

# DEVELOPING GENERATIVE DISPOSITIONS TOWARDS WRITING THROUGH MICRO-COACHING: RESULTS FROM A DISPOSITIONS AWARENESS STUDY

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## Abstract

Building off of scholarship on transfer in writing centers, this study aims to determine whether raising students' metacognitive awareness of their dispositions towards writing through a strategy we've named, micro-coaching, would affect those dispositions. This article reports on the survey, interview and coaching processes we utilized in working with students enrolled in a pre-core composition course. Findings suggest that coaches used a simple four-step process to infuse conversations with micro-coaching and that student participants utilized the strategies coaches suggested. Additionally, participants' self-efficacy in writing increased by the end of the semester. Our discussion highlights moments where this method yielded positive results and suggests ways micro-coaching could be utilized in and out of writing center contexts. Ultimately, we conclude that the micro-coaching methodology used in our study has wide-reaching potential to help students in various environments develop more generative dispositions towards writing.

Writing center scholars have become increasingly interested in the intersection of writing transfer studies and writing center programs, pedagogy, and research, especially in the last five years (Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg; Devet; Devet and Driscoll; Hill, "Tutoring for Transfer," "Transfer Theory"). We (your coauthors) agree that writing centers have a lot to offer and learn from writing transfer studies. Of the complex factors that contribute to students' ability to successfully transfer, we are most interested in how writing support programs can foster students' dispositions towards writing.<sup>1</sup> Dispositions, as defined by Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells are "individual, internal [psychological] characteristic[s]" such as self-efficacy, self-regulation, attribution, and value.<sup>2</sup> Both Driscoll and Wells' "Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions" and Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger's "How Students Perceive Transitions: Dispositions and Transfer in Internships," found that students' dispositions impacted their ability to transfer writing from one context to another. In our own experience, though we think many of you will agree, tutors often counsel writers in ways that could impact their dispositions towards writing. Take this classic scenario, for instance:

a writer comes to their first tutorial and opens by saying "I'm a terrible writer." We've all experienced this. How did you respond? How do your tutors respond? It's likely you, like us, work on building the writer's self-efficacy.

In the current study, we focus on self-efficacy and self-regulation, in part due to the advice Driscoll et al. offer in "Down the Rabbit Hole: Challenges and Methodological Recommendations in Researching Writing-Related Student Dispositions." They suggest focusing on one or two dispositions at a time in research design and/or in data analysis. We also chose to focus on self-efficacy and self-regulation because of their interwoven nature. Albert Bandura defines self-efficacy as "people's beliefs in their abilities to produce given attainments" (307). In the context of learning to write, self-efficacy can be understood as a writer's belief that they can engage in the process of writing and produce a composition. Self-regulation, on the other hand, "refers to the process by which learners personally activate and sustain cognitions, affects, and behaviors that are systematically oriented toward the attainment of learning goals" (Schunk and Zimmerman, vii). In the context of learning to write, self-regulation can be understood as the choices writers make to ensure that writing happens. These choices include everything from managing distractions to strategically choosing a topic they're interested in to engaging in healthy work habits. Frank Pajares, in "Motivational Role of Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Self-Regulated Learning," synthesizes the research on the interconnectedness of self-efficacy and self-regulation: "Students who believe they are capable of performing academic tasks use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and, regardless of previous achievement or ability, they work harder, persist longer, and persevere in the face of adversity" (119-120). In other words, a student who believes they can successfully write a paper for class will have more motivation to try different strategies to complete the paper than a student who doubts that they can successfully write.

As we noted above, tutors often play a key role in helping students build self-efficacy and self-regulation. However, the research about the specific strategies tutors use and their measurable outcomes is still nascent, though growing. In “Transfer and Dispositions in Writing Centers: A Cross-Institutional, Mixed-Methods Study,” Pam Bromley, Kara Northway, and Eliana Schonberg focused on measuring outcomes by asking students to complete exit surveys and participate in focus groups about students’ perceptions and experiences of transfer. They found that students at three institutions gained self-efficacy and “metacognitive awareness of their abilities as writers” in their learning and writing development as a result of tutoring. Another study found that students with lower self-efficacy were more likely to visit the Writing Center and students who visited the Writing Center were more likely to earn a higher grade in their writing class (Williams and Takaku). These studies brilliantly demonstrate the efficacy of tutoring and even offer some evidence in its ability to positively impact transfer; and at the same time, they focus on outcomes of tutoring, broadly, rather than specific tutoring strategies.

Writing center scholars have studied specific tutoring strategies. Perhaps most well-known is Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson’s, *Talk about Writing*, in which they systematically studied the discourse of writing center tutorials. Their three broad coding categories—instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding—can be taught as strategies in tutor education. In her earlier article, “Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor’s Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies,” Thompson examines the efficacy of tutoring strategies and their effect on student writers. Thompson suggests that the way tutors implement directive, motivational, and cognitive scaffolding during tutoring sessions can increase students’ metacognitive awareness and engagement with their writing. Rebecca Block’s “Disruptive Design: An Empirical Study of Reading Aloud in the Writing Center” is another well-known piece that explores specific tutoring strategies and their outcomes. In this article, Block utilizes empirical research strategies to analyze the efficacy of having students read their papers aloud, a widely-believed best practice that has long been part of writing center lore. Block posits a tutoring method she names “point-predict” wherein tutors take the role of reader and attempt to clarify to the author how meaning is understood and interpreted from a reader’s perspective. Though Block urges scholars to replicate the study to further test the effectiveness of the point-predict

tutoring strategy, this study is a helpful example of how a tutoring strategy can be measured. While these studies are careful not to claim that the strategies tested absolutely lead to the outcomes observed, they do demonstrate ways scholars have tested tutoring strategies.

Similarly, the current study seeks to identify if one intervention might have a positive effect on students’ self-efficacy and self-regulation. The encouraging results of the studies cited above make us wonder which parts of tutoring are key to boosting writers’ self-efficacy. Though it’s difficult to isolate just one part of tutoring, we attempt to do just that by taking the writing out of the interaction and focusing the interaction on students’ dispositions. Metacognition—or a learner’s awareness of their thinking—about writing dispositions is an understudied corner of transfer studies. Preliminary evidence from Kelsey Hixson-Bowles’ *Laying the Groundwork for Transfer: A Case Study Exploring the Impact of Strengths-Based Pedagogy on Students’ Writing-Related Dispositions* indicated that increasing students’ metacognitive awareness of qualities that contribute to success and thinking strategically about how to apply those qualities may help develop students’ generative dispositions<sup>3</sup> towards writing. Though Hixson-Bowles observed students being coached with Gallup’s Strengths program, it is possible that writing center pedagogy could also help writers become more aware of their dispositions towards writing.

Another study that helps us understand how metacognition of dispositions works is Driscoll and Roger Powell’s “States, Traits, and Dispositions: The Impact of Emotion on Writing Development and Writing Transfer Across College Courses and Beyond,” which explored writers’ emotions and emotional dispositions. Driscoll and Powell found that some participants managed the emotions stirred up by the writing process better than others. They called this group “emotional managers.” Emotional managers demonstrated metacognition about their emotions and emotional dispositions, helping them better manage disruptive emotions that occurred during the writing process. It is likely that tutors intuitively help writers learn and practice emotional management around writing when using motivational scaffolding strategies, such as the ones identified in Mackiewicz and Thompson’s *Talk about Writing*. But what about other dispositions such as self-efficacy and self-regulation? Do tutors help writers build metacognition of other dispositions towards writing? To begin to answer these questions, we tested an intervention designed to help writers become more aware of their self-efficacy and self-regulation to see if this awareness helped improve

their dispositions towards writing over the course of a semester. The following research question guided our study:

What impact does metacognitive awareness of and peer-coaching around students' self-regulation and self-efficacy in writing have on students taking pre-core English courses?

In addition to reporting our findings in this article, we'll also share our experience of conducting the study as an admin/undergraduate research team. At the start of the study, Kelsey was the Writing Center Coordinator (a full-time, staff position) and moved into a tenure-track professor position during the study. Led by Kelsey, Hayden, Jessica, and Konnor acted in the dual roles of undergraduate researcher and peer coach throughout the study. Though all three were tutors at the start of the study, they each graduated while we worked to complete our analysis and write-up. We have learned a great deal about how to collaborate on a research project together and believe that our experiences in designing and enacting the study could serve as a useful model for other administrator/tutor research teams. In what follows, we describe how our research team formed, how we recruited students for the study, the survey they took, the interviews we conducted, how we analyzed the data, and the relevant context for the study.

## Methodology

This project grew out of Kelsey's dissertation research as well as writing fellow program assessment based on students' self-efficacy in writing. Hayden, Jessica, and Konnor were writing fellows in the program Kelsey directed and tutors in the writing center. Kelsey sought out these three because they were highly engaged in staff education meetings about transfer and dispositions towards writing, expressed interest or were in the process of applying to graduate programs and wanted research experience, and were exceptionally reliable employees. In short, they had the interest, motivation, and skill set to participate in a collaborative research project. Readers interested in collaborating with tutors on research projects might also consider putting out a general call to their staff (a more democratic process) or facilitate an inquiry-based invention activity in a staff meeting to see what research questions tutors are most interested in pursuing and build from there (a more student-centered process). The nature of the mentoring and collaboration will shift depending on how the project originates. The dynamics of our team were impacted by the fact that the project originated with Kelsey, and she sought the help of

Hayden, Jessica, and Konnor. Whereas in a student-led research project, the priority would likely be the student's growth as a researcher, our project prioritized conducting sound research, and the tutors' growth as researchers was a means to that end.

Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, we collected survey responses from our participants and conducted interviews/coaching sessions with them at the beginning and end of a semester. We determined that a case study methodology was appropriate to our study as it would allow us to observe the efficacy of our intervention and coaching strategies. Not only did we use multiple data collection tools (survey and interview), we also analyzed the data from the perspective of the student-participants as well as the research assistants. Furthermore, we knew that recruiting and retaining pre-core writing students in a semester-long study would be challenging. The case study methodology allowed for us to focus on the few individuals we recruited, seeking in-depth understanding of the students' experiences of our intervention. Our goal was not to make broad generalizations about the impact of our intervention on this population. Rather, our case study approach allowed us to explore the potential of our proposed intervention, learning what—if anything—might be transferable to other contexts.

Similarly, we hope this study serves as a model for other writing center professionals and tutors to use when embarking on collaborative research together. Though Kelsey initially recruited Hayden, Jessica, and Konnor to collaborate, they were highly involved in the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting. Research assistants completed CITI training alongside drafting the IRB (#418). The research team met weekly prior to collecting data to learn key research skills like ethical recruitment, interviewing and communication strategies as well as helping to produce documents like a grant proposal, interview scripts, etc. In between meetings, research assistants read scholarship on writing dispositions and methodology. It is important to note that this was a relatively resource-intensive process. We were able to complete this work with the support of our colleagues and a grant that compensated research assistants and participants. For folks interested in pursuing collaborative research like this, we recommend finding resources like grant money, utilizing independent studies, and/or strategically planning for specific research activities to take place during less-demanding times of the academic year.

In what follows, we describe the study's context, participants, intervention, survey instrument,

procedure, data analysis, and limitations with enough detail to support replication.

## Context and Participants

This study was conducted at an open-enrollment university located in the Western United States during the Spring 2020 semester. At the outset of the study, recruitment and initial interviews were conducted face-to-face. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, however, university and study activities transitioned to an online format. Participants were recruited from two sections of one of the University's<sup>4</sup> pre-core writing courses.

### *Participants*

Two participants completed the study, though more initially signed up. Research assistants recruited individuals by visiting the class and explaining the study. Those who completed the study were offered a \$25 gift card for their participation. Initially, nine students expressed interest in participating in the study. Three students completed the first interview, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic and an inability to contact one participant (whose data has been excluded), only two participants completed the entirety of the study. Unfortunately, low participation rates are common in this particular student population.

Both participants are single males attending college in pursuit of undergraduate degrees and have been given pseudonyms. At the time of the study, Colton was a single,<sup>5</sup> white male between the ages of 23-27. He was in the second semester of his first year at the University with plans to pursue a degree in sports medicine. In addition to attending school full-time, Colton indicated that he worked part-time (11-20 hours per week) and was on the University's lacrosse team. Colton decided to attend the University because of its status as an open-enrollment university. In his pre- and post-surveys, Colton reported that both of his parents had received a degree/certificate beyond a high school diploma/GED; though, due to a discrepancy between Colton's pre- and post- survey responses, we are unsure if his parents both earned bachelor's degrees or career/technical certificates.

Nathan was also a college student in the second semester of his first year at the time of the study. According to the demographic information from his pre-survey, he is a single, Mexican male between the ages of 18-22. Both of his parents possess Bachelor's degrees, and one of them went on to get their Master's degree. Nathan chose to attend the University primarily because of their architecture program, which he hopes to participate in after earning his Bachelor's degree.

## Intervention and Survey Instrument

The intervention consisted of a two-step process repeated once towards the beginning of the semester and once towards the end of the semester. The study participants were both asked to take a 5-minute survey which utilized an amended version of the self-efficacy scale Katherine Schmidt and Joel Alexander developed in "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writerly Self-Efficacy in Writing Centers"—as well as demographic information (see Appendix B). We amended the scale by shortening it from 20 questions to the 16 that focused on self-regulation tasks as well as other dispositions (such as attribution and value). Students rated on a scale of 0-10 how confident they felt in their abilities to complete 16 writing-related tasks such as:

- I can articulate my strengths and challenges as a writer.
- I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will not be graded.

Students completed this survey on their own before meeting with a research assistant for an interview.

To observe the impact of increasing students' awareness of their dispositions toward writing, we infused the interview format with elements of coaching. This hybrid approach was important to gather the context necessary to best inform the research assistants' coaching decisions while also allowing the students to reflect on some of their dispositions towards writing (see Appendix C). The interview/coaching sessions were scheduled after the participants had taken the self-efficacy survey so that research assistants could review participants' responses and chose three items from the scale to bring up in the session. In addition to the interview scripts, which included guidance for how to approach talking about low and high self-efficacy scores, each research assistant formulated their own method for choosing which responses to focus on and both determined the responses prior to each meeting.

Jessica's methodology in selecting responses was to find three categories in which Colton rated himself the lowest. Since there were multiple responses with the same lowest rating, Jessica selected questions that covered a wide range of subject matter. Hayden's methodology for determining responses for discussion in the first interview involved choosing a spread of survey responses from the high, low, and middle scores. Hayden decided to focus on three questions in the initial interview: one among the highest scores, one among the lowest, and one in the middle. For the

middle score, Hayden chose a response to a question covering a topic different from the high and low score responses that had already been chosen.

When selecting responses to discuss from the post-surveys, both Hayden and Jessica chose three responses where the most change could be seen between the pre- and post-surveys. Jessica, however, also prioritized responses revisiting topics discussed in the first interview, where Colton had also made significant improvements in terms of self-efficacy scores.

In addition to the interview scripts, research assistants also prepared through a series of training sessions and practice interviews. Training sessions consisted of reading scholarship on dispositions towards writing, sound methodology practices, and possible responses to low, medium, and high self-efficacy to the various tasks on the survey. Research assistants also practiced the interview/coaching sessions with colleagues in the Writing Center who offered to take the survey and be interviewed.

## **Procedure**

To address the imbalance of power between staff/faculty researcher and student participants, the research assistants recruited, maintained contact with, and interviewed the participants. Towards the beginning of the semester, research assistants visited two pre-core writing courses at the University to explain the purpose of the research, what participation entailed, how the data would be handled, and how participants would be compensated. The professors were asked to step outside of the room so students could ask questions freely and choose to participate or not without the perceived influence of their professor. Students who opted into the study signed consent forms and were later contacted by a research assistant.

Participants were then guided to complete the first survey and schedule a 30-minute interview/coaching-session combo with a research assistant. The early-semester interviews took place in a study room in the University library. In these one-on-one interviews, students were asked questions about their attitudes and past experiences with formal and informal writing education. Then, the research assistant shared the results of the student's self-regulation and self-efficacy in writing scale and explained that these results are not fixed and do not predict their overall writing abilities. Rather, the results offer a snapshot of where the student was when they took the survey. The research assistants then offered strategies for feeling more confident in writing and with managing their writing processes, among other things related to self-regulation. In cases

where a student exhibited high confidence in an area, the research assistant and student discussed what factors and/or strategies bolstered their confidence and self-efficacy as well as discussed strategies for maintaining them.

After completing the first interview, participants were not tracked or contacted until the end of the semester to complete the second survey and interview. Upon completing the second survey, student participants arranged another corresponding interview/coaching-session combo. Due to policy changes related to COVID-19, interviews took place via Google Voice. During this second interview, the research assistants asked how the students felt about their semester overall and again discussed survey results, this time comparing them to the previous survey. Participants were also asked to reflect on what learning and writing strategies they utilized throughout the semester and how those impacted their confidence and success in the class. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for coding.

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed using an AI-powered tool first, and later verified by the research assistants. Following the transcription process, we each completed several read-throughs of the interviews in order to conduct a thematic analysis. During these preliminary read-throughs, we sought to familiarize ourselves with the content of the interviews as well as note salient patterns. Each of us made notes of what we noticed in the four interviews before meeting to compare notes. When we met, we discussed our individual observations, noting when they overlapped. Using the collective patterns that emerged, we collaboratively wrote rich descriptions of each participants' trajectory through the semester. Maintaining a holistic overview of the emerging in-case and cross-case themes was prioritized to allow for a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, we analyzed the coaching strategies Hayden and Jessica implemented throughout their interviews and the effectiveness of those strategies. Patterns ultimately emerged that allowed us to create a method that may be useful in other contexts where writing instruction takes place.

## **Limitations**

Our study was limited by both internal and external factors. Our positionalities limited the research. For instance, none of us took pre-core writing courses in our undergraduate education. Though we had some gender diversity on our team, we are all white in a

predominantly white institution. While Konnor is bilingual, Kelsey, Hayden, and Jessica are monolingual. These identity factors likely shaped our assumptions throughout the research process. For instance, if we were to replicate this study, we would ask participants more about their language practices outside of the context of formal education.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic created unexpected challenges in the design, facilitation, and analysis of the study. Study participants may have experienced stressors outside of the ordinary, which may have affected study results. In mid-March of 2020 (a period between the pre- and post-interviews), the University transitioned face-to-face classes into an online format. As such, researchers and participants alike had to adjust to remotely conducting the research. Final interviews were conducted remotely, using Google Voice. We completed the study analysis remotely, using video conferencing technology.

Even outside the conditions of the pandemic, recruitment and retention of students in pre-core writing courses is challenging. This population is absolutely worth learning more about, which is why we chose to keep the study participants limited to pre-core writing students, despite the challenges and likelihood of low participation and completion. This study could easily be replicated with different populations with higher participation and completion rates.

## Results

This section covers three elements of our results: Colton's and Nathan's cases and patterns we observed in the research assistants' coaching methods. We begin by describing Colton's and Nathan's cases by discussing their pre- and post-survey results as well as the salient themes from their interviews.

### *Colton*

When responding to the sixteen self-efficacy questions on the pre-survey, Colton had an overall average of 6.44 and a median score of 6. The first interview was scheduled for a week after Colton responded to the pre-survey and took place in a study room in the University library. During the interview, Jessica and Colton discussed Colton's previous experiences with writing and various strengths and challenges he had experienced and/or was currently experiencing. They also delved further into four sub-topics from the survey:

1. I can articulate my strengths and weaknesses as a writer (6/10)

2. I can usually find something that interests me in my writing assignments (7/10)
3. I can map out the structure and main sections of an essay before writing the first draft (6/10)
4. I can find ways to concentrate even when there are distractions around me (6/10)

In the interview, Colton mentioned that he is more aware of what his weaknesses are when it comes to writing but has difficulty identifying his strengths. Colton admitted, "... I know everything I, I struggle with. I just don't know what my strengths are yet."<sup>6</sup> When Jessica asked Colton if he has received a lot of feedback on his writing, Colton explained that he has not. One strategy Jessica offered here is for Colton to be proactive and ask for feedback from peer reviewers, writing tutors, and professors, especially to help him determine what he is doing well in his writing.

When discussing his pre-writing strategies, Colton explained that he maps everything out in his mind before committing his idea to paper but has never had much success with outlining. He further explained, "...it's just not as good when I [outline]... if I write an outline, it doesn't really head the way I want it, but if it's up in, in my mind, I can just, I can just have it go off." In response, Jessica did not offer any particular strategy but validated Colton's approach and encouraged him to use the strategies that work best for him.

In terms of minimizing distraction, Colton talked about several strategies he adopted to stay focused on his schoolwork, including doing homework in a quiet, secluded area of the University library. He noted, "Because I'm one of those guys who just kind of gets distracted easily. Like when someone is walking by I'm like, 'Oh, okay, who's that?' You know, or 'what's he doing?' I just get distracted in that way." Jessica validated Colton's strategy of minimizing distraction and reiterated the importance of intentionally doing so.

Lastly, when talking about finding interest in writing, Colton cited only one experience where he liked writing and chose to do so out of personal interest rather than obligation. While serving a religious mission, Colton explained that he kept a daily journal and liked to write because he enjoyed the experiences he was writing about. However, he explained that he has not kept up the habit since returning home and also added, "I don't just go write for fun." When asked if he had ever enjoyed writing in an academic context, Colton hesitated and responded by saying, "I would just say, like, okay, I haven't thought about that before. I would just say just, yeah...I don't know. I, I've never thought about that before." To help increase Colton's self-efficacy in this area, Jessica recommended that

Colton write about topics he is interested in whenever possible and that he continue his practice of journaling.

Colton took the post-survey approximately two months after the pre-survey, close to the final week of the semester. This time, his overall average was 7.38 (a .94 increase from the previous survey), and his median score was 7 (a 1-point increase from the previous survey). Table 1 in Appendix A illustrates the pre- and post-survey responses that were discussed in one or both of the interviews.

The second interview with Colton also took place roughly one week after he took the post-survey, but this time it was conducted via Google Voice. In this interview, Jessica began by asking Colton how he felt about the semester overall, including how he felt about the transition to online classes during the pandemic. Because he had taken online courses previously, Colton said the transition was smooth for him and he felt the semester went well. They continued the interview by discussing strategies Colton learned and implemented throughout the semester.

During the second part of the interview, Jessica and Colton again discussed results from the survey. Colton was shocked to learn that his overall average had increased by almost a full point, and they focused on three areas where his score had increased significantly, which corresponded with topics they had discussed in the first interview:

1. I can articulate my strengths and weaknesses as a writer.
2. I can usually find something that interests me in my writing assignments
3. I can map out the structure and main sections of an essay before writing the first draft.

In terms of being able to better articulate his strengths and weaknesses, Colton mentioned that reading and studying materials that interest him has helped significantly, especially in terms of improving his spelling abilities. He also mentioned that his writing instructor showed him how to outline effectively, which helped Colton better understand both general organization and terminology that is used in writing courses. In Colton's own words, his instructor "basically just like made me like an outline of what I can do every single time on like every single essay that I have. And so I, and so I don't get like off, off, off track." Having this model to work from seems to have helped Colton know where he needs to focus his attention when writing.

In the conversation about finding greater interest in writing assignments, Colton mentioned that approaching his assignments with a more positive attitude has made a difference. He also observed that as

he has gained more writing-related skills and confidence, he has become more excited to write. In the first interview, Colton had never considered writing as "enjoyable;" however, during the second interview, he mentioned turning to writing as an outlet to process events and emotions. During the second interview, when asked what role he thinks writing will play in his life in future contexts, Colton responded, "Well, um, I guess just choosing it as like an outlet ... And so I've noticed when, when, you know, things aren't heading in the way I want to, just like, you know, writing down things that I'm having issues with. And then just having those things and just, um, expanding on it just really helps out a bunch." Colton notably had an increased interest in both academic and personal writing.

Regarding pre-writing, Colton again returned to the topic of outlining. Though Colton expressed a negative view on outlining in the first interview, he mentioned having used them with success since then. Colton noted that this change in practice is primarily due to his teacher taking the time to break down the organization of an essay, as previously mentioned.

### *Nathan*

Nathan's first interview took place about a week after he initially took the survey. Like Colton's results, Nathan's pre-survey results show an average score of 5.88 and a median score of 6.

During the initial interview, Nathan and Hayden discussed a wide range of topics including Nathan's academic experiences at the University, his interest in pursuing a career in architecture, and his relationship with writing. When asked about his academic journey so far, Nathan said, "I took an English class but it was a little bit too advanced for me, so I had to lower, so I lowered down." He names his dyslexia as one of his biggest challenges when it comes to writing, along with navigating grammar expectations, which causes him to lean heavily on tools like Grammarly when writing. He explained, "I'm not that great with grammar or punctuation so I will write out a paper but then I need something to help me like Grammarly. Or something to help me with proper, to proper it up. Cause I just struggle with punctuation, grammar, spelling. I just struggle with all that."

When it came to discussing aspects of writing he felt confident in, Nathan expressed that he enjoys writing book reports more than creative writing or writing about topics he does not care for. He indicated confidence in his ability to outline and structure papers but has difficulty with other aspects of the writing process such as getting motivated and writing with

correct grammar. His primary motivation for writing is based on whether the assignment in question is being graded, though this only motivates him enough to complete the assignment “as best as [he] can.”

Many of these insights were brought to the surface when Nathan and Hayden discussed three specific statements from the initial survey and Nathan’s self-assigned score for them. They were:

1. I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will earn a grade (5/10)
2. I can map out the structure and main sections of an essay before writing the first draft (7/10, one of his highest scores overall)
3. I can attribute my success on writing projects to my writing abilities more than to luck or external forces (4/10, one of his lowest scores overall)

Throughout their discussion, Hayden made an effort to relate to Nathan’s struggles and praise his accomplishments, also making time to suggest specific strategies for Nathan to implement in the future. For example, as they discussed Nathan’s difficulty motivating himself to put more effort into work he wasn’t passionate about, Hayden suggested creating an external reward system. Specifically, he suggested that Nathan create some milestones he’d like to achieve with a given project and then set rewards for himself along the way when he meets those milestones. Similarly, as they discussed Nathan’s insecurities about relying on Grammarly, Hayden reminded Nathan that learning English and writing skills is an ongoing process that takes a lot of time and energy. Additionally, Hayden pointed him to other on-campus resources that might be more instructional than Grammarly.

When Nathan took the survey again on April 23, 2020, his overall scores increased to an average of 7.25 and a median score of 7 (an increase of 1.37 in the overall average, and 1 in the median score), again like Colton. A second interview took place on the same day via Google Voice.

During this second meeting, Nathan and Hayden discussed Nathan’s academic performance during the semester, his development of various writing skills, and how he handled the abrupt transition to online learning in the final weeks of the semester. Nathan explained that the transition to online learning was not too difficult for him because so many of the writing-related tasks he worked on were already being done on computers. He did express some trouble with a math class that was moved online, though he took the initiative to reach out to his professor as well as some

friends to help him when he was struggling with certain assignments.

He also mentioned having some difficulty with a writing assignment in his English class. “The aspect that was the most challenging I’d have to say was the research...I spent like five hours researching stuff” Nathan explained. He then detailed his process of reaching out to a family member who had knowledge on his research topic to get some help. When asked about what he had learned this semester that he could transfer to later semesters, Nathan identified having gained the ability to motivate himself to work on assignments that did not interest him initially and put genuine effort into those projects, stating, “even though if I don’t like it, but it’s still being graded, I want to put my best work into it...even if I did hate the subject, I’ll put in as much time as I need so I can make this as good of a paper as I possibly can.”

Hayden and Nathan discussed three specific survey responses (see Table 2 in Appendix A), two of which were follow ups from the first interview.

Hayden and Nathan discussed the reasons for these increases and, overall, Nathan attributes the helpful feedback from his professor throughout the semester, his newfound ability to put his best effort into projects that will be graded, and his decreased usage of tools like Grammarly as the main reasons for these increases. He noted,

...beforehand I would use Grammarly a lot for grammar errors and punctuation, but this time I went and did as much as I could fix, all that I could find and everything, before I used any external sources for my paper...I realized that I don’t really need external supports that much and I can actually put down something good and I put down stuff that’s good.

Lastly, Nathan also suggested that his early-semester interview helped him pinpoint changes to make in his approach to writing and schooling. He indicated having taken Hayden’s advice and implemented a reward system to motivate himself to complete projects he wasn’t initially inspired by. Additionally, he took advantage of on-campus resources when he encountered difficulties in his studies, as well as experts in his own family and circle of friends.

Between Nathan and Colton, we noticed three commonalities. While both students were required to transition to a fully remote, online learning setting (as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic), each had previous online education experiences. Having previous experiences made the transition less stressful, and both students adjusted well to it. Another commonality was



that both students increased their utilization of in-class and out-of-class resources. Finally, both students increased their overall enjoyment of writing, which may have contributed to the upward trend observed in their self-efficacy scores. These commonalities will be analyzed in more detail throughout the discussion section.

### Research Assistants' Coaching Methods

Coaching strategies were employed in both the first and second interviews, however, the research assistants coached more heavily in the first interviews. The research assistants used overlapping strategies. For instance, both Hayden and Jessica validated students' current strategies with quick affirmations such as, "awesome" and "cool." Additionally, they both related to student-participants by sharing that they also employ similar strategies, though Hayden did this more often than Jessica. Jessica, on the other hand, asked more questions than Hayden to investigate the details of the student-participant's writing strategies. Of course, Hayden also asked questions; Jessica relied more heavily on them. Only after identifying the details of the students' current practices, would Jessica share additional strategies. By asking so many questions, though, Jessica was able to individualize strategies to the student's particular circumstances. Hayden also shared strategies with his student-participant. Hayden's style of coaching included more mindset coaching woven into the writing strategies (ex. Grammarly conversation).

Both Hayden and Jessica's coaching reveal a pattern that other tutors can follow to infuse "micro-coaching" into their tutorials:

1. **Ask** questions to gain a better understanding of students' current practices and mindsets
2. **Validate** what the student is currently doing
3. **Relate**, if possible
4. **Share** strategies

To illustrate this method, consider the following examples from Nathan and Colton's first interviews.

**Jessica:** Okay. When you're given a writing assignment, what steps do you take to complete it? So what does that process look like for you?

**Colton:** Well I was just like have with, have with the, um, the introduction and then, and then all the things I want to speak about. And then the ending part and then ending. Basically we're talking this cause it's not like that's like having like an introduction, having all the things I want to speak about and then, and then, and then having an ending part and ending my essay.

**Jessica:** Okay. What's kind of your brainstorming process?

**Colton:** Brainstorming process...

**Jessica:** How do you come up with what you want to write about?

Jessica could have chosen to stop asking clarification questions after Colton answered the first question about his process. However, by continuing to pursue this line of questioning, Jessica ended up learning about Colton's choice not to outline his papers. At that point, Jessica chose to move on to validation:

**Jessica:** How do you come up with what you want to write about?

**Colton:** I don't know...I do it all my head and so it was kind of just as I write, it just, it just comes out...Cause it's weird cause like when I, when I write out an outline, it's not as good. But when I have it in my mind and as I write, as, as, as, as it's in my head, it just does better. And just like flows a lot easier. I don't know. I don't know if that makes any sense.

**Jessica:** Yeah it does. Yeah. But whatever works for you.

By validating Colton's preference for writing without an outline, Jessica may have increased Colton's self-efficacy in his ability to make sound decisions about his writing process. By the second interview, Colton had learned an outlining strategy from his professor and was practicing it with success. We cannot say for sure, but Jessica's validation in this moment may have contributed to Colton's openness to learning this outlining strategy.

In the following exchange from their first interview, Hayden practices "relate" as well as "share strategies" with Nathan:

**Nathan:** Yeah, so like I said already, so when it's something that's being graded, I will do my best and make it sound as good as it can. But if it's just something that I didn't care for, I will just make it as moderately best as I can. So just to get a good grade, I don't, I didn't care for it.

**Hayden:** Okay, cool. I get that. Like, we kind of talked a little bit earlier about like, I find myself having a hard time writing stuff that I'm not interested in and stuff too...Like one thing that's worked for me with that is like trying to find some sort of motivation outside of the actual writing. So sometimes I'll set up a sort of like reward system for myself where I'll have, you know, like if I write this...not just to get it done, but if I can really like focus and work on this, if, you know, if I get a certain amount done, then you know, I'll let myself go get like a, a Snickers or something like that....Or

I'll let myself like watch a movie tonight instead of doing, you know, next week's homework or something, you know, like, so I think there's a way to kind of create motivation for us sometimes when it's not just naturally there.

As we know from their second interview, this is a strategy Nathan implemented. Having Hayden relate to and normalize the challenge Nathan faced and then share a strategy that was successful for him seems to have helped encourage Nathan to try the strategy, which he ended up finding success with.

Micro-coaching in the interviews took no more than 2 minutes, and often only 10-30 seconds. Though more research is needed, the data suggests that these interactions impacted students in a positive way, helping them build generative dispositions towards writing and learning, and setting them up for successful transfer.

## Discussion

The aim of this research was to better understand if increasing a student's metacognitive awareness of their dispositions would significantly impact those dispositions. More specifically, we were interested in the impact of peer-coaching on students' self-regulation and self-efficacy in writing. Overall, the students we observed experienced an increase in self-efficacy in writing, discovered new ways to motivate themselves, and expanded their self-regulation strategies by utilizing resources and trying new writing processes. They also indicated experiencing more joy in their writing, taking more ownership of their education, and making a relatively easy transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, when Jessica pointed out to Colton that he might benefit from journaling like he did on his religious mission, she was helping him transfer between contexts. This ended up helping Colton reconnect to a writing practice he enjoyed and incorporate it into his current writing context.

Our findings suggest that micro-coaching could potentially be effective in writing centers and other areas of academia as a means of increasing students' metacognitive awareness of their self-regulation and self-efficacy in writing. One major advantage of our micro-coaching method is that it serves as a quick and effective intervention, making it a valuable tool for writing center tutors to make use of in tutorials. Our study indicates that micro-coaching was effective for students who only met with our coaches once during the duration of the semester, suggesting that this strategy would be useful in a single tutorial. This

coaching strategy, already deeply informed by writing center pedagogy, is simple for tutors to learn and apply. Additionally, the skills necessary to execute this micro-coaching approach could be easily taught in a single staff education meeting.

As discussed above, the methods the research assistants utilized in micro-coaching are informed by the writing center pedagogy they had already learned. Specifically, the research assistants utilized some aspects of motivational scaffolding as defined by Mackiewicz and Thompson's *Talking about Writing*. The coaches intuitively praised the students they worked with, used humor to connect with them, and reassured students of their ownership of their own work. These strategies are among those discussed by Mackiewicz and Thompson, and we found them to be similarly effective as a means of scaffolding and building rapport with students. While motivational scaffolding is an effective strategy, Mackiewicz and Thompson only discuss its efficacy in terms of the standard tutorial taking place in the writing center, while we suggest that the methodology has a much larger scope. Writing support programs utilizing a variety of models (i.e., the traditional writing center, the studio-based learning model—see Kjesrud, embedded tutoring models, etc.) could all apply our process of making students more aware of their dispositions towards writing paired with micro-coaching strategies.

We also anticipate that this would be an effective method for professors, mentor programs, academic coaches, and other types of support roles as they work one-on-one with students. Furthermore, this coaching method would be effective for students at various levels of education. Our study focused on students in a pre-core composition course, but we believe tutors working with students further along in an undergraduate or graduate program would also benefit from this method. Though our findings are promising, more research into the effects of the coaching method, especially within different populations, is needed.

## Conclusion

Given the small sample size of our study, we cannot definitively claim that an awareness of dispositions universally impacts those dispositions in students who receive micro-coaching. Our results indicated as much, but there is a need for further research in this area. In conducting further research, it would be beneficial to explore the efficacy of micro-coaching within different populations in and out of writing centers. We believe the method would be useful in most pedagogical situations where one-on-one mentoring is the norm.

Duplicating the same research environment on a larger scale with a larger sample size would also produce useful findings. If verified by further research, these findings would provide writing centers, and other writing support programs, with a valuable and relatively simple pedagogical tool to utilize while working with students and affect positive changes in their dispositions. For those interested in pursuing research along these lines, one thing to factor in is additional training for tutors/coaches on transfer and related writing concepts. Similar to Heather Hill's "Tutoring for Transfer: The Benefits of Teaching Writing Center Tutors about Transfer Theory," we found that the research assistants had some gaps in knowledge, despite having been exposed to transfer, dispositions, and related concepts in tutor education settings. We believe giving more coaching to the coaches involved, specifically more direct information about which tasks and student responses to focus on in the session, would also lead to even more promising results. Despite the challenges, expanding on this research could help scholars better understand how to incorporate micro-coaching into key educational experiences to help students develop more generative dispositions towards writing.

#### Notes

1. Of course, writing support programs can also impact other factors, such as helping students activate prior knowledge, build metacognition about writing concepts, etc. See Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg; Reiff and Bawarshi, and Wardle for more.
2. Others have identified ownership (Baird and Dilger), Dweck's concept of fixed and growth mindsets (Hixson-Bowles) and emotions (Driscoll and Powell) as other dispositions relevant to writing.
3. Driscoll and Wells identified dispositions as either generative or disruptive. Generative dispositions help facilitate learning while disruptive dispositions interrupt learning.
4. To protect participants' identities, we will simply refer to the research site as the "University."
5. We asked about relationship status because almost half of the students at the University are married or in a partnership, significantly contributing to their responsibilities outside of school.
6. Colton had a stutter that we have chosen to retain in his direct quotes.

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**Appendix A: Tables**

Table 1: A Selection of Colton’s Pre- and Post-Survey Results

| <b>Survey Statement</b>   | <b>Pre-Survey Response</b> | <b>Post-Survey Response</b> | <b>Difference</b> |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| I can articulate my strengths and weaknesses as a writer.                                 | 6                          | 9                           | 3                 |
| I can find ways to concentrate even when there are distractions around me.                | 6                          | 7                           | 1                 |
| I can map out the structure and main sections of an essay before writing the first draft. | 6                          | 8                           | 2                 |
| I can usually find something that interests me in my writing assignments.                 | 7                          | 9                           | 2                 |

Table 2: A Selection of Nathan’s Pre- and Post-Survey Results

| <b>Survey Statement</b>   | <b>Pre-Survey Response</b> | <b>Post-Survey Response</b> | <b>Difference</b> |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| I can evaluate the usefulness of others’ feedback on my drafts when revising.                                 | 3                          | 8                           | 5                 |
| I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will earn a grade.      | 5                          | 8                           | 3                 |
| I can attribute my success on writing projects to my writing abilities more than to luck or external factors. | 4                          | 7                           | 3                 |

## Appendix B: Pre- and Post-Survey Self-Efficacy in Writing Survey

### Confidence Questions

As part of the study, we measure students' confidence in various aspects of writing and being a student. Please answer the following questions.

Using a 0-10 scale, please indicate your confidence in your ability to do the following:

Cannot do at all (0)      Moderately certain can do (5)      Highly certain can do (10)

1. I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will earn a grade.
2. I can articulate my strengths and challenges as a writer.
3. When I read a rough draft, I can identify gaps when they are present in the paper.
4. I can write a paper without feeling physical discomfort (e.g., headaches, stomach-aches, back-aches, insomnia, muscle tension, nausea, and/or crying).
5. **When I have a pressing deadline for a paper, I can manage my time efficiently.**
6. I can attribute my success on writing projects to my writing abilities more than to luck or external forces.
7. When a student who is similar to me receives praise and/or a good grade on a paper, I know I can write a paper worthy of praise and/or a good grade.
8. Once I have completed a draft, I can eliminate both small and large sections that are no longer necessary.
9. I can write a paper without experiencing overwhelming feelings of fear, distress, or anxiety.
10. I can map out the structure and main sections of an essay before writing the first draft.
11. **I can find ways to concentrate when I am writing, even when there are many distractions around me.**
12. I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will not be graded.
13. I can identify when I need help on my writing.
14. I can evaluate the usefulness of others' feedback on my drafts when revising.
15. **I can usually find something that interests me in my writing assignments.**
16. I can improve my writing abilities.

### Demographic Questions

1. What is your student ID? [Note: We ask for this only to link your first survey to the last. All identifying information will be removed in data analysis.]
2. Please select your age range.
  - a. 18-22
  - b. 23-27
  - c. 28-32
  - d. 33-37
  - e. 38-42
  - f. 43-47
  - g. 48-52
  - h. 53-57
  - i. 58-62
  - j. 63-67
  - k. 68+
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your race/ethnicity?
5. How many hours per week do you spend earning income?
  - a. 0
  - b. 1-10
  - c. 11-20
  - d. 21-30
  - e. 31-40
  - f. 40+

6. Please check all that apply:
  - a. I am single
  - b. I am in a romantic relationship
  - c. I am married
  - d. I am divorced
  - e. I am a widow/widower
  - f. I have 1-3 children or dependents
  - g. I have 4 or more children or dependents
7. What's the highest level of education your mother (or primary guardian) earned?
  - a. Some high school-level coursework
  - b. High school diploma
  - c. **Career or Technical certification**
  - d. Some undergraduate-level coursework
  - e. Associate's degree
  - f. Bachelor's degree
  - g. Some graduate-level coursework
  - h. Master's degree
  - i. Doctorate degree
  - j. None of the above
8. What's the highest level of education your father (or secondary guardian) earned?
  - a. Some high school-level coursework
  - b. High school diploma
  - c. **Career or Technical certification**
  - d. Some undergraduate-level coursework
  - e. Associate's degree
  - f. Bachelor's degree
  - g. Some graduate-level coursework
  - h. Master's degree
  - i. Doctorate degree

## Appendix C: Interview Scripts

### Sample Interview Scripts

**Please note:** Interview questions may vary depending on the students' survey results and previous interviews. The following is an outline of the expected interview scripts for January and April.

### January Student Interview Script

**Script:** Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! In today's meeting, we will discuss the results from your survey, talk about your experiences with writing education as well as answer any questions you have. At the end, we will schedule your final meeting, where you will get the \$25 Amazon gift card.

Before I begin, do you have any questions for me?

As a reminder, please refrain from using the names of faculty and staff during this interview.

1. Tell me a little bit about your academic journey so far.
  - a. What made you choose the University?
  - b. How have you liked it here so far?
2. Tell me about your experiences with writing for school.
  - a. Potential follow ups:
    - i. Has it been challenging? If so, how?
    - ii. What has come easy for you?
    - iii. What kinds of assignments did you have to write?
    - iv. What were the teachers like?
    - v. Did you like the way they taught? Why/why not?
3. When you're writing for school, when do you feel most confident?
4. When you're writing for school, when do you feel least confident?
5. When you're given a writing assignment, what steps do you take to complete it?
6. What motivates you to write?
7. If you could change one thing about your relationship with writing, what would it be?

**Survey script:** Now we are going to talk about the results of your survey. It's important to keep in mind that this is just a snap shot of where you were the day you took the survey—*not* a fixed evaluation of you as a writer. In other words, you can change.

The survey asked you to rate your confidence in 16 different writing-related tasks on a scale of 0-10 (10 being most confident). Your average score was X. Does that feel accurate?

[[If score was on the lower end, the research assistant will explain that many people at all levels of education have lower confidence in their writing abilities. And there are concrete things people can do to feel more confident in their writing, which will help them have less anxiety around writing assignments. Example strategies: free writing, journaling, etc.]]

[[If score was on the higher end, the research assistant will explain that high confidence in writing is a useful thing—as long as the writer can back up that confidence with skill. High confidence usually helps people be more successful at the task they feel confident in. At the same time, it's important to be ready for a challenge that might shake their confidence. The research assistant should ask how they have handled moments of feeling a lack of confidence in the past. Example strategies: Go see a tutor, write yourself reminders such as: challenges help us grow, failing is part of getting better.]]

[[At this point, the research assistant can look more closely at the specific answers to each question and offer tailored strategies for the student to try out this semester. Example: If the student struggles with motivation, the research assistant might suggest that they choose a topic they care about for their papers, even if it seems like it's not "scholarly" enough.]]

8. Do you have any questions about the survey results, strategies, or anything else we talked about today?



**Closing script:** Thank you for your time today. Do you mind if we go ahead and schedule your final interview?

*Schedule interview for second or third week of April. Remind student to watch for your email at the beginning of April that prompts them to take the survey again.*

### **April Student Interview Script**

**Script:** Welcome! Today's interview will be similar to our last interview. We will talk about how your semester has gone, your attitudes towards writing, and the results from your most recent survey. As a reminder, please refrain from using the names of faculty and staff during this interview.

1. What was the transition to online classes like for you?
  - a. What aspect of it was challenging?
  - b. How did you navigate this challenge?
2. Tell me about how your classes are going.
  - a. What was the most enjoyable project you worked on?
  - b. What was the most challenging project/assignment you worked on?
    - i. What aspect of it was challenging?
    - ii. How did you navigate this challenge?
3. Last time we talked about some strategies around writing. Did you have a chance to try those out this semester? If so, how did it go?
  - a. If need be, remind them of some of the strategies you talked about last time.
4. What have you learned this semester that you hope to apply to future semesters or life, more broadly?
5. Is there anything else about how your writing class has gone that you want to talk about?
6. In the last interview, we talked about past writing contexts. Now, I want to ask about future writing contexts. What role do you see writing playing in your life?
  - a. How do you expect to use writing in your career?
  - b. How do you expect to use writing in your personal life?
7. Are you planning to enroll in classes next semester? If so, which classes?
  - a. If yes, what are your hopes and goals for next semester?
  - b. If no, what are your hopes and goals for the next few months?

**Survey script:** Now we are going to talk about the results of your survey. It's important to keep in mind that this is just a snap shot of where you were the day you took the survey—*not* a fixed evaluation of you as a writer. In other words, you can change.

The survey asked you to rate your confidence in 16 different writing-related tasks on a scale of 0-10 (10 being most confident). Your average score was X. Does that feel accurate?

[[If score decreased, the research assistant will explain that this may reflect the challenges they faced this semester.

Remind them that confidence is only as good as the skills that back it up. It may be that they better understand the realities of different kinds of writing assignments now and have a more realistic view of their abilities. This is a good thing!]]

[[If score increased, the research assistant will explain that high confidence in writing is a useful thing—as long as the writer can back up that confidence with skill. High confidence usually helps people be more successful at the task they feel confident in. At the same time, it's important to be ready for a challenge that might shake their confidence. The research assistant should ask how they have handled moments of feeling a lack of confidence in the past. Example strategies: Go see a tutor, write yourself reminders such as: challenges help us grow, failing is part of getting better.]]

[[At this point, the research assistant can look more closely at the specific answers to each question and ask tailored questions about the results. Example: It looks like you feel more confident in your ability to manage your time when given a writing assignment. Tell me about how you managed your time with your writing assignments this semester.]]

9. What do you think about these results in comparison with your first set of results?
10. Do you have any questions about the survey results, strategies, or anything else we talked about today?

**Closing script:** Thank you for your time today and this semester. Good luck on your finals and in your future plans!  
*Confirm student's email for the \$25 Amazon gift card.*