

Summer 8-2023

## Silently Correcting Your Grammar: Responses to Feedback and Adult Learners' Rural Writing Ecosystems

Jessica Marie Kubiak  
*Old Dominion University*, [jessicamkubiak@gmail.com](mailto:jessicamkubiak@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english\\_etds](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_etds)



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kubiak, Jessica M.. "Silently Correcting Your Grammar: Responses to Feedback and Adult Learners' Rural Writing Ecosystems" (2023). Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Dissertation, English, Old Dominion University, DOI: 10.25777/w77t-3674  
[https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english\\_etds/168](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_etds/168)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@odu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@odu.edu).

**SILENTLY CORRECTING YOUR GRAMMAR: RESPONSES TO FEEDBACK AND  
ADULT LEARNERS' RURAL WRITING ECOSYSTEMS**

by

Jessica Marie Kubiak  
B.A. April 2006, University of Pittsburgh  
M.S. May 2010, Buffalo State University

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY  
August 2023

Approved by:

Daniel P. Richards (Director)

Kristi M. Costello (Member)

Vanessa R. Panfil (Member)

Louise Wetherbee Phelps (Member)

## **ABSTRACT**

### **SILENTLY CORRECTING YOUR GRAMMAR: RESPONSES TO FEEDBACK AND ADULT LEARNERS' RURAL WRITING ECOSYSTEMS**

Jessica Marie Kubiak  
Old Dominion University, 2023  
Director: Dr. Daniel P. Richards

Over a century ago, rhetoricians called on writing instructors in the U.S. to accept and even encourage language diversity among learners. Yet scholars of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies are still advocating for this via arguments for linguistic justice and translanguaging, even referring to strict adherence to a single, mainstream standard for language use as a kind of violence. This disconnect between scholarship and practice is evident in the silences surrounding first-year composition language instruction. This dissertation charts that disciplinary disconnect and then describes how adult students at a rural, open-access community college experience first-year composition feedback, with special attention to corrective feedback on language use and grammar. Based on a study employing focus group methodology, this project locates a complex network of material and cognitive resources that mediate and influence adult learners' experiences of writing instruction. These rural writing ecosystems consist of well-defined beliefs, attitudes, habits, and skills that predispose learners to desire a more agential role in instructive feedback encounters, which in turn enhance interpersonal relationships in the composition classroom, thereby facilitating language growth that respects discursive identities. The project concludes with discussion of how such learner desires might be realized through a reimagining of first-year composition as a coordinating object that facilitates comparable growth and respect among rurally-situated two-year colleges and the communities they serve.

Copyright, 2023, by Jessica Marie Kubiak, All Rights Reserved.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm fortunate to have had a strong network of support while I worked on this project. SUNY Jamestown Community College offered countless opportunities for me to grow as a scholar of teaching and learning. I'll name specific people and offices here, but I can't stress enough how much I value each of my colleagues. In particular, I thank my English colleagues, who offered class time for me to recruit student participants and then regularly checked on my progress. Dale Yerpe accepted yet another year without a campus partner in composition. Karen Weyant is my JCC FYC rock, and she kept me flush in lined journals. David Kadanoff not only stepped in to make it possible for me to leave for the year, but shared wise and instructive suggestions at our coffee shop meetings. My administrative support team included JCC president Daniel DeMarte, vice president Kirk Young, and especially vice president Marilyn Zagora: they kept me connected to the college and focused on the big picture. Other offices provided direct support for this work. Campus Life helped me recruit participants, and Lisa Yohon did so with enthusiasm and extra effort. The staff in Dunkirk fielded all of my questions with kindness.

I'm grateful to those who provided financial support. Thank you, JCC's Faculty Association and administration, for continuing to support paid sabbatical leaves; this year provided me the pause needed to reflect on years of non-stop teaching. Likewise, I am grateful to the donors of Old Dominion's James V. D. Card Endowed Scholarship for their generosity.

A project that centers the role of the extra-curricular in the learning process invites thanks for family and close friends; these can't be separated from those who supported my research. My children, Aodhán and Aoife, let graduate coursework and dissertation research permeate their childhoods. They learned to cook and do laundry younger than most, and I could not have completed this work without them. My mother, my siblings, and my dear friends Amanda

Bartels and Meghan McCune all let me disappear for weeks at a time without blinking an eye. My niece Eleanor kept me energized about how and why we learn and love to read. My friend and first FYC mentor Jessie Blackburn encouraged me to step into doctoral research and continues to model both work ethic and boundaries. Don Ulin is my constant advisor and guide, and he's a stellar life partner.

I'm grateful to my Old Dominion cohort for being open to inquiry and for assuming a humble position relative to knowledge making, and to the cohorts that came before and after who likewise offered wisdom about process and priority. Of all these folks, Julie Sorge Way has my endless gratitude: for nurturing our parallel paths in life, work, motherhood, and graduate school; for her exceptional editing skills; and for being observant, empathetic, and kind.

I thank my committee, not least for navigating the no doubt delicate affair of offering feedback on a dissertation about learner experience of feedback. My external reader, Vanessa Panfil, was my methods center who encouraged me not to lose sight of myself in this project. Kristi Costello kept me grounded and focused on application. Louise Wetherbee Phelps helped me see my work in ways I wasn't yet capable of knowing it, and my only graduate school regret is that I spent so little time with her. Dan Richards was my ideal chair: he offered guidance, and he never skimped on trust, autonomy, or dry humor.

I wouldn't have felt compelled to keep moving on this project had it not been for everyone who first listened to me share about this project, and then shared a story in return. I'm most grateful to the many hundreds of students I've met in the classroom, and especially to those who took part in this project's study. Some of the teachers I most admire say that they learn as much from their students as their students learn from them, but I didn't really understand what that meant until working on this dissertation.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
 Chapter	
I. SILENTLY CORRECTING YOUR GRAMMAR: AN INTRODUCTION .....	1
Entering the Discipline: Composition Studies and Marginalized Discourses .....	8
Silence, Violence, Affect, and Grammar .....	11
Finding Focus .....	15
My Matriarchal Literacies .....	20
Punctuation Profusion, a Vampire Bat, and Adult Literacy Learning .....	21
Chapter Descriptions .....	28
Conclusion .....	32
II. SITUATING SCHOLARSHIP ON GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION AND AFFECTIVE RESPONSE: A LITERATURE REVIEW .....	34
A Caveat: My Situated Two-Year College Perspective .....	37
Enjoy the Silence .....	39
Disciplining of Language .....	44
The Long SRTOL Movement .....	44
Language Instruction in Composition: Grammar and Style .....	48
Discipline through Contextualized Grammar Instruction .....	52
Learning, Affect, and Corrective Feedback .....	55
Foreign Language Instruction .....	57
K–12 .....	60
Language and Identity .....	64
Contextualized Grammar Instruction: It Works Because It Hurts .....	68
Transformative Learning: An Adult Education Framework in Composition Studies .....	70
Conclusion .....	74
III. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION .....	76
Epistemological Framework .....	79
Focus Group Methodology .....	84
Focus Groups: Disciplinary Applications .....	88
Focus Groups in Composition Studies .....	89
Decision Points: Study Design .....	93
Size and Number of Groups .....	94
Group Composition .....	95
Standardization .....	96

Chapter	Page
Structure .....	97
Moderator Qualifications .....	98
Self-Disclosure .....	99
Study Protocol .....	100
Research Site .....	100
Characteristics of Recruited Potential Participants .....	103
Participant Recruitment .....	106
Participant Inclusion .....	110
Participant and Focus Group Characteristics .....	113
Focus Group and Interview Procedures .....	116
Data Security and Participant Confidentiality .....	122
Study Limitations .....	123
Plans for Analysis .....	124
Conclusion .....	125
IV. METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS .....	126
Focus Group and Interview Recordings and Transcription .....	128
Focus Group Data .....	130
A Failed Attempt at Mixed Qualitative Methods: Pre-Focus Group Writing .....	132
Initial and Axial Coding .....	133
Emergent Thematic Framework .....	137
Crystalizing Data: Integrating Discourse Analysis with Thematic Analysis .....	140
Discourse Analysis as Tool for Social Interaction Analysis .....	143
Themes .....	155
Agreement Factors .....	157
Conclusion .....	164
V. “A COUPLE OF SMALL GRAMMAR THINGS”: CLASSIFYING FEEDBACK (AND THE BARRIERS PRECLUDING THIS) .....	167
“What’s a Fragment?”: The Language FYC Learners Use to Talk about Feedback and Language .....	172
“I Almost Wish We Could Have a Conversation”: Learners Classify Instructor Feedback .....	181
Feedback with a General Focus .....	182
Feedback with Specific Instructive Content .....	187
Assessment of Instructor Feedback .....	191
Participant Desire for Instructor Feedback .....	194
Feedback Modality and Interactivity .....	198
Chapter Conclusions and Implications .....	204
VI. “I KNOW HOW TO HANDLE IT”: EMOTIONAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK (ON LANGUAGE USE) .....	209
“Should I Be Concerned?”: No or Neutral Reactions .....	210
“I Love Feedback”: Positive Reactions .....	215



Chapter	Page
“Taking It”: Backgrounds Leading to Learned Resilience .....	220
“Ew, You Need a Tutor”: Learners’ Own Negative Reactions .....	224
“It’s a Me Problem”: Assuming Blame for Negative Experiences.....	225
Instructional Disconnects.....	226
Instructor-Sanctioned Feedback from Peers .....	230
Non-Specific Instructor Feedback .....	231
Negative Emotional Responses to Corrective Feedback on Language .....	232
Bearing Witness to Others’ Negative Responses.....	235
Chapter Conclusions and Implications .....	239
 VII. “IT DOESN’T TRANSLATE WELL”: ADULT LEARNERS’ ECOSYSTEMS AND FYC .....	 246
The Writing Lives of College Students: Daily Writing Practices, Histories, Habits, and Neurological Dispositions .....	248
“I Write Outside of Here”: Reading and Writing in Daily Lives .....	249
“I Have Grammar Issues”: Writing Histories and Habits.....	255
Neurological Dispositions.....	259
“It Depends”: Learner Theories of Feedback and Language.....	262
“If You Do Get Where I’m At, You’re Right There”: FYC as Coordinating Space .....	271
Race and References to “Grammar” .....	274
Redefining Boundary Objects as Ecological .....	277
FYC and Rural Writing Ecosystems.....	281
Chapter and Project Conclusions and Implications .....	288
 REFERENCES .....	 293
 APPENDICES	
A. CLASSROOM RECRUITMENT SCRIPT .....	313
B. RECRUITMENT FLYER.....	315
C. SCREENING FORM.....	316
D. TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS.....	322
 VITA.....	 323

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Focus Group Stratification.....	114
2. Interview Participant Identity Markers .....	116
3. Data Information .....	130
4. Initial Thematic Framework .....	138
5. Domain One Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors.....	159
6. Domain Two Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors .....	160
7. Domain Three Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors .....	161
8. Summary of Agreement Factor Analysis.....	163
9. Term Frequencies.....	179
10. Term Frequencies with Participant Characteristics .....	275

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. “Silently Correcting Your Grammar” .....	13
2. “Vampire Bat with Bloody Belly Button” .....	23
3. Coding for Content and Social Interaction .....	153

## CHAPTER I

### SILENTLY CORRECTING YOUR GRAMMAR: AN INTRODUCTION

Early in my first semester as the English coordinator for my community college's small branch campus, a colleague arrived at my office door flanked by two students. All three looked both worried and annoyed, and my colleague offered a few words of explanation before returning to class, leaving me to mediate. I discovered through conversation that the students had made moves to hurt each other. Their first-year composition peer feedback session, it turned out, had devolved from critique to threats, and the verbal and nearly physical violence happened when one of the two, paired through assignment or chance, experienced their peer's feedback as the first jab.

Scenes like this played out more often than I had anticipated upon taking that coordinator position. And these delicate, if horrible, early professional experiences motivated me to refine my own developmental and first-year writing teaching practices so as to acknowledge the potential pain and violence of feedback. To the extent that these revised practices worked, I expanded their scope by sharing or creating professional development opportunities and materials that might have a broader effect on learners across the college. I'm happy with these changes, which consist mostly of more explicit discussion of what "feedback" is, invitations for learners to share about their past feedback experiences, and what I've come to call a "post-consent" approach to peer and instructor feedback that equips student writers to request specific feedback and consciously dispense with feedback they're not ready to work with. Though I'm pleased with the results for both myself and my students, it's been difficult for me to justify the choices I've made through scholarship that speaks to the contexts in which my colleagues and I teach.

There is an established thread of scholarship within the field of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies that is concerned with affective response to grammar use and its correction. Much of this scholarship speaks to a broader gatekeeping function of English and of literacy studies more generally, a concept well established by J. Elspeth Stuckey (1991) in her *The Violence of Literacy*. However, discussion of affective experience of “incorrect” language that prompts correction has largely been limited to the experience of the hearer, typically instructors (e.g., Dowden et al., 2013). Less often has attention been paid to the experience of the learners themselves who have had their grammar corrected. Throughout my years in higher education I have grown increasingly concerned about the nature of that experience, especially among learners whose primary discourses present as non-standard. Although typically these are racially minoritized learners and learners who are marginalized due to their class and socioeconomic status, in this dissertation I’m concerned about how the mostly adult first-year composition (FYC) learners at my rural, northern Appalachian, open-access community college experience having their language use corrected.

Though not all learners in this study are impacted by racial minoritization and marginalization due to class, they are united in three distinct ways that may also influence their experiences of and their responses to feedback. First, all but a few of this study’s thirty participants are *adults*. Not simply a descriptor of chronological age, the term “adult” in this project refers to people who have reached adulthood from a developmental standpoint. In the field of adult education, adult learners in western contexts are identified as such due to various factors and experiences, such as parenthood, military experience, incarceration, and full-time work experience. In higher education, the term “non-traditional learners” refers to students who are chronologically older adults, and, indeed, those who’ve reached their mid-twenties are more

likely to have had the kinds of experiences that typically lead to cognitive, psychosocial maturity. I use the term “adult” in ways that are consistent with the field of adult education as I refer not only to those called non-traditional learners, but also to those eighteen- or nineteen-year-old learners with significant life experience who might otherwise be called “traditional” students.

A related additional characteristic of participants in this study is their matriculation at an open-access community college in western New York State. Christie Toth (2023) points out that *community college learners* likely share many characteristics with adult learners: both groups are “historically underrepresented in postsecondary education” (p. 37) and are typically first generation college students, poor, caretakers, and workers. An important pair of generalizations made by adult learning theorists about adult learners is that they are more self-motivated than non-adults while also having more critical demands on their time and attention than non-adults. The demographic realities that make these conclusions likely—caretaking responsibilities, employment status, and chronological age—are likewise found among community college learners in general. As I find through this project, these demographic factors and resulting conclusions about adult and community college learners may shape learners’ experience of corrective feedback on language use, both in terms of how learners perceive instructor feedback and regarding the network of supports and resources learners have at their disposal.

That both the participants and the three sites of this study are all *rurally situated* is the final characteristic that may influence learner experience of corrective feedback on language use and of feedback in general. The implications of being a community college-attending adult are already significant: learners are more likely to have major demands on their time and energies,

sometimes leading them to deprioritize the obligations that come with formal learning. At the same time, the sources of these non-academic demands—family, work, healthcare, and so on—may also function as resources for meeting formal learning obligations such as those associated with FYC. Compounding and refining these likelihoods are the unique material and ideological realities that come with living and learning in rural U.S. contexts. Though ruralness manifests differently even across the three sites within this study, and while it remains an undercurrent within data analysis, both historical and contemporary relationships among literacy education, higher education, and the rural U.S. are fraught. The implications of this factor are underdeveloped in this project, but the network of contexts that learners in this study bring to bear on their experiences of feedback in FYC may be seen as uniquely rural.

Based on my experience teaching FYC with adult, rurally-situated community college learners, as well as the scholarship I'll explore below and in the next chapter, I sought to design an empirical study using focus group methodology to inquire into the following argument:

- Because feedback on language use and grammar in the context of higher education and FYC in particular seeks to inculcate in learners the standard academic discourses, often out of a laudable desire to confer discursive power,
- But because language is a primary component of our identity and the means by which we know ourselves and the world,
- Feedback on language use and grammar may be experienced by marginalized learners as a kind of violence.

The warrants that underlie this argument have their basis in the argument that “reality is not merely SOCIALLY, but SOCIO-LINGUISTICALLY, constructed” (Smitherman, 1991, p. 117, emphasis in original). Work such as Geneva Smitherman’s has been taken up across

disciplines. In their introduction to *Language and Identities*, which explores the roles of language in both individual and group identities, Carmen Llamas and Dominic Watt (2009) highlight the elemental relationship between language and identity: “Language not only reflects who we are but in some sense *it is who we are*, and its use defines us both directly and indirectly” (p. 1, emphasis mine). More recently, in her foreword to April Baker-Bell’s *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, Smitherman (2020) suggests that the “pedagogy of bi-dialectalism,” which informs the “linguistic discrimination and linguistic injustice [that] continue to prevail” in English and literacy studies today, is merely a replacement for the previous, more overt “language eradication philosophy and educational programs” that persisted until the mid-twentieth century (p. xv). Asao Inoue (2021), in *Above the Well: An Antiracist Literacy Argument from a Boy of Color*, sharpens the matter of language and identity with his observation that, “Race is a set of structures that make up our lives. Language is one of those structures,” further noting that race is “salient [...] to our use of language and the judgements that language is interlaced with” (p. 23). Baker-Bell (2020) identifies the pain in K–12 settings resulting from corrective feedback on racialized language practices as a contributor to “internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” (p. 8). Moreover, she notes comparable intersectional discrimination for other “communities of color,” as well as “white linguistically marginalized communities,” Indigenous learners, and “Appalachian” learners (p. 16).

This acknowledgement by Baker-Bell helps me justify my sense of why this line of inquiry might be explored at a primarily White institution such as mine, where racially minoritized learners are very much in the minority. Furthermore, though, I’m concerned that reinforcing what’s been called for over 100 years a *single standard* of language use—one “with its roots in prestige dialects” (Bridwell-Bowles, 2003, p. 203)—in turn reinforces a rigidity that



leads such monolingually trained learners to denigrate multilingualism along with Black Englishes, Appalachian Englishes, and anything other than standardized English. As Sophie Bell expands upon in her *Mapping Racial Literacies: College Students Write about Race and Segregation* (2021a) and puts succinctly in her “‘Your Grammar Is All Over the Place’: Translingual Close Reading, Anti-Blackness, and Racial Literacy among Multilingual Student Writers in First Year Writing” (2021b), “Over 45 years after the Conference on College Composition and Communication made Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) their official policy, multilingual student writers still tend to reject linguistic theories of the benefits of multilingualism” (2021b, n.p.). In other words, as Baker-Bell also found, even marginalized learners with command over a diversity of linguistic resources have been disciplined to deny the value not only of their language but of their very identity. Although my study’s participants spoke of a more nuanced and complex emotional response to corrective feedback on language use than I anticipated, it was primarily participants of color—Black and Indigenous FYC learners—whose seemingly contradictory references to both feedback on grammar and the silence of instructor feedback suggested disconnects between FYC instruction, feedback practices, and learner expectations. Such disconnects may be population-specific and may influence or be a consequence of the concerns raised by Baker-Bell and Bell.

In this introductory chapter, I share additional disciplinary conversations about language correction and affective response that motivated my work and that further situate my experiences within the field. Sharing my experiences as a learner, writer, teacher of writing, and professional of various stripes not only establishes my motivation for this project, but introduces me as someone who has felt pain as a result of feedback, who has studied the relationship between feedback and affect, and who prioritizes learners’ perspectives. These experiences also illustrate

some of the foundational concepts and concerns of this study, including what “corrective feedback on language use” looks like. The following sections of intertwined scholarly reflections and personal narratives therefore move between some of the hurts I’ve experienced myself and the pain I’ve worked to avoid for others. They also foreground the important roles played by my family and others in ways that anticipate some of the findings I share in later chapters about what this study has led me to see as adult learners’ rural writing ecosystems.

This concept of rural writing ecosystems features prominently in my ultimate conclusion, which represents a shift in my thinking regarding instructional feedback practices and FYC learner experiences. The study carried out for this project made space not only for exploration of the concerns I map out above, but for participant-prompted areas of inquiry. Resulting conversations among focus group and interview participants—all FYC learners at a rural, multi-campus community college—led me to see learners’ emotional response to corrective feedback as muted and highly contextualized. One potential reason for this is that corrective feedback encounters are experienced through the lens of writers’ broad literacy networks, which themselves may include other sources of corrective feedback and established beliefs about language and feedback. Another is that, in the face of so many factors common to the adult learner, feedback encounters themselves feel less significant than we might expect. This study also led me to recognize learners’ desire for instructor feedback—even corrective feedback on language use—provided that feedback builds upon instruction that supports learners’ existing approaches to and attitudes about writing and language. In such an instructional framework, feedback is a dialogic extension of instruction in which learners prompt feedback, breaking disciplinary and instructional silence about grammar and language use.

## Entering the Discipline: Composition Studies and Marginalized Discourses

This study's findings complicate and occasionally challenge my preliminary assumptions about learner experience of corrective feedback. Several voices from the discipline of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies that informed those assumptions do remain significant to my thinking. While many of these voices were introduced to me before I knew I'd be entering the discipline, they are still central to my teaching and scholarship as they pertain to language learning and corrective feedback. Peter Elbow is one scholar whose work introduced me both to the discipline and to the roles of emotion and social background in the writing process.

As such, in his foreword to Dale Jacobs' and Laura R. Micciche's (2003) *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, Elbow (2003) calls particular attention to "one emotional complication that's central to us all as language teachers," namely that "people tend to have conflicting feelings about correctness in language" (p. viii). His discussion of how "people" feel about language correctness is a focus of his foreword, and while Jacobs' and Micciche's collection does, true to its title, include essays that theorize emotion and consider emotions' roles in the classroom and for us as professionals, only one essay addresses this particular interest that Elbow introduces—grammar. Elbow doesn't gesture to Donna Strickland and Ilene Crawford's (2003) "Error and Racialized Performances of Emotion in the Teaching of Writing" by name, but his mention of what he's "learn[ed] from Geneva Smitherman's various works" (p. viii) echoes Strickland and Crawford. Elbow's quiet but clear nod to the essay includes the point that language and identity have a co-constitutive relationship. He doesn't say this exactly, but he illustrates it by imagining the words of a self-righteous student who's turned in an essay full of "mistakes": "'If you won't take me the way I am, then too bad for you'" (p. viii).

The gatekeeping of writing studies—and English studies more broadly—that Elbow’s imaginary student pushes against through their writing is the focus of a different essay by Elbow that first got me hooked on him and on the field, not to mention on matters related to emotion and language instruction. As Elbow notes, the middle finger implied in some students’ writing is not only something he’s written about but “a feeling I’ve sometimes detected in myself” (p. viii). This feeling was the anchor for his “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard: Reflections on the Inability to Write” (2000a), the first essay in his weighty *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (2000b). In “Illiteracy,” Elbow reflects on his discoveries about language acquisition as full of hopeful “error,” and about writing as a bit of a battlefield. His telling and re-telling of his “experience of being knocked down” (p. 6) while writing in college and graduate school feels desperate in its protagonist’s unwillingness to take “no” or “not good enough” for an answer. Of course, it’s also heartening, because—as I sometimes share with my students—if this rockstar of composition studies was told he was no good and didn’t belong in the field, then any one of us has a shot. Right?

This very specific thought about Peter Elbow steeled me against some of the rejections and criticisms I’ve experienced over the last fifteen years. It was also a thought I first had at a felicitous time in my life and career. This essay of Elbow’s and his collection of work was introduced to me during “The Teaching of Writing,” a graduate course taught at the university where I was completing a master of science in adult education, but one that was taught within the English department. “Teaching Writing” would count as an elective in terms of my degree requirements, but, because it fell outside of the adult education program, would require both a program-specific rationale on my part and English department permission.

The rationale was easy enough, as my advisor and my program director immediately recognized the value of such a course to supplement my focus on family and community literacy. My degree, I'd hoped, would set me up to either find or invent a career that melded literacy work, social work, and community development. The role of literacy in these vague plans was unclear, but it provided some disciplinary anchor, and I was, it seemed, good at English.

The course would introduce me not only to Elbow's work but to the occasionally heartless bureaucracy of higher education, and it reminded me of the gatekeeping I'd faced as an uncultured (read: poor) undergraduate in English studies during my "first try" at a degree many years earlier. Specifically, my petition to the English department to please allow me to enroll in this one course on writing pedagogy involves a lengthy email exchange that I still cringe while reading: I was a lowly adult education student, yes, but I'd graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in English as a returning undergraduate; and I'd gotten in to a very prestigious doctoral program in English; and I'd recently been a research assistant in English; and, and, and. In the end, though, it was only my advisor's plea directly to the instructor that did the trick. I was finally in, even though I certainly didn't feel like I belonged.

I did well in that course on writing pedagogy, partly because Elbow's work showed me that my feelings of not belonging weren't unique, and partly because the course introduced me to the relationships between belonging and discourse. Discourse, as opposed to language alone, was deftly theorized by my instructor and rolled into every concept we considered: from multimodal composing to fanfiction, and from timed writing to sentence combining. Discourse, as defined by James Gee (2014), is not simply a "sequence of sentences" (p. 18), but "the relationship between language and context, [and] the ways in which contexts help determine the full extent of what we mean or can be taken to have meant" (p. 20). And discourses "are the ways of being in the world;

they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities” (Gee, 1989a, pp. 6–7). Norman Fairclough (2001) puts it similarly, that a discourse is “the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part” (p. 20).

I thus came to know my own discursive self in new ways, in ways that foregrounded parts of my identity that I hadn’t yet given thought to as I considered my own language practices, which I reflect on below, as well as the language practices of others. My instructor, who did embrace me as a learner who belonged in her graduate seminar, picked up on a reference I made in one weekly response paper to the volunteer work I’d just undertaken at a federal prison near my home. It turned out that the program in nonviolent communication that I took part in and then facilitated was one that my instructor had also facilitated near her own home. So in addition to giving me a wink every time she incorporated a non-violent communication term in her teaching, she guided me toward a deeper consideration of the implications of language and literacy in the lives of people—such as the imprisoned men we each worked with—whose discourses and discursive identities were non-standard, non-normative, and non-privileged in various institutional spaces. In particular, I became increasingly concerned with how my own feeling of not belonging paled in comparison to the lived emotional experiences of those who are not only marginalized by virtue of their class but racially marginalized as well.

### **Silence, Violence, Affect, and Grammar**

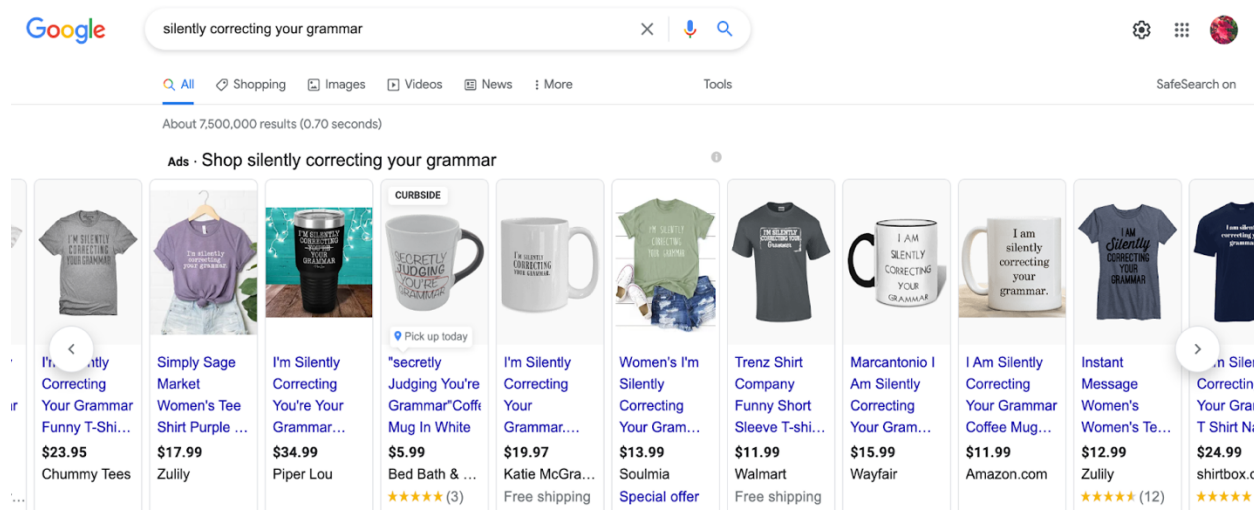
This brings me back to Strickland and Crawford’s “Error and Racialized Performances of Emotion in the Teaching of Writing.” Although this essay was not a part of my introduction to the field of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies, it touches on several areas of disciplinary inquiry and encapsulates those concerns about language instruction, corrective feedback, and discursive identities that accompanied my introduction to the discipline. Strickland and Crawford

explore some pervasive public assumptions and feelings about standardized English grammar and usage for two reasons. First, the authors fear that these assumptions and feelings further marginalize already marginalized learners (especially those Black learners whose grammar is non-standardized), and, second, they are dismayed that the strategies and scholarship aimed at disrupting the status quo regarding language use and the correction imperative haven't worked. As scholars who identify as White women, the authors advocate for a rethinking of their own (and by extension my own) re-performance of Whiteness that decouples it from instructional authority. At the same time, the authors "are not arguing that teachers of writing abandon discussions of grammar in the classroom," for, they assert, "*silence* about grammar with our students [...] is an act of collusion with a colonizing white consciousness" (p. 79, emphasis in original). The pedagogy they propose, then, is one that breaks the silence by reckoning not only with the sociohistorical realities of non-standard and standard language use, but also with the emotional realities of those who use and hear those languages.

Strickland and Crawford suggest grammar norms that are conceived "outside of the classroom" (p. 68) result in "reinforc[ed] patterns of feeling that support the dominant culture" (p. 69). These patterns of feeling that are reproduced by and support dominant culture privilege a White, western vision of the world, as seen not only in a McDonald's commercial critiqued by the authors but also in the profusion of "I'm Silently Correcting Your Grammar" merchandise available to us today (Figure 1). Such reproduced patterns of feeling about grammar marginalize speakers and writers and, as the authors note, make it hard to teach writing that seeks *not* to reproduce and support dominant culture and norms around language use.

**Figure 1**

*“Silently Correcting Your Grammar,” Screenshot of Google Search: July 17, 2021*



Strickland and Crawford chart the scholarship on the emotional reactions of those who hear or read “error.” They note that the errors most often negatively reacted to—“double negatives, incorrect verb forms, many incorrect pronoun forms,” and so on (Williams, 1981, as cited in Strickland & Crawford, p. 70)—“are characteristic of Black Language/Ebonics,” and are seen as hallmarks of “laziness” in spite of African American English’s rule-bound grammar (p. 70). The authors point then to the fact that if we rejoice in “correct” standardized grammar but denigrate “correct” non-standardized grammars, we’re really just rejoicing in Whiteness. Thus the authors establish a connection between language, identity, and emotion in particular: “the schooling of language and the schooling of emotion are never far apart” (p. 72). Their recognition of how racialized discourses are policed via various media and formal instruction reinforces the imperative I felt upon first being oriented to the discipline.

The multiple contexts that led to my concerns about the role of language in the maintenance of dominant priorities—not only my Teaching Writing course and the alternatives-



to-violence workshops at the prison, but undergraduate coursework in post-colonial studies—positioned me to develop my own pedagogy (or, as I was studying adult education, my own andragogy) that enacted a non-violent, anti-racist agenda. That is, I was poised to do this *if* I ever decided to teach, a prospect I was not enthusiastic about. But I *was* enthusiastic about working with people who had been hurt by formal educational experiences, especially where painful experiences pertained to identity and language. Admittedly, I had a bit of a savior complex and saw formal literacy education as my first snake to stomp on. I now realize the issue at hand is much broader, though I expect the experience is the same.

That is, though the pain of learning might not be limited to the spaces and imperatives of formal education sites, the emotions that comprise that pain still make up what Lynn Worsham (1998) calls “the hidden curriculum for the vast majority of people living and learning in a highly stratified capitalist society” (p. 216). Worsham lists these painful emotions: “grief, hatred, bitterness, anger, rage, terror, and apathy as well as emotions of self-assessment such as pride, guilt, and shame” (p. 216). Of shame in particular, Worsham goes on to suggest, “Silenced shame produces anger and rage that are then turned inward to destroy the self or turned outward to destroy others” (p. 227). I felt this shame, for myself, and I knew that silenced shame about language performance could be sufficient ammunition to fuel violence.

Strickland and Crawford recognize the historical and social conditions that would have led to shame and the other feelings listed from Worsham’s “Going Postal.” Learners’ previous education, Strickland and Crawford contend, “would have been marked by incidents that schooled them to feel shame, embarrassment, even disgust” (p. 75) about their own language use. Later, disclosing her own non-standard dialect, Strickland admits to having been “marred by her own schooling in shame” (p. 78). Shame again. And with it, again, the potential for violence.

In *On Violence and Violence Against Women*, Jacqueline Rose (2022) locates the source of physical and other kinds of violence in mental experiences, claiming, “The most prevalent, insidious forms of violence are those that cannot be seen” (p. 1). Also relevant to Strickland and Crawford’s assessment of the invisible impacts of silent, shameful experiences is Sara Ahmed’s (2004) paradigm for conceiving of how emotional memory wreaks havoc on our current lives. Ahmed maintains that emotions are predicated on consciousness of objects that we come into contact with bodily, though not necessarily by touch. Some objects are particularly “sticky” and “saturated with affect” (p. 11), such that “they keep open a history which is already open insofar as it is affective”—that is, “they are effects of histories that have stayed open” (p. 59). These lingering objects of pain, these still-open histories, are what I want to stomp. If I can’t—and I don’t think I can—stomp out dominant cultural imperatives that drive painful experiences, I want to make painful memories less sticky. At least, I want to avoid causing more pain.

### **Finding Focus**

This dissertation engages the voices of learners currently enrolled in first-year composition as they respond to questions about their experiences of corrective instructor feedback on their language use. While studies from K–12 and foreign language studies have asked participants in studies on learner perception of corrective feedback to choose from a predetermined inventory of emotions to describe their experiences, I sought to enact a more constructivist and agential research methodology. I therefore developed a focus group protocol that would create space for learner participants not only to respond to my questions about their experiences, but to challenge and expand upon my research concerns. In the fall semester of 2022, I facilitated focus groups and interviews across three instructional sites at the State University of New York’s Jamestown Community College, where I’ve taught and otherwise

worked since 2010. I employed a non-standard, emergent structure that also allowed participants to introduce and discuss issues related to composition instruction and feedback that they felt were worth my and their fellow participants' consideration. While the bulk of my seven focus groups and three interviews was spent in focused conversation about feedback, language, and feedback on language, the thirty mostly adult FYC students who took part in this study offered more than I could have imagined. Through a synthesis of thematic and discourse analysis, I found that a complex network of factors shape learner experiences of feedback, as focused on in the latter chapters of this dissertation.

To further establish both my personal motivation for undertaking this work and how those motivations are reflected in my research choices, I'll share a few more stories about my life as a student and as an educator. My orientation to the discipline set me up to be supremely mindful of how language use and correction interact with identity and emotion. As a result, I became reflective about my own experiences of not only correction but acquiescence to language standards. These experiences of my own informed professional and instructional choices, and my continued personal experiences regarding language learning and correction would likewise continue to function as lessons in instructional approaches.

One vivid memory of having my own language use corrected takes place not in a composition classroom but in a large, dark history lecture hall my sophomore year of college. I wish I could remember the topic of the paper I'd submitted, and I wish I could remember some of the feedback received on the ideas I'd shared, but all I can recall of being handed back my stapled sheets by the TA was a bold, red, and centered "B+" atop the first page, along with another, slighter handwritten mark. A word had been circled and a note had been scrawled: "Sentences don't begin with 'but'!" Again, there might have been brilliant, instructive,

supportive feedback shared elsewhere, and I might have gone on to read and consider that feedback. But this was the paper I unceremoniously crammed straight into my notebook and ignored until several years later, when I was unpacking boxes after moving into my first house.

There are a few issues to unpack here, along with that B+ history essay. First, sentences do sometimes begin with “but.” And they sometimes begin with “and.” The matter of whether such sentences can be called “standard” in academic contexts is another one entirely. Suffice it to say, though, the veracity of this bit of feedback was questionable to begin with. Second, to the extent that I was aware of the so-called “rules” that regulate where and how we use conjunctions, I’d been recently taught—also in an academic context—not to care. I was concurrently enrolled in a creative writing course and was working conscientiously to free myself of the stodgy prose that won me honors in high school, toying with rules to find my non-fiction-writing voice. So, either I intentionally tossed the word in there to thumb my nose at anyone who’d care, or I managed to ignore it during copyediting. Either way, starting sentences with “but” had become an acceptable and even welcome part of how I chose to communicate my ideas in writing.

This experience of having my newly-acquired yet fully-embraced language performance corrected stuck with me. It depressed me. It made me feel like I didn’t belong—or maybe I did, but only in certain spaces and classrooms. I won’t say it’s the only instance that led me to drop out of college, but it contributed to a growing suspicion that higher education had a “type,” and I wasn’t it. Several other hints were more or less subtle, and taken together these did ultimately send me packing with no degree.

It’s a pretty sad story, but, as may already be evident, my experience is almost cute compared with the experiences of many others. And when I’d initially drafted this introduction, months or maybe a year before conducting my focus groups, this was where my own story ended

and I picked up the voices of experts—of more sociolinguists and critical pedagogy scholars—in order to foreground the experiences of these other learners. Learners who’d endured, as a function of their racialized and class identities, so much more than I had. Learners who weren’t me. But in the process of making sense of what I heard from these learners, students at the community college where I’ve worked for over twelve years, I began to understand myself as one of them, at least in some ways.

Until this project I’d seen myself as a highly empathetic yet still distanced ally, one who had felt just enough of an alienating sting that I could look at what others endure and honestly imagine their pain. I imagined this pain so completely that I wanted to devote my life to protecting others. I moved from job to job, mostly in social and community services, looking more for an opportunity to reduce institutional harm and pain than for anything else. And then I found some direction: I was in the midst of my master’s in adult education and working on a community-based literacy project, when I was told by an undergraduate that if I’d been her English teacher she wouldn’t have been so scared of that class. If callings happen, this was mine.

Armed with my own circled “but” experience and the mandate of this student, I needed to learn how to be a literacy educator in a formal education setting, and—even though such concepts were just barely on my radar—I also needed to ensure I was enacting a non-violent and anti-racist pedagogy. So I enrolled in coursework not only in adult literacy but in multicultural pedagogies, courses that extended what I’d learned in my course on writing pedagogy. In these venues, I pieced together what was happening in the feedback experience I’d had from that history paper and others like it (the resentment clearly still well-ingrained).

In particular, I was learning concurrently about language acquisition, experiential learning, and the history of grammar instruction. As I discuss further in the next chapter, I came to recognize that approaches to language acquisition (as opposed to direct language instruction) generally conformed to theories of experiential learning. Emphasizing the social nature of learning, John Dewey established his theory of experiential learning in his 1916 *Democracy and Education* (1944) by highlighting the role of intentional and forward-looking reflection in regards to action that we might conceptualize as experience: “Experience involves a connection of doing or trying with something which is undergone in consequence. A separation of the active doing phase from the passive undergoing phase destroys the vital meaning of an experience” (p. 151). Language acquisition mirrors this process whereby we try out the language we are surrounded by, and when the language we use leads to undesired results, we self-correct and try again. More psychologically-oriented scholars such as Reijo Miettinen (2000) have expanded how we conceive of the experiential learning process by considering what “experience” and “reflection” mean cognitively. Miettinen looks critically at the component of experiential learning that catalyzes the cycle of experience and reflection: it is the “disturbance and uncertainty” that accompanies one’s realization of error (p. 65). Contextualized grammar instruction, which I’ll discuss at length in the next chapter, is a common instructional practice that seeks to approximate the experiential process of emergent language acquisition: it recognizes the discursive role of language, and capitalizes on the social motivations for discursive language use as well as the psychosocial experiences of the attentive language user.

It became clear to me that my own interior reactions to having my language corrected, the “disturbance and uncertainty” I’d felt by the circled “but,” had been disproportionate to the mark itself. Other students might have (and do) brush off such contextualized grammar instruction,

saying to themselves some version of either, “Eh, that doesn’t apply to me; they don’t know what they’re talking about,” or, “Eh, I’ll be sure to watch for that going forward so I don’t get points taken off next time.” For some reason, I’d felt this circled “but” in neither way but instead as a challenge to my sense of belonging and my appropriateness for college. Unconsciously, I read this bit of corrective feedback as a threat to me as a student at this prestigious university but also as a language user in general, no matter how flippantly I might have used that “but.”

### **My Matriarchal Literacies**

Also unconsciously, I was probably fearful of being pegged as coming from a certain class and geographic space, an element of my discursive identity I’d worked through in my early teens. With each new middle school English grammar unit, my peers and I had the opportunity to sit out weeks of instruction if we earned a perfect score on a pre-test worksheet. I scored well on these pre-tests at first, but not well enough to skip over instruction, until I realized that I had ready-made models for both the “correct” and “incorrect” worksheet options: my grandmothers. I realized that in order to score well on these pre-tests, I had to identify sentences that sounded more like my Grandma Anderson’s brand of English as opposed to my Grandma Kubiak’s.

And so, when stumped by a problem like,

*She (don’t / doesn’t) go to the store anymore,*

I would call up my two grandmothers’ voices, faces, and homes in my head. Grandma Kubiak attended school until 8th grade, at which point she dropped out to care for her brothers and the family farm. But, as my grandmother and part-time caretaker, she wanted more than anything to see me succeed academically, teaching me to read and sing nursery rhymes and to color carefully within the lines. She’d be the one to say, while sitting on her living room davenport, “Oh no, honey, she don’t go to the store no more” (never mind “anymore”), before detailing why getting

to the store became an issue for this person and how someone from down the street should be helping, along with a quick primer on how I'm actually fifth cousins to this poor person who can no longer get herself where she needs to be.

My Anglo-Irish-American grandma, on the other hand, would have said, tapping a finger on the dining table, "She doesn't go to the store anymore." Anything beyond that declaration would have been muttered under her breath so the grandchildren wouldn't hear. Understated without frills, Grandma Anderson played seriously with language, devouring the *LA Times* crossword, writing bawdy poetry, and demolishing us at Scrabble. Her language was that of my grammar worksheets, and it was her somewhat disinterested, melodic alto voice that finally led me to perfect scores and a leisurely academic quarter of fiction reading.

Being told in college that my language use was wrong or inappropriate for an academic setting undermined my work of matriarchal measuring up and discarding. What would have been more shameful to Grandma Kubiak, I wonder: dismissing her language and all the love for us and her community that came with it, or getting it wrong anyway?

### **Punctuation Profusion, a Vampire Bat, and Adult Literacy Learning**

The pain I had felt was real, and the fear felt by others was real, so I remained on high alert when I ultimately started working with others' language, both as a community college educator and as a parent. A final set of intertwined stories from these two worlds of mine illustrates how these conflicting forces played out, reinforcing my desire to facilitate literacy learning without functioning as an additional source of painful authoritative control, especially for those who are likely to encounter corrective forces elsewhere.

Early one semester, a few years into full-time community-college teaching, I sat at home reading drafts of my developmental writing students' personal narratives. After reading several



paragraphs written by a student I'll call Rob, I turned the page and halted. It looked like, in the course of writing this narrative, he'd suddenly been introduced to the quotation mark and decided to use it not just once or twice, but constantly. Some indicated euphemism, such as in his reference to "the view" of his violence-ridden midwestern neighborhood that led him to drop out of school at the age of thirteen. However, quotation marks also liberally peppered the entirety of his last two paragraphs, surrounding conjunctions and nouns like "but" and "mother," in spite of the fact that he introduced no dialogue.

My gut reaction to Ron's quotation mark extravaganza was to screw up my face and utter a "What the...?" Then I stressed: What am I going to do about this? How should I address it with Rob? What, if anything, should I write on his draft? How did he learn to use quotation marks like this? Had I encouraged it? Nothing could account for the profusion of punctuation in front of me.

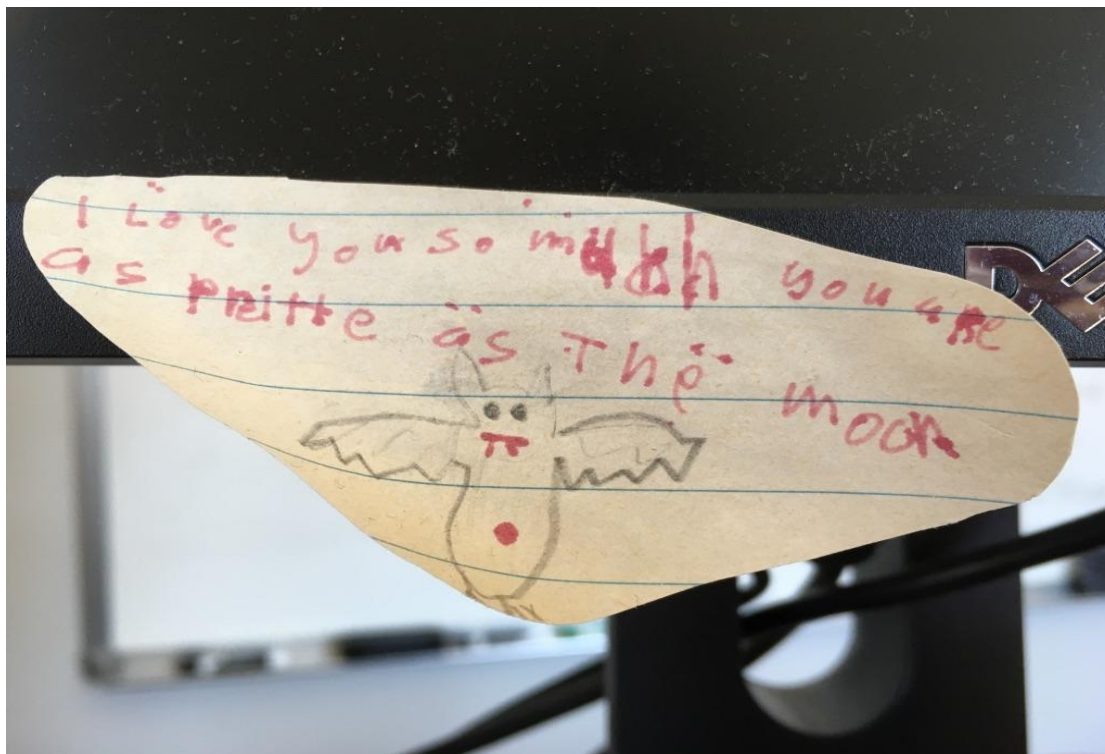
Another instance of quotation-mark overkill that I had encountered a few years earlier provided some direction. My then 6-year-old daughter had come to work with me one day over her winter break, camped out under my desk with scissors, glue, markers, and every color of paper she could find in the copy room. One valuable artifact from that day (Figure 2) is still taped to my computer monitor at work: a carefully trimmed piece of yellow lined paper with a small pencil and red marker drawing of a vampire bat with a bloody belly button, and a message just above it that reads, with quotation marks that also look like umlauts,

*I "love you so" much*

*You are as preitte "as the" moon.*

**Figure 2**

*“Vampire Bat with Bloody Belly Button,” Photo of Line Drawing by My Daughter: Circa 2010.*



Having recently learned about language acquisition, I recognized that my daughter—a vicious consumer of text—was trying her hand at using a piece of punctuation in new ways. She was engaging in a hypothesis-driven language experiment of her own design, and she would (consciously or not) test her hypothesis the next time she encountered quotation marks in her reading. I could have expedited that process by responding to the punctuation, but that was not what she was after. Plus, while the umlaut-like quotation marks caught my attention, her note and her drawing (not her punctuation) invited my immediate reaction above all else.

What if, instead of responding to my daughter’s drawing and love note, I’d instead given her instruction on standard use of quotation marks? “Oh, that’s so nice, honey, but these marks

here really aren't needed." It feels cruel to think about, especially if I put myself in her shoes. However, this is precisely what I'd thought about doing upon reading Ron's final paragraphs. As an adult learner whose exposure to printed text had been limited (based on his own report), it's likely that his overuse of quotation marks was his own hypothesis-driven experiment. Rather than fret about how to "deal" with this overuse, I realized, I should instead feel hopeful about the fact that Ron felt comfortable enough to take the risks necessary for such experimentation.

Both of these stories illustrate two key concepts from scholarship on language acquisition and contextualized grammar instruction via feedback: what may be considered error in grammar, punctuation, and usage is not "bad," in part because it may indicate the learning of new options for meaning-making and the potential for growth; and errors like these will only happen if learners feel comfortable to take risks. This story also points out the core of experiential language learning: the need for a user of a sign system not only to try and fail at using those signs, but also to recognize that failure and to feel a need to make changes for next time.

Given my staunch stance as an aspiring non-violent educator, though, I chose not to use my daughter's or Rob's written expressions as tools for contextualized grammar (or, in this case, punctuation) instruction. I could have capitalized on these as ideal "teachable moments," occasions to gently introduce standard punctuation usage to facilitate recognition of non-standard usage. I stopped short of this, though, because I saw both of them as learners who were both clearly curious about the function of the quotation mark and observant enough to, one day or another, recognize their attempts as failed, probably feel badly about that failure, and then notice how others use this piece of punctuation differently to inform their future attempts.

In spite of their seeming similarities, however, several important elements distinguish my daughter's experience from Rob's. She was a White girl with middle-class resources whose

development of language was concurrent with her development of self; he was an Indigenous and Latino man with a history of trauma and poverty whose current development of academic language use was distinct from that which he'd developed while growing up. And while my kid was, well, a kid, Rob was a grown adult in his mid-thirties. Because he was a racially minoritized person, I was eagerly looking out for Rob's wellbeing while trying not to default to the kind of "white benevolence" that Romeo García and Douglas Kern (2022, p. 81) note is all too common among those of us doing the majority of first-year writing (and especially writing-center) work.

But as adult learners, Rob and I were kindred. Though I didn't and couldn't know everything that shaped his experience of language instruction, I did know what it was like to be a grown adult taking college classes alongside eighteen-year-olds. After dropping out of college, I'd worked in retail, gotten married, run a restaurant, and had two children before deciding to complete my degree, not at the elite private Catholic university I'd initially attended in Boston, but at the public regional college just down the road from my high school.

Adult education scholars have theorized the adult learner as unique. Within the field of adult education, as initially described and classified in its U.S. contexts by Malcolm Knowles in the 1920s (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 2), scholars have continually remapped the sites and roles of adult learning and redefined the hallmarks of the adult learner. In their *Adult Education in the American Experience: From the Colonial Period to the Present*, Harold Stubblefield and Patrick Keane define adult education as "a distinct entity among the varieties of education, as an agency in American society, and as part of adult experience" (p. 9). Within higher education, adult education has found several homes, starting with university extension centers and other community-based efforts, and including community colleges (p. 260). Regarding adult learners themselves, adult education scholars continue to refine their sense of this diverse population's

qualities and characteristics. Barbara Gleason (2015) points to formal attempts by higher education organizations to classify learners as “nontraditional” based on certain factors, including a time lapse from high school completion to college enrollment, part-time college attendance, full-time employment, and caretaking responsibilities (p. 12). As indicated earlier, these factors are not unique to those deemed “non-traditional” by virtue of chronological age, but are found among even younger learners who have developed into adulthood. Though these factors change with time and cultural setting, adult learning scholars have also abstracted certain qualities typically possessed by adult learners that influence their experience of instruction. Ralf St. Clair (2015) documents the continuing relevance of characteristics posited in the 1980s.

Adult learners:

- Have a “sense of self-direction”
- Are actively engaged “in a continuing process of growth”
- Possess “experience and values” that “will affect what is heard” during instruction
- Arrive at learning experiences “with set intentions”
- Have specific “expectations about education”
- Juggle “competing interests” such as family, work, and other obligations
- Have pre-existing “set patterns of learning” (p. 32–33)

Based on demographic data, Christie Toth (2023, p. 37 and pp. 75–76) demonstrates an alignment between the identity markers of community college learners in general and those of adult learners in general. In particular, she notes that both groups are “historically underrepresented in postsecondary education” (p. 37), as they are typically first generation college students, poor, caretakers, and workers. Furthermore, the two-year college student’s learner characteristics, as presented by Toth, also echo those of the adult learner: “As they move

through these various spaces and social situations, [two-year college] students negotiate a range of in-flux and interrelated identities that have claims on their time, attention, energies, and money” (p. 37).

Although I hadn’t enrolled in a community college, I knew long before enrolling in a master’s program in adult education what it was to be an adult learner (and, perhaps by extension, a typical two-year college learner). It was both exhilarating and exhausting. On one hand, most of what I was learning seemed to come so much more naturally than had been the case years earlier: I was reading more thoroughly, getting excited about ideas, making connections between classes and what was happening in the world, getting to know peers and instructors as humans, thinking seriously about graduate school. On the other hand, as wonderful as college was, it could almost never be my priority: I’d enrolled in my late-20s with a toddler and a breastfeeding infant, reeling from various disappointments, feeling guilty daily for giving up work so that I could be in school, seeing family through cancer and divorce and addictions, moving into my own divorce.

And in spite of the major forces at play in my life that pulled me in multiple, conflicting directions, I continued as an adult learner to feel the sting of corrective feedback on my language choices. I’d tried hard to free myself from concerns about grades, but I’d also worked tirelessly at developing complex, brilliant, and perfect arguments in my writing. So to know that someone had looked askance at a given word or idea drove me up the wall. I cannot understate my reactions: critical feedback felt huge to me. But I was also developing a more nuanced awareness of language and literacy through my upper-division coursework, and I was building networks of peers who were also adult learners thanks to an unusually populated capstone course with several English majors even older than I was. And I’d come to recognize what felt like my superpower

as an adult learner: I'd been through enough in my life that nothing on campus ever *had* to be of much consequence, and yet the work I was doing on campus was imbued with so much more consequence by virtue of the experiences I was able to bring to my studies. This paradoxical tension accompanied the more practical, material set of tensions that came from not making an income while needing to pay for college and working through a difficult separation with two small children.

My experiences as an adult learner made me attuned to the process of learning for adults, which contributed to my ongoing interest in corrective feedback on language in particular. Indeed, the narrative thread that runs through this first chapter reflects how these experiences were shaped by various elements of my life, from my grandmothers' grammars to my marriage and divorce. Similarly, study participants who reflected on their own experiences as learners shared stories not only of their instructors' corrective feedback but of foster siblings' copyediting and of the role reality TV shows play in how they interpret criticism. In this way, FYC learners have once again helped me know myself differently, such that negligible stories about middle school pre-tests and my daughter's love note are re-oriented as critical elements of my own rural writing ecosystem. These experiences not only position me as a sympathetic co-learner and an instructor motivated by social justice imperatives, but equipped me with the awareness and understanding needed to undertake the fairly unusual approach to data collection and analysis detailed in the following chapters.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

In this project, I seek to dwell with a portion of April Baker-Bell's argument in *Linguistic Justice*, specifically focusing on the nature of learner experience and the process of internalizing negativity about identity as a result of language correction; more precisely, I want to locate,

though in my own instructional contexts, the phenomenon that Baker-Bell describes. In particular, for reasons I'll detail in Chapter Two, I wondered whether mostly adult learners of various racialized and gendered identities at my rural, open-access community college might experience corrective FYC instructor feedback on their language use as a kind of violence. While I didn't anticipate that learners would articulate their experience as "violence," I wondered what affective descriptors they might use to convey their experiences. How did others feel when faced with corrective feedback on their language use. Did they feel it at all? And, if they did, was it legible as what some scholars have called "violence" (Strickland & Crawford, 2003; Worsham, 1989; Stuckey, 1991; Inoue, 2020)?

Eager to work with care and compassion when prompting reflection on these questions, I designed a study that would provide collaborative and supportive opportunities for sharing. In Chapter Three, I establish focus group methodology as an ideal approach to study design and data collection for my goals, suggesting that a constructivist-oriented social and human science approach to focus groups creates a generative research space, allowing for rich learner participant engagement and even growth. Also in this chapter, I provide detail about my study protocol including recruitment efforts, focus group development, and participant stratification.

Chapter Four describes the data collected through focus group and interview sessions with thirty FYC learners. I discuss my approach to coding, and to a hybrid mode of analysis. The themes I arrived at are described here, and I plot my thematic framework to illustrate not only which focus groups discussed specific sub-themes but—using social interaction analysis—the relative level of agreement or enthusiasm expressed by participants regarding each topic.

The final chapters suggest that, although the FYC learners in this study don't report experiencing corrective feedback on their language use as a kind of violence, learners'



representations of that feedback conjure a complex set of contextual factors that influence their experience. My initial perspective limited me to imagining that learners might be influenced by only very specific components of their writing process in spite of the fact that I recognize a broad network of factors at play in the experiences of adult learners generally. Further, I expected that having one's language use corrected via instructor feedback would be discernable to them as an isolated component of the writing process. What's more, though my study design allowed for participant-driven insights, and though I entered sessions aiming to be a co-constructor of knowledge alongside participants, I imagined that focus-group and interview sessions would yield participant-offered *data*, not their detailed philosophies on feedback and language. On all of these counts, I assumed incorrectly. In reality, the range of factors that shape learner experiences of feedback, as represented through focus group and interview discussion, and as arranged through my analysis, helped me see that adult learners in these rural FYC contexts draw upon complex networks of factors that are "self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic" (p. 4) in ways that reflect Margaret Syverson's (1999) definition of writing ecologies.

Chapter Five, "'A Couple of Small Grammar Things': Classifying Feedback (and the Barriers Precluding This)," positions the FYC feedback encounter as articulated by participants. The first section of the chapter illustrates a phenomenon found within writing studies: that the terminology of FYC is not a linguistic resource that is typically accessed or deployed by learners in FYC. Interestingly, learners' use of the seemingly simple term "grammar" suggested not only a lack of shared language, but a dysfunctionality surrounding a concept that holds nearly mythical status yet is rarely unpacked for FYC learners as an explicit component of instruction. The second section establishes the patterns I found in participant discussions about instructor feedback. Two major takeaways from this chapter are 1) that a lack of shared language around

FYC instruction may function as a barrier to learning, and 2) that the learners in this study wish for feedback that's affirming of their language use yet specific and instructive.

As noted in Chapter Six, the answer to my overarching research question of whether students report experiencing corrective feedback on their language use as a kind of violence is, at least superficially, “no.” The three broad categories of responses that I received from learner participants to my questions about the nature and experience of feedback on their language use are: 1) no or neutral reactions, 2) positive reactions, and 3) negative reactions. Within this final category, the negative reactions to instructor feedback are articulated through several distinct formations of the feedback encounter. However, the most generative discussion in which learner participants articulated specific “emotion words” to describe corrective feedback encounters regarding language use focused on others’ experiences.

Finally, Chapter Seven illustrates that the literate lives of first-semester composition students are expansive and nuanced in ways that may not only shape learners’ emotional experiences, but should shape the work we do as FYC educators. In particular, in this chapter, “‘It Doesn’t Translate Well’: Adult Learners’ Ecosystems and FYC,” I read participants’ situatedness as adult learners at an open-access, rural community college as an important component of an even broader set of complex “experiences and social networks” (Toth, 2023, p. 56). In this chapter I argue, in light of ecological and rural scholarship within the field, that what I call adult FYC learners’ rural writing ecosystems ought to be a framing concept for FYC and higher education in general, whereby not only feedback but FYC itself might function as a site of multiple coordinating boundary objects for engaging learners as agential partners in the transformation of rural, open-access, two-year colleges.

## Conclusion

What I have come to see most clearly through this study is that even nearly indiscernible feedback reverberates among FYC learners' writing ecosystems in ways that vary depending on the elements and relationships within those complex networks. In the case of rural community college-attending adult learners, these reverberations typically 1) mobilize learners' long-standing beliefs and attitudes about themselves, language, feedback, and writing, and 2) are refracted by learners' existing and ongoing writing supports, experiences, and practices, all of which have in turn been shaped by various personal and social forces. In particular, learner experience of mental illness, neurological disability, and racialized linguistic discrimination may amplify the effect of corrective feedback in ways that prompt a negative emotional reaction or association. At the same time, this experience might not be legible as such due to learners' language about feedback encounters that obfuscates that experience through either imprecision or "refoulement" (Rose, p. 329). The relative silence in FYC on the matter of grammar and language use is both a cause of a dysfunctional instructional experience and a consequence for learners who seek instruction about an element of their writing on which they are evaluated.

Adding to the challenges of FYC is the sociohistorical structure that rural higher education inhabits. Specifically, as heir to a legacy of civilizing literacy campaigns across the rural nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States, FYC risks perpetuating an historically oppressive imposition not only of urban standards of literacy but of urban values.

This project ultimately imagines FYC as a malleable, coordinating form that both situates learners at the center of its work and positions itself as a site for adult, rural FYC learners to intentionally and explicitly engage the various elements of their lives, while assuming higher education for their needs and purposes. By prioritizing the dialogic potential of feedback and

affirming diverse learner identities, the feedback encounter, then, would become the contact zone for FYC's co-adaptive affordances within both higher education and adult, rural FYC learners' writing ecosystems.

The next chapter lays out several components of the relationship between language instruction and FYC, including the largely unrealized and unresolved efforts of early twentieth-century rhetoricians who pushed against positivist approaches to writing instruction that persist today. This groundwork of contemporary scholarship seeks to make space for what James Berlin (1987) would call a transactional theory of rhetoric within a decidedly objectively-oriented culture of teaching and learning. At stake, in part, is not only the role of emotion in the teaching of FYC as rhetorical theory, but also the emotional experience of that often silent instruction.

## CHAPTER II

### SITUATING SCHOLARSHIP ON GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION AND AFFECTIVE

#### RESPONSE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

“Words like violence  
Break the silence  
Come crashing in  
Into my little world  
Painful to me  
Pierce right through me  
Can't you understand?  
Oh my little girl”  
Depeche Mode, “Enjoy the Silence” (1989)

“The field of Composition Studies has been relatively silent on the emotional schooling of correctness,” Strickland and Crawford (2003)

In some ways this study extends some observations presented in James Berlin’s (1987) *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985*. In plotting out nearly a century of epistemological shifts and their impact on rhetoric within the United States, Berlin locates the predominant, enduring beliefs about knowledge making and how those beliefs translate to specific instructional moves in the college writing classroom. According to Berlin’s history, the categories of rhetorical theories range from “objective” to “subjective” and finally to “transactional.” In spite of the fact that these categories proceed roughly chronologically, it’s the approaches to teaching first-year composition (FYC) most associated with the earlier, objective theories of rhetoric that persisted throughout the twentieth century and that I see reflected in FYC curricula today. Although some elements of subjective theories of rhetoric—e.g., journaling and peer review—are present in composition classrooms, and although hallmarks of transactional theories—with their emphasis on construction of knowledge in community—can be seen in some realms of higher education and FYC, we have been stuck for the most part with the “positivistic

epistemology” (p. 7) of objective theories. Of these, Berlin repeats, “current-traditional rhetoric has been the dominant form of college writing in the twentieth century” (p. 36).

The implications of this rhetoric—conceived of and enacted by “nineteenth-century American imitators” of eighteenth-century British rhetoricians (p. 8)—are still evident. In particular, the Americanized version of current-traditional rhetoric, which according to Berlin stripped any “concern for the role of emotion in providing motivation for the pursuit of the ethical in persuasive discourse” (p. 8), privileges a scientific orientation to the discovery and sharing of truths, whereby “invention [...] need not be taught” and the role of language is to convey truths via precision and “conform[ance] to certain standards of usage” that align with certain class identities (p. 9). Berlin summarizes: “This rhetoric makes the patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness the main ends of writing instruction” (p. 9). Again, these are not the only ends of FYC today, but the epistemological emphasis on empiricism and the practical emphasis on an objective linguistic clarity remain. Furthermore, Berlin’s reference to emotion as a missing component of dominant rhetorics within writing instruction suggests an ideological foundation that undergirds the instructional experiences of FYC learners—especially those whose language doesn’t “demonstrat[e] the appropriate class affiliation” (p. 9). The consequences of these combined features of the pervasive approaches to writing instruction are where the experiences I introduced in the previous chapter are situated.

In this chapter, I continue to lay out histories, critiques, and attempted interventions that establish the scholarly context for my study’s focus. In particular, I position scholarship from composition, rhetoric, and writing studies, adult education, and aligned fields to suggest that, as a result of multiple compounded disciplinary pressures within English studies during the 1970s and 1980s, the prevalent approach to language instruction that was popularized in the 1990s led

to dysfunction surrounding the teaching and learning of language and particularly grammar within FYC. This approach did little to address the issues introduced in earlier decades regarding language, power, and identity, and depends upon what I argue is a decidedly painful process for its success. Specifically, as I'll unpack below, the 1974 Students Right to Their Own Language statement, along with boundary-pushing scholarship on grammar instruction in 1985, resulted in a desire within composition, rhetoric, and writing studies (which I'll refer to simply as "composition studies" going forward) both to increase disciplinary acceptance of learners' home discourses and also to avoid isolated grammar instruction. Both imperatives drew from sociolinguistic scholarship regarding how racist dominant ideologies were reified through instruction. In the resulting vacuum regarding language instruction (and even scholarship on language instruction), contextualized grammar instruction emerged by 1996 as an approach that both invited learners to write in "their own language" and circumvented the problems of isolated grammar instruction. Mirroring the highly experiential process of language acquisition as theorized within the fields of adult education and literacy studies is contextualized grammar instruction. As discussed below, contextualized grammar instruction involves corrective feedback on a writer's language use, and it relies upon learner attention and affective response to correction in order to be effective. And while scholarship within foreign language studies and English education studies has addressed the issue of what this affective experience is like, little scholarship within the field of composition studies focuses on the affective experience of language correction for English speakers in an FYC setting. Given my professional contexts and resulting concern with adult learners at two-year colleges in particular, I introduce several ideas and concepts from composition studies and adult education that increasingly problematize the practice of contextualized grammar instruction through corrective feedback.

The matter of learner experience of corrective feedback on language use, then, can be understood from various disciplinary perspectives, several of which are reflected below. In general, though, two broad lines of thinking and scholarship in particular help to frame this project's initial approach to exploring the issue: 1) the disciplining of language, and 2) the experience of having one's language use disciplined. These are the two major sections of this literature review, and these sections establish a historical precedent for the seemingly endless multidisciplinary conversation about evaluation of learner language use, pointing to scholarship from linguists, compositionists and rhetoricians, foreign language educators, and English educators who—like those referenced in Chapter One and Berlin above—seek to disrupt disciplinary and social privileging of standardized English. From these two lines of thinking, I carry over a focus on the instructional intervention of contextualized grammar instruction, and I engage voices from adult education and composition studies to further establish the need for additional study of adult FYC learners' experiences of corrective instructor feedback on language use.

### **A Caveat: My Situated Two-Year College Perspective**

I should note that I am focused in particular on scholarship on language instruction and feedback that I was aware of prior to undertaking and just as I started this work, for these were the lines of thinking that informed my own practices and that I saw reflected in the practices of my colleagues not only at my own institution but at other two-year colleges. This literature review, then, is not an exhaustive catalog of the most prominent or most often cited scholarship in the areas of feedback and response, but of what most affected me in preparation for and during my continued development as an FYC teacher of language in a two-year context. These ideas and voices, combined with experiences such as those recounted in Chapter One, informed my



situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Findings from scholarship on two-year college English faculty preparation and professionalization therefore provide an additional lens through which to consider what follows.

An important generalization drawn from scholarship on the professional engagement of two-year college faculty in English studies is that, for various but consistent reasons, these faculty do not engage with national disciplinary conversations in the same way that four-year college and university faculty do. As Christie Toth and Patrick Sullivan (2016) found in their national survey of two-year college faculty, “those who do most of the actual teaching of composition—graduate students, contingent faculty, and, of course, two-year college faculty, both full- and part-time—often have the fewest opportunities to learn about or contribute to scholarship in our field” (p. 249). Here and elsewhere (Andelora, 2007; Hassel & Giordano, 2013; Toth, 2014; Matravers, 2018; Suh et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2021), scholarship on two-year college faculty engagement points to this reality, which leads to a self-feeding cycle of non-representation in scholarship that results in “scholarly isolation” (Toth & Sullivan, p. 260). Contributing to this phenomenon are the various institutional constraints that lead under-resourced two-year college faculty to teach an incredible amount, with little time or incentive left to engage in disciplinary professional development through engagement in national organizations. As a result, “many faculty acquire their professional identities on the job, and only eventually, if they choose to do so, through their participation in professional organizations” (Toth et al., 2013, p. 113). Rather than frame this as merely an absence of a given scholarly pedigree, though, scholars acknowledge that context-specific professionalization is responsive to local needs and beliefs yet informed by major professional organizations, and that it is multidisciplinary in nature. Toth et al. call the labor and skills required for translation and

appropriation of four-year-centric disciplinary conversations to two-year contexts  
 “transdisciplinary cosmopolitanism” (p. 99).

Of course, I’m fortunate enough to have had both the departmentally-anchored introduction to the field that is so common for two-year college faculty and also continued development through doctoral coursework and training in composition and other subfields of English studies. So while the literature review that follows reflects a situated yet well-informed perspective that helped drive this study, it does not come from a place of disciplinary ignorance. Instead, it is reflective of the texts and ideas that ballooned with significance as I returned to them during my career, or that struck me with their ability to reflect and respond to the daily concerns experienced by me and my two-year college colleagues. In later chapters’ discussion of study findings, I offer additional perspectives from scholarship more prominently associated with this project’s focus on experience of feedback, including the work of Nancy Sommers, whose decades of study define the field’s understanding of response to writing.

### **Enjoy the Silence**

The 1980s’ social turn in English studies and aligned fields reflected an increasingly constructivist epistemology, with a socially-oriented pedagogy that included increased attention to the constructedness of language standards. Such reflection on the ways we think and teach about English literature and language in particular prompted conflicts across the field’s disciplines, illustrated by educators’ incorporation of social issues into their instruction, and resulting in some prominent discipline-defining discussions. Within the field of composition studies, Maxine Hairston (1985), one-time chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), took exception in her convention address—and later in her 1992 “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing”—to the proliferating influence of feminist and

Marxist theory on the teaching of writing, particularly as that influence led to themed first-year composition courses that required students to read and write about issues of social justice and politics. Prominent scholars in allied fields lodged similar concerns: Hairston later had some more intentionally polemical company in Stanley Fish (Bizzell & Fish, 2009) but also more earnest contributions from scholar-practitioners such as literacy educator Lisa Delpit.

In the years following Hairston's address, Delpit challenged applied linguist James Gee's appeal regarding approaches to language instruction in a debate between two enduring scholarly voices that influenced the discipline and my approach to instruction. In 1989, Gee's "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: An Introduction" (1989a) and "What Is Literacy?" (1989b)—published in tandem in the *Journal of Education*—introduced the concept of "community-based" discourses (1989a, p. 13), suggesting that discourse isn't simply language but "forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities" (p. 6–7). He also claims, because of the values-laden nature and various elements of discourse, that discourses cannot be taught (p. 7), that the experience of acquiring a discourse can lead to "conflict" (p. 13), and that attempting to teach a discourse is inherently political (p. 14). In her 1992 "Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing Before the Master?" Delpit referred specifically to these points, and cautioned that Gee's work should not deter educators from helping learners access discourses of power, as to be deterred would risk helping to ensure their future success. Her long-standing concern is, "The sensitive teacher might well conclude that even to try to teach a dominant Discourse to students who are members of a non-dominant, oppressed group would be to oppress them further" (p. 298). Delpit, a renowned K–12 literacy educator, had already established her career-spanning claim that those in English studies must continue teaching discourses of power in her "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other

People's Children" (1988)—republished in her 1995 *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (2006). Gee and Delpit both are concerned with issues of power and promote consideration of social conditions and social implications of language learning relative to discursive identities. However, Delpit's position as a field-based education researcher means that she, unlike Gee, has seen the negative effects that Gee's form of progressivism has on the students whose teachers, as characterized in the introduction to *Other People's Children* (1995), maintain different standards and expectations for learners of color, standards born of "bias and ignorance" (p. xiii) that do nothing, says Delpit, "to better educate poor children and children of color" (p. xiv).

Delpit's most compelling argument, I believe, is about the "paralysis" (1995, p. 152) of educators who wish to avoid harming learners and who therefore remain silent, avoiding the teaching of mainstream White language or, indeed, of any language use. To these educators, she recommends caution, maintaining that the work of moving into a new, dominant discourse community is not as impossible as Gee made it seem, that it is worth the effort, and that it will not—as Gee suggested—necessarily lead to psycho-social damage. Though not always the case, Delpit seems to me in these pieces to be almost entirely uncritical as she equates White discourse with success. Indeed, some have argued that Delpit's stance stems from a desire to prevent additional "inequitable social stratification" for already marginalized learners (Lee & Jenks, 2016, p. 323). This is a popular position among those who seek to rectify social power disparities through instruction: that *not* teaching discourses of power will only further disenfranchise learners with marked language use (marked as Black, poor, etc.). Though such scholarship promoting the teaching of Anglo-American, middle-class English (I'll use SWE here for short to

stand in for the broadly used “standard written English”) has petered out in recent decades, the lines of thinking offered by Delpit in particular continue to undergird much of today’s practice.

This was my own line of thinking throughout much of my teaching career. Though I subscribed to liberatory pedagogies that sought to expose underlying oppressive ideologies, employing teaching-learning strategies that made space for multimodal composing and the privileging of existing learner knowledge, my goal was always mastery of SWE. In spite of the imperative I wrote about in Chapter One to do no harm, I, like Elbow (2000c), thought “Lisa Delpit is surely right when she criticizes White ‘liberal’ teachers for handicapping students of color by ignoring their need to master the dialects of power” (p. 325). Hairston was a Black woman, as is Delpit—who in turn evokes the ideas of Black feminist scholar bell hooks (Delpit, 1992, p. 300)—so who was I to argue? I struggled alongside Elbow as he contemplates the same in his “Inviting the Mother Tongue,” where he concludes: when “speakers of stigmatized dialects [...] *speak* to mainstream listeners they must use correct mainstream English—even down to intonation—or risk stigmatization; but when they write to mainstream readers, they can do most of their work in their mother tongue and still end up with a text in SWE” (p. 347, emphasis in original). Throughout his essay, Elbow emphasizes concern for learner safety in ways that resonated with me. The target in both speaking and writing was SWE, the dialect of power, and the goal was safety. Therefore, while I celebrated compelling arguments, and I rewarded earnest peer collaboration, at the first sign of a “he don’t” in a student essay, I dutifully trotted out a well-practiced series of comments designed not simply to correct, but to contextualize. First, I drew attention to the issue by circling the troublesome phrase and writing in the corresponding margin: “s/v.” If I saw several “s/v” infractions, I would mark only a few, placing an asterisk after my first “s/v” note and then offering an explanation at the end of the student’s paper:

*As you can see, I've pointed out a few instances of subject-verb disagreement throughout your essay. Please note that I didn't point to all of them. Instead, I invite you to look at the items I've pointed to, see if you can determine what changes might improve the verb usage, and then review your essay for other subject-verb disagreements. (For help with this, see the relevant section at the end of our textbook or feel free to ask in class!) Please note that while I understand what you're saying in these spots, it's important to be mindful of a broader, more critical future audience that might see subject-verb disagreement as a flaw in your thinking or as a sign of weak communication skills.*

I might have also shared advice about rhetorical awareness, how it's one thing to speak in a certain way with a certain audience but it's important to assume an academic audience when writing formally. I might have suggested that if the "he don't" was important to retain for some reason, then the student might consider putting the phrase in quotation marks or italics, just to ensure their reader is aware of the usage as intentional.

My instructional goal was to help learners notice and replace the kinds of language use that would give gatekeeping courses, instructors, employers, judges, and parole officers a reason to block access to education, to employment, and to freedom. I relied on the kind of reasoning and research shared by Constance Weaver (1996), who points to the errors that matter to those in power as the ones we should address through this contextualized grammar instruction. Though I shied away from using the term "error" when referring to "he don't" and comparable constructions, and though I helped students understand that what others saw as "idiosyncratic" language use (Bartholomae, 2005, p. 41) was valid and comprehensible as part of a non-SWE grammar, I felt obligated to help learners code-switch by seeing which discursive constructions would need to be translated to SWE so that they could ultimately move through various

communities without risking their hard-earned insider status. My approach was not only ethically justifiable in my mind, but it provided a way for me to carry out institutional expectations made explicit in departmental essay rubrics that weighted “clear, correct” language use as heavily as a logical and well-supported argument.

### **Disciplining of Language**

What I had not been privy to was decades if not over a century of scholarship promoting the idea of allowing and even encouraging learners to compose using their own language. To be sure, though Lee and Jenks offer a rationale for Delpit’s stance, they distinguish their own position from Delpit’s and others’ by discussing the dangers of pedagogies that reinforce ideologies that assume the possibility of monolingualism. This recognition of “English” not only as malleable and of various lines of descent, but as multiple itself, is consistent with a code-meshing (rather than code-switching) approach to language instruction. But what is difficult to reconcile is the notion that SWE can be taught and learned as a mechanical tool for communication divorced from identity, from our families and the ways in which we make sense of ourselves in the world, from its discursive features. This is the epistemological concept of language use that spurred decades of statements that Delpit and a few others pushed back against, and that arguably did result in some level of paralysis or at least silence. Although that paralysis has resulted in a shift from formal, isolated grammar and usage instruction to contextualized grammar and usage instruction, as well as diminished scholarly attention given to issues of grammar, the matter of SWE language instruction has not disappeared.

### ***The Long SRTOL Movement***

Though the Students’ Right to Their Own Language resolution wasn’t ratified until 1974, the underpinnings of the statement within the fields of English education and rhetoric date back

to at least the early twentieth century. Berlin restates the conclusion of education scholar Walter Barnes' research conducted in the late 1930s on student language use: "The student must not subscribe to a single standard in the way language is used. Correctness or incorrectness in thought and usage is determined by the social context in which language is used, not by predetermined and fixed standards" (p. 89). Berlin goes on to point out that Barnes' ideas—promoting a contextual understanding of what constitutes "correctness" in language use—draw heavily from a 1935 publication of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which a few years earlier had given equal credence to this concept, "the social basis of rhetorical discourse" (Berlin, p. 90). In fact, a full two decades prior to Barnes' work and the 1935 NCTE publication challenging single standards for language use, rhetorician (and colleague of John Dewey) Fred Scott presented in the 1910s on the need for students to write in their own language, pointing in both that and future arguments to the inextricable relationship between language, experience, and identity (Berlin, p. 48). The matter of whether Barnes was borrowing from the 1935 NCTE publication and Scott's work or simply restating these for emphasis matters less than the fact that 100 years ago, calls for writing instruction to move away from insisting on a single standard of language correctness were being repeated decade after decade. It appears the field of composition and rhetoric, though ostensibly devoted in large part to post-secondary literacy pedagogy and andragogy, has historically unfortunately ignored the pleas of scholars like Barnes and Scott in its practice.

By the 1970s, the issue of evaluating student language against a single, dominant standard was still eliciting statements that took a rhetorically- and sociolinguistically-informed, constructivist view of language and writing instruction. The CCCC 1974 Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution extended decades of research on language acquisition,



dialects, and grammar and language use instruction. The statement's introduction establishes its specific exigence: "American schools and colleges have, in the last decade, been forced to take a stand on a basic educational question: what should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds?" (p. 1). The statement—ensconced in background materials, examples of language varieties in use, and distinctions between grammar and usage—calls on teachers to recognize long-standing scholarship that denies the possibility, desirability, and morality of "a standard American dialect" (p. 2). While "dialect" is the term used in the brief statement itself to describe the linguistic formations at hand, the full document with explanatory background refers almost interchangeably to dialects, language habits and language differences, varieties, idiolects, and grammatical patterns, also referencing social and regional differences in vocabulary and syntax.

Though the SRTOL statement was reflective of previous research on the teaching of writing and prevailing scholarship of the time, it did not seem to have its desired effect. As noted by Geneva Smitherman (1995) in her retrospective of SRTOL, which she co-authored, the statement's inattention to praxis combined with the mere "lip-service" (p. 25) given to the statement's ideas and ideals by teachers meant more work was needed. In fact, the continued practice of evaluating student language use against a single standard continued to prompt additional resolutions and affirmations of the 1974 statement: CCCC reaffirmed the statement in 2003, amended it in 2006, and reaffirmed it again in 2014 (CCCC, 2022).

The issue of student language use continues to provoke scholarship that takes a decidedly progressive stance. Composition and rhetoric scholars of color including Asao Inoue (2015), and literacy scholars of color including April Baker-Bell (2020) and Jamila Lyiscott (2015a, 2015b, 2016), recognize and write about the white supremacy of insisting upon the teaching and

learning of standard written English, and they advocate for mechanisms inviting students to use their own language(s). Inoue (2015) echoes SRTOL concerns about assessing against a “single standard” (p. 116), noting more generally that “composition studies and writing assessment as fields of study have not focused enough attention on racism in classroom writing assessment” (p. 9). Inoue suggests that even ground-breaking writing assessment scholars such as Brian Huot have avoided racism’s impact on our processes and practices (p. 21). April Baker-Bell (2020) takes up Inoue’s argument, pointing to the fallacy of neoliberal adherence to teaching discourses of power by suggesting the efficacy of language often has less to do with the grammar deployed than the body articulating the words. As Gee pointed out in 1989, “It is not just *how* you say it, but what you *are* and *do* when you say it” (1989a, p. 5, emphasis in original).

While very little scholarship seems to have been written in recent years in opposition to this stance, promotion of strategies such as code-switching, emphasis on making learners job-ready, and silence about issues of white supremacy in the field of composition studies may be read as an implicit refusal to seek what Baker-Bell has termed “linguistic justice.” Scholarship aimed at improving the teaching and learning of grammar, for instance, is typically concerned with teaching and learning not for the sake of “linguistic flexibility” (Brown, 2020, p. 597) but rigid adherence to standard, mainstream, White English.

An example of this silence is explored in Tessa Brown’s 2020 CCC article “What Else Do We Know? Translingualism and the History of SRTOL as Threshold Concepts in Our Field.” Brown points to Elizabeth Wardle’s and Doug Downs’ widely used textbook *Writing About Writing* as exemplary of pervasive whitewashing of the field’s disciplinary histories, boundaries, and content. In particular, she suggests that the book’s exclusion of the CCCC’s 1974 SRTOL position statement in otherwise detailed and comprehensive histories of the field is indicative of

a broader fashioning of the discipline that is silently racist: “*WAW* appeals to neoliberal notions of students’ individual successes and career readiness, while SRTOL is oriented toward antiracism, solidarity, and communal uplift” (p. 597). Refocusing on a lived reality of composition and rhetoric led by learners, scholars, and practitioners of color, Brown instead seeks a writing studies more explicitly inclusive of hip-hop literacies, translingualism, and diverse practitioners. Brown situates specific issues of long-standing disciplinary concern, and she represents a handful of perspectives relative to those issues. Specifically, she situates Wardle and Downs’ text as illustrative of ongoing, systemic exclusionary forces within the field of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies. Just as the SRTOL statement has been formally reaffirmed several times by CCCC since 1974, composition and rhetoric scholars such as Brown and others have likewise continued to center anti-racist language instruction in their scholarship.

### ***Language Instruction in Composition: Grammar and Style***

While Patrick Hartwell (1985) didn’t reference the nearly decade-old SRTOL statement specifically in his “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” his conclusions regarding not only formal grammar instruction but language instruction more generally contain echoes of the statement’s underlying focus on the connections between language and sociocultural dominance. In this article, Hartwell somewhat famously declared that the formal study of grammar already had been long dismissed as useless at best (p. 105), suggesting that the discipline of English ought to “move on to more interesting areas of inquiry” (p. 127). Less remembered is that Hartwell’s insistence on a disciplinary refocus comes on the heels of his declaration of what he saw as the real issue at hand: power. “At no point in the English curriculum is the question of power more blatantly posed than in the issue of formal grammar instruction. It is time that we, as teachers, formulate theories of language and literacy and let

those theories guide our teaching.” (p. 127) Suggested here is more than a concern for the unproven practice of formal grammar instruction. Rather, Hartwell takes exception to the power dynamics and imperatives that are wrapped up in what “the English curriculum” does when it teaches language. Rather than challenging the efficacy of the practice of formal grammar instruction, he challenges the unexamined epistemology implicit in instruction that privileges limited standards for language use.

In terms of grammar instruction specifically and language instruction in FYC generally, some have perceived a resulting relative silence from the field of composition studies. In his “Style and the Public Intellectual: Rethinking Composition in the Public Sphere,” Paul Butler (2010) points to the year of publication of Hartwell’s “Grammar” as a transition point in the teaching of composition and rhetoric, especially the teaching of either grammar or style as rhetorical: “since around 1985, the field as a whole has largely ignored stylistic theory and practice and rendered it invisible” (p. 395). Butler posits that the demise of style as a point of instruction has been due first to a conflation between style and grammar, and second to the field’s lack of clear position on the teaching of grammar (p. 397) resulting in part from SRTOL efforts. Butler points, for instance, to David Mulroy’s controversial insistence that “university professors have ignored grammar instruction for the past 75 years” (p. 398) to support the notion that whether or not sentence-level language instruction is taking place, that instruction is not evident. Paul Matsuda (2012) confirms this by way of his summary that “the history of the field of rhetoric and composition is punctuated by a series of attempts to address issues of grammar development—promptly followed by efforts to shoot down those efforts” (p. 147).

Similarly, Amy Stolley (2007) suggests that we’re barely studying how we teach language at all, referring to the “dearth” of research on instruction on grammar and language use.

And as Smitherman admits, the enthusiasm resulting from the 1974 SRTOL statement was nevertheless stymied by “lingering confusion—you know, ‘Well, what they want me to *do*?’” (1995, p. 24, emphasis in original). Between SRTOL’s pressure to increase acceptance of learners’ home discourses, and perceived pressure from Hartwell to avoid isolated grammar instruction, it seems a vacuum was created in the still-emerging field of composition and rhetoric that, in Stolley’s words, led to “a place where language instruction is no longer an integral part of writing instruction” (p. 28).

By way of illustration, I’ll point to Shannon Carter’s (2008) comprehensive *The Way Literacy Lives*, which lays out the author’s “rhetorical dexterity” curriculum that addresses the underlying dilemmas of basic writing instruction, but which almost completely avoids discussion of language use in terms of grammar, mechanics, or style. In spite of the fact that one of Carter’s stated teaching goals is “to get the students to produce sophisticated academic discourse that is well organized, concrete, and convincing” (p. 141)—skills that are evaluated in rubrics found in the author’s appendices—she avoids discussion of how learners work within the newly-entered academic community of practice to use valued forms of language. Her curriculum is strengths-focused, discusses points of contact among multiple discourse communities, and explores the concept of insider and outsider status with regard to specific discourse communities. However, she stops short of exploring what happens when and if her students recognize their outsider status with regard to academic language use. She does reference overall approaches to language in an often-cited excerpt from James Gee (1989a) in which he postulates the importance of context and language in how one asks for a match. Likewise, she points to David Bartholomae’s exploration of how many first-year writers’ use of the word “you” is not a problem of grammar

but an issue of context and relative authority. But this is the extent of what I see as explicit discussion of style and grammar in Carter's text.

Mark Blaauw-Hara's (2007) *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* twenty-year retrospective suggests, though, that the focus on grammar, if not language use in general, did not disappear but perhaps found a particular home with those publishing about two-year college writing instruction. Pointing out a compound set of variables—that underprepared learners are more likely to enroll in two-year colleges, and that this underpreparedness is likely most evident in the arena of grammar—Blaauw-Hara nearly responds to Smitherman's ventriloquized instructor: at the two-year school in particular, “we attend to discussions of error and what to do about it” (p. 32). Indeed, in the realm of the two-year writing scholar, it seems SRTOL concerns have been anything but lingering or unrealized in their application. One of two threads detected by Blaauw-Hara in recent scholarship on grammar in *TETYC* considers grammar as rhetorical with an “audience-centered perspective” (p. 34). The other takes up Hartwell's concern with power as it pertains to grammar instruction, with “authors caution[ing] their readers to consider student agency when correcting a student's grammar” (p. 35). While the suggestions provided in Blaauw-Hara's literature review take steps to diffuse power to some extent, the instructional practices promoted nevertheless assume that an instructor's role is to, in some way or another, point out grammatical error.

Indeed, Stolley concedes that *some* grammar is being taught in writing programs, if not writing courses. Stolley concludes that composition instructors are not teaching grammar for two reasons. First, grammar's displacement in the composition curriculum is due in part to its association with the now-dismissed current-traditional pedagogy, along with the disconnect between process pedagogy and common public beliefs about what professors of writing “should”

be doing (15). Second, in her interviews with Purdue University graduate students, at least one instructor indicated that he avoids all discussion of grammar in his courses due to lack of preparation, and several others claimed to lack the necessary vocabulary to teach grammar (68). In their study of K–12 grammar instruction in England, Myhill and Watson (2014) draw similar conclusions (p. 51). Stolley attempts to issue some hope, though, by conspicuously closing her discussion of writing program administrators' (WPA) attitudes toward grammar instruction with a quote from one interviewee: "If there are students who need more direct assistance in grammar, [the WPA] encourages instructors to work one-on-one with them, because addressing errors 'is best done in the context of the students' own writing rather than in separate instruction in worksheets or handbook lessons'" (p. 55–6). This approach of using student's writing as the context for addressing non-standard grammar reflects the message of a particularly effective approach to grammar instruction that emerged from scholarly and practical conversations like Hartwell's about grammar, language, and power.

### **Discipline through Contextualized Grammar Instruction**

Born at least temporally of the SRTOL statement of the 1970s and Hartwell's grammar scholarship of the 1980s was an increasingly popular approach to instruction that took advantage of students' own language to effect strong gains in grammar and other forms of language learning. Contextualized grammar instruction has been shown to be demonstrably superior to isolated grammar instruction that uses worksheet sentences and the like, and is reflective of the kind of context-driven language instruction that Hartwell promoted. With contextualized grammar instruction as her focus, Constance Weaver (1996) devotes the entirety of her *Teaching Grammar in Context* to what Butler refers to as "the field's leitmotif on the role of grammar in composition instruction" (p. 397). In her monograph, Weaver introduces research about primary

and second language learning to derive a theory of grammar instruction that frames literacy as social in nature and suggests the efficacy of learning about language by using language.

Weaver introduces a meta-study that demonstrates the superiority of contextualized grammar instruction for the purposes of ensuring learner facility with standard academic grammar. She pieces together her approach to contextualized grammar instruction by examining learning patterns in a variety of settings. Pivotal to Weaver's work is the concept of language acquisition. Language acquisition, as opposed to direct instruction, "is a subconscious process that leads to functional command of the rules of a language, though not necessarily to conscious knowledge about the language or its rules" (p. 49). Weaver demonstrates the second half of this definition by asking her reader to name the grammatical conventions that underlie the sentence, "Sharon must have been eating ketchup on her hot dog" (p. 34). The rule, which few of us know consciously, is one we may have mastered unconsciously via acquisition: "Aux  $\rightarrow$  (M) (HAVE + EN) (BE + ING)" (p. 35). Consistent with Hartwell's conclusions about grammar instruction, Weaver posits that "grammatical concepts can be applied without formal study of grammar as a system," and that "students can learn and apply many grammatical concepts without learning to analyze and label the parts of speech and various other grammatical constructions" (p. 25). Instead, we learn to use and master grammatical constructions through acquisition.

The process of teaching grammar in context, from the standpoint of both learner and instructor, can be extended to the teaching of most any use of language. The mechanics of contextualized grammar instruction are straightforward and familiar, and they can be equally effective when teaching use of punctuation and style. To be sure, such instruction rarely results in knowledge *about* grammatical or other language constructs, and, in the literature on teaching grammar in context, this is not typically the goal. Nevertheless, instructors can just as readily



provide feedback on a learner's overuse of a particular transition or underuse of foregrounding techniques by acknowledging a learner's attempt and recommending a different course of action in the future. Indeed, marking up papers with feedback and comments, many of which provide guidance and correction on language use, is a most ubiquitous activity among composition studies educators. As Smitherman and her co-authors of the 1974 SRTOL statement recognized, "spelling, punctuation, usage, and other surface structure conventions of Edited American English (EAE) are generally what's given all the play (attention) in composition classrooms" (1995, p. 23). While I am not necessarily concerned about *all* instances of corrective feedback on language use, it can be difficult for those of us steeped in White academic dialects to recognize which points of correction function to reify the power dynamics already at play in our classrooms.

Weaver is also concerned with how language use and instruction interact with power. Weaver theorizes errors as a result of a learner's decision-making practice that leads them to believe that the decision they are making is what is best for the task at hand. She asks us to recognize the fact that we all make errors all the time, and that oftentimes those errors are done on purpose and to lovely effect. She notes errors that violate conventions of what constitutes a complete sentence abound in the published work our learners read, and therefore make up part of the "comprehensible input" that contributes to language and grammar acquisition. Indeed, Weaver notes that "one of the problems with overreacting to error is that it stunts our students' growth as writers" (p. 81). For this reason, Weaver suggests that rather than find and correct all errors, we limit our scope drastically. However, rather than complicating the corrective feedback process as one tied up in perpetuations of power dynamics, she suggests instructors focus on

errors that 1) “occur relatively frequently” and 2) “seriously bother people who hold positions of power” (p. 105).

Contextualized grammar instruction seems to satisfy two imperatives: the need to allow learners to communicate in their own language, and the need to stop relying on formal, isolated grammar instruction. Of course, the assumption underlying this approach is that mastery of the grammar used by learners who speak, for instance, Ebonics, is not the learning goal at hand. Rather, in Weaver’s work and in most of the research cited here, the focus is on learners’ use of a White, middle-class, academic English. Furthermore, at stake within the context of contextualized grammar instruction are the emotional reactions of learners engaged in such instruction. Although learners are encouraged to use language in ways that make sense to them and for their purposes, contextualized grammar instruction as laid out by Weaver seeks to promote a single standard for language use. And common to some scholarship in composition studies is the idea that when we study language correction and instruction, we are always also studying the affect of instructors, peers, and the public.

### ***Learning, Affect, and Corrective Feedback***

Not only is corrective feedback on language use prevalent among instructors of language across disciplines, but it continues to be a point of concern among a public that continues to privilege “correct” speech and scold error. This was the impetus for Butler’s “Style and the Public Intellectual,” and Strickland and Crawford (2003) also focus on the ways in which public (specifically U.S. Anglo) feelings and beliefs about language use become manifest. What Strickland and Crawford reference without giving it much pause, though, are the affective experiences of the actual learners who have had their language corrected. And it is this

experience—of receiving corrective feedback on language use that comes with contextualized instruction—that I am most interested in exploring.

There are two points in Strickland and Crawford's text, which is otherwise focused entirely on the emotions of *hearers* of language, in which the authors reference the emotional experience of the speaker or writer who has been, as the authors call it, "schooled." First is their hypothesis about the emotional experience of a group of non-specific Black learners who, upon reading two writing samples, were unable to locate the value in the sample composed with Ebonics. Though the authors have not asked learners about their emotional experiences regarding feedback on their language use, the imagined emotions are distinct: shame, embarrassment, disgust. Then, the authors collectively recall Strickland's attempt to speak in her non-standard language variety with her students, noting the difficulty she felt even as a professional language instructor due to "her own schooling in shame" (p. 78). In both cases, anecdotes about learners' emotional experience of corrective feedback on language use are classified as having evoked shame. This is the emotion that I tentatively expected I would find learners experiencing as a result of corrective feedback on their language use, though I wasn't sure what shape that emotional experience might take in focus group and interview conversation.

While few composition studies scholars have studied learners' affective responses to corrective feedback on language use, research not too far afield in the areas of K–12 English education and foreign language learning has made this a focus. Although Hartwell sought to point composition studies' research in new directions that foregrounded language and literacy instruction, scholarship on the efficacy and learner experience of language instruction has been largely limited to the fields of foreign language learning and K–12 English education, where

corrective feedback has been portrayed as positive in terms of intended learning outcomes and learner experience.

### ***Foreign Language Instruction***

In general, formal foreign language instruction involves both direct and contextualized instruction in which—importantly and in contrast with non-foreign language instruction—the target language is not typically affiliated with a competing or immediately oppressive culture that is being forced upon the learner. Although some recent research (e.g., Teimouri, 2018) on L2 learners' feelings of shame and guilt suggests language instruction can be experienced negatively by foreign language learners, I suggest that these learners are not as likely to experience such emotions as a result of challenges to their sense of self. Here and elsewhere, negative emotions in foreign language learning are not a result of an internalization of negative associations with learners' home languages. For instance, Yashmia et al. (2004) recognize that, for adolescent EFL learners from Japan, a willingness to communicate in English is often hindered by emotionally-charged reticence. This reticence has more to do with a culturally normed fear of imprecise expression: the authors attempt to locate a correlative relationship between willingness to communicate and successful use of the target language, ultimately and not surprisingly demonstrating the importance of self-confidence in foreign language learning. I would argue that Yashmia et al.'s conclusion that *self*-confidence will assist with language learning is precisely the point: in contrast with non-foreign language instruction, the self remains unchallenged during foreign language instruction, where one's culture and identity are untouched by language learning.

To varying degrees, English education and foreign language research on corrective feedback on language use via contextualized instruction focuses on ostensible learning benefits

for the most part, but has not historically engaged student learners in discussion about their experience. Azamnouri et al. (2020) point out that emotion was “neglected in language instruction and studies earlier” (p. 31), though the last few decades of research on foreign language learning have seen a notable increase in focus on learner emotions. Arnold (2019) likewise suggests “now more and more attention is also given to affective factors” (p. 11) in language learning. And in their 2009 work, Garrett and Young call for more “studies that focus on the affective responses of the learner to the language learning experience” (p. 209), noting that “few studies have examined the first-person experiences of language learners or attempted to relate their experience of emotion to their individual successes and failures in language learning” (p. 211). Recent research on corrective feedback on language use in foreign language education, then, makes the focus on emotional experience a priority.

Ikpia’s (2005) study of students in a diverse ESL classroom at a large university determined that not only do learners prefer explicit grammar instruction, but they find it useful, see it as a means to overcoming language barriers, and believe it is needed to ensure correctness. In discussing communicative language teaching, Ikpia points to various perspectives on language learning, and draws important distinctions among learners and their environments that impact learning: adult versus child, acquired knowledge versus learned, and errors of habit versus development. Although Ikpia recognizes the value of developmental errors, noting that these mistakes indicate a hypothesis-driven attempt at standard target language use, he stops short of capitalizing on such language use as context for instruction in his study.

Martin and Valdivia (2017) go further in exploring student preferences regarding corrective feedback. They determine that foreign language learners in their study appreciate frequent, explicit corrective feedback in spite of how anxiety-producing it is. Administering two

questionnaires to fifty adult learners of English in an online course in Spain, the authors sought to determine the usefulness of corrective feedback in spite of anxiety produced. The first questionnaire measured learner anxiety; the second measured learner beliefs about feedback. Through cluster analysis, Martin and Valdivia determined that foreign language learners in their study like frequent corrective feedback in spite of anxiety levels, and that they preferred explicit correction to implicit correction. Likewise, they found that learners valued corrective feedback in response to serious errors, preferred to receive that feedback directly after speaking, and preferred to receive it from instructors rather than peers.

In a more qualitative version of this study, Han and Hyland's (2018) work likewise reports positive learner associations with instructor feedback. While this study involved case studies of only two learners, data collection was more thorough compared to that of Martin and Valdivia's. Han and Hyland spent sixteen weeks working with two adult English language learners from China, conducting interviews, collecting instructional materials and assignments, and observing the two participants after receiving corrective feedback. Rather than focus on corrective feedback to oral language use, Han and Hyland explored learners' emotional reactions to written corrective feedback. This study was undertaken in response to the assumption in the literature of the discipline that negative emotions are experienced by learners when confronted with written corrective feedback. After coding data using a specific inventory of emotions, Han and Hyland found no predominantly negative emotions in participants, that learners experience multiple and evolving reactions that fluctuate with time and reflection, that the binary categories of the emotion inventory used are not representative of the experience of emotion, and that—as Martin and Valdivia found—learners have a preference for receiving corrective feedback from instructors. In conclusion, the authors note that even if their study had resulted in learner

experience of negative emotions, written corrective feedback should not be discounted, as there are many positive outcomes of negative emotions.

L2 and foreign language research that explores learner emotional response to corrective feedback (e.g., Chong, 2020; Rodriguez, 2009), like similar K–12 scholarship, provides significant theoretical background and protocol design guidance for this study. However, an important underlying distinction between foreign language learners and adult, non-ELL learners in FYC is the intersection of relationships among identities and languages, both home and target.

### ***K–12***

In K–12 research on grammar and usage instruction in language arts, the focus is on the efficacy of contextualized instruction. For instance, both Jones et al.’s (2013) and Myhill et al.’s (2013) studies seek to demonstrate the positive effects of contextualized grammar instruction on middle school writing. Both support the idea that, in spite of some K–12 research denying the efficacy of grammar instruction, grammar taught in context with attention to writing problems can have a positive impact. Jones et al.’s “Grammar for Writing?” seeks to demonstrate the positive effects of contextualized grammar instruction on middle school writing. The researchers define grammar in context in part by recognizing writing as “a communicative act,” and thus grammar as “a meaning-making resource” (p. 1245). Their motivating concern is that grammar has been taught in isolation, and, consequently, not enough studies have been done on contextualized grammar instruction. Another concern, which echoes ideas from SRTOL, Stolley, and Butler, is that we have not sufficiently defined what we mean by grammar or its teaching, especially given the chasm between such distinctions as prescriptive and descriptive grammar. Jones et al.’s study design points to an assumption if not the reality of grammar’s current status in writing instruction, for while the intervention group’s embedded grammar instruction featured

reviews of model writing and explicit discussion of author choices regarding grammar, in the control group, “there was no focus on grammar” (p. 1248). Collins & Norris’s (2017) work draws similar conclusions, as do other studies (e.g. Andrews et al., 2006; Myhill & Watson, 2014).

None of these findings should be surprising for two reasons. First, as laid out by Weaver and others, the process of corrective feedback on language use via contextualized grammar instruction approximates important elements of language acquisition. The process of language acquisition for children necessarily involves the following components: an unconscious learning and application of rules, many of which are too complicated for most of us to either know or teach; errant application of rules, which show up when language is being acquired; and a deep learning of language “without direct instruction” (Weaver, p. 38). Studies of both first- and second-language learner grammar acquisition emphasize the importance of “comprehensible input” from the environment (p. 49) via readings, and learner willingness to learn through risk-taking in application. While there are many similarities between child and adult language acquisition processes, Weaver points out that children’s “naturally low affective filter” (p. 57) leads to less concern about being “wrong” and therefore higher likelihood to acquire language skills such as grammatical concepts. Then, related to children’s “low affective filter” is the fact that, given most K–12 learners’ developmental status, their cultural identity development and language acquisition are very likely concurrent.

An exception to this trend is in the scholarship of critical literacy scholars such as April Baker-Bell. Her *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (2020) seeks to develop and demonstrate the need for an antiracist Black language pedagogy by studying changes to “students’ language attitudes” (p. 49) before and after her instructional



interventions on the history and culture of Black language. Baker-Bell's project focuses on the unique and specific experiences of Black K–12 English education learners, noting that “linguistic racism and oppression, especially as experienced by Black people, tend to get overlooked or are undertheorized” even in frameworks like critical race theory (p. 12). Ultimately, one accomplishment of this study, which is built from “counterstories” in which Baker-Bell uses interview and other data to situate composite characters in illustrative narratives, is to demonstrate that children internalize anti-Black racism as a result of how their language is policed by family, school, and communities. While Baker-Bell's goal is to develop a pedagogy to help linguistically and racially marginalized learners in K–12 ELA settings confront oppression, her focus on learner internalization of negative assumptions about their identities aligns with my own research goals. And in addition to her primary focus on learners' *intellectual* reactions to corrective feedback on language use, Baker-Bell makes clear the impact and importance of *emotions*: “traditional approaches to language education do not account for the emotional harm or consequences these approaches have on Black students' sense of self and identity” (p. 8).

The study includes very few moments at which Baker-Bell or her participants reference specific emotional experiences, but those few instances suggest that the learners engaged in her study had a generally negative emotional experience of feedback that sought to correct their identity-specific, discursive language use:

- During one reported participant conversation, a child spoke of being told by teachers that her Black language was “wrong,” which made her “feel sad” (p. 52). Narrating that same conversation, Baker-Bell notes the “frustration” heard in that child's voice (p. 53), and in analysis referred to the students' experience of “emotional harm” (p. 54).

- During an interview, one learner recounts his experience of having his language use corrected in math and English classes, noting that the experience “always [makes him] feel a little upset” (p. 58).
- Finally, in contrast to feeling “happy” upon learning about the origins of Black language during Baker-Bell’s interventions, another student reported still feeling the need to use “White Mainstream English” in predominantly White neighborhoods: “‘I wouldn’t want people looking down at me a specific way because of the way I talk ... ‘cause that’s embarrassing, and I don’t want to be embarrassed in front of family, friends, teachers or anybody’” (p. 95).

Another pointed reference to the emotional experience of having one’s language use corrected is shared by Baker-Bell in quoted material from Carmen Kynard in which a learner named “Sherrie described her experiences in her English classes akin to child abuse: ‘You walk on eggshells, timid, and nervous, because any little mistake will set things off and you get punished’ (Kynard, 2013, p. 108)” (p. 27). All of the contributions reported directly by Baker-Bell are those of composite student participants, which inserts some distance between participant and reader, and which is a point I’ll return to below. Also worth noting here in light of how few emotions were reported on in *Linguistic Justice* is the fact that throughout implementation of her pedagogy, Baker-Bell never used learners’ language use à la contextualized instruction as an artifact for study. Rather, she created invented monologues for learners to analyze, also asking learners to evaluate the language use of Detroit-based hip-hop artists.

In addition to not looking specifically at *how* corrective feedback on language use functions to violate learners’ identities, Baker-Bell’s work is clearly focusing on the experience of Black learners. In both regards, my work will be distinct from hers. However, many of the

points Baker-Bell makes in her scholarship help me position my own work. Baker-Bell establishes her scholarship as specifically speaking back to anti-Black linguistic racism, but she also acknowledges the obstacles faced by White and other non-Black learners whose home English is not White, middle-class, academic English. Though people of White and other non-Black racial identities have varying privileges in terms of how their language is policed and the implications of that policing on their sense of self, she points out that other “communities of color” and “white linguistically marginalized communities” also “experience linguistic discrimination,” albeit quite differently; this is “because children of color’s experiences navigating and negotiating language will be impacted by interlocking systems and structures of linguisticism, racism, and classism, which are interrelated and continuously shaping one another” (p. 16). And so while most of my learners’ experiences with their own language will not be impacted in the same way by that set of interlocking systems, their experiences are located in and shaped by the same hierarchies. Baker-Bell references Lippi-Green’s work (p. 82) to highlight the identity markers implicated by the construction of language standards: racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identification, and socio-economic identity. While all of these identity markers may impact learners’ experience of language instruction, I devised this study with the supposition that adult learners might feel this impact more keenly than non-adult learners.

### **Language and Identity**

What’s at stake here is clearly the power dynamics that Hartwell told us to be mindful of: the language use associated with racialized minorities is still seen (in practice) as in need of eradication, and where language is policed so too are bodies and identities. This realization probably shouldn’t be surprising; language instruction has not always focused on empowering learners. To the contrary, we see a global history of efforts at systemic denial of non-standard

primary discourses and resulting devastation of people's sense of linguistic and cultural identity. In the 1980s, Gee (1989b) developed a discourse theory based on a recognition of language and discourse as not just cultural, but psychosocial. In the 1990s, Teresa L. McCarty and Lucille J. Watahomigie (2001) recounted the dehumanizing effects of federal boarding schools on Indigenous North American communities and individuals; these schools emphasized eliminating language customs as a means of eliminating native cultures (p. 489). Also in the 1990s, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles' (2003) "Discourse and Diversity" pointed to class as "a powerful determinant of success and failure within academia and a restrictive force in our linguistic freedom. Standard Written English," she notes, "with its roots in prestige dialects, does not allow our class roots to show" (p. 304). Jamila Lyiscott (2017) points to "the disposability and marginalization of Blackness within our classrooms" (p. 3) that is the ongoing result of an "imposed [...] relationship between [Black] literacy and humanity," whereby "the complex literacies of [Black] ancestors were disregarded, and [Black] efforts to read and write the world, tampered with at every historical juncture ever since" (p. 17-8). And Baker-Bell shares via her Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy that "in addition to kidnapping, beating, abusing, and sexually exploiting African people, enslavers used language planning as a tool" to control slaves (p. 64). This historical relationship between language and oppression underlies literacy instruction.

Language continues to be used as a means of gatekeeping to discriminate against people who fall into particular race, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability categories. Scholars in the field of adult literacy are particularly attuned to this gatekeeping function. Literacy as a construct has historically been manipulated by dominant groups to engender fear among the general population and establish scapegoats for society's ills (Rockhill, 1987). It's "a means of gate-keeping" (Castellano, 1997, p. 193) and a way to dictate what is learned. An example of this is illustrated

by the title of a workplace literacy textbook for English language learners who work in the service industry titled, “How May I Help You?” (Auerbach, 1990, p. 230). The promise of “literacy” is certainly limited here and discriminates based on cultural background. This example makes blatant the existing power structures inherent in literacy instruction generally, during which instructors constantly make decisions that either contribute to or resist those structures (Brown et al., 2000; Tisdell, 1993).

Indeed, many in the field of English education recognize how the relationship between language and identity is always at play during instruction. Dornan et al. (2002) note, for instance, that “to speak of the cultural roots of literacy [...] is also to suggest that literacy in both its teaching and learning is never a value-free, neutral activity. It is rather an act imbued with political consequences” (p. 19). Likewise, as Baker-Bell notes, “eradicationist approaches” (p. 29) to stripping identity and excluding on the basis of identity are still found in English education classrooms, if not in scholarship. Unfortunately but unsurprisingly, neoliberal justifications for requiring a single English variety as found, for instance, in classrooms requiring the use of only “standard” English because of its value in workplace settings (Hoggan & Browning, 2019), suggests eradicationist approaches are also practiced in college classrooms.

It’s important to remember that not all affronts to identity through language instruction are so overt. Structural disenfranchisement and dehumanization on the basis of race or class also—and perhaps typically—happen in ways that are difficult to discern. In addition to Geneva Smitherman, sociolinguists such as Norman Fairclough (2001) point to the inextricable relationship between language instruction and social power. In fact, Fairclough suggests “that there is not an external relationship ‘between’ language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship” (p. 19), and that “the exercise of power, in modern society, is

increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language” (p. 2). The invisibility—indeed, the silence—of discursive practices that “sustain unequal power relations” (p. 27) is what makes them both successful and powerful. In Chapter One, I quoted Rose’s work on violence which suggests, likewise, that invisible assaults are the most “insidious” (p. 1). Rose goes further to point out that beyond the insidiousness of unseen and unheard violence itself, the experience of those who endure violence—whether physical or mental—is such that “it might take a very long time for what happened to fully register, for the experience to break the threshold of its own anguish and pass into speech” (p. 77). Exploration of a phenomenon that both operates below the level of consciousness and evades linguistic representation might therefore seem to be impossible, but the ideas I’ve shared here keep me alert to silences and help me remain open to hearing participants’ stories on and in their own terms.

One of my enduring concerns as an instructor in a rural, predominantly White region is the potential for one kind of violence to sanction or spur other kinds of violence. For if, “when Black students are taught to hate Black speech, it indirectly teaches them to hate themselves” (Baker-Bell, p. 60), what are the comparable consequences for non-Black learners who likewise learn to hate anything but White, middle-class, academic speech? Indeed, one goal for this study will be to contribute to scholarship on linguistic justice by fleshing out why and how such discrimination functions to disenfranchise and alienate learners. What I hear in the arguments from the scholars in this chapter is a clear statement that the experiences of marginalized learners in spaces where White, middle-class, academic English is privileged leads to internalized self-hatred. I hope to better understand the nature of those experiences by listening to the voices of first-semester composition learners. This study will therefore examine learner experiences of

linguistic racism and other forms of linguistic discrimination as one expression of what Strickland and Crawford via Bourdieu call “symbolic violence” (p. 68), what Lynn Worsham (1998) calls “pedagogic violence,” and what Baker-Bell calls “linguistic and racial violence” (p. 27). This is violence done in the name of what linguist Amy Devitt (1989) classifies as either social or “ideological standardization” (p. 1) that moves us all toward White, middle-class, academic English.

### **Contextualized Grammar Instruction: It Works Because It Hurts**

Though the phenomena of learner experience of language instruction through corrective feedback has been studied and theorized, most notably by foreign language studies, I believe studies of these specific populations have not yielded conclusions that are generalizable to the experience of an increasingly large segment of FYC learners, a segment this study will take as its focus: adults. As noted, once considered in light of populations that are racialized, corrective feedback on language use loses its sheen. And seen as effective and positively experienced for the most part by foreign language learners and K–12 learners, it is also clear that such effects are not experienced by racially marginalized K–12 learners. I believe this negative, identity-threatening experience is likely to be the case for all adult learners in first-year composition courses as well. A closer look at how contextualized language instruction works will establish the practice as a violent one, to use the term offered by Worsham, Strickland and Crawford, Baker-Bell, and others.

As indicated above, contextualized language instruction is a practice that seeks to approximate the process of emergent language acquisition: it recognizes the discursive role of language, and capitalizes on the psychosocial motivations for discursive language use. That is, as children, we tried out the language we were surrounded by, and when the language we used led

to undesired results, we self-corrected and tried again. This is a kind of experiential learning in which we engage in hypothesis-driven language experiments, consciously or unconsciously gauge responses to determine the effectiveness of our language, and then, if needed, do something differently next time. Language learners—whether they are children learning their first language or adults learning a language in addition to their first—try to communicate and, in doing so, either have their attempts rewarded (with understanding) or dashed (with misunderstanding). In the case of the latter, learners are forced via social interaction to reconsider their approach and do something different next time. It’s in that process of experimenting with language, and then “pausing, looking back, and then moving forward in a new way” (Myers, 2016, p. 389) that brings about a deep process of learning that’s known as experiential learning (Dewey, 1944, 1980, 2015).

The recursive process of acting and reflecting involves attentiveness to our actions and a willingness to reflect. It requires, as Delpit notes, “sensitivity to language” (1995, p. 48). Therefore, we can say that contextualized grammar instruction is a process that roughly approximates that of language acquisition through experiential learning, a process that necessarily requires comfort with risk-taking, awareness of how our utterances or written marks are received, further alertness to how those we value use similar language, and willingness to take advantage of opportunities to try again. The role of the instructor in these approaches to learning, it then seems, is to ensure an affective response to failures that violate expectations.

I’d like to pause here and repeat this point, because the implications seem immense and potentially unethical. One logical conclusion to be drawn about the efficacy of language instruction via experiential approaches such as contextualized grammar instruction is this: It works because it hurts. This puts instructors in the role of inflicting or at least creating the



conditions for a painful experience. This experience perpetuates a historically oppressive relationship between those whose cultural identities involve minoritized languages or language varieties, and those who act as agents of “planned standardization” (Devitt, p. 75) that reifies the privilege of White, middle-class identities. It’s one component of the operative power by which “educational discourse [...] indirectly reproduces class relations” (Fairclough, p. 33).

And while Baker-Bell makes a convincing case for addressing linguistic racism in K–12, I suggest that the adult community college learner may be just as at risk as the young person of experiencing feedback on their language use as a threat to their identity. Take for instance Weaver’s observation about children’s “naturally low affective filter” cited above: we can infer an inverse scenario for adults, one in which a “naturally” high affective filter leads to a pronounced concern with being “wrong” and a reflective awareness of a disconnect between who we are and who others may wish us to be. Such a distinction is found in the 1974 SRTOL document, as the authors point out, “As one passes from infancy to childhood to adolescence and to maturity, language patterns become more deeply ingrained and more a part of the individual’s self-concept” (p. 6). Likewise, as Kenneth Burke (1984) has suggested regarding our early experiences of linguistic socialization, “The subtleties of propriety (the style and life-style of saying, thinking, and doing the ‘right’ thing) seep into us at a time when our self-consciousness is at a minimum” (p. 300). Unlike the K–12 learner, then, the adult learner—their self-consciousness fully engaged—encounters challenges to deeply ingrained language patterns that are a part of their sense of self with awareness regarding propriety and a high affective filter.

### **Transformative Learning: An Adult Education Framework in Composition Studies**

Scholarship from the field of adult education recognizes not only the pain of corrective feedback in general, but the role that pain plays in learner cognition and persistence specifically.

In a study focusing on the negative emotional reactions to formal education in adult learners, Snyder (2011) found that negative emotions coincided with and were even a requirement for transformative learning, a highly experiential and disorienting process that may deter learners yet results in significant learning. The three adult, career-changing women in Snyder's study experienced transformative learning because of the disruption of their existing frameworks for understanding (p. 246). These frameworks or schema, established via life experience, help explain in part how and why children and adults learn differently and benefit from different instructional approaches. Terms used by Snyder to describe typical emotions felt in the midst of a transformative learning experience include "fear, anxiety, and shame" (p. 242). While these emotions are, according to Snyder and her review of previous work, necessary for transformative learning to occur, Snyder recognizes how alienating and defeating these emotions might be, thus her recommendation that adult educators work to ensure transparency regarding anticipated negative emotions (257), rather than entirely eliminate the occasion for such emotions.

Jack Mezirow's work on transformative learning in adults was established in the late 1970s during his research on college learners. In Mezirow's terms, transformative learning requires "a life-changing occurrence that, more often than not, is accompanied by a long period of extreme mental and emotional difficulty" (Hoggan & Browning, 2019, p. 31). Though transformative learning is recursive, since learners spiral back on their previous conceptions of self before moving ahead, Mezirow did distill the process into ten steps or phases. These steps demarcate learners' movement into and through the process of significant, often tumultuous change and new role adoption. Mezirow updated articulations of such germinal points through the 2010s, and Mezirow's modifications (1997) include his classification of reflection, in which

he promotes critical awareness à la Paulo Freire's concept of praxis (2009) as a tool for working through the process of transformative learning to engage with new frames of reference.

This isn't to say that all negative emotions experienced during the learning experience are indicative of the kind of transformative learning I believe is accompanied by threats to identity during corrective feedback on language use. For instance, McEwan-Fujita's (2010) study explores feelings of shame around the process of foreign language learning for adults, but does not conclude that the negative emotions felt by study participants were indicative of transformative learning, nor that the negative emotions were due to language learning itself. Missing from adult education literature is a discussion of how emotional pain is experienced as a result of first-language instruction in particular.

As Hoggan and Browning (2019) point out in their *Transformational Learning in Community Colleges*, very few college faculty have training in or knowledge of adult education theories such as Mezirow's, despite such theories' relevance. However, to the extent that transformative learning involves fruitfully exploring the painful emotions adult learners face during a challenging life change, I see overlaps with some recent disciplinary research in composition studies. For instance, Gross and Alexander's (2016) apply affect studies and queer studies to the composition learner's experience in order to interrogate connections between negative emotions and the oppressive structures of educational institutions. Rather than conclude, as Hoggan and Browning do, that negative, disorienting experiences must be worked through by learners for the sake of achieving a new role that conforms to dominant norms, the pain of historically underserved students is instead viewed by Gross and Alexander as symptomatic of racist and classist structures in need of their own transformation. This point regarding the potential for institutional transformation is a component of one major conclusion

I'll draw from this study, though I'll seek to facilitate such transformation without relying on learner pain.

Likewise, Kelly Myers' work finds common ground between transformative learning and the field of composition and rhetoric. Her research on the ancient Greek concept of *metanoia*, for instance, suggests that negative emotions such as "regret, disappointment, and fear" (Myers, 2016, p. 387) are productive. Ellwanger's (2020) *Metanoia* extends Myers' work to claim that regret in particular spurs personal transformation. Myers and Ballenger's (2019) "The Emotional Work of Revision" likewise finds important connections between learners' negative emotions and their writing process as it pertains to language use. In exploring the benefits of emotionally-charged reflection in the revision and learning process in her 2016 CCC article in particular, Myers pauses to draw attention to the detrimental effects of this process. Myers' discussion explores *metanoia* in both theoretical and practical terms as a particular element of the learning process. This element seems akin to an experiential learning process, in which "a person reflects back on a mistake, feels the emotional pain, and then moves forward with a changed mind" (p. 388). Although this is a largely positive process, Myers acknowledges the frequent reality of students' realization that they wish they'd done something differently. "Oftentimes [...] students default to the notion of 'mistake,' and they tend to express regret or embarrassment" (p. 396). While this negative emotion does not seem to impede learners' ability to change habits or approaches to the task or challenge at hand, Myers does seem to recognize these emotions—or at least these expressions of emotions—as unnecessary to the process of *metanoia*. Furthermore, she cautions us and learners to be alert to the contexts and sources that might bring about such reactions, the "hidden narratives within experiences of regret that too often go unrecognized" (p. 397). Her discussion of these narratives avoids highlighting specific oppressive relationships that

might cause learners to feel negatively about themselves or their cultures, but does implore her readers to bring about an awareness of emotionally-charged reflection in their learners so that emotions might be viewed critically, rather than taken to heart as indicative of a need to change: “metanoic revision [...] can help us to locate, examine, and even disrupt the underlying stories and cultural narratives that exist in emotion” (p. 397).

In a more recent examination of how various types of failure function in the college composition classroom, Myers goes further to make explicit that “without critical engagement and efforts to create counter-stories, failure and resilience rhetorics operate as a discourse of white privilege” (Myers, 2019, p. 48). Put in other terms, Myers wants us to recognize the power of emotion in learning, but, like Gross and Alexander, implores us to go beyond conforming for the sake of making ourselves feel better, since the social process of receiving feedback about our ideas and use of language carries with it specific and narrow expectations and norms for who we are allowed to be. I envision positioning this study at the intersection of Myers’ and Baker-Bell’s work in particular.

## **Conclusion**

My own recognition of a disparity between the childhood experience and the adulthood experience of learning led me to work for the past couple of decades with adults who are at particular risk of pain from not only institutions of formal education but systems of control such as the mental health care and social services systems. My resulting understanding of the unique orientations of adults has likewise led to my ongoing concerns about adult language instruction in particular. This study therefore both narrows and broadens the parameters considered by Baker-Bell, looking at not only racialized minority adult learners but all adult learners. Baker-Bell asks us to consider the stories “Black students tell about their experiences with the language

education they are offered in school” (p. 40). I wonder something that considers the experience not of children, but of adults, and not only of Black learners, but all adult learners: What’s the emotional experience of adult learners whose language education involves corrective feedback on language use? That is, what are the emotional experiences that lead to internalization of ideas that equate non-“standard” Englishes with wrongness? It is this process of internalization resulting from corrective feedback that underlies Baker-Bell’s work.

These various studies from the fields of English education, foreign and second language studies, adult education, and composition studies all demonstrate an interplay between affect, cognition, language, and significant learning. While the relationship among these varies according to population and context, some tentative conclusions may be drawn about adult, non-foreign language learners and contextualized language instruction: that emotions surrounding such instruction may be experienced as negative, but they hold the promise of significant learning. And so, it is in the spirit of Myers’ and of Gross and Alexander’s concerns with the negative in composition studies, and of Baker-Bell’s focus on linguistic justice, that I wish to explore how corrective feedback on language use catalyzes transformative learning as a result of learner emotion. The research questions that drove this project focus on learners’ interiority because for those who experience language correction, I was (and still am) concerned with their emotional and psychic response, especially as this response emulsifies affronts to racial and class identity, threats to home discourses, insecurities related to literacy, and offenses against other aspects of self and community that are tied up with language.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

This project is in part about the way I approach my daily work as a practitioner of adult literacy in the context of developmental and first-year composition (FYC) instruction at a rural, multi-campus, primarily White, Appalachian community college. As I shared in the previous chapter, for most of my career I've heeded Lisa Delpit's (1992, 1988, 1995) call to teach learners the discourses of power, to arm them with the turns of phrase and grammatical "correctness" that will ensure they get a foot in the door of wherever they want or need to be in life. At the same time, I've seen the ways learners' identities have been dismantled by formal literacy and language instruction. So, I've wondered for the last several years, how do we higher education literacy instructors strike a balance between empowering learners and respecting their primary discourses? And how do we teach a dominant/dominating discourse of power when, on the one hand, that discourse is entrenched and evolving glacially (Devitt, 1989), and on the other, it is a moving target that seems to follow the emotional whims of the powerful and privileged (Bourdieu, 1984; 1991)? While this project will not go so far as to answer these questions, I hope it will provide useful insight regarding how learners experience the process of language instruction via corrective feedback on language use.

In particular, this project seeks ultimately to answer the question: How do adult, "native" English-speaking FYC students report their experience of receiving corrective feedback on their language use? Scholars from across literacy, sociolinguistics, and writing studies have signaled what they believe this experience is like. Stuckey (1991), Smitherman (1995), Worsham (1998), McCarty and Watahomigie (2001), Bridwell-Bowles (2003), Strickland and Crawford (2003), Bartholomae (2005), Lyiscott (2017), Myers (2019), Inoue (2015, 2020), Baker-Bell (2020), and

others have pointed to the pain associated with literacy and language learning, with several suggesting that this pain is tantamount to a kind of violence. This study will attempt to explore more exactly how such feedback is experienced by learners, and the extent to which it is perceived as painful or violent. My ultimate focus and concern is first *whether* and then *how* corrective feedback on language use functions as a kind of violence, especially for adult learners. For though the mechanics of contextualized language instruction, as described in the previous chapter, look the same regardless of learner population, the experience of that phenomenon may be uniquely significant for adults.

I may be particularly sensitive to the phenomenon of adult FYC learners feeling a certain way upon having their language corrected. Most of my teaching experience has been in developmental (sometimes called remedial or pre-collegiate) reading and writing at a small branch campus of the community college where I've taught full-time since 2013. From my own instructional experience, I've found that developmental reading and writing learners are typically quite alert to how their previous experiences in English courses have shaped their relationship with language, and I learned over the years to make space for learners to put those experiences and that relationship on the table. At the same time, I've observed that it's not enough for learners to vent: growth and change are still desired by students and demanded by institutions. My writing peda-/andragogy therefore seeks to balance these factors and imperatives: teaching both the English of the academy and a critical stance. In my instruction, I alert student writers to the consequences of audience and anticipated responses (Elbow, 2000d) while still recognizing and acknowledging conflict as a productive result of difference (Graff, 1993). I also make explicit the reality that, while learners have fully developed a competency within their own discourse communities (Gee, 1989b), standard and racially exclusive (Inoue, 2015; Baker-Bell,



2020) academic discourses remain the prominent, gatekeeping device that they must master in order to access systems of power (Delpit, 1992). Because of my desire both to see marginalized populations master and manipulate the discourses they seek to master and manipulate, and to recognize the relevance and power of primary discourses, I've long remained ambivalent about objective evaluations of writing via rubrics and other assessment tools, and especially about how to approach the process of teaching language use in FYC contexts.

It's this strong ambivalence—born during a writing pedagogy course during my master's in adult education—that led me to a graduate certificate in composition studies and then a doctoral program that's made space for continued exploration of what I first recognized when confronted with my six year-old's drawing of a bloody vampire bat, as detailed in Chapter One: that learners engage in hypothesis-driven language experiments when they feel comfortable *taking risks* in their meaning-making, not when they're constantly *at risk* of experiencing “emotional harm” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 8). The latter of these is theorized by April Baker-Bell as leading to “internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” (p. 8) for minoritized Black learners in particular and, to a different extent, various kinds of intersectional discrimination for other “communities of color,” as well as for “white linguistically marginalized communities,” for Indigenous learners, and for “Appalachian” learners (p. 16). Thus I find myself at a nexus of “structures of linguisticism, racism, and classism, which are interrelated and continuously shaping one another” (p. 16.), charged with carrying out the goals of a system, an institution, a public, a department, a discipline, and an ever-changing group of learners, all of which challenge me—as I've experienced it—to explore not so much the effectiveness of language instruction but its effect.

This chapter will focus on the methods I've used to collect data for this exploration. First, I'll detail some elements of my epistemology, especially as these influence my decision-making as a researcher. I'll then introduce my selected research methodology and data collection method: focus groups. Although focus groups are well-known for their market research utility, I share how they work for enacting a constructivist methodology that promotes collective knowledge-making and community-building. After exploring how focus groups have been represented by and used within the field of composition studies, I'll detail my own study protocol and decisions, as well as some initial information about data collection procedures and this study's participants. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of study limitations and plans for analysis.

### **Epistemological Framework**

While data collection relies heavily on the efforts and contributions of student participants, I recognize that my own positionality in terms of my education and other influences drive much about my study in terms of its design and my analysis. My educational background is in English, area studies, composition and rhetoric, and adult education. My work in adult education in particular helped me develop as a literacy instructor and instructional designer, and what it most cultivated in me is the idea that learning can be transformative, even “emancipatory,” and comes as a result of learners intentionally examining their own lived experiences. In my teaching, I seek to avoid the “banking model” of instruction (Freire, 2014) in favor of a social constructivist paradigm of learning that reflects Dewey's (1938) and Freire's emphases on learner agency in the learning process. In my reading and writing instruction specifically, I adhere to a sociolinguistic approach to literacy that suggests learners will learn what is important to them (Purcell-Gates, 1995), also recognizing that literacy and language are

developed most effectively through socially-prompted acquisition rather than direct instruction (Dornan et al., 2002). As such, my instruction makes room for interaction and choice and encourages inquisitiveness and openness without fear, as these ensure that learners will find work important and will approach their learning with positive affect and thus increased likelihood for growth and learning (Olson, 2010). This is all to say that my reading and work in the fields I'm credentialed in have led me not only to recognize but to embrace learners' need to feel a certain way in order to meet anyone's (theirs, our) learning goals. Our instruction can be brilliant, but without learners' buy-in, it cannot be effective.

So, although I acknowledge that, as Dornan et al. (2002) note, "Literacy in both its teaching and learning is never a value-free, neutral activity" (p. 19)—in that the aims and goals of institutions, literacy instructors, and learners alike are motivated by personal, cultural, institutional, and political stances and desires—I also recognize the false ease of trotting out claims about the impossibility of "teacher neutrality" uncritically. As Richards (2020) cautions, the enduring emphasis on non-neutrality in higher education and in the field of composition studies in particular may obfuscate what motivates us as educators, for rather than "stepping back and unpacking for others why we believe what we believe" in the face of public and learner demand for teacher neutrality, we often instead "scoff and confidently throw theory texts at such a suggestion" (p. 6). In claims about literacy education's particular non-neutral status, I read a dual recognition that shapes my instructional choices. First, I read an acknowledgement that literacy education has been weaponized in sometimes explicit (but sometimes not) efforts at "erasing differences of culture, race, ethnicity, class, and linguistic usage" in the United States (Donehower et al., 2007, p. 23). And I also read an awareness of how literacy education has functioned as a means of personal and community growth and empowerment, prompting, for

instance, estimated post-slavery literacy rates among Black people in the U.S to jump from 7% in 1863 to 90% by the 1950s; in these early decades, “former slaves struggled to establish schools” just after the Civil War (Spring, 2007, p. 55). Underlying both of these opposing potentialities is one of many reality-checks found in Stuckey’s *The Violence of Literacy*: “Literacy neither imprisons nor frees people; it merely embodies the enormous complexities of how and why some people live comfortably and others do not” (p. 68).

Recognizing these realities, how do I, to return to Richards’ concerns, “perform” (p. 12) the neutrality that will put learners at ease in ways that I insist two paragraphs earlier is necessary for learning? I’m fortunate here, because my personal, cultural, institutional, and political stances and desires inform my belief that an adult learning context should invite alertness and consideration of the goals and perspectives of everyone present. In other words, my peda-/andragogical agenda is to facilitate collaborative, learner-driven growth by building community. To do this, I make space for minority and minoritized voices, both in terms of those who are racially minoritized, and in terms of those who do not expect to see their perspectives reflected in a typically progressive higher education setting. I also encourage conflict that highlights difference, but with incredibly careful attention to moderating conflict in a way that centers emotional experience. (My strategies for both encouraging and moderating conflict derive from my experience as a facilitator of workshops in non-violent communication at a nearby medium-security federal prison.) I also remove incentives to please me as the instructor, I privilege (and demonstrate my privileging of) multiple modes of communication, I make room for the subjective in both my assignments and my assessment of those assignments, and I make explicit the inescapable dominance of course and writing standards. In general, I perform instruction in ways that invite a range of learners’ cultural and political stances, insisting only on

a willingness to consider thoughtfully what's being presented or offered by the texts and people encountered through instruction.

My positionality vis-à-vis my training and the above beliefs also impacts my awareness and assumptions regarding knowledge-making and the research process specifically. Indeed, selection of a research methodology benefits from a clear and intentional connection to epistemological beliefs. As Morgan (2007) points out in his work on the pragmatic paradigm in mixed methods research, "It is we ourselves who make the choices about what is important and what is appropriate, and those choices inevitably involve aspects of our personal history, social background, and cultural assumptions" (p. 69). Making explicit the history and identity markers that shape a researcher's decisions is a marker of reflexivity that is often absent in research that assumes a kind of "neutrality," which is actually impossible to achieve. For even when researcher reflexivity is not an explicit component of a study, that researcher's choices are influenced by that person's situated and partial perspective (Haraway, 1988).

Therefore, my positionality in terms of my identity markers and personal history is equally important to share. I was born in the city where the small, satellite campus of my community college is located, and I grew up just across the state border. I identify as a White, ostensibly straight cis-woman with invisible disabilities, and I've managed at several points in my life to pivot—as a result of my upbringing and various familial relationships—between poverty- and working-class. At work, I have been a dean of a broad, multi-campus academic division within a state-funded, unionized community college. I've taught a variety of developmental and college-level courses, all of which comply with the New York State university system's mandated curricular pathways. I was tenured in 2016, after serving two years as director of the humanities (now language, literature, and writing) program with full oversight

for FYC across the college, a de facto writing program administrator. In addition to these administrative roles, I've served on the college's curriculum committee, reaccreditation team, planning advisory council, and more. In all of these arenas, I might naturally cave to what bell hooks (2014) describes as an "allegiance to the ruling classes within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 45), but I resist this as much as possible, especially in my teaching. While I value the transformative potential of formal education for adults, I also recognize that the American university is implicated in a dubious cultural narrative of financial success through education. This tension is one I grapple with constantly as I design instruction, and as I've designed this study.

A handful of broad beliefs and assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge-making also influence my research methodology and study design decisions. First and second, I believe that both identity and experience are socially constructed and mediated by language, and that the sharing of information in any social setting will be performative and influenced by those present. Given both of these, I might be concerned that a research method—such as focus groups—that invites discussion of experiences would lead individuals to be unduly influenced by the reports of others. However, I recognize that any "contamination" of participant beliefs is just as likely to occur regardless of how the data of participant experience is collected, whether through survey or some other means. Any study's questions may prompt consciousness that would in essence "create" the experience being reported upon.

And this is fine, for in this project, I'm not trying to gauge an immediate response, but a lingering impression. Rupiper Taggart and Laughlin (2017) maintain something similar in their own survey study of learner experience of feedback: "To a certain degree, what actually happened in these writing situations doesn't really matter; what the students believe happened,

how they interpret what happened, and what they carry with them to the next writing situation is what we seek to understand” (p. 4). In the case of my study, it’s entirely the case that what learners carry with them is what matters (regardless of what makes it to the next writing situation).

So the actual concern stemming from this set of beliefs should not be how data will be impacted, but how my data collection decisions will influence participants’ sense not only of experience but of self. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) likewise foreground such sociocultural concerns in their discussion of research designs and conclude that participant “identity emerges in discourse through the temporary roles and orientations assumed by participants” (p. 591).

Finally, I believe, given my background and experience regarding adult language learners, that the participants recruited for this study are likely to have marginalized cultural and linguistic identities relative to the expectations of even an open-access community college. Thus, this study’s participants may benefit from the language resources of their peers to help them discuss the experience of receiving corrective feedback on their language use. The issue of discursive identity construction that I mention above and that Bucholtz and Hall propose—that participants will grow and change as a result of engaging in research—is inescapable yet compelling. I therefore undertake this process of orchestrating a research environment carefully and thoughtfully.

### **Focus Group Methodology**

For the reasons listed above, I’ve chosen to work with the identified population during their first year of college composition primarily using focus groups. Pranee Liamputtong (2011) proposes focus group as an appropriate approach to data collection in circumstances such as those I’ve defined:

The methodology has started to gain popularity in research relating to different social groups and in cross-cultural and development research. The main argument for using this methodology in this context is the collective nature, which may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily, and which provides collective power to marginalized people. (p. ix)

Not only do focus groups afford conversation and questioning among participants, but the presence of peers ensures participants are not exclusively enacting the role of student vis-à-vis an instructor.

This topic itself—learner experience of receiving corrective feedback on language use—is a good candidate for focus group research. On the one hand, it's not an experience that learners are likely to have thought about extensively. Therefore, it won't spur "in-depth personal narratives" nor "strong or opposing opinions" (Liamputtong, p. 8). On the other hand, the experience may gain more significance through conversation, as seen in an example cited by Morgan (1997) regarding a focus group discussion about participants' use of bar soap. Here, Morgan points out that "focus groups may have an advantage for topics that are either habit-ridden or not thought out in detail" (p. 11). Likewise, the topic and nature of discursive experiences, explored in a way that foregrounds participant reporting of that experience, simply makes sense as focus group fodder. That is, the social nature of both language and knowledge-making seems to invite a dialogical research approach like focus groups.

Focus groups are best known as convenient and efficient mechanisms for collecting data for marketing purposes. According to Liamputtong, this reputation is well-founded: though focus groups had their early 20th century start in academia, they quickly became corporate tools. Only since the 1980s has the method again become more common in scholarship, though the



marketing industry's influence has contributed still to positivistic approaches to focus groups, with focus groups used as exploratory mechanisms to inform future surveys or questionnaires, or used in conjunction with quantitative approaches to data collection. Further, these recent iterations of focus groups have generally been, like marketing industry focus groups, highly structured with little room for group interaction or organic discussion.

Such market research-aligned perceptions of the focus group are reflected in how focus groups have been conceived and employed in composition studies scholarship. In his "Mapping the Methods of Composition/Rhetoric Dissertations: A 'Landscape Plotted and Pieced,'" Benjamin Miller (2014) catalogs the research methodologies and data collection approaches used by graduate students completing dissertations in the field of composition studies. According to findings, focus groups made up a very small percentage of the overall number of data collection methods represented, though they were used in dissertations from almost every doctoral institution. To this latter data point, though it seems focus groups might be found in emerging composition studies research, I have not found this to be the case (as I'll share below).

Further, Miller's classification of focus groups hints at a disciplinary misunderstanding of how focus groups function in constructivist social science and humanities research. Rather than classify and define focus groups as a unique methodology and data collection method, he classifies them as synonymous with interviews. The initial portion of his definition used for both methods is reflective of their shared purposes and general approaches, defining both focus groups and interviews as data collection methods that involve "studying some external phenomenon through the reactions and 'knowledge about' of many individuals or groups"; but the definition then goes on to say that both focus groups and interviews are "likely to have questions set in advance, rather than emerging from open-ended conversation, and as such

includes questionnaires distributed directly to participants” (p. 152). Here, Miller’s conflation of focus group and interview, and his claim about the structure and content of focus groups, are indicative of a broad misconception about how they function and what they afford not only researchers but participants.

In fact, as I’ll detail below in relation to focus group scholarship and to my own study, focus groups used in the social sciences and humanities are often open-ended with few prescribed questions and with an emphasis on allowing organic conversation, discovery, and collaborative knowledge generation among participants. Focus groups also provide a venue for participants to support each other and develop a sense of agency. In part for this reason, David Morgan pointed out in 1996 that focus groups had recently gained popularity in sociological (as opposed to market) research. As a result, he predicted that focus groups would be used increasingly for action research that seeks to empower and mobilize participants, a prediction borne out by scholars such as Liamputtong. This method appeals to me, then, in part because of its collective activist potential.

The constructivist focus group methodology in particular makes space for consideration of researcher positionality that does not presume a positivist stance toward knowledge, that allows for flexible approaches to analysis, and that in itself can function as a source of empowerment for participants. As Banks et al. (2019) suggest in their introduction to *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods, Queer Projects*, a research method “represents a way of orienting a researcher toward an object, a people, or a space,” which might lead us either to head down the “well-worn paths” that “provide institutional and disciplinary viability” (p. 4), or to “challenge” existing orientations that limit “not only the subjects and contexts of inquiry but also the frames and activities (and activity systems) in which inquiry occurs” (p. 5). Focus

group research, conceived as a constructivist methodology, can be further expanded within the field of composition studies to better account for a fuller range of subjects, contexts, frames, and activities.

Unfortunately, although focus group methodology can be found within composition studies scholarship of teaching and learning, its use has been minimal and typically focused on the experiences of faculty instead of learners (e.g., Roundtree, 2019; Abbott & Eubanks, 2005). In fact, this epistemologically constructivist methodology seems almost absent from empirical studies undertaken within the field. So, though I primarily seek through this project to *employ* focus groups to answer a question regarding FYC learner experience, in this chapter I will also explore the role focus group methodology plays in empirical research in composition studies.

### **Focus Groups: Disciplinary Applications**

It would seem that the field of composition studies especially might benefit from focus group methodology. In focus groups where student experience is the focus, they often allow for a naturalistic research environment (i.e., they take place in the space where the phenomenon occurs; participants are with peers; the researcher is often an instructor). They may also afford a more intentionally curated approach that seeks to ensure space for those who might not otherwise contribute (e.g., via homophily). Additionally, the values and aims of constructivist focus group methodology are utterly consistent with how we in the field conceive of language, knowledge, and discourse: socially constructed, context-oriented, performative, and rhetorical. Focus groups are a space for co-constructive meaning-making that mirrors instructional meaning-making spaces, which makes them ideal for studying learner experience.

However, as noted above, when focus group methodology is employed in composition studies scholarship, it's typically done to explore instructors' perspectives and experiences (e.g.,

Li & Lindsey, 2015; O'Neill et al., 2005; Colombini & McBride, 2012; Kreth et al., 2010; Johnson & Riazi, 2017; Denecker, 2020; Estep, 2021), not learners'. Even where focus groups have been used to explore learner experience, they may only be used as exploratory tools for preparing survey questions (e.g., Gold et al., 2020), or their structure aligns more with marketing industry practice than with social and human science scholarship. This isn't to say that composition studies scholars have been doing it all wrong. To the contrary, and as focus group scholars point out, we've only just begun to theorize focus groups in humanities research, and the more instances of the method's use we can access for this theorization, the better. To this end, then, this section summarizes how focus groups have been used in the field of composition studies and establishes standards for my own work.

### ***Focus Groups in Composition Studies***

A review of major journals within the field yielded surprisingly few articles that employed focus groups, either as a stand-alone methodology or as a component of a mixed-methods approach. Searches of all issues of *College Composition and Communication*, *Composition Studies*, and *Computers and Composition* resulted in eight studies that employed focus groups, only two of which used them as the sole research method for collecting data from undergraduates or other adult learners about their experience of composition or writing instruction. A search of all articles published in *The Journal of Writing Assessment*, *Assessing Writing*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* resulted in a total of nine articles that employed focus groups as a data collection method. Of these, all but one engage faculty or learning support staff in focus group conversations, not learners. And this one, Romova and Martin's 2011 article in *Assessing Writing*, focuses not on first-year composition but on the use

of portfolio in foreign language writing instruction, using focus groups as one of two qualitative data collection methods.

Though I did not extend my search to book projects or dissertations within the field, nor did I initially look beyond the six journals referenced above, it appears that despite the fact that focus groups might function as a promising data collection method for working with students to explore issues relative to the teaching and learning of writing, they have not generally been used for this purpose in disciplinary scholarship. Further, when focus groups *are* used in the study of teaching and learning about writing, the use of focus groups to prompt and gather insights from learners themselves is especially absent. One example makes this trend especially evident. In their comparative study of how students and instructors read rubrics, Li and Lindsey (2015) convincingly establish the need for their study by indicating that the field of writing assessment has never compared instructors' and students' perspectives regarding a given rubric or set of rubrics. In order to reveal discrepancies and areas of agreement among instructors and students, the authors' study involved giving the same rubric to a group of instructors and to a group of students, and then collecting data on each group's impressions in order to then conduct a comparative analysis. However, rather than collecting data from each group using the same data collection method, Li and Lindsey opted to limit their use of focus groups to non-student participants, while administering questionnaires to students.

Available models for conducting focus groups within the field of composition studies are therefore limited. One model, though, can be found in Vetter and Moroz's (2019) "Engl 101: Writing in Wikipedia," which explores the effectiveness of a Wikipedia-oriented first-year composition course the authors developed by engaging in critical reflection incorporating feedback received via focus group. In particular, the authors seek to demonstrate that the

course's highly scaffolded, genre-aware approach to writing instruction effectively introduces learners to transferable skills, knowledge, and habits of mind that will be necessary for success in both collegiate and non-academic writing tasks.

Like some other studies that engage students as focus group participants—especially in K–12 research—Vetter and Moroz conducted a single focus group on the last day of classes. Though the session was not required of anyone, it was open to all enrolled in the course. As is also typically seen in this single, end-of-term approach, Vetter and Moroz used their last-day-of-class focus group to collect “student experience and feedback” so they might report on “common student experiences” relative to course-specific learning experiences (p. 194). In this case, the authors inquired about assignments that asked students to analyze, edit, and create content on Wikipedia (p. 198). Eight students took part in the focus group, and, to reduce the appearance of coercion, the instructor of record did not moderate the focus group or review focus group materials until grades had been submitted. Moroz, as TA, moderated. The authors state that four scripted questions were shared, and a footnote listed these along with two follow-up questions used during data collection. Resulting data were grouped into three themes that the authors use to frame their critical reflection.

Because the authors had a well-defined goal for their focus group—learning about students' experience of the specific course design—scripted questions kept participant responses focused. However, the nature and number of the scripted focus group questions shared by the authors points to a mildly standardized and semi-structured study, characteristics I'll define and explore further below. All but one of six questions are broad and invite general observations, with only one asking participants to speak to a specific aspect of course design. This level of standardization and structure suggests a more constructivist approach, which leaves space for

participants to direct discussion and interact with each other. As one of few articles within composition studies to employ constructivist-oriented focus groups as the primary data collection method for engaging FYC learners as participants in empirical research about the teaching and learning of writing, Vetter and Moroz's study offered a model for my own protocol.

Vetter and Moroz's is not the only study to be found within composition studies that relies on data from focus groups. Harding et al.'s (2018) "Alliances, Assemblages, and Affects: Three Moments of Building Collective Working-Class Literacies," though not set in an FYC or even a formal education context, illustrates the collaborative constructivist potential of the method. More than other focus group studies within the field, theirs highlights affordances of the method that are of particular value in my own planning. Specifically, the authors make the following observations about focus groups as a research method about a set of writing collectives. They:

- Are "well suited to exploring ideas on a particular topic and the complexities of opinions and attitudes."
- Are not ideal for eliciting simple start-to-finish narratives.
- "Foreground interaction between group members as they respond to, agree with, or challenge each other on different topics: co-constructing meaning and shared understandings."
- "Enable researchers to study how individuals collectively make sense of phenomena and why they feel the way they do."
- Are "more likely" to evoke "attitudes, feelings, and beliefs" because of focus groups' "more naturalistic" setting of "social gathering and interaction." (p. 12)

More so than “Writing in Wikipedia,” Harding et al.’s “Alliances, Assemblages, and Affects” helps validate my choice of focus groups as a means of aligning my research approaches with my peda-/andragogical goals.

Although most of the other scholarship that I’ve reviewed doesn’t model how to engage with student participants using focus groups as the sole data collection method, much can be learned from some articles that use focus groups as part of a mixed methods approach or that study the experiences of people other than FYC learners. Disciplinary use of focus groups exploits, to varying degrees, the method’s collaborative constructivist potential (Liamputtong) and adheres to some extent to queer approaches to research design and data collection (Banks et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, the studies that employ focus groups alongside quantitative methods (e.g., McLeod et al., 2005; DePalma & Alexander, 2015) feature less constructivist attributes, while those that rely entirely on focus groups for data collection (Harding et al, 2018) are decidedly more constructivist in nature.

### **Decision Points: Study Design**

In my own iteration of a focus group methodology, I aim 1) to connect the method to epistemologies that drive progressive composition studies scholarship, and 2) to take advantage of the elements of focus groups that align with composition peda-/andragogy imperatives. Both of these are modeled by Vetter and Moroz’s (2019) protocol and Harding et al.’s (2018) reflections on the method. I’m relying on David Morgan’s (1996, 1997, 2007, Collier & Morgan, 2008) work on focus groups as a social science research methodology to establish the parameters of a focus group design. In particular, I’ve extracted a framework for designing focus groups from his instructive “Focus Groups” (1996) from the *Annual Review of Sociology*, supplemented heavily by Pranee Liamputtong’s *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice* (2011).



This framework will be pitched for composition studies based on conclusions drawn from my review above. Then, while focus groups are not discussed in their work, I'll reference ideas here and elsewhere from selections from Banks et al.'s (2019) *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods Queer Projects*, which challenges some scholarly commonplaces in composition studies research, especially in ways that I see focus groups complementing.

### ***Size and Number of Groups***

Research on small group effectiveness (Fujishin, 2007) suggests six is an ideal number of participants to ensure engagement. In focus groups in particular, Morgan notes that group sizes should be responsive to how emotionally-charged discussion might be: the more emotionally-charged, the more participants will share and the more work required of the moderator, which means fewer participants should be involved. At the same time, larger groups allow for a "wider range of potential responses." Liamputtong points to focus group scholars promoting a range of four to twelve participants per group, and to many fruitful groups with as few as two or three participants. Of course, even if an "ideal" number is determined, it may not be realized given participant availability and other issues that fall beyond the researcher's control (transportation issues, sudden illness, etc., as well as pandemic factors). I therefore aimed for seven participants per group as conditions and other factors allowed.

Morgan suggests that most studies using focus groups will include four to six groups. This will vary depending upon the number of segments (see Group Composition below) and the amount of standardization (see Standardization below), with more segments and less standardization both typically calling for more groups. Because I employ some minor segmentation and minimal standardization, and, based on the rationale articulated below in Group Composition, my goal was to have eight groups.

### ***Group Composition***

One factor that may influence group size is group composition and the relative diversity of participants within groups. Morgan (1996) gives two reasons for promoting segmentation to achieve group homogeneity according to at least one variable. First, segmentation “builds a comparative dimension into the entire research project, including the data analysis” (p. 143). Second, it typically facilitates more open discussion, especially if homogeneity aligns with topics of discussion. Banks et al. (2019) speak to the importance of recognizing both in our theorizing and in our research that “language and identity are interwoven and interanimated” (p. 9) in ways that queer writing studies in particular has made evident. Group segmentation is one approach to being intentional about how language and identity may function as interface among participants.

It might seem that segmentation along identity-specific lines might function to minimize difference and therefore disagreement, to erase tension for the sake of an agreed-upon and sanitized narrative. However, this approach to defining groups should actually promote more honest and frank conversation instead. Segmentation allows for what Lunsford and Ede (1990) have promoted as a “dialogic” mode of collaboration in the feminist composition classroom. In their “Rhetoric in a New Key: Women and Collaboration,” the authors promote a “dialogic” mode of collaboration over a “hierarchical” one (p. 235), with the dialogic highlighting and valuing tension that would otherwise be seen as something to quash or solve for the sake of determining whose perspective is more valid or correct.

One practical implication of segmenting is the need to create more groups. Because I approached data collection with awareness of how intra-group composition and dynamics impact participant willingness to share, I employed some segmentation. Specifically, given that racialized and gendered identities may influence participant comfort and forthcomingness

(Jarrett, 1993; Morgan, 1996; Liamputtong), I segmented groups according to these identity markers: White and non-White (e.g., Black, Indigenous); and male-identifying and non-male-identifying (e.g., female-identifying, gender queer).

Because I do not believe existing relationships among participants would particularly hinder or encourage group interactions regarding this study's topic, I did not take steps to limit any pre-existing groups (Liamputtong, p. 37–41). That is, I allowed for the possibility of multiple or even all of a given focus group's participants to come from the same course section, as I didn't account for this factor in participant screening or group segmentation.

### ***Standardization***

Morgan situates the range of options for regulation and consistency of prepared questions on a spectrum from standardized to emergent. As both Morgan and Liamputtong suggest, focus groups in social science research tend towards emergent. However, if the topic being explored is well-defined, some standardization is desired. Likewise, if comparative analysis among diverse groups is planned, standardization may be highly desirable. On the other hand, as Morgan points out, excessive standardization precludes exploratory research.

Because my research topic is fairly focused, I prepared very few (four) standard questions. At the same time, because I was not planning to conduct extensive comparative analysis and because I wanted to remain open to the potential for my study to become more exploratory than conclusive, I was also prepared to ask unscripted questions if participants were to introduce unexpected topics of concern. My four planned, standard questions were a combination of quantitative questions (Liamputtong, p. 90) and reflective questions (p. 104), with follow-up clarifying and probing questions asked as needed.

- “Talk about how Comp I is going.”

- “What feedback have you gotten so far on the assignments you’ve submitted? On your language use?”
- “How did it feel to get that feedback?”
- “What else do you think I should be focusing on in my research?”

### ***Structure***

Imposing structure on focus group discussion is a balancing act, and, like standardization, the level of structure imposed by the focus group moderator depends on researcher goals for the group and the conversation at hand. While Morgan equates high structure with high moderator involvement, Liamputtong clarifies that the nature and quality—more than the quantity—of moderator involvement will impact participants’ resulting experience of structure. Usefully, Morgan suggests the larger the number of prepared questions asked by the moderator, the more structured the group likely will be. While there is no “ideal” number of prepared questions, Morgan posits that posing four prepared questions is probably going to result in a less structured group. The other element of structure is the extent to which the moderator will actively shape group dynamics, where more active shaping results in a more structured group.

Overall, I recognize the focus group as a venue for collective knowledge-making, and, like Liamputtong, “I advocate the less structured focus groups in the social sciences as I base my discussion on the social construction of knowledge and praxis/practices” (p. 3). My approach to moderation is therefore what Morgan might consider less structured: I planned to pose no more than four prepared questions (not including follow-up questions as noted in Standardization above), and while I sought to interact with participants through active listening and follow-up questions, I managed conversation conservatively. That is, only on those very rare occasions when group dynamics appeared to silence specific participants—which typically happens

because of a particularly vocal set of participants—did I intervene. To handle such cases, I was prepared to deploy redirection strategies (e.g., “What do others think?”). In the case of vocalized participant confusion about my questions, I offered reframed questions and was prepared to offer additional examples. And though group conversation rarely moved in an entirely unexpected direction, I only requested a return to the most recently posed question if the conversation had not yet yielded significant interactions.

### ***Moderator Qualifications***

In his discussion of structure, Morgan highlights the need to make moderator qualifications explicit. Moderators not only manage groups through question-posing, drawing out hesitant participants, and ensuring everyone has their say; they ensure participant comfort by developing group cohesion and engaging actively with participants’ ideas. As Liamputtong concludes after sharing transcript extracts from a particularly vocal focus group (p. 34), interaction, not only among participants but between participants *and researchers*, is an important factor in ensuring quality data. So while Morgan does not advocate that more or less standardized questions or more or less structured groups will produce useful results, it seems the nature of that standardization and structure—influenced by moderator experience and strategies—is more likely to result in productive interaction.

Given how critical these aspects of focus groups are, it’s important for me to explicitly state my own qualifications as a moderator. I have over a decade of full-time professional experience with building rapport to prompt thoughtful responses from potentially marginalized individuals and groups, and I believe this experience provides a sufficient foundation to ensure strong interactions during focus groups. I worked in the mental health field for two years as an intensive mental health case manager, during which I regularly interviewed clients with severe

and persistent illness to determine their care needs; I also managed mentoring relationships with a local chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters, which involved meeting with families of mentees to determine child appropriateness for the program and development needs; and I volunteered for eight years at a federal medium-security prison as a facilitator in the experiential and group process-oriented Alternatives to Violence Program. Finally, I have seven years of full-time experience teaching primarily first-year writers as a faculty member at an open-access community college in one of the poorest counties in New York State. In all of these arenas, I've functioned as a moderator who approaches interactions with openness, respect for others' lived and felt experiences, and awareness of power differentials between myself and those I'm working with.

### ***Self-Disclosure***

In an effort to better engage and make explicit my position relative to this research, and to minimize the power distance between myself and participants, I planned to disclose some personal experience (as a language learner, also acknowledging my role as instructor) to the group. Given the potential for selective self-disclosure to impact the level of participant feedback in interviews and during other data collection fieldwork, I planned in particular to share my own relevant experiences and research goals to build rapport and help increase participants' willingness to be forthcoming. To the extent that self-disclosure might lead participants to feel like they need to frame their experience in similar ways, I sought to avoid using specific "emotion words" to describe my experiences.

In general, although I took precautions in data collection as a result of the potentially "sensitive" nature of discussion topics, I did not do this because I anticipated that focus groups would impede participant forthcomingness. Instead, given that the experiences I'm studying take

place in group settings, I anticipated that focus groups would lend familiarity that would make participants feel supported in their risk-taking. While initial questions were standardized across groups, I was prepared at all times to make space for emergent, group-specific questions and for participants to pose questions of each other and of me.

### **Study Protocol**

The following research protocol was exempted by Old Dominion University's College of Arts & Letters IRB Committee. Though the initial IRB exemption proposal was submitted for a pilot micro-study in 2019 (1417978-1), the focus and scope were retained for the current project such that the committee did not require the submission of a new proposal. Instead, protocol amendments with supporting documentation, submitted in 2021, received further exemption (1417978-2 and 1417978-3).

### ***Research Site***

Prospective participants were sought from the State University of New York's (SUNY's) Jamestown Community College (JCC). JCC was established in 1950 as "the first locally sponsored community college accepted into the State University of New York" (Jamestown Community College, 2022). An open access, public, two-year community college, its two official campuses sit on either side of the Seneca Nation of Indians' Allegany Territory. The college is rurally-situated, and all but about 250 of roughly 2,500 matriculated students commute. JCC's immediate service area includes some of the most economically impoverished counties in New York State and Pennsylvania. According to the New York State Comptroller's Office (2022), of the four rural New York State counties with the highest "share of population in poverty" in 2020, three of these (Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, and Allegany) make up the core of

JCC's service areas, with Cattaraugus County—the site of JCC's satellite campus in Olean, NY—atop that list with 16.3% of citizens living at or below the economic poverty line.

Because this study's research site is a single institution, it might function as a case study of that institution's FYC learners. After all, if the population under study is all current first-year composition students, my non-probability convenience sample—limited to a portion of those attending one community college in western New York State—isn't likely to produce conclusions that can be generalized across institution type, state, nation, and so on. At the same time, the participants recruited for and taking part in this study come from not one but three campuses or extension centers, each with unique contexts and with different student populations. All three sites are open-access, employ the same placement processes, and teach the same FYC curriculum. In some cases, faculty travel from site to site or teach via interactive television across sites. A few other markers of common institutional culture can be found across the three sites, but not many, resulting in some ambiguity regarding the scope of this study and therefore its generalizability.

Some distinctions among campus or extension center site contexts and student populations may influence the generalizability of this study. Since its inception in the 1970s, the Cattaraugus County Campus's students have always tended to be older, poorer, and more White. On-campus housing has never been available on this campus, and so all students commute. Because the campus sits directly on the main street running through downtown Olean, it's accessible to those without cars. The other colleges in the immediate area are the private, religiously-affiliated St. Bonaventure University, and the semi-public regional campus of the University of Pittsburgh in Bradford, Pennsylvania, whose collective draw may contribute to the student demographic profile of JCC. Olean's population was 13,937 in 2020, with a median



household income of \$41,500, a 25.8% bachelor's degree attainment rate, and a population that's over 90% White. Because of its location on the eastern side of Cattaraugus County, more than 50 miles east of Jamestown, the campus also enrolls students from nearby Allegany County.

The "main" campus, located on the eastern edge of Jamestown, NY, has typically enrolled students directly out of high school at a higher rate than the Cattaraugus County Campus. On the other side of Jamestown is the high-profile Chautauqua Institution, which has functioned as a site for additional learning experiences and enrichment for JCC faculty and students alike. Jamestown-based students have the option to live in on-campus residence halls and generally have more material resources. Given its proximity to the city center and denser pockets of population, almost all students commute by car. The only other college in the immediate area is Jamestown Business College, a business school that offers four degree programs. The city of Jamestown's population is only somewhat reflective of the campus's demographics: the city's population was 28,712 in 2020, with a median household income of \$34,767, a 19.3% bachelor's degree attainment rate, and a population that's 87.4% White, 9.8% Latinx, 4.5% multi-racial, and 3.3% Black.

30 miles north of Jamestown is the college's North County Extension Center in Dunkirk, NY. The site is not technically a campus because it cannot confer degrees; as such, students enrolled in courses here are considered Jamestown-based students and are required to complete at least half of their program's coursework on the Jamestown Campus, even if those courses are online. The extension center consists of two buildings: a newer training center and a renovated, formerly religiously affiliated building. The site is largely inaccessible by foot, as it sits on a busy road a few miles away from a major interstate highway and a commercial strip. Dunkirk sits on the southeastern shores of Lake Erie, and other colleges in the nearby area include the

State University of New York at Fredonia. Dunkirk's population was 12,743 in 2020, with a median household income of \$36,282, a 14.3% bachelor's degree attainment rate, and a population that's 77.3% White, 29.5% Latinx, 9% Black, and 6.9% multiracial.

The research settings for this study therefore are more diverse than they may appear at first. While these settings and other characteristics of data collection sites and participants may yet have more similarities than differences, this awareness of institutional contexts can inform assessment of external validity. Likewise, to the extent that future replication of this study might increase the range of research settings, that will bring the overall study populations closer to a broader target population. To the extent that future iterations of this study might focus strictly on community college learners or adult learners in FYC, it's my hope that the following delineates data sufficiently to make it a useful baseline for such future research. Awareness of this study's parameters might inform additional case studies or other approaches to exploring learner experience of feedback. As Stake (2003) points out in their work on case study, the study of a "specific, unique, and bounded system" (p. 136) is "of value for refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability" (p. 156). This study is limited in terms of how much can be generalized about the first-year composition student experience, but it also complicates some predominant existing beliefs and practices about the teaching and learning of writing across a variety of instructional contexts.

### ***Characteristics of Recruited Potential Participants***

JCC's learners are largely from the western New York State and northwestern Pennsylvania service area; as such the student population reflects the region's racial, ethnic, and economic demographics. In Fall 2019, 79% of all students (full-time, part-time, and concurrent

enrollment) identified as White, 7% as Hispanic or Latinx, 3% as Black, and 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native. 91% of new matriculated students in 2018–19 received financial aid, with 63% receiving Pell grants averaging \$4,498 per grant for tuition and fees of \$5,850.

Most learners have grown up or made their lives in our region, which developed over the past two centuries around oil, timber, and farming industries. People who enroll at the college declare majors within associate- or certificate-level degree programs, and the students I encounter in my developmental and first year English courses range from the “well-prepared” future academic who plans to transfer to a four-year school, to the GED-holding, first-generation college learner who has little sense of what to expect from a college setting and might only plan to enroll for one semester (and might still be a future academic, of course!).

Like most community colleges, my institution enrolls a student population with a wide range of socioeconomic statuses, races, nationalities, physical abilities and limitations, ages, and mental illnesses, and a variety of employed, veteran, eldercaring, parenting, and grandparenting students. However, as a whole, JCC’s students appear to fit the profile of a “traditional” student. Most (56%) in 2018–19 attended full-time, enrolled in at least 12 credit hours per 15-week semester. Of first-time, full-time students, 60% were retained from year to year. Most (59%) identified as female, and 62.4% of matriculated students were under 23-years old. Of the 4,467 students enrolled in coursework in 2018–19, only 2,515 were matriculated. A large majority of the balance constitutes concurrent enrollment learners from regional high schools who take courses for both high school and college credit from secondary teachers approved and trained to teach JCC’s curriculum.

In FYC and in Comp I in particular, though, *learners’ presence in the campus-based classroom* from which participants were recruited for this study is also significant. As suggested

by enrollment data in the preceding paragraph, JCC enrolls a large number of high school students in its concurrent enrollment program, which counts JCC's two-semester FYC sequence as its most-offered courses across the college's service region. As a result of revisions to college placement procedures in which standardized computerized testing has been eliminated as a requirement for incoming matriculated learners and minimized for concurrent enrollment learners, enrollment in ENG 1510 (Comp I) and the second-semester ENG 1530 (Comp II), high-school enrollment in composition continues to climb. At the same time, these concurrent enrollment courses are not typically open to anyone who wishes to take them for various reasons determined by regional high schools. As a result, the matriculated learners who *do* end up enrolling in campus-based or online FYC are, for the most part, either learners who were not eligible for or not invited to enroll in these courses while in high school, or learners who've been out of school for so long that either concurrent enrollment wasn't an option or the curriculum that they did take has drastically changed. College-wide demographic data, then, are not reflective of the matriculated FYC learner population.

Current and recent Comp I students were recruited from among these matriculated students currently taking at least one face-to-face, campus-based FYC course at JCC. In Fall 2022, 462 students were enrolled in Composition I directly through Jamestown Community College, not including concurrent enrollment students from regional high schools. Of these, 309 students attended on-campus, face-to-face sections and were recruited for this study. Those enrolled in online (either asynchronous or synchronous) courses were not explicitly excluded from study recruitment, but, as detailed in the discussion of study limitations below, these learners were implicitly excluded due to a combination of COVID-19-related restrictions and study parameters.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

Participants were recruited directly via classroom visits (Appendix A) and indirectly via physical and digital flyers (Appendix B). These two approaches to participant recruitment had very different yields. After flyers were posted across all three recruitment sites for over a week, not one potential participant had expressed an interest in the study, but after a single day of visits to four sections of ENG 1510 Comp I classes, 42 students had submitted screening forms. Ultimately, thirteen classroom visits across sections taught by seven faculty yielded a total of 128 screening form submissions, with all but two submissions traced to direct recruitment via in-class presentations.

The website and QR code found on flyers led prospective participants to a web-based screening questionnaire, which was the mechanism potential participants used to indicate a tentative willingness to take part in the study. The form asked for students' college-issued email addresses and included questions that could be answered by checking boxes next to "yes" or "no" responses or filling in freeform response spaces (Appendix C).

Screening form questions were developed in alignment with G Patterson's (2019) recommendations in their contribution to *Re/Orienting Writing Studies*, "Queering and Transing Quantitative Research." Though Patterson's focus is quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis, the specific suggestions made in this chapter for ensuring that closed-answer survey questions better reflect a range of identities are just as applicable to the process of creating screening forms and other data-gathering documents that might otherwise limit respondents to predetermined responses. As Patterson notes, this limitation becomes particularly impactful when dealing with questions regarding respondent identity. In particular, "queer and trans people who've experienced the violence of being pinned down by discourse know firsthand how

confining identity categories can be,” and Patterson identifies “one of the key ways surveys alienate participants,” which is “by forcing them to prioritize one aspect of their identity over another” (p. 58). Patterson recommends not forcing single responses and making it clear that multiple responses are an option. As such, the following screening form questions allowed potential participants to select multiple options in response, and also included a fillable “other” option that could be selected either alone or in conjunction with other options:

**How do you describe your race or ethnicity? Select all that apply:**

- Indigenous / Native American
- Latino/a/x
- Black
- White
- Other: \_\_\_\_

**How do you describe your gender? Select all that apply:**

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary or Gender Queer
- Other: \_\_\_\_

Patterson advocates “profile questions that allow participants to more freely embody themselves,” not only out of “courtesy,” but to “collect richer data” (p. 59). Providing multiple options for potential participants to represent themselves meant that focus group stratification could allow for some additional level of comfort and therefore improved data.

Screening forms were available either online or on paper. The digital version was developed using Google Forms, and the paper version is a printout of the digital version. While I

did not formally track which format was used by those completing the form, I rarely brought more than five physical copies to a classroom recruitment presentation, and only once did I need to have an additional copy made on the spot. Most screening forms, then, were submitted digitally via the Google Form.

Management of data input was more difficult with hand-written submission forms. I initially entered information from hand-written forms directly into the spreadsheet generated by Google Forms, bypassing the Forms interface, but I found that this method led subsequent digital submissions to push my manually-entered entries further down the spreadsheet, separating them from their cohort. I wanted to retain an accurate numbering system that would reflect the order in which submissions had been received, so I instead entered hand-written submissions via the Google Forms interface, logging in as my research pseudonym and entering data as it was reported on paper by potential participants. Occasionally it became difficult to ensure I was reporting details exactly as intended, due both to my inability to read some handwriting and to the occasional crossed-out responses and note-writing next to single-answer items.

Completion of the screening questionnaire and participation in focus group sessions was incentivised through compensation. Every prospective participant who completed a screening questionnaire—where “complete” meant answering all questions and sharing their college-issued email address—was entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. Every selected participant who attended a focus group session, even if they chose not to contribute to group discussion, was given \$15 in cash.

Upon identifying potential participants who met eligibility criteria (see “Participant Inclusion” immediately below), I initiated follow-up contact with those learners to share additional information and extend invitations to focus group sessions. Using a study-specific

pseudonym email address, I contacted eight groups of students (blind carbon copying email recipients), inviting each group to meet at a specific date and time on that group's primary campus location. Outreach emails thanked potential participants for completing the screening form, notified them that they were eligible to participate in the study, and invited them to attend an upcoming focus group. Emails specified focus group date, time, and location of the session they were invited to, along with a reminder that they would be compensated \$15 for the hour or so of their time and would be provided with food and beverages. Email recipients were asked to respond to emails in order to indicate whether they would be attending or not, and those who planned to attend were encouraged to review an attached consent form in advance, as they'd be asked to sign a copy upon arrival. Every eligible participant who responded to my email outreach was invited to attend a focus group. Typically, the only potential participants who responded to emails were those who indicated they planned to attend a focus group: very few responded with their regrets.

Though I'm a full-time instructor at the college where I collected data for this project, I have held an administrative role with supervisory responsibility for all instructors within the division that includes FYC. Given the potential for the appearance of coercion in terms of my relationships with both participants and their instructors, I adjusted participant recruitment methods depending upon my role at the college. I'm likewise sensitive to the fact that I was able, given my full-time faculty status, to conduct in-class presentations. Were I still in an administrative position, I would not have felt as comfortable making in-class study recruitment appeals due to the potential appearance of coercion, likely resulting in fewer submitted screening forms. Likewise, were I a contingent faculty member, I would not have felt comfortable enough to impose upon my full-time colleagues and their students. My own positionality as a colleague-



researcher—as opposed to a part-time faculty member or administrator and supervisor—was therefore crucial to the completion of my project.

### ***Participant Inclusion***

In addition to inadvertently excluding students enrolled in online courses, my initial classification of screening form submissions also impacted inclusion criteria and required a reconsideration of how I might interpret these. Specifically, as I color coded for age, English language learner (ELL) status, and adult characteristics, I found that the categories I'd imposed on potential participants were less rigid and mutually exclusive than I'd anticipated. For example, my screening questions entirely disregarded international students and assumed that those completing the form would have come from neighboring counties in New York and Pennsylvania. At the same time, the open-ended nature of screening questions allowed for nuanced responses from international students, leading me to expand categories to include “ELL international” in addition to existing exclusion categories of “ELL” (implied non-international), “Legal minor,” “Friend/employee of researcher,” and “No adult characteristics.”

This last exclusion category of “No adult characteristics” is another that required some reinterpretation during initial eligibility screening. In particular, I worried that the list of characteristics (along with an open-ended “other” option) that I asked potential participants to select from was not representative enough of the experiences that might signal “adulthood” in a developmental sense. While parenthood, full-time employment, military service, and incarceration, for instance, are recognized and accepted markers of developmental adulthood (Gleason, 2015, p. 12), being a fully matriculated international student from, say, South Africa at a community college is not. However, the decision to study abroad not as a single-semester experience but as a long-term commitment strikes me as what Drago-Severson and Blum-

DeStefano (2016) point to as a decidedly adult way of knowing. Their *Tell Me So I Can Hear You: A Developmental Approach to Feedback for Educators* draws from Robert Kegan's constructive development theory, proposing that people with sufficient life experience to be considered "adults" have likely surpassed the stage in which one's engagement with the world is mediated by rules, and are instead driven by relationships with others, by their own values, and ultimately by themselves. A person who's transcended the rule-following stage is more likely to be self-directed and comes away with "larger and more complex self" (p. 9). The phrase used to describe the third "level" of adulthood, "self-authoring" (p. 40), seemed applicable not only to an international learner but to learners with various positionalities, regardless of age. My curated list of adult characteristics—including age and whether a student had transferred from a different institution—was therefore expanded to acknowledge additional likely hallmarks of adulthood. None of these decisions impacted a potential participant's exclusion, but they did influence how they were recruited; if adulthood characteristics were only shared during discussion, this influenced how that person's contributions were analyzed.

Important to this study was the inclusion of only "native" English speakers. To determine the extent of active and ongoing learning of English as a foreign language, I reviewed individual student transcripts of ELL-identifying international students to determine whether these potential participants either currently or recently enrolled in English language instruction (ELI) coursework. Of those initially coded as "ELL international" (5) and "ELL non-international" (1), one had completed ELI coursework in previous semesters and was currently enrolled in some corequisite developmental English (DEV ENG) coursework, and two others had no ELI coursework on their JCC transcripts but were currently enrolled in co-requisite DEV ENG coursework. Ultimately, I excluded potential participants who indicated that English was not a

language spoken in their home or with their family only if they were currently or recently enrolled in ELI or multiple DEV ENG courses.

After clarifying the “ELL” exclusion category and applying those criteria, along with the more clear-cut “minor” exclusion category, also accounting for a single incomplete submission, I eliminated 14 additional potential participants, leaving 114 individuals who had submitted screening forms and were eligible to participate.

These remaining potential participants were sorted into roughly homologous groups based on characteristics related to gender identity, racial identity, and adulthood characteristics, primarily to increase the likelihood of participant comfort during focus group discussion. Where specific groups were so small that they were not likely to yield a full focus group, they were combined with other groups. For instance, the pool of Jamestown-based male-identifying learners of color who did not report adulthood characteristics consisted of two potential participants. This very small group was therefore combined with the eleven Jamestown-based *adult* male-identifying learners of color. In this case, all thirteen were invited via email to attend a single focus group on a given day and time on the Jamestown campus; three responded affirmatively that they would attend, and three attended.

I had initially planned to further refine the participant pool during data collection to ensure participants fit the approximate category of “adult” in developmental terms, given the difficulty of using quick pre-screening questions to ascertain someone’s adult development stage. However, given the small number of participants who did not ultimately share adulthood characteristics, and given my shifting sense of what characteristics might indicate adulthood (as discussed above), this became less of a priority.

Campus location became an additional and—in the case of satellite campus and extension center locations—primary point of participant stratification. Of the 114 eligible potential participants, nineteen identified as students at the college’s Cattaraugus County Campus, and thirteen attended classes primarily or exclusively at the college’s North County Extension Center in Dunkirk, NY, near Lake Erie. Because I anticipated an overall participant yield rate of about 25%, I did not attempt to further segment either Olean-based or Dunkirk-based potential participants given the small numbers of eligible potential participants located at each site. 26% of all eligible potential participants who completed screening forms participated in a focus group or interview.

### ***Participant and Focus Group Characteristics***

Seven focus group sessions and three interview sessions were held during the four-week data collection period. Focus groups ranged from three to seven participants, and a total of thirty participants were engaged in either focus groups or interviews. Participants ranged in age from eighteen- to 51-years old, and they came from four counties in New York State, four different states within the U.S., and five countries including the U.S. Participant-reported demographic identifiers that I used to stratify groups resulted in the following group characteristics:

**Table 1***Focus Group Stratification*

<b>Focus group</b>	<b>Gender identity</b>	<b>Racial identity</b>	<b>Adulthood status and characteristics</b>	<b>Average age</b>
1	Female and/or Non-Binary/Gender Queer	Multiple*: Black and/or White	Adults: Full-time employment, care-giver, homelessness, age	25
2	Multiple*: Female, Non-Binary/Gender Queer, and/or Male	Multiple*: Indigenous/Native American and/or White	Multiple*: Full-time employment, concurrent employment, age	23
3	Female and/or Non-Binary/Gender Queer	Indigenous/Native American, Black, Asian, and/or White**	Multiple*: Full-time employment, concurrent employment, international	20
4	Male	White	Adults: Full-time employment, international, age	21
5	Female and/or Non-Binary/Gender Queer	White	Adults: Full-time employment, age	28
6	Male	Black	Adults: Concurrent employment, international	19
7	Female	White	Multiple: developmental	18

“Multiple” (\*) is used here (Table 1) to indicate that a given focus group was composed of participants with self-reported identity markers that spanned categories used to stratify focus group populations. For instance, because both female-identifying and gender queer-identifying participants were sorted into a single category for the sake of group stratification, Focus Groups 1, 3, and 5 are considered homologous along the lines of gender. However, because Focus Group 2 included not only female-identifying and gender queer-identifying participants but also male-

identifying participants, this group has been labeled as “multiple.” It’s important here to reiterate that participants were given the option to select more than one item when reporting gendered and racialized identities. Therefore, a single participant might have self-identified, for instance, as both female and male, or as female and gender queer. Likewise, a single participant might have self-identified as both Black and White, or as White and Indigenous. Where non-dominant gender and racial identities (i.e. non-male and non-White) were reported, participants were categorized along female/gender queer/other or Black/Indigenous/other lines.

Likewise, in the case of participants’ adulthood status and characteristics, “multiple” is also used to indicate a lack of homology. In particular, Focus Groups 2, 3, and 7 each included at least one participant who did not report—during study recruitment or during focus group or interview discussion—any characteristics associated with developmental adulthood, as well as at least one who did. Across these three categories—adulthood status, racial identity, gender identity—the markers listed above represent the range of those reported within a specified group. For example, Focus Group 1 included at least one participant who identified as White, and at least one who identified as both Black and White. Above, I’ve labeled this group as “Black and/or White” rather than “Black and White and/or White.” Though the latter would be more precise, the “multiple” label indicates a heterogeneous group consisting of participants reporting a variety of both dominant and non-dominant racial identities. Conversely, in the case of Focus Group 3’s racial identity make up, no participants described their race or ethnicity as only White (\*\*). Rather, in this focus group, at least one individual self-reported a racial identity of White and a non-dominant racial identity (e.g., Indigenous and White).

Had study recruitment yielded larger numbers of participants with specific self-reported identity markers (e.g., both male- and female-identifying), I would have sorted and categorized

the potential participant pool differently to allow for increased homophily along such lines. As it was, group composition as a result of stratification decisions likely allowed for some level of homophily, contributing to participant comfort and forthcomingness. Likewise, where the above categories prove significant in terms of data, some comparative analysis becomes possible.

The three participants who did not take part in focus groups but were instead interviewed are here identified using the same categories and descriptions (Table 2):

**Table 2**

*Interview Participant Identity Markers*

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Gender identity</b>	<b>Racial identity</b>	<b>Adulthood status and characteristics</b>
1	Female	Black	Adult: Developmental
2	Male	White	Adult: Full-time employment
3	Male	White	Non-adult

As detailed in the next chapter, interview data were treated distinctly in coding and analysis, in that the three interview participants' contributions were analyzed via axial coding, using data-coding sub-themes established during the inductive open coding of focus group data.

***Focus Group and Interview Procedures***

The qualitative data collection methods employed in this study stem from a social constructivist paradigm and are consistent with feminist activist methodologies that challenge the preference for and the possibility of passive objectivity, looking instead to engage participants as co-creators of knowledge who stand to benefit from participation in research activities (Creswell & Poth, 2017). At the same time, development of a RAD—"replicable, aggregable, and data

supported” (Haswell, 2005, p. 201)—research protocol is in part a response to calls for replicable research in particular in the field of composition and rhetoric (Raucci, 2021).

Though this project is qualitative in nature, I recognize the limitations of a small or non-representative sample, even in the case of a case study. Nyumba et al. (2018) note in their meta-analysis of focus groups in environmental conservation research, that focus group reporting often suffers from “serious gaps” in details about sample size, group size, number of focus groups, session duration, and group stratification. O’Dwyer and Bernauer (2014) also caution that “in situations where a non-probability [sampling] procedure is the only choice, researchers are advised to describe the sample in sufficient detail so that others can understand to whom, where, and when the findings are generalizable” (p. 83). The following, then, reports such information in detail. Recording specific information not only assists with readers “assessing the reliability of the results” (Nyumba et al., p. 28), as highlighted by Nyumba et al. and by O’Dwyer and Bernauer, but makes possible future replication or adjustment of this study in other contexts.

This study’s convenience sample resulted in the inclusion of a small fraction of students enrolled in the college. Of the 309 students enrolled in-person during Fall 2022 in Composition I, all were recruited either indirectly or directly to take part in the study, and 40.5% or 125 of these submitted screening forms to indicate tentative interest in participating and to determine their eligibility. Three additional screening forms were received from students who had recently completed the course, though one was ineligible due to the number of semesters that had passed since course completion. Two others who were currently enrolled in the second semester of composition—Composition II—and had completed Composition I in the previous semester were included in additional recruitment efforts. Ultimately, 30 students, representing roughly 10% of



campus-based Comp I students across the college's three sites, participated in focus groups or interviews that took place over the course of four weeks in the middle of the Fall 2022 semester.

Scheduled sessions commenced on October 24, 2022, and the final group was scheduled for November 17, 2022. Sessions were carefully scheduled to meet during the common activity hour (12:20—1:20 p.m. Monday through Friday) or times with few scheduled classes (e.g., 4:00 p.m.), and to avoid conflicts with campus-wide activities, student senate meetings, and popular club meeting times. With relatively few follow-up emails, a sufficient number of participants responded for each session. However, in one case on the Jamestown campus, only one respondent attended a scheduled session, and so I conducted an interview instead of a focus group. Likewise, one Olean-based participant and one Jamestown-based participant were unable to attend the scheduled sessions they were invited to attend, but expressed an interest in contributing as participants if possible; for these two individuals, I scheduled one-on-one interviews. (These were also open to others within specified groups who had not attended previous focus groups; no additional participants came forward.)

Focus groups and interviews were conducted at one of three campus locations in classrooms that are typically used for composition instruction and would therefore be familiar and accessible to participants. Given the timing of focus groups, I had access to large yet private-feeling classrooms with furnishings that allowed for flexible seating arrangements. In Dunkirk we met on the first floor of the “old building,” which is where most credit-bearing courses take place. In Olean we met in the room most commonly used for FYC instruction, on the second floor of the building that also contains the library and learning commons. And in Jamestown we met in a second-floor classroom computer lab. It was this last setting that invited the most interruptions from students opening closed classroom doors in order to access computers for

printing. While I had posted flyers outside of these doors indicating the date and time of the current focus group, a “Please do not enter” sign might have further minimized disruptions.

Relatively few other material considerations influenced focus group settings. Though some of the college’s and the SUNY system’s COVID-related restrictions and policies remained in place at the time of data collection, infection rates were at an all-time low across the nation and state, and the strain in circulation was a relatively mild one. As a result, social distancing and masking were not required, though students were welcome to distance and mask as needed. Likewise, food and beverages could be served, and so my pre-session set up routine included finding ATMs that dispensed a variety of denominations, purchasing bottled water and snacks, ordering pizza for delivery or pick up, and finding paper plates and napkins to set out either at the entrance to classrooms or near tables and chairs designated as our focus group space.

Prior to participant arrival, I entered designated classroom spaces to set up tables and chairs in a round near the front of rooms. Nametags, consent forms, lined paper, markers, pens, and pencils were also set out, and I wrote the following on the classroom white- or chalkboard:

*Welcome! First-Year Writing Research Focus Group: [start time—end time]*

*Today is [date].*

*While you wait, please:*

- 1. Sign and date consent form*
- 2. Fill out name tag with a name you’d like us to call you*
- 3. Think/write (informally) about feedback you’ve received so far on your writing in Comp I*

*Also: eat, relax, chat! :)*

Including details about the day's date and the focus group's planned start and end time helped allay commonly expressed student fears about needing to leave in time for their afternoon classes.

Upon arrival, participants were greeted and directed to complete the above items. Depending on the number of participants present and expected, pre-session chat would either extend into dedicated start-time or shift into a more formal welcome. Some participants—though not all, as I discuss in the next chapter—were eager to use pre-session time to write on provided paper, while others opted to talk with me or with each other; very few opted to use their cell phones while waiting for sessions to officially begin.

To commence sessions, I invited participants to gather at seats around the dedicated table(s), thanking them for their participation and reminding them of the purpose of the session: to hear about their experiences in Comp I. I also shared my reasons for conducting focus groups as opposed to interviews or surveys, I insisted that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions, I reminded them that I'd be giving them a cash stipend before they left, and I requested and received consent to audio record our sessions. Prior to recording, I also invited questions and engaged in rapport-building conversation about classes, degree programs, living situations, the weather, whether they knew each other, and so on.

Upon recording, I initiated conversation by setting an informal yet focused tone: "So, just to confirm, you're all in Comp I right now, right? So, how's it going? How's Comp I going so far?" As detailed elsewhere, this question often was more than enough to initiate substantial contributions and interactions among participants. As needed, I gently redirected each group's discussion to consideration of feedback on their writing.

The majority of the one-hour sessions were made up of semi-structured focus group or interview discussions, initially led by me and recorded for future transcription on both my phone's voice memo application as well as Garageband. Follow-up and clarifying questions were asked as needed, and, to the extent that participants ask each other (or me) questions, I typically did not disrupt conversation to introduce a new line of questioning.

Ultimately, I also shared with each group some background on the Students' Right statement from CCCC, leaving most groups with at least a few minutes for additional thoughts in response to that newly introduced information (for, indeed, none of the participants had heard of the statement or been asked to consider its ideas). This optional post-discussion debrief on the history of scholarship on language instruction in FYC was included in my research protocol not as a means of collecting data, but as a potentially ameliorative mini-lesson: after all, if I suspect that the emotional experiences being reflected upon during data collection are negative, I feel an obligation to make space for participants to reframe those experiences.

As indicated in the next chapter, I allowed and eventually made time for questions or continued discussion based on both the SRTOL statement and other topics that arose. Most focus groups ended as our scheduled time came to a close, since participants typically had classes, though some continued for a bit longer, and on several occasions participants stayed behind to chat with each other or with me. Before departing, participants were given their cash stipend, invited to take any food or drinks that remained, and advised that they could reach out to me via email with additional thoughts or any questions. Most participants expressed gratitude for the focus group or interview experience, and several suggested focus groups should happen more often.

### ***Data Security and Participant Confidentiality***

To ensure participants met study inclusion criteria, some potentially identifying information was collected prior to focus group sessions. Screening forms invited potential participants to share demographic information and email addresses that include their college-issued student usernames, and email correspondence with potential and selected participants often included learner full names. To minimize any inadvertent sharing of identifying information, I used a study-specific cloud-based account and email address that are unassociated with any of my other accounts for all digital communication and all collection of digital material. I required that all communication take place via students' school-issued email addresses, I blind carbon copied all recipients on any group emails, and I avoided addressing students by name in email exchanges. The spreadsheet that captured screening form information was also used to track eligibility, responses, and attendance, and the only information included here beyond what was provided by participants in their screening forms is their focus group or interview number.

During focus group and interview sessions, additional identifying information was collected incidentally via discussion. Prior to beginning the sessions, then, participants were asked to maintain the confidentiality of their fellow participants, and they were reminded that such confidentiality is not guaranteed with regard to orally communicated information. Due to the nature of data collection via focus group, participant anonymity was not possible, as participants were or became aware of each other's involvement in the study and of each other's orally communicated responses. Participants were invited to write invented names on their name tags if they wished, and any references to participant or others' names were scrubbed in initial transcription, as I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter.

I completed data entry from paper-based screening forms immediately after receiving forms, which I then immediately shredded. Field notes, consent forms, and pre-writing documents are in a locked drawer in my private office on the Cattaraugus County campus.

### **Study Limitations**

Though the diversity of participants recruited for this project contributed to robust data and complex results, study participants are all students at a small, primarily White, rural community college in southwestern New York State. To more fully answer the question of how adult learners respond to having their language use corrected via instructor feedback, I would want to analyze multiple types of colleges and universities that offer FYC courses and then identify a sample of those at which to conduct additional focus groups. I do believe that the design of this project is replicable, allowing for a more comprehensive picture of adult FYC learner experience.

Another limitation of this study is a lack of attention to how participants engage not only with feedback and instruction in terms of instructional modality. As noted above, distance learners were excluded from this study due to a combination of factors. Because students who had not been vaccinated against COVID-19 were not yet allowed to come to campus, this sub-population of FYC students was necessarily enrolled via distance education. Because I had no way of determining which distance education students were eligible to come to campus for focus group sessions, I had to exclude all of these students from consideration for this study.

A final limitation is the extent to which I engaged participants in establishing the focus of this study. In some ways, this experience might have been more focused and productive if I had either 1) introduced students to my concerns explicitly and let them tell me their thoughts (rather than asking questions about their experiences without the benefit of disciplinary context), or 2)

designed a more intentionally exploratory study in which participants more fully guided discussion. Above, I reference G Patterson's (2019) advice in their "Queering and Transing Quantitative Research" for designing screening form questions. Patterson also promotes "a commitment to theorize with (rather than about) participants" (p. 56). Though I sought to theorize with participants by asking focus groups and especially interviewees what other aspects of FYC I might focus on in my research, very few of those responses are actually reflected here. A study that better engaged participants as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge might have made more space in research questions and protocol for participant agency.

### **Plans for Analysis**

This study seeks to convey the perspectives and lived experiences of learners through their own voices. One of the most common methods of data collection about these experiences is closed response survey (e.g., Li & Lindsey, 2015; Rupiper Taggart & Laughlin, 2017), but I believe research efforts should better honor how learners articulate their experiences, for the sake of both participants and reported data. As detailed in the following chapter, my transcription, coding, and analysis work therefore deemphasized any a priori frameworks. Open thematic coding and coding for interaction employed participant language whenever possible, and yielded a large number of codes that I ultimately refined for axial coding of interview transcripts. I abandoned my attempt at developing intermittent focused codes in favor of re-reading the transcripts with an eye toward both initial thematic and interaction codes as well as research questions. This process drove axial coding and thematic framework development. This multi-layered approach to analysis is distinct from grounded theory analysis because at no point in my initial coding of a focus group transcript did I limit myself to codes already identified from earlier transcript codes. The next chapter details my approach to data crystallization (Janesick,

2003) in which I integrate elements of discourse analysis with thematic analysis to capture significant ideas and levels and agreement around ideas. This process results in three overarching thematic domains that inform the analysis and discussion found in Chapters Five through Seven.

## **Conclusion**

As with most projects, research-oriented or otherwise, the experience of carrying out plans in context presents challenges and opportunities that couldn't have been anticipated, forcing constant reflectiveness upon why protocol decisions were made in the first place and how these link to epistemological foundations. Indeed, the several months during which I recruited and met with participants and then transcribed and coded data were full of opportunities to check my intentions and fine tune process to ensure I was meeting my methodological goals. The trick was making these decisions expediently and in a way that accommodated participant needs and realities as detailed in participant and site descriptions above.

The contexts in which I carried out this study expanded my sense of more than simply focus group protocol and feedback on writing. For the FYC learners who'd lived through the splintering of classes and workplaces due to COVID, for instance, small pods and bubbles of safety became the spaces in which learners felt safe enough to communicate and grow with each other. So, while focus groups of three would have been seen as only marginally useful just a few years earlier, they might make for the most comfortable group data collection setting in this moment. That early lesson in flexibility served me and this study well, I think, as the processes in action detailed above sufficiently reflect a contextualized and intentional commitment to both engaging learners in an agential process of constructive and collective knowledge-making, and ensuring that my own role in interpreting, shaping, and reporting this knowledge is reflexive yet studied.



## CHAPTER IV

### METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Focus group research, when approached from a social constructivist paradigm, can afford a non-threatening, non-coercive, generative space for participants to collectively reflect on their experiences. That this generative space leaves open the potential for participants to introduce their own focus for discussion may be seen as both a blessing and curse. Focus group and interview sessions did help me and learner participants better understand the roles that writing instruction in general and feedback in particular play in the development and identity of writers, and participants did often speak directly to the concerns that drove my line of questioning. However, at times, the actual experience of corrective instructor feedback on language use was nearly imperceptible in participants' discussion of the complex systems that directly or peripherally influence that experience. I was aware of this potential outcome while planning this project and developing this study's protocol, but I was less prepared for how such broad and diverse discussions would influence the work of coding and analyzing data. In this chapter, I reflect on the choices I made both in conducting focus group and interview sessions, and in working with data after recordings were complete. Data are described in detail, as are my approaches to coding, thematic framework development, and integrated analysis.

Focus group and interview questions sought to establish rapport with participants, focus on first-year composition (FYC) instruction, and identify specific personal responses to corrective feedback on language use. As such, I limited my scripted prompts to:

- Tell us about the feedback you've gotten on your writing so far during Comp I.
- What's that feedback focused on?
- Have you had your language use or grammar corrected? How so?

- What was that like for you? Did it lead you to think or feel any way?

To close the first few sessions, I debriefed participants—as planned—with a very short and compressed history of both open-access two-year colleges and the Conference on College Composition and Communications’ Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) position statement, first issued in 1974 and reaffirmed most recently in 2014. I ended each debrief by sharing that I saw my own work as an extension of the research that informed the SRTOL statement. In particular, I shared that I was concerned for the linguistic, social, and emotional welfare of the students attending open-access institutions. These first few debriefs seemed to land harder than I’d anticipated: participants adopted the notion that their instructor’s language did not align with their own and shared anecdotes after I’d stopped recording; those who had brushed off my failed pre-writing component of the study grabbed paper and scribbled their thoughts furiously; one older woman of color walked up to me and put the \$15 I’d given her as compensation back in my hand, telling me that being a part of this research was payment enough for her and encouraging me to keep up this work.

Going forward, then, I added this debrief as a fifth scripted prompt to my repertoire, and I deployed it carefully. What I came to call my “SRTOL spiel” was still sometimes wedged in near the end of sessions, depending on how productive discussions had been. In interviews, I was more invested in making participants my co-researchers and so typically shared how these ideas motivated me early on. In focus groups that seemed to struggle with understanding what I meant when I asked about feedback on language use, I used my SRTOL spiel as an illustrative device to hopefully prompt additional discussion. In most cases, now that all participants had more time and space to consider what I was saying, they seemed to grasp, either immediately or after minor

clarification, the significance of this history of learner language correction in FYC. Given focus group and interview participant makeup, sociolinguistic concepts and implications were evident.

Between my repositioning of the SRTOL spiel, the fact that I was hearing significant references to “grammar” from participants as they discussed what they saw as weaknesses in their writing, and decades of scholarship on student response to instructor response, I expected to find at least some participant reflection on their experiences of having their language use corrected. While my expectations weren’t entirely foiled, they were more nuanced than anticipated and resulted in a diverse set of themes for analysis.

### **Focus Group and Interview Recordings and Transcription**

Focus group and interview sessions were recorded both via GarageBand on a laptop and via a cell phone voice memo app, the latter used as a backup and to allow for additional coverage in larger groups. Only on one occasion did the GarageBand application fail mid-session, leaving me with only the phone-recorded audio file. While entire sessions lasted between an hour and ninety minutes, recorded portions of the focus groups ranged in length from 39:05 to 59:49, with an average recording length of about 47 minutes. Interviews were generally shorter, with recorded portions ranging from 28:01 to 40:41, and an average length of about 36 minutes.

Individual GarageBand or voice memo files were exported as MP3s and then uploaded to Otter.ai, an internet-based automatic transcription service. Transcript editing required several replays of each recording, and this process was completed as close to the conclusion of each recorded session as possible. Some sparse field notes also helped ensure the fidelity of transcriptions, especially at points when audio recordings were unable to capture participant movement and particularly quiet contributions.

Transcription was completed with an eye toward: 1) identifying individual speakers, 2) capturing all verbal utterances, and 3) noting non-lexical voluntary utterances and other significant sounds. Minimal field notes were taken, as I was eager to enact active listening strategies at all times and did not want to appear distracted or overly clinical. When something happened that might have been captured in notes, I instead called attention to those aloud. This was done both as a means of recording the incident and as an opportunity for participants to explain their movements. For example, when participants shook their head to indicate disagreement or uncertainty, I would say, for instance, “Monica, you just shook your head.” This invited verbalized commentary (“I don’t even know”). (However, when a participant in an early focus group fell to the ground laughing, my, “She’s gone down; she’s on the floor,” only invited additional giggles rather than an explanation.) Other pre- and post-group interactions went unrecorded, but were memorable, such as when two participants who’d just met exchanged jibbitz (a.k.a. Crocs bling) at the conclusion of a focus group.

Identity protection for not only participants but the peers and faculty they referenced was top of my mind during transcription as well. Where participants gave names of instructors or high school teachers, I typically replaced those names with non-gendered pronouns. When comparisons among faculty were made, I anonymized these while still allowing for productive comparison by using the stand-ins “Prof. A,” “Prof. B,” and so on. For nearly all references to others, I replaced names and gendered pronouns with non-gendered they/them/their pronouns. Finally, my decision to not stratify data along the lines of campus or extension center was made out of a concern for potential identification of participants, especially given the small number of participants and students at the college’s extension center.

## Focus Group Data

Recordings and transcriptions from focus groups resulted in a useful collection of data. All participants took part in focus group discussions and were able to contribute in a way that was represented by audio recordings. That is, participants seemed fully engaged in oral communication, with no participants opting to “sit out” on the session or refusing to answer any questions. Session recordings in turn were complete and well-captured, and transcriptions yielded comprehensible and clear contributions from participants. Details about focus group data collection and manipulation are reported in Table 3, “Data Information.”

**Table 3**

### *Data Information*

Original recording	Date	Original transcript	Word count	Coding document	File location
FG-X-10.24.22	10/24/22	1 - X FG.docx	9,498	FG 1 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed
10.26.X	10/26/22	2 - X FG.docx	8,951	FG 2 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed
10.27.X	10/27/22	3 - X FG Adult Non-Males of Color.docx	9,312	FG 3 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed
X-FG-11.9.22	11/09/22	6 - X FG Adult White Males.docx	10,950	FG 4 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed
X-FG-11.10.22	11/10/22	7 - X FG Adult White Non-Males.docx	8,617	FG 5 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed
X-FG-11.14.22	11/14/22	8 - X FG Adult Males of Color.docx	8,949	FG 6 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed
X-FG-11.17.22	11/17/22	10 - X FG Non-Adult White Non-Males.docx	10,057	FG 7 Initial Coding	Drive, DISS, Drafting, 05., 04., Scrubbed

While some of the words reported in focus group transcription word counts in Table 3 above came from me as moderator, my substantial utterances were limited to 1) brief recorded snippets of lingering preliminary remarks regarding confidentiality, 2) a brief summary of the history of higher education in the United States as well as the SRTOL statement, and 3) concluding comments, such as thanking participants and indicating next steps before ending recording. Other than these, my utterances were limited to question-posing and perhaps an excessive amount of “mmhm,” “right,” and “yeah” interjections, active listening indicators referred to in discourse and conversation analysis as “backchannel” (Heinz, 2003).

In retrospect, upon reviewing transcribed sessions, my backchannel contributions may have hindered session productivity in ways that might not become evident in analysis. In general, though, transcripts are full of contributions from and among participants. For the most part, the questions posed to participants during focus group sessions were consistent with those posited in Chapter Three. One additional question intended to put participants at ease and give everyone a chance to speak prior to the “meat” of the session was a general question about how the course in question (“Comp I”) was going so far. In fact, this question often prompted a great amount of discussion among participants, frequently leading without further direction from me into active conversation about instructor feedback.

In terms of planned focus group content, sessions proceeded as intended, with queries regarding experiences of and specifically emotional reactions to corrective instructor feedback being my target questions that all other questions led up to, or attempted to parse out. Though much of the literature on focus group methodology cautions moderators about discussion management obstacles, my groups felt easy and enjoyable to work with, allowing for a successful period of question and response. I rarely found myself having to quiet a particularly

talkative participant or prompt additional contributions from less forthcoming participants. When these did happen, I recalled advice from the literature and clearly but kindly suggested a pause or invited thoughts. Likewise, only twice did I feel the need to interrupt conversation in order to redirect the session.

Focus groups invite collaboratively arrived-at observations, reflections, and conclusions that come about through generative and empathetic conversation about shared experience. They also make space for reduced power distance and the discovery of personal and collective agency. To the extent that the data resulting from this study's focus groups do not deliver these (though I believe they do for the most part), it's because of my own emerging comfort and uneven facility with session planning and discussion moderation. Indeed, as I'd hoped would be the case, these groups occasionally seemed not to need me, as participants eased into conversation with each other, taking the lead from time to time and asking questions of their own.

### **A Failed Attempt at Mixed Qualitative Methods: Pre-Focus Group Writing**

An additional component of this study that was inconsistently deployed for various reasons was participants' brief written response to a general query about feedback received. As indicated above, when participants arrived at the designated classroom space prior to the formal commencement of focus group sessions, they were greeted by me and directed to instructions listed on the white- or chalkboard. Specifically, after signing a consent form and filling out a name tag, participants were instructed: "Think/write (informally) about feedback you've received so far on your writing in Comp I." Paper and writing utensils were issued to participants for this purpose, and all participant writing was collected and was to be transcribed verbatim.

This element of the study was introduced for two reasons. First, the opportunity to think and write about feedback experiences should have provided additional time for participants to

consider their experiences and put those experiences into words in advance of focus groups, thereby prompting more immediate and detailed responses in discussion. Second, collecting participant-reported experiences prior to their engagement in focus group sessions might provide an additional avenue for sharing for those participants who might be less likely to speak up in a group setting, while also providing some additional data for the purposes of triangulation.

Unfortunately, the actual completion of the written component was uneven, with participants typically only engaging in this step if they arrived early or on time. Late-arriving participants did not complete this step (with the exception of one group's late-arriving participants, who, after my debrief, grabbed paper and pen to share a bit more). Instead, those who arrived more than five minutes after the scheduled start time were instructed to simply complete the consent form and name tag before moving directly into the session. Because these written reflections were not consistently completed by participants, I have elected not to include them as data in this study. Future iterations of this study should account for late-arriving participants, perhaps increasing the amount of time scheduled for focus groups or inviting participants to reflect via email prior to arrival.

### **Initial and Axial Coding**

Upon scrubbing transcripts of identifying information, each focus group transcript was pasted into the left-hand column of a word processing document. Beginning with the first focus group (FG1), I read the transcript two or three times and drafted initial codes in the right-hand column, employing participant language wherever possible. As Krueger (1997) reminds us, qualitative analysis of focus group data involves avoiding assumptions so that we can "be open to the reality of others" (p. 3). Open coding in particular is conducted without concern or consideration for predetermined theories or assumptions about the data at hand.



At the same time, even this very first step of the coding process constitutes a kind of interpretation. Indeed, Krueger (2014) also reminds us that “the direction, depth, and intensity of analysis” (p. 138) will be driven by a study’s purpose. While I read transcripts, some material did stand out to me more than other material: I was alert to mentions of instructor feedback and attempts at incorporating that feedback, mentions of emotions, mentions of mental health, mentions of storytelling, mentions of family and friends engaged in the writing process, and so on. Not all of these emphases were reflected in my project’s initial focus, but their continued presence in focus group contributions made them more significant, and all of these do show up in analysis. Conversely, where discussion of emotional response to corrective instructor feedback was minimal in comparison to participants’ enthusiastic discussion of other components of their Comp I experience, my conscious awareness of this study’s purpose prevented sought-after comments about the feedback experience from getting lost in my code development.

I’d initially planned to separate the processes of coding for content from the process of coding for group interactions, first conducting open coding for participant utterances that introduce or respond to discrete ideas, and then returning to conduct open coding for contributions in which participants engage with each other (or with me). However, group interactions felt so central to the transcripts that I had difficulty ignoring them. The first focus group in particular built considerable community through agreement, empathy-building, and laughter. Therefore, an additional lens used in my initial readings of transcripts is one that comes from discourse analysis. Specifically, as I detail in the second half of this chapter, I annotated for significant conversational markers, such as places that suggest participant agreement, and places where participants engaged in reported or imagined dialogue. Because of the potential significance of reported or imagined dialogue in particular—because it functions as a mechanism

for delivering content while also positioning the speaker in relation to others (both others in the focus group and those in the setting being described)—I opted to code these speech instances as distinct from either content or group interaction.

After initial open coding of all focus group data was complete, I reviewed and revised my list of codes with the goals of 1) refining and standardizing codes to minimize redundancy and repetition, and 2) creating a framework for the axial coding of interview data. Across the seven focus group transcripts, I'd recorded a total of roughly 2,500 duplicated codes, more than half of which were unduplicated. While this is an enormous number of codes to handle, I was nevertheless eager to fully complete open coding with all focus group data before beginning the process of refining and consolidating these into focused codes, categories, and themes. This was particularly important to me because of the order in which I'd met with groups that had been stratified according to racialized and gendered identity characteristics. The fact that, for instance, my single focus group of Black- and male-identifying participants was one of the last focus groups scheduled and transcribed, meant that I would already be unconsciously imposing frames for understanding their contributions based upon my earlier experiences with previous groups. I did not want to compound this and further limit my data reading by employing a list of codes that did not reflect later groups' perspectives. As such, I did end up with an unwieldy number and variety of initial codes.

My process of developing a list of focused codes involved decoupling initial codes from transcript data, sorting these alphabetically, searching for distinctive words and phrases, and essentially conducting another round of coding on my codes. I'd planned to apply these focused codes as secondary ones in my initial coding documents, ensuring initial codes also remained for any future data auditing needs.

It was at this point, though, overwhelmed with codes and drafted subcodes that I struggled to wrap my arms around, that I regretted not using qualitative data software to assist me with this phase. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) promise, working with qualitative data can be “messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating” (p. 154). Indeed, the amount of time and effort that went into sorting and combining decontextualized codes as conceived above proved less useful than I’d hoped, as the process quickly began to result in codes that didn’t accurately capture my reading of the data. For example, the focused code “Describing experience of receiving instructor feedback” became a useless catch-all for utterances as varied and non-parallel as these:

“Every time I get frustrated or mad or I would start to tear up.”

“But they, my English professor, they’re amazing. Like, they give us reasonable amount of time to write, um, good feedback. And I just feel like they’re very helpful.”

A purely inductive approach of moving from codes to subcodes to categories to themes still feels like the best approach, but in reality this sequence drew me too far astray from focus group data. Therefore, I abandoned my drafted focused codes and returned to my initial open codes. Reviewing these again, I scanned for particularly descriptive existing codes that represented recurring or significant ideas shared by participants, returning to the data that prompted codes in the first place. I then revised and abstracted these codes with an eye to my research questions regarding learner experience of corrective feedback on language use as well as tentative analytical notes, and arrived at several relevant draft thematic categories. These were then color coded and applied first to coded focus group data (to ensure they functioned well as representative categories, revising categories as needed) and then to interview data.

This third pass at coded focus group data, completed with an eye toward axial coding, minimizing redundancy, and categorization, resulted in a more manageable number of descriptive thematic categories. In addition to linking these categories to transcript data and initial open codes, they were used for the sake of axial coding of interview data.

### **Emergent Thematic Framework**

During my later reviews of focus group data and initial codes, I employed a more intentional interpretive lens in order to pull together a thematic framework for analysis. After describing my process for conducting initial analysis below, I will unpack each of three major categories and share a rough quantification of which groups or interview sessions generated the content reflected in themes and sub-themes. The following table provides an initial overview of the three domains, eight themes, and twenty sub-themes I arrived at during analysis. Each sub-theme is accompanied by a representative excerpt. These themes are more fully fleshed out and considered in relation with each other in the next sections of this chapter and in the chapters that follow. It's important to acknowledge that the themes contributing to my argument regarding learner experience are selective. They do not represent the entirety of my data, and are reflective of not only learner participant contributions but of my own interpretive lens.

**Table 4***Initial Thematic Framework*

<b>Domain 1 - "I write outside of here": Extracurricular ecosystems of writing practice and support</b>
<p><u>Theme 1</u> - The writing lives of college students: daily writing practices and technologies</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 1 - Reading and writing in daily life</i>  "The only other time I've written a story was for my friends. And I'm still technically writing it but it's not finished yet."</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 2 - Writing technologies</i>  "Yeah, no, I'm chronically really bad at spelling. Like, I had my Google docs open while I was writing this right here so I could use it to help me with spelling. I'm constantly just speaking to my phone to get like the right word."</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 3 - Writing done for other courses, HS</i>  "I do have a writing background in high school. [...] At times, we didn't have time to even plan [...], we just have to dive straight into it. So I was, I've kind of gotten used to that."</p> <p><u>Theme 2</u> - Knowing self as a writer</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 4 - Self-assessments: long-standing characteristics</i>  "Personally uh, grammar is something I struggled with in high school, because -- it's not that I, I'm bad. You know, it's just like uh, let's say there's only a certain amount of words I can get to, before I actually start, like slipping up and start missing words, you know: the issue I have with focus."</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 5 - Established writing processes</i>  "My current teacher would [...] tell me to do it a different way than I did in high school. And I found that like, very like, weird, like hard to get used to [...]. So when we were doing drafts, I would like, kind of break it down. And like, I would write paragraph one and put it in bold and like, write the paragraph under it, and then I do that for everything."</p> <p><u>Theme 3</u> - Literacy sponsors</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 6 - Family and friends as components of the writing process</i>  "So sometimes I'll just give my computer to my grandma. I was like, 'Can you look at this to make sure it makes sense?' She's like, 'Yeah, it's really wordy.' 'I'm sorry.' 'It's okay, Regulus. I know how you write.'"</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 7 - College peers: roommates, others not formally aligned with composition instruction</i>  "I just make my roommate read my essays 'cuz she's really smart."</p>
<b>Domain 2 - Emotional reactions to feedback (on language use)</b>
<p><u>Theme 4</u> - How learners classify feedback (and the barriers that preclude this)</p> <p><i>Sub-theme 8 - Language for language and feedback</i>  "Everything that I write is in like a story formation. Because I don't know how else to tell it. [...] But] it's not supposed to be a story when you're writing a thesis thing, or a this or a that."</p>

## Table 4 Continued

### *Initial Thematic Framework*

---

#### **Domain 2 - Emotional reactions to feedback (on language use), continued**

---

##### *Sub-theme 9 - Classifying feedback: content, modalities*

"I got, 'Know where to put commas.' I got, 'You need to place more commas.' Other than that, they said I did good. I still don't know where to put a comma, though."

##### Theme 5 - Emotional reactions to corrective feedback

##### *Sub-theme 10 - None/Neutral/No memory*

"To me personally, [it] just doesn't, I'm just like, 'Okay, I'll change it.'"

##### *Sub-theme 11 - Positive*

"So when teachers like, give me constructive criticism, and take my grammar, and say something's wrong, I really kinda like it."

##### *Sub-theme 12 - Negative*

"Because like, [the feedback] makes me- I know, like, I kind of do good with writing stuff like that. But like with all this, it's like, I wasn't taught this, how can I do better? But if I'm not talented, then well, I guess I'm crap."

---

#### **Domain 3 - "Taking it"—Learner theories of feedback and language use**

---

##### Theme 6 - Desire for instructive feedback

##### *Sub-theme 13 - Articulating a desire for feedback*

"Yeah, we have the same English teacher, so I feel like their feedback is, it is very balanced, but like sometimes, I just need more."

##### *Sub-theme 14 - Technology as hindrance*

"That's another thing. It's like, 'Where did I find that specific...?' And then you're like looking for half an hour where this one specific thing was. It just drives me nuts."

##### *Sub-theme 15 - "I wish we could have a conversation": lack of interaction as hindrance*

"I almost wish we could have like a conversation sometimes. Because most of our feedback is like: get it in Brightspace on the little like, feedback section, sometimes [the instructor] will go in and write on the paper in, like, on the computer and everything. And you can look at that, too. Sometimes I have like -- these, like burning questions, though. And I wish I could just sit down and be like, 'Well, what did you mean by this?'"

##### Theme 7 - Learned resilience and other influences on experience

##### *Sub-theme 16 - Language of resilience and pain regarding the feedback experience*

"I feel like -- I used to be kind of bad at taking it. I feel like it's a growing thing 'cuz -- I'll be honest, when people used to, I'd sound like, 'You can't tell me nothin', like, 'I know I'm right.' I'm like, 'What do you mean?' But now I realized I'm like, 'Well, you know you can't always be right sometimes.' I, sometimes -- you growin'. So then I just started taking it."

## Table 4 Continued

### *Initial Thematic Framework*

---

#### **Domain 3 - “Taking it”—Learner theories of feedback and language use, continued**

---

*Sub-theme 17 - Feedback delivery and backgrounds that lead to resilience*

“That’s why I was so thankful that I actually took that [criminal justice] class [...]. Because it like broke you down and then built you up.”

Theme 8 - Beliefs and observations about learner language and instructor feedback

*Sub-theme 18 - Learner theories of feedback*

“Yeah, I think it also depends on how it’s presented to the person. I think, um, that really depends on what other people like or not.”

*Sub-theme 19 - Mind/brain narratives, mental health, and cognitive disability*

“Especially if you’ve gone through trauma in the past, and then like you have P- PTSD, and then your brain starts to go in fight or flight mode, and then you can’t even concentrate on what you’re doing. You’re literally just going in circles, essentially.”

*Sub-theme 20 - Learner theories of language*

“I write the exact way that I talk and [...] it’s like, uh, you know, it doesn’t translate well, sometimes. And then, but it’s like, you know, if you’re reading my paper, [...] you’re like, you -- it’s not anything like anybody else, because, you know, the way we talk.”

---

### **Crystalizing Data: Integrating Discourse Analysis with Thematic Analysis**

I identified three overarching domains through the largely inductive process, described in the last section, of first coding and then abstracting those codes in light of my research concerns in order to arrive at a thematic framework. Developing and relying on codes allowed me to identify patterns in participant contributions recorded during focus group discussions. Where those patterns aligned with or expanded my focus on learner experience of feedback, as well as learner beliefs about language use more generally, they became anchors in my analytical process for this project.

However, the following analysis relies on more than the themes that emerged through my work with focus group discussions. First, to the extent that *interviewee* contributions align with focus group-derived themes, these are also reflected in analysis and discussion. As explained in more detail in the previous section, I did not develop new codes based on interview data for the sake of this project. Instead, I mapped focus group-derived themes and codes onto interview transcripts, proceeding more deductively with interviewee contributions. When excerpts from interviewee transcripts are introduced here to illustrate a point, they will be noted as such. Otherwise, they should be a seamless component of analysis.

An additional feature for analysis in this study is social interaction. Attending to the interactions among participants not only honors the collective knowledge-making and community-building that often takes place during focus groups, but expands the material available for analysis. As Liamputtong notes, though, most focus group research does not explore group interaction in analysis; instead “focus group researchers tend to neglect analytical consideration of social interactions within groups” (p. 174). Liamputtong points to feminist analysts in particular who suggest a major component of the value and power of focus group research is the social interactions among group members. Indeed, these social interactions were of particular interest to me in both planning and moderating focus groups. Not every study that employs focus groups in its approach to data collection will consider the multi-layered data available, in part because focus groups are often employed as a method of efficiency, rather than a methodology of co-constructed knowledge-making.

While this study could do more to fall within the latter category to emphasize the quality and impact of interaction on reported experiences of feedback, there is still room for considering how markers of interpersonal engagement ought to color my reading of discrete pieces of



transcript data. In particular, attention to social interaction can help not only with locating thoughts that are meaningful for both the speaker and others in the group, but with identifying significant points of disagreement. To this last affordance of social interaction analysis, as Liamputtong notes, “it is essential,” in thematic analysis, “that the researchers attempt to differentiate between the views of individuals and the actual group collective perspectives” (p. 174). Her recommendation for accomplishing this differentiation among participants is to conduct at least some form of “deviant case analysis” (p. 174). Social interaction analysis allows for this attentiveness to dissenting opinion, especially when carried out in conjunction with thematic analysis. In the next several paragraphs, I will present a combined analytical framework that engages elements of thematic analysis and social interaction analysis in order to explore how the learners I spoke with represent their experiences of feedback as an element of writing instruction.

Given these opportunities for analysis, working with focus group data seems unique in that it allows for a kind of immediate data triangulation or, what Janesick (2003) instead calls data “crystallization” (p. 67) through various types and sources of input. In particular, where participants come together in agreement—or where they express dissent—via focus group discussion regarding a specific point or experience, or where participants arrive at a conclusion together, data may point more definitively to “the discourses or themes that are produced within the group context” (Liamputtong, p. 175). That is, by reading focus group data not only for discrete content but for indicators of engagement via social interaction analysis, results should provide a fuller and more nuanced sense of the phenomenon being discussed. Therefore, I extend Janesick’s concept of data crystallization to include multiple types of analysis that can be conducted in a focus group data collection setting.

### *Discourse Analysis as Tool for Social Interaction Analysis*

The social interaction exploration component of my analysis relied on standard approaches to interpretation from the field of discourse analysis. Though my use of discourse analysis as an adjunct to thematic analysis involves minimal use of transcription conventions and fairly elementary discursive lenses, the following helped me to see various empathy markers as I sought to gauge the level of agreement expressed by participants in response to other participants' contributions, and to determine which statements and experiences were most noteworthy and more representative. First, I relied on participants' explicit utterances to help me identify where participants agreed or disagreed, noting where transcript data include vocalized agreement or disagreement, both lexical (e.g., "I feel that") and semi-lexical (e.g., "Mmhm") (Keevallik & Ogden, 2020), also tracking participant and group stances on agreed-upon points throughout discussion group sessions.

A second tool of discourse analysis that helped direct me to points of agreement and significance among focus group participants is identification of contiguous or overlapping speech. A common feature of conversation in general, contiguous or overlapping speech occurs when there is either "no interval between adjacent utterances" (Atkinson & Heritage, 2006, p. 159) or when two speakers speak at the same time (occasionally also completing each other's statements or saying the same thing). As analysts such as Thompson (2009) have indicated, such conversational latching and overlap typically indicate active listening (p. 446) and understanding (p. 438), and, in some cases, may be seen as comparable to head nodding (p. 425). For example:

**LILY:** The teacher leaves you like, "If you have any questions email me!" I would email them, and they wouldn't get back to me until like a week later, the day before-

**JENNY:** -class.

**LILY:** Yeah, the day before I had class with them, the day before my whole thing is due.

And I was like, “I can't do this tonight. I have other things to do for homework.”

Here, Lily, a White- and female-identifying adult learner, describes during a focus group session the issue of having received a delayed response from a former high school English teacher in spite of the teacher's instruction to email with any questions regarding an upcoming writing assignment. Lily notes that the delay was roughly a full week, with the response not arriving until the day before an assignment was due. While reporting on this sequence of 1) being invited to email with questions, 2) emailing the teacher, 3) not hearing from the teacher for a week, and then 4) determining that the response arrived too late to be helpful, Lily is met in the middle of this with a single word from Jenny: “class.” The latched speech of Jenny—who identifies as a Black and White woman in her mid-30s—effectively and accurately, it seems, completes the thought of Lily, who might very well have said, “They wouldn't get back to me until like a week later, the day before class.”

The effect of this exchange is significant. First, it illustrates Jenny's attentiveness to and understanding of Lily. Though Jenny doesn't say anything that explicitly points to her understanding, her empathy, or having been in a similar experience, the timing and placement of her latched speech suggests any of these is likely. Jenny's latched speech also puts Lily in a position of having to respond to Jenny. Here, Lily indicates agreement with, “Yeah,” and a repetition of their collaboratively-uttered statement. Lily then follows this with a rephrasing (“the day before my whole thing is due”), suggesting she might not have intended to complete her previous statement with “class” but instead “my whole thing is due.” Regardless of the accuracy of Jenny's contribution to Lily's story, it established an opportunity for mutual agreement,

understanding, and empathy, as well as a co-constructed retelling of an experience. Latched and overlapping speech thus may signal a richly textured agreement in focus group analysis.

Also in discourse analysis, and in particular conversation analysis, lexical moves such as reconstructed speech and hypothetical reported speech are often noted, as these features also prove useful in determining how speakers think and feel. In general, reported speech “is the representation of speech (or thought) outside the immediate deictic frame of the speech event” (LeBlanc, 2019, p. 26). Such speech may attempt to report or reconstruct speech with accuracy, but it may be entirely imagined and thus hypothetical. Conversation analysts have concluded that both reconstructed and hypothetical reported speech are used for “two apparently opposing functions of involving [...] and distancing/detachment” when, in either case, a speaker is “backing a claim” (Koester & Handford, 2018, p. 70). Given this, it’s clear that not all instances of reconstructed or hypothetical speech signal support for or agreement with another’s point. However, such utterances are, at times, clearly introduced as a means of empathizing out of a sense of understanding.

For example, in the following extended excerpt from the same focus group excerpted above, Lily relays a problem she once encountered with a high school writing assignment’s restriction on the use of first-person pronouns. Jenny again responds not only with multiple instances of latched speech, as she did above, but several instances of hypothetical speech. In the following transcript, I’ve indicated latched, interrupted, or overlapping speech with a hyphen attached to a word (e.g., “write-” and “-No”); trailed-off speech with ellipses; and increased speaker volume, laughter, and non-verbal noises by enclosing descriptors in angle brackets (e.g., “<yelling>” and “<slapping hand on table>”). A short pause is indicated by a single, freestanding hyphen, while longer pauses are indicated by strings of freestanding hyphens (e.g., “---”). When

a speaker interrupts their own thought and then begins a new thought, I indicate that with the same attached hyphen used to indicate latched speech (e.g., “this is the- you’ve gotta use”). A full list of transcription conventions can be found in Appendix D. Reported and hypothetical speech occur with nearly every turn among Lily, Jenny, and Regulus (a White- and genderqueer-identifying adult), though I’ve opted not to enclose some of these in quotation marks, a decision I describe below.

**LILY:** I was like, “I don’t know what else to write.” And [the teacher] was like, “Well, this is the- you’ve gotta use ‘me’ sometimes.” I’m like...

**JENNY:** “You just said I can’t write-”

**LILY:** -Yeah! I’m like, “You told me we can’t say ‘I’ or ‘me’ or like those types of things.” And I was like, “You got to...” They’re like, “You use them sometimes, just for other sentences.”

**JENNY:** You can’t. That’s not...

**REGULUS:** That’s contradicting yourself!

**JENNY:** <yelling> Thank you!

**LILY:** “You told us to tell you a story about ourselves. But we can’t use, like...”

**JENNY:** “You said, ‘I,’ ‘me,’ and ‘you’ or some bullshit like ‘me’ in the first-”

**LILY:** -Yeah. I’m like, I don’t know. I can’t. Like I – We, we went back and forth for a little bit. I was like, “I can’t do this.” They’re like, “Yes, you can.” I’m like-

**JENNY:** “-No, I can’t do this with *you* is what I’m saying.”

**REGULUS:** <laughter>

**JENNY:** “Like, you are literally the problem. It’s you! I can’t go back and forth with *you*. You give one direction, and then the very next day now you’re saying, ‘Oh, you can use it three out of five sentences.’”

**REGULUS:** <yelling, slapping hand on table> Exactly!

**JENNY:** <yelling> “What do you *mean*?”

**LILY:** They said that for every essay: that we couldn’t use, like, “I,” “you,” or “me.”

In this set of turns, Lily attempts to narrate her struggles with composing an essay in which she faced the familiar prohibition against using first-person pronouns. The excerpt begins with Lily employing reported speech to reconstruct a conversation with her former high school teacher in which she first indicates her own difficulty with the assignment and then relates the teacher’s acknowledgment that first-person pronouns can’t be entirely avoided. The speaker continues recounting the exchange with her former teacher, ultimately reiterating the pattern of initially being prohibited from using certain pronouns when given an essay assignment, in spite of reported teacher direction to the contrary.

During the course of this retelling, Lily is met with vigorous and enthusiastic interjections from her fellow focus group participants who use not only latching but yelling, table-slapping, laughter, and hypothetical speech in a way that indicates understanding, agreement, empathy, and perhaps shared experience. Further, throughout most of this excerpt, Jenny’s turns consist entirely of hypothetical speech that is clearly directed toward her fellow focus group participant’s former high school English teacher (i.e., “Like, you are literally the problem”). These emphatic retorts and proclamations call out the non-present teacher’s shifting standards and inconsistent expectations for student writing in a way that positions the speaker as equally aggrieved as (or even more aggrieved than) Lily. This is one of several points from focus group

transcripts that I marked as “empathetic hypothetical dialogue” because exchanges involved not only markers of hypothetical speech but also attempts to narrativize a fellow participant’s experience by playing the part of the fellow participant and an ally.

Reported and hypothetical speech both often include pronominalization (through the use of “you,” for instance), which can also point to speaker intent. Pronominalization allows a speaker to address an individual who is present, mark various kinds of reported speech and thought, introduce one’s own ideas, frame specific groups of people, and universalize experience (Koester & Handford, 2018). In the previous excerpt, the participants’ use of “you” in hypothetical and other kinds of speech seems to do several of these. First, the use of “you” found in most of Lily’s turns index reconstructed and directly reported speech (e.g., “They’re like, ‘You use them sometimes’”). Then, several of the speakers’ references to “you” are references to the second-person pronoun being prohibited in essay assignments (e.g., “We couldn’t use, like, ‘I,’ ‘you,’ or ‘me.’”). A third use of “you” is seen in Jenny’s, “Thank you!” said in reply to another participant’s observation regarding the teacher’s contradicting instructions (which had also been an earlier complaint about instructor feedback in general, thus the laughter and table slapping). However, of the 22 instances of a “you” construct found in this excerpt, most are more complex instances of pronominalization.

Specifically, Jenny’s use of “you” most often places her again in the shoes of her fellow focus group participant, as she assumes Lily’s position as a frustrated and confused high school student who is confronting an educator. This is seen, for instance, in her, “‘No, I can’t do this with *you* is what I’m saying.’” Jenny also seems able to provide more detail about the conflict, as roughly half-way through this excerpt she partially recounts that the prohibited words are classified as first-person pronouns (with her “‘or some bullshit like “me” in the first-’”) before

having her speech latched by Lily resuming her story. This is a remarkable piece of empathetic pronominalization and hypothetical speech to begin with, even as part of a decontextualized excerpt. Even more remarkable, though, is that Jenny, at another point of this focus group, reveals that she most likely never experienced anything like a restriction on using first-person pronouns in her essay-writing, as she reports never having taken a high school writing course:

**JENNY:** I never really, like, knew how to write. I just never, I don't, I was never a writer. I've never wrote, I never, I never really did the whole high school thing. I got my GED, and never really had to write an essay before or do much of that.

Especially in light of this contribution, Jenny seems to have an uncanny power to conjure the emotions, the stakes, and the contexts that drive many of her focus group peers' reported experiences and feelings relative to writing instruction generally and instructor feedback in particular. However, she is not alone in this, as hypothetical speech is found throughout transcripts. Such markers of empathy and peer identification, which often include but sometimes extend beyond agreement, seem to be a hallmark of these focus group data.

One of the eight themes I identify in the thematic framework above, and which I explore in detail in Chapter Seven, is the theorizing that participants do during focus group and interview sessions. I identify places where participants seem to be declaring long-standing beliefs about writing instruction, in part, by locating pronominalization that might appear to introduce hypothetical speech, but doesn't. At times, especially when a participant engages in the kind of empathetic imagining as seen above, pronominalization can be used to address non-present individuals, but without markers that suggest the speaker is employing hypothetical speech. In particular, Jenny's second turn and Regulus's first turn in the excerpt above both feature pronominalization through the use of the word "you" in a way that may read like hypothetical



speech. In both cases, the speakers are engaging in empathy-driven responses to Lily's story about her teacher's apparent change of mind regarding pronoun use, and their respective utterances, "You can't. That's not...", and, "That's contradicting yourself!" read as though they might be directed to their fellow participant's former teacher. However, in such cases, the "you" being indexed seems less fixed, and the utterance seems more broadly or diffusely targeted.

Here, pronominalization results in a universalizing statement, which is another common function of "you." The distinction between hypothetical speech and this other, more diffuse address of a pronominalized non-present individual might seem slight. However, where such speech points to a broader reflection on non-present individuals as a collective or non-specific entity, I read these moments as a kind of theorizing on the part of participants. In the case of the preceding, for instance, the speakers' use of "you" and "yourself" in these instances could just as logically be read as partial stand-ins for the more awkward and literal, "Teachers who've said one thing can't all of a sudden ask for something else," or, "The feedback just given is contradictory to the assignment instructions given."

Likewise, in the following excerpt (from a different focus group) that includes turns from six speakers (including me, the moderator) in very quick succession with significant amounts of latched and overlapping speech, "you" is used to address a non-present instructor, but in a way that makes it feel less like imagined or hypothetical dialogue. Logan, a White- and genderqueer-identifying learner without adult characteristics, initiates and takes the most turns in the excerpted portion of an exchange focusing on the timeliness of instructor feedback. Fawn (a White- and female-identifying learner without adult characteristics) then engages in highly empathetic latching before closing the exchange with an abstraction of Logan's situation that uses pronominalized address to a non-present individual.

**LOGAN:** For the feedback in general – I feel like it’s kind of rushed. Because I feel like it's just like, “Oh, yeah, good job. You, you’ve evaluated this.” And but I also feel like it doesn’t get out to us soon enough, because we’ll have another assignment due like that week, and we still won’t have the feedback-

**BELLA:** -Mm-hmm-

**LOGAN:** -from the previous one-

**MONICA:** -Yeah-

**WALKER:** -So I don’t know how-

**LOGAN:** -that we’re supposed to use to edit-

**FAWN:** -Yep-

**LOGAN:** -the new assignment.

**JMK:** Yeah.

**LOGAN:** So it’s like-

**FAWN:** -like you’re deciding what to do.

**LOGAN:** -So I don’t know what I'm doing-

**FAWN:** -Yeah, you’re telling me to rush my work. But yet you’re sitting there and you’re gonna make three assignments due that are based on this one draft that I’m doing, and you’re not going to give me shit for feedback?

In this rich, barely 30-second exchange, Logan introduces a statement with what might be called a high agreement factor, as four other focus group participants took turns during this excerpt in order to express some level of understanding. These include not only “Mm-hmm,” “Yep,” and “Yeah,” but a partial statement of identification and confusion from Walker (an adult who identifies as a White man). Likewise, Fawn begins to interject half-way through the excerpt with

latched speech and emerges as the fellow participant seemingly most invested in affirming and building upon Logan's point. To Logan's "So it's like-," Fawn's latched "-like you're deciding what to do," not only attempts to complete Logan's statement but repeats their "like," signaling a more explicit assumption of another's position. Almost immediately, in Fawn's final turn, the "you" of their previous turn (which might have indicated either Fawn, Logan, both at once, or a universalized student), is suddenly directed at an instructor. "You're telling me to rush my work" indicates an abrupt, concrete assumption of a position (either their own or Logan's), and is followed by specific contextual details such as an image of a "sitting" instructor who lets three assignments pass between offers of feedback. In spite of these details, Fawn's invective seems to me to target instructors in general rather than Logan's or Fawn's instructor in particular.

The actual intent and reality behind this exchange remains unclear, though. Is this a highly empathetic turn that abstracts from a fellow participant's point in order to universalize what is right and wrong? Or is this Fawn recognizing a scenario introduced by Logan that's comparable to something she's experienced and then speaking to her own non-present instructor? This is one of several exchanges that I coded as "addressing a peer's non-present former (or current) instructor, but not via imagined dialogue." While turns such as these are difficult to nail down as hypothetical speech or as some other type of utterance, and while they do not include an explicit, "I agree with you," they clearly indicate pronounced levels of understanding. In exchanges such as the one excerpted here, my coding for social interaction—in italics below (Figure 3)—is more profuse than my coding for content:

Figure 3

*Coding for Content and Social Interaction*

<p><b>7</b> 34:05 For the feedback in general -- I feel like it's kind of rushed. Because I feel like it's just like, "Oh, yeah, good job. You, you've evaluated this." And but I also feel like it doesn't get out to us soon enough, because we'll have another assignment due like that week, and we still won't have the feedback</p> <p><b>3</b> 34:21 Mm-hmm</p> <p><b>7</b> 34:24 from the previous one</p> <p><b>4</b> 34:26 Yeah</p> <p><b>5</b> 34:26 so I don't know how</p> <p><b>7</b> 34:27 that we're supposed to use to edit</p> <p><b>1</b> 34:29 Yep</p> <p><b>7</b> 34:29 the new assignment.</p>	<p>Classifying feedback ("rushed") Instructor feedback (positive but limited) Classifying feedback (too delayed to be useful)</p> <p><i>Agreement</i></p> <p><i>Agreement</i></p> <p><i>Agreement</i> <i>Building upon other's point</i></p> <p><i>Completing other's sentence</i> <i>Agreement</i></p> <p><i>Agreement</i></p> <p>Difficulty of incorporating</p>
<p><b>Jess Kubiak</b> 34:30 Yeah</p> <p><b>7</b> 34:30 so it's like</p> <p><b>1</b> 34:31 like you're deciding what to do.</p> <p><b>7</b> 34:33 So I don't know what I'm doing</p> <p><b>1</b> 34:33 Yeah, you're telling me to rush my work. But yet you're sitting there and you're gonna make three assignments due that are based on this one draft that I'm doing and you're not going to give me shit for feedback?</p>	<p>instructor feedback when timing doesn't allow for it</p> <p>Decision-making without feedback</p> <p>Classifying experience (uncertain)</p> <p><i>Addressing non-present instructor, but not via imagined dialogue</i></p> <p>Classifying feedback (insufficient in quantity and timeliness)</p>

In addition to gauging levels of agreement or understanding, conducting social interaction analysis via discourse analysis provides a window into the affective outcomes of focus groups. In particular, consider the community-building effect of the turns explored in detail above: these excerpts' initial speakers are not only met with affirmation and agreement, but a voice in their corner that's trying on and acting out their felt frustrations. Indeed, it's during discourse analysis such as this for the sake of evaluating focus group transcripts for social interaction that I found the clearest signs of cohort development among classmates and strangers alike. In reading speakers' turns for signs of agreement, I found tenderness and fierce protectiveness, sometimes all at once.

The tools of discourse analysis that I chose for the sake of evaluating social interaction in this project are limited. Additional concerted approaches to identifying points of agreement or significance might have involved looking, for instance, at points of interruption, deflection, or laughter. Or I might have considered turns in which participants themselves asked questions of me or of their fellow participants. And while I do take these markers into consideration as I explore excerpts that are illustrative of a theme-specific point, these did not inform the initial stages of my theme-identification work. Instead, after 1) establishing draft themes via inductive open coding and consideration of my research concerns, 2) applying these draft themes to transcripts, and then 3) confirming that themes capture the major ideas found in the data, I looked for clusters of agreement using the discourse markers detailed above in order to confirm that points of agreement or significance were accounted for in thematic categories. In this way, my focus group analysis combined thematic and discourse analysis to represent participants' various statements regarding their feedback experience. The analysis and discussion sections that follow do not consistently include the kind of detailed conversation analysis work illustrated

above. Instead, these sections will synthesize thematic and group interaction data to arrive at points of discussion and conclusions. Where I do employ discourse analysis strategies, transcripts will be excerpted as above, with minimal transcription markup to include “modified orthography,” which attempts to capture pronunciation versus standard spellings (Ochs, 2008, p. 177), as well as minor symbols based on Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Bucholtz, 2007).

### **Themes**

A combination of thematic and discourse analysis generated several prominent themes, which I organized into three overarching domains. The central concern that underlies this study is most directly addressed by the second domain described two paragraphs below—“Emotional reactions to feedback”—and is developed in Chapter Six. The question of whether and how first-year composition students experience instructor corrective feedback on their language use drove focus group and interview discussions that touched not only on this specific phenomenon, but a more holistic profile of what it means to be a college writing student today in a postpandemic, technology-infused, anxiety-ridden world. So while data collection yielded sufficient information to support analysis and discussion limited only to learner experience of instructor feedback, the following analysis also follows the lead of study participants, as I broaden its focus to reflect what these first-year college students brought to the focus group table. Though there is evident overlap among these domains and the themes they contain, each area of focus develops a discrete set of phenomena for the consideration of writing instructors and learners alike. These domains are presented discretely here but are largely integrated in Chapters Five through Seven, with a focus on addressing the research concerns that prompted this study.

The first domain, “‘I Write Outside of Here’: Extracurricular ecosystems of writing practice and support,” establishes context for the feedback experience being studied. Several study participants, perhaps not surprisingly, shared that they not only maintain vigorous daily writing practices but have developed strategies for composing, both of which have been cultivated and exist largely outside the confines of formal college writing instruction. Across the board, the diverse yet consistent elements of these ecosystems of writing practice and support appear to then be supplemented in particular by college peers, including those introduced to them via instructor-driven peer review sessions as well as those not formally connected to composition instruction. One potential implication of the themes outlined in this domain is that the role of the instructor in the experience of writing instruction and practice is relatively limited, as instructor feedback is modulated or refracted as a result of other elements of learners’ writing ecosystems.

Participants’ emotionally framed experiences of feedback are then cataloged in the domain titled “Emotional reactions to feedback (on language use).” Though the overarching concern of this study is the experience of feedback on language use in particular, I’ve bracketed off “on language use” to indicate a series of complexities I encountered while discussing feedback on language use with participants. As detailed throughout the following chapters, these complexities manifest in a spectrum of learner awareness of language use, ranging from a lack of alertness to language use on one end, to a perhaps hyperalertness to language use on the other. This spectrum has been simplified into the themes “Neutral,” “Positive,” and “Negative,” though a reported absence of instructor feedback on language use can be seen in all areas, regardless of emotional stance. In general, this domain attempts to conceptualize learner-reported experiences of their emotional reactions to instructor feedback, and focus group stratification according to participant identity markers invites some comparative analysis. This analysis establishes the

current-state emotional experience that is only one component of participants' overall stances relative to instructor feedback.

Finally, “‘Taking it’—Learner theories of feedback and language use” extends exploration of learners' reported emotional experience of receiving feedback on language use and examines how learner histories of experience with feedback of various kinds influence their desire for instructive feedback, in spite of the decidedly non-consensual language used by some participants to frame their experience of receiving it. One of the most surprising patterns that emerged through this study is participants' nearly universal desire not only for feedback in general but for constructive feedback from both instructors and peers. And, to the extent that participants expressed an acknowledgement of the pleasure or absence of feeling they associate with feedback, they often also articulate a philosophy of feedback that allows them to endure and grow as a result of potentially painful experiences. These participants locate their philosophies in personal histories of receiving constructive criticism or their beliefs about the approach used to deliver feedback. However, in spite of participants' continued struggle with finding language to describe the material components of the feedback process as detailed in Chapter Five (e.g., what various elements of feedback are called, what instructors are doing when they provide it), the ubiquitous phrase “taking it” signifies an uncomfortable common experience of receiving feedback. The implications for this phenomenon are further explicated in the following chapters, both during discussion of positive experiences of corrective feedback on language use in Chapter Six and in my final discussion of study implications in Chapter Seven.

### **Agreement Factors**

In some cases, such as the topic of daily reading and writing, excerpts and other quoted materials from focus groups and interviews alone will make evident the conclusions I draw in the



following chapters. However, where transcript data are much more voluminous (such as regarding the topic of reading and writing done in high school and for other courses), I will introduce only representative excerpts and other quotes, leaving significant supporting data out of sight for the reader. I'm therefore introducing agreement factors here in part to help ensure transparency in my analysis and discussion.

I attempt in the following tables (Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7) to represent how much agreement exists about a given contribution or how similar one participant's reported experience is to others'. Themes were arrived at in part by observing the frequency of a given point or focus of discussion, but indicators of understanding and agreement (or disagreement) helped me identify a particularly poignant, strong, or empirically significant idea. The resulting catalog of themes below therefore represents not only how prevalent topics of conversation were among and across focus groups, but how prevalent and sustained participant positions were regarding topics within a given theme. A more formal quantification or other representation of this merging of social interaction and thematic analysis might be useful, but the following rough quantification is intended only to indicate who spoke about what, and to what extent. My hope is that this contributes to study trustworthiness and allows for a clear sense of where topics are of broad interest, and where they are of interest to few and represent "deviant case[s]" (Liamputtong, p. 174).

Krueger (2014) demarcates these qualities as representative of a focus group's level of agreement: frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, internal consistency, and participant perception of importance. The "agreement factor" in the table below therefore represents this range of qualities regarding a given sub-theme or topic. Marks in these most granular columns indicate whether evidence of a specific topic within a theme is present in focus group or

interview transcripts, as well as the quality of that evidence. Where a given topic was not evident during initial or axial coding, an “X” has been placed in the table below to indicate that absence. Where a given topic *was* evident in review of the three individual interview transcripts or seven focus group transcripts, the nature of those contributions is qualified using a three-tiered metric. “Low,” “Moderate,” and “High” reflect the relative level of agreement determined using a combination of discourse analysis as described above and Krueger’s (2014) classification scheme. Because one-on-one *interview* data in particular do not include the possibility of several of these interpersonal elements (e.g., discourse markers of agreement or extensiveness), only applicable elements such as frequency and internal consistency are used to determine the agreement factor. (Indeed, “agreement factor” is a misnomer in the case of an individual interview, but I’ve retained the term given that it encapsulates the elements evaluated.)

**Table 5**

*Domain One Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors*

FG/Int	Theme: Writing Lives of College Students			Theme: Knowing Self as Writer		Theme: Literacy Sponsors	
	<i>Daily Reading, Writing</i>	<i>Writing Technologies</i>	<i>Writing for High School</i>	<i>Self-Assessment</i>	<i>Established Writing Processes</i>	<i>Family and Friends</i>	<i>College Peers</i>
FG 1	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low
FG 2	X	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	Low	Low
FG 3	Low	High	High	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low
FG 4	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low	X	Moderate
FG 5	High	Low	Low	High	Low	X	Low
FG 6	High	Moderate	Low	High	High	Low	Moderate
FG 7	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	X	X
Int. 1	Low	X	Low	High	Low	X	X

**Table 5 Continued***Domain One Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors*

FG/Int	Theme: Writing Lives of College Students			Theme: Knowing Self as Writer		Theme: Literacy Sponsors	
	<i>Daily Reading, Writing</i>	<i>Writing Technologies</i>	<i>Writing for High School</i>	<i>Self-Assessment</i>	<i>Established Writing Processes</i>	<i>Family and Friends</i>	<i>College Peers</i>
Int. 2	X	High	Low	Low	Low	X	Low
Int. 3	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	X	X

**Table 6***Domain Two Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors*

FG/Int	Theme: How Learners Classify Feedback (and Barriers)		Theme: Emotional Reactions to Corrective Feedback		
	<i>Language for Language, Feedback</i>	<i>Classifying Feedback: Content, Modalities</i>	<i>None, Neutral</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
FG 1	Moderate	High	Low	Low	Moderate
FG 2	Moderate	High	Low	X	Moderate
FG 3	X	Moderate	X	High	Low
FG 4	Low	High	Moderate	X	X
FG 5	Low	Moderate	Moderate	X	Moderate
FG 6	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low	Low
FG 7	X	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low
Int. 1	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low	Moderate
Int. 2	Moderate	High	Low	Low	Low
Int. 3	Low	High	X	X	Moderate

**Table 7***Domain Three Themes: Presence and Agreement Factors*

FG/Int	Theme: Desire for Instructive Feedback			Theme: Learned Resilience and Other Influences		Theme: Beliefs about Language and Feedback		
	<i>Desire for Feed-back</i>	<i>Tech as Hind-rance</i>	<i>Lack of Interaction as Hind-rance</i>	<i>Language of Resili-ence and Pain</i>	<i>Delivery and Back-grounds</i>	<i>Theories of Feed-back</i>	<i>Mind / brain Narra-tives</i>	<i>Theories of Language</i>
FG 1	High	Low	Low	X	Low	High	High	Moderate
FG 2	High	High	High	X	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low
FG 3	High	Low	X	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Low
FG 4	High	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Low
FG 5	Low	Low	X	Low	Low	Low	X	Moderate
FG 6	High	Moderate	Low	Low	Low	Moderate	Low	High
FG 7	Moderate	Low	Low	Moderate	High	High	Low	Moderate
Int. 1	X	X	X	X	Low	High	X	High
Int. 2	Low	Low	X	Moderate	High	Moderate	X	Low
Int. 3	X	X	X	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Low

Because of the constructed nature of the focus groups carried out for this study, quite a few participant contributions came about, not in response to questions that I asked, but in response to others' questions. I've adjusted for this in the agreement factors above. For example, in terms of the codes within the theme The Writing Lives of College Students, the intensity of responses has been gauged partly in relation to the questions posed to participants. In other

words, where participants independently introduced an aspect of their lives that related to, for instance, writing technologies, without any prompting by my line of questioning, I weighted that contribution as particularly intense and therefore of a higher general agreement value. For example, because participants only introduced reading and writing in their daily lives of their own accord, I valued the intensity of their contribution at a high rate whenever it occurred. And as I tracked participants introducing additional details that align with this topic, or as they reiterated a previous point about their daily reading and writing lives, I likewise valued internal consistency at a high rate. At the same time, most focus group participants who introduced this topic were *not* met with comments from fellow participants that indicated reciprocity or agreement. As a result, only Focus Group 5 and Focus Group 6 have an agreement factor of “high” on the sub-theme of Daily Reading and Writing in Table 5: the former because of intensity, internal consistency, discursive markers for agreement, and extensiveness; and the latter because of intensity, significant frequency, extensiveness, and internal consistency.

The following summary in Table 8 highlights the main points that I derived from the process of identifying agreement factors.

Table 8

*Summary of Agreement Factor Analysis*

<b>Agreement: Frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, internal consistency, participant perception of importance</b>	
<b>Highest Levels of Agreement</b>	<p><i>Classifying feedback: content, modalities</i>            “I got, ‘Know where to put commas.’ I got, ‘You need to place more commas.’ Other than that, they said I did good. I still don’t know where to put a comma, though.”</p> <p><i>Learner theories of feedback</i>            “I think it also depends on how it’s presented to the person. I think, um, that really depends on what other people like or not.”</p> <p><i>Articulating a desire for feedback</i>            “We have the same English teacher, so I feel like their feedback is, it is very balanced, but like sometimes, I just need more.”</p>
<b>Lowest Levels of Agreement</b>	<p><i>Family and friends as components of the writing process</i>            “Sometimes I’ll just give my computer to my grandma. I was like, ‘Can you look at this to make sure it makes sense?’ She’s like, ‘Yeah, it’s really wordy.’ ‘I’m sorry.’ ‘It’s okay, Regulus. I know how you write.’”</p> <p><i>Positive emotional reactions to corrective feedback</i>            “When teachers like, give me constructive criticism, and take my grammar, and say something’s wrong, I really kinda like it.”</p> <p><i>Lack of interaction as hindrance to feedback</i>            “I almost wish we could have like a conversation sometimes. Because most of our feedback is like: get it in Brightspace on the little like, feedback section, sometimes [the instructor] will go in and write on the paper in, like, on the computer and everything. And you can look at that, too. Sometimes I have like -- these, like burning questions, though. And I wish I could just sit down and be like, ‘Well, what did you mean by this?’”</p>

Weighing focus group agreement more heavily than interview agreement, I found that the sub-themes Classifying Feedback, Theories of Feedback, and Desire for Feedback were most prevalent and featured the most features of agreement. Conversely, but not unimportantly, I determined that the sub-themes Family and Friends, Positive Emotional Reactions, and Lack of Interaction as Hindrance may reflect minority stances worthy of additional consideration in

further analysis. Finally, several sub-themes saw contributions from all seven focus groups and all three interviews, suggesting the broad importance of the ideas found in these discussions: Writing for High School, Self-Assessment, Established Writing Processes, Theories of Language, Delivery and Backgrounds, Classifying Feedback, and Theories of Feedback. These final two sub-themes that were mentioned in all focus group and interview sessions—Classifying Feedback and Theories of Feedback—are also the two sub-themes with the highest levels of agreement. Participant contributions that were coded for these sub-themes are therefore considered at length in the next three chapters and bookend the extended analysis and discussion that follow.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, not all items of significance that were introduced by participants are reflected in this initial analysis. Swaths of focus group transcripts focused entirely, for instance, on in-class peer review, which is not part of my thematic framework. Also absent are the extensive comments on the role played by assignments and classroom instruction, including fast-paced lecturing. The fact that these are not included as explicit themes or topics here shouldn't suggest they're irrelevant. Rather, these are issues that would benefit from additional framing and focus that can't be sufficiently provided within the scope of this project.

What *has* been shared through the preceding discussion of my approaches to data analysis is a roadmap for how I moved from transcribed focus group and interview sessions to the detailed analysis and interpretation in the chapters that follow. In particular, this chapter has explored my approach to managing data that range from highly applicable to largely tangential relative to my study's focus. Even within the selected range of data represented above, each sub-theme or topic stands in for a diverse set of dozens, even hundreds, of participant statements. My

multi-pronged approach to initial transcript analysis included open coding, attempted focused coding, study-aligned revised coding, and axial coding, all with attention not only to thematic content but to social interaction markers. As a result of these steps, I arrived at three thematic domains that consist of twenty sub-themes or topics, and I identified each topic's agreement factor in order to locate both broadly significant issues and matters of concern to specific focus groups or individuals. This process, in turn, provided much-needed focus for the forthcoming work of putting select participant contributions in conversation with each other and with scholarship on feedback and response.

In the three following chapters, the themes and topics delineated above will not be mutually exclusive of each other, nor will they proceed in order. Chapter Five addresses the first theme within the second domain (Theme 4 - How Learners Classify Feedback), along with the first theme within the third domain (Theme 6 - Desire for Instructive Feedback). Chapter Six addresses the second theme within the second domain (Theme 5 - Emotional Reactions to Corrective Feedback), and the second theme of the third domain (Theme 7 - Learned Resilience and Other Influences on Experience). Chapter Seven then considers all three themes found in the first domain (Theme 1 - Writing Lives of College Students, Theme 2 - Knowing Self as a Writer, and Theme 3 - Literacy Sponsors), along with the final theme of the third domain (Theme 8 - Beliefs and Observations about Learner Language and Instructor Feedback). Although themes and sub-themes fit together one way during the process of coding, the process of telling the stories of these data challenged me to further consider how topics might better align. As reconfigured, these themes first establish in Chapter Five the language and attitudes I found so prevalent during initial analysis. They then address, in Chapter Six, the focus of this project while also highlighting the variety and nuance that was evident throughout my conversations



with learners. Finally, Chapter Seven provides a participant-driven sense of the contexts in which corrective feedback on language use is experienced. Threaded throughout all three chapters are the desires and considerations made most evident through focus group and interview conversations.

## CHAPTER V

### “A COUPLE OF SMALL GRAMMAR THINGS”: CLASSIFYING FEEDBACK (AND THE BARRIERS PRECLUDING THIS)

Concern about students’ negative experience or perception of instructor feedback on their writing is nothing new. In the Fall 1972 issue of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Thomas C. Gee shares the results of his experimental study of juniors in high school, from which he concludes, “Students often interpret a marginal notation like *clumsy*, *poorly written*, or *illogical* as personal indictment or as almost total disparagement of their skill” (pp. 212–213, emphasis in original). In the most enduring thread of her career’s work, Nancy Sommers (1982) has spent at least forty years highlighting the impact on student revision of what she calls “arbitrary and idiosyncratic” instructor feedback on student writing, laden with “hostility and mean-spiritedness” (p. 149). (Though her position has become more nuanced, these ideas and those from her 2012 “Beyond the Red Ink” video stick with me the most.) More recently, Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest (2013), after lamenting how “few studies focused on students’ responses to teacher comments” and that “those fairly dated studies largely concentrated on first-year college students in a university setting,” survey and interview their own two-year college students in anticipation of finding “poor attitudes” due to “poor past experiences with writing” (p. 231). Their research questions are framed as such: “How do developmental writing students react to our comments? What do they do with our comments?” (p. 232).

My own work is concerned more narrowly with how learners—in the case of this study, adult learners at a rural, open-access community college—experience feedback on their language use in particular, especially as the feedback received reflects and reinforces affronts to learners’ racial and class identities, threats to home discourses, insecurities related to literacy, and offenses

against other aspects of self and community that are tied up with language. To some extent, then, this study responds to a relatively recent yet robust scholarly dialogue about first-year composition (FYC) student understanding of instructor response to their writing (Brannon & Knobloch, 1982; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 1997; Sommers, 2006; Sommers, 2012; Bowden, 2018; Bowles, 2020), especially as this scholarship concerns itself even in part with FYC learners' emotional experience of feedback (Gee, 1972; Treglia, 2008; Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Rupiper Taggart & Laughlin, 2017), if not emotional experience of feedback on language use in particular.

The focus group and interview sessions that made up this study included surprisingly little participant discussion of specific instances of such feedback or the emotional experience suggested by those cited above and by others. More typically, learners pointed to general categories or types of feedback. Then, when asked about what those feedback encounters looked like, some learners could illustrate what they'd shared, but others struggled to provide examples of the kinds of feedback they had indicated receiving. Finally, when asked how that feedback made them feel, learners generally were unable to associate an emotion with their specific feedback experience, whether that feedback sought to correct language use or not. However, because this project's methodology and data collection protocols invited collaborative participant-directed discussion, responses shared by learners point to additional considerations that might not be captured via survey or even interview. These additional considerations that fall outside of the specific feedback encounter, addressed throughout this chapter and the next two, constitute the complex set of contextual factors that influence learner experience of corrective instructor feedback on language use. I'm referring to these complex sets of factors, in light of

established theories of both composition ecology and rural literacies, as adult FYC learners' rural writing ecosystems.

To my research questions regarding whether adult FYC students in a community college setting experience corrective feedback on their language use as a kind of violence, the superficial answer is “no.” For some learners, though, there *is* an awareness of how corrective feedback on language use may be experienced as painful, and this awareness comes from various sources within two broad categories: personal experience and observing others' experiences. This chapter will introduce the themes I found in focus group and interview data that surround the experience of feedback, both generally and in particular with attention to language correction. The following categories and selected excerpts help establish the range of responses received related to feedback, both corrective feedback on language use and feedback generally.

Upon arriving at focus group or interview sessions, the participants of this study were immediately clued in—if they read the instructions posted at the front of the room—to the fact that our discussion would in some way touch on the feedback they'd received to date in their FYC classes. There, prior to any participant's arrival, I'd written on the white- or chalkboard a brief bulleted note that welcomed participants, reminded them of the date and time of our session, asked them to fill out a name tag and sign a physical copy of a consent form, and invited them to think or write about the feedback received so far on their writing in ENG 1510, English Composition I (Comp I). As I discussed in Chapter Four, the variable timing of participants' arrival to focus group sessions meant this pre-session writing exercise, intended as both a way to prompt thinking before sessions began and a means of data triangulation, was inconsistently completed by participants and therefore not included in the data analyzed for this iteration of my project. Given the number of participants whom I had to orally direct to fill out a name tag and

sign a consent form in spite of my written instructions, it's likely that at least several of the thirty learners I spoke with did not catch this clue to our upcoming session's focus. However, most of them likely did, as roughly half of the participants I spoke with completed this pre-session writing exercise, with a few explicitly referring to what they'd written while responding to focus group or interview prompts about feedback.

I reiterate this failed component of my study design because the fact that pre-session writing was completed by so many participants is somewhat surprising, given what I'll share in this chapter's next section. With the exception of two or three outliers who attempted verbatim recollections of FYC instructor feedback, most participants conveyed their initial recollections of feedback in what struck me as fairly vague, broad-brush strokes with notably little detail. In spite of the fact that focus group and interview sessions took place directly in the middle of the fall semester—meaning that most participants had received instructor feedback on one or more major essay assignments within the last couple of weeks—the most common kinds of response to my prompt, “Tell us about the feedback you’ve gotten so far,” were general statements that either classified or qualified instructor feedback. Follow-up questions about the specifics of feedback, especially on language use, resulted in conversations in which participants used their own terms to describe the components of feedback and composing, often negotiating with others within focus groups to land on preferred or commonly accepted phrasing, in order to convey the content and nature of instructor feedback. In general, I found, feedback is desired by learners though it is often experienced as frustrating and requiring interpretation, which is in turn informed by other materials or resources, or what Bowles (2020) refers to as the “(con)texts” of the FYC experience. Additionally, the prevalence of references to “grammar” in participants’ definition and classification of instructor feedback is noteworthy, especially given the lack of specificity or

emotional reaction participants attribute to instructor feedback on grammar. These “small grammar things” were significant enough for participants to introduce when discussing feedback in general, yet seemed illegible or unrecognizable as either instructional content or stimuli for emotional response. In other words, for the most part learners were unable to point out how grammar was introduced to them or how grammar correction made them feel, in spite of their regular references to “grammar.”

This chapter proceeds in two sections. The first, “‘What’s a Fragment?’: The Language FYC Learners Use to Talk about Feedback and Language,” briefly establishes and illustrates a phenomenon found within writing studies research: that even the most standard terminology of writing studies is not a linguistic resource that is readily accessed by FYC learners. This section establishes that this lack of shared language between writing instructors and learners may function as a barrier to learning, and it also points to some of the community- and resource-building effects of constructivist focus group studies such as this one. The second section, “‘I Almost Wish We Could Have a Conversation’: Learners Classify Instructor Feedback,” more properly introduces several of the student participant voices of this study as they discuss instructor feedback in greater detail. Not quite a classification scheme, the non-parallel categories presented in this section—feedback with a general focus, feedback with specific instructive content, assessment of instructor feedback, participant desire for instructor feedback, and feedback modality and interactivity—instead reflect the patterns I found in participant discussions. While these findings reflect previous scholarship suggesting that students read and want instructor feedback, learners in this study also present a complex set of desires for feedback that challenge some instructional conventions of FYC. In particular, the learners in this study wish for feedback that’s affirming of their language use, yet specific and instructive.

## **“What’s a Fragment?”: The Language FYC Learners Use to Talk about Feedback and Language**

Before unpacking these findings further, it’s important to frame what I’ll be sharing with a brief discussion of the language the participants in this study use to talk about writing, feedback, and language. As my prompts became increasingly focused on writing assignments submitted and the feedback received on those assignments, participants moved accordingly from a general discussion of their experience of first-semester composition toward a more focused discussion of the feedback experience. In general, I asked participants to share what feedback they’d received on their writing, what that feedback focused on or said, and what they believed reported instructor feedback meant. In many instances, focus group participants then engaged in diverse and somewhat meandering conversation about instruction, assignments, feedback, and more, leaving me with small snippets of what I saw as more relevant conversation to return to later. Some of the questions asked by me in excerpts below, then, may reference phrasing or specific terms used earlier by participants themselves. Responses of more evident substance will be shared in the next section and next chapter, but I share the following first to illustrate a trend in language for language.

In particular, while contributions generally demonstrate a considerable metacognitive awareness of learners’ writing practices and instructional experiences, participants often seem to struggle to locate terms to describe that awareness when it comes to discussing instructor feedback both in general and on their use of language. This is seen by Sommers (1980) in her observation of student unwillingness to use words like “*revision* or *rewriting*” (p. 380, emphasis in original), and it is noted by Stolley (2007) in her dissertation work. Harding et al. (2022) also point to this phenomenon in their recent work on feedback reception: specifically, they “noticed

that students and instructors tended to use very different language to talk about writing” (p. 85).

While my study does not engage with *instructor* language for talking about writing, it is clear that many of the learners in this study did not rely on instructor or instructional material language for their own sense of how to discuss feedback on their language use. Though not always directly related to feedback or language use, many of the following excerpts demonstrate that FYC content itself is often not evident as one of learners’ linguistic resources for discussing the work of FYC.

Even prior to reading the previous scholarship referenced here, I did anticipate that participants might struggle—for various reasons—with finding language to describe their experiences, especially in the presence of someone (me) who could never completely prevent herself from representing the very source of potentially hurtful feedback they were being asked to discuss. One of my reasons for conducting focus groups as opposed to individual interviews was therefore not only to diffuse my own power in these spaces but to make room for collaborative language finding. As Liamputtong posits, a focus group’s “collective nature [...] may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily, and [...] provides collective power to marginalized people” (p. ix). Whereas more typically positivistic data collection methods such as closed-response surveys also help people who might struggle to put their experiences into words, the words selected to represent those experiences are limited to what’s been selected by the researcher and do not invite participant collaboration, let alone the enactment of “collective power” (even if only to aid in the pronunciation of term like “apostrophe” or “synonym,” as commonly happened in my study).

In the following focus group excerpt, Lily shares a very specific piece of instructor feedback received on an essay draft with Regulus and Jenny. In response to my question about



her understanding of this feedback, other participants chime in both to echo my prompt and to assist Lily in resolving the matter of what instructor feedback meant.

**LILY:** I've gotten told "put more pizzazz" in my discourse community. [...]

**JMK:** How did you know what "pizzazz" meant? Like-

**REGULUS:** -Exactly like, "How much like, how much pizzazz do you want? What's your definition of pizzazz for me to write in this part of this essay?"

**LILY:** I don't know! They said it a couple of times, so I just meant I thought they meant like-

**JENNY:** -Snazzy.

**LILY:** Yeah-

**JENNY:** -Colorful-

**LILY:** -Colorful!

**JENNY:** Yeah.

Later in this transcript, Lily's additional comments suggest she would have benefitted from such an exchange earlier in her revising process, as she notes that her chosen strategy for dealing with this piece of feedback was not to imbue her essay with pizzazz, but to actually use the word, "pizzazz," in her submitted revision. Recognizing the potential for such a "collective power" effect, I was hopeful upon seeing exchanges like the above, in which learners not only struggled to locate technical if not standard terminology for discussing writing and feedback, but also searched with each other for words to describe basic elements of the FYC experience, defining terms for and with each other, and even developing agreed upon focus-group specific language for certain concepts. This is seen below in an exchange that begins with a participant attempting a high-fidelity report of instructor feedback from memory.

**PHIN:** I can say what I've seen from my um reflections and feedback from my professor. So one being, "Good content, good content, very fleshed out piece of writing; needs some work on your word fragments." That's been something I've been getting a lot on my essays, "word fragments, word fragments." [...] So um I like the- well, my professor has been very, very good in their feedback, and all my drafts, essays. They've really given me a good um what's this word now? Very good, uh -- review?

**AJ:** Mm.

**PHIN:** <hushed> Is that what they're? -- I don't know.

**AJ:** Yeah.

**PHIN:** Yeah, feedback, I guess, is the word.

As is the case in this excerpt, language for instructor feedback seemed to be a common stumbling block for study participants, potentially preventing participants from feeling confident enough to speak with authority on a topic that they lack the confidence to name. However, once Phin landed on the word "review" as a noun to describe instructor feedback, "review" became the term used by others in this focus group to refer to feedback going forward. Using "review" as a noun wasn't unique to this group, though, as it was used within at least one other to describe instructor feedback:

**JMK:** So you got your computer out?

**BELLA:** Mm-hmm

**JMK:** What are you looking at?

**BELLA:** I'm looking at um one of my uh review thingies that they -- my feedback.

What instructors do when reading and responding to learner drafts was a regular point of confusion for participants, both in terms of the activity undertaken and how to name it. When

explaining what their instructor does when providing feedback, one participant shared that their instructor “fixes whatever is there.” Another referred to an instructor’s feedback as “their little paragraph of what they thought.” Several participants noted with consternation or disappointment that they weren’t sure what their instructor does when providing feedback. As discussed in the final chapter, though, participants seem better equipped or more ready and comfortable to discuss—unprompted—the other sources of feedback on both their academic and non-academic writing, including how those other sources of feedback work alongside instructor feedback.

Terms related to grammar and punctuation were another common point of uncertainty and confusion. In particular, when one or more participants in a focus group introduced the concept of a “fragment,” this almost always (though not always immediately) prompted additional comments from others in the group. Some comments were focused on a desire for classroom instruction on elements—such as sentence fragments—that their writing was being evaluated on. As Bella—a White- and female-identifying learner without adult characteristics—indicates, “I wish they like explained certain vocabulary. And since like, a few people don't know ‘fragment,’ I wish they explained it.” On other occasions, focus group members requested a definition from the participant who introduced the term, as seen in following two exchanges:

**JMK:** Have you ever gotten feedback like in comp one that, like, felt not great?

**MONICA:** The only thing that was my discourse community essay, is when [the instructor] did the corrections or whatever, they’re like, “This is a fragment.” It’s like, “What do you mean, ‘It’s a fragment’? Like there's no explanation.”

**FAWN:** What’s a fragment?

**MONICA:** Yeah, right? It’s a, it’s a sentence that’s not complete, right? Uhhh.

\*\*\*

**PHIN:** Yeah it's just fragments. I'm okay with grammar. I'm just it'll be like-

**AJ:** -Sorry, what does fragments mean?

**PHIN:** So when you basically have an incomplete sentence-

**AJ:** -Ah, okay.

**PHIN:** So when you have like, an idea, but not really explained...

**MAX:** Gotchu.

**PHIN:** Further explanation, so...

**AJ:** Sometimes you end it, and then you carry on that same idea

**MAX:** -Yeah-

**AJ:** -To the next sentence.

**MAX:** Yeah.

**PHIN:** So it just pieces of like, ideas that're not really connected in a way?

**MAX:** Gotcha.

**PHIN:** Because yeah, it's not connected. So you know, just the fragments.

**MAX:** Yeah.

**PHIN:** But yeah, because I haven't had much problems with my grammar. I think I'm pretty good at that. I know, grammatically, like this is how periods, colons-

**MAX:** -Mmhm okay-

**PHIN:** -All that how it works.

Notably in this last excerpt among three Black- and male-identifying adults, Phin distinguishes his reportedly regular instructor feedback on “fragments” from the concept of “grammar,” only to illustrate the concept of “grammar” by pointing to conventions of

punctuation. Here and elsewhere, Phin shares with his focus group that he consistently receives notes from his instructor that point specifically to sentence fragments as something to be corrected in his writing. Then, in both his first turn and his final turns of this exchange with AJ and Max, Phin follows his report of corrective feedback on fragments by insisting that, because of his knowledge of how to use “periods [and] colons,” he’s “okay with grammar.” I found this juxtaposition interesting. On one hand, I’ve found that it’s common for people to lump together “grammar and punctuation,” essentially viewing elements of punctuation as grammatical elements, as is the case in this exchange with Bane—a White- and male-identifying adult—where “grammar” is used to include not only punctuation but capitalization:

**JMK:** You said, “a couple of small grammar things.” Like what?

**BANE:** Like, periods, commas. Or just fixing, like, putting capitals and all.

However, on the other hand, it seems more unusual for such a ubiquitous grammar construct as the fragment to be seen as something non-grammatical. Further, learners occasionally struggled to give names to things like drafts and essays. In addition to one participant’s reference to “a thesis thing, or a this or a that,” another’s description of their first essay draft included this: “It was our like, first actual, like, thing we had to upload and like, whatever.” I should note that in both of these specific cases and others, participants had some prior college-level writing experience—whether through concurrent enrollment high school courses not taken for credit or through other previous attempts at FYC—yet they appeared either unwilling or unable to use precise or even approximate terms for fairly basic concepts related to FYC.

The implications of this lack of precise language on learners’ experience of corrective feedback within the context of FYC may be minimal, as it’s nearly a commonplace of literacy acquisition that language for language is not what increases learner facility with grammatical

constructs or language in general (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 1995; Weaver, 1996; Dornan et al, 2002).

However, that participants in this study so often called up the term “grammar” to describe the feedback received suggests the *concept’s* significance in how FYC learners conceive of or make sense of instructor feedback encounters. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven, the concept of grammar seems to hold a kind of mythical status in both its pervasiveness and its lack of application and utility. Below in Table 9, the three discrete terms most frequently introduced by participants are charted according to focus group and interview, along with total counts.

Unsurprisingly, “grammar” is among these.

**Table 9**

*Term Frequencies*

FG/Interview	“High school”	“Grammar”	“Spelling”
FG 1	5	2	4
FG 2	11	0	0
FG 3	9	10	13
FG 4	17	4	8
FG 5	10	17	0
FG 6	6	13	1
FG 7	7	1	1
Int. 1	2	9	0
Int. 2	3	1	0
Int. 3	4	2	8
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>35</b>

Focus group and interview participants referred to grammar a total of 59 times, with all of these (apart from several contributions from Focus Group 5) introduced in relation to instruction and feedback provided by their instructors. As a point of reference, the most commonly referred to discrete and specific term introduced by participants was “high school,” with 74 references across all interview and focus group sessions, and the third-most referred to term was some variation of “spelling,” with 35 participant references across one of three interviews and five of seven focus groups. The distribution of these three terms is shared above in order to highlight the relative frequency of participants’ use of the term “grammar” in particular, as this is the only one of these most frequently referred to terms that participants struggled to define or illustrate. The concept of “grammar,” then, seems unique in its prevalence yet obscurity in learners’ reported experiences of instructor feedback.

As became evident to me through continued conversation, though, what appear to be lapses don’t necessarily point to a lack of knowledge, understanding, or concern on the part of learners in this study. If nothing else, the learners in this study aren’t alone, given the pervasiveness of this “language for language” disconnect across previous research on student experience of response to writing as noted above. Additionally, though, in spite of the fact that the terms being used by learners to discuss FYC writing and feedback are likely inconsistent with instructor usage—as also noted by Sommers and others—may be immaterial, this inconsistency may instead function as an obstacle to realizing FYC and feedback in particular as what Harding et al. (2022) refer to as a “boundary object,” as I’ll suggest in the final chapter. The ability to describe the emotions attached to such un-namable experiences may likewise be impacted.

I hesitated to begin this chapter with what may look like mere participant foibles. I'm hopeful, though, that in addition to gesturing toward a broader interpretive lens for the impact and significance of corrective feedback on language use in FYC, I have also established some general context for the depth and complexity of what's to come. As will be seen below and in the next two chapters' discussion of reading and writing activities within and beyond the FYC classroom, as well as discussion of learner theories of feedback and language use, learners do in fact come to their FYC experiences not only with language for language but with significant resources and experiences that inform their writing practice.

### **“I Almost Wish We Could Have a Conversation”: Learners Classify Instructor Feedback**

To the extent that participants were able to call up or arrive at terms to describe the feedback they received, I identified discrete categories for the foci of these descriptions, which speak to both the content of and perceived approach to instructor feedback as well as learners' preferences for and beliefs about feedback, language, and feedback on language. In order to help participants move toward reflection on the experience of feedback on their language use, I first inquired about the feedback they'd received in general. Prompts such as, “Tell us about the feedback you've gotten on that assignment,” elicited general responses that I could then inquire about further, focusing on feedback on language use specifically or on participant feelings and other reactions to feedback. Participant responses to such follow-up questions typically focused on one or more of these elements of instructor feedback: its general focus, its specific instructive content, its quality, and its modality or location. In the process of describing and critiquing feedback, participants also ultimately articulated a clear desire for additional instructor feedback, especially through feedback encounters that affirm learner voice and identity to arrive at both increased understanding and growth.



While multiple classification schemes exist for describing and categorizing instructor feedback, the previous studies on instructor feedback that have led to these schemes involved researchers developing classifications of instructor feedback as they themselves understood it (e.g., Sia & Cheung, 2017; Bowden, 2018). In the case of this study, I've asked learners to talk about feedback and am relying on their reports of feedback received to frame and understand the instructor feedback they describe. Feedback on language use in particular can be found across these categories, and though feedback on "grammar" is reported broadly, reported corrective feedback on language use is typically only described by learners as "feedback with specific instructive content" if it is reported upon at all.

### ***Feedback with a General Focus***

As seen in one of the excerpts above regarding fragments ("What do you mean, "It's a fragment"?"), feedback with a general focus was reported as non-instructive, and much of it tended to be framed as pertaining to feedback on grammar and aligned concerns. Instructor feedback with a general focus is reported by participants less as feedback that led them to act or do anything with that feedback, and more as a succinct descriptor of success or error. Typically, general focus feedback did not invite additional participant (or co-participant) utterances of substance during focus group and interview sessions. Instead, reports of general focus feedback led to nods, quick responses of agreement, or a change of subject, as is seen here:

**MAX:** Um, I think a lot of my -- first, most of my feedback is grammatical errors, um.

**JMK:** Okay.

**MAX:** But, you know, like I said, I'm bad with planning. And when I'm in class, I keep up with everything. But when I'm out of class, I don't really do like a lot of classwork.

Here, Max initiates his description and classification of feedback received by referencing “grammatical errors” before returning to a previous discussion of his ongoing self-assessment about his planning abilities. Though this particular turn extends for some time, Max does not return to his mention of “grammatical errors,” nor does he—in this set of turns—provide information that might tie into or expand upon this initial comment. As such this piece of feedback with a general focus was a conversation stopper more than a point for further discussion. Much later in this focus group session, which I analyze both below and in the following two chapters, Max does return, in the very last turn of substance of this focus group, to the matter of grammar feedback on his writing in FYC, pointing out that “a lot” of the corrective instructor feedback he receives is on grammar and language use.

Feedback on “grammar” as a general area of focus therefore also seems to function at times as a starting point for participants in their discussion of feedback received. In the case of Max, he ultimately returns to unpack this point with additional detail, though as will be seen this move requires some imagination on his part. However, in some cases learners who classify their feedback as more general at first—pointing to “grammar” as the focus of that feedback—end up recalling more specific and instructive detail about feedback that seems to have little to do with grammar. In the following exchange, for instance, Hannah, a White- and female-identifying adult learner responds to my general question about what feedback had been received to date with, “Um, mostly grammar.” Though this was met with immediate agreement by Cate (a White- and female-identifying adult) and Lucy (a White-, female-, and genderqueer-identifying adult), Hannah (a White- and female-identifying adult) then revised or built upon her initial response:

**JMK:** Okay, so that’s what you’ve gotten so far. Yeah. What about the two of you?

What have you gotten so far in terms of feedback?

**HANNAH:** Um, mostly grammar.

**CATE:** Same.

**LUCY:** Yeah.

**HANNAH:** Explaining more, which I get, because you want the reader to understand what your perspective is so I get that.

In addition to Hannah's slightly more specific addition of instructor feedback regarding "explaining more," Cate and Lucy ultimately abandon the implication that they've received feedback on their grammar, despite their utterances of agreement here. Indeed, both participants later explain that they in fact rarely receive corrective feedback on their grammar but instead often issue corrective feedback on grammar use to their peers, given what they describe as their own comfort with grammar conventions.

Feedback with a general focus was occasionally not only reported by participants but also evaluated. In the following excerpts and exchanges, participants point out general focus feedback on their thesis statements in particular, then referring to such feedback as non-specific, "repetitive," and "broad."

**DESTINY:** The thing that is usually always the thing that I get feedback on is um my thesis statement. So I think I mostly understand the point of what I have to do, but I guess I don't state it properly. So I think that's really what stands out to me. It's pretty repetitive.

\*\*\*

**JUSTIN:** Yeah, it was sort of like a broad thing, [the instructor] doesn't reference if this is- the thesis is wrong, what part of my thesis is wrong. It sort of just says, "Your thesis here." So I'm like thinking, "Is my whole thesis wrong? Or is it just like, maybe I just

need it altered this way?” That’s, I’d prefer it if they sort of said, “Your thesis, this part is fine. But then this part, you need to change it in a way so it gives the reader this perspective.” But [the instructor] sort of just says, “That’s wrong.” So it’s like, “Do I have to redo my thesis? Or is some words wrong or what is wrong?”

**CARL:** Yeah, I understand that.

**JUSTIN:** So I prefer them to be more specific with what’s right and wrong.

**CARL:** Yeah, like I said, I think like, um [the instructor] like, most of the time, they, they just link us to go to other places. So it seems like they expect us more to do some of the things ourselves. But in -- Yeah, there- has its pros and cons, because I’ve had the same feeling as him.

The term “vague” was also offered by a handful of participants to describe both instruction and feedback, especially where that feedback did not provide specific instructive suggestions for learners to consider in revision. Instead, as is seen in responses like this last report of feedback with a general focus, learners do not report why feedback with a general focus is given or what they should as a result of it. Justin, a White- and male-identifying adult, comments, “It sort of just says, ‘Your thesis here.’ So I’m like thinking, ‘Is my whole thesis wrong? Or is it just like, maybe I just need it altered this way?’” This closely mirrors the experience shared by one Bunker Hill Community College student featured in Nancy Sommers’ 2012 documentary, “Beyond the Red Ink”: “A teacher wrote ‘bad’ on top of one of my sentences, and I didn’t- I didn’t know what that meant. [...] Is the sentence structure bad? Is the idea bad?” I’m not suggesting the instructors who issued this feedback *didn’t* offer specific instructive content, but it’s clear that if specific instructive feedback was shared, the learners above did not perceive it.

In rare cases, participants were able to expand upon instructor feedback with a general focus. Below, Nicole, an adult learner who identifies as a Black woman, notes that her instructor has suggested that she make her writing “more mature” and proceeds to unpack what she believes was intended by that.

**NICOLE:** Um <clears throat> my essays, before I got good feedback. [The instructor] likes my writin’. I got an A on both my past essays, but uh, it’s like, they’ll be like, “Make sure you just, make your writing more mature.” That’s what they’re about, like...

**JMK:** Do you know what that means? Like, or what they mean by that?

**NICOLE:** Yeah, I think I do know what [the instructor] means. Like, as in like be more -- I’m not in high school anymore. So some of the words I gotta, like change up, find synonyms for ’em, like, use my commas in the right places, [that] type stuff and use quotes and actual- the punctuation and grammar that you use in English.

Nicole has language for what’s been said in feedback and, when prompted, seems ready and able to unpack and define that feedback in terms of not only what to do differently but how those changes in approach signal a departure from “high school” and the kind of thinking and writing that comes with it. Interestingly, in unpacking her instructor’s reported suggestion that she work to make her writing “more mature,” Nicole suggests that “the punctuation and grammar that you use in English” is also something other than what’s been part of her writing repertoire up to this point. In this exchange, Nicole seems able to imagine the intent behind feedback with a general focus because she is able to call upon existing literacy resources to interpret or extend feedback without specific instructive content. Nicole is not unique in this, but the value of different kinds of literacy resources is sometimes called into question. For instance, Justin bemoaned even the specific points of feedback he received from his instructor because he perceived them as like

“bullet points I can read from a normal book. [...] It doesn't correlate directly to my essay specifically; it's more like a broad spectrum of things that you could look on a textbook of what you should have.” As I'll discuss in the next chapter, FYC learners might therefore benefit from more explicit prompting to reflect upon how the various elements of their broad writing ecosystems intersect with their FYC feedback encounters.

### ***Feedback with Specific Instructive Content***

Reported feedback on grammar and thesis statements is not limited to feedback with a general focus, though, and is also found in reported feedback that included specific instructive content. Where learners are able to provide detail about a feedback encounter's specific instructive content, they often feel positively about that encounter. This is the case for Phin's LMS interface-mediated feedback on thesis placement, transitions, and idea organization:

**PHIN:** It's just the more structural alignments in like, in terms of placing I- my thesis, my overall thoughts, how ah- the transitions it's just those like little details that, that I'm a bit behind. Yeah, but my professor has been really good. Like, when I submit my rough draft, they would give like, pop up notes, like, here, here, here, like, “Okay, I see what you're saying, yeah, but let's just maybe switch it up with this idea.” And which I think has been very, very useful.

On the other hand, as Justin notes, feedback on grammar is often experienced as the most instructive specific feedback learners receive, yet it doesn't appear to leave learners feeling particularly positive: “Sometimes you do get the comments, ‘Should be this, should be this.’ But then once again, it's the stuff that's black and white, punctuation, grammar, stuff like that.” This construct of grammar and punctuation as “black and white” was repeated across several focus groups and interviews. Similarly, grammar and punctuation as the “little things” (or sometimes

“stupid things”) that are the stuff of feedback was introduced by multiple participants. These are usually specific and instructive items that are “caught” (“they’re good with catching the things that, you know, my old teachers usually didn’t catch”) and then “fixed” as is the case in the following:

**JMK:** How important do you think like grammar and language use is to your instructor when they’re grading?

**LUCY:** I think they-

**HANNAH:** -It’s important-

**LUCY:** -It’s important, but [the instructor is] more focused on the structure of the overall essay. Yeah.

**JMK:** Do you think that’s consistent with your experience, too?

**CATE:** Yeah.

**HANNAH:** And structure.

**CATE:** They do care about grammar, but not-

**HANNAH:** -They do comment on it. Yeah, but.

**CATE:** -It’s -- they make it seem like it’s just an easy fix. Like no big deal. You know, if there’s only a few.

**HANNAH:** Yeah.

**CATE:** Then it’s not a problem. But...

Lucy, Cate, and Hannah discuss how important they believe grammar and language use are to their respective instructors when grading, and their use of the word “but” throughout this exchange signals an ongoing negotiation of their collective sense of the message they’re articulating. While Hannah, who indicated above that her grammar use is often corrected or

pointed out via feedback, is the first to suggest that grammar and language use are important to her instructor's grading, Lucy counters that "the structure of the overall essay" is a point of greater focus. Cate's initial response of, "Yeah," followed by her, "They do care about grammar, but not-," suggest she finds a middle ground between Hannah's and Cate's experiences. However, as Cate continues, it becomes evident that there are two outcomes in terms of instructor feedback on grammar and language use. In one scenario, "If there's only a few," then "they make it seem like it's just an easy fix. Like no big deal." The other scenario, implied but not played out in detail by Cate, suggests that if there *are* more, then it becomes a less "easy fix" and more of a "problem."

Another common focus of specific instructive feedback is learners' reported overuse of personal pronouns in their writing. Here, what begins as a fairly typical recounting of feedback about the use of the word "I" leads to a vibrant discussion among Monica (who identifies as an Indigenous woman in her 50s), Fawn, and Walker about strategies for responding to this piece of specific and instructive feedback.

**MONICA:** Oh, and then in my community essay, it was like about me, so I had a lot of "I, I, I," and they're like, "You have too many 'I' statements." So I'm like, "But it's about me," like, and so I'm looking up all different words to use for "I"-

**MULTIPLE:** <some laughter>

**MONICA:** -And I'm like, "I, myself, me," and I'm like, this is not -- so that like totally stressed me out. I'm like-

**FAWN:** -I got that same feedback.

**MONICA:** How can I not use an "I" statement? "I crossed the road."



**FAWN:** Yeah, they were like, they told me that I use too many “I” statements. And I was like, “But this is about me. This is a community I’ve been in since I was five years old. Like, what do you want me to be, like, ‘The person with blond hair and blue eyes was like, “Oh, this is real cool.”””

**MONICA:** “My alter ego.”

**WALKER:** I caught myself out and instead of doing that I’d be like, “On the weekends, we do this,” instead of being like, “Me and my cousins on the weekends,” I just cut all that out and be like, “On the weekends,” I got straight to it. And that’s, I think might help you guys too to get rid of some of the “I”s, just get straight to the point.

**MONICA:** I tried. But it’s still like a lot of it was still “I” because it was just me. And, but I did do a lot of that. Like where I could take out an “I” statement and just start the sentence here and finish it there. I did. But some there was no way around it.

**FAWN:** Yeah.

**MONICA:** It’s like, but it’s: this is what I did.

**JMK:** Right. Do you have a sense of why... And I mean, I have not- having not read your work, I have no idea why that was the feedback. But did your instructor give you a sense of why it’s a problem to use “I”?

**MONICA:** Mm-mm.

**WALKER:** No, I don’t think they mentioned it-

**MONICA:** Mm-mm, just “too many ‘I’ statements.”

While instructor feedback regarding the use of “I” clearly led to significant concern and strategizing on the part of multiple participants, the collaborative sharing of approaches for limiting the use of “I” seemed to fail in this instance with Monica’s “I tried.” Notably, then, upon

asking participants whether they had a sense of why the use of “I” might have been problematic for their instructor, I was not met with comparable enthusiasm or idea-generation. Instead, the generative qualities of specific instructive feedback as seen above seemed lost, perhaps due to a lack of instructor-provided rationale.

Later on in this same focus group, a different participant offered their experience regarding feedback on the use of personal pronouns, which seems to have actually prompted the use of “I,” a move the participant had not made before.

**REGGIE:** Ummm. Well, [my instructor] is not as strict as like other teachers. They base it on... Well I'm not actually sure what they do. But they're pretty balanced at both sides, the objective and the uh subjective. So um they'll give -- Since I'm more of a, like, a logical writer, like in high school, I never used the “I” sentence. They'll give me -- they told me to use more, like, opinions or stuff that I know.

### ***Assessment of Instructor Feedback***

This excerpt also includes the participant's evaluative assessment of instructor feedback, noting that they believe their instructor's feedback is “pretty balanced.” Several participants offered such comments, usually in the context of sharing instructor feedback content as seen earlier, and usually as part of a summarizing or closing statement, but also typically without any other detail about why the feedback warrants their assessment. Generally, evaluative comments regarding instructor feedback are *positive*, such as this from Reggie, a White- and male-identifying learner without adult characteristics. Comments such as Phin's—“My professor has been very, very good in their feedback”—represent the majority, although these are also the evaluative comments that tend to have the least detail or rationale.

*Constructive* assessment of instructor feedback, conversely, was thoughtful (if occasionally flippant) and typically well-reasoned. The extended excerpt in Chapter Four, for instance, features learner commentary on both the nature of feedback (both “kind of rushed” and limited to what’s summarized as, ““Oh, yeah, good job. You, you’ve evaluated this””), and the timing (“I also feel like it doesn’t get out to us soon enough, because we’ll have another assignment due like that week, and we still won’t have the feedback [...] from the previous one”). Participants’ evaluative assessment of instructor feedback is oftentimes indicated by a speaker’s use of pronominalization. For example, the following excerpt, presented in a more extended form further below, begins part-way through Max’s reflection upon instructor feedback on language use, and it includes shifts in pronoun use from “we” and “my” to “they” and an understood “you” before spending several sentences positioning Max-as-writer as “I,” and the instructor as “you.”

**MAX:** We all like individually have different lexicons. And just because someone may not like understand all of my words, I don’t I don’t think that means they need to change it. I think maybe that means- I don’t know, read more of my work or something like that. If I were to say words like “gonna,” ’er you know, “I ain’t ’bout to,” stuff like that. It’s not, it’s not like you have to take a huge mental leap to get where I’m at. And if you do get where I’m at, you’re right there because I have- I didn’t use any other word, I used *that* word, you know, I mean, “’bout to” like, you know, “’bouts to,” like shit like that. I um, and me specifically I definitely like language and words. So I feel like you- if you tell someone to write something I don’t really, I mean, you’d have to- you can only correct the things that they are literally incorrect on rather than a thing you would have said differently.

**PHIN:** Mm.

**AJ:** Yeah.

**MAX:** Which is actually a lot of my reviews now that I think about it.

Though the majority of what Max shares here is his commentary on how feedback on language use might look and function differently to account for writers' "different lexicons," his evaluative assessment of instructor feedback is located at the end of the first turn excerpted and the final turn of the excerpt: "I feel like you- if you tell someone to write something [...] you can only correct the things that they are literally incorrect on rather than a thing you would have said differently. [...] Which is actually a lot of my reviews now that I think about it." Though he only realizes after issuing his assessment that the feedback he's critiquing is feedback he's actually received, Max suggests that his instructor's efforts to "change" or "correct" his language use in spite of the fact his instructor might be "right there" in terms of meaning is useless. Earlier in Max's focus group, his feelings about getting what he sees as too little feedback are clearly equivocal, as he expresses some consolation in equating very little instructor feedback with doing "enough [...] to be alright" and allowing him "to keep [his] head down," but he also expresses a desire for growth that he believes would come via instructor feedback and getting "called out."

**MAX:** But ya know, they don't have very many, like, specific um -- points for me. And -  
- I guess it's nice that, you know, it's kind of like, I want to keep my head down. I, I want to do okay. But also, I want to get -- better. So I felt, you know, even like, for me to get like, called out would be cool. And be like, "Yo, I don't- that point doesn't really make sense. You should fix that and make it better." But, you know, if that's not happening, maybe it just means I'm, I'm doing enough. Okay, enough-

**PHIN:** -Mm-

**MAX:** -You know, to be alright.

Max moves from evaluating (“I guess it’s nice”) feedback with a general focus (“they don’t have very many, like, specific um -- points for me”), to expressing a desire for growth (“I want to get - - better”) and even giving voice to the hypothetical specific and instructive instructor feedback encounter that he imagines might prompt such growth (“Yo, I don’t- that point doesn’t really make sense”). Indeed, a major theme related to learner assessment of instructor feedback is participant desire for instructor feedback in general.

### ***Participant Desire for Instructor Feedback***

Echoing findings from Sommers (2006, 2012), Treglia (2008), and others, I found that study participants such as Max not only read instructor feedback, but they generally wish for more of it. The following extended exchange among a group of learners with various identity markers and adulthood characteristics likewise supports this finding. Here, one of the brief excerpts introduced above about learner uncertainty regarding concepts such as “fragment” is put into context, with Bella initiating a rich discussion among five focus group participants about their feedback experiences, preferences, and desires. Notably, though each of the five speakers indicates at least some level of frustration with instructor feedback, all express a desire to see the process and content of feedback improve.

**BELLA:** [The instructor] goes over like some basic stuff that we already know, like, the MLA format, but they don’t actually go over like the feedback and be like, “Oh, hey, this is part of this person’s essay. And this is-” kind of like, “Oh, hey, this is kind of how you fix it. And this is how you know, like, when you need to put it in,” because all [the instructor] puts in their comments is just like, “Get a tutor. Get a tutor.” Like...

**WALKER:** I got, “Know where to put commas.” I got, “You need to place more commas.” Other than that, they said I did good. I still don’t know where to put a comma, though. I’m just gonna start putting them after every single word. <laughter>

**BELLA:** Yeah. I wish they like explained certain vocabulary. And since like, a few people don’t know “fragment,” I wish they explained it and be like, “Okay, this is where you need to put it in. And this is no-, this is like how you know how to do it. And this is how we get better grades.”

**MULTIPLE:** <sounds of agreement>

**MONICA:** “And this is how you avoid it.”

**BELLA:** If [the instructor] just puts in the feedback, like, “Oh, yeah, these are like two separate sentences, like put in like, you know, a colon or whatever.”

**GABRIEL:** I almost wish we could have like a conversation sometimes. Because most of our feedback is like: get it in Brightspace on the little like, feedback section, sometimes [the instructor] will go in and write on the paper in, like, on the computer and everything. And you can look at that, too. Sometimes I have like -- these, like burning questions, though. And I wish I could just sit down and be like, “Well, what did you mean by this? Because like, I have a very specific idea that I was going for, I’m very passionate about the way that I put this together. And you don’t like it, why not?”

<laughter>

**FAWN:** I also feel like, it’s the same way with texting too. You could say something, it means something completely different. And they’re like, “Well, why are you being this way?” I’m like, “What do you mean? I’m not! That’s the way I talk.”

**MULTIPLE:** <laughter>

**GABRIEL:** Because it was a very, like, I know that what I did makes sense stylistically, but maybe it didn't come across. And then I'm like...

**MONICA:** I said, "Okay."

**FAWN:** I feel like that's the same way with writing, it's like, it's our first semester with this teacher, they don't know us at all, and they don't know how we write. So they're like, "Okay, but like, why this?" And I'm like, "If you knew me, you'd know why." [...] And I feel like if we had that conversation, like you talked about, there would be like a different, different understanding, a different level of understanding in the classroom altogether.

A desire for specific instructive feedback is expressed by Bella and Monica, punctuated by Walker sharing a piece of what's experienced as feedback with a general focus ("Know where to put commas"). Gabriel and Fawn then begin to contribute their own perspectives. Though Gabriel—a White- and male-identifying learner without adult characteristics—focuses on a desire for additional dialogue with an instructor, and Fawn's primary focus is developing opportunities for instructors to know learners' writing voices, these ultimately intersect via Fawn's incorporation of Gabriel's leading point: "I feel like if we had that conversation, like you talked about, there would be [...] a different level of understanding in the classroom altogether." Two things in particular broke my heart during the last half of this focus group exchange. First, Fawn's desire for increased "understanding" in the FYC classroom not only struck me as earnest and lovely, but represented a rapid about-face for her. Fawn had been the first participant from this focus group to respond to my opening question, "How's Comp I going?" Her immediate, unironic, and reasserted response was, "I hate it." For her to arrive, then, less than twenty

minutes later, at a desire for improved classroom understanding through increased conversation took my breath away.

Second, as Gabriel, a quiet participant who sat next to me during our session and who admitted early on to feeling more favorably about English and writing than other focus group members, shared their, “I almost wish we could have like a conversation sometimes,” they looked me straight in the eye and delivered this with a resigned yet hopeful sigh. The “almost” of this statement stung the most, as it suggested that the possibility of a conversation was so far-fetched that Gabriel felt compelled to mitigate or soften their desire for the imagined scenario. Though I was in fact sitting there engaging learners in such conversation, I felt called out: for not doing this with the hundreds of students I’d taught before, for not making interpersonal contact a priority when redesigning our FYC curriculum, for not listening often enough or well enough. More broadly, though, this exchange points to a concept I’ll unpack in the final chapter: the potential for the FYC feedback encounter to function differently for learners, in ways that affirm diverse identities by prioritizing the dialogic elements of feedback which in turn require FYC—especially in rural spaces—to function as a more malleable and co-constructed coordinating space within higher education.

It was also during this focus group—the second of seven—that I was led to realize just how badly FYC learners sought instructor feedback on their writing. Given the gap in my awareness of the scholarship that has spoken to this phenomenon, I was surprised and impressed to the point that I felt the need to confirm what I thought I was hearing during focus group and interview sessions. To a focus group of White- and male-identifying adult learners, I asked:

**JMK:** Would you say in general that you, that you welcome feedback on your writing?

**BANE:** Mmhm-



**CARL:** -Of course.

And from a focus group of multiracial or Black- and female- or genderqueer-identifying learners with various adult and non-adult characteristics, I heard:

**NICOLE:** Yeah, I'm jealous. <laughter> Like hearin' that? Like I'm really jealous because-

**ALEXIS:** -Yeah, if anything [my instructor] like over explains things, like they-

**NICOLE:** -I'd rather have that!

### ***Feedback Modality and Interactivity***

As indicated above by Gabriel's mid-excerpt turn in particular ("I almost wish we could have like a conversation sometimes"), two related obstacles are seen as preventing or hindering what learners consider successful feedback encounters: personal interaction and technology. Participant discussion of feedback modality and interactivity as shared here and below provides a sketch of the typically computer-mediated mechanisms students navigate for the sake of accessing and perhaps responding to instructor feedback. In general, the theme of technology as a hindrance to successful feedback encounters in FYC was prevalent, and was linked to a preference for "paper and pen," a desire for feedback encounters to be "more interactive" and "social," or both.

In a recent Conference on College Composition and Communication convention presentation, "'I Want Them to Look at the Feedback': FYC Instructors as Designers of Multimodal Feedback," Angela Laflen (2023) charted the drastic variations seen in FYC instructors' feedback delivery design choices at California State University's Sacramento campus, and then shared learner responses and reactions to these. Needless to say, learners in Laflen's study expressed confusion about what feedback said or meant, especially where faculty

did not explain their design choices. Learners reported having to constantly navigate not only the alphabetic text that made up instructor feedback, but the meanings of shapes, highlight colors, and call-out boxes that also frequently required different kinds of mouse or touchpad manipulation to access. Based on my focus group and interview conversations, learners at my institution seem to engage in comparable navigation; this work and these communication modes influence a major component of learners' overarching experience of FYC and the feedback received, both on their language use and generally. Indeed, feedback location, timing, tone, content, and delivery systems may contribute to what appears to be a missed opportunity for coordination between learners, FYC, and higher education in general.

While discussing instructor feedback of all kinds, the learners who participated in my study typically spoke indirectly about the ways in which digital technologies mediated their feedback encounters with instructors. Prior to the following excerpt, I've just noted aloud that Orpheus—an Indigenous and genderqueer-identifying adult—has their computer in front of them. Eager to share instructor feedback verbatim, Orpheus tells us they're logging in to the college's LMS in order to access specific feedback. Their report summarizes both the content of instructor feedback and the experience of accessing LMS-mediated comments.

**ORPHEUS:** I was just opening Brightspace. Just to remember all the feedback, 'cuz uh we get our essays and anything we sent and basically sent back to us, um, along with like, a comment, and then whatever, like, [the instructor] will go in to the actual essay, and like, highlight things that- or like add a comment being like, "This should be a comma." Um. Or like, "I didn't get what you get here," and it's mainly just being like, "Hey, add clarification." Um, "I would like to see that -- more ethos here," or like, "Explain more." Just stuff like that.

Orpheus introduces several elements of the LMS-specific process of accessing and understanding instructor feedback: probably a holistic “comment” that appears to the side of the marked-up essay, “the actual essay” itself, points within the essay with “highlight[s],” and point-specific “comment[s]” that appear some other way. The various feedback delivery modes and the respective functions used by instructors didn’t seem to faze several participants, who rattled off where and how they accessed feedback, as well as what that feedback looked like. Sage shared, “Let’s see, my professor, they do the comments. Like when we turn the essay into Brightspace, they do it in the comments.” Like Orpheus, Sage—a White- and female-identifying learner who uses they/them pronouns—was one of many participants who referenced the college’s LMS, D2L’s Brightspace. Equally prevalent were references to Google-based document management and sharing systems, as indicated by Jane, a White- and female-identifying adult: “Um, so we email and then they’ll just leave a comment, like right, like through Google to the doc. And then you just open the doc and it’s there. [...] They’ll highlight it, and then they’ll write on it.” Less frequent were references to emailed copies of marked-up essays that had been converted to static documents, such as this from Saul, a White- and male-identifying learner who disclosed several neurological disabilities: “And then instead of actually sending just a copy of [my essay] back, they’ll send a PDF with highlights and what they believe with highlights, then those highlights are attached to notes that tell me what to fix within that area.”

Where feedback technology variability did play a role was in focus group participants’ discussions of their feedback experiences. For some, comments regarding feedback technologies led to minor notes of comparison, such as the following between Nicole and Alexis (an Indigenous- and White-identifying woman):

**NICOLE:** Like I’ll have my draft that I wrote and then I’ll have side comments.

**JMK:** Oh like comments like, on the...

**ALEXIS:** I think ours is like -- and it's all on Google Docs too. So it makes sense to create-

**NICOLE:** -Yeah, we don't get all that. [The instructor] just write on my doc.

This exchange comes just after a fairly protracted discussion among five focus group participants about one group member's feedback in particular. Sammy, an Indigenous- and female-identifying adult, has announced that the feedback received on her latest essay was limited to feedback with a general focus that pointed out "grammar errors" without further explanation or instruction. The discussion that ensues seems focused on determining whether instructor feedback was in fact this limited and of such a general focus, or whether Sammy was simply not finding additional feedback on the LMS.

**SAMMY:** Um, I don't know. This just says, "Essay meets all expectations, but there's grammar errors," and that's the only comment I have.

**ORPHEUS:** What?

**MULTIPLE:** <overlapping talk> "Wait," "No way," "I can," "I think."

**ORPHEUS:** Is this for your whole essay?

**NICOLE:** Yeah, [our instructor] doesn't do a lot of commenting.

**SAMMY:** This is my, this is my only comment. So I don't know.

**NICOLE:** [Our instructor] doesn't comment a lot. [...]

**SAMMY:** This is all I have-

**ALEXIS:** -What did you, what did you get on the essay?

**ORPHEUS:** No, wait okay...

**SAMMY:** An 82.

**ALEXIS:** Ok so there has to be more that you did wrong.

**SAMMY:** I just write whatever like comes like up to my head -- like I just write off the top of my head like and then like I don't really go over anything. [... But I] like go back and then [the instructor] gives me like that comment so I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

**ALEXIS:** If that was the feedback I got I'd be really...

**ORPHEUS:** No wait, wait. [...] Do you want to see the feedback you should be getting? [...] It should look like this. And like-

**SAMMY:** -I don't think I get any of this.

**MICHELLE:** Is it inline?

**NICOLE:** Oh, I don't get papers like that, like.

**ORPHEUS:** Yeah, I get the full thing like this.

**MICHELLE:** The whole thing like that, yeah.

While Nicole, who has the same instructor, responds on Sammy's behalf, the rest of Sammy's fellow focus group participants are concerned and fairly indignant on her behalf. Here, the LMS- or other digitally-mediated nature of FYC feedback prompts confusion, uncertainty, points of comparison, and the need for clarification. Nicole's justification for a perceived lack of instructor feedback, Orpheus's distress, and Alexis's sympathizing might suggest the pervasiveness of this kind of experience.

On some occasions, the use of digital technology for submitting work and accessing feedback was seen by participants as an even more evident obstacle. Max shared this frustration:

**MAX:** You have to do everything online. And there's so many different like, you have to get, get the assignment here and then make sure you do it right on this website and then

you turn it in on this website. And then you may not know if it got turned in correctly and it's like you get weird emails and stuff. And so that was a thing that was like, um really irritating me. It's hard to get past.

Such commentary was typically followed by an expressed desire for “physical” assignments and feedback. In the following, Bella and her focus group bemoan what they perceive as the difficulty of accessing LMS-housed feedback in particular:

**BELLA:** If I can go back to the right place...

**MONICA:** That's another thing. It's like, “Where did I find that specific...?” And then you're like looking for half an hour where this one specific thing was. It just drives me nuts.

**BELLA:** They're like, “It's in Brightspace.”

**MONICA:** Yeah.

**FAWN:** Where?

**GABRIEL:** They don't even know is the problem. <laughter>

**MULTIPLE:** <laughter>

**GABRIEL:** <laughter> I click on everything.

What participants were likely unaware of is that JCC had just moved to a new LMS that very semester, and while several faculty piloted the product the previous spring and summer, it would have been as novel to most faculty as it was to the learners who participated in this study. Regardless, Gabriel's “I click on everything,” is a striking and likely familiar-sounding description of the embodied experience for both faculty and learners as they navigate the digitally-mediated feedback encounter. At times, the LMS-mediated nature of instructor

feedback on grammar and language use in particular not only influenced learner understanding of the feedback itself, but it also seemed to trump any instructive element of feedback content.

**SAGE:** Oh, yeah. I got feedback on that, like, run on sentences, I had a lot in my one, one of my essays.

**JMK:** What did that feedback look like?

**SAGE:** Um...

**JMK:** Like, how did your instructor communicate that to you?

**SAGE:** They put it in a box to where the sentence led on. So.

**JMK:** Did you have a sense of what to do about it after the instructor pointed it out to you?

**SAGE:** Kinda, kind of not.

This exchange between Sage and me touched on both modality of feedback and feedback that was perceived as non-instructive. Whether Sage's uncertainty about what to do with instructor feedback regarding run-on sentence use was a function of that feedback's LMS-constrained design and digital mediation isn't clear. But the theme of technology as a hindrance to successful learner engagement with FYC via feedback was nevertheless a prominent one across focus groups and interviews.

## **Chapter Conclusions and Implications**

This chapter introduced three major findings of this study, which I'll unpack below, aligning them to broader concepts, scholarship, and likely implications for FYC instruction in contexts such as mine.

- The terms associated with writing instruction are not always evident as one of learners' linguistic resources for discussing their experience of FYC and feedback.

- When feedback on writing is discernible to learners, that feedback is often labeled as feedback on “grammar,” even when the examples provided don’t support that label.
- FYC learners in this study want explicit, in-class instruction on the stylistic and grammatical concepts they’ll be evaluated on, though they want this instruction to be a component of a classroom environment that features increased interpersonal communication that in turn results in awareness and acceptance of learners’ language use.

First, FYC learners in this study did not seem ready to use even foundational writing-specific terms when discussing their feedback experience. Terms including “feedback,” “draft,” “fragment,” and “punctuation” often eluded participants during conversation with me and their peers. This finding is consistent with findings from Sommers (1980), Stolley (2007), and Harding et al. (2022). As I note earlier in this chapter, the implications of imprecise language may be minimal, especially if we consider first-semester writing students’ inculcation to the discourse of writing studies as emergent and in-process. However, there are some potential obvious consequences to the teaching-learning process in FYC. Consequences include difficulty in the instructional processes that include feedback, not only in learner understanding of what’s been suggested through feedback encounters, but in learner lack of agency to request specific feedback from instructors or others. Additionally, as will be more fully discussed in Chapter Seven, the fact that the term “grammar” was used so extensively by participants in this study suggests a desire to possess and deploy the language of writing and feedback, even if feedback on “grammar” as even loosely related to how words fit and function together was not often evident in focus group and interview discussion.

Second, learners seem to arrive at FYC with a sense that grammar is important and a likely focus of instructor feedback. To some extent, this sense may be reinforced by or



reinscribed on the feedback learners do receive from instructors. The overuse (and likely misuse) of the term “grammar” when referring to feedback was pervasive in participants’ discussion of instructor feedback, and grammar was introduced as a focus across various feedback categories. One implication of this is that the concept of grammar holds oversized sway over learners in their efforts as both writers and peers. For those learners who do know what’s meant by “grammar,” an emphasis on grammar likely results in a reinforcement of current-traditional beliefs about what is most important in the process of composing.

In general, though, focus group discussion about specific instructor feedback regarding language use suggests learners struggle to make connections between feedback and practice. Learners do not generally understand, for instance, why personal pronouns such as “I” are so often prohibited or limited. Likewise, discussion of instructor feedback regarding “fragments” featured similar confusion. In both cases, the process of having such transgressions pointed out via feedback seems insufficient for learners, in spite of their creative and sustained efforts at incorporating misunderstood feedback in their writing. Instead, the learners in this study expressed a desire for explicit, in-class instruction on such stylistic and grammatical details, especially when learners are being evaluated based on these details.

Third, the decisive desire for instructor feedback that was found in this study echoes and supports similar findings from previous scholarship on response to student writing. In addition to classifying instructor feedback as either general or specific and instructive, learners in this study were eager to offer advice regarding the feedback they wish to receive from instructors. In fact, as found by Sommers (2006, 2012) and Treglia (2008), participants appear to read the feedback received and they typically report a desire for more instructor feedback than they are currently being given.

Two participants in particular arrived at a specific conclusion regarding their desire for instructor feedback, which is a conclusion echoed throughout focus groups and interviews. They expressed a desire for increased interpersonal communication among learners and instructors, thereby improving instructors' understanding of how learners' language use reflects who learners are. This two-fold desire reflects a discursively oriented awareness of how language functions in ways that are not simply contextualized but embodied and, as Toth (2023) says, *emplaced*. The perceived lack of interactivity is likely compounded by digitally-mediated feedback encounters, which most learners in this study chafed against, reporting a preference for both composing and receiving feedback on physical paper.

Taken as a whole, these conclusions point, at least in the contexts of this study, to the realization of Delpit's long-standing concern about the "paralysis" (1995, p. 152) of educators who wish to avoid harming learners and therefore avoid teaching about language at all, a finding of both Stolley (2007) and Matsuda (2012). Indeed, this study's findings suggest that regardless of what FYC instructors are providing, learners are left wanting more. The vacuum of instruction on language use in FYC seems to leave in its place a silence. Adult FYC learners' desire for instructor feedback is one result, though learners' sense of FYC feedback is textured by what they see as various foci of feedback, different levels of specificity and instructiveness, and feedback design and modality. In general, learners seem to prefer feedback that is more specific and instructive and that is perceived as facilitating growth, albeit within the context of an extensive network of interpersonal communication and opportunities for instructors to know FYC writers' voices. In particular, as will be seen in greater detail in the following chapters, where learners perceive little more than silence on the matter of grammar and language use,

those who are motivated to hear something may call upon existing literacy resources that fall beyond the bounds of FYC instruction.

In the next chapter, I'll return to focus group and interview findings that explicitly address this study's research questions regarding the emotional experience of corrective feedback on language use. By the conclusion of the following chapter, I will have expanded the scope of this project to include learner reaction to feedback both in general and as a function of other experiences. In the process of describing their experiences of feedback—good, bad, or neutral—the learners in this study disclose components of their writerly lives that may impact their writing and their experience of feedback. In light of a few findings from this chapter—namely learners' desire for instructive feedback that is supportive of discursive identities, and their sense of “grammar” as an outsized concept—I further define the dysfunction that leads adult FYC learners to conceive of corrective feedback either as non-existent or as an injury they've prepared themselves for.

## CHAPTER VI

### “I KNOW HOW TO HANDLE IT”: EMOTIONAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK (ON LANGUAGE USE)

In general, studies of learner response to feedback have been undertaken with an ultimate goal of understanding and improving writing outcomes. In studies from Gee (1972) and Sommers (1982) to Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest (2013) and Bowden (2018), the “effectiveness” of instructor feedback on writing is paramount, with evidence for effectiveness sought in learner revision work. As an educator fully immersed in the institutional culture that promotes this privileging of outcomes-defined successes for learners, I can’t help but be reminded by these goals of Deborah Brandt’s (2001) slight yet punctuating final clause in her definition of literacy sponsors: “Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 19). As literacy sponsors, FYC instructors and institutions deal in normative learning outcomes, and these reportable results are part of the advantage we gain on our end of the bargain. Kim Donehower (2007) puts it similarly in her contribution to her co-edited *Rural Literacies*, highlighting the fact that literacy sponsors “seek validation of their own world view” (p. 50). Because of this extractive relationship that centers improved outcomes in much of our research, because of my concern for learners as embodied and situated humans who are also students, and because of the United States’ educational histories of imposing values of the metropole via literacy instruction (Stuckey, 1991; Donehower et al., 2007; Baker-Bell, 2020), I’m happy to make space here for an exploration of responses to feedback in the context of what I’ll call in the

next chapter a rural FYC writing ecosystem after cataloging and analyzing in this chapter the three overarching emotional stances participants articulated in relation to instructor feedback.

I shared briefly in the previous chapter that learners in this study by and large did not tie a specific emotion to their specific experience of a given feedback encounter. Though my sequence of prepared questions included explicit inquiries about participants' feedback-related feelings in general or negative emotions in particular, learners for the most part only report feelings that are *associated* with feedback. That is, while participants spoke in various levels of detail about corrective feedback both in general and on their language use, and while they also used emotionally-charged or emotion-specific language during focus group and interview sessions when talking about feedback, a causal relationship between feedback and emotion was not typically evident. However, participant contributions to this study have helped me to recognize the influence of many other factors (some addressed in the previous chapter, some addressed below and in the next chapter) that mitigate or mediate the emotional experience of instructor feedback. Therefore, although the line from feedback to emotion is not always a straight and obvious one, it's evident that feedback—especially about language use—plays a role in learners' emotional experience of FYC.

### **“Should I Be Concerned?”: No or Neutral Reactions**

The first category of emotional associations with corrective feedback in this section is one that was shared—as seen in agreement factor tables in Chapter Four—with little frequency, though not infrequently enough to be seen as insignificant. During the course of seven focus group sessions and three individual interviews, several participants, when asked how feedback on their writing made them feel, suggested that they didn't feel much of anything. In some cases, as was seen in the previous chapter's discussion of learners' classifications of instructor

feedback, my frequently direct and explicit questions about emotional experiences resulted in what appeared to be participants' side-stepping of my question. Some provided fairly unequivocal responses, though, and report not having received any feedback that they would classify as hurtful, as is seen in the exchange below between Phin, AJ, and me.

**PHIN:** No, I haven't really gotten any feedback back like that that personally I would be hurt by.

**JMK:** Okay. Gotcha. Yeah. Okay. What about you?

**AJ:** Oh, from an instructor? Nah nah nah, nothing.

AJ in this excerpted exchange initially sought clarification regarding the source of potentially hurtful feedback, and upon assuming that I was asking about instructor-sourced feedback did they respond, "Nah nah nah, nothing." Though this begs the question of whether feedback from some other source might have been classified as hurtful, both the excerpted exchange and the contributions following it suggest that this group did not have hurtful instructor feedback to report on.

Given my specific concern regarding emotional experiences of corrective feedback on language use, and given the number of participants who introduce "grammar" as a category of content on which they receive feedback as discussed in the previous chapter and in the final chapter of this dissertation, I was especially curious to know whether participants who *hadn't* themselves introduced grammar as a focus of instructor feedback recalled such feedback. In the following exchange, Henry, a White and male-identifying adult, reports not knowing of or remembering feedback on, as I put it, their "language use or grammar or anything like that."

**JMK:** Have you gotten any feedback at all on like your language use or grammar or anything like that?

**HENRY:** Not that I know of.

**JMK:** Okay.

**HENRY:** Um. Yeah, not that I can like, remember.

In a very small number of instances, participants simply didn't recall any feedback on a given assignment under discussion, as seen below in my brief exchange with Reggie.

**JMK:** How did you feel about the feedback that you got from your instructor on that?

On that particular essay? If you-

**REGGIE:** -I don't remember.

One participant reported a decidedly ambivalent emotional response to having her language use commented on (though not corrected) with specific but non-evaluative feedback.

**JMK:** What about other feedback on your language use, your grammar, things like that, have you had anything?

**JANE:** Um, for my language use? No, but they said mine's very different. Like, I- instead of like, "however," is- I use a lot of like, "consequently." [The instructor] says it's just a very different way. They said, they've never really seen that before. So I'm not really sure if that's good or bad. But they just say I have a different way of explaining things. [...]

**JMK:** How did that make you feel?

**JANE:** Good and bad because I'm not like everybody else, I guess because we are allowed to read our- other students' [writing] through our websites. Um, so I don't know if that struck [my instructor] as like, "Wow." Or should I be concerned? Um, but they had left me "excellent" on my rubrics. So I'm assuming that I'm doing okay. But that's

generally my writing voice. And I'm not going to change it for somebody, right? You know, yeah, I will improve but I won't change it.

Jane responds first to my explicit inquiry about feedback on language use or grammar and then to my follow-up question about any feelings she had in response to that feedback. Though Jane at first responds, "No," that she hadn't received any feedback on her language use, she then recalls with specific detail the feedback her instructor had given on her language use, that it was "very different" due to her use of terms such as "'consequently.'" Perhaps because this was more of an observation as opposed to a bit of correction or advice, this didn't register as "feedback" as such. Further, being left without a sense of what this bit of feedback indexed regarding her instructor's feelings, Jane herself seemed unsure how to feel. She's first unsure if the feedback is "good or bad," and, perhaps consequently, she's then left *feeling* "good and bad."

Jane goes on in this excerpt to reference several other features of this study's findings. First, she references her peers and their writing, in particular the fact that her sense of her own writing and the significance of her instructor's feedback are both situated in terms of the others whose work she reads (and who read her work). Then, Jane references her class's "websites," or their semester-long portfolios. As discussed in the previous chapter, discussion of digitally-mediated feedback encounters was prominent in this study, especially as it influenced learners' experience of engaging with both feedback and faculty. To this latter point of engagement, Jane's note of uncertainty regarding how her instructor felt—whether they "[were] like, 'Wow,'" or whether Jane should "be concerned"—may be illustrative of the desire for increased communication with instructors. Next, Jane references another component of instructor feedback



as communicated via a rubric, which echoes Bowles' (2020) and others' findings regarding the role of instructional texts in how learners conceive of feedback and instruction generally.

Combined with Jane's earlier point regarding peers, we can start to see hints of the various components that make up her writing ecosystem, which I'll detail more fully in the next chapter. Jane's final statements, also referencing a component of her writing ecosystem, echo the last chapter's discussion of Fawn and Gabriel's comments about instructor feedback on their language as precluding the possibility of a writer learning from or changing as a result of corrective or otherwise instructive feedback. Here, Jane shares an established sense of herself as a writer: she has a "writing voice" that is hers and that she won't change. At the same time, also reflective of the ambiguity read in Max's seemingly opposing statements from the previous chapter—first, "I don't think that means they need to change it. I think maybe that means- I don't know, read more of my work or something like that," and then, "I want to get -- better")—Jane leaves open the possibility of growth, albeit growth that doesn't threaten her voice: "I will improve it but I won't change it."

I share all of this to illustrate an important conclusion of this study: that for the adult FYC learners at my rural, open-access community college, instructor feedback on language use (and perhaps in general) is only one component of a broad and complex network of similarly broad and complex factors experienced in their writing lives. And so, though responses to questions about learners' emotional experience of corrective feedback encounters tend to be nonexistent, nondescript, or speculative, 1) this may be a function of how relatively minor such feedback encounters feel in the face of so many other factors, and 2) emotional reactions may be more a function of the writers' broad and networked literacy contexts than the feedback itself. This isn't

to say that corrective feedback is never noticed or experienced emotionally by learners, as the next two subsections discuss.

### **“I Love Feedback”: Positive Reactions**

Though I intentionally excluded English language learners from this study, research on adult and community college foreign language learners’ attitudes toward corrective instructor feedback on language use suggests the experience is so overwhelmingly positive (e.g., Yashima et al., 2004; Ikpia, 2005; Rodríguez, 2009; Chong, 2020) that I struggled to imagine not hearing at least some unequivocal points of appreciation and good feelings from the learners I spoke with. While I was very much alert to evidence of negative emotion in particular, I was equally interested to hear from learners that certain approaches to feedback from instructors seemed to be associated with a positive experience.

A few responses that fall under this sub-theme of “positive emotional reaction” suggest positive feelings amount to no more than discovering how to get a better grade as a result of feedback. As Destiny, who identifies as a Black woman shared, “Yeah, usually when I get my feedback back, I know what the issue was, and I’m able to solve it. And then okay, good grade on the assignment.” This transactional yet positive attitude seen in Destiny’s comment evokes Sommers’ (1982) observation about “students [who] make the changes the teacher wants rather than those that the student perceives are necessary” (p. 149). But this was rare. Equally rare were expressions of positive feedback because of said feedback’s “personal” nature. One instance came from Henry, who recounted having written about not being able to sign up for military service at one point of his life, and then receiving an offer from his instructor to talk with him about potential options. “It was just like, very personal. [...] And [I] was like, ‘Oh, that’s kind of cool,’ [...] but it was personal.”

More common were expressions of positive feelings that were associated with learners' earnest efforts at essay revision or general growth, accompanied by "nice" or otherwise encouraging presentations of feedback from instructors that supported learner efforts.

**JANE:** Feedback for me is more so positive rather than negative, like, the way that my professor like, presents their feedback to me, they're, in a nice way, like, they're not hard on me, they'll just be like, "You need to do- you need to explain more, what the position is, more of what the general idea is, and the exceptions." And I feel like if they were, like, "You need to do this, you need to do this," I would be very discouraged. But they encourage me by like, saying, "I feel like you should... it would sound better if you..." But I've been doing good because [the instructor] is very, like, they understand that we're not professional, you know what I mean, so as far as feedback, they're good. And they're good with their explanation, like [...] explaining questions.

**SAGE:** Same with my professor. They're like, they're sort of like the same. They're like, they don't like discourage you, but they like, tell you what you need to fix, and like, what is fine. Yeah.

**JMK:** So how does that sound? How does it compare to your experience?

**ZOYA:** Yeah, I would say it's pretty similar. Because it's like, usually, like, what my professor would do is like, they'll leave like a note or -- like a lot of it's just like, putting, like, in like a speech bubble or something. It'll be like, "Fix this," or whatever. But sometimes they'll leave like notes. Like, for example, my previous essay, they left a note about my title and introduction and transition so like, "Hey nice job," stuff like that. But a lot of, a lot of it sometimes kind of, like with comma splices, because that's my biggest

issue. [...] 'Cuz like, my last essay, there are a ton of, "Comma splice," "Comma splice," in speech bubbles, like [the instructor] will point them out whenever I make one.

Jane is again featured in this exchange along with Sage and Zoya (who identifies as a White woman and did not report adulthood characteristics). Here, Jane begins her comments with a discussion of her FYC feedback experience in general before pinpointing both what her instructor does to prompt that experience as well as what her instructor might do differently to make that experience less positive. Sage and Zoya then frame their own discussion of their feedback experiences in response to each other's points. As Treglia (2008) points out in her study of feedback in a two-year college setting, "Most writing experts suggest that [...] successful collaborative interaction is hindered if teachers authoritatively tell students what to do" (p. 108). Indeed, more so than Sage and Zoya's reported experience of feedback that's somewhat directive and authoritative-sounding, Jane's description of her instructor's positively framed "'I feel like you should...'" is illustrative of feedback that makes space for learner agency while also leaving learners feeling, as Jane notes, "encourage[d]" and "more so positive rather than negative."

However, instructor framing of feedback on language use doesn't always seem to matter as much as learner preparedness and desire for feedback. Jenny spoke with her focus group about the strategies she uses in her composing process to ensure she "isn't repetitive" in her word choice when writing. Upon hearing a fellow focus group participant say they wished they'd learned similar strategies, Jenny suggests this wasn't a long-standing skill but one introduced to her just in the previous semester:

I got my GED, and never really had to write an essay before or do much of that. So I was like, 'I have no idea what I'm doing.' So [the instructor's] like, 'Yeah, you know, you

just don't want to...' I was like, 'Okay.' And so I just been building off that, and so I just keep doing it.

Though no positive emotions were used to define this experience, three things in particular interest me about Jenny's sharing of this otherwise positive feedback encounter. First, her report of the feedback being delivered contains no hint of the positive framing strategies applauded in the extended exchange above, but instead suggests her instructor's advice was entirely prohibitive ("you just don't want to..."). Second, though the actual exchange between Jenny and her FYC instructor likely commenced with corrective feedback on Jenny's language use, prompting her to approach her instructor regarding her lack of academic writing experience, in her retelling of the exchange, Jenny is the one who initiates the feedback encounter. This agential imagining of a feedback encounter with an instructor not only introduces Jenny as a learner but positions her—a GED-holder who'd never written an essay prior to FYC—as a model for her focus group peers. As Sommers concluded in 2006, "Affirmation is often the end result, but a key finding [of her study] is that constructive criticism, more than encouraging praise, often pushes students forward with their writing; constructive criticism more than praise reveals instructors' investments in their students' untapped potential" (p. 251).

The third thing that interests me about Jenny's telling of this encounter is one that might already be evident from what I've shared of her other focus group contributions in previous chapters. Jenny has feelings—big feelings and lots of them—and she did not typically shy away from sharing these during her focus group session. Likewise, she was one of two or three students who became visibly upset when I was recruiting study participants through classroom visits: as my recruitment talk turned briefly to my research concern regarding learner experience of writing instruction, she started to tear up, wipe her eyes, and nod her head knowingly. Jenny

arrived with stories to share, both of her own experience and in reaction to her fellow focus group participants' experiences, talking with us about dealing with rigid instructors in non-FYC courses and feeling slighted by others who underestimate her abilities. And yet Jenny's description of this positive, productive, corrective feedback encounter on her language practices was decidedly non-emotional.

Similarly, the following excerpt from a focus group of mostly adults who identified as women of color or genderqueer people of color features a discussion among three learners who all report or agree with reports of liking or loving corrective feedback on language use.

**JMK:** So like when you get feedback on your language use, right, your word choice, grammar, whatever it is, like, what is it that you're sort of- what's being pointed out to you? And what is that like for you? Like, what do you do with it? How does it make you feel?

**NICOLE:** Um, personally, I'm the type of person can, when I get constructive criticism, I use it. Like I don't really look at it bad or anything, because I can use it to improve my life. So I really just try to take it and then use it on my next paper or use it on when I can apply it to something in my life. So like, if [the instructor] like says on my paper, "No more run on sentences and my- you need to make sure your commas are correct." So then I'll try to push myself harder to use more stuff that uses commas, so I can start learning how to put them in. So when teachers like, give me constructive criticism, and take my grammar, and say something's wrong, I really kinda like it. Like, I don't have a problem with them saying it, 'cuz in the long run, it's helping me.

**MICHELLE:** Yeah.

**ORPHEUS:** Yeah, I love feedback.

Here, Nicole responds to a series of pointed questions posed by me to the entire group about their emotional experiences of feedback on language use. Nicole frames her corrective feedback experiences positively by saying, “I don’t really look at it bad or anything,” and, “When teachers [...] take my grammar, and say something’s wrong, I really kinda like it.” Nicole attributes this attitude in part to the process she’s developed for both reactively incorporating corrective feedback into future writing assignments, and seeking out additional opportunities to practice using the element she’s been corrected on. I will point out here that though Nicole indicates that she “really kinda like[s]” the experience of corrective feedback on her language use, all of the other phrases she uses to indicate her positive emotional experience involve negation of a negative experience. Rather than reading these as litotes, I read her, “I don’t really look at it bad,” and, “I don’t have a problem with them saying it,” as both a recognition that a bad and problematic experience is what might be expected and an attempt to distance herself from discourses of negativity around corrective feedback on language use.

***“Taking It”: Backgrounds Leading to Learned Resilience***

This stance in relation to what Nicole calls “constructive criticism” aligns with an important sub-theme that I identified among participants, especially those who felt either positively or non-negatively about corrective feedback on their language use. In particular the sub-theme of “resilience” emerged through repeated instances of participants referring to their receipt of corrective feedback on their language use as “taking it.” Unlike Nicole’s use of the phrase “take it” in the exchange just excerpted, which envisions Nicole as an objective observer of feedback received who applies it to her “next paper” or “something in [her] life,” other instances of the phrase across focus group and interview sessions feel more insidious.

Later in this focus group session, Nicole reflects on how she's changed over time relative to constructive criticism, both in an educational setting and in life generally:

I feel like -- I used to be kind of bad at taking it. I feel like it's a growing thing 'cuz -- I'll be honest, when people used to, I'd sound like, "You can't tell me nothin'," like, "I know I'm right." I'm like, "What do you mean?" But now I realized I'm like, "Well, you know you can't always be right sometimes." I, sometimes -- you growin'. So then I just started taking it. Like it's just then I realized how much [the teacher] was helping me. Then it was cool.

Just prior to this excerpt, Alexis discusses her experiences with critical feedback, especially with high school peers.

**ALEXIS:** I feel like my -- when we do peer reviews, like peer reviews in high school, some of these girls think they're like Jesus.

**MULTIPLE:** <laughter>

**ALEXIS:** "Oh whoa whoa whoa. We're in the same class." <laughter> "I know your writing is not that good, either. So let's calm down."

**MULTIPLE:** <laughter>

**ORPHEUS:** I love that.

**ALEXIS:** Yeah. I mean, I don't know. I feel like, it's when, when, when -- people just get cocky. You know? And then that's when they can't take criticism. And then they'll really give other people criticism though. They're really good at that but they're not good at taking it.

In both of these cases, "taking it" seems to mean something distinct from Nicole's use of it at the end of the preceding section. Rather than a transitive verb phrase that indicates agential



application or appropriation of what's been handed to them, these last two instances of "taking it" signal more of a powerless complacency. Similarly, Justin uses a slightly extended version of the phrase, adding the preposition "in," making the phrase more evocative of an embodied experience: "I don't really take offense to whatever feedback, I just sort of try and take the feedback in. Even if I don't agree with it, I take it in just so I get the grades."

At times, participants spoke of a comparable experience but with different phrasing. Henry put it this way: "Every teacher is different. And you just go in, shut up, and do what you're told." Jane, who shares both mixed and positive feelings about corrective instructor feedback on language use in the first two sections above, describes her experience of corrective feedback as similarly infantilizing: "They'll like, point me out like that, and like, they'll put me in my place." Later, Jane continues to discuss her experience:

I feel like [...] I know how to handle it, but I feel like people, students coming into this that aren't really familiar with it- I feel like I got a lot of it in high school for sure from my English teacher. So I know how to take it now. If I wouldn't have had that, I know, I wouldn't have been able to take it, the way- Like I'm not saying [my professor] does in a bad way. They do it in a nice way. But it's still, we're in college. So I always feel like everything has to be perfect. [...] I definitely feel like, I feel like a student that like wasn't me would break down, mentally.

Here, Jane not only introduces another example of how several participants in this study employed the concept of "taking it" when referring to receiving corrective feedback on their language use, but also specifically attributes her ability to "take it" to her experiences in high school. Jane is then able to imagine that someone without her high school background might "break down, mentally," despite her instructor issuing feedback "in a nice way." I'll address the

role of high school feedback in learners' sense of FYC feedback in the next section of this chapter and in Chapter Seven, but I'll first continue to discuss the ways learners perceive high school and other experiences as preparing them to "take it" in college.

Nicole shares an additional source of preparation for "taking it" by linking her ability to "take" corrective feedback to her experiences as an athlete.

**NICOLE:** I feel like a lot of athletes are good at taking constructive criticism when it comes to the classes-

**ALEXIS:** -Yeah-

**NICOLE:** -Because we take the most crucial, constructive criticism, but it's like, you gotta swallow it, like you can do nothing about it. Like, if your coach tells you, "Yada yada," they might be yelling at you. But really, they're just saying that. So like, if I know I could take that, if I can take constructive criticism in sports, I use it to take constructive criticism everywhere. As far as like family, my teachers, even if my friend has told me something, "Yo, [Nicole], you gotta work on this." Okay, I'm gonna take that, I'm not gonna get mad at you like. Yeah.

Henry also points to athletics as contributing to, as I put it, "not taking criticism personally."

**JMK:** Is there anything else in your life that you think has contributed to that: you not taking criticism personally?

**HENRY:** Maybe like sports.

**JMK:** Okay. Yeah.

**HENRY:** You just say like, "Yes, sir. Yes, ma'am." Fix it.

Additionally, Henry attributes his resilience in the face of criticism to the curriculum he completed at a secondary vocational school:

In high school, I took, uh, I went to [a vocational school] and took criminal justice. And um my teacher. It's like, it was a very strict program. Like we had uniforms, and we had to walk certain ways and stuff like that. [...] And we will get yelled at a lot. And I guess I just like, learn better that way. [...] That's why I was so thankful that I actually took that class [...]. Because it like broke you down and then built you up.

Many participants locate their ability to “take” feedback in their personal histories of receiving constructive criticism or in their beliefs about the approach used to deliver feedback. However, the pattern of framing this experience via such decidedly non-consensual phrasing troubles me. In particular, it points to a lack of felt agency, a perception of authoritarianism, and what Stuckey calls “the daily violence against those who are not favored by the system” (p. 127).

### **“Ew, You Need a Tutor”: Learners’ Own Negative Reactions**

As indicated in some of the above transcript excerpts, my most probing questions during focus groups and interviews were direct questions regarding whether participants had experienced negative emotions associated with feedback in general and corrective feedback on language use in particular. Several of these were clarifying questions directed at participants who did not discuss their own experiences of negative-feeling feedback, but who hinted at or otherwise implied having some knowledge of or fear for others who have had such experiences, as discussed in the following section. Indeed, while most participants did not share a negative experience associated with having their own language use corrected through FYC instructor feedback, most also had concerns about the phenomenon, either through first-hand observation or speculation based on other experiences.

***“It’s a Me Problem”: Assuming Blame for Negative Experiences***

Unlike the learner conversations excerpted above, Fawn reports that she “hate[s] being criticized.” In sharing this, she positions that distaste for criticism as a failing.

**FAWN:** Yeah, I feel the same way. But like at the same time, if you give me like too much criticism, I’m like...

**MULTIPLE:** <laughter>

**FAWN:** “I didn’t ask for that much.” But then I just hate being criticized? I just, I don’t know. It’s a me problem. Not a teacher problem.

Fawn’s situating of her instructor, critical feedback, herself, and her hatred of criticism is complex. While it’s clear that Fawn feels negatively about what she’s calling “criticism,” she also seems to suggest that her negative feelings constitute a “problem.” Furthermore, Fawn assumes the blame for this by not only pointing to herself as the problem but absolving her instructor of any blame: “It’s a me problem. Not a teacher problem.” A similar situating is seen across focus group and interview discussions. Carl, an adult learner who identifies as a White man, notes of his negative feelings, “I think that’s mainly me, the habits of me on like, pretty much every class,” later equivocating a bit with, “So yeah, it’s partly me, but I’m not completely sure.” AJ introduces his frustration and uncertainty with negative feedback experiences by saying, “I don’t even think it’s on [the instructor’s] side. It’s just me personally.”

This isn’t to say that writers shouldn’t take ownership of their feelings or of the language that prompts response. However, taken in conjunction with the preceding discussion of “taking it,” I see in these instances learners deploying coping mechanisms in order to manage their learning experiences in FYC.

### *Instructional Disconnects*

Several participants who discussed their negative experiences of feedback within FYC did not link those experiences to correction of language use. Rather, these experiences arose from feedback on other components of their submitted writing. For some learners—especially but not exclusively those who are *not* racially minoritized—it’s not the affront to their language use that leads to negative emotions, it’s the frustration of dealing with a disconnect between their efforts and what their instructor seems to convey as an instructional priority. Lucy talks about getting “dinged” because of “not having consistent topic sentences.” As a result, notes Lucy, “On my second essay I just treated my reader like they were an absolute baby.” Regulus recalls feeling bad after revising a discourse community analysis of their high school cheerleading team. Regulus reports being asked in draft after draft by their instructor to further explain the importance of a given routine that had been described, then having their grade reduced as a result of complying: “I kept explaining why it was in my paper, and I got points marked off because then I explained too much --- so....” Sage, one of few participants without adult characteristics and one of several participants who disclosed a neurological disability, shares a commonly expressed feeling of “discourage[ment]” as a result of the disconnect between perceived performance and instructor feedback:

Um I was actually gonna agree with her like, because like, from my perspective, I think the essay is good. But then from [the instructor’s] perspective, it’s like, like, either, like average, or, like below or above average. [...] I get it’s college, but like, sometimes it does discourage me. Because like, I thought it was like, so good. And then like, it just ends up being average.

Bella shares her similar frustration with instructor feedback that challenged her sense of instructional expectations and that gestured toward language use correction. She had pulled her computer from her bag to read aloud to the focus group her instructor's holistic feedback on a recent essay. Because this lengthy piece of instructor feedback was read verbatim, I won't reproduce this portion of the transcript here, but will instead summarize it. Feedback commences with positive points regarding topic choice and efforts at establishing the importance of her work, and then moves into constructive comments regarding some missing components of the essay, as well as specific points for attention regarding sentence structure and clarity. Reported feedback instructs Bella to see a tutor for assistance with "catching errors" regarding sentence correctness, also noting that peer review would be another venue for seeking feedback to ensure clarity. The paragraph of feedback closes with several sentences of positive comments regarding places where the instructor found clear and compelling language in the essay. This is what throws Bella.

**BELLA:** What kind of confuses me is like, oh, like, "It's not clear to the reader," and then they're like, "Oh yeah, it was clear to the reader." And there's like sentence fragments and like other stuff in here that like I don't know how to do or what they're talking about. I wasn't really taught it.

**JMK:** Right. So how does that make you feel then, sort of, getting that feedback?

**BELLA:** [...] When I asked [the instructor] to like review like the sentence and stuff like that they said like, it wasn't like, towards like the narrative of the class that everybody in the lesson needs. And I don't know where I can really learn it other than looking online, but it's better for me to ask the questions or just looking it up or watching YouTube videos or something. [...] Because like, it makes me -- I know, like, I kind of do good

with writing stuff like that. But like with all this, it's like, I wasn't taught this, how can I do better? But if I'm not talented, then well, I guess I'm crap.

This frustration born from a disconnect between the specific, directive, and sometimes corrective feedback given and the revision attempts made in response is of course not new to FYC learners. Here, Lily, a young FYC learner who reported dealing with sporadic homelessness since her mid-teens, shares such an experience from high school:

**LILY:** Well, I was talki-, I was like writing and it was like multiple people. So I put [an apostrophe] after the s. And they're like, "That goes before the s." And I was like, "No, no, I wasn't -- Can you re-read that before you tell me that?" And the teacher's like, "No, I know what I'm talking about." And it then goes on. I fixed it to the way [the teacher] worded it-

**JENNY:** -And then it tells you it's wrong.

**LILY:** Yeah, they're like, "It's wrong." And I was like...

**JENNY:** You dumb, dumb... [...] "It was right the first time, thank you. Like, don't come around telling me it's wrong. And then I hand it in and then your head telling me it's wrong. Because of who? Because of *you*."

**LILY:** And, and I like talked to them about that. I was like, "You told me to do that."

And they're like, "No I didn't."

**JENNY:** Yes, you did.

**LILY:** I was like, "I've been around too many gaslighters in my life. I know that I did this."

**REGULUS:** <gasp> Gaslighters! <slaps hand on table>

**LILY:** I'm like, "I know!"

**JENNY:** That's what I really don't like is the gaslighting. Like if you have a [...] teacher that's like a gaslighter or that just straight up like lie about something and then pretend like, "Oh no. Oh no."

In addition to frustrations that came about as a result of specific instructive feedback received on drafts, participants also report feeling negatively about receiving critical or otherwise constructive feedback on efforts that they felt met instructional priorities as established by assignment instructions. Word count in particular is introduced by participants as a "standard" that they believe would trump all other efforts:

**BELLA:** Oh, um, another thing that I noticed with some other people, and I probably have to do this quite a bit myself. But with the 700 to 900, like word essay, because in high school it's like 300, 500, which is like manageable enough, I guess. But like, for that, if you run out of all the good stuff to write down you have to fill in words. And it's like, <whining voice> "You still need to put this in here and take minus like, 30 points," even though you're trying to get to like, the standard of like, you know, 700 words.

**FAWN:** Yeah, fluff it up.

**BELLA:** Yeah. And then it's like, <snotty voice> "Ew you need a tutor, like your writing sucks."

Bella again recounts disappointment and frustration at having received corrective feedback on an assignment that she believed she'd performed well on. In particular, because she'd met the minimum word count, she feels slighted by feedback pertaining to other elements of her writing, pointing in particular to having points taken off for not having included certain conceptual elements of the assignment and being directed at some point to a tutor, paraphrasing



this last piece of advice in a way that suggests she believes her instructor thinks that her “writing sucks.”

### ***Instructor-Sanctioned Feedback from Peers***

Such a disconnect may be felt as a result of receiving corrective or directive feedback from other sources, such as peers or tutors. Concerns about incorporating advice or feedback from both peers and tutors (who, at JCC, are also peers) was pervasive throughout my focus group discussions in particular. I’ll share one example of an exchange that speaks to this concern and also articulates specific negative emotional experiences associated with that concern:

**MONICA:** I did my essay, and I thought I killed it. And I took it to the tutor, and they wrote it right out. And I’m like, <gasp> “Huh!!”

**WALKER:** I woulda been like <acts out a wrestling move and swears> [...]

**BELLA:** One of the nervous things that I have when seeing a tutor is because like, they can like write and say like, oh, “This like needs fixed, like this will be better that way.” And once you turn it like you lose points and like [the instructor] will be like, “Your original was better in the first place.” And that’s like kind of what I’m worried about.

Monica initiates discussion regarding peer tutors in response to my question about negative emotions to feedback. This exchange, punctuated by Walker’s enthusiastic turn, ultimately sees Bella expressing nervousness and worry about following her instructor’s advice given via feedback (discussed just above) to work with a tutor on sentence clarity and correctness.

Feeling negatively about instructor referrals to tutoring for sentence-level assistance surfaced as a minor sub-theme itself, though it’s one with potentially significant consequences. Bella’s reading of instructor feedback excerpted above helps to confirm that her reported association here between being directed to tutoring and receiving critical instructor feedback on

language use is not unfounded. Saul also reports experiencing a specific negative emotion upon being referred to tutoring for what he noted elsewhere were persistent spelling and other sentence-level “issues”: “I was recommended to go see a writing counselor. Because I tend to miss- mess up a lot of things. And it just feels a little insulting.”

Indeed, what might appear in some ways to be Bella’s conflation of tutoring referrals and corrective feedback on language use may have a logical basis. That is, both in her case and generally, where instructor feedback intentionally avoids specific corrective feedback on language use but instead provides broad, non-instructive feedback on things like “clarity” and “sentence structure” along with specific instruction to seek assistance on these from tutors, instructors seem to be outsourcing what is potentially the most fraught component of learner composing and writing assessment. As discussed in the sub-sections that immediately follow, the prevalence of non-specific, non-instructive instructor feedback on “grammar,” combined with a curious absence of reaction to that instructor feedback, may be explained in part by this outsourcing.

### ***Non-Specific Instructor Feedback***

Participants also report decidedly negative emotions arising from non-specific components of instructor feedback encounters in general. For the most part, these focus group and interview contributions came from people of color who spoke of their stances relative to instructor feedback. Phin, who features prominently in upcoming discussion of learner theories of language, reports avoiding multiple components of or opportunities for instructor feedback. “For me, I usually tend to just ignore all the reflections and reviews. Because to be honest, I don’t like criticism, and I really just want to get this done and over with.” While Phin’s sustained coping strategy is to ignore, Jenny’s is to emote: “Like, I usually end up crying over my

teachers.” Both Phin’s and Jenny’s use of the word “usually” suggests that these are long-standing, engrained positions. Likewise, Phin also speaks—albeit in a joking manner—about crying as a recurring component of his established writing process; crying in response to instructor feedback was introduced by adult participants across three different focus groups.

### ***Negative Emotional Responses to Corrective Feedback on Language***

As indicated above, learner reports of negative (indeed, any) emotional responses to corrective feedback on their language use were noticeably absent, especially given the prevalence of participant-reported feedback on grammar as an “issue” (as further detailed in the following chapter). Typically, participants who did attribute specific negative emotions to the experience of having their language use corrected were recalling experiences from high school. Here, Regulus recalls what appear to be ongoing instances of having their language use corrected in both high school and FYC, which prompts Lily to share a comparable story from her K–12 vocational school:

**REGULUS:** There’s some words that I have like used, and I got told, “That’s too elementary.” But I couldn’t think of the bigger word that would work for it sometimes. Like, I suck at spelling words and everything. Like, I’m really bad at vocabulary. And um so I would get told to use bigger words -- well, I’d use the bigger words, and then sometimes I’d misspell them. And sometimes I didn’t realize it. And then my -- sometimes my Word does not pick it up. So there’s that. And then you get told a word. And then you’re not -- someone didn’t, they didn’t explain it, but what it means and everything. So, and I’m like, I can’t use that word anymore. And so it’s like that sometimes. [...]

**LILY:** I use some big words. And when I do, some professors, like, don't think I know that word. And they're like, "What is this?" And my mind just goes blank. And I'm like, "Oh, I do, like I do know." Then it's like, "I don't know now, this is it, you put me on the spot. And now I can't think of it." That happened to me so many times when I was in criminal justice class, for [vocational school]. The teacher would call me out, they'd be like "Lily, what's this word?" and I'm like, "We just went over this word, and I wrote it in my essay, and now you're calling me out on it. Now I don't know. Thanks a lot." [...]

**JMK:** How does that make you feel?

**REGULUS:** Not knowing like the big words and getting told to like use, like, more appropriate like ...

**JMK:** Being told that your words are, what did you say? Elementary?

**REGULUS:** Elementary. Yeah. I don't know, I felt kind of dumb when I heard it. I was like, "I'm, I'm sorry."

Though Regulus doesn't specify at this point which words were called "too elementary," that they "couldn't think of the bigger word that would work for it" suggests the words in question would likely have been verbs or adjectives. As this exchange continues, Regulus confirms a word they were prohibited from using because it lacked sophistication was "happy."

What stands out to me in their initial turn is the sequence of events and the self-evaluation Regulus describes. They recount struggling to identify different terms that might have been equally precise, before agonizing over "suck[ing]" and being "bad" with language and spelling in the face of instructor or teacher demands, useless computing technologies, and failed attempts at incorporating new terms into their repertoire. Regulus seems stuck in a version of what Sommers (1980) calls "a 'thesaurus philosophy of writing'" (p. 381) and "revision

strategies [that] are teacher-based” (p. 383), as their repeated use of the word “sometimes” bookends what seems to be an established narrative about their abilities and the pressures faced as a writer. Upon being asked about their feelings regarding the incident, Regulus reports feeling “kind of dumb.”

Saul also reports specific negative emotions that he associated with corrective feedback. First, he refers again to his difficulty with spelling, and in response to my question about how he feels about feedback on spelling corrections, he says he feels “annoyed.” He continues: “It makes me moderately annoyed that I keep getting the same errors over and over again, who wouldn’t get annoyed with getting the same spelling mistake fifteen times?” Perhaps because Saul was an interviewee and not a focus group participant, he feels compelled to evoke what he either knows or assumes would be the experience of his peers, were they to face a similar situation. I later asked him to consider more explicitly the experiences of others, which he reports being able to do in part because of his own experiences of corrective feedback on language use:

**JMK:** What words do you think most other people who have their language use corrected -- how do you think they would describe that feeling?

**SAUL:** Disappointment, embarrassment, anger? Maybe joy in the fact that they get to learn more, but that’s probably a minority. But it is mostly disappointment or a feeling of failure or embarrassment that they didn’t get something right. I would know from firsthand experience.

Saul locates specific terms to describe the negative emotions he reports “disappointment,” “embarrassment,” “anger,” “failure.” Again, Saul is in the minority of study participants in his articulation of such specific negative feelings that were tied to language correction. And, again, to the extent that these experiences have taken place in an FYC setting, FYC rarely introduces

learners to the experience of having language use corrected for the first time and instead typically functions as a potential site for learner reflection on previous corrective feedback as well as engrained self-assessments. This evokes Ahmed's (2004) concept of "sticky" memories as discussed in Chapter One.

### **Bearing Witness to Others' Negative Responses**

Saul's discussion of his peers' experiences of feedback in this last excerpt above is unique in that he seeks to validate his reading of others' negative emotional responses by linking their responses to his own lived experience. In doing this, Saul gives voice to his experience by virtue of his awareness of others. For me, the comment above about feeling "annoyed" at some feedback was a bit of a breakthrough in my interview with Saul. He was incredibly forthcoming and shared moving and at times disturbing details about his life and education, but he was clear with me that he did not feel comfortable talking about his feelings. So I tread carefully. Having recognized a remarkable empathy for former peers, though, and having picked up on this willingness to link others' feelings with his own, I wondered if my more targeted inquiry about others' feelings might make way for his own emotional disclosure.

Indeed, some of the most evocative and prolific discussions of emotional reactions to feedback on language use came about in response to the question, "How do you think *others* feel when they have their language use corrected?" This question doesn't always prompt such responses, or even any. In a mini-pilot of this study for which I conducted a single interview, my participant was a sociable, opinion-sharing, and lively adult learner and proud father who never wanted for words. But when I asked him how he thought others felt upon having their language use corrected via instructor feedback, an impossibly long 9-second pause lapsed between us, and his response consisted of a halting list of invented words. During data collection for this study, I

occasionally found similar responses to this line of questioning. One participant shared, for instance, “I know one of my friends in there are mad at [the instructor] for the feedback they gave, but it’s like, I don’t know how you can be mad at somebody for that.”

For the most part, though, participants were readily able to report or imagine others’ feelings. Destiny had been talking about her own language practices and those that she’s observed in others. “There are people who, who speak, you know, AAVE, you know, Ebonics, whatever you want to call it, you know, they will say something different, you know, in a different way, they’ll mean the same thing.” She goes on to think through her own theory of language and feedback relative to people who use African American Vernacular English (AAVE), after which I pose a question about whether she’s witnessed others’ emotional response to language correction:

**JMK:** How do you think they feel when they do have their language use corrected?

**DESTINY:** When I’ve witnessed it, it’s usually they feel upset, maybe angry. [...]

**JMK:** So you just used the word like angry.

**DESTINY:** Yeah. Yeah. Like, frustrated. [...] Just like not listened to, I guess.

Destiny talked for a bit more about her own discursive identity, as she’d shared that people tell her she “talks White,” having been brought up by her “White mother in a White family in a White neighborhood.” She then expresses some exasperation at those who correct writers’ AAVE to “standard” English, noting that she perfectly understands those who speak AAVE—“you know, for example, ‘gonna,’ ‘tryna’ [...] I don’t think it’s wrong”—and therefore recognizes that most other people likely understand, too, including those who issue corrective feedback. In response to an additional prompt from me regarding others’ feelings when such correction occurs, she says, “So I think, I don’t know, people that struggle with that [and] have

always been corrected, probably feel pretty, like upset. Like, ‘Why are you...? Like you’re hearing me, but you’re not like listening?’”

Other participants had entirely different access points for imagining negative emotional reactions to corrective instructor feedback on their language use. In the series of exchanges below from the a focus group of White-identifying women and/or genderqueer adults, Lucy and Hannah begin by commenting on Lucy’s tendency to focus during peer review on grammar, regularly leaving “fifty comments” that consist largely of corrective feedback on peers’ writing. The group returns to the question of feedback recipient experience throughout the session.

**LUCY:** I always feel nervous when I do peer review, because I, I correct grammar a lot, and then there are fifty comments from me just going through and correcting the grammar. <laughter>

**HANNAH:** I know, I feel bad. <laughter>

**LUCY:** And I feel like whenever anyone sees that they get intimidated by my -- Yeah. As detailed in Chapters Five and Seven, the term “grammar” was used quite a bit by participants (and me) during focus group and interview sessions. Of all the focus groups, though, the one excerpted here features the most participant mentions of “grammar” by far, with seventeen. Some mentions from this group are typical of focus group and interview findings—that is, participants use the term to reference what they see as weaknesses in their writing or to reference feedback. However, several are from the mentions in this and the following exchange, as well as Lucy’s matter-of-fact statement made early in our discussion, “My grammar is impeccable.” Perhaps because of this self-proclaimed skill with grammar, Lucy also very quickly shares reservations about issuing such effusive corrective feedback, pointing to feeling “nervous” and worrying about peers feeling “intimidated,” to which Hannah commiserates with, “I feel bad.” I



should note that this particular exchange commenced just under three minutes into this focus group session's recording.

About ten minutes later, I bring conversation back to Lucy's heavy-handed language correction:

**JMK:** How would you feel if you were him? Do you think?

**LUCY:** I think I would feel bad seeing fifty comments about my grammar, when I'm trying to learn the language. [...]

**HANNAH:** I mean, back to the discussion of like, negative comments. I personally don't have any negative comments on mine. So I don't like- I feel like my wo- writing went really well. Yeah, but I could see how that would affect someone's like, uh thrive to write, like, "Oh, it's garbage anyway, why do anything?"

Consciously or not, Lucy adapts Hannah's language from the earlier excerpt, not to describe their feelings about imposing so many corrections, but to make an empathetic hypothesis about a peer's experience. "I would feel bad," they note, adding context identifying the corrected peer in question as an English language learner. This is one of several instances during focus group and interview sessions in which participants recall witnessing pain inflicted through language instruction on peers who were learning English as an additional language. Unlike Lucy's comment above, other participants offer descriptive details about how such pain was inflicted, and for the most part these observations had been made during elementary or high school.

Hannah's redirection to "the discussion of like, negative comments" provides space to engage in some more specific empathetic imagining. In particular, she's able here to articulate why she might have felt "bad" about issuing negative comments to peers, as noted above.

Hannah points to the damaging effect she imagines excessive negative feedback might have on a

learner's "thrive to write," illustrating that effect via hypothetical speech in which a learner, seeing their writing through the feedback received, feels their work is "garbage" and decides to give up. Over fifteen minutes later, this focus group returns to the topic of others' experiences by way of Lucy's statement that they "haven't really experienced anything like that [language correction]," but that they "can see how that can affect other people." In response, Hannah extends more empathetic agreement: "It could be discouraging, yeah."

Another focus group of White- and female-identifying learners sums up these findings:

**JMK:** How do you think that would feel?

**ZOYA:** Terrible.

**SAGE:** Awful.

**JANE:** For sure. [...] Um, unsatisfied. For sure. Um...

**SAGE:** Definitely discouraged.

**JANE:** Unmotivated, it would unmotivate me for sure. Not want to come to class.

Whether a result of their own lived experience of corrective feedback on language use, their observations of others' experiences, or purely hypothetical speculation, Zoya, Sage, and Jane make explicit mention of the words "terrible," "awful," "unsatisfied," "discouraged," and "unmotivated" to describe their sense of how such feedback might make learners feel.

## **Chapter Conclusions and Implications**

To my research questions regarding whether adult FYC students in a community college setting report experiencing corrective feedback on their language use as a kind of violence, the superficial answer is "no." However, some of the most significant findings from this chapter arose out of participant discussion of emotional experiences of feedback in general and of corrective feedback on language use. In particular, findings from this chapter lay groundwork for

discussion about feedback and adult FYC learners' rural writing ecosystems. In this chapter's conclusion, I summarize several important findings and implications that, when taken together, suggest adult learners' emotional reactions to feedback are shaped by their broad network of supports and life experiences, and that any experience of emotional dysfunction may be the result of 1) a corresponding long-standing dysfunction in FYC relative to language instruction and evaluation, and/or 2) systemic social conditions that cause painful emotions and that promote damaging forms of resilience.

In this chapter, learner participants recounted emotional experiences of various kinds of feedback, with reactions ranging from neutral to positive to negative. As I will further illustrate in the following chapter, for the adult FYC learners at my rural, open-access community college, instructor feedback on language use (and perhaps feedback in general) is only one component of a broad and complex network of similarly broad and complex factors experienced in their writing lives. One related finding that I draw from the current chapter echoes Toth's (2023) point about the ecological realities of two-year college transfer learners in particular, that "alongside-school identities are often embedded in relationships, forms of cultural participation, sources of motivation, and access to financial and other resources that sustain students as they pursue their degrees" (p. 37). Relative to the adult learner's feedback experience within FYC, I see this reality having the following implication:

- *Neutral* emotional reactions or an *absence* of emotional reaction may be a consequence of a learner's robust writing ecosystem, which itself may offer additional feedback sources and frames of reference for instructor feedback.

For example, despite an absence of the decidedly singular emotional reaction I was looking to elicit, Jane's response to my question, "How did that make you feel?" included an impressive

array of elements located within her writing ecosystem: peers, digital portfolios, instructional texts, and uncertainty about her instructor's emotions. As I noted above, this “neutral” emotional response to instructor feedback on language use points to several findings of this study. First, the response illustrates findings discussed in Chapter Five: learner woes about digitally-mediated feedback, and learner desire for increased communication with instructors. Likewise, Jane’s uncertain emotional response is due in part to not knowing what her instructor’s emotional response was to her writing, further suggesting that learners desire increased communication with and feedback from instructors, if only to gauge instructor emotions.

Additionally, Jane’s comments point to the role that peers play in conceiving of one’s writing, a theme that gets explored alongside the role of family, friends, and other sources of writing support in Chapter Seven. Ultimately, though, Jane’s response to my question about her feelings illustrates a major finding of this dissertation. As I’ll more fully discuss in Chapter Seven:

- Even feedback on language use that isn’t discernible as feedback—that is, nearly silent correction—reverberates among the various elements of adult learners’ writing ecosystems, and not only evokes long-standing beliefs and attitudes about themselves, writing, and feedback, but also prompts consideration of that feedback in light of various writing supports, experiences, and practices.

One singularly negative emotional reaction from this chapter illustrates the effect of instructors’ silent grammar correction. In particular, feedback received by Bella gestures toward language use correction, pointing out the presence of sentence fragments and referring Bella to a tutor for help with “catching errors.” As noted above, instructors may be outsourcing the most fraught component of writing evaluation.

- This feedback encounter illustrates findings from multiple studies including Stolley (2007), Matsuda (2012), and Myhill and Watson (2014), who point to the absence of grammar and language use instruction in FYC and language arts classrooms, along with a corresponding yet understandably perplexing emphasis on grammar and language use in evaluation of writing.

Further, Bella's reported experience of having her request for classroom instruction about fragments denied suggests the dysfunctional silence in FYC extends to an active silencing of learners. Indeed, as Strickland and Crawford (2003) conclude, "*silence* about grammar with our students [...] is an act of collusion with a colonizing white consciousness" (p. 79, emphasis in original). And Bourdieu (1991) likewise warns of "injunctions that are powerful and hard to resist precisely because they are silent and insidious" (p. 51).

In an additional account of negative reaction to feedback, Regulus recounts what appears to be an ongoing experience of language correction—specifically of feeling "dumb" as a result of feedback that their word choice was "elementary." The evaluative language embedded in this story suggests that earlier experiences of corrective feedback on language use have informed not only Regulus's ongoing self-assessments but also their expectations for the corrective feedback encounter. Similarly, Saul shared his experiences of significant traumatic corrective feedback during his K–12 years and likewise indicates that his current experiences of receiving corrective feedback in FYC prompts his feelings of annoyance.

- Participants who did attribute specific *negative* emotional reactions to corrective feedback on their language use often were recalling experiences from high school or middle school, a trend that's evocative of Ahmed's (2004) "sticky" and affect-saturated objects from memory (p. 11).

For various reasons, participants seemed more ready to attribute specific negative emotions to others' experiences of corrective feedback on language use. Saul shares that he believes—as a result of his own experience—that others feel “disappointment,” “embarrassment,” and “anger.” As a result of witnessing AAVE-using peers having their language use corrected, Destiny believes others feel “upset,” “angry,” “frustrated,” and “not listened to.” Lucy and Hannah, by virtue of their own correction of peers, are concerned that those who have their language use corrected feel “intimidated,” “bad,” and like their writing is “garbage.” And Sage, Zoya, and Jane believe—evidently as a result of their empathetic imagining—that those who have their language use constantly corrected via feedback feel “terrible,” “awful,” “unsatisfied,” “discouraged,” and “unmotivated.” Although I have not drawn conclusions about what this awareness means for the participants who offered these emotion-rich words or the learners these participants are referring to, it is worth pointing out that:

- The terms used by learners who are able to imagine or otherwise know the interior, emotional experience of peers who have had their language use corrected echo the terms introduced by Worsham (1998) as she describes the violence-feeding emotions that comprise “the hidden curriculum for the vast majority of people living and learning in a highly stratified capitalist society” (p. 216).

Finally, and most disheartening, I found that reports of *positive* emotional reactions to corrective feedback on language use are often accompanied by assurances about learners' resilience to potentially painful experiences. In particular, I identified a pattern in which several participants who reported neutral or positive emotional reactions also framed their experiences using decidedly non-consensual language. In addition to the fairly common “taking it,” learners in this study used other phrases to communicate what I read as a powerless complacency: “go in,

shut up, and do what you're told," "they'll put me in my place," and "I know how to take it now, [...but] I feel like a student that like wasn't me would break down, mentally." Participants attribute this resilience to punishing experiences including athletics and particularly "strict" vocational programs, where students learn to "swallow it." The pervasiveness of "taking it" and assuming blame is evocative of a coping mechanism for an otherwise decidedly negative experience. An additional finding of this chapter, then, is:

- The coping strategies that seem almost necessary for many learners' positive experience of corrective feedback suggest what Rose (2022) calls "refoulement,"—"literally, pushing back or repulsing"—which is both "the French word for the psychoanalytic concept of repression" and the "technical term for the forcible return of migrants to their country of origin" (p. 329).

Some of the findings from this chapter—in particular what I read as the coping mechanisms of "taking it" and learned resilience, links between feedback and negative self-assessments, and participants' personal and witnessed histories of painful feedback—lead me to question whether I was asking the right question when conceiving of this study. A more complicated question, likely leading to a different research protocol, would have been, "How does instructor feedback on language use function as a part of adult FYC learners' broad and complex writing lives?" Fortunately, as I'll sketch out in the next chapter, study participants were already ready to tell this story. Chapter Seven provides additional insights about what I'll call adult FYC learners' rural writing ecosystems. This final chapter closes with additional analysis of key findings from Chapters Five through Seven, along with discussion of how instructor feedback might function as—or within—a boundary object by positioning concepts from various approaches to ecological analysis with concepts from Donehower et al.'s (2007)

*Rural Literacies*. In particular, this study's findings regarding learner experience of language correction are situated as rural, thereby broadening the stakes and the potential of both FYC in general and feedback on language use in FYC as boundary objects for coordinating and ensuring the co-adaptation of not only learners but institutions of higher education.



## CHAPTER VII

### **“IT DOESN’T TRANSLATE WELL”: ADULT LEARNERS’ ECOSYSTEMS AND FYC**

This chapter unpacks many of the domains, themes, and subthemes that emerged from focus groups and interviews with current first-year composition (FYC) learners at my rural, multi-campus, open-access community college in western New York State. The questions asked during this study focused on learners’ emotional experiences of having their language corrected via instructor feedback, questions born of my concern regarding how this enactment of contextualized grammar instruction (Weaver, 1996) might function as a kind of instructional violence (Worsham, 1989; Stuckey, 1991; Strickland & Crawford, 2003; Inoue, 2020) for not only Black learners, but all learners of color and others with marginalized discursive identities impacted by “interlocking systems and structures of linguisticism, racism, and classism” (Baker-Bell, p. 16). As I discuss in previous chapters, though, focus group and interview participants challenged my expectations for this study in multiple ways. In addition to conveying a more nuanced experience regarding feedback as detailed in Chapters Five and Six, student participants introduced significant information about their previous and current situated literacy practices, and they advanced abstract ideas about feedback, language, and feedback on language.

One of the things that most surprised me about focus group and interview data, both during sessions and later during transcription, coding, and analysis work, was the breadth of information and detail shared by participants. My scripted questions regarding FYC, assignments, feedback, and feelings about feedback prompted discussion about components of FYC teaching-learning that weren’t on my research radar. While some findings reflected what’s been reported in previous scholarship on emotions and feedback on writing (Rupiper Taggart & Laughlin, 2017; Dowden et al., 2013; Myers & Ballenger, 2019), I was led to reconsider

additional elements and angles that have also been discussed in the literature on response. Participants steered me away from thinking exclusively about instructor feedback on language use and pointed me towards additional factors and contexts as discussed by Bowden (2018), Straub (1997), and Sommers (2006). In particular, the learners who talked with me and with each other about their corrective feedback experience spoke about non-FYC personal influences, overwhelmingly confirmed that they do in fact read instructor feedback, and posited that knowing exactly how to craft feedback is difficult because of the differing needs and dispositions of learners. Indeed, as indicated in Chapters Five and Six, many findings from this study corroborate findings from previous studies on both response to writing in general and corrective feedback on language use in particular. Most notably, the findings of this study echo many of those found in Darsie Bowden's (2018) "Comments on Student Papers: Student Perspectives" in the *Journal of Writing Assessment*. Though Bowden's research concerns were broader than my own, the variety of influences on learner attention to and experience of instructor feedback found through my focus group and interview work reflects much the same variety found by Bowden, who concluded it's "small wonder, then, that even the 'best' [instructor] comments may not result in an improved draft" (p. 12). In other words, the many variables at play in adult learners' lives—as articulated by Gleason (2015), St. Clair (2015), and others—not only demand learners' attention but offer additional perspectives and support that inform their writing practice. As I'll discuss below, these variables also reflect components of composition ecologies as conceived within rhetoric and composition over the last few decades.

This chapter consists of two sections. The first, "The Writing Lives of College Students: Daily Writing Practices, Histories, Habits, and Neurological Dispositions," charts the largely extracurricular literacy realities of study participants, looking at how daily reading and writing

events and pasts, as well as what I'm calling neurological dispositions, inform both learners' established decision-making regarding writing and their sense of selves as writers. Taken as a whole, these beliefs, attitudes, habits, and supports, which for the most part have been cultivated and maintained outside the confines of formal college writing coursework, help make up adult FYC learners' rural writing ecosystems; layered with learners' explicit theorizing about feedback, language, and feedback on language, these become learners' ecologies, a distinction of terminology I'll unpack in the final major section of this chapter. Learners' writing ecosystems comprise the context for learning within first-year composition, influencing experiences of feedback. The final section, "If You Do Get Where I'm At, You're Right There': Additional Implications and Conclusions," pulls together some of the critical findings from Chapters Four through Seven and puts these in conversation with frameworks for conceiving of feedback as a specific formation within an ecological system. Ultimately, I suggest in this extended discussion and conclusion that FYC feedback often functions as a dysfunctional space for learners of color in particular, and I propose some tentative recommendations for not only developing a shared vocabulary for talking about writing, but establishing FYC as a more malleable and co-constructed coordinating space within higher education.

### **The Writing Lives of College Students: Daily Writing Practices, Histories, Habits, and Neurological Dispositions**

More than any other portion of this project, the contents of the first half of this chapter reflect largely participant-driven points of concern and focus. No scripted focus group or interview questions asked about daily writing practices, established uses of different writing technologies, long-standing writing processes, disabilities, philosophies of feedback, or experiences of writing in high school or other courses; and only on occasion did I inquire about

high school experiences in order to prompt comparative thinking about participants' current or recent experiences in first-semester composition. This is to say that the fact this section exists is an indicator of how important its topics are to the participants who took part in this project.

These first sections are concerned with the more material *and* cognitive elements of the writing practices of study participants, especially as these elements emerge as anchors within an ecosystem of writing practice and support. In particular, details about participants' reading and writing done for pleasure, along with the conditions of those literacy events, provide conceptual touchstones for knowing learners as writers with literate lives. Discussion of their reading and writing experiences in other courses, and especially in high school, provides a bridge from the mechanical elements of daily writing practices to the interactions and expectations that contribute to their habits and self-assessments. Finally, introduction of what I'm calling learners' "neurological dispositions," as well as their theories of language and feedback, establishes two other dimensions that both partially constitute and influence adult FYC learners' rural writing ecosystems and therefore their experience of corrective feedback on language use.

***"I Write Outside of Here": Reading and Writing in Daily Lives***

One topic that cuts across most focus groups and interviews is participants' reported reading and writing for non-academic purposes. Reading as a discrete activity was introduced more rarely by participants, and this is typically introduced as a point of explanation for their general attitude toward and aptitude in their composition courses. In addition to unsolicited comments regarding reading, participants provide examples of what they prefer to read. Here, for example, Hannah introduces a fairly tepid and changeable like for reading, and is interrupted by Lucy, who doesn't hesitate to reiterate and amplify their own stance by way of agreement:

**HANNAH:** I mean, I like reading, but-

**LUCY:** -I like literature too-

**HANNAH:** -it depends on the topic. <laugh>

**LUCY:** I like literature, too. My Inquiry class this year was “Monster Theory,” and we got to read like *Frankenstein* and stuff like that, and I love, I love reading books like that.

That Hannah was in the middle of hedging her appreciation for reading didn’t seem to faze Lucy, whose overlapping speech suggests significant enthusiasm. Lucy goes on after Hannah’s laughter to repeat the statement, “I like literature too,” before providing additional detail and evidence. Lucy refers specifically to a recent occasion for reading (their themed first-semester seminar course, “Inquire”), locating the reading of *Frankenstein* as an academic endeavor. However, their concluding phrase, that they “love reading books like that” points to an enduring appreciation for reading that extends beyond academic contexts.

Some participants extend discussion of reading to include engagement with other forms of media. Saul watches a variety of informative television channels, noting he watches “a lot of Science, Science Channel. A lot of science, you know, a lot of History Channel, a lot of a lot,” before introducing details about his reading habits: “And I tend to reread [...] the articles we’re using [in Comp I] a couple of times for fun.” Nicole provides extensive detail regarding not only her consumption of various media and other sources of linguistic input but also how she sees that language consumption positively benefitting their vocabulary, a result of intentional practice:

I just like -- to be honest, I think I have a wide vocabulary because I really, like I read a lot every day. Like, I try to learn something new every day. And on top of that, I listen to a lot of music. And it’s not just the same type of music. It’s like different music. So different words, I always hear. It’s coming to me. And I’m also very -- I pay attention to what people say. So like, um, if somebody says something, that will stick with me, then

boom, I learned a new word just like that. And then I guess uh -- I really try to just read signs, like posters, just little stuff like that, because I know, reading the littlest stuff, really expand your vocabulary. But I really think it's music 'cuz I know a lot of music. And it's just, yeah, helps me with my vocabulary, I feel like.

More effusive are participants' expressions of "love" for the writing they do in their daily, non-academic lives. Some emphasize specific kinds of writing, and some point to the relevance of particular academic genres to daily life, while most gesture more generally to the fact that learner participants "write outside of" academic contexts. At times participants introduce their affinity for writing after commenting on their experience in FYC. One shares: "Some of my other English classes are more literature focused, but this one has just been writing and I like writing a lot." Another indicates that they liked composing a process analysis in FYC, pointing out "how applicable it is," because "this is something that you do like on a daily." Others share, while talking about their FYC experiences, that they "love rhetoric" or "like think pieces." Most participants who speak about their daily reading and writing activities don't anchor these practices in terms of academic experiences, though. In the following, Jane does the opposite:

**JMK:** You've mentioned this phrase "writing voice" a few times.

**JANE:** Yes.

**JMK:** So that seems like something that you value a lot.

**JANE:** For sure. Yeah. Because I write outside of, outside here. So...

I learned later on that Jane's FYC class and affiliated workshop both took place in the classroom where our focus group was held. So Jane's "here" can be read literally as the classroom where writing instruction takes place, or as college in general. Other participants locate their writing

practices outside of academic settings, providing more specific information about what they write, such as “personal writing,” “books,” “stories,” and “novels.” Lily discusses one such endeavor:

The only other time I’ve written a story was for my friends. And I’m still technically writing it but it’s not finished yet. I’m writing them a fairytale novel -- not really a novel, just a little thing, but I’m writing it for them.

Though Lily circles back to clarify the description of what she’s writing for some friends, this self-correction points to a clear desire to define and articulate the genre in which she’s working. Ultimately, the technicality regarding whether this is a story or a novel is unimportant, as Lily broadens (yet minimizes) her description by calling it “just a little thing” before repeating with emphasis who the work’s audience is. In all of these instances, I am struck by the earnest engagement with reading and writing that FYC learners reported.

**Family, Friends, and Other Peers.** Family, friends, and college peers not formally associated with composition instruction are introduced across focus group and interview contributions. Though some of these people feature as obstacles to successful composing (such as infant nephews who turn off computers mid-sentence), individuals in the lives of study participants are for the most part reported as playing significant, positive, and active roles in learners’ experience of feedback on their writing, both personal and academic.

Orpheus reports an established sequence of working with instructor feedback and then seeking additional feedback from others, such as their foster sister and “thousands of people”:

I usually have my draft feedback and improve that- incorporate that immediately into my work. And then I send it off to my foster sister, who also looks over my essays. And then I get feedback from her and usually I have someone else also read over it. [...] I have like,

thousands of people look after and be like, “Okay,” and, “It’s good.” Usually the content’s always good. It’s just the grammar and spelling that needs fixing and, um, not from my teacher, but I always get the comment from my foster sister being, like, “Commas won’t hurt you! Use them more.” Which I think is very funny, because I usually remove some commas. ’Cuz I’m like, “This seems like too many...”

Noteworthy here is not only that Orpheus actively seeks feedback from such a large number of non-FYC people, but that they have a clear sense of how their writing is typically received by others. Orpheus notes “the content’s always good,” but that “the grammar and spelling [...] needs fixing,” and at this point makes a distinction about where this bit of corrective feedback comes from: not an instructor, but a sibling. Indeed, most references to the feedback received by family members, friends, and other college peers involve grammar or punctuation correction, such as this from Sammy: “I just make my roommate read my essays ’cuz she’s really smart. She fixes them. Like she puts the words in and everything.” More rare but still present are cases where learners’ networks provide more conceptual support: “I reach out or I talk to one of my buddies who knows what they’re doing because I need to know exactly what I’m doing or I can’t do it.” Here, Walker notes his tendency to stall on or even not complete writing assignments if he doesn’t “know exactly what [he’s] doing,” and identifies a friend within his network who functions as a bridge to FYC assignment expectations.

**Writing Technologies.** Additionally, as touched on in Chapter Five’s discussion of digital technologies as barriers to engagement with instructor feedback, participants shared a range of comfort with and knowledge of various composing technologies. For some, such as Monica, the writing technologies she arrived with seem to carry less utility in the FYC context:



Well, it's been really hard for- adjustment for me, because I haven't been in school for like, fifteen years. And when I first showed up, I pulled out my notebook and my pencil or my pen, and I'm like, "Okay, I'm ready to take notes." And everybody's sitting there with their laptops. And I'm like, "Oh my god. Now I gotta learn how to maneuver all this."

Of particular importance to this project's focus on corrective feedback on language, though, is participants' regularly-expressed conversance with digital technologies that specifically address grammar. In their responses to questions about corrective feedback on language use, several learners made explicit reference to how such technologies directly impact their experience of such feedback. Max notes of reviewing his drafts in Microsoft Word, "Well, usually my all- my whole thing is just dotted red, on top of everything so I gotta click through and edit like, 'Okay,' every, every sentence like a word in every sentence." Hannah likewise speaks of the relative ease associated with "fixing" grammar prior to sharing with an instructor: "And then grammar. Yeah. It's an easy fix with Grammarly, and then send it in." Finally, AJ indicates an explicit preference for using computers with word processing software because it addresses a long-standing difficulty: "Grammar is something I struggled with in high school [...] so actually having it on a computer, having the assistance for writing is nice. It's actually been helping."

Taken as a whole, these glimpses into the experiences reading and writing done by FYC learners indicate that first-semester community college students come to the instructional context of FYC already identifying as writers and with tools and other resources at their disposal for meeting their writing goals. These findings are consistent with but also slightly expand upon several long-standing adult learner characteristics reiterated by St. Clair.

***“I Have Grammar Issues”: Writing Histories and Habits***

AJ’s comment points both to the role played by digital technologies in his writing experience, and to the histories, habits, and self-assessments that adult FYC learners bring to that experience. These three sub-themes speak to how participants situate themselves as writers.

**Histories: High School.** The prevalence of participant references to their high school writing experiences surprised me. Though certain groups referred to high school more frequently (as detailed in Table 7.1 below), and though I did eventually inquire about high school experiences to prompt comparative thinking about FYC experiences, unsolicited discussion of high school is found across all focus group and interview transcripts. Just as consistently, participants introduced references to high school in order to make specific points about their identities, established processes, and current experiences.

Points of comparison between high school writing experiences and FYC experiences typically included learners’ feeling of a disconnect between the preparation they believe they didn’t receive in high school and instructors’ expectations in FYC, as seen in the following.

**FAWN:** I feel like the problem is, your high school teachers are like, “Oh, in college, they’ll teach you this.” And in college, the professors are like, “Oh, you should have learned this in high school.”

**JMK:** Right. And so there’s a little bit of a gap.

**WALKER:** I didn’t even have an English class in high school.

Fawn illustrates through hypothetical reported speech from both a high school teacher and college instructor what I summarize as “a gap.” Strikingly, Walker is unable to relate, as he reports not having taken “an English class in high school.”

Others point to the differences in what they perceive is valued in high school versus college. AJ appreciates what he's experienced as more freedom in college: "I think also just having that freedom to like, share my opinion, because we didn't have that in high school you know. So like having that freedom to share my opinion, and being graded based on that. I really like that." Gabriel seems to feel the opposite way, in part because of the phenomenon of the "gap" between the two instructional settings:

I used to be one of those people would just be like, "I'm going to write it the day before." And I'd always get an A and it was always super easy. And it was like, "This is fine. This is why I'm doing it. That's why I'm an English major." I can't do that anymore. [...] It feels like I'm having very abstract concepts be explained to me -- like, but not in a very, like intuitive or, like human way. Like it's very, like, I feel like I was already supposed to know certain things that I don't know, or was supposed to get certain things in like an academic setting, maybe I don't get because I'm coming from high school to college.

Likewise, AJ speaks to having "a writing background in high school" that has influenced his FYC expectations and experience.

**AJ:** The thing is, I, I do have a writing background in high school.

**PHIN:** Okay.

**AJ:** So at times, we didn't have time to even plan.

**MAX:** Mmm.

**AJ:** We just [had] to dive straight into it. So I was, I've kind of gotten used to that.

AJ's point of comparison—that high school writing assignments didn't provide him "time to even plan"—transitions into an additional influence upon his sense of self as a writer: his established writing processes.

**Habits.** Participant discussion of high school writing experiences often includes references to cultivated or incidental habits, processes, and preferences that influence their experience of FYC writing. AJ resumes his discussion of how high school writing experiences shaped his current process in this continuation of the previous excerpt.

**AJ:** Then when it comes to my planning, I just jot down ideas like things I wanna put in my essays, like short keywords, not even like planning it's just keywords and spots.

**MAX:** Just like ideas you don't want to forget.

**AJ:** Yeah, yeah.

AJ details the focus of his composing planning process in particular, which includes noting “ideas” and “short keywords” that allow for the kind of time-pressed writing demanded of him in high school. While AJ doesn't note that this established process has been an obstacle for him in FYC, Henry's contrast between high school and FYC writing does suggest such a problem:

My current [FYC] teacher would write, like feedback on stuff. And would tell me to do it a different way than I did in high school. And I found that like, very like, weird, like hard to get used to [...]. So when we were doing drafts, I would like, kind of break it down. And like, I would write paragraph one and put it in bold and like, write the paragraph under it, and then I do that for everything.

Henry describes his established process for composing, which involves using bold headings in conjunction with paragraphing to organize and develop his draft essays. While this was something that Henry reports doing in high school with presumably no push back from teachers, his current FYC instructor has asked him “to do it a different way” without textual markers. Some reported habits or preferences, such as the pithy, “I don't like writing multiple paragraphs,” point also to learners' long-standing beliefs about themselves as writers. The source

of learners' habits, established processes, and beliefs may often be invisible (to instructors and even learners themselves), but their influence is often evident.

**Self-Assessments.** The following reported self-assessments about writing are representative of the range of what learners shared of this topic. As seen in the next exchange, I often respond to comments such as Cate's "I'm horrible with grammar," with a question about where that belief comes from. Here, Cate and Hannah exchange comments about Cate's self-assessment regarding grammar and how that influences her ability to engage in peer review.

**CATE:** I feel like I'm not very good at grammar myself. So it's hard to see the mistakes in other people's.

**JMK:** How do you know you're not very good at grammar? Why do you say that?

**CATE:** Um, like because I have grammar issues, you know, like where they- there's supposed to be a comma or, you know, whatever. So when I'm reading someone else's work, I'm like reading it the same way that you know, I would write, so I don't see as many grammar issues. And sometimes when I do feel like I see one, I'm like, "Am I wrong, though?"

**HANNAH:** You second guess.

**CATE:** Yeah. So I don't want to comment something and then have them do that. And then-

**HANNAH:** -It be wrong-

**CATE:** -Me be wrong.

**HANNAH:** Yeah.

While Cate's response to my questioning of her "I'm not very good at grammar" didn't directly answer me, it suggests the source of this self-assessment is whatever instructional or other

feedback—current, historical, or both—that led to her diagnosis of “grammar issues.” Beyond grammar, self-assessments typically focused on planning and, most frequently, spelling or “vocabulary,” as heard from Max (“I was like, always horrible at planning”), Orpheus (“Yeah, no, I’m chronically really bad at spelling”), and Regulus (“I suck at spelling words and everything. Like, I’m really bad at vocabulary”). Rarer but refreshing to hear were positive self-assessments, even those that came at the expense of peers, such as Alexis’s, “No offense to some of my peers, but some of them don’t really care as much as I do.”

### *Neurological Dispositions*

At the close of most focus groups and interviews, I asked participants what they thought I should be focusing on in future research on FYC. One response stood out to me, as it encapsulated a series of comments that were already emerging as a theme: mental illness and neurological disabilities. Specifically, one participant suggested, “Maybe ask if they have any, like, anything like ADHD or anything like that, because that can- that alters writing,” also recommending attention to autism spectrum disorder and traumatic experiences. Up to that point, I’d been conceiving of a theme called, “Mind/Brain Narratives,” in part because of my own relationships with mental illness and neurological disabilities as well as the instructional lens that I’d come to use for thinking about anxiety and FYC. Additionally, it wasn’t always clear to me that the participants who referred to anxiety and ADHD in particular were actually disclosing their own diagnoses, or whether these terms were the best they had for representing their interior experiences. I’ve therefore landed on calling this theme “Neurological Dispositions.” I’ll note that although learners disclosed their diagnoses often repeatedly and always without my solicitation, I’ll refrain here from identifying speakers in any way.

Several learners speak explicitly of how either their diagnosis or their experience of a mental health diagnosis influences their FYC activities. One learner notes, “I have a learning disability that like really messes with my spelling, consummate free, <laugh> saying things the right way, as you can see.” Attentiveness is one specific area in which participants report struggling. Here and in several instances, learners introduce imagined hypothetical conversations with their own minds that are prompted by confusion and overstimulation, particularly from rapid peer or instructor speech. As one learner noted, their mind “goes overboard.”

**SPEAKER 1:** I can’t do that. Because I, if they start talking fast, my brain will be like, “Oh, I’m not gonna get all this nope,” and then I’ll go off to think about something else.

**SPEAKER 2:** My ADHD mind goes.

A few participants introduced their mental health therapists or counselors in their discussions of FYC experiences.

There’s a whole lot more in the brain that happens, like, like I talk about with my counselor, especially if you’ve gone through trauma in the past, and then like you have P-PTSD, and then your brain starts to go in fight or flight mode, and then you can’t even concentrate on what you’re doing. You’re literally just going in circles.

Some point to how their disability-specific needs are not met and how that impacts not only their work but their emotional health.

With [my instructor] the only problem I have with them is I’m very, very neuro-neurodivergent, and if you’re talking to- you have to tell me exactly what you want me to do or I’m gonna mess it up. And then I don’t know how to fix it and then I freak out. So if you’re talking to me, just tell me exactly what you want me to do or I’m not going to get it done. And the teachers just don’t do that.

\*\*\*

Throughout my high school years, like every time I get frustrated or mad or I would start to tear up and I got made fun of including by other teachers and other students before and that just like, made me like really more in a depressive state.

At times, the additional anxiety that comes with corrective or otherwise constructive instructor feedback may have little to do with an instructor's framing, suggests one student who notes that their ADHD drives certain assumptions about what's intended. "So yeah, I think, like, 'Oh, like oh, he's probably saying this in a meaner way.' Like, but I think that that's like, kind of like a self mental thing." Indeed, increased alertness to critical feedback and to how peers are treated are recurring topics among learners who disclose ADHD in particular.

As has been the case for all of the topics discussed in these chapters, what I'm sharing reflects my reading of participant contributions during focus group and interview sessions. In some cases, especially where those topics relate to concepts I'm conversant or nearly expert in, such as the teaching of FYC and the issuing of feedback in that context, I've taken significant liberties to do more explicit interpretive work, such as in the previous chapter's discussion of what I read as learners' coping mechanisms in the face of potentially painful corrective feedback. However, I've tried to limit this kind of interpretation in this section for three reasons. First, though I've worked in the mental health field and often credit those professional experiences with preparing me for my successes as a community college educator, my field of study is not mental health. Second, although the field of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies invites interdisciplinary research, and though I might integrate a study of mental health with disciplinary concerns, this is not something I felt equipped to tackle for this iteration of my project.



Finally, though I've lived much of my life with various anxiety disorders, it was one participant's additional observation that began with, "ADHD can affect your writing," that abruptly put into focus every single one of the concerns and motivations I've laid out for completing this project. That person, along with the dozen other participants who opened up about how their mental health and illness influence their writing (in particular their experience of receiving corrective feedback), helped me remain open to better knowing myself and especially my neurotransmitters. I've therefore avoided too much interpretive work above, lest I map myself entirely on the experiences of study participants, inadvertently obscuring them and their voices in the process. Having said this, it is the case that ADHD has been linked in studies across disciplines with "writing difficulties" resulting either from opportunity loss as a result of inattention or from the fact that the very executive functions required for successful writing experiences are those typically limited for people with ADHD (Soto et al., 2021, p. 793).

***"It Depends": Learner Theories of Feedback and Language***

This final series of contributions highlights the beliefs—sometimes tentative but often firmly established—that participants shared regarding feedback, language, and feedback on language. In addition to reflecting on their own experiences as well as those of peers, participants often waxed profoundly, even philosophically, about language correction as an ethical matter. The excerpts I share in this section are lengthy. I offer them to round out the complex network of material and cognitive resources and realities these many learners bring to their FYC experience.

**Feedback and/as Instruction.** As suggested in Chapters Five and Six, learners prefer instructor feedback to be both specific and instructive. Likewise, they want more interactivity with instructors. The following excerpts, first from Gabriel and then from Bella propose some approaches to feedback and instruction as well as feedback *as* instruction.

I think that sometimes, feedback kind of sounds jumbly like sort of, like their thoughts are all like, it's very like, note taking. Like, we've done peer review in my classes. And whenever I do it, peer review, I do my best to make sure that if someone were to read that, that was not me, that they would understand it. I feel like maybe our instructors don't do the same thing. It's like they're expecting us to just make the leap in communication between their notes and like, what they actually want us to glean from them. And it's like, really difficult to actually like, synthesize that into your next paper or whatever you're going to be writing. Because it's not that they're not actually paying attention to you, as an individual, it is more like, "I am grading this paper, and I'm just writing stuff down that I see and not thinking, at least consciously, that someone else is going to read that and actually try and learn from it." And so it gets kind of hard to, you know, read it.

\*\*\*

I wish like, when, like professors like read essays or like see, like, "Oh, hey, the most common thing is like uh the vocabulary errors or where to put like, sentence fragments that we have no idea about." And I wish like they took like some time out of the class or like the whole dang class period and be like, "Okay, like this is what it is. Here's the definition, here's some examples, here's a video, and this is how—" like, "Oh hey, here's a sheet of paper or like, write a few these to kind of practice it, and I'll come around and look at what you're doing and kind of improve," so it is a little bit of like one-on-one.

**"It Depends."** Several participants nearly summed up a major conclusion about how to craft feedback as found in Sommers' "Across the Drafts" (2006) by suggesting, simply, "It depends." But not only do this study's participants point to the fact that the feedback experience

depends upon the learner, they also recognize that it depends upon the person issuing feedback. Below, Nicole and Orpheus discuss both of these variables. Following that exchange, Carl introduces an illustration of how the same feedback experience might be experienced differently by different people. His concluding statement reinforces other findings that point to the importance of establishing interpersonal communication and relationships in order to effect feedback that's both affirming and instructive.

**NICOLE:** I feel like some people don't like constructive criticism. I feel like it depends on how really mature you are, or your mindset of it. But not everybody takes the constructive criticism as a good thing. They take it as a, "Why are you trying to tell me this if I know I'm right, why are you doing this?" If this is like, they just will always have a excuse, or like, "Well, I did this." But you'll also find people who just don't like it 'cuz they always think they're right. But personally, I like it, it's how you become a better person. You don't take constructive criticism, you're not working on yourself.

**ORPHEUS:** Yeah, I think it also depends on how it's presented to the person. I think, um, that really depends on what other people like or not. Like, I really like how my professor and anyone I know presents constructive criticism to me, because it's like, "Hey, this is just not the most correct."

**NICOLE:** Yeah.

**ORPHEUS:** Like, "This is [what] I would do, but you can decide what you wanted to do." That's how it's always been presented for me. But I know that some people are mean about it. And I'm like, "Why?" And...

**NICOLE:** Yeah.

**ORPHEUS:** I feel like, "Why you gotta be a bitch? Don't..."

\*\*\*

I think a good example of what I was talking about before is like a TV show called um *Bar Rescue*. It has [...] a host, that he, uh, he's, he can be a little loud and direct with his feedback. And, and sometimes it's like a help. It like shows it really helps some people. And for some people, it shows to be kind of distressful. [...] And it's, and you can tell it's helped some people and sometimes it's like, "Why is he yelling? That man's really mean." So yeah, you just kind of have to know. Uh like, I'm, in order to like, know what, what type of feedback to give you, you have to know that person.

Another point of variability within the FYC feedback encounter is the matter of "right and wrong." At several occasions, especially when comparing high school and college experiences, learners reflected on what was sometimes seen as the general constructedness of knowledge, but was more often perceived as instructor preferences constituting what is considered "right and wrong." Here, the changing guidance Carl has received regarding spacing in his essays prompts first a recognition of the contingency of knowledge and then a conclusion about "how teachers are" relative to not only what is "right and wrong" but presumably how learners are supposed to function within that variable framework.

Like for example, in high school, I was told that you need to have like two spaces between paragraphs, but [this instructor] says that there's like one, but, so I think that there's like a little bit [of a] difference between wha- what you think is right and wrong between different teachers. But, but I think that's just how teachers are, like every English teacher is different and what they think is right and wrong.

At the same time, in a more abstract positioning of variability, Carl notes, “It’s good to have multiple minds, like, kind of a coming together in some way. Even if you agree or disagree with a- can be nice to have like a more vary-, varied writing or mindset when making something.”

**The Violence of Literacy.** In 1991, J. Elspeth Stuckey wrote in her *The Violence of Literacy*: “We must understand the extraordinary power of the educational process and of literacy standards not merely to exclude citizens from participating in the country’s economic and political life but to brand them and their children with indelible prejudice, the prejudice of language” (p. 122). It’s striking to me that the following extended excerpt from Phin not only grapples with concepts of ideology, class, race, hierarchy, language, and MLA formatting, but reflects on his personal experiences as he deals with the messiness that comes with realizing as a first-year college student that, as Stuckey wrote: “The truth is that literacy and English instruction can hurt you, more clearly and forcefully and permanently than it can help you, and that schools, like other social institutions, are designed to replicate, or at least not to disturb, social division and class privilege” (p. 123).

I’ve read this- an article before about the gatekeeping of intelligence, and that [...] intelligence needs to be kept in certain realms of ideologies or, or people. And based on that, language is probably one of the biggest form of- or showcases of intelligence. [...] Like in terms of high end vocabulary, and the way of writing, MLA... Like -- who, who thought about MLA formatting? <laughter> [...] And like, you see like, all that deep academic writing that yeah, only the very privileged who go to high end institutions with good enough education can have access to. So yeah, that the gate-, the gatekeeping of intelligence has just obviously trickled down to many forms of social reforms. How are we going to have, now, better access to education? Should people now start focusing on

demolishing the whole idea that intelligence isn't- shouldn't be for certain, I don't know, specifically White, White people, and that some people just shouldn't be able to grasp intelligence? So, no, it really is something that personally I kind of went through that line because I, luckily enough, I was very blessed enough to go to a [...] very privileged high school that got me access to intelligence. And yeah, and how I think about my background and how, maybe not necessarily my family, but the people that I know how they don't have access to that. And why first of all, why should that be a thing that we should be thinking about on a daily basis like, why are we gatekeeping intelligence? Like, why should we be doing that? We- society- we're all meant to understand each other. So let's not try to put ourselves in this sort of hierarchy that, okay, "You did not do comp one in college so I don't consider you like-minded." So no, I don't know. <sigh> Yeah, it- it's just- I don't know. <voice trails off>

**“Let Them Write Like That”: Feedback on Language.** Finally, as participants reflect in abstract ways about correction of language use, they articulate both personal standards as well as challenging admonishments to others who issue corrective feedback. Jane distinguishes here between “careless mistakes” that invite “nitpicking” and the “writing voice” that she believes should not be corrected:

I feel like nitpicking is okay, to an extent I enjoy nitpicking, because I enjoy little mistakes, careless mistakes, being fixed. But just something simple, like a word you don't like, somebody else might like, sure. So I try to like, when I am reading other people's, I try to see, “Hey, maybe that's a different word that's their writing voice.” Let them write like that.

Jenny and then Henry both question the possibility of writing that's "truthful" or their "best" work in the face of language correction:

How? How? How is what I want to know. And how, and how do you want someone to give you a good piece of work off of said guidelines if they can't give it to you [in a way] that's actu- like, like real, truthful, from the heart?

\*\*\*

I think if they didn't like, correct you on your grammar, like more people would be able to express stuff and like the writing would just be better in general. Like, it'd make everything feel more personal, because I know, my best essays are the ones like, I personally, like connect with, like, feel strongly about because the rest, I'm just like, I don't want to do this. I just want to get it over. But those ones I'll actually sit for like hours and write. But. So then to the extent that, you know, if you're writing and you know, someone's probably gonna, like, pounce on the way you use language. It's just a harder thing to do. And it's just less enjoyable.

Pressed by me to pinpoint the process that leads from language correction to feeling discouraged, Lucy situates "higher education" as a space that sets up a conflict between what's expected and "the voice in your head."

**LUCY:** My language has always been eloquent, because I like to use a lot of big words. And it's been my my -- the way I write is mostly, like, consistent with higher education. So I haven't really experienced anything like that. But I can, I can see how that can affect other people.

**HANNAH:** It could be discouraging, yeah.

**JMK:** Yeah, how do you think? In what ways would it be discouraging? Like, how does that happen?

**LUCY:** Because you're, you're taught how to, you're taught how to speak by your peers all your life. And then you go into higher education, and you're expected to completely rewrite the way that you not just speak, but that you think. The voice in your head doesn't speak in that kind of dialect. So why would you write in that kind of dialect?

The "rewrit[ing]" imagined here seems to be rejected by the peer conjured by Lucy, who closes by asking why someone would write in a dialect that's not their own. This refusal is echoed by Bane, who suggests that instructor desire alone is insufficient for altering a learner's language: "You can't really make them change their language, even though you want them to."

In the following final series of excerpts, Destiny discusses her beliefs about how diverse "vernacular[s]" should be received by instructors as "okay," then suggesting the standard "English course" is a flawed concept as she currently knows it:

There are other students that maybe don't have the same grammar or English use that I do. [...] I don't know, as a woman of color, you know, I'm African American, there are people who, who speak, you know, AAVE, you know, Ebonics, whatever you want to call it, you know, they will say something different, you know, in a different way, they'll mean the same thing. [...] If you comprehend what others are trying to say, if you know what their point is trying to be, even if it doesn't come off perfectly, you know, structured with the grammar that's, you know, being taught, I think that that should be okay. I don't think that there should just be a one set, you know, English course, or English courses that everybody has to like, pass or fail. "If you don't get this, then, you know, you're bad at English." I dunno, I feel like everybody's different. Everybody is brought up in



different places. So, you know, maybe their vernacular is just different than yours. You know, it doesn't mean that they're, you know, not as smart as you. [...] There are different dialects of English and that- they should all be accepted into the curriculum.

Destiny then initially positions herself along with instructors through pronominalization, saying, "We understand them." She then abruptly grammatically unlinks herself from educators, saying *to* instructors this time that the learners being corrected, "They know that people are understanding what they're saying." They know we know:

I understand them, and we understand them, you know, if they, if they wrote this in an essay, you know, that you would understand, but it's just not exactly what you want [...] I don't know, I feel like if you understand where they're coming from, you know, they're just, I don't think it's wrong. [...] They know that people are understanding what they're saying, but I guess I don't know why it's so technical. When people, [...] I don't want to say in like positions of power, but like, you know, teachers who are correcting are trying to, I don't know, correct them because it's -- you understand them, but it's just why does it have to be so perfect?

In their "Translingual Praxis: From Theorizing Language to Antiracist and Decolonial Pedagogy," Rachael Shapiro and Missy Watson (2022) advance an approach to writing instruction that addresses the needs and desires of "students who experience the material consequences of linguistic discrimination today and want to see their teachers acknowledge and address the racism underlying such injustice" (p. 294). These are the needs and desires expressed by Destiny as she closes by saying, "I wish that this was something that was talked about more because like now that we're talking about, I'm thinking about it. I'm realizing, like how this really like is kind of an issue. I wish I had more, like time to think about that."

The preceding posits that first-semester composition learners often arrive with an arsenal of writerly experiences and personae, preferences, and tools at their disposal. Of interest to me as a first-year writing instructor are the implications of these realities and experiences for developing instruction that builds upon and supports existing learner approaches to and attitudes about writing and language. And with regard to this study's concerns about learners' emotional experiences of having their language use corrected via feedback on their writing, this section illustrates that the literate lives of first-semester composition students are expansive and nuanced in ways that may not only shape that emotional experience as articulated in the previous chapter, but should shape the work we do.

### **“If You Do Get Where I'm At, You're Right There”: FYC as Coordinating Space**

Throughout the last three chapters, I've highlighted one particular exchange between Fawn and Gabriel, during which they collaboratively express a desire for increased personal communication between learners and instructors in order to improve the “level of understanding in the classroom.” In Chapter Five, I suggest this exchange imagines a version of FYC that functions as a coordinating space within higher education. To actually conceive of this version of FYC, though, it's important first to pinpoint what Fawn, Gabriel, and others imagine in light of this study's findings. In particular, the FYC learners in this study wish for feedback that's affirming of their language use, yet specific and instructive. Working explicitly with learners, we should find this approach to feedback feasible, especially given one finding from this chapter: that adult learners are robustly equipped with established beliefs and strategies regarding writing. At the same time, there's a pervasive disconnect in the language that learners and instructors use for feedback, a silence that's symptomatic of dysfunction where there could instead be productive interactivity for community building and growth. Using Harding et al.'s (2022) work as an entry point, I expand upon their recommendations for realigning learner and instructor

language for feedback, ultimately calling for a version of Fawn and Gabriel's reimagining of FYC. In particular, I apply Harding et al.'s exploration of feedback as a boundary object to imagine both feedback and FYC itself as a site of coordination and co-adaptation.

Motivating Fawn and Gabriel's exchange is the importance placed by both learners on how instructors engage with their writing voices. Reflecting on a hypothetical conversation with an instructor after initially receiving some likewise hypothetically critical written feedback, Gabriel explains, "I know that what I did makes sense stylistically, but maybe it didn't come across." Fawn then concurs with this idea, introducing what is likely hypothetical speech between her and an instructor: "It's our first semester with this teacher, they don't know us at all, and they don't know how we write. So they're like, 'Okay, but like, why this?' And I'm like, 'If you knew me, you'd know why.'" In these instances, Fawn and Gabriel either insist or imply that the writing choices they've made hold intrinsic value because those choices reflect who they are as writers and people. Gabriel refers to stylistic choices and being "very passionate about the way that I put this together." And Fawn insists that increased personal knowledge of her as a person would mitigate any perception of error or misstep in an instructor's reading of her work. This idea is echoed in Max's "Just because someone may not like understand all of my words, [...] I don't think that means they need to change it. I think maybe that means- I don't know, read more of my work or something like that." In the previous section of this chapter, Destiny likewise suggests that correction of AAVE should be unnecessary if someone's position is understood.

In all of these cases, the possibility of a writer learning from or changing as a result of corrective or otherwise instructive feedback is not evident or desired. And in all of these cases, the possibility of an instructor issuing what is perceived as needless corrective feedback on a

learner's language use exists in an FYC context in which 1) conversations about stylistic choices are not had and 2) personal relationships among members of an FYC classroom are not developed. The learner participant-imagined inverse of this is an FYC context that both invites such conversations and relationships, and precludes or at least restricts instructors' corrective feedback on language use.

Not necessarily competing but perhaps difficult to envision achieving concurrently with this imagined FYC scenario, is learners' equally strong desire for specific, instructive, growth-stimulating instructor feedback. In fact, in a different, earlier) excerpted comment, Max imagines a feedback encounter in which an FYC instructor provides instructive feedback that Max believes would lead to desired growth. As he notes, "I want to get -- better." And the feedback mechanism he proposes to facilitate this growth sounds like this: "Yo, I don't- that point doesn't really make sense. You should fix that and make it better." This imagined feedback conforms to several of this study's findings: it is specific ("that point"), it is instructive ("fix that and make it better"), and it likely pertains to language use or arrangement, as the point in question "doesn't really make sense." What Max either doesn't desire as part of this feedback or doesn't articulate in this moment is specific corrective feedback on language use.

At least part of what may prevent learners in this study from being able to imagine corrective feedback on language use in the context of an FYC classroom that facilitates increased communication for improved understanding, is a lack of shared language as found by Sommers (1980) and others, and as discussed at the outset of Chapter Five. Learners' use of the term "grammar" in particular suggests that beyond a lack of shared language is a conflation and dysfunctional appropriation of a concept that holds nearly mythical status yet rarely gets

explicitly defined or otherwise unpacked for FYC learners as a component of their writing and their instructors' corrective feedback.

That participants in this study so often called up the term “grammar” to describe the feedback they’ve received points to the term’s significance in how learners conceive of or make sense of instructor feedback encounters. This is in spite of the fact that participant reports of more instructive feedback rarely point to specific grammatical elements, and that participants’ illustrations of what’s meant by “grammar” suggest a disconnect between what instructors intend and learners perceive. This is a problem for realizing FYC as a space for both improved understanding and growth-facilitating feedback, especially when feedback pertains to—or seeks to provide instruction about—language use.

Max identifies needless correction in his instructor’s feedback on terms like “gonna” and “bouts to,” noting, “It's not like you have to take a huge mental leap to get where I'm at. And if you do get where I'm at, you're right there.” Here, I read Max articulating the role of language in establishing a sense of not just cognitive or social but imagined physical proximity among learners and instructors, writers and readers, rhetors and audiences. In the case of FYC learners, the term “grammar” likely both evokes and masks concepts that might otherwise function this way.

### ***Race and References to “Grammar”***

As I shared in Chapter Five, focus group and interview participants used the term “grammar” 59 times. In the following iteration (Table 10) of the word frequency chart first introduced in Chapter Five, I’ve added a column that details participant demographics, as some simple comparative analysis points to a relationship between participant reference to the concept of grammar and racialized identities.

**Table 10***Term Frequencies with Participant Characteristics*

<b>FG / Interview</b>	<b>Participant characteristics</b>	<b>“High school”</b>	<b>“Grammar”</b>	<b>“Spelling”</b>
FG 1	Adult; Multi-Racial and White; Female and/or Genderqueer	5	2	4
FG 2	Adult and Non-Adult; White and Indigenous; Male, Female, and/or Genderqueer	11	0	0
FG 3	Adult and Non-Adult; Black and Multi-Racial; Female and/or Genderqueer	9	10	13
FG 4	Adult; White; Male	17	4	8
FG 5	Adult; White; Female and/or Genderqueer	10	17	0
FG 6	Adult; Black; Male	6	13	1
FG 7	Adult and Non-Adult; White; Female	7	1	1
Int. 1	Adult; Black; Female	2	9	0
Int. 2	Adult; White; Male	3	1	0
Int. 3	Non-Adult; White; Male	4	2	8
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>74</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>35</b>

Though the White- and female- and/or genderqueer-identifying participants in Focus Group 5 offered the most references to “grammar,” as discussed in a previous chapter this is due less to their reports of instructor-delivered feedback and grammar and due more to conversation about their own approaches to offering grammar-related feedback to peers.

Setting aside this group, then, it’s noteworthy that the next highest frequencies of references to “grammar” (with 13, 10, and 9) come from the only focus groups (Focus Group 6 and Focus Group 3) and interview (Interview 1) that consisted of homogenous groups of learners of color. Their utterances make up more than half of the total mentions of “grammar,” whereas

focus groups and interviews consisting strictly of adult learners (even accounting for Focus Group 6) do not reference grammar at anywhere near these frequencies. The focus group consisting of adult White- and male-identifying participants, for instance, references grammar only four times in total. This is in spite of the fact that I inquired directly and explicitly about feedback on grammar five times with Focus group 4, versus only one time with Focus Group 6. Though this study was not designed to develop conclusions from such quantitative data description, the relative emphasis placed on grammar-conceived feedback by participants with various identity markers can be seen in part by this comparative work.

In particular, Black-identifying participants and other participants of color were more alert to the concept of grammar as they articulated their experience of corrective feedback on language use. Again, this is the *concept* of grammar, not necessarily grammatical correction or instruction as found in writing handbooks (though actual correction and instruction were certainly pointed out too), and grammar-as-concept was as erroneously conceived by participants of color who discussed receiving corrective feedback on grammar as it was by the White-identifying focus group who discussed doling out heaps of peer feedback on grammar and noted that they “correct grammar a lot.” But the disconnect between grammar-as-concept and the experience of having one’s marginalized language use corrected via contextualized grammar instruction that comes via feedback will likely influence Black-identifying learners and other learners of color in different and greater ways. Gere et al. (2022) point to scholarship that highlights “the ways assessment has harmed Black students by pathologizing and stereotyping them, while also limiting their opportunities for educational advancement” (p. 383). One implication, then, of a lack of shared and specific language for the very feedback encounters that should coordinate learners and FYC is learner displacement. I’m using the term “coordinate”

here intentionally, as I arrived at it through a close reading and brief analysis of a recent study on the role of language for writing in feedback encounters.

### ***Redefining Boundary Objects as Ecological***

In their “Feedback as Boundary Object: Intersections of Writing, Response, and Research,” published in the *Journal of Response to Writing*, Harding et al. (2022) studied examples of instructor feedback on student writing and then conducted interviews with learners to determine how they engage with that feedback. As I note in Chapter Five, their study highlighted the problem of having “very different vocabularies to talk about writing,” and the authors go on to warn that this “difference might turn feedback into a roadblock to learning or could even lead to misconceptions or misunderstandings” (p. 97). The findings I’ve shared over the last few chapters support Harding et al.’s suspicions and concerns, as I’ve also found that the terms associated with writing instruction are not always evident as one of learners’ linguistic resources for discussing their experience of FYC and feedback.

Harding et al. then conceptualize feedback as a “‘boundary object’ (Star & Griesemer, 1989), an interactive space in which words and actions—and deeper still, meaning and motivation—are explored and negotiated to facilitate collaboration (or not)” (pp. 75–76). To their parenthetical “or not,” the authors add that “boundary objects can facilitate or inhibit students’ writerly development” (p. 81). The affordance of a boundary object, then, according to Harding et al., is its interactivity that allows for the exploration and negotiation of meaning. Its constraint, again according to Harding et al., is also its interactivity, which might instead inhibit growth when feedback “act[s] more as input to be processed through students’ existing schemas” (p. 75) due to a misalignment between learner and instructor language for writing and feedback.



Their resulting recommendations, which they base on what they see as feedback's variable nature as both facilitator and barrier, are to:

- 1) "create a shared language for talking about writing" (p. 97),
- 2) "establish a dialogue around feedback" (p. 98), and
- 3) "increase transparency about feedback" (p. 98).

My own recommendations mirror these in many ways, not least because I clearly agree with the authors' emphasis on increasing our awareness of learners' existing resources. However, I struggle with the utility of a concept ("boundary object") that depends entirely upon some other element or formation—i.e., learners "established vocabulary and action framework" (p. 75)—in order to realize its benefits. I want to agree entirely with Harding et al.'s work on feedback as a boundary object, but I first need to challenge their conceptual sense of how boundary objects function as forms and also make explicit the ecological nature of their argument.

Certainly, any given form can feature an affordance that under certain conditions may also or instead function as a constraint. As Caroline Levine (2015) notes in her new formalist approach to literary and cultural analysis, forks can both stab and scoop (p. 6), and containers can both include and exclude (p. 39). But in these cases, the makeup of the fork or the container doesn't influence how an affordance is deployed: a fork with sufficient fork-ness to allow for scooping will also allow for stabbing. Likewise for the container. In Harding et al.'s conceptualization of a "boundary object," though, the formation at hand, which consists of instructor feedback, "can facilitate *or* inhibit dialogic interactions on the boundary of student writing" (p. 79, emphasis added). This is a claim about boundary objects which the authors report is in keeping with "broader research about boundary objects that critiques their presumed productive function and suggests instead that boundary objects embody a dual potential to either

facilitate or inhibit progress” (p. 81). However, I find that in the first of two sources cited at this point, Carlile’s (2002) discussion of boundary objects points to “the characteristics of effective ones” (p. 443), distinguishing “the difference between a good and a bad boundary object” (p. 451). In the second source, Fox (2011) doesn’t suggest that a single boundary object might both facilitate and inhibit, but instead notes that some forms function as “effective boundary objects” (p. 73) and some do not, with effective boundary objects consistently “enhanc[ing] the capacity of an idea, theory or practice to translate across culturally defined boundaries” (p. 71). When a form’s exclusive affordance—in this case, productive interactivity for community building and growth—isn’t realized, I have to conclude that the item in question doesn’t function as the form in question. Therefore, I’ll suggest that a “bad” (Carlile, p. 451) or “negative” (Fox, p. 75) boundary object isn’t actually a boundary object. So while I agree with Harding et al. that instructor feedback has the *potential* to function as a boundary object, I don’t believe that feedback functions as such a formation simply by virtue of it being feedback.

Another look at the origin of the concept not only recenters the affordances of boundary objects as detailed by Harding et al., but introduces additional approaches for application. Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer (1989) make it clear through their distinctly (and maybe prescient) formalist description that boundary objects are forms in a Levinian sense of the term: not only are they “both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites,” but they are “a means of *translation*” (p. 393, emphasis added). The implication of this definition for feedback on writing is that if we can realize FYC and the feedback given as a boundary object that’s adaptable, robust, and a means of translation, learners and instructors should be better positioned to engage in feedback encounters that affirm voices and facilitate growth. I believe

this is what Harding et al. desire, and what motivates their three conclusions outlined above. One of these—“create a shared language for talking about writing” (p. 97)—responds in part to what they saw as failed attempts at translation of feedback on the part of students, as they point out that in their interviews they saw “students’ perceived feedback on their ideas as pointing to problems in translation” (p. 93). Here, the solution to a boundary object that affords insufficient translation seems to be translation. In addition to being circular, *this line of thinking assumes the only language or text worth translating in a feedback encounter is the instructor’s*. I suggest that a return to Star and Griesemer’s conceptualization of boundary object might re-situate feedback as more dialogic than Harding et al.’s application of the concept allows.

In my own study, it was Black students in particular who spoke directly of the additional labor involved in recognizing and accommodating failed translation. Max shared, “You know, it doesn’t translate well, sometimes [...] because, you know, the way we talk.” And Destiny summarized a specific instance of corrective feedback by saying, “I guess it just doesn’t really translate too well.” In both cases, the work of translation required learner and instructor to arrive at a shared understanding, but in both cases Max and Destiny framed the failure not as theirs or even their instructor’s, but of their language. Instead, FYC feedback on language use as a boundary object would enable that translation, re-placing learners of color and other students with historically marginalized discourses in the FYC economy. Indeed, Max’s “If you do get where I’m at, you’re right there,” in evoking the very collaborative, interactive, engaging nature of a boundary object as posited by Harding et al., makes it clear that learners are waiting for their FYC readers—instructors and peers—to not only get where learners are at, but to actually be there with them. Indeed, Star and Griesemer also focus on boundary objects affording “coherence,” especially in the face of “radically different meanings” (p. 362), leading them to

theorize the museum under study as a boundary object in part because such forms “act as anchors or bridges,” and “are not simply the imposition of one world’s vision on the rest” (p. 414). One evident implication of these additional characteristics is that instructor feedback does not typically function as a boundary object in part because that feedback so frequently violates this final characteristic: that is, feedback *is* often the imposition of one world’s vision on the rest.

Finally, it’s worth noting that Star and Griesemer’s development of the concept of boundary objects derives from their ecological analysis of an early zoological museum’s development, extending and building upon concerns within the area of “institutional ecology.” Within the field of composition studies, ecological analysis was most thoroughly developed by Margaret A. Syverson (1999) in her *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*. While Star and Griesemer’s focus is on the museum as a translating entity within a complex system of stakeholders, Syverson’s is on composition as one such complex system. Here, much of Syverson’s language for positioning various elements of the composing process parallels that used in Star and Griesemer’s analysis, most notably through both texts’ reference to specific forms as “bridges” (Syverson, p. 75). Syverson also employs the verb “coordinate” in order to describe complex “composing situations, particularly in educational settings,” highlighting the intensely collaborative nature of such situations by adding, “The concept of coordination helps us see the mutual effects—on the part of the individual or a particular system and its environment—as they ‘co-adapt’” (p. 120).

### ***FYC and Rural Writing Ecosystems***

What prompts Syverson’s approach to analysis is reflected in her admonition that “we cannot cling to our familiar, comfortable assumptions about writers, readers, and texts, or we will find ourselves increasingly irrelevant and even obstructive” (p. 27). This concern may be even

more pronounced today than it was twenty years ago, especially in rural North American spaces where the urban-aligned construct of higher education is being challenged by those who see our work in this light. In their *Rural Literacies*, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell (2007) foreground the ecological concept of “sustainability” to establish rural literacies as a site for managing this friction in a way that leads to social (more than economic) sustainability. As Donehower et al. note, those who rail against standard-bearing urban-aligned entities such as institutions of education are not wrong for associating the urban with the middle class (p. 17) and literacy (p. 22), as well as the standardization and violence that introduced class-specific values via literacy during civilizing missions across the rural U.S. (p. 23). As is also detailed in Joel Spring’s (2007) *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, “civilizing” literacy campaigns across the rural nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States sought to impose not only urban standards of literacy but urban values, meaning that higher education’s presence in rural spaces reiterates historically oppressive efforts regarding language and culture.

Rather than simply throw up barriers between the urban and rural (both literally and conceptually), Donehower et al.—especially Donehower (2007) in her contribution “Rhetorics and Realities”—promote “facilitating appropriative relationships between literacy sponsors and sponsees [...] to moderate the tensions of the struggles for identities and identifications inherent in rural literacy work” (p. 72). That the authors “encourage appropriation” as opposed to “assimilation” (p. 75) or pure rejection evokes the need for coordination, and Donehower promotes higher education as a site for such coordination. However, if our feedback, FYC, and higher education as a whole refuse to function as a coordinating boundary object in the rural literacy economy, we’ll continue to be seen, per Donehower et al., as imposing urbanizing

constructs that seek to transform, embalm, or erase rural lives and spaces, leaving us, as Syverson would warn, “irrelevant” and “obstructive.”

Such coordination would benefit from some shared language, as suggested by Harding et al. This doesn’t necessarily need to be the language of FYC, though we should recognize the need to be more explicit about the terms we use, the processes we undertake, and the materials we produce relative to feedback in that instructional context. After all, as seen in Chapter Five especially, learner language for instructor feedback was a common stumbling block for study participants, potentially preventing them from feeling confident enough to speak with authority on a topic that they lack the confidence to name, while also potentially limiting learners’ ability to describe the experience of and the emotions attached to corrective feedback on their language use. At the same time, as Gere et al. posit in their work on critical language awareness, we need to “invite students to explore [...] rather than follow along a pre-paved path” (p. 380). In other words, to slightly complicate one of Harding et al.’s recommendations, learner acquisition of a predetermined FYC discourse shouldn’t have to be a prerequisite to engaging with feedback.

Such coordination would also benefit from an awareness and an appropriate exploitation of the material and cognitive resources learners bring to FYC feedback encounters. Though they do not speak explicitly to the ecological foundations of the ideas they’re developing, Harding et al. suggest that conceptualizing feedback as a boundary object invites a “framework [that] accounts for the student, the teacher, the normative and institutional context, the feedback itself, and related interactions and processes” (p. 82). This proposed framework echoes Syverson’s concept of writing ecologies, which posits that “writers, readers, and texts” are a complex system within “a larger system that includes environmental structures, such as pens, paper, computers, [etc.], and other natural and human-constructed features, as well as other complex systems

operating at various levels of scale, such as families, global economies, publishing systems, theoretical frames, academic disciplines, and language itself” (p. 5). In the current study, the first example of the kinds of learner resources we might better understand and take appropriate advantage of was introduced in Chapter Five. Nicole’s unpacking of the feedback she’d received to make her writing “more mature” illustrates her ongoing access to and reliance upon the lessons learned from high school and other contexts in order to make sense of FYC instructor feedback. Additional examples populate the first portion of the current chapter and suggest an almost limitless range of options for re-centering learners in our instruction, issuing FYC as not the primary but an additional tool for “facilitating appropriative relationships” (Donehower, p. 72) among rural learners and open-access higher education.

An awareness of what learners bring to FYC would allow not only for opportunities within FYC to prompt the calling up of such resources, but for critical examination of where these resources came from, and what they mean. The various elements of learners’ writing ecosystems interface with their FYC feedback encounters. This is simply the case, as Christie Toth (2023) also posits in her *Transfer in an Urban Writing Ecology*, in which she suggests “an ecological framework has the capacity to decenter the [college or university]—and, for that matter, [...] the entire academic enterprise” (p. 41). To the extent that instructors are not privy to these elements of adult learners’ ecosystems, we’re missing opportunities for the feedback encounter to function differently for learners, in ways that affirm diverse identities by prioritizing the dialogic elements of feedback, and which in turn may require FYC itself to function as a more malleable and co-constructed coordinating space within higher education. Syverson likewise advocates for such co-adaption: “The concept of coordination helps us see the mutual

effects—on the part of the individual or a particular system and its environment—as they ‘co-adapt’” (p. 120). And so, to Harding et al.’s three recommendations, I’ll add:

- 4) be ready to meet learners in and through their language,
- 5) make space for learners to take the lead in articulating feedback needs, and
- 6) create an FYC curriculum that co-adapts with learners.

By imagining open-access FYC as a site of multiple “boundary objects” (and other formations) we might not only engage adult learners as agential partners in literacy building but transform rural, access-oriented institutions from prompting in adult learners “a period of disillusionment or even shock” (Risquez et al., 2007, p. 190) due to “a sense of cultural displacement in university [and college] environments” (Donehower, p. 76) to, instead, “inspir[ing] students to examine and/or generate language choices that push the boundaries of possibility in academic writing” (Gere et al., p. 380). In other words, we might move away from the internalized “linguistic hegemony” discussed by Baker-Bell (p. 59) and illustrated here by Jenny and Regulus.

**JENNY:** If you don’t have, have a semicolon up in that you gonna have a problem.

**REGULUS:** For real.

**JENNY:** Nor [does my instructor] like it when I talk like that.

**JMK:** Why?

**JENNY:** Because it’s not their language! <laughing and banging on table and clapping>

[...] But I mean I would never do it in my essay, of course.

And we might instead make space for what Gere et al. imagine via “innovation and subversion, through investigation of emerging and evolving forms of language” (p. 380), illustrated here by Max.



**MAX:** I like to use grammar almost like, incorrectly, because I feel like it gives you a better idea of like-

**PHIN:** -Mmhm-

**MAX:** -How I'm saying it.

Within this study's three domains, I coded for themes focusing on feedback classification, daily writing practices and technologies, self-assessments and established writing processes, literacy sponsors, desire for instructive feedback, learned resilience and other influences on feedback experiences, and beliefs about learner language and instructor feedback. Taken together, these adult FYC learners' rural writing ecologies reflect rural, FYC-contextualized theories on language feedback as derived from lived experiences amongst complex systems of literacy.

The biological term "ecology" has been used as a framing metaphor within sociological discussions of institutional interactions since the 1930s (Hughes, 2009), "writing ecologies" have been studied within composition studies since the 1980s (Cooper, 1986), and books on ecological concepts within literary studies are being published today (Griffiths & Kreisel, 2023). Although I refer in the previous paragraph and in the last half of this chapter to discipline-specific approaches to *ecological* analysis, I have, for the most part, referred instead to adult FYC learners' rural writing *ecosystems*. I've made this distinction for several reasons, but the most relevant are these.

First, as Toth acknowledges, not only are "writing ecologies [...] shaped by social inequities bound up in coloniality, [but] such structures have shaped the literature on writing ecologies, as well" (p. 29). She points, as an example, to David M. Grant's work regarding "new materialist scholars' failure to acknowledge longstanding Indigenous traditions of relationality"

(p. 29). This failure is likewise illustrated in the recent CCC article “I Am Not Your Teaching Moment: The Benevolent Gaslight and Epistemic Violence” (Prasad & Maraj, 2022). This sociohistorical reality led Toth to “agonize” (p. 30) over her use of the term “ecology,” given the hyper-rational and colonial origins of the concept as well as its misuse (e.g., in social Darwinism). My concerns are similar. Likewise, within the field of composition studies, approaches to writing ecologies have often disregarded activities and elements that are seen by scholars—if not learners—as “peripheral to the composing situation,” including family (Syverson, 1999, p. 113).

Second and more substantive in terms of this project, to the extent that the term ecology remains a familiar and accepted analytical concept within the discipline, it’s just that: an approach to analysis. Although conceiving of an ecosystem assumes some level of interpretation in drawing its borders, an ecology is necessarily analytical and interpretive and is the work of one who not only knows what constitutes an ecosystem but conceives of how the elements within that ecosystem interact, co-exist, and co-evolve. In other words, while I echo Toth’s desire to use ecological thinking to honor the lived experiences of learners and the co-constitutiveness of our learning environments, I attempt through my use of the term ecosystem to reflect the fact that learners’ ecosystems exist for them, from learners’ perspectives.

Analysis of the interrelation among elements within an ecosystem to draw conclusions has been done by composition ecologists from Cooper (1986) to Toth (2023). And although in this study I’ve engaged in analytical work *pertaining* to the elements of adult FYC learners’ rural writing ecosystems, even promoting awareness of those elements in redefining curricula and instruction, I have not conducted an ecological analysis that “consider[s] connections, relationships, flows and dynamics of change over time,” as Syverson (2008) defines the process

(p. 110). However, where the learner-participants in this study did this work of analytical consideration—most notably in their theorizing earlier in this chapter about feedback, language, and feedback on language—I do refer to participants’ framing and analysis as ecological, as learners’ analyses of their own ecosystems.

### **Chapter and Project Conclusions and Implications**

This project was an attempt at clarifying for myself and for my disciplinary colleagues how experiences of corrective feedback function in the lives of FYC learners. For in spite of a broader acceptance that we need to move, as Sommers (2012) suggests, “beyond the red ink,” departmental rubrics across FYC programs—and indeed grading criteria across disciplines and institutions—demonstrate that writing is being evaluated for its “clarity.” Clarity and its partner criteria “correctness” and “coherence” are not objectively bad, but without additional context let alone instruction, they do silently demand adherence to a single standard for language.

I’ve long struggled with my instructional approach to that single standard of grammar and language use in my FYC context. My early pedagogy was shaped not only by Delpit and Elbow, but by my witnessing of the ways in which feedback encounters were felt as—and occasionally led to—violence. These scholars and students helped me recognize early on that while corrective feedback on language use is effective and even sought after, the benefits to learning may not be realized if the affective experience is negative, which is to say nothing of the fact that the learners I seek to help are instead hurt. My concern for individual learner’s physical and psychic safety was amplified by my recognition—thanks to sociolinguistically-informed scholarship within composition studies—of the additional threat of structural violence. I recognized that telling a writer that their language needs to change in order to help them acquire the linguistic components of a dominant discursive identity—“to master the dialects of power”

(Elbow, 2003c, p. 325)—served to strengthen the power of White discourses in particular and smacked of historical colonizing efforts at spreading or increasing literacy.

My primary concern about the potential violences of our work in FYC was and continues to be informed by feminist writing studies and cultural studies scholarship (Stuckey, 1991; Worsham, 1998; Strickland & Crawford, 2003; Ahmed, 2004; Dolezal, 2015; Baker-Bell, 2020; Rose, 2022). The most formative takeaways for me, then, come as a result of these last few chapters' conclusions that consider learners' experiences and desires relative to the FYC feedback encounter in light of their writing ecosystems, especially as these either challenge or support the scholarship that influences my beliefs regarding feedback. What I found is that the corrective feedback experience of the participants in this study both fell short of and transcended the metanoia-prompted (Myers), transformative kinds of learning experiences I anticipated.

Confirming the concerns of Strickland and Crawford (2003) that I introduced in Chapter One, two connected major findings of this chapter suggest the inescapability of the histories and norms that accompany learners into our classrooms. Rather than strictly concerning, though, I find these generative and hopeful, given what I found to be their scope:

- The writing ecosystems of this study's participants consist of a complex network of material and cognitive resources and realities that these mostly adult, rural learners bring to their FYC experience. The elements of learners' lives that influence their sense of what matters, and that inform their self-assessments and other beliefs are often invisible to us but are no less present as learners make decisions about their writing and about themselves.
- Among these elements are personal histories—which are heavily influenced by high school experiences—and neurological disorders and other disabilities, all of which may

be silent or invisible, but which the participants in this study heavily foreground as they conceptualize their experience in FYC.

These ecosystems are not limited to the people in learners' presents and pasts, but also include the "environmental structures, such as pens, paper, computers, books, telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, printing presses, and other natural and human-constructed features" (Syverson, 1999, p. 5). Among participants who expressed a preference for or a facility with digital composing technologies in particular, the impact of digital tools relative to language use became evident during focus group and interview discussion. Specifically, I conclude:

- Learners who might otherwise employ something other than SWE—such as African American Vernacular English—are alert to the language-specific affordances of digital word processing and of browser extensions such as Grammarly, and as a result of accepting the suggestions that come from these sources ultimately are less likely to submit written work that is reflective of their discursive identities.

As this study has shown, adult learners in particular are robustly equipped with established beliefs and strategies regarding writing, and they know what they want (and, to a large extent, what they need) from us in terms of feedback on their writing and language use. They want feedback that's specific and instructive, and that doesn't shy away from sentence-level suggestions. They also wish for conversations and relationships, in part to prevent or restrict what they feel is instructors' impersonal and *uninformed* corrective feedback on language use. (An illustration of this is Jane's distinction in this chapter between "careless mistakes" that invite "nitpicking" and the "writing voice" that she believes should not be corrected.)

As I suggest above, the seemingly conflicting desires for both the feedback scenario illustrated by Max, and a limitation on corrective feedback on language use expressed by others,

may be due to the disciplinary and pedagogical silence that Delpit (1988, 1995) warns us of, and that Stolley (2007), Matsuda (2012), and Myhill and Watson (2014) locate across composition studies and aligned fields. One significant consequence of learners' silence-situated desire for feedback is their conflation and dysfunctional appropriation of the concept of grammar.

Grammar holds a nearly mythical status for the learners in this study: it is a concept that feels incredibly important yet rarely gets explicitly defined or otherwise unpacked via instruction.

And, as I demonstrate above, it's the participants of color and particularly Black adult participants who evoke the concept of "grammar" most often to classify and otherwise conceptualize their FYC feedback experience. The same silence that feeds into grammar's mythical status is what underlies Destiny's comment as we spoke about the experience of language correction for marginalized learners: "I wish that this was something that was talked about more." This desire echoes what Shapiro and Watson propose is students' desire "to see their teachers acknowledge and address the racism underlying [linguistic] injustice" (p. 294). Given all of this, and in light of my analysis of Harding et al.'s study regarding feedback as boundary object, I conclude:

- We mustn't insist, in our instruction or in our response to learners, upon continued silence about grammar and language use. Baker-Bell offers one model for how to make language instruction explicit.
- We must develop instruction that builds upon and supports learners' existing approaches to and attitudes about writing and language. Beyond honoring students' right to their own language, we should honor students' existing writing strategies and attitudes.
- FYC instructional spaces should coordinate learners' established beliefs, strategies, and resources with the affordances of higher education to realize desired growth for learners

and sustainable change for institutions. As Toth likewise proposes, in doing this work, “faculty can decenter the institutions that are the focus of their professional lives to recenter students and their movements within a broader society” (p. 48).

Informed both by this study’s findings and by Gleason (2015), St. Clair (2015), and other adult educators, it’s clear that adult first-semester community college students come to the instructional context of FYC already identifying as writers and with tools and other resources at their disposal for meeting their writing goals. The role of feedback in this instructional scenario should therefore be a dialogic extension of instruction, in which learners assume the agential role of prompting feedback from instructors and peers alike. In other words, instructors should assume that learners will have some sense of what they need and want from feedback, and should request that learners provide direction and goals for the feedback given to them. To the extent that learners don’t have the ability or willingness to articulate their feedback needs, instruction should create sufficient space for learners to articulate what they do know and believe, so that a shared conceptual and terminological understanding of the collaborative writing process can be established. As Harding et al. suggest, instructors should make their feedback practices and content explicit, breaking the silence, as Strickland and Crawford proposed, “about grammar” (p. 79). Likewise, instructional mechanisms should allow for continued conversation about observations made via feedback. Classroom instruction—as suggested by Bella’s desire for instructors to take “the whole dang class period” to review points from feedback—seems an ideal mechanism.

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, C., & Eubanks, P. (2005). How academics and practitioners evaluate technical texts: A focus group study. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 19(2), 171–218.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.
- Andelora, J. (2007). The professionalization of two-year college English faculty: 1950–1990. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 35(1), 6–19.
- Andrews, R., Torgerson, C., Beverton, S., Freeman, A., Locke, T., Low, G., Robinson, A., & Zhu, D. (2006). The effect of grammar teaching on writing development. *British Education Research Journal*, 32(1), 39–55.
- Arnold, J. (2019). The importance of affect in language learning. *Neofilolog*, 52(1), 11–14.
- Atkinson, J. M. & Heritage, J. (2006). Jefferson's transcription notations. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (2nd ed.) (pp. 158–165). Routledge.
- Auerbach, E. (1990). Toward a transformative model of worker education: A Freirean perspective. In S. H. London (Ed.), *The re-education of the American working class* (pp. 225–237). Greenwood.
- Azamnouri, N., Pishghadam, R., & Meidani, E. N. (2020). The role of emotioncy in cognitive load and sentence comprehension of language learners. *Issues in Language Teaching*, 9(1), 29–55.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Ballenger, B., & Myers, K. (2019). The emotional work of revision. *College Composition and Communication*, 70(4), 590–614.



- Banks, W. P., Cox, M. B., & Dadas, C. (2019). *Re/orienting writing studies: Queer methods, queer projects*. Utah State University Press.
- Bartholomae, D. (2005). *Writing on the margins: Essays on composition and teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bell, S. R. (2021a). *Mapping racial literacies: College students write about race and segregation*. Utah State University Press.
- Bell, S. R. (2021b). “Your grammar is all over the place”: Translingual close reading, anti-blackness, and racial literacy among multilingual student writers in first year writing. *Composition Forum*, 47.
- Berlin, J. (1987). *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges 1900–1985*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Bizzell, P., & Fish, S. (2009). Composition studies saves the world! [with response]. *Profession*, 94–104.
- Blaauw-Hara, M. (2007). Mapping the frontier: A survey of twenty years of grammar articles in *TETYC. Teaching English in the Two Year College*, 35(1), 30–40.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. (J. Brookshire, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 1984)
- Bowden, D. (2018). Comments on student papers: Student perspectives. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 11(1), 1–17.

- Bowles, B. (2020). The texts within the context: Examining the influence of contextual documents on students' interpretations of teachers' written feedback. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 6(1), pp. 6–41.
- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brannon, L., & Knoblauch, C. H. (1982). On students' rights to their own texts: A model of teacher response. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 157–166.
- Bridwell-Bowles, L. (2003). Discourse and diversity: Experimental writing within the academy. In G. E. Kirsch, F. S. Maor, L. Massey, L. Nickoson-Massey, & M. P. Sheridan-Rabideau (Eds.), *Feminism and composition: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 294–313). Bedford.
- Britannica Dictionary. (n.d.). Take. In *Britannica dictionary*. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/take>
- Brown, A. H., Cervero, R. M., & Johnson-Bailey, J. (2000). Making the invisible visible: Race, gender, and teaching in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(4), 273–288.
- Brown, T. (2020). What else do we know? Translingualism and the history of SRTOL as threshold concepts in our field. *College Composition and Communication*, 71(4), 591–619.
- Bucholtz, M. (2007). Variation in transcription. *Discourse Studies*, 9(6), 784–808.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-), 585–614.
- Burke, K. B. (1984). *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose* (3rd rev. ed.). University of California Press.

- Butler, P. (2010). Style and the public intellectual: Rethinking composition in the public sphere. In P. Butler (Ed.), *Style in rhetoric and composition: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 389–409). Bedford.
- Calhoon-Dillahunt, C., & Forrest, D. (2013). Conversing in marginal spaces: Developmental writers' responses to teacher comments. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 40(3), 230–247.
- Caouette, B. L. (2012). On the college front: Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, grammars, and the teaching of grammar" and the composition of anthology. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 27(2), 57–62.
- Carlile, P. R. (2002). A pragmatic view of knowledge and boundaries: Boundary objects in new product development. *Organization Science*, 13(4), 442–455.
- Carter, S. (2008). *The way literacy lives*. SUNY Press.
- Castellano, M. (1997). "It's not your skills, it's the test": Gatekeepers for women in the skilled trades. In G. Hull (Ed.), *Changing work, changing workers: Critical perspectives on language, literacy, and skills* (pp. 189–213). SUNY Press.
- Chong, S. W. (2020). Theorizing ESL community college students' perception of written feedback. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 44(6), 463–467.
- Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education*, 55, 425–446.
- Collins, G., & Norris, J. (2017). Written language performance following embedded grammar instruction. *Reading Horizons*, 56(3), 16–30.

- Colombini, C. B., & McBride, M. (2012). “Storming and norming”: Exploring the value of group development models in addressing conflict in communal writing assessment. *Assessing Writing*, 17, 191–207.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (1974). Students’ right to their own language. *College Composition and Communication*, 25, 1–32.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2022). Students’ right to their own language (with bibliography). College Composition and Communication.  
<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/srtolsummary>
- Cooper, M. (1986). The ecology of writing. *College English*, 48(4), 364–375.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people’s children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 53(3), 280–298.
- Delpit, L. (1992). Acquisition of literate discourse: Bowing before the master? *Theory Into Practice*, 31(4), 296–302.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. W.W. Norton.
- Denecker, C. (2020). Closing the gap? A study into the professional development of concurrent enrollment writing instructors in Ohio. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 48(1), 66–87.
- DePalma, M., & Alexander, K. P. (2015). A bag full of snakes: Negotiating the challenges of multimodal composition. *Computers and Composition*, 37, 182–200.
- Depeche Mode. (1989). Enjoy the silence [Song]. On *Violator*. Sire.

Devitt, A. (1989). *Standardizing written English: Diffusion in the case of Scotland 1520–1659*.

Cambridge UP.

Dewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*.

The Free Press.

Dewey, J. (1980). *Art as experience*. Perigree.

Dewey, J. (2015). *Experience and education*. Free Press.

Dolezal, L. (2015). *The body and shame: Phenomenology, feminism, and the socially shaped body*. Lexington Books.

Donehower, K. (2007). Rhetorics and realities: The history and effects of stereotypes about rural literacies. In K. Donehower, C. Hogg, & E. E. Schell (Eds.), *Rural literacies* (pp. 37–76).

Southern Illinois University Press.

Donehower, K., Hogg, C., Schell, E. E. (2007). *Rural literacies*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dornan, R. W., Rosen, L. M., & Wilson, M. (2002). *Within and beyond the writing process in the secondary English classroom*. Allyn and Bacon.

Dowden, T., Pittaway, S., Yost, H., & McCarthy, R. (2013). Students' perceptions of written feedback in teacher education: Ideally feedback is a continuing two-way communication that encourages progress. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(3), 349–362.  
10.1080/02602938.2011.632676

Drago-Severson, E., & Blum-DeStefano, J. (2016). *Tell me so I can hear you: A developmental approach to feedback for educators*. Harvard Education Press.

- Elbow, P. (2000a). Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard: Reflections on the inability to write. In P. Elbow, *Everyone can write: Essays toward a hopeful theory of writing and teaching writing* (pp. 5–27). Oxford University Press.
- Elbow, P. (2000b). *Everyone can write: Essays toward a hopeful theory of writing and teaching writing*. Oxford University Press.
- Elbow, P. (2000c). Inviting the mother tongue. In P. Elbow, *Everyone can write: Essays toward a hopeful theory of writing and teaching writing* (pp. 323–350). Oxford University Press.
- Elbow, P. (2003). Foreword. In D. Jacobs & L. R. Micciche (Eds.), *A way to move: Rhetorics of emotion & composition studies* (pp. vii–ix). Boynton/Cook Heinemann.
- Ellwanger, A. (2020). *Metanoia: Rhetoric, authenticity, and the transformation of self*. Penn State UP.
- Estep, J. (2021). When tenure doesn't exist: A case study of NTT faculty at a tenure-free institution. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 48(3), A8–A23.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Fox, N. J. (2011). Boundary objects, social meanings and the success of new technologies. *Sociology*, 45(1), 70–85.
- Freire, P. (2009). *Education for critical consciousness*. Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (D. P. Macedo, Trans., 30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.
- Fujishin, R. (2007). *Creating effective groups: The art of small group communication* (2nd ed.). Rowman and Littlefield.
- García, R., & Kern, D. (2022). The stories we tell and don't tell from the writing center. In F. Condon & W. Faison (Eds.), *Counterstories from the writing center* [eBook edition]

(n.p.). University Press of Colorado. <https://books.google.com/books?id=R-pcEAAAQBAJ>

- Garrett, P., & Young, R. F. (2009). Theorizing affect in foreign language learning: An analysis of one learner's responses to a communicative Portuguese course. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(2), 209–226.
- Gee, J. P. (1989a). Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: An introduction. *The Journal of Education*, 171(1), 5–25.
- Gee, J. P. (1989b). What is literacy? *Journal of Education*, 171(1), 18–25.
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Gee, T. C. (1972). Students' responses to teacher comments. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 6(2), 212–221.
- Gere, A. R., Curzan, A., Hammond, J. W., Hughes, S., Li, R., Moos, A., Smith, K., Van Zanen, K., Wheeler, K., & Zanders, C. J. (2022). Response to Shawna Shapiro. *College Composition and Communication*, 74(2), 379–387.
- Gleason, B. (2015). Adult learners in US postsecondary education: A brief overview. In B. Gleason & K. Nuckles (Eds.), *The Bedford bibliography for teachers of adult learners* (pp. 7–19). Bedford/St. Martin's and Macmillan.
- Gold, D., Day, J., & Raw, A. E. (2020). Who's afraid of Facebook? A survey of students' online writing practices. *College Composition and Communication*, 72(1), 4–30.
- Graff, G. (1993). *Beyond the culture wars: How teaching the conflicts can revitalize American education*. Norton.

- Griffiths, D., & Kreisel, D. (2023). *After Darwin: Literature, theory, and criticism in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gross, D. M. (2016). *The secret history of emotions: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science*. Chicago University Press.
- Gross, D., & Alexander, J. (2016). Frameworks for failure. *Pedagogy*, 16(2), 273–295.
- Hairston, M. (1985). Breaking our bonds and reaffirming our connections. *College Composition and Communication*, 36(3), 272–282.
- Hairston, M. (1992). Diversity, ideology, and teaching writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 43(2), 179–193.
- Han, Y., & Hyland, F. (2019). Academic emotions in written corrective feedback situations. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 38, 1–13.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Harding, J., Pauszek, J., Pollard, N., & Parks, S. (2018). Alliances, assemblages, and affects: Three moments of building collective working-class literacies. *College Composition and Communication*, 70(1), 6–29.
- Harding, L., King, J., Bonanno, A., & Powell, J. (2022). Feedback as boundary object: Intersections of writing, response, and research. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 8(2), 73–105.
- Hartwell, P. (1985). Grammar, grammars, and the teaching of grammar. *College English*, 47(2), 105–127.



- Hassel, H., & Giordano, J. B. (2013). Occupy writing studies: Rethinking college composition for the needs of the teaching majority. *College Composition and Communication*, 65(1), 17–39.
- Haswell, R. H. (2005). NCTE/CCCC's recent war on scholarship. *Written Communication*, 22(2), 198–223.
- Heinz, B. (2003). Backchannel responses as strategic responses in bilingual speakers' conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35(7), 1113–1142.
- Hoggan, C. D., & Browning, B. (2019). *Transformational learning in community colleges: Charting a course for academic and personal success*. Harvard Education Press.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.
- Hughes, E. C. *The sociological eye: Selected papers* (3rd printing). Transaction Publishers.
- Ikpia, V. I. (2005). The attitudes and perceptions of non-native English speaking adults toward explicit grammar instruction. *Humanities Review Journal*, 5, 1-13.
- Inoue, A. B. (2015). *Antiracist writing assessment ecologies: Teaching and assessing writing for a socially just future*. The WAC Clearinghouse.
- Inoue, A. B. (2020). Stories about grading contracts, or how do I like through the violence I've done? *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 13(2). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zw9h7p9>
- Inoue, A. B. (2021). *Above the well: An antiracist literacy argument from a boy of color*. WAC Clearinghouse.
- Jacobs, D., & Micciche, L. R. (2003). *A way to move: Rhetorics of emotion & composition studies*. Boynton/Cook Heinemann.
- Jamestown Community College. (2022). *College catalog*.

- Janesick, V. J. (2003). The choreography of qualitative research design: Minuets, improvisations, and crystalization. In N. K. Denizen & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.) (pp. 46–79). Sage.
- Jarrett, R. L. (1993). Focus group interviewing with low-income minority populations: A research experience. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 184–201). Sage.
- Jensen, D. L., Calhoon-Dillahunt, C., Griffiths, B., & Toth, C. (2021). Embracing the democratic promise: Transforming two-year colleges and writing studies through professional engagement. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 55–66.
- Johnson, R. C., & Riazi, A. M. (2017). Validation of a locally created and rated writing test used for placement in a higher education EFL program. *Assessing Writing*, 32, 85–104.
- Jones, S., Myhill, D., & Bailey, T. (2013). Grammar for writing? An investigation of the effects of contextualised grammar teaching on students' writing. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 26(8), 1241–1263.
- Keevallik, L., & Ogden, R. (2020). Sounds on the margins of language at the heart of interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 53(1), 1–18.
- Koester, A. & Handford, M. (2018). “It’s not good saying ‘Well it it might do that or it might not’”: Hypothetical reported speech in business meetings. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 130, 67–80.
- Kreth, M., Crawford, M. A., Taylor, M., & Brockman, E. (2010). Situated assessment: Limitations and promise. *Assessing Writing*, 15, 40–59.
- Krueger, R. A. (1997). *Analyzing and reporting focus group results*. Sage.
- Krueger, R. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage.

- Laflen, A. (2023, February 15–18). *"I want them to look at the feedback": FYC instructors as designers of multimodal feedback* [Conference session]. 2023 Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Laver, J. (1975). Communicative functions of phatic communion. In A. Kendon, R. M. Harris, & M. R. Key (Eds.), *Organization of behavior in face-to-face interaction* (pp. 215–238). Mouton Publishers.
- LeBlanc, R. J. (2019). Pedagogic ventriloquation: Projected constructed direct reported speech in teacher talk. *Language & Communication*, 64, 25–37.
- Lee, J. W., & Jenks, C. (2016). Doing translingual dispositions. *College Composition and Communication*, 68(2), 317–344.
- Levine, C. (2015). *Forms: Whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network*. Princeton University Press.
- Li, J., & Lindsey, P. (2015). Understanding variations between student and teacher application of rubrics. *Assessing Writing*, 26, 67–79.
- Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principles and practice*. Sage.
- Llamas, C. & Watt, D. (2009). *Language and identities*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Lunsford, A. A., & Ede, L. (1990). Rhetoric in a new key: Women and collaboration. *Rhetoric Review*, 8(2), 234–241.
- Lyiscott, J. (2015a). *Cyphers for justice* [Prezi slides]. <https://prezi.com/hst6rfzfgyiz/cyphers-for-justice>
- Lyiscott, J. (2015b). *How broken English made me whole: Exploring race, new literacies, and social justice within a youth participatory action research framework*. [Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University.] ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

- Lyiscott, J. (2016, February 22). *How broken English made me whole: The politics of race and language* [Presentation]. Jamestown Community College, Olean, NY.
- Lyiscott, J. (2017). Racial identity and liberation literacies in the classroom. *English Journal*, 106(4), 47–53.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman G. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Martin, S., & Valdivia, I. (2017). Students' feedback beliefs and anxiety in online foreign language oral tasks. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 14(1), 1-15.
- Matravers, L. S. (2008). *A fractured conversation: The professional, scholarly, and disciplinary identities of two-year college writing faculty*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville.] ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Matsuda, P. K. (2012). Let's face it: Language issues and the writing program administrator. *WPA*, 36(1), 141–163.
- McCarty, T. L., & Watahomigie, L. J. (2001). Language and literacy in American Indian and Alaska native communities. E. Cushman, E. R. Kintgen, B. M. Kroll, & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 488–507). Bedford.
- McEwan-Fujita, E. (2010). Ideology, affect, and socialization in language shift and revitalization: The experiences of adults learning Gaelic in the Western Isles of Scotland. *Language in Society*, 39(1), 27–64.
- McLeod, S., Horn, H., & Haswell, R. H. (2005). Accelerated classes and the writers at the bottom: A local assessment story. *College Composition and Communication*, 56(4), 556–580.

- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12.
- Miettinen, R. (2000). The concept of experiential learning and John Dewey's theory of reflective thought and action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(1), 54–72.
- Miller, B. (2014). Mapping the methods of composition/rhetoric dissertations: A “landscape plotted and pieced.” *College Composition and Communication*, 66(1), 145-176.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 129–152.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *The focus group guidebook*. Sage.
- Morgan, D. L. (2007). Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 48–76.
- Myers, K. A. (2016). Metanoic movement: The transformative power of regret. *College Composition and Communication*, 67(3), 385-410.
- Myers, K. A. (2019). Unspeakable failures. *Composition Studies*, 46(2), 48–67.
- Myhill, D., Jones, S., Watson, A., & Lines, H. (2013). Playful explicitness with grammar: a pedagogy for writing. *Literacy*, 47(2), 103–111.
- Myhill, D., & Watson, A. (2014). The role of grammar in the writing curriculum: A review of the literature. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 30(1), 41–62.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2020). Jamestown Community College. College navigator.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=jamestown+community+college&s=all&id=1919>

New York State Comptroller's Office. (2022, December). New Yorkers in need: A look at poverty trends in New York State for the last decade.

<https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/new-yorkers-need-look-poverty-trends-new-york-state-last-decade>

Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2017). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation.

*Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 9, 20–32.

Ochs, E. (2006). Transcription as theory. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (2nd Edition) (pp. 166-178). Routledge.

O'Dwyer, L. M., & Bernauer, J. A. (2014). *Quantitative research for the qualitative researcher*. Sage.

Olson, C. B. (2007). *The reading/writing connection: Strategies for teaching and learning in the secondary classroom* (2nd ed.). Allyn and Bacon.

O'Neill, P., Murphy, S., Huot, B., & Williamson, M. M. (2005). What teachers say about different kinds of mandated state writing tests. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 2(2), 81–108.

Patterson, G. (2019). Queering and transing quantitative research. In W. P. Banks, M. B. Cox, & C. Dadas (Eds.), *Re/orienting writing studies: Queer methods, queer projects* (pp. 54–74). Utah State University Press.

Prasad, P., & Maraj, L. M. (2022). “I am not your teaching moment”: The benevolent gaslight and epistemic violence. *College Composition and Communication*, 74(2), 322–351.

Purcell-Gates, V. (1995). *Other people's words: The cycle of low literacy*. Harvard UP.

- Raucci, J. (2021). A replication agenda for composition studies. *College Composition and Communication*, 72(3), 440–461.
- Richards, D. P. (2020). Introduction: The politics, praxis, and performativity of teacher neutrality. In D. P. Richards (Ed.), *On teacher neutrality: Politics, praxis, and performativity* (pp. 3–24). Utah State University Press.
- Risquez, A., Moore, S., & Morley, M. (2007). Welcome to college? Developing a richer understanding of the transition process for adult first year students using reflective written journals. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 9(2), 183–204.
- Rockhill, K. (1987). Gender, language and the politics of literacy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 8(2), 153–167.
- Rodríguez, A. G. (2009). Teaching grammar to adult English language learners: Focus on form. *CAELA network brief*. Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Romova, Z., & Martin, A. (2011). Teaching and assessing academic writing via the portfolio: Benefits for learners of English as an additional language. *Assessing Writing*, 16, 111–122.
- Rose, J. (2022). *On violence and violence against women*. Picador.
- Roundtree, S. V. (2019). *Pedagogies of noise: Black women's teaching efficacy and pedagogical approaches in composition classrooms*. [Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University.] OhioLINK ETD Center.
- Royster, J. J. (2022). Opinion: Democracy as a noble experiment: Where do we go from here? *College Composition and Communication*, 74(2), 352–372.

- Rupiper Taggart, A., & Laughlin, M. (2017). Affect matters: When writing feedback leads to negative feeling. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(2), 1–11.
- Schuster, J. (2015). *The ecology of modernism: American environments and avant-garde poetics*. University of Alabama Press.
- Seth, A. K. (2013). Interoceptive inference, emotion, and the embodied self. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17(11), 565–573.
- Shapiro, R., & Watson, M. (2022). Translingual praxis: From theorizing language to antiracist and decolonial pedagogy. *College Composition and Communication*, 74(2), 292–321.
- Sia, P. F. D., & Cheung, Y. L. (2017). Written corrective feedback in writing instruction: A qualitative synthesis of recent research. *Issues in Language Studies*, 6(1), 61–80.
- Smitherman, G. (1991). “What is Africa to me?”: Language, ideology, and *African American*. *American Speech*, 66(2), 115–132.
- Smitherman, G. (1995). “Students’ right to their own language”: A retrospective. *The English Journal*, 84(1), 21–27.
- Smitherman, G. (2020). Foreword. In A. Baker-Bell, *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy* (pp. xii–xvii). Routledge.
- Snyder, C. (2011). Pride badly shattered: The transformational journey of career-changing women in secondary education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 9(4), 242–260.
- Sommers, N. (1980). Revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(4), 378–388.
- Sommers, N. (1992). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148–156.



- Sommers, N. (2006). Across the drafts. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(2), 248–257.
- Sommers, N. (2012). *Beyond the red ink: Teachers' comments through students' eyes* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKfLRz7h7gs>
- Soto, E. F., Irwin, L. N., Chan, S. M., Spiegel, J. A., & Kofler, M. J. (2021). Executive functions and writing skills in children with and without ADHD. *Neuropsychology*, 35(8), 792–808.
- Spring, J. (2007). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States* (5th ed.). McGraw Hill.
- Stake, R. E. (2003). Case studies. In N. K. Denizen & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.) (pp. 134–164). Sage.
- Star, S. L., & Griesemer, J. R. (1989). Institutional ecology, “translations” and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley’s museum of vertebrate zoology, 1907–1939. *Social Studies of Science*, 19(3), 387–420.
- St. Clair, R. (2015). *Creating courses for adults: Design for learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Stolley, A. (2007). *(Re)placing grammar in the composition classroom*. [Doctoral dissertation, Purdue University.] ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Straub, R. (1997). Students’ reactions to teacher comments: An exploratory study. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 31(1), 91–119.
- Strickland, D., & Crawford, I. (2003). Error and racialized performances of emotion in the teaching of writing. In D. Jacobs & L. R. Micciche (Eds.), *A way to move: Rhetorics of emotion & composition studies* (pp. 67–79). Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

- Stubblefield, H. W., & Keane, P. (1994). *Adult education in the American experience: From the colonial period to the present*. Jossey-Bass.
- Stuckey, J. E. (1991). *The violence of literacy*. Heinemann.
- Suh, E., Giordano, J. B., Griffiths, B., Hassel, H., & Klausman, J. (2021). The profession of teaching English in the two-year college: Findings from the 2019 TYCA workload survey. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 48(3), 332–349.
- Syverson, M. (1999). *The wealth of reality: An ecology of composition*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Syverson, M. (2008). An ecological view of literacy learning. *Literacy*, 42(2), 109–117.
- Teimouri, Y. (2018). Differential roles of shame and guilt in L2 learning: How bad is bad? *Modern Language Journal*, 102(4), 632–652.
- Thompson, I. (2009). Scaffolding in the writing center: A microanalysis of an experienced tutor's verbal and nonverbal tutoring strategies. *Written Communication*, 26(4), 417–453.
- Tisdell, E. J. (1993). Interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression in adult higher education classes. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43(4), 203–226.
- Toth, C. (2014). Unmeasured engagement: Two-year college English faculty and disciplinary professional organizations. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 41(4), 335–353.
- Toth, C. (2023). *Transfer in an urban writing ecology: Reimagining community college–university relations in composition studies*. NCTE and CCCC.
- Toth, C., Griffiths, B. M., & Thirolf, K. (2013). “Distinct and significant”: Professional identities of two-year college English faculty. *College Composition and Communication*, 65(1), 90–116.

- Toth, C., & Sullivan, P. (2016) Toward local teacher-scholar communities of practice: Findings from a national TYCA survey. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 43(3), 247–273.
- Treglia, M. O. (2018). Feedback on feedback: Exploring student responses to teachers' written commentary. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 27(1), 105–137.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Explore census data. <https://data.census.gov>
- Vetter, M. A., & Moroz, O. (2019). Engl 101: Writing in Wikipedia. *Composition Studies*, 47(2), 193–202.
- Weaver, C. (1996). *Teaching grammar in context*. Boynton/Cook.
- Worsham, L. (1989). Going postal: Pedagogic violence and the schooling of emotion. *JAC*, 18(2), 213–245.
- Yashima, T., Zenuk-Nishide, L., & Shimizu, K. (2004). The influences of attitudes and affect on willingness to communicate and second language communication. *Language Learning*, 54(1), 119–152.

## APPENDIX A

### CLASSROOM RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello! My name is Jessica Kubiak, and I'm both a professor here at JCC and a graduate student at Old Dominion University down in Virginia. I get to spend much of this year working on some research that's important to me, and my research interests revolve around you: students who are taking composition courses, especially here at JCC.

Here's a little about my research: After literally years of library research, I've found that lots of scholars have lots of thoughts about how students experience first-year writing courses, but not many people have asked students to talk about their experience. And that's what my research aims to do.

So, I'm here today to see if any of you would be willing to take about one hour of your time in the coming weeks to meet with me and a handful of other students for a focus group. I won't test you or ask you to do anything out of the ordinary: we'll meet in a classroom on campus, you'll do some quick, informal writing, and we'll talk as a group. To compensate you for your time, everyone who attends a focus group session will be given \$15 in cash.

Keep in mind that there is no pressure at all to take part. Your grades in this class or other classes will not be impacted by your decision to either take part or not take part. But I do hope you'll consider it!

Not all students will be eligible, so to find out whether you meet eligibility criteria, I'll invite you to complete a short screening form. This form should take about 3 minutes to complete. You can do it right now, if you'd like – scan the QR code or, if you want a paper copy instead, raise your hand and I'll bring one to you. Where are the flyers? Who'd like a paper copy instead?

Okay, while you're doing this, I'll let you know that even if you're not eligible to participate in a focus group, by completing the screening form that you've got there, you'll be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift certificate. And, again, if you are eligible and you do participate in one of the focus groups I'm facilitating, you'll also earn \$15 in cash. So that's a chance to win \$50 for completing the screening form, and \$15 for participating.

And just to reassure you, know that while this research isn't an experiment in which I trick you or ask you to do anything weird, it still had to be reviewed very closely and approved by several groups of other researchers, both at my grad school (Old Dominion) and at JCC. Essentially, these groups reviewed my research plan to ensure that any benefits to students and to the field of composition studies would outweigh risks to study participants. And that really is my goal: to make the future of composition instruction better.

So if you're even potentially interested in helping me out with this, please do complete that screening form and then be on the lookout for an email from me in your JCC email inbox (so be sure to only list your JCC email address). I'll follow up with you by email to let you know if you're eligible to take part in the study. If you are eligible, I'll give you a couple of dates to choose from and ask you to confirm your availability. Then, at the focus group session itself, you'll review and sign a consent form, hang out for a bit and talk with a few other students in response to some discussion prompts from me, and get paid \$15.

No one apart from me and other students who volunteer would know that you've agreed to take part in the study, and if you do volunteer and are selected to participate, I'll ask you to keep the identities of others confidential, though this confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Also, I will be audio recording the conversation, but I'll be the only one with access to that recording. And if you choose not to take part in everything we do or talk about during that hour or so, that is totally fine: you can do only some of the talking or writing, and you'll still earn the \$15.

And tell your friends! I'm recruiting all JCC students who are currently in Comp I or who took it very recently (last summer or spring), and I'll be accepting screening forms for the next [week] or so. And the more student perspectives I can reflect in my work, the better. So spread the word! Questions?

## APPENDIX B

## RECRUITMENT FLYER

Appendix Figure 1

# Participate In A Study About YOUR Experience!

## What's this study about?

Researchers are interested in hearing directly from students about their experiences in first-year writing courses.



## Why participate?

- Help shape the future of college writing instruction.
- Reflect on your experiences this semester.
- **Earn \$15 for participating.**
- Enter a chance to win a **\$50 Amazon gift card** for completing the screening.

## Who can participate?

Participants must meet both of the following criteria:

- JCC students recently or currently enrolled in ENG 1510
- Adults ages 18+

***Interested? Scan This***



or email:

**FirstYearWritingResearch@gmail.com**



## APPENDIX C

### SCREENING FORM

#### First-Year Writing Research Screening Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study about college students' experiences of first-year writing! The following questions will be used in part to determine whether you qualify to participate in the study. By fully completing and submitting this screening form, you will be entered in a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon gift card. (You will not be entered more than once. You must use your JCC email address to be entered.) Completing this screening form will probably take about 3 minutes.

If you are chosen to take part in this study, you will be contacted by email with additional information, and you will be invited to attend a one-hour long focus group discussion at a JCC campus location. You will not be tested or asked to do anything out of the ordinary, and you will sign a consent form before you take part in the study. You may stop participating at any time. Every focus group participant will receive \$15 cash in compensation.

This study was exempted by Old Dominion University's IRB (#1417978-1) and approved by SUNY Jamestown Community College's Chief Academic Officer. Questions can be sent to the study's moderator at [FirstYearWritingResearch@gmail.com](mailto:FirstYearWritingResearch@gmail.com).

[Screenshots of web-based screening form follow.]

## Appendix Figure 2

**JCC** email address: \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Is English the language you speak at home or with your family? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered "no," did you learn English as a foreign language?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are you enrolled in a degree program at JCC? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure



Appendix Figure 3

Are you planning to transfer to a four-year institution after completing your degree \*  
at JCC?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Are you 18 years of age or older? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered "yes," how old are you?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix Figure 4

How do you describe your race or ethnicity? Select all that apply: \*

☐ Indigenous / Native American

☐ Latino/a/x

☐ Black

☐ White

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you describe your gender? Select all that apply: \*

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Non-Binary or Gender Queer

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

During what semester were you enrolled in ENG 1510, Composition I? \*

☐ This semester

☐ Last semester

☐ Both this semester and a previous semester

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix Figure 5

Which of the following apply to you? Select all that apply: \*

- ☐ I currently work at least 30 hours per week.
- ☐ I have worked a full-time job at least one point in my life.
- ☐ I am (or have been) a parent or guardian of a child.
- ☐ I have served (or am currently serving) in the military.
- ☐ I am (or have been) homeless.
- ☐ I have been incarcerated.
- ☐ I attended college somewhere else before coming to JCC.
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live? \*

- ☐ On campus
- ☐ Off campus
- ☐ Currently without a home

What county (for instance, Chautauqua County) do you consider home? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix Figure 6

Have you lived in that county for at least half of your life? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

What JCC campus / site do you primarily attend? \*

☐ Jamestown

☐ Cattaraugus (Olean)

☐ North County (Dunkirk)

☐ Online only

Submit

Clear form

**APPENDIX D****TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS**

-	micropause
--	moderate pause
---	long pause
word-	latched, interrupted, or overlapped speech
<words>	analyst description of utterance, noise, volume, etc.
...	trailed-off speech
[...]	extracted transcript content
[word]	analyst-substituted content
“word”	reported or imagined speech

## VITA

### JESSICA MARIE KUBIAK

Department of English, Old Dominion University, 5000 Batten Arts & Letters  
Norfolk, VA 23529

#### Education

Ph.D., English, Old Dominion University, 2023  
Graduate Certificate, Composition Studies, Indiana University East, 2016  
M.S., Adult Education, Buffalo State University, 2010  
B.A., English, University of Pittsburgh, 2006

#### Faculty Appointments and Program Leadership: SUNY Jamestown Community College

Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Instructor of Reading and Composition:  
2013–present  
Planning Consultant to the President: 2022–2023  
Interim Dean of Arts, Humanities, and Health Sciences: 2020–2022  
Director of Humanities: 2015–2019  
Coordinator of Humanities, Cattaraugus County Campus: 2014–2015  
Director of Academic Initiatives: 2011–2013  
Coordinator of Experiential Learning: 2010–2011

#### Teaching Awards

Conference on College Composition & Communication Outstanding Teaching  
Award: 2021  
State University of New York Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching: 2020  
Jamestown Community College President's Award for Excellence in Teaching: 2020

#### Selected Publications

“Putting Accuplacer in Its Place: Expanding Evidence in Placement Reform” in  
*Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: The Pursuit of Equity in  
Postsecondary Education*, edited by Mya Poe, Christie Toth, and Jessica  
Nastal. WAC Clearinghouse: 2022  
“Engaged Citizenship: Joining the Conversation,” in *Digitally Mediated Composing  
and You: A Beginner's Guide to Understanding Rhetoric and Writing in an  
Interconnected World*, edited by Stephanie Hedge and Courtney Cox. Kendall  
Hunt: 2021  
Review of *Transformational Learning in Community Colleges: Charting a Course  
for Academic and Personal Success* by Chad D. Hoggan and Bill Browning  
for *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*,  
issue 33.3: 2021  
Review of *Creating Courses for Adults: Design for Learning* by Ralf St. Claire for  
*Basic Writing e-Journal*, issue 15.1: 2018  
“Middle Passage,” and “Phyllis Wheatley,” in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage*,  
edited by Toyin Falola and Amanda Warnock. Heinemann: 2007