student-student—since it assigns roles and responsibilities and sets expectations. For example, a teacher might begin a conference by asking a student to explain what they think is working or not about their paper. This is essentially an impromptu reflective assignment: the student is being required to take a particular analytical stance toward their paper. One presumes that the teacher feels that this assignment will be helpful for the student's learning, and thus this use of authority seems at worst benign, and at best productive to learning.

The same authority is useful in a context in which one student threatens another, or threatens the teacher. Most teachers probably have a sense of what boundaries they would like students not to cross, and may even address these in policies laid out in their syllabus. My point here is that positive regard does not conflict with such policies, but is instead partly defined by them. Policies about what sorts of behavior and speech are acceptable in the classroom essentially lay out the teacher's vision for safe, productive learning conditions. Positive regard is possible within these conditions, but not outside them.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, demonstrations of generosity are major part of how Bernadette and Lydia work. For teachers, demonstrating interest when a student is

struggling with some aspect of writing can help students take seriously their own personal trouble with writing or school. Demonstrating sincere interest in students' ideas is a way of reflecting back that those ideas are worth taking seriously, and that what they have to say is worthwhile. Demonstrating interest can also be a way of making sure that those might not normally feel included in a particular space feel that they belong there.

A place to begin discussing how positive regard shapes pedagogy, especially in the context of composition's history, is the degree to which student ideas and goals are the focus of the classroom and the conference. It seems to me that writing teachers will always have to tack back and forth between their own vision, which might include for example the role of literacy in students' civic, professional, and intellectual lives, and what they understand to be students' visions. As historians of composition such as Sharon Crowley and Robert Connors have detailed, various philosophical orientations have at various times claimed the class as their own, and reshaped pedagogy to better fit their philosophical orientations. Crowley, for instance, writes that the process movement of the 1970s "intervened" in first-year composition by "reconfiguring" writing pedagogy to address a "self-directed student who would take control of his or her writing process"—as opposed to the "rule-bound," "grammar anxious" student that they believed was the subject of current traditional pedagogy (217). In this same vein, I observe that subsequently, some cultural studies theorists would intervene in composition pedagogy by arguing for an orientation toward the need to dismantle late stage capitalism and various malicious systemic social forces. A question that this procession of orientations has at least partly elided is, what do students think students need writing for? If we don't believe they have an answer to this—or at least not one we should seriously attend to—than person theory is not for us. However, if this answer to this question is worth listening to, then perhaps whatever orientation teachers bring to

class should not begin with pre-configured assumptions about who students are, what they want, and what will be good for them. Rather, students might participate in forming these assumptions.

To narrow my focus: there are a number of ways in which positive regard can inform conferences. The headline guideline might read, “allow students more space.” This means finding ways to permit and encourage students to explore, challenge, and develop ideas. In practice, this means mustering a sincere curiosity into the students’ thinking process. It also means—and perhaps this is the most difficult aspect—finding ways to resist overcorrecting and micromanaging ideas. That is, finding ways to resist asking students to think as you think. This does not mean not challenging students at all, of course. But practitioners should be mindful of where challenges come from. Successful positive regard, like the other intellectual tools discussed in this dissertation, depends on a good understanding of one’s relationships to others. Practitioners who cannot see that they speak dismissively or harbor the unconscious need to dominate students’ ideas will undoubtedly suffer gaps in a performance of positive regard. Challenges can be earnest contributions to a working alliance, or they can be underwritten by a need to demonstrate intellectual prowess and performance. The same is true in therapy, of course, which is why therapists are required to go to therapy themselves, and why a system of supervision exists in which new therapists are paired with more experienced practitioners to regularly review transcriptions or recordings of their work. Supervision allows therapists to identify moments in which they could have performed differently, and to improve in the future. I will discuss how composition may develop a similar practice in my conclusion.

Paradoxically, in conferences, positive regard might also mean acting *more* authoritatively. Students often worry that they need to figure out what teachers think in order to write. Taking this worry seriously is a form of positive regard, and one way to demonstrate that

one takes this worry seriously is through a willingness to be more explicit about conditions for students' success. Teachers might also offer a trade: a few minutes of discussing the assignment's requirements followed by a few minutes of idea exploration. Establishing firmer boundaries in this way can help free students to take risks.

Finally, positive regard meshed with MSJC helps verify that the dyadic work teachers do acknowledges and accounts for the role that various sociocultural factors play in shaping experience. As I've said, person-centered theory acknowledges only generally that therapists might harbor within themselves harmful views of others. A MSJC framework encourages a much more comprehensive acknowledgement and investigation of the differing worldviews between members of the dyadic pair. Using positive regard through a MSJC framework will assist teachers in demonstrating investment without flattening differences. By taking the time to investigate students' worldviews, teachers will be better able to account for what students find meaningful and to respect their individual complexities. Teachers who take the labor of self-awareness seriously might also learn ways that their beliefs preclude them from respecting certain types of experiences or worldviews, and work to change these beliefs. At the very least, such self-awareness will complicate their interpretations of student texts.

Other than grades, the most serious incentive for students to take the writing they do in school seriously might well be a trusted teacher's investment. If the writing teacher demonstrates that it is possible to see the student's work through a lens of curiosity and sincere interest, than perhaps the student should see it this way, too.



## CHAPTER VI.

CONCLUSIONS: HOW PERSON-CENTERED THEORY CAN POSITIVELY SHAPE THE  
CONDITIONS FOR LEARNINGOverview

I imagine that readers of this study have, at various times, wondered about the role of *writing* throughout. That is, I have focused heavily on the relationship between teacher and student, and I have nearly ignored texts and textual production. Given that I am writing about the teaching of composition, this might seem like a serious oversight.

My reason for this elision is that I wish to draw attention to the role of relationships in learning. A prior assumption that informs this project is that the teacher-student relationship is at the heart of learning. That is, one always teaches writing to *someone*, and we ignore this collision of subjectivities at our peril. To further clarify this point: this project does not take a stance with respect to what the content of composition should be. I argue that tools for doing dyadic work are important for teachers who believe that composition is a space in which students should develop critical consciousness, or who believe it is exclusively for what Stanley Fish (2009) calls “the craft” of writing—whatever that might be.

Another important aspect of this assumption that I hope has been clear is that this relationship is relevant across the types of assignments that students might work on in a writing class. That is, of course it is useful for teachers to be empathic and congruent when students discuss their personal experiences during the process of writing personal essays. However, the teacher-student relationship is also relevant when students work on assignments that privilege critical and rhetorical thinking. There is serious emotional and intellectual labor accompanying and guiding another’s mind as they struggle with a new argument, perspective, or theory. To put this in perspective, writing instructors with a WAC perspective will need to understand the

student's experience of varied genres and audiences, and will need to help students craft voices and stances that fit the disciplinary contexts in which they're working.

As I described in the first chapter, the composition literature did in the 1980s take up the notion that teaching involves considerable emotional and relational labor. However, perhaps because of the field's proximity to literature, the theories and tools through which they considered these notions were Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. I argue that this constitutes a missed opportunity, especially if composition conceptualizes education not as the neutral transition of knowledge from expert to novice. There is rigorous, challenging labor in guiding, and being with, a mind that struggles with, against, and for new ideas. Respecting this labor means constructing a pedagogy that acknowledges it, theorizes it, and provides for it.

### **Review and Summary of Findings**

This study has explored how writing teacher and therapist participants approach dyadic work, particularly with respect to whether person-centered theory's core concepts—congruence, empathy, and positive regard—fit with their practices. I have characterized the use of these core concepts as employing “intellectual tools.” Additionally, I have considered how person-centered theory's intellectual tools might be paired with a multicultural and social justice framework to produce a writing pedagogy that acknowledges and accounts for culturally sensitive and successful dyadic work. In this final chapter, I will summarize the conclusions I've drawn about my research questions based on my study's results. Then, I will discuss the overall implications of this research, as well as opportunities for future research.

***What are the significant similarities in how therapists and writing teachers report interrelating with clients and students respectively in dyadic settings?***

The main similarity I identified in this study is that writing teacher and therapist participants described approaching dyadic relationships as guided by similar values. For example, members of both participant groups named “empathy” as the most important value (see chapter four). Similarly, members of both groups expressed concern about creating safe, secure spaces in which to interact with others, and felt strongly about demonstrating to their dyadic partners that they were invested in their experiences (see chapter five). Even as the ends of therapy and writing instruction differ, participants agreed on conditions under which those ends should be accomplished. The explanation I would offer for this is that students and clients have in common that they are engaged in activity whose purpose is growthful change—intellectual, emotional, personal, etc.—and that there are conditions under which growthful change best occurs, such as those that participants identified.

The main implication of this finding is that writing and therapy do share similarities. Whereas the writing pedagogy literature that I reviewed in chapter one comprised a debate about if they had similar ends—i.e. if both were useful for student self-reflection—my finding suggests that they have similar means: teachers and therapist strive to create similar conditions for their respective work to take place.

***How are writing teachers already using the intellectual tools of person-centered theory (empathy, congruence, and positive regard) in writing conferences (even if they don't use the terms)?***

I concluded that writing teacher participants often did use some variation on one or more person-centered tools. Sometimes these tools were named explicitly, as was the case with Harris's use of empathy (chapter four). Sometimes they were based more on a feeling that some way of relating was productive, as was the case with the relationship between congruence and

Bernadette's concept of the "teaching instinct," in which teachers are honest and open with students (chapters three and five).

An equally important aspect of this finding was that teachers often self-theorized their ways into using ideas that look as though they might fit within person-centered theory. For example, Opal spoke of coming to an integrated, comfortable teaching identity after years of trial and error and Bernadette reported that she tried to avoid seeming ingenuine with her compliments, since she had disliked when teachers acted that way toward her when she was a student (chapter three).

This finding relates to the previous finding in that teacher participants seem invested in creating the conditions for growthful change, and their pseudo person-centered tools assist them in doing this. It should not come as a surprise that they stumbled upon practices that might fit within person-centered theory. Rogers framed his contribution to clinical theory as defining the conditions in which change is possible. According to my study's results, those changes are applicable to a pedagogical context, too.

***If writing teachers do report employing these intellectual tools, how do they alter them to fit writing-teacher specific needs?***

Writing teacher participants' dyadic work was shaped more by externalities than therapist participants'. For example, Harris commented that he must eventually steer conversations away from reflection toward writing for an audience, since that was one of his course goals (chapter four). Bernadette alluded to the role that grades play in her authority and in shaping student compliance (chapter five). Violet felt compelled to know more about genres and subject matter than student writers, which implies the need for content knowledge (chapter three). Such pressures mean that teachers would not be able to implement these tools as liberally as Rogers

perhaps intended; students will never be able to self-determine their education to the degree that clients self-determine their clinical experience. The existence of grades, assignments, evaluative feedback, and prescribed start and end times attest to this.

***How would intellectual tools for relating with others benefit teachers in their teacher-student relationships?***

My study finds that teachers might benefit from person-centered tools in several ways. To my mind, the most striking opportunity is fully theorizing empathy. This is an area in which both person-centered tools and MSJC could benefit teachers in ensuring that dyadic relationships accounted for the full complexity of student identities, helping teachers resist assumptions and universalizing experience, and resist flattening difference. Person-centered theory provides a more fully conceptualized vision of empathy, and the MSJC framework helps compensate for person-centered theory's blind spots vis-à-vis differences in worldview and subject position.

Another benefit would be in how teacher participants acknowledged and accounted for power asymmetries. As we saw in chapter three, therapist participants seemed better equipped to envision their role's authority as something they could use to create secure spaces in which growthful change could occur. Teacher participants, by contrast, seemed less comfortable in their roles, and it is possible that person-centered tools, particularly the notion of congruence, could admit more ease. Here, too, an MSJC framework would help, as it encourages practitioners to work toward self-awareness of their uneasinesses and discomforts with power.

***How might training in congruence, empathy, and positive regard inform how we train writing teachers to relate to students?***

The main finding with respect to how training might inform dyadic work is that writing teachers would have access to more fully theorized versions of the concepts they already claim

are important, such as empathy. In addition, since these concepts have been linked to growthful change in studies of clinical contexts, it is reasonable to think that they might similarly be linked to better learning in the classroom. Similarly, teachers identified student-teacher relationships as such an important part of their work, and learning concepts that would help them build, maintain, and repair those relationships would only seem to benefit their pedagogy.

To realize these benefits, pedagogical training would have to incorporate new practices and goals. Some basic examples would include literature on the concepts and class discussions about differing approaches and definitions, much as happens now in training programs that focus on evaluation, or teaching second-language learners. Ideally, teachers in training—beginning and professional development—would watch videos of dyadic interactions, discuss what they saw happening, and apply concepts from literature. It should be far easier to create writing conference training videos than therapy session videos, since HIPAA laws do not apply to the former. Writing Center training videos would not be ideal, since they're acted, and they do not recreate the teacher-student power dynamic, which is an important component of writing conferences.

Equally importantly, training in dyadic work continues after an initial training session. Ideally, writing programs would develop a process for writing teachers to receive regular feedback on their dyadic work with students. Currently, the most robust feedback institution within writing pedagogy is the student evaluation. Unfortunately, the second most robust feedback institution is probably Ratemyprofessor.com. While some institutions do perform observations, regular sustained observation (i.e. one or more every semester) and subsequent collaborative, nonevaluative feedback sessions are rare. Therapists, by comparison, work under clinical supervision, a process by which they meet regularly (i.e. as often as weekly) with a more experienced therapist to review their work. These sessions may include recordings or

transcriptions of sessions and reflective discussions. They focus on the therapist's professional, and possibly personal, development.

Ideally, new writing teachers would receive regular feedback from more experienced teachers. This might come in the form of observing a conference or class, or watching a video of a conference or class, followed by a discussion focused around how the teacher interrelated with students (and vice versa). The goal would be for teachers to gain insights into their patterns of relating, to bring into consciousness aspects of how they see and think about students that shape their teaching. Furthermore, these pairings could form an outlet for teachers frustrated with their work. Unlike many other work contexts, teaching is usually only indirectly collaborative: the bulk of the work is done alone, and the "collaborating" with peers done in halls and offices afterword. Paired peer reflections would provide teachers with a pseudo classroom colleague, with whom they could share materials, experiences, and feedback based on another party's observations of their actual interactions with students. Working with a supervisor, or even a peer reviewer, to process these interactions might provide a welcome source of clarity for otherwise opaque social encounters.

A final reason to consider this kind of training is that it formally acknowledges labor that teachers already do. It's not a controversial argument to say that pedagogical labor is not economically valued; even in the discipline of composition studies, it is a research degree that opens a path for a more stable job, increased income, and health benefits. (I make no arguments about improved hours.) If the composition labor market continues to be structured such that large numbers of teachers with little training teach courses whose position in the curriculum—required, first-year—imply that they cover basic, generalizable skills, then it seems unlikely that those teaching positions will become more economically valued. Finding ways to identify and

reify value would be a first step toward increasing the perception that teaching composition, and teaching generally, are complex, challenging skills.

### **Other Findings & General Implications**

By this point in this project, I hope that two points are quite clear. First: student-teacher relationships are worth analyzing and theorizing. The dyadic and classroom work that teacher participants have alluded to in this study are complex and nuanced, which is why teachers and therapists must take similar approaches and need similar tools. My goal in juxtaposing teachers and therapists has also been to emphasize the degree of dyadic labor that teaching entails; as the state of writing pedagogy manuals demonstrate, it is easy to overlook this aspect of teachers' work.

The first point leads to the second: it is worth composition's time and effort to draw on what clinical theory knows about dyadic relationships. I acknowledged in chapter one that, for a brief time, writing scholars did engage with therapy—or at least, an antiquated school of thought within therapy. Given that clinical theory's "social turn" occurred a decade *before* composition's, it's frustrating that writing scholars mostly drew on drive theorists Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in this moment in history. I selected person-centered theory and MSJC for this project because their ideas are relatable and contextually portable; however, even they are not the most recent contributions to knowledge about dyadic work. For writing scholars interested in exploring this area of teaching labor, newer methods of psychodynamic clinical practice might be quite useful, too. Regardless, it is time to revitalize this area of interdisciplinary research.

Third: a major focus of this dissertation has been how teaching and therapy are similar. I now wish to address important ways that I have found them to differ. If we think of these as social genres—that is, forms of social interactions that have been developed and formalized



through repetition—we can see some crucial distinctions in why the participants attend each, and what exigencies underwrite them. Writing conferences are shaped by a teacher’s role as evaluator. There is no way to step out of this role entirely, unless the student has the option to turn in no work and attend no classes and assign themselves whatever grade they wish.

Therapists certainly evaluate and make diagnostic decisions, but the evaluative infrastructure of education does not exist in therapy: there is no GPA, for example, no system of institutionally-endowed credits, no diplomas.

We can see this difference more clearly if we look at the social context that frames the teacher and therapist roles. Therapy is, in most cases, a market built on voluntary participation: clients go to therapy because they feel that something is wrong, and they are at least somewhat motivated to fix it.<sup>4</sup> Education, conversely, is coercive--and I do not just mean that writing classes are often required. College degrees still provide access to higher-paying jobs, and thus a higher standard of living: the U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2017 that the average salary for those with a high school degree was \$35,256 per year; \$41,496 for those with an associate’s; and \$59,124 per year for people with a bachelor’s. It’s fair to say that students don’t carry these numbers into conferences with them, but it’s also fair to say that do not experience education as the freely-chosen, self-determinative choice that therapy is. Student choices are shaped in subtle, implicit ways in education. The teaching role is embedded in this context, and to try to deny this—for instance, by insisting that a conference can be nondirective—rings incongruent.

These difference between teaching and therapy suggest that composition needs to develop a theory of teacher-student communication that acknowledges the specific context in

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<sup>4</sup> Instances of court-mandated therapy and nonvoluntary in-patient counseling do happen. However, the participants I worked with for this project work with clients who choose therapy of their own volition, and the vast majority of therapeutic encounters are similarly voluntary.

which it occurs. Interestingly, there are composition scholars who have drawn attention to the way social forms and genres shape talk and behavior. For example, Amy Devitt (2008) and Thomas Deans (2010) have used Carolyn Miller's (1984) rhetorical genre theory to explore how classroom activity is shaped by the context in which it occurs. This trajectory of scholarship attempts to systematize the classroom, or at least to map the various connections and relationships occurring within it. If one can understand how these relationships succeed or fail, one can learn something about what kind of pedagogical system succeeds. To my knowledge, this "macro" perspective does not have a "micro" counterpart: what role do teacher-student dyadic interactions play in learning, and what knowledge about speaking to students do teachers need to encourage learning?

More practically, theories of student-teacher interaction are important because writing teachers have to talk to students a lot. Understanding what students want to write about, what they want to accomplish in their writing, and the relationship between their thinking and writing are crucial aspects of writing pedagogy, perhaps to a greater degree than is true for other types of pedagogy. Additionally, writing teachers must often prepare qualified, individual feedback for students. This feedback is to some degree specific to a text, and to the student who wrote that text. Knowledge about communication would thus shape these responses, too.

In the remaining pages of this conclusion, I propose a writing pedagogy that integrates person-centered theory. While this project's thesis has been about convincing readers that such a project has merit, it now seems appropriate to briefly consider what this pedagogy would look like. In the interest of brevity, I focus primarily on how it would shape writing conferences, since those are the primary pedagogical dyadic contexts I am aware of.

### **A Person-Centered (Writing Conference) Pedagogy**

What would a writing conference that employs person-centered pedagogy look like?

On the one hand, not so dissimilar from writing conferences now: it involves a student and teacher sitting together, often with a student text, and a lot of talking about that text and the ideas and process that contributed to it.

A person-centered pedagogy would not contribute to a radically different writing conference structure or purpose. Rather, the major differences would be in how teachers approached and participated in talk about writing. Composition theory has long acknowledged that focusing on the writing process can be more productive than focusing on product. One approach the person-centered teacher would take is focusing on the student's writing process: to try to understand the idiosyncratic way in which each student produces texts. This is relevant for both person-centered theory and MSJC framework. Person-centered theory's tools help teachers better unpack the encounter--to acknowledge how the student's writing process is shaped by varying degrees of confidence in their abilities, by rich or impoverished conceptions of what is expected of them, by rich or impoverished understandings of the genres and social contexts in which they are working, and so on. By getting a sense of the various factors that shape the student's process, the teacher can have a better idea of the terms in which to frame responses, challenges, and encouragement. As readers might imagine by now, entering the student's perceptual frame implies empathy, and communicating in such a way that the student feels their perspective is being taken seriously implies positive regard. At the same time, the MSJC framework encourages teachers to be aware of how their own worldviews and values differ from the students'. This is beneficial in that it can help teachers notice conflicts and differences between the students' goals and their own. These can be directly addressed and worked through

so that teachers might get a better understanding of the mental work they will need to do to explain, listen, motivate, and challenge effectively.

Delving into the student's experience of writing in this way also entails encountering and acknowledging how students feel. This too is not radically different than what already happens in conference, though I would posit that under current pedagogical theory, teachers deal with how students feel in varied, and sometimes unconvincing, ways. Students will be bored, irritated, frustrated, and delighted—and any of these may be at odds with how the teacher feels.

Acknowledging and repairing conflicts that arise as a function of how everybody in the dyad feels might be an important part of curating a teacher-student relationship. Monitoring one's own feelings and actions toward students entails congruence-based practices.

Furthermore, implementing congruence-based practices would undoubtedly introduce some complicating variables for teachers. Observing that one's patterns of emotions shift when working with a student of a particular gender or background might feel troubling. These realizations might happen in subtle ways, too: the metamonitoring teacher might micro shifts in their thinking and speech depending on the student they're working with, and investigating the underlying causes for such shifts can be a difficult, painful endeavor. However, from both a person-centered perspective and a MSJC perspective, getting a handle on one's hang-ups, anxieties, and biases contributes to a more effective dyadic presence.

As I showed in chapter three, the issue of authority is particularly thorny for teachers—and person-centered theory offers less help in this vein than in others. In some way, teachers hold more power than therapists—or at least, there is typically less negotiation in the pedagogical dyad than in the clinical one. I claim this because of the existence of grades and other forms of evaluation, as well as the teacher's role in shaping assignments and deadlines. Perhaps a purely

Deweyan vision of education seems not to account for the institutional structure in which we work. This conflict is best illustrated by Lisa Delpit's (1995) response to James Gee's (1989) argument that composition should see literacy as political, and that teaching literacy involves reifying existing, asymmetrical power structures. Delpit is concerned that teachers should work to do exactly what Gee warns against. She sees providing access to the codes of power as liberating. The literature I surveyed for this dissertation repeatedly emphasized the importance of empathizing with students, of student-centered work, and so on—and yet it is clear that teachers have goals of their own to accomplish in the classroom. Such conflicts must manifest in dyadic work all the time. The anecdote with which I began this project is an example of one. I wanted Robby to learn rhetorical analysis. Robby hated the article he was supposed to analyze, and perhaps did not see any value in rhetorical analysis. In retrospect, there might have been a way to name this conflict and work at it directly. I speculate that such would be the product of an assessment of the *frame*, or context, in which dyadic work happens. This project has led me to become disinterested in troubling this frame. Rather, I argue that teachers could, to borrow Lydia's terms, use their authority *for* and *with* students.

One way to approach this stance is to imagine the ways that the various rigid structures that contribute to pedagogical authority might work in students' favors. For example, thinking of evaluation as a tool whose purpose should be productively challenging and encouraging students. From this perspective, evaluation does not work if students find it demoralizing, but does work if students find it motivating. Teasing out this relationship with students could helpfully underwrite how teachers conceive of evaluation.

In order for any of the above to be implemented, let alone work, teachers would need access to training and scholarship that support person-centered pedagogy. In these, pedagogy

could borrow nearly directly from clinical institutions: therapists-in-training read theory, watch recordings, and discuss cases, all of which teachers-in-training could do, too. Therapists also receive supervision as they begin practicing, as I discussed in the third and fifth chapters. Many writing programs already have observation programs. These could be converted into more robust instances of pedagogical reflection.

Finally, in an ideal world, writing teachers would have a body of scholarship on which to draw the conceptualized person-centered tools within a pedagogical context. This would mean returning to the intellectual moment that characterized the brief-lived turn to psychoanalytic theory in the 1980s; however, this time, scholars might branch further afield, considering the implications for composition of not only person-centered theory and MSJC, but other psychodynamic and subjectivity-sensitive practices, too.

In addition to considering a range of theories, more studies like this one are needed to make knowledge about teacher-student dyads. As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult to trace dyadic work except in studies that closely examine each participant's experience, which means more depth and less breadth. A critical mass of such studies can ultimately deliver breadth, provided that researchers assemble participant pools that represent perspectives that have previously been elided.

There is an opportunity here for collaboration between clinical therapy and composition. Clinical therapy offers concepts and tools for working with students, and composition offers concepts and tools for genre and literacy. Writing is an important part of clinical work and training, and there is reason to believe that a relationship between the fields could be mutually beneficial. Joint conference panels and polyvocal texts could productively explore this shared space.

### A Final Word

I began this project because I felt that a portion of the teaching labor required of me was not fleshed out in the composition literature. It seemed like some of the most important “heavy lifting” I did only related to writing tangentially; it was in trying to hear what students were saying, what they understood or did not, and how they understood. Furthermore, the work that I put into my responses to students, both in person and in writing, seemed to involve a lot more than my knowledge of writing or of the course. Rather, it entailed thinking about what sort of appeal would be most effective to a given student.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that I went looking for work on student-teacher relationships. As I noted earlier, there is some—but it is dated, and it does not comprise the sort of rich debate that I believe the subject deserves. One reason I focused this dissertation on person-centered theory is that I thought it would integrate well with what composition already espouses about teaching. It is not so far off from the “student-centered classroom,” which I take to be a familiar term for writing teachers and those familiar with the writing pedagogy literature. That said, there are many other approaches to relating that might be worth considering. Composition might “forage” in clinical psychology, as it has foraged in fields such as sociology, education, and philosophy, in the interest of unpacking this important aspect of teaching. This is not to say adopt wholesale. But, just as scholars like Paul Prior (1998) and David Russell (2003) have attempted to synthesize activity theory—a theory rooted in 20th century soviet psychology—with English and composition pedagogy, knowledge gleaned from clinical psychology would need to be adapted for composition purposes.

Whether theories are borrowed or made in-house, as it were, it seems important that all writing pedagogy include some focus on the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. To my

mind, the teacher-student relationship is the most important variable in the classroom. It shapes every aspect of the course. It is the mechanism through which students feel invited to fully participate in the learning process, or to resign in frustration from active participation. To ignore the relational aspect of teaching is to see writing as a behavior. To acknowledge it is to see writing as a human practice.



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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER &amp; RESEARCH MATERIALS

## University of New Hampshire

Research Integrity Services, Service Building  
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585  
Fax: 603-862-3564

26-Aug-2016

Cogbill, Adam  
English, Conant Hall  
18 oxford St  
Somerville, MA 02143

**IRB #:** 6528

**Study:** Working Alliances: How Concepts from Psychoanalytic Theory Can Inform Writing Instruction

**Approval Date:** 24-Aug-2016

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. This document is available at <http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources>. Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or [Julie.simpson@unh.edu](mailto:Julie.simpson@unh.edu). Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,



Julie F. Simpson  
Director

cc: File

Ortmeier, Christina

## Interview Protocols (Teacher)

### Guiding Questions for Interview #1

#### Questions about history

1. How did you get your start teaching?
- a. (and in what contexts)
2. Was there anything you believed about teaching when you first began that turned out to be not true/more complicated?
3. Has anything surprised you about teaching?
4. What kinds of things do you do now that you didn't do when you first started?
5. Have there been any major moments/realizations in your career that changed how your thinking about teaching?

#### Questions about general epistemology/values

1. If you had to describe the most important traits of a good writing teacher, what would they be?
2. Do you believe college writing classes should adhere to any particular overall purpose? If so, what?
- a. Alternatively, what goals do you set for your classes?
3. Has your teaching been influenced by anybody or anything in particular?
4. Has your thinking about the students you work with been influenced by anybody or anything in particular?
5. Do you believe that the teaching of writing holds any particular social value(s), i.e. do you see your job as important, and in what way?

### Guiding Questions for Interview #2

#### Questions about relationships with students (general)

1. I'm wondering about the role one-on-one writing conferences play in your classes. Are they important? Do you find them helpful?
2. What kinds of advantages, if any, do you believe working one-on-one with students provide you as a writing teacher?
3. Writing conferences have the potential, obviously, for much more interrelating than classroom time does: it's just you and the student, usually. Do you think this requires anything of you that "regular" teaching does not? (If so, what)?

#### Questions about relationships (post video stimulus)

1. I'm hoping we can start just by comparing your own writing conference practices to what we've just seen. Are there any outstanding similarities or differences?
2. What do you think of the way the teacher and the student were speaking to one another in this video, i.e. would you have done anything differently if you were the teacher? (*with this in mind*):
3. How would you describe your role in a writing conference?
4. How would you describe your students' roles?
5. Obviously, not every conference goes like the one we've just seen. Are there particular kinds of students or topics that you think you struggle with (and why)?

### Guiding Questions for Interview #3



This interview will likely begin with follow-up questions from interview #2. I will also introduce the second video stimulus, Carl Rogers's *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*, by explaining what it is and what it is used for (e.g. therapist training).

Questions about similarities and differences between therapeutic and pedagogic alliances (post video stimulus)

1. So, I acknowledged before we watched this video that it was for training therapists. But I'm wondering if you noticed any similarities between what you saw in the video and what you do in a writing conference?
  - a. Any differences?
2. Is there anything you saw the therapist do/say in this video that you think might productively inform your own conferences?
3. Is there anything you saw the therapist do/say in this video that, if you incorporated it, might harm your own conferences?
4. What, if anything, do you think student writers have anything in common with the client you saw in the video?
5. Does this comparison my questions have been drawing make you at all uncomfortable (and why/why not)?

Interview Protocols: Counselor

Guiding Questions for Interview #1

Questions about history

1. How did you get your start as a counselor?
  - a. (and in what contexts)
2. Was there anything you believed about counseling when you first began that turned out to be not true/more complicated?
3. Has anything surprised you about counseling?
4. What kinds of things do you do now that you didn't do when you first started?
5. Have there been any major moments/realizations in your career that changed how your thinking about counseling?

Questions about general epistemology/values

1. If you had to describe the most important traits of a good counselor what would they be?
2. Do you believe counseling should adhere to any particular overall purpose? If so, what?
  - a. Alternatively, do you set any particular kinds of goals for clients?
3. Has your counseling been influenced by anybody or anything in particular?
4. Has your thinking about the clients you work with been influenced by anybody or anything in particular?
5. Do you believe that counseling holds any particular social value(s), i.e. do you see your job as important, and in what ways?

Guiding Questions for Interview #2

Questions about relationships with clients (general)



3. Was there something you discussed that seemed particular positive/productive for the student (and why)?
4. Was there anything you discussed that seemed unsuccessful/unclear for the student (and why)?
5. How would you describe the effort the student has put in to this assignment so far?
6. Is there anything about your past experiences with this student that shaped this conference?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

#### Post-Writing Conference Survey (Student)

Feel free to continue any answer on the back of this sheet!

1. Generally, how do you think this conference went?
2. Has working one-on-one with your teacher been particularly rewarding or challenging in some way? If so, how and why?

3. Was there anything that came up during the conference that you think will be particularly helpful for you in the future (and why)?
  
4. Was there anything that seemed particularly unhelpful (and why)?
  
5. Has this assignment presented any particular challenges to you as a writer?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What do you think your teacher's impression is of your work on this paper so far?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

## Counselor Recruitment E-mail

Dear [subject's name],

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in an interview for my dissertation research project. The purpose of the project is to investigate whether or not the concept of the “working alliances” between therapists and clients is relevant for, and can inform, writing teachers. In particular, I am hoping to learn from your experience working one-on-one with people, and from your expertise on the role that relationships play in personal development. I believe that my field, Writing Studies, has a great deal to learn from your experience.

Participation in this study would involve three one-hour interviews. These interviews would take place at a time and place that is convenient for you, with the single caveat that I hope for intermissions between each session of no more than three days. We would discuss your professional work and your experiences, and the insights you've learned from both. I am cognizant that much of your experience with clients is restricted; however, I am nevertheless interested in generalizations and any personal observations you might have regarding the relationship that is central to therapy. Unfortunately, I am unable to provide any monetary reward for participating in this study.

I would be delighted to speak more with you about this study, and to address any concerns you might have about privacy, your rights as a participant, and why I believe this work is important. You may contact me at this e-mail address, or by phone at 610-986-8396, whenever is convenient.

Sincerely,

Adam P. Cogbill  
Doctoral Candidate  
Composition Studies  
University of New Hampshire

## Teacher Recruitment E-mail

Dear [subject's name],

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in an interview for my dissertation research project. The purpose of the project is to investigate if writing teachers can learn anything from the so-called “working alliances” that counselors form with their clients. More specifically, psychological research has indicated that within a clinical setting, relationships play a major role in intellectual development. I am hoping to learn if, or to what degree, the same is true during writing conferences.

Participation in this study would involve three one-hour interviews. These interviews would take place at a time and place that is most convenient for you, with the single caveat that I hope for intermissions between each session of no more than three days. We would discuss your experiences with teaching, writing

conferences, and what you have learned over the course of your career about working with students. Unfortunately, I am unable to provide any monetary reward for participating in this study.

I would be delighted to speak more with you about this study, and to address any concerns you might have about privacy, your rights as a participant, and why I believe this work is important. You may contact me at this e-mail address, or by phone at 610-986-8396, whenever is convenient.

Sincerely,

Adam P. Cogbill  
Doctoral Candidate  
Composition Studies  
University of New Hampshire

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORMS

### Consent Form C1: Consent to participate (Writing Teacher)

#### *Researcher and title of study*

My name is Adam Cogbill, and I am a 5th-year doctoral at the University of New Hampshire. My study, *Working Alliances: How Concepts from Psychoanalytic Theory Can Inform Writing Instruction*, is investigating whether or not writing teachers can benefit from becoming acquainted with how counselors communicate with clients.

#### *What is the purpose of this form?*

This consent form describes the research study and helps you to decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do in the study, about the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and about your rights as a research participant. You should:

- Read the information in this document carefully.
- Ask the research personnel any questions, particularly if you do not understand something.
- Not agree to participate until all your questions have been answered, or until you are sure that you want to.
- Understand that your participation in this study involves you participating in three interviews, each of which will last about an hour, and filling out a brief survey. In total, this should take about four hours.

#### *What is the purpose of this study?*

The purpose of this study is to learn if there are any similarities between how writing teachers and counselors communicate with students and clients respectively in one-on-one situations. This study will include eight participants, all of whom will be experienced practitioners (either counselors or writing teachers).

#### *What does your participation in this study involve?*

Participants will meet with me for three interviews, each of which will take about an hour. During the first interview, participants will fill out a brief survey, and then discuss how they came to their occupation, as well as their experiences as practitioners. The second interview, which will take place between one and three days later, will begin with a short video of a one-on-one writing conference. We will use this video as the basis for a 50-minute discussion of how you conduct conferences, as well as about your experiences working with students one-on-one generally. The final interview begins with a video used for training counselors (i.e. a therapy session). Then, in the remaining 50 minutes, we will discuss how the practices of writing conferences and therapy sessions converge and vary. I will also ask you to speculate about how the counseling techniques you see might be helpful or harmful in a writing instruction setting. In total, these interviews should take no more than 3 hours.

#### *What are the possible risks of participating in this study?*

Participation in this study might entail discussing tense or anxiety-inducing experiences participants may have had during their time teaching or counseling. I will maintain your anonymity when reporting my findings by changing your name and the names of institutions you work with and for.

#### *What are the possible benefits of participating in this study?*

You will have the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon your teaching experiences, and you may gain valuable insights into how you relate to students. These insights may productively inform your teaching in the future.

*If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?*

The only cost associated with participating in this study is time. The only cost associated with participating in this study is time. You will attend roughly 3 hours of interviews and meetings.

*Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?*

Unfortunately, no financial compensation is available for participating in this study.

*Do you have to take part in this study?*

Your consent to participate in this research is entirely voluntary. If you refuse to participate, you will not experience any penalty or negative consequences.

*Can you withdraw from this study?*

If you agree to participate in this study and you then change your mind, you may stop participating at any time. Any data collected as part of your participation will remain part of the study records.

*How will the confidentiality of your records be protected?*

I seek to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research.

There are, however, rare instances when I am required to share personally-identifiable information (e.g., according to policy, contract, regulation). For example, in response to a complaint about the research, officials at the University of New Hampshire, designees of the sponsor(s), and/or regulatory and oversight government agencies may access research data.

I am also required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

While I plan to maintain confidentiality of your responses, I also plan to publish my findings, which may include brief quotations of your language. It is therefore hypothetically possible that someone who knows you well might recognize you from reading my findings.

Interviews will be recorded on a password-protected laptop and then erased once they have been transcribed. Once transcribed, they will be secured on a password-protected hard drive that I will keep with me while on campus, and locked in a drawer in a desk while at home. I will employ pseudonyms when reporting data. Other than me, only my faculty advisor, Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper will have access to the data.

*Whom to contact if you have questions about this study*

If you have any questions pertaining to the research you can contact Adam Cogbill at (610) 986-8396 or apx44@wildcats.unh.edu, or Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper at christina.ormeier@unh.edu to discuss them.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you can contact Dr. Julie Simpson in UNH Research Integrity Services, 603/862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu to discuss them.

Yes, I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent/agree to participate in this research project.

No, I, \_\_\_\_\_ do not consent/agree to participate in this research project.



---

 Signature

---

 Date

### Consent Form C2: Consent to participate (Therapist)

#### *researcher and title of study*

My name is Adam Cogbill, and I am a 5th-year doctoral at the University of New Hampshire. My study, *Working Alliances: How Concepts from Psychoanalytic Theory Can Inform Writing Instruction*, investigates whether or not writing teachers can benefit from becoming acquainted with how therapists communicate with patients.

#### *What is the purpose of this form?*

This consent form describes the research study and helps you to decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do in the study, about the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and about your rights as a research participant. You should:

- Read the information in this document carefully.
- Ask the research personnel any questions, particularly if you do not understand something.
- Not agree to participate until all your questions have been answered, or until you are sure that you want to.
- Understand that your participation in this study involves you participating in three interviews, each of which will last about an hour, and filling out a brief survey. In total, this should take about four hours.

#### *What is the purpose of this study?*

The purpose of this study is to learn if there are any similarities between how writing teachers and counselors communicate with students and clients respectively in one-on-one situations. This study will include eight participants, all of whom will be experienced practitioners (either counselors or writing teachers).

#### *What does your participation in this study involve?*

Participants will meet with me for three interviews, each of which will take about an hour. During the first interview, participants will fill out a brief survey, and then discuss how they came to their occupation, as well as their experiences as practitioners. The second interview, which will take place between one and three days later, will begin with an excerpt of a counselor training video. We will use this video as the basis for a 50-minute discussion of how you approach counseling sessions, and with your experiences relating to clients generally. The final interview also begins with a video of a “writing conference,” a practice in writing courses when teachers meet with students one-on-one to discuss an essay. Then, in the remaining 50 minutes, we will discuss how the practices of writing conferences and therapy sessions converge and vary. I will also ask you to speculate as to what the two practices seem to have in common and where they diverge. In total, these interviews should take no more than 4 hours.

#### *What are the possible risks of participating in this study?*

Participation in this study might entail discussing tense or anxiety-inducing experiences participants may have had during their time as counselors. I will maintain your anonymity when reporting my findings by changing your name and the names of institutions you work with and for.

#### *What are the possible benefits of participating in this study?*

You will have the opportunity to reflect and discuss in depth your own experiences as a therapist. You may gain valuable insight into your relationships with patients.

*If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?*

The only cost associated with participating in this study is time. You will attend roughly 3 hours of interviews.

*Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?*

Unfortunately, no financial compensation is available for participating in this study.

*Do you have to take part in this study?*

Your consent to participate in this research is entirely voluntary. If you refuse to participate, you will not experience any penalty or negative consequences.

*Can you withdraw from this study?*

If you agree to participate in this study and you then change your mind, you may stop participating at any time. Any data collected as part of your participation will remain part of the study records.

*How will the confidentiality of your records be protected?*

I seek to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research.

There are, however, rare instances when I am required to share personally-identifiable information (e.g., according to policy, contract, regulation). For example, in response to a complaint about the research, officials at the University of New Hampshire, designees of the sponsor(s), and/or regulatory and oversight government agencies may access research data.

I am also required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

While I plan to maintain confidentiality of your responses, I also plan to publish my findings, which may include brief quotations of your language. It is therefore hypothetically possible that someone who knows you well might recognize you from reading my findings.

Interviews will be recorded on a password-protected laptop and then erased once they have been transcribed. Once transcribed, they will be secured on a password-protected hard drive that I will keep with me while on campus, and locked in a drawer in a desk while at home. I will employ pseudonyms when reporting data. Other than me, only my faculty advisor, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper will have access to the data.

*Whom to contact if you have questions about this study*

If you have any questions pertaining to the research you can contact Adam Cogbill at (610) 986-8396 or apx44@wildcats.unh.edu (to discuss them).

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you can contact Dr. Julie Simpson in UNH Research Integrity Services, 603/862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu to discuss them.

Yes, I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent/agree to participate in this research project.

No, I, \_\_\_\_\_ do not consent/agree to participate in this research project.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

Date

Consent Form C4: Writing conference videorecording (teacher)

*researcher and title of study*

My name is Adam Cogbill, and I am a 5<sup>th</sup>-year doctoral at the University of New Hampshire. My study, Working Alliances: How Concepts from Psychoanalytic Theory Can Inform Writing Instruction, is investigating whether or not writing teachers can benefit from becoming acquainted with how counselors communicate with clients.

*What is the purpose of this form?*

This consent form describes the research study and helps you to decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do in the study, about the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and about your rights as a research participant. You should:

- Read the information in this document carefully.
- Ask the research personnel any questions, particularly if you do not understand something.
- Not agree to participate until all your questions have been answered, or until you are sure that you want to.
- Understand that your participation in this study involves you participating in three interviews, each of which will last about an hour, and filling out a brief survey. In total, this should take about four hours.

*What is the purpose of this study?*

The purpose of this study is to learn if there are any similarities between how writing teachers and counselors communicate with students and clients respectively in one-on-one situations.

*What does your participation in this study involve?*

One of the writing conferences for your writing course will be recorded and you will fill out a brief survey. This videotape will then be seen and discussed by four different writing teachers, four professional counselors or therapists, and me. I may share some of the survey responses with other participants.

*What are the possible risks of participating in this study?*

It is **likely** that you will be recognized by some of the other study participants, as some work in the same department. However, when reporting on data, I will protect your confidentiality by changing your name, your student's name, and your institution's name.

Your student will not be given access to your survey comments. Video recordings of conferences will be erased after I complete my interviews. Survey data will be digitized and stored on a hard drive, which will be locked in a desk at my home in Somerville, MA. Hard copies of these surveys will be shredded after they have been digitized.

*What are the possible benefits of participating in this study?*

You will be contributing to what we know about good teaching practices.

*If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?*

There is no cost to participating in this study.

*Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?*

Unfortunately, no financial compensation is available for participating in this study.

*Do you have to take part in this study?*

Your consent to participate in this research is entirely voluntary. If you refuse to participate, you will not experience any penalty or negative consequences.

*Can you withdraw from this study?*

If you agree to participate in this study and you then change your mind, you may stop participating at any time. Any data collected as part of your participation will remain part of the study records.

*How will the confidentiality of your records be protected?*

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I am also required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

While I plan to maintain confidentiality of your responses, I also plan to publish my findings, which may include brief quotations of your language. It is therefore hypothetically possible that someone who knows you well might recognize you from reading my findings.

Video recordings of conferences will be erased after I complete my interviews. Survey data will be digitized and stored on a hard drive, which will be locked in a desk at my home; I will delete these once I have finished my dissertation (estimated September 2017). Hard copies of these surveys will be shredded after they have been digitized. Other than me, only my faculty advisor, Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper will have access to the data.

*Whom to contact if you have questions about this study*

If you have any questions pertaining to the research you can contact Adam Cogbill at (610) 986-8396 or apx44@wildcats.unh.edu, or Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper at christina.ormeier@unh.edu to discuss them.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you can contact Dr. Julie Simpson in UNH Research Integrity Services, 603/862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu to discuss them.

Yes, I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent/agree to participate in this research project.

No, I, \_\_\_\_\_ do not consent/agree to participate in this research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Consent Form C4: Writing conference videorecording (Teacher)

*researcher and title of study*

My name is Adam Cogbill, and I am a 5th-year doctoral at the University of New Hampshire. My study, Working Alliances: How Concepts from Psychoanalytic Theory Can Inform Writing Instruction, is investigating whether or not writing teachers can benefit from becoming acquainted with how counselors communicate with clients.

*What is the purpose of this form?*

This consent form describes the research study and helps you to decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do in the study, about the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and about your rights as a research participant. You should:

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- Understand that your participation in this study involves you participating in three interviews, each of which will last about an hour, and filling out a brief survey. In total, this should take about four hours.

*What is the purpose of this study?*

The purpose of this study is to learn if there are any similarities between how writing teachers and counselors communicate with students and clients respectively in one-on-one situations.

*What does your participation in this study involve?*

One of the writing conferences for your writing course will be recorded and you will fill out a brief survey. This videotape will then be seen and discussed by four different writing teachers, four professional counselors or therapists, and me. I may share some of the survey responses with other participants.

*What are the possible risks of participating in this study?*

It is likely that you will be recognized by some of the other study participants, as some work in the same department. However, when reporting on data, I will protect your confidentiality by changing your name, your student's name, and your institution's name. Your student will not be given access to your survey comments.

*What are the possible risks of participating in this study?*

You will be contributing to what we know about good teaching practices.

*If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?*

There is no cost to participating in this study.

*Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?*

Unfortunately, no financial compensation is available for participating in this study.

*Do you have to take part in this study?*

Your consent to participate in this research is entirely voluntary. If you refuse to participate, you will not experience any penalty or negative consequences.

*Can you withdraw from this study?*

If you agree to participate in this study and you then change your mind, you may stop participating at any time. Any data collected as part of your participation will remain part of the study records.

*How will the confidentiality of your records be protected?*

I seek to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research.

There are, however, rare instances when I am required to share personally-identifiable information (e.g., according to policy, contract, regulation). For example, in response to a complaint about the research,

officials at the University of New Hampshire, designees of the sponsor(s), and/or regulatory and oversight government agencies may access research data.

I am also required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

While I plan to maintain confidentiality of your responses, I also plan to publish my findings, which may include brief quotations of your language. It is therefore hypothetically possible that someone who knows you well might recognize you from reading my findings.

Video recordings of conferences will be erased after I complete my interviews. Survey data will be digitized and stored on a hard drive, which will be locked in a desk at my home; I will delete these once I have finished my dissertation (estimated September 2017). Hard copies of these surveys will be shredded after they have been digitized. Other than me, only my faculty advisor, Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper will have access to the data.

*Whom to contact if you have questions about this study*

If you have any questions pertaining to the research you can contact Adam Cogbill at (610) 986-8396 or apx44@wildcats.unh.edu, or Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper at christina.ormeier@unh.edu to discuss them.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you can contact Dr. Julie Simpson in UNH Research Integrity Services, 603/862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu to discuss them.

Yes, I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent/agree to participate in this research project.

No, I, \_\_\_\_\_ do not consent/agree to participate in this research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date