BRINGING LIVED CULTURES AND EXPERIENCE TO THE WAC CLASSROOM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED NONTRADITIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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* * *
ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the increasing presence of nontraditional students in college classrooms today, focusing on how nontraditional students draw upon lived experience when writing across the curriculum—in Henry Giroux’s terms, connecting the “discourse of lived cultures” with the “discourse of textual analysis.” I discuss various definitions of “nontraditional student,” present statistical information concerning the increasing number of such students across the country, and consider how they are represented in the media. After reviewing pertinent literature in adult education and composition, I discuss my qualitative teacher-research methodology, which included classroom observation, field notes, interviews, writing samples, and questionnaires.

I recruited nine nontraditional students, gathered data from six participants, and developed case studies on three. The questions focusing my inquiry address how nontraditional student presence should shape our professional discussion and teaching practice; the degree to which my participants experienced writing-related anxiety, and the strategies they used to work through it; and how they drew upon lived cultures and experiences when writing across the curriculum in order to negotiate their emerging academic identities. My findings demonstrate that the study participants used their experiences critically and reflectively in their academic writing—in Paulo Freire’s words, “bring[ing] subjectivity and objectivity into constant dialectical relationship.”

Finally, I connect my findings with conversations in the field concerning the use of personal writing in academic contexts, using frameworks offered by Candace Spigelman, Jane E. Hindman, and Barbara Kamler. I discuss the theories of two adult
educators—Malcolm Knowles’ concept of “andragogy” and Timothy Quinnan’s articulation of the nontraditional student as postmodern phenomenon—with process, post-process, and feminist composition theory, as well as with the critical theories of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks. After discussing the relationship between infantilization and oppression, I argue for abolishing the term “pedagogy” from college contexts and suggest that we adopt Freire’s concept of “praxis” as a more inclusive term. I conclude by calling for a reflexive and dialogic approach to composition and WAC which pays heed to the voices of our students, traditional and nontraditional alike.
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PREFACE

Purpose of Dissertation

This dissertation addresses the increasing presence of nontraditional students in college classrooms today, specifically focusing on how nontraditional students draw upon lived experience when writing across the curriculum (WAC) in order to negotiate their developing academic identities—in Henry Giroux’s terms, connecting the “discourse of lived cultures” with the “discourse of textual analysis” (Giroux 135). In the fall of 2003, I conducted qualitative teacher-research case studies of selected nontraditional female students in two writing-intensive sections of English 255 (Short Story and Novel), taught by me at the University of Hawai‘i system’s Leeward Community College campus. My findings and case studies are presented within a theoretical framework drawing upon adult educator Malcolm Knowles’ concept of “andragogy,” or the teaching of adults; the principles of critical educators such as Giroux, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks; and the work of composition scholars such as Jane E. Hindman, Barbara Kamler, and Candace Spigelman, who argue for critical and reflective uses of the personal in academic discourse. After bringing these theoretical conversations into dialogue with one another and considering my research findings within this multifaceted theoretical framework, I argue for an approach to composition and WAC which takes full account of both the increasing presence of nontraditional students and the rich life experiences they bring with them to the academy.

For purposes of this study, I am using the definition of “nontraditional student” set forth by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES defines
“nontraditional students” as those who meet one or more of the following criteria: delayed enrollment (past the calendar year that he or she finished high school); part-time attendance; full-time employment (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; financial independence for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; caring for dependents; or those who received a GED rather than a traditional high school diploma. While this definition of “nontraditional student” does not specify a particular age range, many of the above criteria for undergraduates are strongly correlated with student age older than the traditional undergraduate range of 18 to 22 years. Various definitions and criteria exist for what constitutes a “nontraditional student”; my first chapter considers some of these alternative definitions and presents my rationale for using the NCES definition.

Situating the Study

In recent decades, the field of composition studies has been proactively responsive to demographic changes in the student body and increasingly aware of issues surrounding difference and identity. In response to the early scholarship of the writing process movement in the 1960s and 1970s which often posited an undifferentiated “universal student writer,” many composition scholars of the 1980s and 1990s both argued for and produced composition scholarship foregrounding issues of gender (see, for example, Flynn, Jarratt, Kirsch); race (Royster, Gilyard, Moss); sexual orientation (Malinowitz); culture (Fox); and class (Heath, Chiseri-Strater, Rose). Ethnographic studies such as Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words*, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater’s *Academic Literacies*, and Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* emphasize class issues. Keith Gilyard’s *Voices*
of the Self and, more recently, Beverly J. Moss’ Community Text Arises, foreground race in their investigations of African-American literacy. Gesa Kirsch’s Women Writing the Academy investigates how female academics claim authority in their writing in a male-dominated academy, and Helen Fox argues for teachers to be more aware of and open to the cultural differences that shape students’ rhetorical strategies in her ethnographic study, Listening to the World. These are only a few examples among an impressive array of ethnographic composition studies foregrounding various aspects of identity and difference.

It is more difficult, however, to locate ethnographic composition studies foregrounding student age and nontraditional status, and the issue of nontraditional students remains under-discussed in composition scholarship as a whole. Yet the age of the average college student is increasing annually, and nontraditional students presently comprise the “fastest-growing group in academe today” (Tierney, in Quinnan xiii). In light of this demographic trend, the time is ripe for both ethnographic studies foregrounding nontraditional students, and for theoretical positions advancing the consideration of nontraditional student perspectives. This study attempts to address both these areas.

Overview of Methodology

Gesa Kirsch argues for a feminist research methodology that brings the voices of subjects to bear upon the findings by “opening up the research agenda to subjects [and] listening to their stories” (Kirsch 257). That is what this study attempts, using a multifaceted qualitative methodology that encompasses teacher-research, ethnography,
and the case study. I present my case study narratives using Clifford Geertz’ approach of
“thick description” and I draw upon multiple theoretical frameworks for
analysis—feminist, process, and post-process composition theories, theories of critical
pedagogy, and the adult education concept of andragogy.

In order to conduct my analysis, I followed Beverly J. Moss’ suggestion of
allowing “research questions to emerge from the situation being studied” (Moss 157).
Thus, I began my initial phase of inquiry with a general research question: (1) How
should the increasing presence of nontraditional students on college campuses shape
both our professional discourse and our teaching practices in the field of composition
studies? While this broad framework provided an initial point of entry into my inquiry, it
was clearly too general to lead to a focused discussion. After obtaining my first set of
data from questionnaires and classroom observations, I developed a second, more
specifically focused research question generated, as Moss suggests, by the data itself: (2)
To what extent do these nontraditional students experience apprehension in conjunction
with writing assignments across the curriculum; and what strategies do they use for
overcoming their apprehension? This more specific question gave me a focus for
additional data-gathering in the form of interviews, a second questionnaire, and further
observation. Finally, my interpretation of data, along with my ongoing reading in the
field of composition studies, led me to develop the third, most specifically focused
research question: (3) How do the participants in this study draw upon personal
experience in order to negotiate their developing academic identities when writing across
the curriculum? A detailed discussion of how my questions were formulated through a
recursive process of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation is presented in Chapter Three, “Methodology.”

Since my initial research question was overly general and constructed primarily as a point of entry, the body of my findings focuses primarily on the latter two questions. In my conclusion, however, I circle back to my original research question to consider some broad implications of my research for composition studies. In doing so, I return to the theoretical framework established in my review of the literature, arguing for an approach to the use of the personal in academic writing that, in Paulo Freire’s words, brings “subjectivity and objectivity [into] constant dialectical relationship” (Freire 1990, 32).

**Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter One I establish the groundwork for my study. I begin by presenting background information regarding competing definitions of “nontraditional student,” both nationally and at my research site, the University of Hawai‘i system and specifically, the Leeward Community College campus. I consider the implications of the definition of “nontraditional student” proffered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), along with a consideration of competing definitions and the rationale for my use of the NCES definition. I then turn toward a discussion of nontraditional student percentages and distribution, demonstrating that the percentage of such students has burgeoned in recent years on all classifications of college campus. Using its own definition, the NCES concludes that approximately 75% of the national student body can be termed as “nontraditional” to some degree, begging the question of why the academy continues to define “traditional” (read: “normal”) in a way that applies to a numerical
Finally in Chapter One, I discuss some of the resources available for nontraditional students. I then discuss selected representations of nontraditional students in the mainstream media, demonstrating the tendency of such reporting to emphasize individual "heroic" efforts of nontraditional students. Such an individualistic focus on the challenges faced by many nontraditional students may potentially obscure discussion of the need for institutional flexibility and responsiveness when it comes to addressing nontraditional student needs.

Having established the broad context for my study in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I situate my study in the field of composition studies. Before reviewing the composition literature, however, I consider and review several relevant texts in the field of adult education. I begin with a recent collection, *Adult Education: A Reader* (Peter Sutherland, editor), to introduce basic concepts and issues in adult education. I then discuss Malcolm Knowles' *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* and *Andragogy in Action*, two important foundational texts that introduce Knowles' concept of "andragogy." I discuss what makes a teaching approach "andragogical," according to Knowles, and how an andragogical teaching model geared toward teaching adults may differ from a pedagogical model geared toward teaching children. Next I discuss Timothy Quinnan's *Adult Learners At Risk*, a text which considers the concept of andragogy from the vantage point of critical and postmodern theory and posits that nontraditional students are marginalized in the academy. I then briefly review a 1989 text which explicitly attempts to connect the concept of andragogy with composition studies, Robert Sommer's 1989 *Teaching Writing to Adults.*
My consideration of Sommer’s text leads naturally to the second phase of my literature review, a consideration of the composition scholarship pertinent to my project. Many of the teaching practices envisioned by Knowles’ andragogical model share significant territory with certain paradigms in composition studies, most notably process, certain post-process, and feminist theories. Accordingly, I discuss the historical development of process and feminist composition scholarship, along with current, post-process theoretical issues and debates. This discussion establishes the theoretical context for the case study narratives I present subsequently, while demonstrating how different theoretical starting points–feminism, critical theory, and andragogy–may lead to a largely shared set of teaching practices. Many of the “andragogical” principles suggested by Knowles, Quinnan and Sommer are already operational in composition studies, though perhaps under different nomenclature. Because my study focuses on a WAC classroom rather than a freshman composition classroom, I also discuss the relationship between WAC and composition, demonstrating how WAC’s emphasis on “writing to learn” shares common ground with Knowles’ andragogical model.

I conclude Chapter Two by reviewing the available recent composition scholarship that deals with nontraditional students, whether explicitly or indirectly. Where nontraditional students are discussed peripherally rather than centrally, I address how nontraditional students are often represented, and consider the class and age-based biases that may result if composition scholarship continues to hypothesize an 18-to-22-year-old undergraduate student writer. For this and other reasons, it is time for further research studies which place nontraditional students at the center rather than the
In Chapter Three, I present the methodology I used to conduct teacher-research case studies of selected nontraditional students. I begin by considering the characteristics of qualitative composition research methodology, particularly teacher research and feminist methodology, as articulated by Kirsch, Wendy Bishop, Beverly J. Moss, Patricia Sullivan, Ruth Ray and others. Although my study foregrounds nontraditional status, age, and life experience rather than gender *per se*, I argue that my methodology is feminist in design and intent. I discuss the study's design, recruitment procedures, the courses from which participants were recruited, the institutional context for the course, the assignments given, and the demographics of both the courses and the selected participants.

I then present the research questions that framed my inquiry, discussing the recursive process through which these questions developed in dialogue with my ongoing data gathering efforts. I describe the methodological instruments I used for gathering data—observation and field notes, open-ended interviews, two questionnaires, and review of writing samples; the implications of my methodological choices; ethical issues faced by teacher-researchers; and safeguards taken to preserve the integrity of my data in light of the complex power dynamics of the teacher-researched classroom. Kirsch notes that the feminist researcher recognizes the impossibility of neutrality or pure objectivity and "directly acknowledges [her] research agenda and interests" (Kirsch 257); accordingly, I explore my own experiences as a nontraditional student, considering how my subject-position has likely shaped my interpretation and analysis. I conclude by discussing the potential limitations of my inquiry and suggesting possible avenues for future research.
projects regarding nontraditional students.

Chapter Four presents the general findings of my fieldwork and the results of my data coding and interpretation, all considered within the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter Two. Chapters Five through Seven contain the crux of my study—narrative accounts of three participants selected for in-depth case studies. The stories of these three non-traditional students demonstrate several of the methods they used for connecting personal with academic issues in written assignments—a strategy that allowed them to negotiate their academic identities through critical consideration of their lived experiences.

In my conclusion I call for a professional discussion that takes full account of the changing demographics of our classrooms; of the rich, deep life experiences of today’s students; and for a practice of teaching academic writing across the curriculum that provides students with the rhetorical option of drawing upon life experiences when producing academic discourse. Using examples from such scholars such as Jane E. Hindman, Barbara Kamler, and Candace Spigelman, I assert that academics should not only continue to produce their own hybrid forms of academic writing that make space for the personal, but that teachers should allow students the same discursive freedom which so many academics (such as Hindman, Jane Tompkins and others) now practice. I connect this discussion with the critical educational theories of Giroux, Freire, and hooks, and suggest for an approach to teaching composition and WAC which, in Freire’s terms, “brings subjectivity and objectivity into constant dialectical relationship” (Freire 1990, 32). In the case of writing instruction, this means finding ways to allow nontraditional
students to draw upon the rich and often fascinating body of lived experience that they bring with them to the academy.

Finally, while Giroux proposes a “border pedagogy,” Freire argues for a “radical pedagogy,” and feminist composition scholars argue for “feminist pedagogy,” I posit that all these terms are oxymoronic, given that “pedagogy” is an infantilizing term implying the teaching of children, and the precepts informing both critical and feminist theory would appear to be against infantilization of students—especially given the strong historical relationship between infantilization and oppression. Yet “andragogy,” with its implied erasure of women, is an unsuitable term for feminists. Because of a dearth of adequately inclusive Greek roots, I suggest that educators who identify themselves with critical, inclusive, and potentially transformative teaching paradigms should take a non-infantilizing stance and instead use Freire’s term of “praxis,” connecting it with Quinnan’s concept of “border andragogy” and feminist theory, to create approaches to both teaching and theorizing composition which are inclusive in name as well as practice. I conclude by calling for an approach to composition studies, both in its scholarship and in its teaching, which is dialogical and reflective. As Christopher Ferry puts it, we must “transform our relationship to students” by “replac[ing] the ‘us versus them’ model that now prevails with a more collective one,” in order that we may “break down received power structures.” The goal, says Ferry, is for “[s]tudents [to] understand composing in writing not as a required, school-sponsored task, but as integral to being human, reading in the word and the world, as Freire says” (Ferry 18).
CHAPTER ONE:
DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS IN STUDENT POPULATION

Introduction

Before turning to the literature review and to the study itself, it is necessary to provide some context for my research and analysis. This chapter begins by considering various definitions of “nontraditional student,” along with a discussion of alternative terminology; an investigation of how many such students are attending college today (both nationally and specifically at my research site); and where they are distributed. After discussing some of the resources available to nontraditional students and considering what these resources suggest about the challenges nontraditional students face, I present selected representations of nontraditional students in the mainstream media. Such representations tend to emphasize the “heroic” individual efforts undertaken by the nontraditional student, rather than suggesting any need for institutional reform. All the information in this chapter serves as context for the remainder of my study, beginning with my review of literature in adult education, composition studies, and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) in Chapter Two.

Defining Nontraditional Students

Definitions of the “nontraditional student” vary, as does the nomenclature for undergraduate students who are older than the “traditional” range of 18 to 22 years old. Nontraditional students are alternatively referenced in adult education literature as “lifelong learners,” “adult learners,” “mature students,” and “returning students,” with each term implying an older-than-typical student, yet each term carries slightly different
connotations as well as implied limitations. In Teaching Writing to Adults, Robert F. Sommer points out that “adult learner” is a term frequently applied to adults learning outside the traditional academy, in a range of settings including occupational training and re-training programs, adult-focused literacy and language programs. While “lifelong learner” may include adults attending traditional college classes, the focus of this term tends to be away from traditional degree-earning programs. As Timothy Quinnan argues, references to lifelong or adult “learning” and “learners” imply learning that takes place in a wide variety of sites, whereas the appellations “student” or “education” imply the involvement of institutions. “Mature student” is the term most often used for older university students in Great Britain and is much less frequently used in the United States (perhaps for the better, since it implies its own opposite: that “traditional” students can be fairly characterized as “immature”). Although “mature student” is not a term widely used in the United States, it is nonetheless a useful term for the researcher studying the topic, particularly since so much significant scholarship in adult education originated in Great Britain with the advent of the Open University.

Sommer, Quinnan, Stephen Brookfield, and others point out that the two terms most frequently used to describe adults older than 22 years working toward traditional degrees at college and university campuses in the United States are “returning student” and “nontraditional student.” In recent years the adjective “nontraditional” has tended to eclipse “returning,” since it allows for a more wide-ranging and inclusive definition. While “returning student” implies a student of older-than-average age, it tends to cast the student in a somewhat prodigal role and may also eclipse elements of nontraditionality
other than age. “Nontraditional” casts a wider net, including students who may (or may not) be much older than traditional students and emphasizing differential life experiences—such as being married, being a parent, or being financially self-supporting—that need to be accounted for by the academy. “Nontraditional” also suggests a variety of student life experiences that, while they may correlate with older age, are not necessarily limited to it.

“Adult student” is another term in current usage for researchers to consider, especially when conducting literature searches. This term, however, is particularly problematic. As Sommer points out in his preface to Teaching Writing to Adults: “The meaning of adult . . . is problematical. In many ways, ‘traditional’ or ‘younger’ students in postsecondary education are adults: they are old enough to work, to become parents, and to vote” (Sommer 4). Nevertheless, there seems to be a clear difference between older and younger or traditional-age college students, as Sommer himself acknowledges: “Most teachers and administrators readily acknowledge differences between adult—that is, nontraditional—students and traditional students . . . Adult students are distinguished as much by the occasion for their learning as by age or personal profile. Adult students are usually people who work or have worked; they are financially responsible for themselves and their families; they have paid bills, voted, and felt the consequences of political decisions and social issues” (Sommer 4-5). While Sommer believes there is a clear distinction between “adult” and “traditional” students, he suggests that “nontraditional student” is a more inclusive and accurate term than “adult student,” not only because traditional college students are legal adults but because the flexibility of the term
"nontraditional students" includes younger students in nontraditional circumstances:

"The numerical convenience of eliminating those under the age of twenty-two would also eliminate many nontraditional students" (Sommer 5). Sommer cites actual examples of "younger" nontraditional students he has taught, such as a twenty-one year-old military veteran with a full-time job, a twenty-year-old single mother, and a twenty-year-old prison inmate.

"Nontraditional" does not delineate a particular age cutoff to the extent that "mature student," "returning student," or "adult student" might. Instead, "nontraditional" suggests any student whose educational path has veered from the "traditional" expectation that a college student should begin his or her freshman year at age eighteen immediately after finishing high school, continue straight through, and earn a Bachelor's degree by the age of twenty-two, all the while devoting the greater part of his or her time and energies to the educational enterprise. For that reason, "nontraditional student" is the term I will primarily use for purposes of this dissertation, except when quoting from sources that use an alternative term. (I should point out, however, that occasionally the term is used in other contexts, such as women studying for careers in male-dominated fields; that is not the way I am using the term in this study.) At some moments I may reference "adult student," specifically when discussing whether educators conceptualize their students as children or adults. My methodology chapter will discuss the specific definition of "nontraditional" that I used for purposes of recruiting participants.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggests a nuanced and flexible definition of "nontraditional student" that takes into account a number of
potential criteria beyond mere age, which may be combined in various ways to create
different degrees of nontraditionality. According to NCES, a "nontraditional student" is
one who meets one or more of the following criteria:

• Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same
calendar year that he or she finished high school);
• Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
• Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
• Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining
eligibility for financial aid;
• Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes
others);
• Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has
dependents); or
• Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED
or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

The NCES considers students to be "minimally nontraditional" if they meet one of the
above characteristics, "moderately nontraditional" if they meet two or three, and "highly
nontraditional" if they meet four or more of the above criteria. (NCES does not include
childless married students in its definition, though most married students would probably
meet the designation of “financially independent for purposes of financial aid
consideration.”) Interestingly, by NCES’ definition, almost three-quarters of
undergraduates in the United States can now be termed “nontraditional” to at least some degree. For purposes of my study, I recruited students who met the NCES’ definition of “moderately nontraditional” and “highly nontraditional,” in that I wanted to study students who met three or more of the above-listed criteria.

NCES’ assertion that nearly 75% of students nationwide are to some degree nontraditional begs an obvious question: If it is really true that 75% of students are “nontraditional,” then do we need a new definition of what constitutes a “traditional” student? While “nontraditional” may be preferable to some of the alternatives discussed above, this term carries within itself the implication of its own opposite (as with “mature student”), suggesting there is also a type of student who can be labeled “traditional.” Yet this “traditional” and supposedly, therefore, “normal” student appears to be now in the numeric minority, at least at certain sites.

This terministic disjunction brings to mind the similarly termed “traditional family,” which sociologists state applies to a minority of families today. The arguments that we need a new concept of the so-called “traditional family” comporting with reality could be deployed with regard to the rapidly changing college student population as well. Accordingly, Timothy Quinnan suggests that, while “nontraditional” may be a useful term for educational program administrators, educators themselves should reconceive nontraditional students as the “new majority.” (Quinnan further suggests replacing the term “student” with “learner” and “teacher” with “facilitator,” in order to deconstruct the power differential between teachers and students—a common practice in the field of adult education.)
The NCES criteria constitute only one of many potential definitions of "nontraditional student"; campuses across the country each develop and use their own definitions of "nontraditional student" for administrative purposes. Recent research in adult education has usually used the definition of "an undergraduate student over the age of 25" (see, for example, Senter & Senter; Benshoff & Lewis; Hoffman; Lee). In the early 1990s, when the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa briefly offered an Office for Nontraditional Students to support adults returning to education at a later age, it offered an internal definition of "nontraditional undergraduate student" as meeting one or more of the following criteria: 

1. an undergraduate student over the age of 25; 
2. an undergraduate student who initially began college after the age of 22; 
3. a married undergraduate student; 
4. an undergraduate student with children or other dependents; 
5. an undergraduate student with prior military experience; 
6. an undergraduate student who qualifies as financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid."

(Brochure, Office for Nontraditional Students, University of Hawai‘i, 1992) This office was discontinued in 1995 due to budget cuts, however, and now in 2004, I cannot locate a definition of "nontraditional student" in any of UH-Manoa's public documents—despite the fact that the fall 2003 enrollment report indicates that the mean age of students in the University of Hawai‘i system is 26.

Alternative definitions of "nontraditional student" circulate in the various academic disciplines. In the *Journal of Psychology*, for instance, Dill and Henley defined the nontraditional student as "over the age of 24 . . . or, having multiple roles (e.g., parent, employee, student), and traditional students as those who enroll directly from high school
who do not typically have multiple roles” (Dill and Henley 2). This definition, like the
NCES definition, does not distinguish between graduate and undergraduate students. In
1994, the most recent year that the Journal of Psychology makes its information
available, 43% of all college students met the criteria for “nontraditional” using this
definition. I question, however, how such a broad definition as “multiple roles” could
result in such a low percentage of “nontraditional students,” considering that the NCES
reports that the majority of students, even of traditional age, hold some type of
employment and could therefore be construed as fulfilling “multiple roles.” Arguably,
this definition could apply to college athletes, performing arts students, or students with
internships as well. While the point about “multiple roles” is well taken, it seems this
definition needs further refinement in order to be useful in identifying a student
population. Moreover, since this statistic is now a good ten years out of date, it may no
longer be relevant.

For purposes of my discussion, I find the NCES definition of “nontraditional
student” to be the most useful, allowing as it does for various degrees of nontraditionality
that correlate with, without being strictly limited to, age. While other definitions may be
located in adult education literature, college catalogs, and Internet-based resources for the
nontraditional student, all of the criteria posited by NCES’ definition—age, military
experience, financial independence, marriage, parenthood—are subsumed under NCES’
criteria, making this the most comprehensive framework available for understanding and
defining the nontraditional student. The flexibility of NCES’ approach allows us to view
student nontraditionality along a continuum, rather than as a sharp “either/or” divide—a
more nuanced viewpoint which allows us to consider how aspects of nontraditionality may affect even some of the younger college students.

Finally, I must point out that this project focuses on nontraditional undergraduate students. It seems apparent that in graduate school, most students share certain characteristics—such as older age—that would be associated with nontraditionality at the undergraduate level, making the NCES criteria less useful for this stage of education. Yet it seems equally apparent that there is a continuum of “traditionality” among graduate students as well, since a 22-year-old who begins a Masters program immediately after graduation is going to be in a much different situation from a 40-year-old who returns to graduate school after many years in the work force. However, because the demographics, circumstances, and goals of graduate programs are so different from undergraduate programs, it would seem that a different set of criteria must be deployed to distinguish between “traditional” and “nontraditional” graduate students. For purposes of this study, then, “nontraditional” students are undergraduate students, though there may be fruitful research to be done in the future with regard to nontraditional graduate students.

**Where They Are: Nontraditional Student Distribution**

NCES provides extensive information on the distribution of nontraditional students by type of institution. According to its most recent table, in 2002, 17.3% of traditional students attended a public two-year college, while 52.1% attended a public four-year university, 27.3% attended a private not-for-profit university, and 2.2% attended a private for-profit university. In contrast, 64.2% of highly nontraditional students attended public two-year colleges, with 17.2% attending four-year public universities,
10.1% attending private not-for-profit universities, and 6.6% attending private for-profit universities. Among moderately nontraditional students, 55.5% were located on public two-year campuses, 27.2% on public four-year campuses, 8.6% on private not-for-profit campuses, and 7.1% on private for-profit campuses (http://nces.edu.gov). In other words, the more “nontraditional” criteria a student meets, the more likely he or she is to attend a public two-year college; when a highly nontraditional student attends a four-year campus, it is more likely to be public than private. While more than a quarter of the nation’s traditional students are located at private not-for-profit universities, only 10% of highly nontraditional students attend this type of university.

On campuses themselves, the NCES reports that fully 50% of students at private, not-for-profit four-year colleges are classified as completely traditional, with 14.7% defined as minimally nontraditional (primarily due to working outside of college), 16.4% defined as moderately nontraditional, and 19% defined as highly nontraditional. The percentage of highly nontraditional students at four-year public universities is slightly lower than at private universities—only 14.4%—yet the percentages of students meeting the definitions of minimally and moderately nontraditional are slightly higher at public four-year universities, at 20.0% and 23.1% respectively. Once again, statistics reveal that the type of campus with the highest percentage of nontraditional students is the public two-year campus, where traditional students comprise a mere 10.5% of the student body. On this type of campus, highly nontraditional students comprise a full 40.2% of the student population, with 14.3% meeting the definition of minimally nontraditional and 35.0% falling under the definition of moderately nontraditional. Finally, the private for-profit
college offers a stark contrast to the private, not-for-profit college, as only 11.3% percent of its student body meets the definition of traditional student. 35.4% of students on these types of campuses are highly nontraditional, 38.5% moderately nontraditional, and 14.7% mildly nontraditional.

In the University of Hawai‘i system, in the fall of 2003, 39.3% of students were over the age of 38. This percentage has increased 2.6% since the year 1999 (http://www.hawaii.edu/cgi-bin/iro/maps), November 2004). Specifically at Leeward Community College, 48.1% of all students were 25 or over. While data regarding other aspects of NCES' criteria for “nontraditional” are available—percentage of students who are married, employed full-time and/or attending college part-time, economically self-supporting, or delayed entry—the University of Hawai‘i’s MAPS system did not correlate this data with age. If we assume that at least some of the 18 to 24-year-old students meet other NCES criteria for some degree of “nontraditionality,” it is easy to see that a high percentage of students, both at Leeward and in the system as a whole, meet the NCES definition of nontraditional to some degree. Despite the difficulty of correlating various aspects of nontraditionality from statistical data, my review of the University of Hawai‘i’s data suggests that the UH system generally comports with current trends nationwide, including the fact that nontraditional students are concentrated somewhat more intensely at the two-year community college campuses.

The discrepancies in percentages of nontraditional student enrollment on various types of campuses nationwide suggest a correlation between socioeconomic class and nontraditional student status, with the usually more prestigious not-for-profit private
colleges having the fewest number of nontraditional students, and four-year public universities having the next fewest number. Statistical analysis bears out my initial hypothesis that statistically, nontraditional students are more likely to attend campuses like Leeward Community College than campuses like Princeton and Yale. Accordingly, when I discuss the relative scarcity of composition scholarship concerning nontraditional students in Chapter Two, I argue that scholars concerned with issues of socioeconomic class would do well to pay more attention to nontraditional students, given their class-based distribution across various types of campuses. I demonstrate that in certain composition literature, the implied student being discussed is a traditional-age student; I also argue that when composition scholarship discursively constructs a hypothetical student who is of traditional age, this may lead to both ageism and an unintentional class bias.

Clearly, nontraditional students are concentrated in greater numbers at public colleges, particularly two-year campuses. This suggests a correlation between socioeconomic class background and nontraditional student status. But even given this disparity, it is also interesting to note that when the current percentage of nontraditional students at private, not-for-profit universities is considered in historical perspective, the percentage of such students is increasing dramatically even at these campuses, and even at private, not-for-profit universities, the NCES states that 50% of the student body is to some degree nontraditional. While the overall percentage of such students may be lower at private four-year colleges than at other types of campuses, even the private campus shows an upward trend, indicating that the explosion of nontraditional students is a
phenomenon now affecting all sectors of American society. Clearly, this is a demographic shift that the academy cannot afford to ignore.

**Resources for Nontraditional Students**

The dramatic increase in nontraditional student populations over the past two decades has led researchers in a variety of fields to consider the implications for higher education with regard to program administration, delivery, access, specific teaching strategies, and even theories underlying disciplinary discussions and practice. A Yahoo search of “nontraditional student” yielded 153,000 hits and a number of useful web sites geared toward helping current and prospective nontraditional students navigate the complex waters of academia. A review of these resources can provide clues to the challenges faced by many nontraditional students.

One site geared specifically for the current or prospective nontraditional student is [www.back2college.com](http://www.back2college.com). This source offers extensive information on every aspect of the nontraditional student experience: admissions, financial aid, online programs, career planning, internships, discount textbooks, scholarships specifically for what it terms “re-entry students,” and valuable study and time management tips, along with a newsletter for subscribers. The site also provides reports, discussion forums, and links to other sites of interest such as the National Center for Education Statistics, [www.adultstudent.com](http://www.adultstudent.com), and the Association for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education, or ANTSHE ([www.antshe.org](http://www.antshe.org)). The latter two sites offer numerous links to resources for nontraditional students such as scholarships, conferences, and mentoring. ANTSHE also offers a nontraditional student list serve, web log, and chat room. Reviewing these sites
and their links—particularly the frequently asked questions—suggests some of the primary issues of concern to nontraditional students include: fitting in with younger classmates, access to financial aid, juggling college with family and work responsibilities, the need to take standardized admission tests, low GPAs from previous educational experiences, the length of time required to complete degrees, difficulty finding adequate and affordable child care, lack of programs specifically designed for nontraditional students, availability of distance learning, challenges of goal setting, and performance anxiety stemming from the length of time away from formal education. These sites also suggest wide variance on the part of campuses in regard to efforts to meet nontraditional student needs, ranging from near ignorance of nontraditional student presence to active, highly visible programs for adult students.

Many traditional campuses, including four-year, do make explicit attempts to accommodate nontraditional students. In order to encourage such accommodations, ANTSHE recently established the first week of November as “National Nontraditional Student Week,” described as an “annual nationwide celebration of nontraditional students in higher education.” According to ANTSHE’s web site, college institutions and ANTSHE members are “encouraged to plan events to recognize the nontraditional students on their campus as well as improve the adult student environment” (www.antshe.org).

ANTSHE’s list of institutions conducting activities in observance of National Nontraditional Student Week is short, suggesting that only a few academic institutions participate at this point, but inroads have been made at a number of sites. Examples
include the University of Oklahoma’s “Adult Student-Friendly Awards,” issued each year to offices and departments on campus with the most adult-friendly policies; and “Bring your significant other to class day,” designed to “help mates understand what their partners are doing in school.” Weber State University hosts “family tailgate parties,” and Middle Tennessee State has an ambitious program for “Older, Wiser Learners” (OWLS). The OWLS engage in a variety of activities, including an essay contest for nontraditional students offering cash awards, an educational campaign for faculty and staff, OWLS open houses, a weekly faculty e-mail newsletter featuring an OWL issue or question of the week, and an OWLS juggling performance, in which OWL members entertain the campus community with a literal, not just metaphorical, juggling act. Kent State University offers an annual recognition reception specifically to recognize the achievements of nontraditional undergraduates, and several institutions offer designated nontraditional student lounges which also provide opportunities for networking. Some campuses offer further services such as specific orientations for nontraditional students, social activities, services, nontraditional associations, introductory college courses designed specifically for “re-entry students,” and dedicated scholarships. At the same time, however, relatively few institutions are mentioned on the ANTSHE web site, and a review of nontraditional student blogs, chat rooms, and list serves would suggest that many institutions could do a great deal more to accommodate nontraditional student needs.

Fortunately, there are signs of institutional reform on the horizon. As an example, in February 2004 Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Senator Phil Graham jointly
proposed a Congressional bill designed specifically to meet the needs of nontraditional students. According to Senator Clinton: "Today, 39 percent of students at higher education institutions are 25 years or older, compared with 28 percent in 1970. Forty percent of undergraduates work full-time, up from just one-quarter fifteen years ago. And close to 30 percent have children" (http://clinton.senate.gov).

Senator Clinton does not cite the source of her statistical information, which varies somewhat from the data I was able to locate. Nevertheless, this proposed legislation suggests a growing awareness of nontraditional student presence and needs, and the recognition that nontraditional students often face formidable barriers that need to be addressed at institutional and even national levels if more nontraditional students are to meet their educational goals. The proposed Nontraditional Student Success Act is designed to increase graduation rates for nontraditional students by addressing the range of barriers they face: financial, life balance, academic and social. Clinton and Graham state that they seek to “increase the availability of financial aid to nontraditional students and the ability of those students to earn a living without risk of losing financial aid; reward schools that create class schedules accommodating to students who cannot attend classes on a traditional calendar; provide further incentives to schools to offer students child-care services; expand the availability of remedial programs for students; counsel students who face social and cultural challenges in their quest for higher education” (http://clinton.senate.gov). It is heartening to see this issue finally receiving attention from public officials.
Nontraditional Student as Questing Hero: Media Representations and Their Limitations

Representations of nontraditional students in the media have proliferated recently, often constructing the nontraditional student as the “hero” in a quest narrative, who must slay the dragons of bureaucratic inefficiency, insensitive professors, multiple demands by family members and employers who do not understand their decision to return to school, and uncaring institutions. Reading the first-person accounts of nontraditional students suggests that many of them face formidable obstacles, with the number and severity tending to increase as the degree of “nontraditional” status slides up the scale from “mild” to “high.”

Sometimes the “heroic narrative” has undertones of the tragic. As one example, the “Business” section of the Monday, May 3, 2004 Honolulu Advertiser ran a prominent story complete with color photo, entitled “Older students face unique challenges.” This was an Associated Press feature focusing on students at Holyoke Community College in Holyoke, Massachusetts, profiling a 60-year-old student named Donald Vitkus with “no spring in his step, no looking forward to new friends and new ideas.” Vitkus reported “dread at the prospect of studying again, and of being thrown in a classroom with students one-third his age.” According to this article, the nontraditional student may enter the academy at a disadvantage: “Many already have a sense of failure and—once at school—must revive long dormant skills while balancing study, work and family.” At the same time, “Older students also bring a greater sense of purpose to classes, and a willingness to share their life experiences. Many ask sharper questions, bridge the gap
between the ivory tower and the real world, and challenge conventional thinking.” Vitkus’ instructor, Bob Plasse, describes how Vitkus used his personal “traumatic” experiences with social workers to influence the class discussion in his social work course; “That gave me, as a teacher of social work, such rich material—to actually have someone who had had such a negative experience.” Plasse counts Vitkus as a “success story” and says that “older students often get the most from the classroom—and add the most to it . . . they can also have the most trouble finishing. If forced to choose between supporting their families now and investing in an education for later, most will choose their families.” Plasse calls it a “noble choice, but a tragic dilemma . . . I think it’s mostly the world outside that gets in the way” (Pope 5/3/04).

This feature is disturbing on several counts; it is odd that a social work professor would conceive of the family as part of “the world outside,” while disavowing the academy of any responsibility for resolving his student’s “tragic dilemma.” Some may also read the attitude toward a student’s real life experience with social workers as patronizing, and one wonders why it was “surprising” that real-life experience actually entered into an academic discussion of social work.

Other articles offer a more optimistic account, while still tending to emphasize the heroic struggles of individual students. For example, the University of Hawai‘i student newspaper, Ka Leo, ran a feature from the Orlando Sentinel in its September 24, 2003 issue: “Career and college juggling trend rises.” This feature also cast nontraditional students in heroic but beleaguered roles. One student in the feature, Karen Bowden, is described as a “wife, mother and full-time senior quality technician” pursuing a
bachelor’s degree in liberal studies; another, Zoraida Renta, is a single mother working full-time as a marketing assistant. The Sentinel points out the range of reasons that adults have for returning to college later in life, despite the tremendous obstacles they face. Bowden cites primarily economic motives: “Without a bachelor’s degree, there’s a certain limit to how far you can go in a career”; while Renta has more idealistic, less tangible priorities: “Neither of her parents graduated from college, and she wanted to set an example for her own two daughters.” Cliff Cox, a full-time auto sales consultant, is working toward an online degree in information technology in order to obtain a “business-oriented job with more reasonable hours to have more time with his family.” Jamie Chesler, a Masters candidate in human resources development, entered community college as a freshman when she was a single mother with three children and a job at an auto parts store. Chesler, the first person in her family to attend college, “juggled job, school and kids with the help of neighbors.” It took five years for Chesler to earn her associate’s degree, and another five years to earn her bachelor’s degree in business administration—and this was at a college, Barry University in Miami, which specifically caters to working adults. The stress was worth it, according to Chesler; though she clearly wishes to make herself more marketable and command higher pay, she also cites less tangible benefits: “Your whole outlook on life changes . . . You can communicate better. You develop self-confidence . . . Everything changes, for the good” (Wessel 9/24/03).

Such media accounts are useful for alerting the public to the prevalence of nontraditional students, as well as noting the sometimes formidable challenges they face.
Yet few of the recent articles I located in local newspapers discuss any possibility of institutions changing to adapt to nontraditional students’ needs. As yet another example, the May 10, 2004 Honolulu Advertiser featured a full-color photograph of a nontraditional student, the single mother of a nine-year-old daughter, who juggles parenthood with providing day care, serving cocktails, and a full-time pre-nursing program at Leeward. This student says she gets “about five hours of sleep a night.” (Tsai 5/10/04) Another profile presents a 44-year-old Leeward student who hopes to transfer to an electrical engineering program at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. A former Silicon Valley employee, he receives aid from the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation following a minor stroke, and though he is one of the fortunate nontraditional students who does not have to juggle his studies with a full-time job, while a student he has been forced to cope with life stresses typical of an older individual: the illness and death of his father, a divorce, and serious health problems. According to Vierra, “compared to that, Art 101, History 152 and Math 103 shouldn’t be anything to stress over” (Tsai 5/10/04).

Certainly these students deserve all the accolades they can get, and it is high time students like this were recognized for the sometimes extraordinary effort they must put into achieving their educational goals. Yet continued media emphasis on individual nontraditional students tends to eclipse any discussion about possible structural and institutional reforms that could help alleviate some of the difficulties faced by these students. (An analogy may be drawn with discussions of working parents and child care; so much of our public discussion focuses on individual dilemmas and solutions while
neglecting to address the social, political, and cultural conditions that cause such challenges to individuals in the first place.)

Some media reports, however, do address the need for institutional reform. In the November 12, 2003 Honolulu Advertiser, history professor Dan Boylan of the University of Hawai‘i at West Oahu discusses the student body on that particular campus. With an average undergraduate age of 33, 70% of West Oahu’s students are working adults, 63% are part-time students, and 70% are women. “These nontraditional students are West Oahu’s staple and the fastest growing portion of university populations nationally,” says Boylan. “They are a joy to teach. They are very serious about school. . . . Many excel.” Boylan cites individual examples of nontraditional students who have gone on to earn doctorates, serve as state legislators, or pursue careers in education, nursing, and medicine. Boylan offers his own share of heroic narratives—such as that of a male adult student who had initially begun college at 18, failed, worked in a blue-collar occupation, married, had children, and decided to change careers. “He was a terrific student,” says Boylan, “articulate, thoughtful, diligent. And he wrote like a dream.” This particular student graduated with a degree in sociology and continued to law school, where he graduated near the top of his class and spoke at the graduation ceremony. “This story repeats itself,” says Boylan, “with variations, again and again and again on West Oahu” (Boylan 11/12/03).

But unlike some of the feature articles which emphasize individual student effort at the expense of acknowledging institutional responsibility for these students, Boylan does argue for institutional reform and flexibility. UH-West Oahu, says Boylan, offers
36% of its courses at night, 8% on weekends, and 15% through distance learning. Every major offered includes an evening/weekend degree option, whereas UH-Manoa (the system’s flagship campus) and UH-Hilo offer only one evening degree program each (business administration at Manoa and psychology at UH-Hilo). The question of funding and a permanent facility for the West Oahu campus is currently a controversial issue in Hawai’i’s political landscape, and Boylan seems to have a clear political agenda in mind when he emphasizes UH-West Oahu’s structural attempts to serve nontraditional students. Boylan’s account suggests that no matter how hard nontraditional students work and how much effort individual educators devote to meeting their needs, some structural adjustments in the nature of higher education itself are necessary if the needs of all current and prospective nontraditional students are to be met. Some adult education specialists such as William Tierney and Timothy Quinnan argue that, just as nontraditional students are marginalized within the academy, those institutions which specifically attempt to accommodate their needs are themselves marginalized within the hierarchical, status-conscious world of academia. Boylan’s article suggests this is a possibility within the University of Hawai’i system.

The proliferation of articles, web sites, nontraditional student resources, and statistics reminds us that the “ivory tower” paradigm of higher education (modeled on monks living in monasteries during medieval times) is outdated in the face of today’s circumstances. Intractable bureaucracies, spiraling expenses, elitism, and assumptions of a “norm” from which nontraditional students deviate—whether on the part of administration or faculty—are all potential barriers to learning which need to be addressed.
if nontraditional student needs are to be met. Older models of education catering primarily to 18-to-22-year-old students with no other significant life obligations are to higher education in the 21st century what the “Leave it to Beaver” television program is to contemporary American family life: an obsolete fantasy. As the student demographics of academia change, faculty must also adapt, bearing in mind that our own existence as “keepers of the institutional flame” depends upon the presence of students. Thus, our professional viability depends upon our ability to understand and meet students’ needs, whatever their ages or life circumstances.

**Accommodating the Nontraditional Student: Where We Are Currently**

The proliferation of Internet-based resources for nontraditional students and media reports on their experiences reflects a growing awareness of the demographic changes discussed earlier in this chapter. Many mainstream campuses, such as the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the University of South Carolina, and Middle Tennessee University, appear to be ahead of the curve with regard to programs specifically designed to address nontraditional student needs proactively. Further, web sites such as www.antshe.org, www.back2college.com, and www.adultstudent.com contain extensive links to sources of information regarding recent innovations in higher education, such as distance learning, online classes, accelerated degree programs, evening, weekend or summer course offerings, and low-residency options. Such alternative approaches to education have proliferated across the country in recent years, and while many of these are not explicitly identified as “for the nontraditional student,” the frequent reference to such programs on adult education web sites suggests that these programs serve the
pragmatic function of meeting nontraditional student demands for access and flexibility. Articles such as Boylan’s, and proposals such as the Clinton-Graham bill, suggest that much more remains to be done at the institutional level. Yet progress is clearly being made at a variety of sites across the country, with awareness of nontraditional student presence and needs appearing to increase steadily at all levels of the higher education enterprise.

**Nontraditional Students and Composition Studies**

Much current scholarship regarding nontraditional students focuses on the needs of the student outside of the actual classroom. If so many hurdles exist for nontraditional students before they even set foot in the door, then what do such students face once they enter the classroom? Are the professional conversations in academic disciplines keeping current with this demographic shift? Our own discipline, composition studies, has done an exemplary job of interrogating how well our professional discourse and teaching practices are adapting to the ever-increasing diversity of students—female and male, gay and straight, and of all races, socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, and abilities. This attention to diversity has motivated some of the most important and influential composition scholarship to date. But are we as a discipline equally cognizant of other aspects of nontraditionality?

Obviously, when considering issues of identity and positionality in the classroom, there is considerable overlap between categories, and as Min-Zhan Lu points out, there is danger in foregrounding one component of identity—such as gender—in a way that “erases differences” such as race, class, or sexual identity (Lu 239). Clearly many components of
student nontraditionality, including but not limited to age, may also correlate with
differences in socioeconomic class, ethnicity, or gender; and given that various
components of identity interact in complex ways, it is impossible to discuss any aspect in
isolation. Thus, while my own discussion of student nontraditionality foregrounds issues
surrounding student nontraditionality as age, delayed entry, and the juggling of multiple
roles, other components of identity such as class, race, ethnicity and gender will also enter
my discussion.

Lu recognizes that we can “mobilize our lived experiences of one form of
discrimination to end social amnesia about other forms of discrimination” (Lu 251),
making it possible to foreground certain aspects of identity and difference while still
attending to others. An analysis which foregrounds nontraditional students—that is,
students of various ages and life circumstances, who must fulfill multiple roles while
undertaking their educations—need not, and should not, take place at the expense of other
kinds of analyses, but may be used to highlight and critically consider a certain kind of
difference that has been to this point under-addressed in composition studies.

In the next chapter, I review some of the most prominent texts in the field of adult
education, introducing adult educator Malcolm Knowles’ concept of “andragogy.”
Though I resist this term’s anti-feminist prefix, I nonetheless point out its usefulness as a
model, as well as its significant intersections with certain aspects of the process, certain
post-process, and feminist composition theories which I subsequently review. Of
particular interest in terms of my research findings are the ways in which andragogy, as
well as certain process, post-process, and feminist composition theory, conceptualize the
use of personal writing in academic discourse. Because my study took place in a WAC rather than a composition classroom, I also articulate the relationship between WAC and composition studies, particularly noting WAC’s emphasis on “writing to learn” as an andragogical approach. Following this discussion, I review the currently available composition scholarship dealing with nontraditional students and discuss some of its implications.
CHAPTER TWO:
REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

Adult Education: Recent Scholarship

The field of adult education is broad and not limited to nontraditional students pursuing traditional academic degrees in traditional academic settings (the focus of my inquiry). Research in adult education encompasses such diverse matters as workforce training and retraining, vocational education, literacy programs, lifelong learning motivated by desire for personal fulfillment, remedial education, and of course the pursuit of advanced degrees.

A review of recent research, however, suggests that the topic of nontraditional students pursuing traditional college degrees is an area of increasing interest in recent decades. A July 2004 search of Digital Dissertation Abstracts, for example, revealed that between 1985 and 2004, 278 dissertations concerning nontraditional academic students could be located by referencing the term “adult students,” 135 by referencing “nontraditional students,” and 20 by referencing “returning students.” A review of the abstracts indicates that the vast majority of these dissertations were produced in subdisciplines of education, such as educational administration, educational psychology, and educational policy. Only nine of those 433 dissertations were cross-referenced with the term “composition,” and of those, only one was located specifically within the discipline of composition studies. Existent scholarship tends to focus on administrative concerns rather than issues specific to the classroom or to particular disciplines. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have examined, among other issues, the degree to
which nontraditional students experience themselves as marginalized on campus, whether they face unique issues and require special services, and what steps educational institutions should take to address their needs.

An ERIC search for documents containing the keywords “nontraditional student” yielded 1,992 hits even when limited to documents produced between 1997 and 2004, indicating that scholarship regarding nontraditional students in the college setting has exploded in the field of adult education in recent years. As with the dissertation abstracts, most of this research is located in the discipline of education, and while a range of issues are examined, the focus tends to be on administrative issues such as access, retention, and the need for special programs. Research includes both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, short-term as well as longitudinal, both within and across research sites.

When the keyword “composition” was added to the ERIC search, however, the hits between 1997 and 2004 plummeted to 44. My subsequent review of the abstracts revealed that of those 44, only one three were actually located in the field of composition studies. In a 2003 conference paper by Donald Pardlow, “Finding New Voices: Notes from a Descriptive Study of Why and How I Learned To Use Creative-Writing Pedagogy To Empower My Composition Students—and Myself,” Pardlow examined the effectiveness of using teaching techniques normally associated with creative writing as a tool for teaching composition to a group of students which included, but was not limited to, nontraditional students. In 2002, Virginia Crisco presented a paper entitled “Navigating Alternative Discourses in the Basic Writing Classroom: Ethnography as Agent for Change,” in which she argued along lines similar to what I will assert later in
this study: "Ethnographic pedagogy builds a bridge between nontraditional students' home community with the values of the academic community, but the point of 'bridging' the two communities seems to be for the student to come over to 'our side.' This paper proposes an ethnographic pedagogical approach that is reciprocal, bridging both directions, becoming a call for teachers, not just the students, to learn about and change the position of alternative discourses in the institution" (Pardow 1). In 1999, Howard Tinberg delivered a conference paper, "Writing with Consequence: On-Line Collaboration and Desktop Publishing in a First-Year Writing Course," discussing an on-line course designed to "encourage civic discourse." Like Pardlow, Tinberg discussed a group of subjects which included, but was not limited to, nontraditional students.

While studies focusing on nontraditional students are relatively rare in composition studies, then, research regarding nontraditional students is ubiquitous in the field of education. Recent education scholarship suggests consensus on several points: Nontraditional students are demonstrably marginalized on most college campuses, and nontraditional students typically face more structural obstacles than the majority of traditional students. (See, for example, Brookfield; Tierney; Benshoff & Lewis; Leask). The overriding concern in adult education today appears to be nontraditional student retention, and many recent dissertations offer quantitative analysis of various factors affecting nontraditional student persistence and retention at particular sites. Studies focused on specific disciplinary and classroom practices are far fewer, though it is possible to locate some studies which investigate classroom practices. One excellent example is Marion L. Houser's 2002 conference paper, "They Have No Idea What I
Need: An Investigation of Nontraditional Student Expectations of Instructor Communication Behavior.” Houser questioned whether the needs of students older than 25 has been adequately addressed in research regarding instructor communication styles, and conducted her own qualitative study to determine whether a selected group of nontraditional students felt their communication needs were adequately addressed in the classroom. Houser describes some of her expectations as “surprising,” including the fact that the nontraditional students she studied expressed a desire for teachers to view students “as peers,” and that nontraditional students desired a relationship with instructors in which information can flow both ways and "instructors learn from students" as well (Houser 2).

With a few exceptions such as Houser’s study, the potential barriers facing nontraditional students before they enter the classroom—primarily administrative—have received more research attention than the potential barriers these students face inside the classroom. Moreover, as Timothy Quinnan points out, much of the extant classroom research tends to focus on underprepared nontraditional students and assumes that nontraditional students will face intellectual as well as structural challenges.

There are, however, a few notable exceptions. In “Dispelling Some Myths about Mature Students in Higher Education: Study Skills, Approaches to Studying, and Intellectual Ability,” John T.E. Richardson challenges such an assumption. Like Quinnan, Richardson posits that much adult education scholarship emphasizes the intellectual challenges faced by nontraditional students, while downplaying their strengths: “Discussions about the role of mature students in higher education tend to
emphasise their supposed needs rather than the potential benefits they can bring. Indeed, many accounts characterise the situation as inherently problematic” (Richardson 166). Richardson cites a 1993 study by the American Psychological Association which considered mature students “solely in terms of their special needs and problems” (Richardson 167), and a 1993 British study which stated that the “problems” faced by “mature students” are best “understood in terms of the . . . concept of the mid-life crisis” (Richardson 167). Yet Richardson also points out that “mature students tend to be regarded as having ‘difficulties’ studying in higher education because the rest of their lives (financial, emotional and personal) impinge on the only role in which institutions are prepared to recognise them . . . the unacknowledged reality is, of course, is that these roles have always impinged on students’ experience of higher education but the prevailing culture did not permit its articulation” (Richardson 167).

According to Richardson, more institutional acknowledgment of the effect of “non-academic factors” on classroom experience is bound to positively influence students of all ages, including traditional students. He suggests that the original model of academia as “ivory tower” separated from the rest of the society—a paradigm derived from the medieval monastery—is no longer valid in a postmodern (or post-postmodern) world, yet so many institutional designs and assumptions seem to imply otherwise. Moreover, Richardson states, society’s assumption that most adults will embark upon a traditional life cycle of education followed by entry-level career, marriage and family, job promotion, grandparenthood, and retirement, has gone the same way as the “medieval
monastery” paradigm of higher education (along with the so-called “traditional family”). Yet these antiquated paradigms seem to die hard, particularly in institutional settings.

Of particular interest to critical educators is Richardson’s distinction between a “deep approach” to studying, or “meaning orientation,” in which students are “motivated by the relevance of the syllabus to their own personal needs and interests,” and a “surface approach” or “reproducing orientation” which stresses the “superficial properties of the material” (Richardson 168). Richardson discovered in his own research that adult students were “more likely than younger students to exhibit a . . . meaning orientation towards their academic studies” and “less likely to adopt a surface approach or reproducing orientation” (Richardson 169). He locates this tendency in the higher likelihood that adult students will be motivated by “intrinsic goals,” “the prior life experience of mature students promot[ing] a deep approach,” and to the fact that students in their final years of secondary education are often propelled by institutional demands into a “surface approach to learning,” an orientation which traditional students may carry with them into college the next year (a problem likely to be exacerbated in the U.S. in the future with the current over-emphasis on standardized testing and rote memorization in secondary schools).

Finally, Richardson uses scientific data to correct the notion that age-related changes in intellectual capacity may impinge upon the success of mature students. Richardson dispels some negative stereotypes of adult learners or “mature students” found in adult education literature, using statistical evidence to prove the invalidity of negative assumptions such as: older students lack effective study skills because of their
time away from the academy; older students have time management problems; older students' study skills are “inferior” to those of younger students.

Interestingly, Richardson concludes by observing that a survey of higher education faculty in Australia indicated a general belief that “mature age students perform better overall than normal age students, that they have a positive influence on the course, and that their tutorial contribution is considerably better than that of normal age students” (Richardson 172). While results in Australia may not necessarily be transferable to other contexts, it is nonetheless interesting to note that while textual representations of nontraditional students tend to focus on deficiencies, this may not be reflected in faculty attitudes. Accordingly, Richardson calls for more classroom studies examining the attributes these students bring to the classroom, and for listening to what these students have to say to us as educators. Richardson also reminds us that when soliciting the voices of nontraditional students, we would do well to assume these are voices of intelligence rather than voices of academic deficiency.

**Malcolm Knowles' Concept of Andragogy**

Richardson refers often to precepts first introduced in America by Malcolm S. Knowles, one of the most significant and influential figures in adult education. Knowles’ 1970 *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, continues to shape discussion in the field today. In this text Knowles established a model for teaching which he termed “andragogical”—meaning “the teaching of adults”—as opposed to “pedagogical,” which implies the teaching of children. Knowles remains, arguably, one of the most influential educators in adult education, with ten books to his credit.

After receiving his Bachelors from Harvard and his Masters and Ph.D. in educational theory from the University of Chicago, Knowles served for several decades as executive director of the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. He also served as Professor of Adult Education at Boston University, before transferring to North Carolina State University where he retired as Professor Emeritus of Adult and Community Education.

His key concept, andragogy, is still both embraced and debated within the field of adult education.

When Knowles first became an adult educator in the 1950s, he was bothered by the fact that most formal theories of learning were based either on "research on animals [mostly rodents, at that] and children" (Knowles 1984, 5). Educational psychologists at that stage, according to Knowles, were not studying learning so much as "reactions to teaching." As Knowles considered his own experimental teaching practice with adult students in light of innovative scholarship by British adult educators (such as Cyril Houle’s *The Inquiring Mind*), Knowles began to develop his own theoretical framework, though he states: "I didn’t have a label for it that would enable me to talk about it in parallel to the traditional pedagogical model" (Knowles 1984, 5). In 1967, Knowles heard the term "andragogy," which originated in Europe, after conducting a summer workshop attended by European adult educators. After presenting his still-nameless theoretical model, one of the European attendees told him: "‘Malcolm, you are
preaching and practicing andragogy.' I responded, 'Whatagogy?' because I had never heard the term before" (Knowles 1984, 6).

With a term now in place for his alternative teaching model, Knowles published The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy. Knowles argued that the term “pedagogy” was pejorative in the context of adult education because the literal definition, using the Greek roots, is “the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles 6). Below, I paraphrase Knowles’ characterization of the major differences between pedagogy and andragogy:

- In pedagogy, the learner is dependent, whereas in andragogy, the learner is self-directing. (Knowles 1984, 9)
- Pedagogy assumes the learner has little life experience and thus “the backbone of pedagogical methodology is transmission techniques”; the andragogical model “assumes that adults enter into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youth” (Knowles 1984, 10).
- Pedagogy assumes that student readiness depends on students being told what they have to learn next; andragogy assumes that adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know. (Knowles 1984, 11)
- Pedagogy focuses on subject-centered acquisition of content; andragogy focuses on “organizing learning experiences around life situations rather than according to subject matter units” (Knowles 1984, 12).
The pedagogical model assumes student motivation comes primarily from external sources, whereas the andragogical model posits that "the more potent motivators are internal" (Knowles 1984, 12).

My summary, above, is paraphrased. Knowles himself acknowledges that this is an overly simplistic contrast, and that actual teaching practices may (and sometimes must) use aspects of both models simultaneously. Moreover, as I will discuss at length later, many of the most prevalent and widely discussed teaching practices in composition today—including, but not limited to, strategies for teaching composition and WAC associated with process, post-process and feminist methodologies—are usually labeled as "pedagogy" yet may fit more appropriately within the definition of "andragogy" if considered in light of Knowles’ model. This can largely be accounted for by disciplinary differences in the meanings and usages of particular terminology, since adult education and composition studies are different discourse communities with different shared assumptions and tacit definitions. Nonetheless, I would argue that the term "pedagogy" is particularly problematic when yoked to certain critical and feminist educational projects. Unfortunately, "andragogy" is hardly an ideal substitute, since the prefix "andra" excludes women. For purposes of this current discussion, however, I will continue to use the two terms in the sense that Knowles used them. In my conclusion I will take up the question of terminology further, asserting that both terms are unnecessarily exclusionary and therefore inadequate for the critical educator who wishes to be inclusive and socially responsible.
Knowles’ thinking about the differences between andragogy and pedagogy has evolved over time; in his earlier years he viewed the two models as dichotomous, but as he continued to train teachers of both children and adults, he found that the two models can work together effectively if viewed as points along a continuum rather than as oppositional practices. Certain adaptations of the andragogical model, for example, proved effective for Knowles even when teaching children, and for certain types of adult education—especially when the teaching of basic skills was required—Knowles and the adult educators who worked with him found that certain aspects of the pedagogical model could, and at some points should, be deployed at various junctures in the learning process (Knowles 1984, 6). As his teaching experiences deepened, Knowles came to understand the two models as “parallel, not antithetical” (Knowles 1984, 12). Nevertheless, Knowles argues, while some aspects of the pedagogical model may be appropriate in certain circumstances, the term “pedagogy” is itself inappropriate, implying that the learner is always a child and establishing through terminology a power differential that infantilizes the adult learner.

A further difference between Knowles’ pedagogical and andragogical teaching models is that where pedagogy is content-driven and sequentially delivered, emphasizing the efficient transmission of content, andragogy emphasizes process, with the teacher serving more as a “facilitator” rather than a repository of content. Says Knowles: “The andragogical model assumes that there are many resources other than the teacher, including peers, individuals with specialized knowledge and skill in the community, a wide variety of material and media resources, and field experiences. One of the principal
responsibilities of the andragogue is to know about all these resources and to link learners with them” (Knowles 14). In his or her role as facilitator, the andragogue’s most important initial function is to establish procedures “likely to produce a climate that is conducive to learning” (Knowles 14). The andragogue must take care to create such an environment both physically and psychologically, with learners feeling they are in a climate of mutual respect, collaboration, trust, supportiveness, openness, and pleasure. Knowles also argues for “humanizing” the educational enterprise by attending to physical as well as psychological needs. Having established a climate conducive to learning, the andragogue then involves learners in mutual planning; allows participants to diagnose their own needs for learning; asks learners to formulate their learning objectives; involves learners in designing a learning plan; and, as the term of the course progresses, assists learners in carrying out their learning plans and evaluating their own learning (Knowles 1984, 17-18). As we shall soon see and explore in more detail, the andragogical model shares considerable theoretical ground with certain approaches to composition studies, particularly process paradigms and feminist theory.

In *Andragogy in Action*, Knowles outlines andragogical approaches used in various settings for adult education: business, industry, government, continuing education in the professions, religious education, remedial education, colleges and universities—and perhaps surprisingly, even elementary and secondary education. Knowles also asserts: “It is perhaps a sad commentary that, of all our social institutions, colleges and universities have been among the slowest to respond to adult learners” (Knowles 1984, 100). While this may be true to some extent, it appears that in 1984,
Knowles was largely unfamiliar with some of the significant movements in English departments throughout the 1970s and 1980s—most particularly process paradigms and feminist composition theory, both of which set forth a number of teaching principles that resonate with the concept of andragogy, as we shall see in my forthcoming discussion. Moreover, many developments in the composition studies were significantly informed by critical educational theory as elucidated by, among others, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks—not to mention the numerous postmodern and poststructuralist theorists who have called into question every kind of traditional authority, power differential, and canonical body of knowledge in the English discipline as a whole. Historical disciplinary scholarship has traced numerous theoretical innovations and paradigm shifts in English, heralded by some and castigated by others (see, for example, Ohmann; Graff; Connors; North; Miller; Faigley). Though English never conceived of itself as shifting from a “pedagogical” to “andragogical” paradigm, considering Knowles’ model may be one method of conceptualizing certain paradigmatic shifts (though, as Miller, Faigley and others have pointed out, reconceiving theoretical notions of power did not necessarily translate to transformed power differentials in practice).

While radical teaching practice has not uniformly resulted from ostensibly radical theorizing, it seems clear from a historical review of English generally, and composition specifically, that a number of theoretical insights and teaching innovations that developed in English during the latter 20th century would comport with Knowles’ andragogical model, even if these shifts have not been explicitly articulated as such. Certainly some of the concepts set forth by Knowles, such as shared authority and connection of course
material with life experience, are hardly new ideas for composition practitioners—a point I will return to shortly when I review the composition literature. The difference is that Knowles foregrounds the issue of student age and nontraditionality in formulating his proposed teaching practice, while composition theorists usually enter into discussions of teaching methods from other locations. Part of my project is to weave together these different discursive strands to demonstrate how an andragogical teaching approach may resonate with approaches that start from other points, such as process theory or feminism. Before doing so, however, it is helpful to turn to the adult education theorist who most explicitly draws upon critical theory in his own consideration of nontraditional students and andragogy—Timothy Quinnan.

**Timothy Quinnan: Andragogy and Critical Theory**

Timothy Quinnan’s *Adult Students “At-Risk”: Culture Bias in Higher Education* is one of the few adult education texts that explicitly invokes critical and postmodern theories to analyze the institutional position of nontraditional students. (At several junctures Quinnan veers away from his narrative thread in order to defend his methodological choices, a telling move suggesting this theoretical approach is not *de rigueur* in adult education.) According to Quinnan, most adult education research “strikes a prosaic chord,” with “hypotheses repackaged” to “reaffirm outcomes of earlier scholarship” (Quinnan 1). Quinnan wishes to treat “root causes” rather than “symptoms,” and to uncover “academia’s appalling dereliction in naming them cursory rather than substantive problems” (Quinnan 2). In this regard, Quinnan’s project resonates well with work in composition studies which, similarly, uses critical and postmodern theories to
“dig” more deeply into the roots and structures shaping composition studies, rather than simply offering facile “how-to-teach-a-writing-class” instruction manuals.

Quinnan begins by suggesting that “Much of what the adult student encounters along the path to learning is not of his or her own making but is imposed by the academic culture” (Quinnan 1). Drawing upon critical theories as put forth by, among others, Michel Foucault, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, he argues that “critical theory seeks to reveal the contradictory and hegemonic elements underlying our social and cultural arrangements” (Quinnan 14). Quinnan draws upon postmodern theories as elucidated by, for example, Michael Awkward, Lyotard and Baudrillard, that “postulate the decentering of norms/self, deterritorializing public and political life to admit groups beyond the majority, and redrawing boundaries of knowledge and power” (Quinnan 16). Quinnan then delineates the hallmarks of a “critical postmodernism” which seeks to transform hegemonic social structures by incorporating the voices and subjectivities of traditionally excluded Others—and in terms of the particular hegemonic social structure known as academia, says Quinnan, adult students are indeed Others.

Quinnan locates the reason for nontraditional students’ Otherness in the economic, cultural, and political structures of capitalism:

A culture as driven as ours by capitalism and the puritan work ethic . . . refuses to tolerate those who fail to abide by norms so embedded in our social fabric. To some, adults as students are an affront to American democracy—where corporate and government leaders collude to promote commercial interests at the expense of other priorities such as social justice and economic equality. It is from these normative grounds—the fact that adult students are defying a solemn social obligation in choosing school over work—that deeply rooted cultural opposition to their inclusion in campus life springs. (Quinnan 32).
As cultural agents who defy social expectations regarding social roles and established hierarchies, says Quinnan, nontraditional students contribute to a postmodernist questioning of hierarchies by questioning received wisdom and scrambling standard categories through their “delayed” entry into college. For traditional institutions who consider their continued viability as dependent on the status quo, the categorical complications presented by postmodernism in general are often seen as a threat to the established order. Some institutional discomfort with nontraditional students may stem from the fact that their mere presence represents a similar disruption and challenge to expected patterns. On a pragmatic level, the higher likelihood of nontraditional student self-assertion means these students may challenge certain institutional assumptions and practices directly:

Adult students may be a potential threat to the authority and autonomy of the academy by virtue of their unwillingness to abide by the status quo. . . . Because they use this experience base critically to assess course content, college policies, and teaching styles, adults place themselves at further risk in higher education for challenging not just the authority of the academy, but the values and beliefs—or ideology—undergirding university culture. In traditional academic cliques, adults may be viewed as invaders into the body politic. . . . In postmodern theory, adults earn ‘at-risk’ status simply because they are culturally suspect to the established order. (Quinnan 33)

Adult students “form a distinct cultural association” in the “larger educational landscape,” an Other in an environment where “a politics of exclusion continues to hold sway” (Quinnan 33). As a result, says Quinnan, “adults quickly learn that universities welcome them as long as their usual ways of operating do not have to make accommodation” (Quinnan 33).
Further, as Quinnan’s statistical research points out, the Otherness of nontraditional students hardly appears to stem from their scarcity. His 1997 research revealed that, according to the 1996 edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 58.2% of all college students were older than 23 (40.9% of full-time enrollees at community college and 30.9% at four-year colleges). Between 1971 and 1991, the number of students older than 25 increased by 171%, with the number of 25 to 29-year-old students increasing by 99%, 30 to 34 year-olds by 201%, and students over 35 increasing by a stunning 248%. “By any stretch,” says Quinnan, “these trends necessitate change in the way higher education conducts its affairs” (Quinnan 28).

Nor does Quinnan fall into the trap of considering student nontraditionality in isolation:

Adult students may well be ‘at-risk’ on more than one count. Age is the primary factor; gender is the second. In 1993 women accounted for 55% of the total enrollment in higher education . . . It is reasonably safe to state that a significant percentage of adult students are in fact women. Am I suggesting that a correlation exists between age, sex and subordinate status at the university? Unequivocally, yes. The ‘isms’—sexism, racism, ageism, classism—are ubiquitous in the academy and in combination can prove culturally lethal for the nontraditional student. (Quinnan 29)

Further, suggests Quinnan, those institutions who most consciously set out to serve nontraditional students may find themselves on the institutional margins of academia:

With their long open-access history, community colleges are not as culpable as other postsecondary institutions in erecting barriers . . . Community colleges, because of their longstanding role as educational servers of nontraditional students, have been relegated to the same academic Siberia as the multicultural clienteles that populate them. If so, such bias would partly explain why denizens of the ivory tower continue to deride community colleges as inferior. (Quinnan 29).
Nor do institutions do nontraditional students any favors by conceiving of educational objectives in purely economic or instrumental terms. In a capitalist society, an “economic bedrock” underlies all assumptions regarding the purpose of education. According to Quinnan, this “logic of commodification . . . is in large measure responsible for the anti-egalitarian nature of modern educational practice” (Quinnan 45). A disconnect exists, asserts Quinnan, between the way that government, society, and business conceptualize the purpose of higher education primarily as “having a preeminent economic role in the postindustrial world”—whereas academia itself, particularly among liberal arts faculty, may have a quite different, more idealistic and less economically driven conception of its role and purpose. The view of human beings as “commodities” or “human resources,” of education as primarily a segment of the economy, and of motivation for higher education as primarily economic, is part of what leads to the marginalization of the adult student: “Colleges refrain from investing too heavily in the human capital of adult students. Younger students are seen as an outlay for the future. They have years of work, earnings, philanthropy, and social and financial production still ahead of them, all of which may be viewed as collateral on the university’s investment. At the other end, adult students come to college in the ‘depreciating’ stages of their productive years” (Quinnan 50).

Moreover, Quinnan argues, the traditional role of the academy to prepare the children of the privileged for life in the professions comes into conflict with the impetus of radical educators to make higher education more accessible:
Higher education advances the interests of the contented majority in securing for them passage into the professions, a better standard of living, and the social prestige bestowed on college graduates. Coming from a different perspective, critical theorists marshal evidence of the hidden, paradoxical messages pervading the entire phenomenon of schooling: the unassailable primacy of Western thought, the imposition of lower academic and ultimately occupational expectations upon women and minorities, and consequently the perpetuation of economic divisions through the formal process of education. (Quinnan 48).

The presence of adult students on college campuses thus disrupts the status quo at many different levels. As Quinnan points out, along with the deep intertwining of education with economics, and the ways in which traditional higher education has served to keep the current hierarchies of class, race and gender in place, comes an entire ethos of social acceptability into which all of us have been, to some degree, interpellated. Referencing Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Quinnan states:

> It is widely held, erroneous or not, that in Western societies there is presupposed order to things. Such ordered systems are especially pronounced and inflexible when applied to economic matters. Children play, adolescents attend school, adults labor, and retired persons live off pensions and social security entitlements. Simple and unswerving is our social obedience to this canon... In American myth... the concept of adult student is an oxymoron. Adults are providers, heads of households, units of production. If they are in school, they cannot be working. In the unforgiving light of Capital's day, adult students are eschewing their obligation to the free enterprise system. The college, as a preeminent institution dedicated to maintaining social and economic stability, implicitly views them as reprobates. The worst sort, this myth tells us, are adults who had jobs, voluntarily gave them up, and have now discovered college... This may be why adult learners enter higher education with attributes comparable to other disadvantaged populations. They, too, are like the Other, deficient in the ways of capitalism and in need of cultural reindoctrination... Faculty, staff, traditional-age students, even adult learners themselves are racked with doubt as to the appropriateness of their assuming a 'student' role. Too often they fall prey to the cultural stigma placed on them for playing this part. The staying power of socialization in commerce-driven societies should never be downplayed. Debunking these social myths and companion misconceptions must therefore remain at the forefront of any dialogue on the economy of adult education. (Quinnan 52-53)
Quinnan questions the widely held assumption that the primary motivation for adults to return to college is sheerly economic: "If there is even a smattering of other factors motivating adults to attend college, why do universities insist on developing adult education programs that stress only career rather than intellectual or emotional benefits? . . . Why do educators and theorists suffer from a mental occlusion allowing them to envision adult learning only as preprofessional training instead of something that stimulates personal and cognitive growth?" (Quinnan 61) While Quinnan acknowledges that "adult education . . . must be concerned with occupational issues to a certain extent," he says, "the critical error lies in thinking that career considerations should be the beginning and end of planning services for adult students. . . Mechanistic views of education are incomplete" (Quinnan 61-62).

Yet Quinnan's vision for adult education is not devoid of hope: "The disadvantaged status put upon adult learners by universities designed to serve a younger population is somewhat mitigated by the adults' intense inner drive to prevail" (Quinnan 31). Further, even though administrators tend to focus on support service shortcomings such as financial aid, day care, advising, and inflexible scheduling, such attempts do address real needs, and may allow us to reconceptualize the cause of nontraditional student marginality as stemming less from "organic or native inadequacy in the student" and more from "cultural bias in the host university" (Quinnan 32).

Quinnan suggests that those engaged in teaching nontraditional students consider the "border" paradigms set forth by scholars such as Giroux and Gloria Anzuldua, conceiving of adult students as "resid[ing] in a borderland between the college’s main and
subordinate cultures” (Quinnan 35) There is a link, says Quinnan, between Giroux’s “border pedagogy” and Knowles’ “andragogy,” in that in both models, teachers “serve as critical guides to students evolving their own sense of place in historical, cultural, and social contexts” (Quinnan 38). Though the two teaching paradigms have different theoretical starting points, both posit that:

Adult students have accrued a lifetime of experiences which are affirmed by professors as integral to learning and made a regular part of classroom fare. Once the teacher enables self-narrative to develop, the prospect of a learning dialogue, wherein students contribute from a position of elevated personal status, arises. Under such instructional conditions, the adult assumes new responsibility for his/her own learning. In taking control, s/he revises the terms of the contract with the academic institution and emerges in less danger of alienation from the educational process. (Quinnan 38)

Though Quinnan is not specifically concerned with composition or writing, the passage above resonates with scholarship in both composition and WAC, since writing assignments offer students such explicit possibilities for engaging in “self-narrative” in order to enter a dialogue with the subject matter being discussed. Moreover, Quinnan’s use of critical and postmodern concepts to establish and conceptualize the marginality of nontraditional students is useful for mapping their metaphorical location. Rather than considering age in isolation, however, Quinnan acknowledges the complex matrix of variables that constitute identities, such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, recognizing the complexity of how students are situated socially. Regardless of other potential factors, however, Quinnan maintains that the nontraditional student is “always-already” marginalized on the university campus simply by virtue of being an older person in an environment designed for those who are younger; and is marginalized
in society at large by refusing to acquiesce to socially expected roles. Quinnan uses the term “dyssynchronicity,” meaning “at odds with expected chronology,” to describe the sense of displacement nontraditional students may experience when they assume roles that mainstream society has assigned to those of a different age and stage of life.

Quinnan concludes by arguing for a reconceptualization of Knowles’ andragogical model cast in postmodern terms, then connects that model with Giroux’s concept of “border pedagogy” to describe a “border andragogy” that draws upon aspects of both. Border andragogy, according to Quinnan, means creating a learning environment in which “an adult student feels the pleasure of being recognized for having a store of personal knowledge that complements and enriches subject matter presented in class discussions . . . In border andragogy, experience is credited, stories are recounted, and the lessons learned over the course of the adult’s life are valued as integral to transformative learning” (Quinnan 103). While Quinnan does not specifically address the composition or WAC classroom, it is easy for the writing instructor to imagine teaching strategies that enact such a model: “Adult students and those that teach them would be enriched by the admission of individual experiences into a class setting that previously prohibited all but disciplinary versions of knowledge” (Quinnan 106). The term “andragogy,” however, with its implication of a male student, is in many ways no improvement over “pedagogy,” with its implication of a child student. Later I will consider alternative terms that are both gender and age-inclusive.
Robert Sommer: Andragogy Meets Composition

To date, the only full-length book that explicitly connects Knowles’ concept of andragogy with composition studies is Robert Sommer’s 1989 Teaching Writing to Adults. This text, while it offers a strong practical component, does not break much new theoretical ground. In its foreword, Edward M. White calls Teaching Writing to Adults “an important book [that] not only brings together the two fields of adult education and writing instruction, but it shows how each field enriches the other. . . . Writing instruction desperately needs the invigoration and inquiry that andragogy brings” (White, in Sommer xiii). Yet, says White, he is not convinced that Sommer’s research has led to new theoretical knowledge so much as demonstrating “what most practicing writers have known all along [that] most English teachers have not . . . Far too much writing instruction remains teacher centered, reading dominated, rule bound, grammar ridden, and product oriented” (White, in Sommer xiii). Despite Sommer’s lack of strikingly new theoretical insights, White acknowledges the necessity of work such as Sommer’s which considers the teaching of composition in light of concepts used in adult education.

A review of chapter headings reveals Sommer’s pragmatic focus: “Evaluating Writing Assignments and Responding Constructively,” “Effective Writing in the Workplace,” “How to Improve College Writing Courses,” “Handling Divergent Levels of Writing Experience,” and “Successful Writing Instruction for Adults.” Appendices include sample assessment questionnaires, suggested writing activities, and course evaluation forms. This text is quite helpful for the instructor faced with the task of teaching adult students to write (I actually used many of his suggestions in designing my
own composition course recently), though his engagement with theories of teaching writing is limited, especially in light of some of the debates in composition studies that were beginning to take shape in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, Sommer makes a compelling case for "andragogy" in the writing classroom, arguing not only that adult writing students have different needs than younger learners but, moreover, that andragogical teaching methods may be beneficial for younger students as well. An andragogical model suggests, among other things, an approach to composition which honors the individual subjectivities, personal experiences and voices of students, while allowing students to determine their own educational goals.

But what then is the difference between "andragogy" and other approaches to composition, such as process and post-process methodologies and feminism? Sommer himself notes that when he applies andragogy to writing instruction, what becomes immediately apparent is the resonance between his proposal for "composition andragogy" and some of the approaches developed in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by process composition scholars such as (among others) James Britton, Janet Emig, Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, Mina Shaughnessey, James Moffett, and Peter Elbow. In particular, the kind of "teacherless writing class" envisioned in Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*, says Sommer, "provides a perfect example of andragogy in action: self-motivated learners, driven by a readiness to learn, maturity, and experience, set[ting] their own learning goals in an atmosphere of trust and sharing" (Sommer 12).

It is interesting that the process approach to composition studies, now denounced by many composition scholars as theoretically retrograde and politically naive, was
initially identified by Sommer as a non-infantilizing approach to teaching adult students. One weakness in Sommer's text, however, was that he did not address some of the critiques and alternatives to process composition approaches that were coming to the forefront at the time (see Berlin 1982, Faigley 1986, Bizzell 1992, Bartholomae 1995, Miller 1992). In my forthcoming discussion, I will discuss some of these critiques and subsequent developments in composition studies, specifically with regard to debates regarding the use of the personal in academic discourse. In my conclusion I will address how an "andragogical" approach to teaching of writing may connect and/or conflict with process and certain post-process approaches to composition.

Sommer himself, while arguing that a process writing classroom is andragogical, does not argue for an exclusively "expressivist" approach to the teaching of writing. Drawing upon James Britton’s distinction between "expressive" and "transactional" writing, Sommer argues that developing writers need to learn how to work in both forms. An effective andragogical writing course, Sommer says, allows the writer to develop increasing rhetorical sophistication by learning when and how to use different modes of writing. Sommer also resists positing a sharp binary distinction between "expressive" and "transactional" writing: "Adult students will be more likely to succeed in transactional writing if they are writing from experience that helps them to understand their relationship to the reader. . . . Experience is more than what has happened to a person; experience consists of what a person has done, her assessment of her actions, her articulation of their meanings, and her integration of them into new activities. In the context of transactional writing, experience thus may be represented as a circle of
activities in which fieldwork, writing, reading, and response lead to further fieldwork, writing, reading, and response” (Sommer 120-121).

Sommer then suggests that students may benefit from a recursive process or “looping” between expressive and transactional writing. Andragogy, says Sommer, suggests that even when teaching transactional writing and academic discourse, students should be encouraged to find ways to draw upon their experiences, though he grants that a writer’s conceptualization and use of “experience” should become increasingly sophisticated and critical as the writer’s rhetorical skills develop: “The line between expressive and transactional is smudged, blurred—and is so much the better for being so . . . In essence, the shift . . . is not so much a movement away from the experience of student writers as an enlargement on the idea of experience—what it is and what it means to the writer” (Sommer 118-119). Whereas Britton posited that “children and adolescents learn writing on a continuum, moving from expressive writing . . . to transactional writing” (Sommer 170), Sommer questions a strictly linear and developmental understanding of the “expressive-to-transactional” movement, suggesting that the adult writer may benefit from a more relational concept between the two types of writing and a more recursive approach to using both of them. The use of “expressive writing,” or “personal experience,” should not be limited to children: “It is useful to return to expressive modes for the very reason that the personal experience of adults greatly enriches writing . . . Expressive writing taps a natural condition of adulthood” (Sommer 107). Furthermore, “Restricting writers in an academic or a business setting to nonexpressive modes may cut them off from a means of developing their own voices, learning strategies for discovering
the connections among ideas and events, and finding a way through problems in other
types of writing . . . Expressive writing thus affords the writer practice at understanding
the relationship between experience and the expression of it” (Sommer 108).

What Sommer finally suggests is a hybrid approach to teaching writing—
expressive assignments that allow the adult writer to prioritize and focus on his or her
experiences, transactional assignments that require the writer to consider primarily the
purpose of the work and its audience, and recursive processes that bring the two types of
writing into dialogue with one another.

**Writing from Personal Experience: Controversies in Composition**

Some of the most vigorous recent controversies in composition studies take up
this very question of the role of “expressive” writing in the academic classroom, with
“expressive” holding pejorative overtones in a great many composition circles. As a
result, many composition scholars today resist that label, even as they encourage various
approaches to using the personal in academic writing. Labels aside, it is crucial to note
that the principles of andragogy—whether discussed by Knowles, Quinnan or
Sommer—consistently point to the critical and reflective consideration of personal
experience in the learning situation. To reiterate Knowles, andragogy “assumes the
learner has a rich body of life experience.”

How personal narratives should be used in academic settings is a question not
only of interest to the adult educator, but has been a lively site of discussion in
composition studies for decades, beginning in the mid-1960s with the advent of two
closely related “schools” of composition: the process movement and so-called
“expressivism.” The two terms are sometimes used as near synonyms, and there is considerable overlap between the two, but each term carries a slightly different set of implications. “Process” largely emphasizes an approach to writing which, as its name suggests, emphasizes the process of writing and focuses on revision. Teaching methodologies often include exploratory forms of writing, such as freewriting, journals, class letters, or process writing; frequent individual conferencing; group work and peer response. “Expressivism,” while often linked with process approaches, refers more to a philosophy of teaching writing that emphasizes first-person narratives and concepts such as voice and—according to “expressivism’s” critics—“authenticity.” Because the two terms have become so conflated (particularly by those philosophically opposed to “expressivism”), because so many prominent composition specialists are associated with both, and because both terms share considerable philosophical ground with andragogy, I will discuss the two terms in conjunction, while recognizing that “process” and “expressivist” are not synonyms.

Other theorizations of the role of the personal in academic writing developed specifically from feminist composition studies. Elizabeth Flynn and others point out that the rise of the both the process movement and “expressivism” coincided with the rise of

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1“Expressivism” is a term often used by those opposed to this “school” of teaching writing. However, many who are labeled “expressivists” themselves oppose the label, asserting it has never meant what its opponents have claimed it to mean and arguing that it is usually only used in a pejorative way (see, for example, Tobin and Elbow). Because I agree with those who question its accuracy, I use the term in quotes throughout this dissertation. For a detailed discussion of the contested history of this term, see my unpublished 1997 University of Hawai‘i Master’s thesis, *Embracing Student Voices: A Journey Inside the Peter Elbow Composition Classroom.*
feminism, both within and outside the academy, and both had their ideological roots in the social justice movements of the 1960s. After addressing process/expressivist and feminist concepts of writing instruction—along with the theoretical roots of Writing Across the Curriculum, or WAC—I will demonstrate that all these fields share considerable theoretical ground with andragogy as well.

**The Process Movement and “Expressivism”**

Composition scholars point to the 1966 Dartmouth Writing Conference as the process movement’s founding moment, when a diverse set of reactions to the way writing had usually been taught (later termed, in retrospect, "current-traditionalism") gained cohesion and momentum. The then-dominant “current-traditional” approach emphasized surface correctness and adherence to standard forms. With the Dartmouth Conference, the social upheaval of the 1960s, and the call for increased diversity and access to the academy came a revolution in writing instruction—one that prioritized classroom emphasis on the writing process over grading and ranking the writing “product.” A partial list of those identified with the early movement would include Peter Elbow, Don Murray, Janet Emig, Donald Stewart, Mina Shaughnessey, James Moffett, and Ken Macrorie (many of the same people identified by Sommer as using andragogical teaching techniques). While the approaches of these various process proponents were far from identical, on the whole there were enough people sharing sufficient common ground to constitute—especially with benefit of hindsight—a new paradigm for the teaching of writing.

The nomenclature of “process” is not perfect; as Lad Tobin points out, all writing processes lead to products of some kind, and all writing products result from some sort of
process. Nonetheless, prior to the mid-1960s, a great many writing instructors advocated a "particular kind of product—the superficial, packaged, formulaic essays that most of us grew up writing and teaching—and a particular kind of process—write, proofread, hand in" (Tobin 5). It was this type of process and product against which Elbow, Macrorie, and others were reacting; directing more attention to composing processes themselves and teaching those processes in the composition classroom also served to expand previous notions about what "good" writing might entail. In Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the '90s, Lad Tobin reminds readers that "The writing process movement began . . . as a critique and an alternative. . . . After all, we were speaking up against rigidity, legalism, authoritarianism, fuddy-duddyism. We were speaking up for students, freedom, innovation, creativity, and change" (Tobin 5).

In her influential 1977 Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy pointed out that much of the driving energy for the process movement—and her own contribution, the study of error patterns and the ways in which their underlying logic reveals intelligence—derived from other social justice movements of the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, the antiwar movement, and the demand by many segments of the populace for increased access to higher education and other traditional centers of power. Less restrictive college admissions policies opened the door to a more numerous and more diverse student body; thus, the philosophical or intellectual impetus for process approaches both fed and was fed by the practical impetus. The founding impulse of the process movement was democratic, anti-elitist, anti-institutional, and linked to similar moves in various realms of American life. But later critics such as
Lester Faigley, while acknowledging the "radical edge" with which the process movement began, would assert that that edge "quickly was dulled" (Faigley 1992, 58) as the movement gained institutional respectability.

Tobin points out that from its inception, educational conservatives tended to view the process movement as "just another fad, a product of its time ... excessive, soft-headed, and irresponsible" (Tobin 5). But resistance from the right is not the only resistance the process movement has encountered. Tobin summarizes the double-bind in which process compositionists found themselves in the early 1990s:

Proponents of process are, of course, used to these [conservative] arguments. What they are not used to is what happened next: somewhere along the line, the followers ... still struggling to convince the establishment, somehow became the establishment. And to their surprise and horror they suddenly found themselves exposed on their left flank (the military metaphors unfortunately seem to fit the spirit of the debate). (Tobin 5)

One early such critique can be located in James Berlin's 1982 essay, "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." Though Berlin identified himself as a New Rhetorician believing that "truth is never fixed finally on unshakable grounds ... it can only represent a tentative point of rest in a continuing conversation" (Berlin 1982, 20), he makes an unshakable-sounding claim to an less-than-tentative point of rest in his assessment of process teaching: "One conclusion should now be incontestable. The numerous recommendations of the 'process'-centered approaches to writing instruction as superior to the 'product'-centered approaches are not very useful. Everyone teaches the process of writing, but everyone does not teach the same process" (Berlin 1982, 20-21).
Yet to this point no process compositionists had ever argued that anyone taught the "same" process; indeed, each of the major proponents had a different emphasis. As Lisa Ede points out: "Janet Emig's, Donald Graves', Peter Elbow's, and Linda Flower's research projects differ in as many ways as they are similar... yet all have been cited as examples of process research" (Ede 36). What Berlin seemed to be objecting to in 1982 would appear to be not "process" so much as "expressivism," or an emphasis on personal narratives in academic settings.

This objection was taken up further by critics such as David Bartholomae, Lester Faigley, and Patricia Bizzell, who viewed the purpose of the college writing class primarily as instruction in the conventions of academic discourse—though with a specifically left-wing, liberatory agenda. Scholars who identified themselves with the "social-epistemic" school did not support the teaching of academic discourse for the same kinds of reasons as conservative scholars, such as E.D. Hirsch; instead, as Bizzell states in her introduction to Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness: "I was attempting to serve a utopian educational project by suggesting that initiation into academic discourse could be a good thing from a left-oriented point of view" (Bizzell 1992, 18). Such scholars argued for teaching the conventions of academic discourse as a method of promoting critical consciousness among their students and empowering students to speak back to power structures by working within and through those structures—though in the same introduction, Bizzell reveals an evolution of her thinking over time that has caused her to have "doubts about my own earlier advocacy of teaching academic discourse as a means to critical consciousness" (Bizzell 1992, 27). Not only
did Bizzell question the relationship between Freirean “critical consciousness” and “academic discourse,” but she reports that she was “alarmed to hear that I was not regarded in some quarters as advocating the imposition of academic discourse on all students at all costs with total disregard for whatever knowledge they might bring to school from other discourse communities” (Bizzell 1992, 27). Such “inculcation,” Bizzell insists, was never what she advocated, though she acknowledges, “I did see how I could be read as advocating the inculcation of academic discourse; I did in fact advocate teaching academic discourse, while trying to find ways of doing it that were not quite so dominating as the notion of ‘inculcation’ might imply” (Bizzell 1992, 27). Bizzell rightly points out that such glib assessments of hers and others’ work are oversimplifications that do not do justice to the complexity of the emerging concepts of discourse communities and what she calls “rhetorical power” (Bizzell 1992, 30).

Nevertheless, during the late 1980s and 1990s it became apparent that two “camps” were forming in composition studies. The group of scholars with which Bizzell, Bartholomae, Faigley, Berlin and others identified—termed “social-epistemic”—consciously committed themselves to articulating the relationship between composition studies and emerging literary theories such as postmodernism, deconstruction and poststructuralism, along with cultural studies and the consideration of differences such as gender, race and class. Scholars associated with this position generally placed themselves in opposition to those committed to “process” or “expressivism,” two distinct terms which were often conflated.
"Expressivism," too, is a term with a contested history. As discussed by Robert Sommer, James Britton viewed expressive writing as the opposite of transactional writing—writing that prioritized expressing the views of the writer over writing that sought to act on an audience. James Kinneavy also used the term in his 1972 *A Theory of Discourse*. In 1979, Richard Fulkerson defined “expressivism” when he drew on M.H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp*—an important text in literary criticism—to propose a classification of writers’ texts similar to Abrams’ classification of literary texts. An emphasis on the internal language traits of a text, Fulkerson termed "formalist"; an emphasis on the audience or reader, "rhetorical"; an emphasis on correspondence to reality, "mimetic"; and an emphasis on the writer, "expressive." Fulkerson traced “expressivism,” or an emphasis on the writer’s point of view, to the Dartmouth Conference of 1966—the same site where Mary Minock and others locate the origins of the process movement—and associated it with Ken Macrorie, Donald Stewart, Lou Kelly, and others (typically also identified with process) who promoted the concept of voice in writing. (Interestingly, Fulkerson classified Peter Elbow, so often identified by others as “expressivist,” as a rhetorician: "Elbow's techniques *seem* to put him with the expressivists, but . . . Elbow saw himself, accurately I think, as a rhetoricist" [Fulkerson 6].)

Fulkerson proposed his classification quite neutrally, his stated goal being for instructors to situate their teaching philosophically and to strive for consistency between their actual goals and the goals they communicate, explicitly or implicitly, to students. In 1982, Berlin proposed an epistemological complication, positing that the implications of
particular approaches depend not only upon which of the four elements of the rhetorical situation is emphasized, but also upon how each of those particular elements is conceptualized. Drawing his classification schema from philosophy rather than from literary criticism, Berlin identified four approaches, each of which derives from a particular epistemology of knowledge, truth, self, reality and audience: Neo-Aristotelian/Classicism; Positivist/Current-Traditionalism; Neo-Platonist or Expressivism; and New Rhetoric or Epistemism, where Berlin placed himself. Whereas Fulkerson proposed his schema neutrally, Berlin clearly positioned himself in relation to his own mapping: "I am convinced that the pedagogical approach of the New Rhetoricians is the most intelligent and most practical alternative available, serving in every way the best interests of our students" (Berlin 1982, 10).

Berlin's straightforward self-positioning obviates the need to read "through" a claimed objectivity—a helpful rhetorical move. However, Berlin shifted Fulkerson's terms from classification into the realm of value judgment, and while his straightforward opinion is preferable to the obfuscated opinions often hidden beneath an ostensibly "objective" stance, his assertions about other-than-New-Rhetoric approaches to composition began to take on pejorative overtones.

Berlin made sweeping claims about the nature of "expressivism" that had never been made by the so-called "expressivists" themselves—claiming, for example, that "expressivists" believe "truth is conceived as the result of a private vision." Though Berlin acknowledges that many of those he associates with "expressivism" were the original proponents of collaborative group work, he discounted the communal dimension
of writing groups, stating (without citing his sources) that the "expressivist" uses groups in the ultimate service of an isolating individualism: "The purpose [of class dialogue] is to get rid of what is untrue to the private vision of the writer" (Berlin 1982, 16). By contrast, Berlin says, the New Rhetorician "sees the writer as a creator of meaning, a shaper of reality, rather than a passive receptor of the immutably given" (Berlin 1982, 20).

By positing a sharp binary opposition between writerly expression and the rhetorical negotiation of meaning, Berlin suggested that these goals are mutually exclusionary. He also made sweeping claims about the nature of "expressivism" as positing a writer working in solitude (though those he identifies as "expressivists" insist his description of their philosophy was never correct):

For the expressionist, truth is always discovered within, through an internal glimpse, an examination of the private inner world. In this view the material world is only lifeless matter. The social world is even more suspect because it attempts to coerce individuals into engaging in thoughtless conformity. For the expressionist, solitary activity is always promising, group activity always dangerous . . . it denies the place of intersubjective, social processes in shaping reality. Instead, it always describes groups as sources of distortion of the individual's true vision, and the behavior it recommends in the political and social realms is atomistic, the solitary individual acting alone. (Berlin 1987, 145-146)

In my 1997 Master's thesis, I discussed some reasons why Berlin's assessment constitutes an "uncontextualized and uncomplicated reading" of Peter Elbow specifically, and of others identified with "expressivism" as well. Berlin, for example, drew his analysis solely from an uncontextualized reading of Elbow's Writing without Teachers, a text specifically designed for writers outside of academia, without considering Elbow's academic scholarship or teaching practice, and without considering the more nuanced philosophical complications of this text, such as Elbow's assertion in the preface that
meaning is negotiated between writers and readers, rather than fixed and stable.

Nevertheless, the disdain for "expressivism" took deep root in some segments of composition studies, particularly among those who placed themselves in the "social-epistemic" camp. Meanwhile, many who identified themselves (or were identified by others) as "expressivists" disputed such characterizations, claiming they never held the atomistic beliefs they were accused of holding. As Peter Elbow has stated, "I don’t think I used the term until I began to reply to its hostile uses" (Elbow 1994, 200).

The growing rift between those labeled "expressivist" and those doing the labeling reached an apex in a series of public conversations between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, beginning with the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication, continuing at the 1991 conference, and appearing in 1995 articles in *College Composition and Communication*. Bartholomae argued against what he construes as an "expressivist focus" which reifies the category of "author" and pretends the writer can be autonomous, outside culture and history, free from "institutional pressures." In a remarkably direct attack against Peter Elbow, the author of *Writing Without Teachers*, Bartholomae asserted:

There is no writing that is writing without teachers. . . . To hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing. . . . As I think this argument through, I think of the pure and open space, the frontier classroom, as a figure central to composition as it is currently constructed. . . . The open classroom; a free writing. This is the master trope. And, I would say, it is an expression of a desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside of history, an academic setting free from academic writing. (Bartholomae 1995, 46-62)
Bartholomae went on to characterize Elbow's work in scathing terms:

Learn to be logocentric? Learn to celebrate individualism? Learn to trust one's common sense point of view? Who needs to learn this at 18? . . . Should composition programs maintain a space for, reproduce the figure of, the author at a time when the figure of the author is under attack in all other departments of the academy? That is, should we be conservative when they are radical? Should we be retrograde in the face of an untested avant-garde? . . . I don't think I need to teach sentimental realism . . . I find it a corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre. I don't want my students to celebrate what would then become the natural and inevitable details of their lives. I think the composition course should become part of the general critique of traditional humanism. (Bartholomae 1995, 70-71)

From an andragogical viewpoint, this particular passage is shot through with assumptions regarding student age. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to note that this debate, and the increasingly polemical scholarship of the 1990s, tended to place compositionists on opposite sides of a sharply demarcated binary opposition—the theoretically sophisticated, social-epistemic, postmodern theorists who cared about racial, class, gender and other inequities, and promoted academic discourse as the primary goal of college composition, in the service of eliminating oppression; and the theoretically naive, politically retrograde process/expressivists who foolishly continued to believe in Romantic notions of the autonomous, isolated, and authentic "self," promoting "voice" and personal narrative at the expense of serious intellectual writing, thereby acquiescing to an apolitical and solipsistic acceptance of the status quo.

Fortunately, later scholars on both sides of this philosophical divide would complicate this simplistic picture and recognize that when it comes to personal writing versus academic discourse, there are more than two options. It is important to note, however, some important factors motivating the social-epistemic backlash against
“expressivism.” First, early process and “expressivist” literature did usually elude questions of difference and identity. Some texts also oversimplified a range of concepts, from the concept of the “self” of the writer to the scene of writing to the rhetorical purposes of writing in various contexts. Thus, much social-epistemic theory supplied a necessary corrective. Second, as Susan Miller and other historians of English as a discipline point out, composition has had to struggle to validate itself institutionally and intellectually, given the way it has been relegated to the “low” in English departments. This struggle for institutional respect led many compositionists to turn back towards the rich, lengthy and venerated tradition of rhetoric—a move away from the simplistic and uncritical use of personal experience. Others sought to establish intellectual validity by elucidating the intersections between composition and cultural studies (Berlin), or by considering the relationship of postmodern and other theories to composition (Faigley). Furthermore, even many who strongly identified with at least certain aspects of the process movement and/or “expressivism” acknowledged the need for students to gain access to discourses of power (Delpit). Finally, as later scholars such as Candace Spigelman would argue, the personal narrative is only one among many genres to which students should gain access in order to become effective writers; and, like other genres, it can be used most effectively when placed within a critical framework.

Much recent composition scholarship regarding the role of personal narratives in academic discourse takes a more complex, hybrid approach such as that suggested by Candace Spigelman, Jane Hindman, and others. Many who identify primarily with process and “expressivism” now acknowledge the importance of attending to issues such
as gender, race and class; of teaching writing as a socially situated and rhetorical activity; and of helping students to establish a critical consciousness. For example, Sherrie Gradin's *Romancing Rhetorics* proposes a new category of "social-expressivism"—an approach which values student choice, personal writing and self-expression, while explicitly addressing many of the issues first brought to the forefront by "social-epistemic" theorists, such as difference, identity, power differentials, and oppression. In *I Writing*, Karen Paley Surman offers an ethnographic study of two primarily “expressivist” writing teachers who explicitly attempt to deploy personal narrative for purposes of increasing critical consciousness surrounding social issues such as homelessness and racism—while at the same time offering an ethnographic study of a course taught by Patricia Bizzell to demonstrate how a “social-epistemic” approach might also make use of the personal. Surman extensively cites my 1997 unpublished ethnography of Peter Elbow’s freshman English classroom in which Elbow explicitly foregrounded issues of gender, class, sexual orientation, and nonstandard language in a process, supposedly “expressivist” classroom. Such moves suggest many scholars are now taking the hybrid approach called for by Randall Freisinger in “Voicing the Self: Toward a Pedagogy of Resistance in a Postmodern Age”:

We need to examine more deliberately the direction of composing pedagogy in light of what recent literary and social theory have claimed about language and knowing. It is obvious that we cannot simply cling to Romantic notions of self. . . Nor should we, as it seems to me both Berlin and Faigley are inclined to do, sever our connections with teachers of the Authentic Voice school—teachers like Macrorie and Elbow and Coles—and the pedagogical practices they advocate and which have served us well. (Freisinger 209)
On the other side of the philosophical divide, many scholars who identify themselves primarily as social-epistemic theorists also suggest a “hybrid” approach which, while foregrounding various theoretical concerns such as postmodernism, marginality and oppression, or critical consciousness, do not completely banish the personal narrative from the academic classroom. As one example, John Trimbur suggests:

[We should] recast the current impasse in composition studies that has polarized personal voice and authentic selves on the one side and academic discourse and textual selves on the other. We might regard this impasse . . . as a symptom of the historical polarization of the public and the private . . . we might look at the study and teaching of writing . . . as a topoi where the everyday life and personal experience of students intersect with schooled knowledge and the discourse of experts. (Trimbur 131)

Barbara Kamler undertakes such a project in Relocating the Personal. Using “relocation” as a metaphor to consider how we might reconceptualize the role of the personal altogether, Kamler states:

The notion of relocation implies a dissatisfaction—a desire to move elsewhere from somewhere. I am dissatisfied with the way the personal is treated in school writing as a space of confession, a telling of inner truth. I am also dissatisfied with current competency-based moves to eradicate the personal from school writing altogether and focus on the more functional genres students need to master . . . I wish to assert the importance of working with the writer’s personal experience but differently—by relocating the personal—theoretically and pedagogically—to allow a more critical engagement with the personal. (Kamler 1)

Often the literature suggests a “conversion experience” on the part of various scholars. Where Kamler describes her shift from a more simplistic view of “expressivism” to a more heavily theorized, critically assessed, postmodern deployment of the personal narrative in academic settings, Nancy Sommers describes an opposite
trajectory in “Between the Drafts.” Sommers describes herself as someone who was once “deeply . . . under the influence of a way of seeing . . . reproducing the thoughts of others, using them as my guides, letting the post-structuralist vocabulary give authority to my text” (Sommers 158-159) After a somewhat unsettling encounter with a less theoretically minded colleague in the supermarket, Sommers recalled snippets from her own past—her mother’s dependence on tourist guides which prevented her from seeing “for herself” natural wonders such as the Grand Canyon, or her father’s dependence on hi-fi records for teaching his native German language to his own children. Sommers’ self-reflection led her to question why she, like her parents, so eagerly sought to locate her own authority in sources other than her own experience. While Kamler’s “relocation” took her on a journey away from prioritizing personal experience to a more theoretical reconception of personal experience, then, Sommers seems to have passed Kamler on the highway going in the opposite direction; Sommers now wants her students “to know how to bring their life and their writing together” (Sommers 161).

Despite their seemingly opposite priorities, what Sommers and Kamler share is a sense that an “either/or” approach is inadequate. Sommers finds her students’ best writing occurs when there is a productive tension in “the pull between someone else’s authority and our own . . . In the uncertainty of that struggle, we have a chance of finding our own voice of authority” (Sommers 161). Kamler also appears to focus on the “tension” in between the personal and the academic as a source of creative and critical energy, finding her locus in the space between the two, which she calls the “interpersonal—the power relations that shape the writer as she attempts to speak out in
the genres her culture requires she adopt—and to disrupting the binary division between personal and factual writing” (Kamler 83).

Many other scholars would appear to agree with Kamler’s concept. Candace Spigelman, for instance, draws upon both feminist and rhetorical theories to issue a “call for personal writing” that allows personal stories to be “interrogated as argument and evidence,” as suggested by Aristotle. As Spigelman puts it, a broad and undifferentiated category of “personal narrative” is not of necessity either a “good” or a “bad” thing in a rhetorical or classroom situation. Like every other aspect of the scene of writing—as social-epistemic theorists point out—the use of the personal narrative is best understood and theorized when fully situated in its context. Thus, states Spigelman, “the personal narrative is not problematic because of the limits of judgment to its validity claims; it is problematic because the uninterrogated and unevaluated personal narrative is seductive and, consequently, dangerous” (Spigelman 83). Yet the serious scholar, according to Spigelman, does not throw out the personal narrative as a genre or as an approach, but instead is “obligated to evaluate and to test narrative methods and findings” (Spigelman 83).

Echoing Sommers’ point about “productive tension,” Jane E. Hindman points out the contradictions inherent in scholarship which takes a stance against oppression and yet simultaneously promotes a concept of academic discourse devoid of the personal:

This view of academic discourse is not popular among scholars whose professional and personal aims are to end oppression. They may argue that such professional reproduction of what Clifford Geertz has called “author-evacuated prose” misrecognizes the events of our daily lives because it willfully ignores the social construction of our experiences, our knowledge, even our very bodies, and
likewise dispenses with the material aspects of composing and revising our lives. Thus proponents of discourse that challenges oppression contend that such discursive conventions as those of academic literacy maintain authoritarian inscriptions of self, knowledge and power. (Hindman 89)

Citing Andrea Lunsford, Richard Miller, Min-Zhan Lu and others, Hindman argues for an approach which “revises” concepts of literacy by recognizing what Lu calls “the tension between individual agency and collective goals of ending oppression.” Expanding on Lu’s concept, Hindman conceptualizes this “tension” as “the conflict between opposing conceptions of an expressivist, autobiographical self whose autonomy creates coherence out of inchoate experience and a socially constructed self who is always already constrained by the conventions of discourse” (Hindman 89). For Hindman, a productive way to reconceptualize the role of the personal in academic discourse does not mean viewing the conflict as “a binary opposition that must be resolved,” but rather, consciously holding in place the tension between these two ways of conceptualizing the self and writing: “By instead holding that tension, we can critically, professionally affirm both the social basis of our professional discourse and our material agency as individual writers” (Hindman 89).

Scholarship such as that by Kamler, Spigelman, Hindman, Sommers and others suggest the possibility that the two polarized positions were never in fact as oppositional as the antagonistic nature of the debate would suggest. One foundational text of the “academic discourse” proponents, Bartholomae and Petrosky’s 1985 *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*, included exploration of personal experience in a course designed to help students learn to speak the “language of the academy.” A review of Elbow and
Belanoff's textbook, *A Community of Writers*, offers chapters on "the essay," "persuasion," "argument," "research," and "text analysis." And John Trimbur's fine English 100 textbook, *The Call To Write*, includes chapters on--among other things--"Memoirs: Recalling Personal Experience," and "Working Together: Collaborative Writing Projects." Furthermore, numerous scholars on both "sides" of the debate cite a similar body of radical theorists--Freire, Giroux, Antonio Gramsci, and bell hooks, to name only a few examples. It would appear that numerous scholars holding a variety of theoretical positions have already been engaged in what both Sommers and Hindman call "holding tensions" (or, as Elbow might say, "embracing contraries") between the personal and the academic. Reviewing these texts brought to mind an experience I had in 1997 when I attended a workshop given by Lester Faigley--a year after I took two graduate seminars from Peter Elbow and conducted an ethnography of Peter Elbow's freshman writing class. Several of my classmates in Elbow's graduate seminars also attended the Faigley workshop, and we all remarked to one another afterwards how much similarity we noted between the two: work in small groups; freewriting followed by discussion in pairs, smaller groups, and the group as a whole; encouragement to consider theoretical questions in light of personal experience. (This observation might well have surprised both Faigley and Elbow.)

Indeed, over time it appears that prominent scholars on both sides of the philosophical divide have shifted their positions. For instance, Bizzell stated in 1992: "Mastery of academic discourse lets students participate in the community primarily responsible in our society for generating knowledge" (Bizzell 1992, 150). In 2003,
however, in her introduction to the co-edited volume, *Alt/Dis*, she states: “We should be welcoming, not resisting, the advent of diverse forms of academic discourse, and encouraging our students to bring all their discursive resources to bear on the intellectual challenges of the academic disciplines” (Bizzell 2003, 9). At the same time Peter Elbow, long associated with a “naive” view of “expressivism,” argues for a rhetorical teaching approach in his 2003 essay in the same volume: “Next I ask students to change the rhetoric or discourse style or structure; that is, I ask them . . . to find and articulate the ‘points’ that are already embedded in the writing, and to figure out other points that are needed in order to make a piece of analysis or persuasion that is fairly impersonal rather than an expression of their feelings” (Elbow 2003, 134). Thus, despite surface differences in the emphasis of various theorists when it comes to issues such as “process” and “expressivism,” and despite a vociferous debate that Tobin characterizes as worthy of “military metaphors,” it appears that scholars in the field have indeed been listening to and learning from each other (despite some appearances to the contrary). Much recent scholarship regarding the personal writing in academic contexts, as well as other alternatives to academic discourse, has made use of insights from a variety of points across the spectrum.

The poststructural emphasis on power is well taken and a useful complication of process pedagogies, though I would argue that process pedagogies were never as simplistic as the subsequent discussion would suggest. A close look at actual process *practice* (see my 1997 unpublished Master’s thesis for one example; see, also, Gradin and Surman) demonstrates that actual process *teaching* may include serious critical self-
reflexivity, a strong emphasis on audience and rhetorical strategy, and a commitment to negotiation of meaning in discourse communities. While many scholars raise important questions about the appropriate uses of personal narratives in academic contexts, it seems there are many voices today calling for a more complex, less binary conceptualization of what constitutes "academic discourse," and of the role that "the personal"—sometimes termed "expressivism," though this use is often pejorative—should play in academic contexts.

The kind of "andragogical" approach suggested by Knowles is, as illustrated by Sommer, demonstrably compatible with process and "expressivist" paradigms for teaching writing, along with more theoretically complex "hybrid" approaches to the personal such as those discussed by Spigelman, Kamler, Hindman, Bizzell and others. A further recent development in composition scholarship has been the "post-process" movement, which—like the "process movement" itself—cannot be described as a monolithic enterprise. In the introduction to his collection, *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*, Thomas Kent acknowledges: "Some of the authors in this book understand and represent post-process theory somewhat differently than the way I frame the notion ... the authors appearing in these pages may disagree about the nature of the 'post' in 'post-process' theory" (Kent 5). Accordingly, even "post-process" theorists concede that it is difficult to define what "post-process" means, though Kent offers a broad framework for understanding the term: "Most post-process theorists hold three assumptions about the act of writing: (1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated" (Kent 1). In order to determine whether the kind
of "andragogical" model envisioned by Knowles is compatible with theories of composition posited by post-process theorists, then, one has to look at each post-process theorist individually. In my conclusion I discuss in depth two post-process theorists, Joseph Petraglia and Barbara Couture, arguing that while an andragogical teaching model resonates with the kind of "post-process" approach envisioned by Couture, it conflicts with the paradigm envisioned by Petraglia. While andragogy clearly resonates with process and certain post-process approaches to composition, then, it may or may not resonate with all post-process approaches, depending on the specific assumptions underlying any particular scholar's version of "post-process."

**Feminist Composition Studies and the Personal Narrative**

As Elizabeth Flynn points out, process and "expressivist" schools have always shared much common theoretical ground with feminism even when that common ground has not been explicitly articulated. One interest that overlapped both fields was the expansion of definitions of "academic discourse" to include a broader range of rhetorical and generic options, including the use of the personal. Furthermore, as is the case with process and "expressivism," feminist theory over the past several decades has evolved and become more complex, thereby complicating conceptions of the personal/academic nexus in writing classes as well.

In "Composing as a Woman," Flynn argued that while feminism and process schools of composition have historically shared a great deal of common ground and can trace their roots to related social justice movements, explicit considerations of the role of gender and of the relationship between feminism and composition studies had been, to
that date, largely lacking. (There were some exceptions, such as Cynthia L. Caywood and 
Gillian R. Overing’s 1987 *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity.*) Flynn 
drew upon Nancy Chodorow’s psychological theory, Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different 
Voice,* and the Belenky, et al. collective’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing,* to suggest that 
women and men may have different writing styles, based on female preference for 
“connected” or “web-like” relationships and cooperation and male preference for 
hierarchical relationships and competition. While this article stopped short of a full-
length study, Flynn cited examples from some of her own students’ work in order to 
demonstrate how such a gender-based analysis of language might function.

Other feminist scholars expanded upon Flynn’s hypothesis. For example, Rae 
Rosenthal argued that male and female discourses are essentially “separate languages,” 
proposing a “bilingual” approach to writing education which allows students of both 
genders to learn and use the language of the other. In “Beyond Argument in Feminist 
Composition,” Catherine Lamb argued for non-adversarial argumentative strategies as 
feminist alternatives to traditional, agonistic, “male” modes of argumentation—an 
approach which may at times include use of personal experience.

Feminists such as Susan Jarratt and Laura Brady, however, questioned the 
simplistic binaries implicit in this type of feminist scholarship, in which the 
personal/connected/nonadversarial equals “feminine” and the abstract/intellectual/ 
argumentative equals “masculine.” Such a division is not only excessively facile, but it 
may have the unwelcome side effect of essentializing traditional gender roles. Just as 
Lisa Delpit argues against disempowering minority students by refusing to grant them
access to the language of power, these feminist scholars argue that as part of a feminist project, teachers should empower their students, especially their female students, to use traditional argumentation, rather than simply labeling it "male" — an argument that extends to the use of "the personal" as well.

A useful way to conceptualize the two different feminist schools of thought was offered by Flynn herself in a 1995 *College English* essay, "Review: Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition." Flynn identifies three distinct strands of feminist thought: "liberal feminism," which focuses on issues such as equal rights in the workplace and reproductive rights; "cultural feminism," which posits a "female nature" that is more "connected, giving and nurturing" than its opposite "male nature"; and "postmodern feminism," which emphasizes the socially constructed and performative nature of gender roles (Flynn 1995). Many earlier feminist composition scholars locate their theoretical underpinnings in cultural feminism, which draws heavily upon such texts as *In a Different Voice* and *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Rae Rosenthal, for example, conceives of "distinctly male and female modes of writing" (Rosenthal 119), with the male mode characterized by "objectivity, logic, facts, conciseness, and clarity" — in other words, traditional rhetoric, which Rosenthal terms "male-dominated discourse." Like all things associated with the male, asserts Rosenthal, the "abstract" and ostensibly "objective" is overvalued in the academy. Rosenthal describes the characteristics associated with female writing as "emotional, digressive, imaginative, open . . . favor[ing] questions over answers and seek[ing] response rather than agreement" (Rosenthal 125). Teaching techniques used to foster the "female" mode of writing may include journal writing,
freewriting, and the encouragement of personal narratives—in other words, approaches used by process teachers, characterized as “feminine” by cultural feminists, and termed “andragogical” by Robert Sommer.

Rosenthal takes some pains to distance herself from more essentialist strands of cultural feminism by arguing for a “bilingual” approach to composition studies in which “men and women [are] both forced to learn the dialect of both sexes” (Rosenthal 129). Yet as pointed out by postmodern feminists such as Laura Brady and Eileen Schell, there is always danger in ascribing terms like “male” or “female” to any particular set of characteristics, including style of language, genre, or teaching approach, whether one assumes that the difference is essential or socially constructed. In “The Reproduction of Othering,” Laura Brady points out that when cultural feminists suggest that “logic” and “order” are hallmarks of “male discourse,” those hostile to feminism could twist things around to suggest that women are not capable of being logical or orderly. Another danger is that such formulations can easily lead to glib overgeneralizations: Do all women write in the “female style” (and is one somehow a less than “authentic” woman if she doesn’t)? Similarly, do all men take equally well to what Rosenthal calls “male discourse”?

Yet Brady is not reacting against cultural feminist scholarship in a knee-jerk way; she acknowledges that this particular approach to feminist theory may have been both useful and necessary at a particular place and time. Using Michel de Certeau’s theory of the difference between “strategy” and “tactics,” in which strategies “are designed to prevent change in an existing order” while tactics depend on the “clever utilization of
time, the opportunities time presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power” (Brady 25), Brady argues that early cultural feminist composition scholarship had “tactical value” at a particular cultural moment when it was necessary for female voices to speak out regarding certain assumptions about male dominance and the valorization of traditional rhetoric. According to Brady, the heightened visibility and repetition of tactical disruptions, however, create a risk that “tactics” may become institutionalized into “strategies.” Again referencing de Certeau, Brady warns that with institutionalization, ideas with radical roots often lose their original disruptive and potentially transformative powers. (In some respects this is the same argument that some post-process theorists have made regarding the process paradigm of composition; see, for example, Dobrin 2003.)

While liberal feminists focus on expanded legal access for women to current centers of power, cultural feminists argue that the centers of power themselves need to change—that the values traditionally associated with the feminine realm should gain cultural ascendancy, in order to redress both the historic and current overvaluation of “male” characteristics, transform the current patriarchal culture, and create a more just and compassionate society. Yet postmodern feminists argue against rigid gender roles and the ascribing of certain traits to “male” and “female” altogether. Meanwhile, cultural and liberal feminists often retort that postmodern feminists with a strong theoretical orientation (such as Judith Butler) may give insufficient attention to the material conditions of oppression.

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Such questions go to the heart of the question regarding the goals of feminism. Is the goal of feminism to change society completely, or simply to admit more women to the public sphere while keeping present power formations intact? And if the goal is the former, can this be accomplished without essentializing women? In some ways this is similar to the question composition studies asks itself regarding its role in the academy: Is the goal of composition studies to transform the academy by expanding notions of what academic discourse is? Or is the primary goal to admit composition and rhetoric to the academy as a full partner with equal status and power, but without substantially changing current assumptions? As teachers, we face the same dilemma: Is our goal to empower students by allowing their voices, experiences, and perspectives into the academic conversation? Or does empowering students mean teaching them primarily to speak the academic language, genres, and conventions that already exist? Transformation, or accommodation? The question of the role of the personal in academic discourse, then, strikes at the heart of the status quo, particularly for feminists.

With regard to conceptions of the personal/academic dilemma in composition today, there is considerable diversity to be found in feminist scholarship, just as there is in scholarship that foregrounds issues other than gender. "Cultural feminists" continue to assert the value of teaching personal writing as a potentially disruptive, antipatriarchal move. As characterized by postmodern feminist Eileen E. Schell, cultural feminism "revalues the experience of women students and encourages individual voice and personal growth in the writing classroom . . . The desire [is] to reverse the perpetuation of harmful masculine values" (Schell 75-76). Process and cultural feminist approaches to
composition, says Schell, share considerable ground: they emphasize “process over product; the encouragement of inner voice, exploratory or discovery writing; collaboration; and the decentering of teacherly authority” (Schell 76). I would add, process and cultural feminist approaches also share considerable ground with andragogy, despite the problematic “andra” prefix.

Just as many social-epistemic positions do not completely negate all facets of process and expressivist (or andragogical) approaches, postmodern feminisms are not necessarily completely at odds with cultural feminism when it comes to certain classroom practices. Brady, Schell, Jarratt, and others raise important warning flags regarding the dangers of gender essentialism, and toward the limits that cultural feminism might impose on those who desire to challenge normative gender roles. Cultural feminists often posit that society must reverse the current paradigm which devalues all those characteristics associated with the female; postmodernist feminists, on the other hand, do not necessarily disagree that values need to be changed, but they prioritize the arguments that the binary itself needs to be called into question, that our understanding of the nature of gender roles needs to be complicated, and that we need to understand both the socially constructed and performative nature of gender norms.

Yet many postmodern feminists still appear to believe in several principles espoused by cultural feminists, such as the importance of making space for multiple voices and genres as a specifically postmodern practice. In Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald’s discussion of courses they taught on women’s rhetoric, for instance, they demonstrated that they used methods such as journal writing and response from personal
experience to help students engage critically with some of the most compelling questions
surrounding women’s rhetoric (such as whether “women have an “authentic rhetoric apart
from men,” a stance that Ritchie and Ronald recognize as potentially essentialist yet also
necessary for recovering women’s voices). Postmodern feminist uses of the personal
point out the many vexed questions of power and representation brought forth by the use
of the personal in the classroom, at the same time suggesting that it would be a grave
omission not to allow “students’ voices [to] engage the voices of tradition on an equal
footing in discussions” (Ritchie and Ronald 237). “New dialogues disrupt fixed
hierarchical categories, roles, and power relations,” say Ritchie and Ronald (237). Such
an approach has corollaries in andragogy, especially as formulated by Quinnan in the light
of postmodern and critical theories—though I would argue that both Quinnan and Knowles
(as well as Sommer) could have benefitted from more awareness of feminist issues in
their own considerations of nontraditional students.

If one considers postmodern and cultural feminisms in conjunction with one
another—once again, holding a “productive tension” between them rather than insisting on
a sharp binary opposition that resolves one way or another—it becomes possible to
envision a feminist project which both promotes the values traditionally associated with
the “feminine” and at the same time resists continuing to label those values as essentially
“feminine.” Such a “hybrid feminism” in composition studies can make space for
rhetorical alternatives that include the use of the personal, for male as well as female
students. The postmodern conception of multiply situated teachers offering multiple sites
of discursive and rhetorical access to their multiply situated students resonates well with Quinnan's postmodern formulation of andragogy.

Much recent composition scholarship points to an approach that holds opposites in productive tension rather than positing binary oppositions that must be resolved—whether those binaries are posited between academic/personal, male/female, argumentative/non-adversarial, expressivist/social epistemic, process/product, and so forth. With so much excellent scholarship available from a variety of different theoretical locations, it would seem disabling to students and to composition studies as a whole to continue to assign asymmetrical value judgments in search of the one "correct" way to teach writing. A more productive approach, it seems to me, is to heed Peter Elbow's suggestion of "embracing contraries," or Jane E. Hindman's approach of "holding productive tension," in order to develop approaches to both writing and the teaching of writing which make use of insights from all points on the map. Is this not what it means to be "multiply situated"? Should the truly postmodern scholar and educator feel comfortable obtaining his or her ideas from only one place?

Putting the Pieces Together

What seems clear at this juncture is that numerous strands of composition theory today potentially share significant philosophical ground with principles of andragogy, making this particular theory of adult learning more a complement to current teaching practices and theoretical discussions rather than something starkly oppositional to what is already happening. This is encouraging, for while I will argue that we need to expand our disciplinary awareness of nontraditional students, the required shift is probably more a
question of degree of awareness rather than a need for radical change. A discussion that places nontraditional students at the center is necessary at this moment, due to the increasing numbers of nontraditional students on our campuses and their continued marginalization despite their numerical strength. Depending upon the teaching philosophy and practice of particular scholars and teachers, what this may mean in terms of actual practice may vary from little or no change to a radical reconception of who “the student” is.

If an andragogical teaching approach is not so qualitatively different from other approaches currently in use in at least some circles of composition, then what is the point of such a reconceptualization? First, a dialogue between the fields of adult education, composition studies, and feminism has been notably lacking. In 1987, Flynn pointed out that while feminism and process composition theory shared similar radical roots, the two fields had developed largely independently of one another. Early process compositionists, while sympathetic to many radical social movements, largely failed to conduct an explicit dialogue with feminism (or with racial or other social justice movements)—a point that would come back to haunt them later. Similarly, process compositionists failed to conduct an explicit dialogue with the discipline of adult education, and adult education neglected to conduct dialogues with either feminism or composition studies.

By and large, then, conversations that could have brought the three schools of thought into productive resonance with one another failed to occur. There is a notable ignorance of gender issues in Knowles’ theory of andragogy, and in subsequent adult
education scholarship which draws upon his concepts. Likewise, there is a gap in the composition literature when it comes to discussing student age; and the term "pedagogy," which implies the teaching of children and thus infantilizes the student, is still the widespread term of choice in both composition studies and even radical educational theory such as that of Freire, Giroux, hooks and others. Despite notable gaps in all these areas, however—adult education, critical educational theory, feminism, and composition—the fields still share significant philosophical overlaps, even though little scholarship is available to date which makes those relationships explicit.

Considering all these fields in conjunction, then, is both necessary and potentially useful. In a postmodern framework, it becomes possible to enter conversations from a variety of locations or subject-positions; given the prevalence of nontraditional students in the academy, this is yet one more subject-position that needs to be invoked, simply because these students are already here. For those who emphasize the importance of understanding identities as multiply constituted, it is important not to discuss age or nontraditionality in isolation, but it is also a glaring omission not to discuss these issues at all.

I would add that a consideration of nontraditional students allows us to reconceptualize some of the arguments regarding the appropriate use of personal narratives in academic settings. Does Bartholomae’s sweeping dismissal of the personal as “sentimental realism” remain valid if we follow Knowles’ andragogical concept of assuming our students come to us with rich life experiences, both in terms of quality and quantity? (Note also in the previous quotation Bartholomae’s explicit assumption of an
And if we conceive of personal narratives as produced by adults rather than as essentially “female,” can we untether some assumptions about language and genre from rigid, potentially essentializing gender roles?

Composition studies in the post-process era are moving in a variety of different directions as we consider the multiply situated subjects and rapidly shifting contexts of postmodernism. As composition scholarship moves away from the tendency toward fixed identities and “authentic selves” toward a vision of students—and teachers—with multiply situated, complex and shifting identities, a consideration of variables such as nontraditional student age and their differential life experiences can enhance our discussion, illuminating and expanding (rather than eclipsing) the important issues posed by other forms of difference such as race, class, gender and sexuality. It may be that a consideration of andragogy in light of composition studies may not radically alter our actual teaching practices so much as shift our awareness, yet greater theoretical sophistication and more nuanced awareness are always worthy goals in themselves.

One goal of composition scholarship is to interrogate earlier assumptions to determine whether scholarship is taking adequate account of postmodern complexities; Quinnan and others make a strong case that nontraditional students are marginalized. To do so contributes to larger liberatory educational practices as envisioned by Freire, Giroux and hooks—a teaching practice with the power to transform, as I will discuss further in my conclusion.
Writing Across the Curriculum: Its Relationship to Composition

In *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*, David R. Russell points out that—like the process movement and “expressivism”—WAC has its theoretical roots in the Dartmouth Conference of 1966. As with early composition studies, some of the most prominent influences upon WAC were Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Donald Graves, and James Moffett, all of whom drew heavily on theories put forth by James Britton. Like process and “expressivism,” WAC focused on “student-centered pedagogy, often with a subversive tinge,” and on “the classroom as community” (Russell 273).

Russell identifies one of the “seminal essays” of the WAC movement as Janet Emig’s 1977 “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” which drew upon such diverse influences as Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, Britton, Moffett, and others. A 1977 National Endowment for the Humanities seminar at Rutgers strongly influenced the thinking of future leaders in the WAC movement, such as Toby Fulwiler, and led to the development of WAC programs across the country in both K-12 and higher education, beginning in the 1970s and continuing to today. Fulwiler and Art Young describe the successful establishment of WAC at Michigan Tech in the 1980s in their collection, *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research Into Practice*.

Just as the process movement and “expressivists” reacted against the current-traditional method, WAC reacted to the longstanding academic assumption that writing was an “elementary transcription skill” requiring a simple “talking with the pen”—what Mike Rose calls “the myth of transience” (Russell 7). This paradigm considered the general composition course as an all-purpose “solution” to writing dilemmas, since the
“myth of transience” dictated that writing was a generalizable skill, easily transferable to various contexts once learned. According to Russell:

The myth of transience masked deep conflicts in the mass-education system over the nature of writing and learning: what is academic writing and how is it learned? What is an academic community and who should be admitted? America has never come to terms with the submerged conflicts that underlie its attitudes and approaches to advanced literacy. And this continuing failure to confront those conflicts kept writing instruction on the margins of the curriculum rather than at the center. (Russell 9)

Russell comprehensively traces a number of historical trajectories in the American academy, demonstrating that different disciplines conceived of writing differently. Scientific disciplines, for example, promoted objectivity as the ideal form of knowledge, leading scientists to downplay the role of persuasion and rhetoric in their disciplinary writing and to view “academic writing” in the contexts familiar to them as “transparent,” “vehicles for discovering the bare facts” (Russell 11). Traditional literary scholars of the old humanist school, on the other hand, historically had a more complex understanding of language and writing, but steeped as they were in the “great books tradition,” the “literati” adopted an elitist stance toward writing that posits good writing cannot be “taught”:

“How, then, does education improve writing? Liberal culture answered that a proper education produces deep thoughts, which cannot but find their proper expression” (Russell 175).

While the humanities disciplines, based upon liberal arts and “great books,” were in many ways a welcome counterpoint to a wider university culture that was primarily industrial and utilitarian in its focus on higher education as occupational training, the dominant attitude of the humanities toward writing in the early 20th century remained
staunchly elitist: “The only way to improve students’ writing is to improve their thinking” (Russell 175). Many literary scholars even advocated the banishment of freshman composition from English departments, unsuitable as this “lowly” enterprise was to the “noble” study of great works, and given that writing “cannot be taught” anyway. Moreover, a certain “split” between composition and literary specialists is evident in English departments even today, as discussed by many other disciplinary historians. As Russell points out, this split was not neutral:

At bottom, composition instruction represented the values of equity and inclusion, of vocation and pragmatism, over and against standards of taste and culture, which professional generalists in the humanities defended. What most disturbed . . . was the influx of students who came to the university not to absorb liberal culture but to prepare for mundane professional careers. The required composition course represented an intrusion into the English department of people who did not share its values. (Russell 179)

Indeed, Russell notes, the American academy in general has always struggled to “accommodate the competing claims of ‘equity’ and ‘excellence’,” and to some degree the response of American academia has been to “institutionalize ambiguity.” The general composition course may be understood as an example of institutionalized ambiguity; in one sense, college composition promotes access by preparing students for college work, but in another sense, the college composition course serves a gatekeeping function by “weeding out those considered unfit for college work before they have the opportunity to enter specialized studies” (Russell 27). Academic disciplines, which Russell terms “agonistically structured enterprises,” typically “exert pressure for higher standards and greater exclusion” by restricting access, encouraging competition between scholars for
professional accomplishments and status, and structuring disciplinary activities as a “series of hurdles, many of them primarily written” (Russell 29).

After tracing a number of competing theoretical trajectories from the 19th through mid 20th centuries—writing as research, as utility, as social efficiency, as humanities activity, as Deweyan progressive activity—Russell turns to a discussion of disciplines in the “information age” and, finally, to the WAC movement, with its emphasis on “writing to learn.” Like its “cousins,” the process and “expressivist” movements, WAC’s origins are potentially radical and therefore the movement has always faced some resistance by more traditional scholars who still tend to view writing through the “myth of transience,” and/or who resist the ideas of expanded access so central to WAC’s philosophy:

WAC challenges deeply held institutional attitudes toward writing, learning, and teaching . . . Faculty who grew up with the century-old notion that writing is a generalizable mechanical skill . . . have difficulty experimenting with alternatives . . . Assumptions about the nature of writing in their disciplines may also make faculty reluctant to assign personal or expressive writing . . . Faculty who are accustomed to complete autonomy and authority in the classroom often feel threatened by reforms . . . that necessitate personal and intellectual involvement with students and colleagues. WAC is therefore sometimes perceived as an attempt to take time away from content and thus lower standards. (Russell 292-293)

Further, says Russell, many educators view their role as “showing the students the ‘right’ way within the constraints of the discipline” (Russell 293), rather than writing to learn or even allowing revision of drafts.

WAC, according to Russell, “attempts to reform pedagogy more than curriculum,” in that “writing to learn overshadows learning to write” (Russell 295). Thus, in an
institutional practice, “WAC exists in a structure that fundamentally resists it” (Russell 295). And, like process and “expressivism,” WAC has recently faced challenges from those who view the goal of academic writing as primarily disciplinary in nature—Writing Across the Disciplines (WID). The difference between WAC and WID, Russell says, is that WID encourages students to “learn to write in the ways disciplines do,” as opposed to WAC’s emphasis on “writing about the disciplines they study” (Russell 310). While some argue that WAC and WID are “two sides of the same coin,” other theorists argue that WAC is “interdisciplinary and freeing,” while WID is “disciplinary and confining”; or that WAC emphasizes “public discourse” while WID emphasizes “specialized academic discourse” (Russell 311). Russell refers to the current WAC/WID split as an “unfortunate but understandable controversy” (Russell 311). Russell makes the point that both approaches are ultimately necessary, for clearly, once a student declares a major and enters an academic discipline, he or she is then expected to learn how to write in the conventions of that discipline. But for core courses taken outside a student’s major, is it always necessary to learn to write “in the way that disciplines do”?

One solution to the disciplinary writing/writing to learn dilemma is offered by Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Peter Elbow in Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines. Elbow and Sorcinelli propose that teachers use a mix of “high stakes” assignments, traditionally graded according to standard disciplinary criteria, and “low stakes” or “writing to learn” assignments which are not ranked or graded and which encourage reflection, exploration, and personal response to academic issues. “Low stakes” writing assignments may have the advantages
of helping students "involve themselves in the ideas or subject matter of the course," may allow them to feel more comfortable with language because of the lower pressure, may give teachers a sense of how students are understanding course material, and—not least of all—may encourage students to keep up with class readings (Elbow "High Stakes" 7-8). Moreover, Elbow has found that in his experience, "low stakes writing improves the quality of students' high stakes writing." By the time a "high stakes" assignment is assigned, students are "already warmed up and more fluent" (Elbow 7). The performance anxiety generated by high stakes assignments often produces "terrible and tangled prose," but low-stakes writing assignments allow students to explore without anxiety and eventually find ways to transfer that same ease into more formal writing. Elbow also makes the provocative point that, while learning a discipline indeed means "learning its discourse," students truly know a field when they reach the point where they are able to "write and talk about what is in the textbook and the lectures in their own language" (Elbow 7).

A combination of low and high-stakes writing assignments in WAC courses avoids unnecessary dichotomizing and allows students to achieve the benefits of both—learning the language and conventions of a discipline while using their own language and ideas to help them develop a relationship to those disciplinary and linguistic conventions. In my next chapter when I discuss my teacher-research methodology, I will discuss the course I taught from which participants were recruited, and the mix of low and high-stakes writing assignments I devised for this course, drawing upon Sorcinelli
and Elbow’s hybrid model—an approach that Knowles might call andragogical, since it allows students to “organize their own learning experiences” to some extent.

Despite the current WAC/WID controversy, WAC remains vital at many sites of higher education, with much scholarship devoted to issues surrounding its implementation, ongoing development, assessment, and improvement. Chris M. Anson recently edited a collection of case study scenarios, *The WAC Casebook: Scenes for Faculty Reflection and Program Development*, which presents problems from real-life WAC situations in order to allow practitioners and administrators to reflect on problems, issues, and potential solutions. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner address issues of administration, building disciplinary partnerships, various available models, and potential pitfalls in *Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs: Building Interdisciplinary Partnerships*.

The hybrid, high stakes/low stakes approach to writing has more potentially radical potential than a strict “either/or” approach of teaching *only* academic discourse or *only* “low-stakes” writing. This approach can “break through the pedagogic wall,” in Elaine P. Maimon’s terms, by “prepar[ing] students to move gracefully and fluently from one setting to another, understanding differences, learning intellectual tact” (Maimon xiii). WAC “implies a set of powerful ways to make classrooms interactive” (Maimon xiii). And, Maimon points out, “an interactive classroom is one that is much more likely to respect difference” (Maimon xiii). There are also socially justifiable reasons for using a WAC approach: “[WAC] means incorporating student response into teaching. When
we take student responses into account, we give new meaning to teaching for diversity” (Maimon xiii).

Yet Maimon would appear to agree with Lisa Delpit that it is wrong to disempower students by not granting them access to the language of power, and that to do so does not necessarily constitute a conservative act. Maimon sees a role for WID as well; in fact, for those who see part of our work in the classroom as working toward social change, both WID and WAC need to work together. The “intellectual tact” students can develop by learning to move “fluently” between discursive settings has, says Maimon, “the best chance of developing in students the confidence to question conventions and to challenge rules. Approaches to freshman composition depend on understanding this paradox: rebels are people who know the landscape and can move easily through it. Those who would keep students ignorant of the academic landscape in the name of helping them to find their own rebellious voice do not understand much about guerilla warfare” (Maimon xi-xii). Learning, says Maimon, “occurs at the intersection of what students already know and what they are ready to learn” (Maimon xii). A WAC orientation that includes, but is not limited to, WID: “involve[s] students in their own learning, enabl[es] students to establish dialogue with each other, with their textbooks, with documents of their culture, and with the world” (Maimon xiii). Such an approach to writing across the curriculum, in other words, offers an excellent opportunity for teachers to practice andragogy.
Composition Scholarship Regarding Nontraditional Students

While scholarship in the field of adult education has kept pace with the demographic increase in nontraditional students within academia, the field of composition studies has been comparatively slow to pick up this topic, with a few notable exceptions. In this section I will discuss several specific examples of recent scholarship directly addressing nontraditional students, as well as scholarship in which nontraditional students appear as peripheral presences.

Patricia Shelley Fox offers a recent groundbreaking essay, “Women in Mind: The Culture of First-Year English and the Nontraditional Returning Woman Student,” in Robert Yagelski’s collection The Relevance of English. Fox argues along lines quite similar to mine: that “returning women students are not the naive readers assumed in so many of our discussions of first-year composition. The traditional first-year students we often imagine are those, untested yet by life, for whom the reading and writing they do in our first-year English courses will serve to push them out of their comfortable nests for the first time” (Fox 189). Referring to David Bartholomae’s “Writing With Teachers,” Fox grants that “students write in a space defined by all the writing that has preceded them,” a “noisy, intertextual space” described by Bartholomae as “crowded with others.” Yet as Fox points out, nontraditional women students, whose very presence in the academic classroom “is evidence of their resistance to the metanarratives of domesticity and womanhood,” are less likely than the 18-year-old freshman Bartholomae references in his essay to produce simple or “sentimental” narratives. Furthermore, says Fox, the
lack of “academic experience” among the women in her study “does not equate to a lack of ‘intellectual’ work in their lives” (Fox 189).

In her fieldwork with ten women (for which she performed more in-depth fieldwork regarding four), Fox discovered that the histories of these students were “rich and complex . . . in comparison to those of their younger, traditional classmates,” and that these histories positioned the women well—in the words of Adrienne Rich—to “enter an old text from a new critical direction” (Fox 192). Fox describes specific students, the “rich and complex histories” they brought to classroom assignments, and the ways in which they drew upon those complex histories to engage with a variety of texts—once again, a project quite similar to my own.

Fox herself acknowledges, however, that these nontraditional women students are “students [she] never expected to find,” due to the propensity of composition studies to assume an 18-year-old student as its subject of conversation: “So much of how we have conceived of the work of first-year English students . . . has been predicated upon the assumption that we have in mind an audience of traditional eighteen-year-old students, fresh out of high school” (Fox 202). This brings to mind Susan Miller’s observation in *Textual Carnivals* that composition studies has typically imagined the student as a “presexual, preeconomic, prepolitical person” (Miller 87). The consequences of imagining an 18-year-old student, according to Fox, are not neutral, as it is our “imaginary student” who helps shape our curricular goals and teaching strategies:

We imagine them [students] to be callow, untested, anticipating a life as yet unlived. In this light we see our jobs as teachers, and the roles that reading and writing will play for students, in terms of pushing them from credulity to
incredulity. As a consequence, we offer them texts that we believe will complicate a world view that, until now, has rested upon received truths and inherited cultural narratives. But the work of nontraditional returning women students brings a new kind of text and a new kind of reader into our classrooms, one who comes poised—in ways that traditional students are not—to do the real intellectual work of the academy, and who in many cases has already begun to do so. By challenging our inherited cultural narratives—of schooling, of domesticity, of womanhood, of individual freedom—they work within and among the competing discourses in their lives to offer us an oppositional world view. (Fox 202)

Fox does not extend her discussion to consider what kind of texts should be offered to nontraditional students in light of their “rich and complex histories.” Despite pulling up short of suggesting potential alternatives, however, she breaks welcome new ground and opens an important discussion on a variety of fronts—the rich lived experiences of nontraditional students, the way their mere presence in the academy challenges the status quo (as pointed out by Quinnan), and the fact that composition studies has tended to posit an 18-year-old hypothetical writer in its scholarship.

In “It’s Not an Economy, Stupid! The Education-as-Product Metaphor,” Scott A. Leonard uses concrete examples of student-teacher interactions—“living, breathing human beings who have strengths and weaknesses, passions and antipathies”—to bolster his argument that purely instrumental conceptualizations of higher education are inadequate and insulting. As one example, he cites a nontraditional student, “Robert,” who is 27, married, with a daughter, a job, a full-time academic load, and seven years of military experience. While Robert initially entered the academy for primarily instrumental reasons—“All these new guys would get the job I was applying for while I was stuck—again—in diesel maintenance” (Leonard 59)—Robert was surprised to discover, as he
progressed in his studies, that he liked “that stuff” he was learning in his writing class, finding it “rewarding and engrossing” (Leonard 60).

Leonard makes a sustained and compelling argument against strictly utilitarian and economic models of education, using the experiences of nontraditional students such as Robert to demonstrate how education can offer other than purely instrumental benefits. At the same time, however, Leonard grants that some critics of English as a discipline, or of academia in general, often make valid points about elitism and about academia’s relevance. Leonard asserts that if academics wish to gain the support and respect of the community as a whole and stave off accusations of elitism, the key lies in faculty demonstrating solidarity with their students: “If making meaningful contact with students in the classroom and working for tangible improvements in their lives elsewhere on campus is not what we care most about, why should we occupy a publicly funded institutional space?” Leonard asks pointedly (Leonard 77). By aligning ourselves with our students, we can make the study of English “relevant.” That requires being cognizant of their needs, and that students today are multiply and differently situated, such as “Robert.”

In the same volume, Kathleen R. Cheney touches briefly on the marked presence of nontraditional students in community colleges in “Community College English: Diverse Backgrounds, Diverse Needs.” According to Cheney, “The community college student has many more obligations than just academics” (Cheney 216). Even traditional-age students at community college usually work due to financial reasons, and “since the community college is also a place for adults to return to academic pursuits, their presence
in the classroom introduces another problematic time management concern” (Cheney 218), especially when adult students are also parents. The need to assist students in juggling complex time management issues leads educators such as Cheney to “participate in problem solving, counseling, evaluating, and supporting the students as they attempt to negotiate the complex experience of student life at the community college” (Cheney 218). Thus, Cheney finds she is not “limited to teaching English, at least not in any way that I imagined” (Cheney 218). Student nontraditionality may require educators to reassess and adjust their own roles. As Cheney acknowledges: “If [students] are to attain the literacy skills necessary to be active citizens in our democracy, then I as an instructor of English studies need to situate my teaching so as to acknowledge the reality of students’ lives” (Cheney 218).

Cheney is among those who recognize the benefits of allowing nontraditional students to write from personal experience: “Not confessional writing,” she qualifies, “but how many more students might I help if I recognize more effective ways to bring their life stories into the classroom?” (Cheney 266) Her account is notable for her willingness to self-examine, particularly in the case of one situation with a nontraditional student that did not go so well. “Charlie,” a nontraditional student, was attempting to gain a career direction after having served a prison sentence. In a remarkably honest admission, Cheney says she failed Charlie by assigning a set theme, “imposing a focus,” rather than “invit[ing] Charlie to select his own from the complex material of his life” (Cheney 266). Charlie stormed out in anger one day and, though he returned and apologized, later drifted away. If she had to do it again, Cheney says, she would
encourage Charlie to “reflect and to sort out, to make sense of the conditions of his life . . .
. to write, not just record, and to affirm his life in ways that reflect and critically evaluate
not only his personal experiences but also the society in which those experiences
happened. These personal narratives would give testimony to his life and create a text
through which his voice could be heard” (Cheney 266-267).

In a post-chapter forum among various authors in the collection, Juanita Comfort
responds to Fox’s assertion that nontraditional students “work within and among the
competing discourses in their lives to offer us an oppositional world view” (Comfort
273), with a call for educators to admit student voices into our professional conversations
regarding the direction of the discipline. According to Comfort, “The extent to which we
teachers and scholars are responsive to such contributions from students helps to
determine the shape that English studies takes . . . Each group of students . . . gives
teachers and scholars the impetus and direction for reconceptualizing English studies in
light of our present society’s social, political, and cultural diversity . . . As a result of our
collaboration with students, it is they, ultimately, who decide what, and how, English
studies mean, as they apply the fruits of their literacy negotiation in their daily lives”
(Comfort 273). Cheney’s account suggests that if she were to encounter Charlie again,
she would take up Comfort’s challenge rather than trying to impose subject matter onto
the student.

In the only other composition literature I have been able to locate that uses the
term “andragogy,” Michael J. Kiskis offers some perspectives on the relationship between
“adult learners” (his term for what I am calling “nontraditional students”) and experiential
writing, in “Adult Learners, Autobiography, and Educational Planning: Reflections on Pedagogy, Andragogy, and Power.” This essay appeared in the 1994 collection Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading (in) the Academy, edited by Patricia A. Sullivan and Donna J. Qualley. Kiskis says that “Adult students were rarely mentioned during [his] study of composition theory and pedagogy as a graduate student” (Kiskis 56), though he went on to work at a particular site, Empire State College, which is specifically devoted to teaching adult students through individualized contracts. Kiskis makes several of the same points that I attempt to make later in this dissertation, arguing for the “potential that autobiographical writing holds for adult students as they struggle with their decision to return to college and as they work to compose a clear plan of study” (Kiskis 56), drawing upon Freire and Dewey to develop his thesis that “prior learning is especially important when working with students who have already accumulated some thirty years of learning” (Kiskis 60). Kiskis also introduces Knowles’ concept of “andragogy” as an approach he has found effective for teaching adults. Quoting andragogist Laurent Daloz, Kiskis states: “In the end, good teaching lies in a willingness to attend and care for what happens in our students, ourselves, and the space between us. Good teaching is a certain kind of stance . . . of receptivity, of attunement, of listening” (Kiskis 60).

At the same time, however, Kiskis states that while his essay began as a “celebration” of the uses of autobiography for the adult learner, as he proceeded to draft and revise his essay he found himself increasingly drawn to questions of power, including the particular power dynamics often experienced by female students. Adult learners in
the Empire State program are required to write up their own learning contracts which allow them to draw upon prior life experience; the contracts are negotiated in a demanding process, described by Kiskis as a sometimes “herculean” exercise in “applied politics” (Kiskis 65). Kiskis provides one notable example of a promising woman student, Jane, who proposed a program in “technology and society,” an area in which she had rich life and work experience. However, Jane so resisted the “demands of discipline-based writing” that she eventually dropped the contract and left the program. Kiskis attributes Jane’s decision to neglect of women’s developmental issues in the Empire State program.

As Kiskis points out, even ostensibly more progressive and “andragogical” models, such as those offered by Knowles and Daloz, are male-dominated—a problem I would suggest is inherent in the prefix “andra”—and Kiskis, though male himself, argues for adult educators to attenuate themselves to feminist theory as well. Kiskis quotes from Belenky to demonstrate how certain feminist theory resonates with andragogy: “Mary Belenky comments that ‘teachers have to start with who students are—including their perspectives on the world—and, from that start, help students articulate what their driving questions are.’ From that initial inquiry, we can next show them how to ‘merge their questions with the ongoing questions in their disciplines’” (Kiskis 67). Kiskis thus makes a nuanced argument for bringing into the composition classroom an “andragogy” informed by feminism as well as awareness of other forms of difference, and of the dynamics of power in the teaching situation: “Too often we put students through an intellectual hazing. We, after all, hold power. Instead, we need to share the power and
authority” (Kiskis 68). Kiskis calls for making adult learners aware “that they are already active and important participants in our culture’s conversation” (Kiskis 68). Both his elucidation of the need for nontraditional students (or as he calls them, “adult learners”) to draw upon personal experience in negotiating their academic identities, and his awareness of the way nontraditionality interacts with gender and power, are points I will return to in my conclusion, when I too argue for an approach that is both “andragogical” and feminist (though such an approach, obviously, requires different terminology).

Other composition scholarship suggests that the “oppositional world view” introduced into the academy by the increasing presence of nontraditional students may spark an initial sense of anxiety on the part of the educator. As one example, in “A Story from the Center about Intertext and Incoherence,” Lynne Craigue Briggs explores her initial discomfort with an older woman, “Mary Ann,” who came to the Writing Center where Briggs worked to request a consultation: “She looked old, or older, at least . . . She looked rather gray–wavy graying hair, neutral clothes, sort of pale” (Briggs 1). Mary Ann wished to work on an individually motivated personal writing project, and Briggs, more used to working with traditional students and teaching standard academic discourse, was “used to writers who didn’t do self-sponsored writing.” To Briggs, Mary Ann looked like a “housewife-poet” (Briggs 2). Briggs assumed she was being asked to help a “homemaker” find “self-fulfillment,” but soon found out that Mary Ann was a woman with a Ph.D., two children, and a rich personal history. Eventually, Briggs became so fascinated by Mary Ann, her text-in-progress, and the relationship they were developing in the Writing Center, that Briggs made Mary Ann the centerpiece of her dissertation.
Briggs' “Mary Ann” is a particularly “nontraditional” type of nontraditional writing student—someone who has already achieved the highest academic accreditation possible, yet still chooses to pursue a nonacademic writing project and deliberately seeks out assistance from an academic resource such as the writing center where Briggs worked. As such, “Mary Ann” is considerably different from the students such as those discussed by Fox, or by my own participants. Yet what makes Briggs’ narrative of this encounter compelling—and, I believe, what places it squarely within the concerns of my own study—is Briggs’ honest revelation of how her own assumptions and prejudices shaped the initial encounter and then changed over time, in response to both Mary Ann as a person and the text she worked on with Briggs. Briggs’ initial assumptions about Mary Ann are clearly stereotypical and verging on pejorative; Briggs is shocked out of her own academic “indoctrination” by her realization that Mary Ann holds “status as a postsocialized writer and academic” who comes to the center with “real world power.” Moreover, Mary Ann’s insistence on producing a text not located in the academic fields into which Briggs herself has been socialized—a series of letters to Mary Ann’s dead mother—forced Briggs to examine her own assumptions about what constitutes “academic discourse” and, especially, the importance of “coherence.”

As a result of working with this nontraditional student’s nontraditional text, says Briggs, “I saw constructs and values, paradigms and choices, not truths, commandments, or laws” (Briggs 15). Briggs states that her relationship with Mary Ann “shook up many of my assumptions—assumptions about writing, pedagogy, the academy, and discourse” (Briggs 16). Given the considerable territory Briggs traversed in her journey, from her
initial negative stereotyping of the "graying housewife-poet" to a more nuanced and complex understanding of both Mary Ann and the mixed genre in which she was working, it appears Briggs' assumptions about nontraditional students were shaken up as well—all for the better, according to Briggs.

Other essays in the same volume also present nontraditional students as potential sites of anxiety for the educator. In "Negotiating the 'Subject' of Composition," for example, Stephen Davenport Jukuri discusses the challenges he faced when he was called upon to tutor the mother of one of his high school classmates in a small town. Jukuri's work with Carla awakened "multiple subjectivities," with his role as "coach" and "teacher" sometimes conflicting with his status as "friend of your children" and "local resident." Jukuri was finally able to help Carla negotiate her way through a difficult writing assignment—understanding Aristotle's definition of the difference between art and science—by drawing upon her own experience as a nurse to consider both the "scientific" and "artistic" components of her nursing role—yet another instance of nontraditional students connecting to academic subjects through personal experience. In another example, Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hulbert discuss Susan Blalock's account of tutoring a Vietnam veteran, "Dan," in "If You Have Ghosts." "Dan" visits the Vietnam War Memorial and is asked by his writing teacher to juxtapose the visit and the memories of his own war experiences into a standard "compare-and-contrast" essay—a move the authors criticize as "not begin[ning] to do justice to the significance of this man's experience" (Blitz and Hurlbert, 86). Blitz and Hulbert suggest that for the educator who truly wishes to allow students to connect personal experience and academic subject
matter in a reflective, critical and productive way, standard academic genres may be inadequate.

It is interesting that I located the most examples of nontraditional students in one volume entitled *The Relevance of English*, which focuses on how English studies can be made relevant for student; and *Stories from the Center*, where nontraditional students usually appear as students who proactively seek writing assistance from the resources offered to them. Both of these collections are focused in some way on the issue of “relevance”—on making writing and learning meaningful for students. In more theoretical, less practice-oriented works, one is more likely to find only traditional students mentioned—that is, if students are discussed at all.

In a search of *Digital Dissertation Abstracts*, I located one recent dissertation concerning nontraditional students and composition: “Regulating Higher Education: Writing, Representation, and “Non-Traditional” Students,” written by Carrie King Wastal at the University of California, San Diego, under the direction of Linda Brodkey. My review of the dissertation, however, indicates that Wastal’s project is considerably different than mine. Wastal uses a different definition of “nontraditional” than mine—“students who traditionally have not had opportunities to enter higher education because of their race and/or class” (Wastal xix). Wastal’s approach is historical rather than ethnographic, as she traces “representations of nontraditional students, debates about admissions and writing instruction in various public policies, legislative mandates, articles in popular magazines and academic journals, and composition textbooks” (Wastal xix) at various sites in California. As such, there is very little overlap in our discussions.
However, we share similar goals: "to create educational experiences that take into account the differences that students bring with them into the university and into writing classrooms" (Wastal xi).

One disturbing example of the nontraditional student creating anxiety and disrupting teacher and peer expectations occurs in Brooke, Mirtz and Evans' *Small Groups in Writing Workshops: Invitations to a Writer's Life*. The authors confess to their own tendency to stereotype nontraditional students as "motivated and goal-oriented, but hav[ing] less patience for exploration and development" (*Groups* 103). While the authors discuss the danger of stereotyping students on any basis—pointing out that aggregated stereotypes "describe no individual student we have ever met" (*Groups* 103)—the single nontraditional student, "Frank," who appears in one of their small groups, is presented as a nuisance. Frank may indeed have been annoying to some of the other class members, but this negative portrayal largely stems from the fact that Frank is represented exclusively through the voices and perspectives of his fellow group members. We never hear Frank’s voice; we have no access to his perspective, no sense of how it might feel to be forced to work in a "peer" group with students much younger than himself. Clearly there was a problematic dynamic in Frank’s small group, yet why did the authors’ attempt to understand and explain that dynamic only consider the subjectivity of the traditional students? This particular instance offers an excellent illustration of Quinnan’s assertion about nontraditional student marginality. If marginality is understood as lacking voice, Frank clearly was marginalized in this classroom, a structural issue that could have conceivably contributed to his cantankerous attitude.
In some instances, nontraditional students are discussed but with age and nontraditional status backgrounded rather than foregrounded. As one example, Anne Aronson provides two brief case studies of nontraditional women students in “Danger Zones: Risk and Resistance in the Writing Histories of Returning Adult Women.” In her introduction, Aronson states that she deliberately selected women over the age of 25, first, because they are “highly self-reflexive . . . [and] able to speak articulately about the relationship between their lives and their writing”; and second, as Fox and I have also pointed out, “because they have been virtually ignored within the composition literature” (Aronson 58). Yet when Aronson presents her case studies, she does not explicitly emphasize the ages of her participants in her analysis. Aronson’s presentation of “Ginny” focuses primarily on Ginny’s attempts to negotiate her working-class background with academic expectations, while her discussion of “Rashida” focuses on a troubling incidence of racism in a mentor-mentee relationship. Obviously, this does not mean Aronson is neglecting to consider nontraditionality per se, particularly since numerous studies have established the relationship between nontraditional status and other causes of marginality such as class and race. Moreover, Aronson’s purpose is to explore some of the “danger zones” that student writers may encounter, and it seems clear from her presentation that class and race—not age per se—are the primary “danger zones” for Ginny and Rashida. Aronson notes, however, that Ginny and Rashida’s age and life experiences make them more able to articulate their experiences and subject-positions than many younger students, and her self-conscious selection of adult students represents a welcome change from the more typical assumption of the 18-year-old student.
In “Reading and Writing Differences: The Problematic of Experience,” Min-Zhan Lu discusses a problem that sometimes arises in her classroom when her readers foreground gender to the exclusion of other issues such as race, class, or sexual identity. Lu argues for deep revision assignments that allow students to re-interpret their original positions in more depth after taking account of the complexities of a story. One of the students she mentions in passing is a “practicing Catholic and an ‘older generation’ woman,” which Lu acknowledges “originally marked her as the other in this classroom” (Lu 248). This student’s deeper, revised reading of a Sandra Cisneros short story illustrates Lu’s point well, though Lu focuses more on how the student’s religious background shapes her interpretation than on her “older generation” status—even though Lu also acknowledges that this student’s age marked her in this classroom not only as an “Other,” but as the “Other” in a classroom that included many women.

My observations that neither Aronson nor Lu fully explored the implications of age or generation of the students they mentioned is not intended to be a criticism; each of these scholars has her own projects and concerns. As I experienced myself during the course of this project, the researcher is constantly making choices about what to foreground, what to relegate to the background, and what data bears most significantly on the specific research questions being asked. Clearly Aronson and Lu were interested in other, equally important issues. I bring these examples up, however, simply to demonstrate two points: first, the rapidly increasing presence of nontraditional students in our classrooms is a phenomenon of which many in our field are becoming increasingly
aware; and second, scholarship explicitly dealing with these students may offer rich opportunities for us to reconceptualize our own field.

Nor can any of these issues of identity and subjectivity be considered in isolation. Adult education scholarship has clearly established correlations between nontraditional student status, working-class background, and first-generation college attendance. (See, for example, Benshoff & Lewis; Dill & Henley). This is further borne out by my examination of statistics which revealed that nontraditional students are a proportionately larger presence at public colleges, particularly community colleges, than at private colleges, particularly of the not-for-profit variety. Studies foregrounding issues of class and first-generation status, then, often include a great many nontraditional students by default, even if those two issues are foregrounded rather than age and nontraditionality per se. This observation has two implications. First, many of the studies regarding working class and/or first-generation higher education students may be applicable to nontraditional student populations as well. Second, to neglect the presence and perspective of nontraditional students is to perpetuate not only ageism, but may also constitute a class bias.

Quinnan discusses some structural reasons that nontraditional students are *de facto* marginalized in the academy; first, the learning environment is designed for younger students, and second, traditional educational institutions were originally envisioned as serving those who had no other significant life purpose other than to fulfill the demands of that institution. Moreover, institutions of higher learning fit into the larger social, political, and economic patterns of capitalism which promotes hierarchy, fixed social
roles, and the adult as producer/consumer. Thus, the nontraditional student is by nature marginalized, and may be further marginalized in society at large by the complex of factors that may have led these students away from entering college at the expected age of 18 in the first place—socioeconomic class, non-college-educated families, poor school performance, race, and so forth.

To assume an 18-year-old student, then, is to assume a host of other things, not only about our students but about society—its hierarchy, its conception of what is “appropriate,” its attitude toward those who challenge cultural norms, whether by conscious choice or because they feel they have no other choice. Educators with self-avowedly critical, radical, or transformative agendas must stop assuming they are speaking about 18-year-olds when they are speaking about students—just as other researchers have pointed out the pitfalls of assuming we are talking about white students, or male students, or upper-middle-class students. As scholars such as Fox, Comfort, Cheney and Leonard point out, to conceptualize our students in all their complexity may lead to a reconsideration of composition studies and English that is more rich and nuanced than ever before.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview of Qualitative Methodology

In order to conduct this study, I used a qualitative, feminist teacher-research methodology that brings the voices of the participants into dialogue with theoretical conversations in composition studies; as Gesa Kirsch states, “opening up the research agenda to subjects [and] listening to their stories” (Kirsch 257). My approach was multifaceted, drawing upon various approaches to investigation including teacher-research, ethnography, and the case study. Triangulation of data was achieved by gathering information from a variety of sources, including interviews, questionnaires, observation and fieldnotes, and writing samples. I also achieved theoretical triangulation by interpreting my data through several different theoretical lenses. My focus throughout my research was “listening to the stories” of my participants, finding out what they had to tell me about their experiences as nontraditional students writing across the curriculum. Accordingly, my primary goal throughout was to resist imposing my own predetermined agenda or theoretical template onto the data, instead using naturalistic methods that would—to the extent ever possible in qualitative research—“allow stories to emerge” (Moss 157).

My study is primarily a teacher-research project in that I recruited participants from a class I taught, and used observation of my classroom interactions and conferences with these students, along with the written work they produced for my course, for data. Because I did not limit myself to data drawn from my own classroom, however, there is
also a larger ethnographic component to my methodology. I distributed two
questionnaires for the students to fill out that asked them to respond based on all their
college-level writing experiences; solicited writing samples from other composition and
WAC classes; and conducted open-ended interviews in which I encouraged participants
to discuss their experiences, both in my course and in others. Finally, I used a case study
approach, gathering in-depth data from a few selected participants rather than broadly
studying a specific classroom, work site, or other subculture as some other ethnographic
researchers have done (see, for example, Heath, Chiseri-Strater, and Moss). While I will
present data gathered from six students in order to elucidate patterns, I will also present
three case study narratives, using Clifford Geertz’ approach of “thick description” and
following Thomas Newkirk’s observation that the case study approach has its roots in
narrative, or storytelling. For interpretation and analysis, I draw upon multiple theoretical
frameworks—feminist, process and post-process composition theories, theories of critical
pedagogy, and the concept of andragogy. Finally, for reasons outlined below, I consider
my study feminist in design and intent.

A qualitative study such as this one cannot claim the reproducible or generalizable
results sought by empiricism, nor can it make any claim to “objectivity.” Indeed, the
distinguishing feature of qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) research is that
qualitative studies are never intended to result in quantifiable or generalizable findings—a
point for which qualitative research has traditionally been criticized, especially in earlier
times when it was still considered new. (See, for example, Denzin and Lincoln; Lincoln
and Gubar; Anderson; Carspecken; Clandinin & Connelly; Eisner; Gubrium; Mortenson

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& Kirsch; Wolcott; Goswami; Bleich). Findings will always be dependent on context and situated in a specific location. Thus, the intention and purpose of the qualitative study is self-consciously different from the quantitative study (though as many researchers point out, there is no true neutrality or disinterestedness in quantitative and empirical research models either). As David Bleich puts it, the stated goal of qualitative research is not reproducible or generalized results, but the generation of “local” or “situated knowledge,” specific to a particular context.

This is not to say, however, that “local knowledge” cannot be made useful to those working in other contexts. Though specific conditions, and thus results, may vary across locations, nevertheless the findings of qualitative researchers may resonate with those at other sites even though results may not be directly reproducible. Researchers and practitioners may notice thematic similarities or “points of resonance” between their own situations and the ethnographies of others: “While [the qualitative project] has mostly local reference, the questions raised . . . could give other teachers and students a different view of their own classroom situations” (Bleich 190-191). Dialogue between various “local knowledges” may, according to Bleich, prove to be “productive ways of enlarg[ing] research toward political and social consciousness” (Bleich 191). Bleich terms this type of research “socially generous research,” and my objective is for this study to fall into that category.

Teacher Research: Goals, Challenges, and Ethics

In “Composition from the Teacher-Research Point of View,” Ruth Ray points out that teacher research is not simply a methodology but a perspective, and that “the
revolutionary nature of teacher research has to do with its emphasis on change from the inside out—from the classroom to the administration, rather than the other way around” (Ray 172-173). Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle point out the basic difference in the kind of research usually conducted by higher education—“research on teaching,” or university-based research, which holds “high status” because it is obtained through “the traditional modes of inquiry”; and “teacher research,” which they define as “systematic and intentional inquiry carried about by teachers” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 3).

“Research on teaching” is usually conducted by university-based researchers in educational settings other than their own, with questions generated by academic or theoretical concerns rather than from the teachers or their classroom situations. “Teacher research,” on the other hand, is usually motivated by teachers themselves, with research questions often generated from issues arising directly from practice.

While most teacher research is conducted by non-university level teachers in their own K through 12 classrooms, Cochran-Smith and Lytle acknowledge that “some teacher-researchers are university teachers who reflect on their own teaching at the university level” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 5). Because of the difference in perspective that a teacher-researcher brings to the enterprise, however, Ray points out that even university-based teacher research differs from university-based “research on teaching”: “Successful teacher research is usually conducted by an open-minded, inquiring teacher who sees the classroom as an egalitarian community in which he or she is but one of many learners . . . Students are not merely subjects whom the teacher-researcher instructs
and assesses; they are co-researchers, sources of knowledge whose insights help focus and provide new directions for the study” (Ray 175-176).

In my own case, I occupy somewhat of a hybrid position—that of a university researcher-in-training (a PhD candidate), associated with a research university but not yet credentialed or holding power. Furthermore, I am reflecting on my own teaching at the community college level, which structurally equates to the first two years of the university level yet often holds less status for many in academia who subscribe to hierarchical thinking and view the community college as lower on the academic hierarchy. In the larger scheme of academia I held little power, as a part-time adjunct community college teacher with low status and power, in an institution that itself holds low status.

Nevertheless, as a researcher, I held power over the participants, and as a teacher, I held power in the classroom over students, both participant and non-participant. While I was committed throughout the project to Ray’s approach of working with my students as “co-researchers,” Elbow points out in Embracing Contraries that we as teachers are “never wholly peer with our students” (Elbow 1986, 150). Thus, there is always a power differential even in the most egalitarian of research situations, even when the researcher is keenly aware of power differentials and committed to using non-oppressive, non-coercive research methods. Nevertheless, Elbow adds that we can “still be peer in the crucial sense of also being engaged in learning [and] seeking” (Elbow 1986, 151), and Ray reaffirms the ability of teacher research to “revitalize and improve the field” of composition even as she acknowledges the many structural difficulties that teacher researchers must negotiate.
While the position of teacher-researcher is always “multiply situated” by its nature, my own position was even further complicated. Because of my affiliation with a university, there is a certain “research on teaching” aspect to my position; yet I was still conducting “teacher research.” At various points in the process, I found myself in shifting power positions, with constantly fluctuating relationships to my participants (who, as my students, were multiply situated themselves), my dissertation committee, Leeward Community College where I was teaching, and the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa where I was studying. The complexity of my location—along with, as I shall soon discuss, my own position as a former nontraditional student who now found myself as a teacher of both traditional and nontraditional students—required me to engage in serious reflection about the goals of my study and the ethics of my methodology. Later in this chapter I attempt to clearly situate myself with regard to my subject matter and to the shifting power contexts in which I operated. The most important ethical issues to bear in mind are the points raised by Kirsch and Moss, that my goal was not to impose my own agenda but to allow the stories of my participants to emerge.

While there is a broader ethnographic component to my overall methodological design, I locate my methodology primarily in the field of teacher research as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle: “systematic, intentional inquiry.” “Systematic” refers to strategic, consciously thought-out methods of gathering and documenting experience; “intentional” demonstrates that the activity is planned rather than spontaneous; and “inquiry” suggests that teacher-researchers generate questions in order to “make sense of their experiences—to adopt a learning stance or openness toward classroom life”
These authors propose four categories of teacher-research: teachers' journals, essays, oral inquiry processes, and classroom studies. Using this definition, it seems clear that "teacher-research" is my entry point into what turned out to be a wider-ranging ethnographic study. Though there is a strong "classroom study" component to my approach, I only "studied" the nontraditional students in my classroom. I also allowed them to inform me about other academic writing experiences, making my project more akin to what Cochran-Smith and Lytle call "oral inquiry." My data gathering, coding, interpretation, and write-up (discussed in further detail in Chapter Four) rendered the study systematic; my deliberate plan made it intentional; and my generation of pertinent research questions (as outlined below), designed both to help me better understand how to teach nontraditional students effectively and to help me share my findings with others, qualify my study as "inquiry."

One potential ethical challenge in all teacher-research is that the teacher-researcher holds a dual evaluative role. In addition to designing the course and the written and other assignments, the teacher-researcher designs the research questions for consideration, then has the responsibility for assessing both student performance in the course and qualitatively interpreting her research findings. Participants are always aware that the teacher holds evaluative power over them when it comes to the course grade, a factor which may shape the data itself. This requires the teacher-researcher to engage in constant self-reflection and consider all these factors when making interpretations.

Thus, if the goals of qualitative teacher-research were empirical and reproducible findings, most teacher-research would be arguably untenable, given the obvious lack of
even pretense to objectivity or a neutral “space” from which the teacher-researcher can stand. Fortunately, the goals of teacher-research, like the goals of all qualitative research, are different from the goals of empiricism. Cochran-Smith and Lytle point out that “the criterion of generalizability has been used to discount the value of research prompted by the questions of individual teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 6). Yet countless qualitative researchers have made valid arguments that what we need from qualitative studies are not generalized “laws about what works generically in classrooms,” but “insight into the particulars of how and why something works and for whom, within the contexts of particular classrooms” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 6). Furthermore, as Kirsch, Wendy Bishop, and others point out, the concept of objectivity is the most vexed of epistemological issues today, even in ostensibly empirical or quantitative research designs, since there is never a “neutral” or truly “disinterested” space from which any researcher can report findings with pure objectivity. In my own case, I separate the purpose of assessment in my teacher-role—namely, grades for the course—from the purpose of assessment in my researcher role—interpretive analysis.

The above truism notwithstanding, the ethical teacher-researcher nonetheless has obligations to build into her research design certain precautions in order not to abuse the power she holds over student-participants, whether in her role as teacher or as researcher. Care must be taken in order to preserve the integrity of the data, for even though the goal of qualitative research is not reproducible or generalizable results, and even though current theories acknowledge the impossibility of pure objectivity, this does not mean “anything goes” and that the responsible researcher can say anything and get away with it
since “objectivity is impossible anyway.” As a researcher, I took all precautions to ensure that participants were not coerced either into participating in the first place, or into responding in a manner suggested or imposed by me. I also had to separate my evaluative role as a teacher giving grades from my role as a researcher interpreting data. And at all times, it was necessary for me to bear in mind my goal: to gain “insight into the particulars of how and why something works and for whom, within the contexts of particular situations” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 6).

One advantage of my research design is that my research questions did not require me to evaluate participants’ performance in my class; it was their writing processes I was interested in, specifically how they experienced issues such as writing anxiety or personal writing in academic settings. Thus, their performances in my assignments and the grades they achieved as students in my course were not significantly related to the questions I asked myself when interpreting their responses to my research inquiry, and I was able to maintain significant critical distance between my goals as a teacher and my goals as a researcher. I was further assisted in my ability to maintain critical distance by the fact that my data-gathering efforts continued beyond the semester in which I taught, as well as my inquiry into students’ writing experiences outside my own classroom. This provided a broader context for my data gathering, coding, interpretation, and construction of case study narratives.

**Safeguards Taken to Preserve Integrity**

My recruitment procedure and the care I took to avoid coercing students or violating confidentiality are outlined below. The primary ethical dilemma I faced was
that of evaluation, particularly of student writing samples. Fortunately, as I have already mentioned, my purpose in reviewing the writing samples generated in my course was quite limited in terms of my research goals; I sought not to evaluate the quality of student writing so much as to examine how these participants used assignments to write their way into a deeper understanding of the issues being discussed. In other words, as a researcher, I considered the students’ processes more than their performances. I handled participants’ writing samples by, first, refusing to separate participants’ written work from other students’ written work until after the grading process had been completed, effectively blocking the study and its implications from my mind when evaluating written student work for grading purposes. After feedback was given and grades assigned (the process I describe below), I photocopied the participants’ essays and set them aside; I did not attempt to code or interpret any of these writing samples until after the semester was over.

I put another ethical safeguard in place by offering each participant the option to conduct the interviews and respond to questionnaires after the semester was over, if they were uncomfortable participating in these activities before grades were issued. While two students did request that their interviews be delayed, both told me that concerns about grading had nothing to do with their requests; both students simply felt they had no time to participate in anything extracurricular during the fall semester, a position I respected. In fact, the two who made such requests ended up withdrawing from the study due to time constraints and health considerations; thus all interviews actually were conducted in the
fall of 2003. I waited, however, until the semester was over to begin transcription and coding of data.

Because of the particular design and goals of my study, I felt that there was no problem in delaying certain aspects of my data gathering and interpretation as described above. First, as already discussed, while my project can clearly be defined as teacher research, there is also a broader ethnographic component to my methodology, in that I allowed participants to discuss other classes and writing experiences and provide writing samples from other courses. The reason for this decision had everything to do with the purpose of the study: While my goal as a teacher-researcher was partially to “reflectively consider” my own teaching practice as suggested by Ray, Goswami, Bishop and others, my larger goal was to find a way to generate narratives from nontraditional students, to bring their voices and experiences into the academic conversation. To limit my data-gathering efforts to my own classroom would seem to limit those voices and circumscribe those stories unnecessarily. This design also allowed me to establish some critical distance that, to a certain extent, mitigated potential conflicts between my “teacher” role and my “researcher” role, obviating some of the problems of power differential that always exist in the research situation.

Ultimately, once I reached the stage of writing up case study narratives, the fact that all the participants were also my students became simply a point of commonality shared by all participants, rather than a significant factor in my overall findings. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, the fact that all participants took my class also meant that they shared some writing assignments specifically designed to allow students
to use personal experience as a way of understanding difficult classroom texts. This allowed me to discuss all the participants in conjunction with one another and demonstrate the variety of approaches they each took to the assignment. The data gathered regarding other courses then allowed me to reflect in more detail, especially for those I selected for in-depth case study, on the individual ways that the participants continued this process of negotiating their academic identities through writing assignments in academic contexts outside our own classroom.

**Defining Feminist Methodology**

Although my study foregrounds nontraditionality rather than gender per se, I would argue that my methodology is feminist and design in intent. Patricia Sullivan asserts that a feminist research design must: (a) foreground gender; (b) be written by women, primarily for women; and (c) use a qualitative rather than empirical methodology. If Sullivan's definition were followed strictly, my project would not qualify as "feminist" since I am choosing to foreground nontraditionality, even though all my participants are women, I am researching and writing as a woman, I am using a qualitative methodology, and I am committed to an explicitly feminist stance in my analysis. Perhaps Sullivan would characterize my project as "two-thirds feminist" according to her taxonomy.

However, other feminist researchers offer broader definitions of what constitutes "feminist methodology." Gesa Kirsch draws upon Sandra Harding's work to argue that what makes a study "feminist" is the assumptions underlying methodological choices, rather than simply whether a study foregrounds gender. For Harding, what makes a study
“feminist” is the acknowledgment that “the researcher’s presence and authority are never neutral,” the grounding of questions in participants’ experiences, and the explicitly articulated awareness that the researcher’s agenda is never disinterested (Harding, quoted in Kirsch 1992, 256-257). Considering this more fluid definition of “feminist methodology,” my project can be classified as feminist. I made a methodological choice to ground my research questions in participants’ experiences, to situate myself with regard to the project, and to work collaboratively and recursively with my participants. Following the practice suggested by numerous feminist researchers today (Kirsch; Goswami; Cushman & Monberg), I offered each case study participant the opportunity to review and respond to my unfolding draft narratives. Two of the three responded with marginal comments, while one participant, Christina, told me she was too busy and that she trusted my interpretations. For all these reasons, I am comfortable characterizing this project as “feminist in design and approach,” even though Williams may disagree on the basis that my analysis foregrounds issues other than gender.

**Study Design and Development**

I had originally envisioned this project in a different form, as a series of surveys and interviews conducted with a fairly large number of nontraditional students, both male and female, and to include interviews with faculty at the University of Hawai‘i-Manoa campus (the four-year, flagship university in the University of Hawai‘i system, a Carnegie I research institution), in my research. However, my work was languishing due to a lack of focus and a difficulty of finding subjects, given that such students are dispersed across
the campus rather than located in one specific area as might be the case with other kinds of ethnography—what Wendy Bishop refers to as a “diffuse community.”

Just as I was in the midst of struggling with how to focus my research and locate participants, in the fall of 2003 an alternative presented itself when I was offered a last-minute opportunity to teach two sections of English 255 (The Short Story and Novel), a sophomore-level fiction course designated as Writing Intensive (requiring at least sixteen pages of writing), at Leeward Community College in Pearl City. On the first day of class, I realized that each of my sections was teeming with nontraditional students—all of them women, as it turned out. The idea of doing a teacher-research project using my own students began to germinate, and after consulting with my dissertation director, we determined that such a project would be feasible. I then developed my research design and methodology in conjunction with my dissertation director, after studying and reflecting upon important literature on teacher-research, particularly Cochran-Smith and Lytle, Wendy Bishop, and Ruth Ray. While one possible criticism of my approach is that I took an approach that appeared “expedient,” it is important to note that had this opportunity not presented itself to me, I would still have undertaken a qualitative study of some sort; and whatever research situation I ultimately found myself in, my challenge would be to develop a sound methodology. Any research context offers both potential and limitations, and the responsible researcher must be aware of whatever limitations are posed by a particular study’s design. Furthermore, as I would discover once my project progressed, when it comes to qualitative research (especially for the teacher-researcher who must juggle her project with teaching and other responsibilities), the term
"expedient" is relative; there simply is no quick and easy way to perform qualitative research.

Thus, the final design of my study is markedly different from what I originally envisioned. My site turned out to be a two-year community college rather than a Carnegie I flagship institution; while I would originally have preferred a mix of male and female participants, all my participants turned out to be female; and all participants share the commonality of having taken English 255-WI from me. My study is now primarily a teacher-research study rather than an ethnographic study of a discrete community or subculture, even a diffuse one. My revised design, however, allowed me to achieve my primary objective of engaging with the voices of nontraditional students, bringing them into dialogue with professional conversations in composition studies and WAC. This approach, a teacher-research qualitative case study, allowed me to achieve my goal, with the added benefit that I was able to reflect critically upon my own teaching practice.

One final change in my original plan was that when I envisioned studying a diffuse group of students on a four-year campus, I had also planned on interviewing instructors, in order to determine where there were points of both resonance and dissonance between nontraditional students’ perceptions of themselves as students and writers and the perceptions of their teachers. As the study developed in its current form, however, I came to believe that teacher interviews would be less useful in this new research design, since the focus of my research question development and subsequent findings moved increasingly toward asking how the students themselves negotiate the academic demands of the WAC classroom. I also came to believe it would be
problematic to consider the processes and viewpoints of other WAC teachers, given that I was now doing a teacher-research project involving my own students and I did not want to be put in the situation of qualitatively assessing the differences between my own teaching philosophy and that of others. To do so would have taken this study in a much different direction. However, I do acknowledge that in the future, there is room for such a project regarding nontraditional students that takes into account the viewpoints, experiences, and voices of teachers as well.

**About the Course:**

**Institutional Requirements**

The University of Hawai'i system requires Writing Intensive courses of all students. Liberal arts majors are required to take five WI-designated sections for a Bachelor's degree, in addition to English 100 which is required of all incoming students and all transfer students who do not have an equivalent course in their transcript. On the community college campuses, two WI-designated courses are required for liberal arts students wishing to receive an Associate of Arts degree which then transfers to the four-year campus upon matriculation as the equivalent of UHM's two-year core requirement. Students who matriculate at the four-year UHM campus (or UH Hilo or UH West Oahu, the two other four-year institutions in the system), are then required to complete three additional WI sections for a Bachelor of Arts degree. The prerequisite for enrolling in any writing-intensive course is completion of English 100 (English Composition) with a “C” or better.
At Leeward Community College, writing-intensive courses in English literature are offered through the Arts and Humanities Division. Freshman composition and sophomore-level writing courses are offered through the Language Arts Division, thereby dividing the college's English instructors into two separate divisions. WI classes are also offered in several other disciplines but are most concentrated in Arts and Humanities disciplines such as history, philosophy, and comparative religion. The Arts and Humanities Department has designated all its courses Writing Intensive, since this allows the department to cap enrollment for each of these classes at twenty, effectively keeping the work load manageable for instructors. While Leeward's approach is ostensibly "writing across the curriculum," in practice, very few WI courses at Leeward are offered outside of Arts and Humanities and Language Arts.

The requirements of a writing-intensive section are sixteen double-spaced pages of "formal writing" (or "high-stakes writing") per semester, with guidelines encouraging "writing to learn" as well. Many instructors also include "informal" or low stakes writing as part of the WI requirements. Some instructors, particularly those who emphasize a process-based method of writing instruction, include such activities as peer feedback and small group work in WI classes. However, the teaching of writing, both process and product, often takes a back seat to the need that WI instructors have to deliver course content. Thus, the amount of specific writing instruction offered in a WI-designated section varies from instructor to instructor. While some instructors report that they emphasize the revision process, others see WI as simply requiring them to assign "a lot" of writing. Thus, while the stated institutional objectives of the WI requirement may be
to help students write better, some WI courses may simply ask their students to write *more*. There is considerable variation between courses and teachers, as pointed out by my participants and as reflected in college documents. Finally, while Leeward Community College ostensibly offers a WAC program, many elements of the Writing Intensive classes would be better characterized as WID.

**Syllabus and Readings**

The sophomore-level course from which participants were recruited, "The Short Story and Novel," was a writing-intensive sophomore literature course that fulfilled both the College’s Humanities core requirement and the Writing Intensive requirement. The course is designed to include both short and long fiction readings and written assignments. In the case of my course, the book selection process was unusual because I was called in literally at the last minute (two days before the beginning of the semester) to teach two sections of the same course, which had originally been scheduled for two different teachers. Because I did not have time to design my own curriculum and select my own texts, I opted to use the texts which had already been ordered, merging texts from the two different sections in order to minimize book-purchasing hassles for both the bookstore manager and my students. This led to a somewhat disjunctive and challenging reading list—Kiana Davenport’s *Shark Dialogues*, a novel set in Hawaii; William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*; Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*; and Penguin’s *Fiction: A Pocket Anthology (3rd Ed.*), which included well-known short stories by a wide range of frequently studied authors of both genders, across a range of cultures. With little time and few choices, I had to make the best of matters by trying to design a cohesive course
with diverse readings, along with writing assignments that would be beneficial for my students.

**Writing Assignments and Assessment**

In my Writing Intensive sections, I combined eight "low-stakes" writing assignments with three graded or "high-stakes" assignments. The "low-stakes" assignments were subjective personal response papers, graded Credit/No Credit, with ten points granted for credit. Five of these were responses to short stories, while three were informal responses to the novels, designed to help students prepare for the high-stakes essays on the novels. The three "high-stakes" assignments were literary essays, one on each novel, each calling for a thesis supported by textual evidence and a sustained argument. The eight responses were distributed evenly over the course of the semester. The three formal essays, five pages each, were worth fifty points apiece, accounting for 150 points total of a possible 350 for the semester. Other points were earned through quizzes, exams, peer reviews, and participation, with 90% or better earning an "A," 80% or better earning a "B," 70% or better earning a "C," 60% or better earning a "D," and below 60% failing the course.

I encouraged students to conceptualize the first two of the three formal essays as drafts, and I encouraged them to revise the first two essays, in response to feedback from myself and a peer, for a higher grade. For the first two essays, students also traded essays with a peer and provided one another guided feedback in response to specific questions. These peer responses were worth 10 points apiece. Revision was optional, so I offered an incentive for those who revised essays in that the final points were not averaged with the
points received for the draft; students who revised would simply receive the higher of the
two point totals. Thus, while each student could take the option to "coast," all but those
who did exceptionally well on the initial draft would do better by taking advantage of the
revision opportunities. This somewhat lowered the initial stakes of the formal essays, in
that students were given more than one opportunity to succeed with the high-stakes
assignments.

I evaluated formal essays using a three-step process of feedback: (1) I wrote
comments on the essays themselves, using underscores and plus marks to point out
particularly strong passages and wavy lines to indicate points of confusion or unclarity. I
also noted any glaring grammatical and punctuation errors. (2) I used a grading rubric
which divided components of the essay into various criteria—validity, organization,
clarity, fluency, grammar, and so forth—and weighted each section according to a certain
number of points, with validity, organization and clarity worth substantially more points
than grammar and spelling. These points were then totaled for a provisional grade that
was re-totaled later if the essay was revised. The rubric gave students a quick visual
snapshot of their strengths and weaknesses by observing how many X’s appeared in each
of the three columns, “Strong,” “Acceptable,” and “Needs improvement.” (3) Finally, I
typed a short narrative response to the each writer, explaining how I viewed each essay’s
strengths and weaknesses and what the writer would need to do upon revision in order to
improve the essay. With this three-part feedback and the peer review sheet in hand,
students were then encouraged to revise, based on suggestions made by me as well as by
the peer who offered them feedback. For the low-stakes responses, I simply responded
narratively with a handwritten comment at the bottom of each entry, in a conversational style, engaging the students with the ideas that they offered rather than evaluating them. As previously discussed, I went through this process with all students’ assignments without regard to whether they were participants in the study. Once I completed assessing essays for the complete class, I then photocopied the essays of the study participants and set them aside for later consideration.

Classroom Demographics

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<th>Nontraditional</th>
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Figure 1: Student Enrollment, Beginning of F2003 Semester: Section 1

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<th>Nontraditional</th>
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Figure 2: Student Enrollment, End of F2003 Semester: Section 1

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</table>

Figure 3: Student Enrollment, Entire F2003 Semester: Section 2

The above figures demonstrate the breakdown of the two sections I taught, by gender and nontraditionality (using the NCES definition for “moderately traditional” or above). My first section, taught from 8:00-9:15 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, originally had eighteen students, eight of which could be classified as at least moderately
nontraditional. Only three students were male, and all of the males were of traditional age. Two students dropped within the first six weeks; one was a nontraditional female student who had trouble finding child care for her daughter, and the other was a traditional-aged male student. Two other students failed to complete the course; one, a male traditional-age student who performed poorly throughout the course, and the other, a nontraditional female student who was forced to drop the class (and the study, as discussed below), due to an endangered pregnancy. Thus, fourteen of the eighteen originally enrolled students completed the course. Six met the definition of "nontraditional," while two of the four who did not complete were nontraditional. Five nontraditional students volunteered to participate. (I note that of the eight nontraditional students originally enrolled, the two dropped did so due to circumstances directly related to their nontraditional status, thereby demonstrating in their own way some of the challenges these students face.) I opted to omit two younger students who volunteered for the study because they technically met the definition of "nontraditional," but only by virtue of being married and self-supporting, since they were both nineteen. This left three potential participants in the first section. Two were of mixed Hawaiian/Asian/Caucasian ethnicity, while one was fully Caucasian. Two later dropped out of the study, one due to health problems and one to a problematic pregnancy (yet another example of potential hurdles more likely to be faced by nontraditional students). Thus, only one participant from section 1 completed the study—Carolyn.

The second section of English 255 met at 9:30, immediately following. This class originally had twenty-two students because I accepted two overloads at registration; one
student dropped within the first week, leaving a total of 21, nine of whom were classified as nontraditional. All twenty-one students proceeded to finish the class (though one nontraditional student, not a participant, received an incomplete which she made up just in time to receive a “D” instead of an “F”). Five of the twenty-one students were male. All nine of the nontraditional students were all female—meaning more than half of my sixteen female students were nontraditional. Of these nine, five volunteered to participate in the study: one Caucasian, one African-American, one Filipina, and two students of mixed ethnicity (Thai-Caucasian and Filipina-British). All five completed the study.

**Recruitment Procedure**

I recruited participants with an announcement to each of my classes during the third week, at the end of the class when I customarily announce due dates, campus events of interest, and the like. I ended the formal portion of the class three minutes early and announced: “If you are a nontraditional student and you are interested in participating in a study I am conducting regarding the experiences of nontraditional students in college-level writing-intensive courses, please consider meeting with me after class. The University of Hawai‘i system defines ‘nontraditional student’ as fitting into one of the following four categories: you are over twenty-five years of age; you began your college education after the age of twenty-two; you are married; you are a parent; you are, or were, a member of the military. If this applies to you and you are interested in participating, I’d love to talk to you. Participation, however, is strictly voluntary and will not affect your grade in this course in one way or another.”
As stated previously, five students from the first class initially volunteered for the study. I provided each potential participant with a copy of the "Invitation to Participate" and "Informed Consent" (attached as appendices), asked them to read the documents over the weekend, and to sign and return them to me, if and only if they still felt like participating in the study after learning what it entailed. I also asked them to contact me via email or telephone if they had further questions or concerns they wished to discuss before making a decision. All five returned the signed documents to me the following Tuesday, and all five expressed enthusiasm for participating. I eliminated two younger students and, as discussed above, two students were forced to drop out of the study.

I made an identical announcement at the end of the 9:30 a.m. class on the same day. In this class, five of the nine nontraditional students enrolled chose to meet with me after class. Three chose not to respond to my solicitation at all, and one explained to me privately that although she is very interested in the topic, as a working single mother and student, she does not have any spare time for outside projects (providing yet another example of the many challenges faced by nontraditional students).

Because of the power differentials between teacher/student and researcher/participant, I believed it was absolutely crucial not to give any sense that I approved or disapproved of student choices regarding this voluntary project. I could not let anything about the subjects' participation or lack thereof shape my assessment of them, obviously, but more than that, I could not allow for even the appearance of such favoritism. Thus, I simply chose not to pursue students who opted not to communicate with me any further about my announcement.
On the following Tuesday, four of the five students in the 9:30 class who had taken Informed Consent and Invitations to Participate returned them, signed, and expressed eagerness to start the process. One student delayed for several class periods in returning the signed documents, telling me after class several times that “I plan to participate and will bring that paper to you, but I keep forgetting and leaving it at home.” I did not interpret her forgetfulness as reluctance, because she seemed genuinely interested in the topic and eager to participate. Without further prompting from me, within the month she submitted the signed documents. She went on to complete the study.

I only made the recruitment announcement in each class once, and from that point forward, all discussion of any aspect of the study was held with individual participants, not mentioned to the class as a whole. In order to keep the inquiry as naturalistic as possible, I tried to minimize any sense among nonparticipant students that anyone was being “studied” in our class. I conducted all my email exchanges with each subject individually rather than sending group emails, so as to preserve the confidentiality of the participants one from another. Finally, students were advised, both in writing and verbally, that participation was strictly voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time, with no explanation required.

Permissions and Informed Consent

I received permission from the University of Hawai’i’s Human Subjects Committee to conduct this research, and used the University’s format for developing informed consent documents and permission slips. Samples are attached as appendices.
Signed permissions and informed consents were initially obtained from nine students. However, because three students dropped out of the study, I only collected data from six of the original nine.

**Research Questions and Their Development**

My development of research questions followed the approach described by Moss, wherein “new questions should emerge and old questions be reshaped as data are collected and analyzed” (Moss 157). Therefore, I began my fieldwork with an initial question that is admittedly broad and overgeneral: *How should the increasing presence of nontraditional students on college campuses shape both our professional discourse and our teaching practices in composition and WAC?* At the outset of this project, I began by closely observing the nontraditional students in my classroom and writing field notes regarding those who had given me written permission to include them in my study. This research question, while general, gave me an entry point to begin my initial observations and to design my first questionnaire, distributed in the fall of 2003. This questionnaire was also general, primarily asking about student satisfaction with the way the college addressed nontraditional students’ needs. Though overbroad, this approach gave me the initial framework I needed to commence my investigation, and allowed me to notice commonalities in the ways my students participated in class and responded to writing assignments, without forcing a predetermined theoretical agenda onto my data—once again, heeding Moss’ observation that “research questions and hypotheses are context-dependent and, therefore, should emerge from the social situation being studied” (Moss 157).
As I assimilated data gathered from the first round, I noticed that my nontraditional students in particular expressed considerable anxiety over their ability to write well in a college setting, at least initially. I heard a lot of statements such as, "I'm not sure if I'm doing this right but..." "I'm not sure if my writing is really up to a college level but..." Yet ironically, on the whole the same students who overtly expressed their anxiety tended to be among the stronger writers in my courses, despite their avowed nervousness. Drawing on Moss' observation about allowing hypotheses to "emerge from the situation being studied," my observation of the disjunction between students' apprehension and their written work led me to develop a second, more precise question: To what extent do these participants experience anxiety in conjunction with college-level writing assignments, and what strategies do they develop for working through that anxiety? It was this question which focused my second phase of inquiry, the initial interview, and the second questionnaire, which overtly addressed the issue of writing apprehension.

Clearly, this was a better, more focused question that allowed me to dig more deeply into the college writing experiences of the participants. However, for the most part, I found the participants' answers remarkably straightforward. As I indicate in my findings, all the participants indeed expressed some degree of anxiety with regard to college writing, and each of them described specific, concrete strategies for overcoming that anxiety. Yet at this point it seemed this question alone was insufficient to sustain a dissertation-length inquiry. As I began coding the next set of data, however—a process I describe in detail in Chapter 4—I noticed a commonality shared by all participants: a
strategy of drawing upon some aspect of personal experience in WAC assignments, not only in my course but in others as well, in order to work through initial apprehension and find a way of actively connecting their lived experiences with the subject matter of an academic course.

Part of this phenomenon I observed undoubtedly arose because of my own teaching style and course design, which deliberately mixes “low stakes” and “high stakes” assignments and encourages subjective responses in the low-stakes assignments. Some of my assignments made explicit space for exploration of the personal/academic nexus; for example, in an attempt to help my students understand Virginia Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing style in *To the Lighthouse*, I gave them the opportunity to write a response paper in stream-of-consciousness style. Most students, whether participating in the study or not, wrote remarkably well in this particular piece, and many commented that this was one of their most enjoyable academic writing assignments to date (even when that appreciation did not explicitly transfer into an appreciation of Woolf). At the same time, I noticed that the nontraditional students I studied were able to use personal experiences in academic writing assignments in other courses, not only mine. Each participant had somehow found a way to use personal writing as a bridge to the academic world—a world which they had entered much later than would normally be expected of them—in at least one course besides mine. Certainly the fact that these students used such a strategy would suggest that their instructors either required, or at least allowed, this approach; however, this should not detract from the validity of my findings in that the
focus of my case study analysis is not so much why they used this strategy, but how they did so.

Here I found my point of interest, a research question with enough theoretical resonance to sustain a dissertation-length study. The third research question focusing my inquiry, then—the bull’s eye, if my research approach is visually conceived of as a dartboard—developed through my own dialogue with the composition literature and the voices of my subjects: *How do these nontraditional students draw upon personal experience in order to negotiate their academic identities?*

Taken together, these three research questions allowed me to explore in depth and consider several aspects of the participants’ experiences. The design of the study also allowed me to bring the voices of these participants into the academic conversation, not by forcing my own agenda onto them but by conducting a naturalistic investigation that allowed “stories to emerge” which resonate with some of the current theoretical issues in composition studies.

**Sources of Data**

My primary sources of data consisted of classroom and conference observation and field notes; interviews; two questionnaires; and investigation of writing samples, both for my class as well as for other WI classes taken by the participants.

*Interviews:* I interviewed each participant using the questions attached as Appendix 2. Each interview lasted one to one and one-half hours. All interviews were conducted in Leeward Community College’s Arts and Humanities Department, either in my office or in the department’s conference room, during regular business hours.
Interviews were scheduled at the students' convenience, which on some occasions required me to come to campus on a day when I normally do not, since it was my intent to disrupt these participants' lives as little as possible. I attempted to direct the actual interview as little as possible in order to allow narratives to emerge, as Moss suggests.

The same set of questions was used as the basis for each interview. However, the interviews were open-ended in the sense that when a participant had a narrative response, I did not attempt to interrupt, steer, or in any way shape the response; I allowed the participant as much time as she needed, to answer in whatever way she felt necessary.

I tape-recorded all the interviews and transcribed them verbatim within six weeks. Since I am a professional transcriber (my profession prior to entering academia), I transcribed the tapes myself using court reporting software. I then converted the transcripts to Word Perfect, where I re-read them again against the tapes, double-checking for omissions and mis-hearings, and making sure my punctuation choices were appropriate. I circulated the draft of each case study chapter to the appropriate participant in the fall of 2004, giving each of them an opportunity to offer additional feedback or corrections, or to expand on ideas initially expressed in the interview. Two of the three, Carolyn and Amber, responded with marginal comments which I have incorporated into the chapters; the third, Christina, indicated to me that she was "too busy" to become involved any further, telling me she "trusted" my interpretations.

After reviewing the interview transcripts, I coded the data—a process I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four. I observed common themes which might shape my discussion and provide me with a framework for analysis. What I noticed as I
investigated the second question was that all participants appreciated college writing assignments which allowed them to use some aspect of personal experience in order to connect to the academic subject matter—whether in my class or in one of their other WI classes. This realization allowed me to formulate my final, most focused research question.

**Questionnaires:** I issued an initial, general questionnaire regarding overall satisfaction with how the college addresses the need of nontraditional students in the fall 2003. In the spring of 2004, I circulated a more specific questionnaire specifically addressing how students respond to using personal experience in academic writing assignments (having developed my third research question following my initial review of writing samples and the transcripts of the interviews). Both questionnaires were issued to participants as email attachments, along with a request that they respond within two weeks. Both questionnaires are attached as appendices.

**Observation and field notes:** After each class session, I hand-wrote my field observations during my office hours following the classes. Because I tended to write on scraps of paper and notebook pages, I would assemble all my field notes into typewritten form periodically, within a few days of each class. The classes were scheduled to meet thirty times each, and I cancelled once because of my own illness. I deliberately chose not to record my class sections electronically, in order to keep the interaction as naturalistic as possible and minimize the sense that my students had entered a "laboratory." (This was also in deference to the confidentiality of the majority of students who either were not eligible or chose not to participate in the study, and who had not
given informed consent.) Moreover, given the specific focus of my inquiry, I did not think this type of recording would be germane to my findings.

Writing samples: After the semester was over, I began to read and interpret the copies I had made of drafts and revisions of class assignments, along with my feedback. I also obtained writing samples for other WI courses from students in the study, at their initiative. (When quoting from student writing, I have corrected student spelling errors; however, all punctuation, syntax, and word choice appear exactly as they appeared in the student texts.)

Situating Myself As Researcher

It is now almost a given that there is no such thing as a truly disinterested researcher; we are all somehow positioned with regard to our subject matter, and even an ostensibly "objective" stance represents a particular kind of positioning. No one writes from a neutral space. In feminist methodology, the researcher makes her own positioning explicit, and I proceed to do so here.

I came to this topic through personal experience and interest, since I first entered college as a full-time undergraduate when I was thirty. Like the students I have studied here, my entry into academia began in a community college, when I took part-time evening courses while working full-time as a court reporter. Eventually I entered the university full-time, though I continued to work nearly full-time. Obviously, I identify with nontraditional students, having been one myself, and having personally experienced the "dyssynchronicity" Quinnan discusses.
With regard to the issue of personal narratives in academic settings, my experience and position are both complex. After completing my Bachelor of Arts in English, I began a Master of Arts in English with an emphasis on composition and rhetoric. As my studies progressed, I became more critically aware of issues such as gender, race, and class—an awareness which eventually allowed me to reconceptualize the reasons for my own nontraditionality.

A good student all my life, I always assumed I would attend college immediately after high school, as was expected of good students in middle-class families. But two weeks after I graduated from high school, my father suffered a freak accident which left him disabled for several months. Because he had recently started a new job, our family was not covered by medical insurance, and we had to go on welfare. Due to financial pressures as well as the stress and trauma surrounding the horrible accident I had witnessed, I decided to forego college and instead took a secretarial job, to assist my family financially and gather my wits. I planned, however, to begin community college at night that fall. But on the day I was scheduled to begin classes, I was rushed by ambulance to the hospital while suffering an acute attack of appendicitis. Because of that same lack of medical insurance, I ended up in the operating room of the county welfare hospital, rather than in the college classroom as I had planned. Suddenly I knew how it felt to be treated as a “welfare case” by doctors, social workers, and even paramedics. Our family’s collapsed class position radically altered my politics and helped me, for the first time, to understand what it means to be a “multiply situated subject,” though of course I wouldn’t have phrased it that way at the time.
The extreme duress I was under during that time intensified the relationship with my then boyfriend, culminating in marriage a year later, and we both decided to attend occupational school at night while working in the daytime to support ourselves, believing that vocational training was a more surefire track to economic security than the vagaries of a liberal arts education. My own family’s rapid fall from middle-class safety to welfare case, and the rude treatment that attaches to the latter, made economic security my top priority. I went on to an extremely successful career as a court reporter and, later, a television broadcast captioner.

As the years went by, however, I began to crave that liberal arts education I had originally foregone. Because I worked in a paralegal capacity, I found myself surrounded by college-educated people, many with advanced degrees, which made me painfully aware of my own, relatively low, social and educational status. On a daily basis, as I transcribed conversations between the highly educated, I felt like I had been omitted from a club to which most successful people seemed to be belong. I began to take night classes at community college and finally, after turning thirty, I acted on my inclinations and entered college full-time (while continuing to work nearly full-time). To summarize that move in a sentence makes the process sound much easier than it was; in reality, this was a decision resulting in unanticipated upheaval, necessitating extreme downsizing, several geographical moves, the sale of assets, and other radical life restructuring (further complicated by my husband’s decision to do the same thing and attend college himself while in the midst of a career in commercial highrise construction).
It was only then, in college, that I began to realize the role that socioeconomic
class and the lack of a financial safety net, particularly with regard to medical coverage,
had played in my delayed college entry and my original choice of vocational school.
Until then, I had assumed my "failure" to enter college was entirely a personal one
(exemplifying the point made by Bartholomae, Faigley and others, that personal
experience needs to be critically examined to understand how social structures interact
with individual experience).

When I began graduate study in composition, I found myself on the one hand
strongly attracted to the approaches associated with process and "expressivism,” for the
simple reason that I had discovered these methods work—both in my own writing and in
my tutoring and teaching of others. At the same time, I could not discount the
observations of “social-epistemic” composition scholars as I considered my own
complex, multiply situated subject position and the role of, among other things, the
government, the medical establishment, and the educational system in my own
nontraditional situation. As I became more aware of how significantly my own
educational experience was shaped by social structures, at the same time I resisted overly
deterministic theories because I found myself unable to reject the concept of agency
(without agency, I asked a professor once, would I even be here at all?). My own
experiences, then, attracted me to more complex, hybrid theories and approaches to
composition which, in Elbow’s terms, “embraced contraries”; or, in Hindman’s terms,
“held productive tensions.” Process and so-called “expressivist” methods had worked far
too well for me, as a writer and, later, as a teacher, to reject them. At the same time, my
growing critical consciousness made it impossible to reject “social-epistemic” viewpoints out of hand (a realization I first came to, ironically, while writing an essay for a graduate seminar with Peter Elbow).

Given all the above, I acknowledge that while my research questions were developed recursively, in dialogue with my participants, I have had a deep interest and investment in many of these issues for quite some time. Obviously, my own experiences, both inside and outside the academy, have shaped my field of interest, the focus of my inquiry, and my subsequent interpretation. Yet for the feminist researcher, this personal investment in a topic enriches the qualitative research study rather than detracting from it. While my goal has been to present the voices and stories of my participants, my own voice and story is also ever present, adding to the multivocality of the text. Nevertheless, the ethical researcher is obligated to be fair—to consider alternative viewpoints, and to present the narratives of participants even if something appears other than what the researcher had hoped to find. Throughout the long process of both gathering and interpreting data, I have attempted to take a reflective, interpretive stance, remaining mindful of my own position and aware of how my experiences may have shaped my particular interpretations, always listening first for the voices of my participants.

Limitations of Study and Possible Future Directions

I have already discussed some of the limitations of both qualitative research in general and teacher-research in particular—the dual roles and potential biases of the teacher-researcher, the non-generalizability of qualitative findings, and the lack of pretense to objectivity. As many qualitative researchers have pointed out, critiques along
these lines were especially pronounced in the early years. Today, however, a strong body of scholarship supporting both qualitative and feminist methodologies—which are closely linked—is solidly in place. While some who are deeply invested in quantitative or empirical research designs may continue to challenge teacher-research and other qualitative approaches, this study cannot pretend to be anything other than it is; those in search of quantitative or empirical investigations of nontraditional students will need to look elsewhere. Many such empirical studies do exist, as discussed in Chapter Two, and they serve an important function by providing information that institutions require if they are to do a better job of meeting nontraditional students’ needs. Such studies will have to be left to others, however, since my own training has not been in empirical or quantitative research design.

One potential limitation of my study is that all the participants are women. Both Patricia Shelley Fox and Patricia Sullivan, along with Timothy Quinnan, point out that nontraditional or “returning students” are very often women, and that the life situations which lead to “delayed entry” and, subsequently, a “return” to the academy often correlate with gender. The fact that all participants in this study are women would seem to verify these observations, at least anecdotally. Yet in my own experience, I have encountered numerous nontraditional male students as well. (I have, as yet, been unable to locate national statistics breaking down the percentage of nontraditional students by gender.) The fact that the participants in this particular study are all women did not occur so much by design as by happenstance; I chose to do a teacher-research study regarding my own students, and during the semester in question, all the nontraditional students in my
courses happened to be women. This may be partially accounted for by the fact that almost all my students that semester were women; perhaps male students are less likely to sign up for literature courses (anecdotally, at least two male students told me during the semester that they had worried this would be a “chick class”). Yet in previous and subsequent semesters, I have had the opportunity to teach numerous nontraditional male students, even in literature classes, so the gender demographics of these particular sections would seem to be at least partially a fluke.

While I myself take an explicitly feminist stance and strongly believe in the importance of giving voice to nontraditional women students, I also believe, with Timothy Quinnan, that all nontraditional students are always-already marginalized, both within the academy and in society at large. I also identify myself more as a postmodern feminist who resists rigid gender labeling, and who believes that questioning assumptions and challenging the status quo can ultimately yield benefits for women and men alike. Furthermore, while Patricia Shelley Fox points out that nontraditional female students are challenging normative gender roles, I would add that nontraditional male students are as well, by temporarily stepping away from the traditional male role as wage-earner. Thus, in the future I believe it would be productive to conduct additional research projects that include the perspectives and voices of male nontraditional students—to take up the question I posed regarding Brooke, Mirtz and Evan’s handling of the nontraditional “Frank” that I discussed in Chapter 2. Whether for better or for worse, I was not able to undertake that kind of study this time around, but I hope to have the opportunity to do so in the future.
As noted earlier in the text, additional research possibilities exist, such as a study that includes the voices of teachers of nontraditional students—perhaps exclusively, or perhaps in dialogue with the students. An investigation of nontraditional graduate students would provide us with much-needed information regarding the particular challenges faced by that category of nontraditional student. Finally, a project closer to the one I originally envisioned—an investigation of a broader sampling of nontraditional students—would likely yield a great deal of useful information. Both qualitative and quantitative surveys could be done, whether nationally, regionally, or at specific sites. Comparisons of the experiences and perceptions of traditional versus nontraditional students could also be useful. Part of my hope is that this project will initiate a larger dialogue within composition studies about the issue of nontraditional students, and that this study will be only a part of a larger, ongoing conversation that considers nontraditional student needs and perspectives from a variety of angles.

Because qualitative research depends so much on context, it is important to note that my findings were limited to a very specific context—two writing-intensive sections of English 255, taught by me as an adjunct lecturer at Leeward Community College in the fall of 2003. Had my study had been conducted in another context—on a four-year campus, for instance—or in a place other than Hawai’i, or in a private institution, or in a composition rather than WAC classroom, to name just a few potential alternative contexts—any number of alternative interpretations may have emerged. Moreover, my participants were somewhat self-selecting; each was already the sort of student who would sign up for a literature class as one of her Writing Intensive requirements, and who
would volunteer for such a study. Findings may have been different had I recruited across
the curriculum.

Yet this is always the case with the qualitative study; as Wendy Bishop points out, if we allow the limitations of context to paralyze us, no research studies would ever be done. Most qualitative researchers end their own projects by calling for more studies to be done at various sites, in order to establish an ever-expanding dialogue across contexts and differences. What I offer here is one more contribution to the conversation, along with an invitation for others to offer contributions of their own. It would be intriguing and enlightening to hear nontraditional student stories from as many different sites and contexts as possible.
CHAPTER FOUR:
OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Data Gathering, Coding, and Interpretation

While my study is not quantitative (and this would hardly be a statistically valid sample if it were), Wendy Bishop notes that general, quantitative data gathered from participants initially may serve as an "interpretive backdrop" against which to consider qualitative findings. That is the procedure I used for this study. As discussed in Chapter Three, I circulated an initial questionnaire and conducted interviews in the fall of 2003. Questionnaire #1, as discussed in more detail below, was designed to gain general information from participants regarding their overall satisfaction with their nontraditional student experiences, as well as a sense of how they perceived themselves as writers, both initially and (then) currently. After collecting completed questionnaires, I merged the responses into a grid that allowed me to get a visual snapshot of all the participants’ responses alongside one another, allowing me to note patterns of consistency among responses as well as differences.

In addition to gathering basic information and establishing points of commonality between participants, an additional goal in circulating the first questionnaire and in conducting interviews was to develop more focused research questions that "emerged directly from the data" (Moss 157), such that my investigation would focus on matters of interest to the participants themselves rather than from a predetermined and imposed agenda. This is also what makes my project "teacher research" rather than "research on teaching"; I sought to develop research questions that "emerged from the site being
studied" rather than from "theoretical questions imposed by university researchers" (Cochran & Lytle 3). Findings from this first questionnaire are discussed below.

I was still amassing data from the questionnaires when I formulated my second research question regarding writing anxiety. This question emerged largely from my classroom observation and field notes, close to the time the first formal essay was due. I noted that percentage-wise, a higher percentage of my nontraditional students (not only those participating in the study, but all of them) requested conferences, asked questions in class about my expectations, or emailed me with questions regarding the essay. This observation led me to hypothesize two potential explanations for the relative assertiveness of nontraditional students when it came to their writing assignments: (a) Nontraditional students experience more anxiety than traditional students in conjunction with college writing assignments; (b) Nontraditional students are also more assertive when they experience anxiety about college writing assignments.

Since writing anxiety is a highly subjective experience, difficult to measure by any method other than self-reporting, I decided my best option for investigating this new research question would be to include questions regarding writing anxiety and strategies for overcoming it in my interview questions. I could also observe students in class and note if I observed any particular anxiety with any of the participants (though this is an even more problematic instance of subjective reporting since it requires me to interpret students' behaviors rather than allowing students to self-report). Thus, I felt it best to take the students' self-reporting regarding writing anxiety and strategies somewhat at face value, though this is always a potential limitation of qualitative research studies.
My interviews were designed to serve several purposes. First, I gathered necessary biographical and demographic information. Next, I explored such issues as how participants perceive their performances as nontraditional students, both generally and with regard to writing; what they perceive their needs as nontraditional students to be; advantages and disadvantages they see to being nontraditional students; and whether the institution is meeting their needs. I also inquired as to their best and worst writing experiences. Interviews were structured enough to be consistent from one participant to the next, but I also kept them open-ended in that if respondents digressed, I allowed them to do so without interruption. I hoped for narratives to emerge so that I could follow Moss' practice of allowing further research questions to develop from the data.

After transcribing the interviews, I read them each separately first, in order to get a feel for the concerns of each individual participant. Having done so, I then cross-referenced responses to specific questions, creating a document that outlined each interview question and merged pertinent portions of the responses from each participant underneath each question so that, as with the questionnaire grid I developed, I could easily view responses in conjunction with one another and look for points of thematic similarity as well as potential conflicts. Comparing the merged interview responses with the questionnaire grid also allowed me to note points of potential inconsistency in participants' responses. I did not always insert responses in full, since the open-ended approach to interviews allowed my participants to digress, a number of them did so, sometimes quite considerably. When responses were either repetitive or not pertinent to
the specific question being asked, I set that information aside for use in compiling my case study reports but did not insert it into the interview template.

As discussed in Chapter Three, my third research question regarding how nontraditional students use their personal experiences to negotiate academic identities emerged primarily from my ongoing collection of writing samples (both produced for my class and for others) and my reading of the interviews, in conjunction with classroom observations and consideration of questionnaire responses. While I specifically attempted not to impose my own agenda on to the data, my own subject-position with regard to this issue would suggest that I was possibly predisposed to picking up on this particular thread. It is important to remember, however, that in a feminist and teacher-research design in which the researcher and participants are in dialogue with one another, it stands to reason that the research questions will be in effect "negotiated" between participants and respondents. Thus, even though my agenda was not imposed, this research question clearly developed as a result of my dialogue with the students, with the subject-positions of each of us contributing to the overall project design.

This kind of approach does not absolve the researcher of ethical responsibility, however, and I have a particular responsibility to report the findings as presented to me by the participants even if those findings conflict with what I hoped to find. I believe I have done that here. I would also point out that in none of my interview questions did I specifically ask about the use of personal narratives in the classroom; typically, the topic of "being interested in your subject matter" emerged during interviews in response to questions regarding best and worst writing experience, or in some cases, while we were
discussing writing anxiety and how the participants broke through it. As will be
discussed in detail shortly, almost all the participants indicated that one of the primary
blocks to academic writing is “lack of interest” in a topic.

As my study progressed, it was becoming apparent that most of the students in my
course (both participants and not) were finding ways to draw upon personal experience in
their academic writing—not at all surprising, given that much of the writing in my class
(particularly the low-stakes assignments) were specifically designed to encourage
students to exercise that option. Some might say this potentially skewed the data. At the
same time, however, as I began to collect writing samples written by participants for other
classes, I noted that most of the participants were somehow negotiating their “lived
experience” with “textual analysis” in other courses as well. This could be, once again,
because they all had teachers who were doing the same thing.

The overriding point here, however, is that my research question does not go to
whether participants drew upon personal experience. Given that all the participants had
at least one class—mine—which explicitly encouraged them to do so, that seems axiomatic.
My research question, rather, is how they negotiated their academic identities through
personal experience. In other words, what did these participants notice in their own lives
that they felt resonated with aspects of the subject matter, and how did they explore that
in their academic writing? In Freire’s terms, did they bring “subjectivity and objectivity
into constant dialectical relationship?” (Freire 1973, 32) Or as Giroux phrased it, did they
“connect the discourse of lived experience with the discourse of textual analysis”? Were
they writing solipstically, as Bartholomae suggests, thus reproducing “sentimental
realism”? Did they indulge in the kind of self-indulgent “expressivism” that Berlin critiques, imagining themselves as isolated, autonomous beings writing in a “neutral space free of cultural, historical, and institutional restraints”? Or were they instead doing as Hindman suggests, exploring a “productive tension” between their own experiences and the discourses they encountered in the academy? Moreover, were the techniques they used an effective way for them to address any anxiety they may experience when writing? These were the questions that occurred to me as I began collating writing samples and reading through interview transcripts.

My second questionnaire, distributed via email after our semester was over, was designed to elicit more specific responses than the initial one. In this survey instrument I asked participants the extent to which they had been allowed to write about personal experience in academic classrooms, as well as whether they perceived this to be primarily a positive experience, or whether they experienced it as intrusive or otherwise potentially problematic. Other questions concerned the issues participants identified as primary concerns for nontraditional students; information concerning their class backgrounds and whether or not they were first-generation students; what they viewed as both strengths of and challenges faced by nontraditional students; how comfortable they felt within the college environment; and, if they felt uncomfortable, to what they attributed that discomfort. Once again, I merged these questionnaire responses into a grid similar to that I created for questionnaire #1 so that I could easily view responses in conjunction with one another. The responses also served to triangulate data obtained from writing samples, interviews, and classroom observations.
My discussion in this chapter, and in the case studies that follow, addresses the findings from each source of data, then considers how each research question is answered when the data is taken as a whole. While in this chapter I do touch on some of the theoretical concerns framing my analysis, I discuss at more length some theoretical implications of my findings in my conclusion. I also consider the extent to which these students' use of personal narratives constituted an "andragogical" approach to learning, suggesting that whether a learning experience is primarily "andragogical" or "pedagogical" does not depend solely on the way a teacher structures a course but is also heavily influenced by how the student responds and interacts. The learning situation for the nontraditional student is something of a two-way street—even if, one could say, the teacher's side of the street has a few more lanes. The nontraditional students I studied certainly found ways of asking for what they wanted from instructors and negotiating their own academic experiences and identities even in the midst of institutional constraints. The students' proactive engagement with course matter through reflecting on life experiences suggests that, while power in a teaching-learning situation will always be somewhat asymmetrical, nevertheless it can flow in both directions to some extent, particularly when the student is nontraditional and accustomed to being proactive in other areas of her life as well.

Introducing the Participants

The six participants who completed the study are "Carolyn," "Helen," "Barbara," "Christina," "Amber," and "Anna." For further case study I selected Carolyn, Christina, and Amber, for reasons discussed at the end of this section.
“Carolyn” was 56 years old, married, the mother of eight (with her youngest, a teenager, still at home), and grandmother of fourteen. She was in her second year at Leeward Community College, where she was earning her Certificate of Music. Carolyn eventually plans to transfer to UH-Manoa to complete her Bachelors degree and teaching certificate, and may consider doing graduate work in the future. Carolyn, of mixed Hawaiian/Scotch-Irish/Chinese ancestry, identifies herself primarily as Native Hawaiian, speaks Hawaiian, and is an ordained minister (though not the pastor) in a Congregational church dedicated to perpetuating the Hawaiian language and culture, conducting all its services in the Hawaiian language. Carolyn was born in Hawai‘i, but moved around frequently because her father was in the military. She returned to Hawai‘i in time for high school and has lived here ever since. She initially began college immediately after high school, but dropped out after her first year.

“Helen” was a 32-year-old married mother of one, pregnant with her second child at the time of our class. Born and raised in Oregon, Helen entered the Navy immediately after high school, where she received training in networking and computers. Her husband is still enlisted. She was in her second year of pursuing her AA in liberal arts. Though she had originally considered elementary education, when I met her she was “unsure” about her major, though she does plan to complete her AA and transfer to a four-year program. Helen is of Caucasian ancestry, and has lived in Hawai‘i for five years.

“Barbara” was a 29-year-old married mother of two, pregnant with her third child at the time of our class. She is African-American and was born and raised in Brooklyn. Like Helen, Barbara entered the military immediately after high school, where she served
as a medic. She was in her first year at Leeward at the time of our class and plans to transfer to an R.N. program at a four-year college. Barbara has lived on base in Hawai‘i since 1997. When we last spoke, her husband was preparing to deploy to Iraq.

“Amber” is a twenty-five-year-old single woman of mixed British and Filipino ancestry, born in England to a British mother and a Filipino-American father who was from Hawai‘i. Amber’s family relocated to the Hawai‘i when she was a baby, first to the Waianae Coast of Oahu and later to the Big Island. Amber briefly attended UH-Hilo following high school, but dropped out before completing her first semester and trained as a massage therapist instead. After extensive traveling, Amber returned to Oahu and began pursuing her AA in communications and visual media at Leeward Community College. At the time of our class, she was in her second year and was preparing to transfer to UH-Manoa. She has since completed her AA and is now at UH-Manoa, self-designing a liberal arts major in critical film theory and media studies.

“Christina” was thirty-one and a married mother of three children, of mixed Thai and Caucasian ancestry. The daughter of a military family, she was born in Colorado and, like Carolyn, moved around frequently as a child. Her father was stationed in Hawai‘i when she was a teenager, and Christina graduated from high school on Oahu. Christina attended Leeward after high school graduation, but dropped out after one semester and trained as a cosmetologist. When carpal tunnel syndrome forced her to quit that job after several years, she worked briefly for an airline before returning to Leeward. At the time of our class, Christina was completing her second year as an Honors student. She has
since completed her AA and transferred into the Bachelors R.N. program at Hawai`i Pacific University.

"Anna" was a thirty-two-year-old married mother of two, the daughter of immigrants from the Philippines, born and raised on the Leeward Coast of Oahu. Anna took one semester of community college immediately after high school, but dropped out after one semester and received clerical training at a business school. She worked for many years as an office assistant. At the time of our class, Anna was in her second year of studies at Leeward and planned to transfer into a nursing program. The summer following our class, I received an email from her indicating that she and her family had moved to Las Vegas for economic reasons. She now hopes to be admitted into the nursing program at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

Participants who originally signed up for the study but dropped out include a twenty-four-year-old, self-supporting, married Caucasian woman from Hawai`i named "Megan," who withdrew from the study citing lack of time. "Beth," a thirty-two-year-old married woman of mixed Asian/Caucasian ethnicity, withdrew due to a chronic health condition. "Denise," a thirty-four-year-old married flight attendant of mixed Hawaiian/Asian/Caucasian ethnicity, was a mother of two, then pregnant with her third child. She was forced to drop both the class and the study when her pregnancy became endangered. I mention these students because the reasons they withdrew demonstrate some of the barriers nontraditional students often face: higher probability of health problems, including pregnancy complications, and, of course, time. (Time and the problems inherent in juggling college with family and work commitments, I should add,
were the primary reasons why several of my nontraditional students told me they could not participate in the first place.)

In the next section, I address specific findings from each of the two questionnaires and from interviews. I then turn first to the two latter research questions regarding writing anxiety and the negotiation of academic identities, drawing upon the previously discussed questionnaire and interview findings and considering them in conjunction with observation and writing samples. However, I do not discuss the findings of my observations and writing samples in isolation. The uniformity of questions in the questionnaires and the interview structure allowed me to code and interpret the participants' responses in conjunction with one another, but there was considerable variability in the type and number of writing samples produced and the observations I noted. This made it much more difficult to correlate the data from these sources. Thus, I do not address the observations or writing samples as separate subsections. Instead, I consider data obtained from those sources in conjunction with other data when formulating answers to my research questions, as well as when considering potential discrepancies between data sources. I also, obviously, consider all the data in conjunction with one another in the case study narratives in the chapters to follow.

**Findings: First Questionnaire**

The questions in the initial questionnaire were general, focused on overall student satisfaction with college programs offered to them; and the degree to which they believe their educational experience, specifically with regard to writing, as been shaped by their nontraditional status (whether positively or negatively). Participants were asked to
respond to twenty statements with “strongly agree,” “agree,” disagree,” “strongly disagree,” or “no opinion.” The responses of the six participants were remarkably consistent across the board, as seen in Figure 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary - Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience is influenced by being nontrad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More successful as a nontraditional student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less successful as a nontraditional student</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider self strong college writer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider self strong writer outside college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe self to be stronger writer as nontrad</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe self to struggle more as nontrad</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys college writing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys writing outside college</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writings plays significant role in life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes nontrads have special needs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes college experience is influenced by age</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes college is doing good job</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes nontrads bring positive attributes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Says writing instruction has been effective</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Says opinions are taken seriously</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes teacher respects her experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been allowed to express opinions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes she has strong voice in education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Grouped Responses to Questionnaire #1

Discussion: Grouped Responses to Questionnaire #1

"I believe my college educational experience has been significantly influenced by the fact that I am older than the average student." Three of the participants strongly agreed with this statement, while the other three agreed. None disagreed.
"I believe I have been more successful as a college student because I am older than the average student." Five agreed, and one strongly agreed. None disagreed.

All six students disagreed, three of them strongly, with the statement’s opposite: "I believe I have been less successful as a college student because I am older than the average student." (This statement was inserted into the survey as a control.)

The next statement was: "I consider myself a strong writer within the college setting." Five of the six of the participants considered agreed, one “strongly,” while one had no opinion. None of the respondents saw themselves as weak writers. In responses to the next statement, "I consider myself a strong writer outside the college setting,” all six participants also agreed, two of them “strongly” so. In response to “I consider myself a good student,” all six agreed, with two checking “strongly.”

The only major point of discrepancy among responses was in regard to the two questions regarding whether these students perceived their nontraditionality as making them better writers or not. In response to the statement, “I believe I am a stronger writer as a nontraditional student than I would have been earlier,” five of the six agreed and one (Christina) disagreed. Responses were consistent in that all five who “agreed” with this statement also disagreed with the next statement, “I believe I struggle more with writing as a nontraditional student than I would have earlier,” and Christina agreed with this statement. Interestingly, however, Christina’s interview responses suggested otherwise—a point I will address at more length when I discuss discrepancies in the data.
When it came to the statement, “I enjoy writing required college assignments,” four of the six agreed (though none strongly) and two had no opinion. With regard to “I enjoy writing when it is not required for college,” the responses were the same: the same four of six agreed and the same two had no opinion. The “no opinion” responses in both cases came from nursing students (Anna and Barbara) who are majoring in science rather than arts, and both suggested in interviews that while they realize they “have” to write in academic settings, they are not envisioning educational or career paths that will require a great deal of writing once college is over. Yet at the same time, all six participants agreed with the statement “Writing plays a significant role in my life,” with one—Amber, the critical film theory major—strongly agreeing with this statement. This would suggest that both Anna and Barbara understand the importance of writing, even though they are neutral as to how much they enjoy it.

Some statements dealt with how the participants perceived themselves as students in general without regard to writing, and whether they felt their nontraditional status had any effect on their education. To the statement, “I believe nontraditional students have special needs that faculty and administrators need to consider,” all six agreed. All also agreed that “My college experience has been significantly influenced by the fact that I am older than the average student.”

When it came to institutional responsiveness to nontraditional student needs, there is good news for Leeward Community College. All six agreed that “Nontraditional students have special needs that college professors and administrators should consider,” and all six agreed also with, “I believe this college does a good job of
meeting the needs of nontraditional students,” four of them strongly so. Five of the six strongly agreed with the statement, “Nontraditional students bring many positive attributes to the college classroom,” with one agreeing. To the statement, “Most of my instructors have used effective methods of writing instruction,” all six agreed. In response to “I believe my instructors take my opinions seriously,” all six again agreed. In response to, “I believe my respect the life experience I bring to the classroom,” all agreed. (However, nobody indicated “strong” agreement on any of these points). All six agreed that “I have been allowed to express my opinions in writing assignments.” The final statement with regard to student satisfaction was, “I believe I have a strong voice in my higher education experience.” All six agreed, three of them strongly so.

The latter two statements were presented to assess how well the students felt respected by faculty and administration.

While this is not a quantitative study (and my small pool of participants certainly would not constitute an adequate sample if I were attempting one), the results of the first survey nevertheless paint the kind of backdrop that Wendy Bishop suggests can serve as a canvas on which to analyze qualitative findings. As a group, there was remarkable consistency in the responses. All participants believe nontraditional students have special needs that should be considered, all believe they are strong students and good writers, and all believe their educational experience has been significantly influenced by their nontraditionality, primarily in a positive way. At the same time, as a group they report satisfaction with Leeward Community College’s attention to their special needs.
The positive assessments of themselves as writers and students suggest confidence and satisfaction with their academic performances to date. There may admittedly be discrepancies between how the students view themselves as writers and students and how teachers view them. In the case of these particular six students, three received “B’s” while three received “A’s” for the course, yet five of the six considered themselves “successful writers in the college setting” and all six considered themselves “strong students.” Yet two of the three who “strongly agreed” that they were “strong” students received B’s for my course. This should not be surprising, however. Assessment is always subjective, and student self-expectations vary as well; one student may be quite satisfied to receive a B, whereas another might view a B as a failure. Most likely, there would be variability among faculty assessing these students as well (I did not ask my participants to provide grade-point average data). This particular question was not framed so much to determine objective accuracy as to gauge the level of participants’ own confidence, self-perception, and satisfaction with their own performances in meeting the goals they have set for themselves. Responses would indicate this was a confident and satisfied group.

Findings: Second Questionnaire

The second questionnaire was circulated in the spring semester of 2004, after my course was complete and grades had been issued. Questions for this survey instrument were generated directly from data generated from the fall 2003 interviews and observations I made during the course of semester, following Moss’ suggestion to “allow the questions to emerge from the data itself.” Questions were designed to assess how
comfortable the participants felt in the college environment; the degree to which they found being a nontraditional student challenging, and why; what they viewed as the specific strengths of nontraditional students; and their attitudes toward writing about personal experience in college. The findings are as follows in Figure 5 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>VERY</th>
<th>REASONABLY</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT NOT</th>
<th>NOT AT ALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable were you in academy initially?</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable are you now?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How challenging is it to be a nontrad?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Responses to Questionnaire #2: Comfort Level and Challenges

Once again, while this is not a statistically valid sample and my goal was not to provide quantifiable findings, there was remarkable consistency between participants. In response to the first question, "When you first returned to college as an adult student, how comfortable did you initially feel in the college environment," four of the six reported that they felt “very comfortable,” one was “reasonably comfortable,” and only one reported feeling “somewhat uncomfortable” initially. Nobody reported feeling “very uncomfortable” from the outset. This would suggest that despite the structural and institutional marginality that some adult education researchers have emphasized, none of these participants felt extremely uncomfortable in the classroom. In fact, in response to the question, “As an adult college student today, how comfortable do you feel in the college environment,” all six reported, “I feel very comfortable.” (Other options here were “reasonably comfortable,” “somewhat uncomfortable,” and “extremely
uncomfortable.”) Once again, this suggests that Leeward is doing a good job in meeting
the needs of these particular students.

The third question offered students several choices if they checked anything other
than “a” in response to either question #1 or question #2: “If you marked anything
other than ‘a’ on question 1 or question 2, to which of the following would you
attribute your sense of discomfort? Check all that apply.” Possible responses (in
order of presentation) included: race or ethnicity; gender; age; marital status; parental
status; socioeconomic background; educational background; length of time since last
educational experience; intellectual ability; writing ability; military status; and “other
(please specify).” Since only two participants, Amber and Anna, reported feeling less
than “very comfortable” from the beginning, there were only two responses here, and they
were identical: Both Amber, who reported feeling “reasonably comfortable” from the
beginning, and Anna, who reported feeling “somewhat uncomfortable,” attributed their
discomfort to “age” and “length of time since last educational experience.” Amber is of
mixed ethnicity and Anna is the Filipina daughter of immigrants, and both reported a
working-class background, but they both believed time and age since last educational
experience caused them more discomfort than ethnicity, class, or gender. (Part of this
may be accounted for by the gender and ethnic distribution of Leeward’s student
population in that 52% of its students are female and only 20% are Caucasian.)

Figure 6, below, shows participant responses to questions regarding to what they
attributed any discomfort they felt as nontraditional students, as well as sources of
challenge they identified. The first number in each column shows how many participants
responded positively to that particular question; the second number shows the total response (in some cases, one participant did not respond to a question one way or another).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of Discomfort</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Sources of Challenge</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race or ethnicity</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Managing my time</td>
<td>6/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Juggling school/work</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>Juggling school/family</td>
<td>4/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Financial difficulties</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental status</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Gaining family support</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic background</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Feeling out of place</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time away from school</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>Commuting</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual ability</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Deadlines</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing ability</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Writing requirements</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military status</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Reading requirements</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>Understanding concepts</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Remembering concepts</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interacting w/teachers</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating w/faculty</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating w/admin</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dealing with college requirements</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Attributes of Discomfort and Sources of Challenge

Four participants all reported feeling “very comfortable” from the beginning, and still feeling “very comfortable” today. All are women, yet none felt discomfort in the academy due to their gender. Of the four, one identifies primarily as Native Hawaiian,
one is African-American, one is mixed Thai-Caucasian, and one is Caucasian (a group comprising only 20% of the student body at Leeward), yet none of the participants reported feeling “uncomfortable” in the college environment due to ethnicity. Of the six, four (Anna, Amber, Barbara and Christina) described the socioeconomic background of their families of origin as “blue-collar,” and two (Carolyn and Helen) described their families of origin as “military.” Two of the participants, Helen and Barbara, were ex-military themselves, and both Helen and Barbara were currently married to spouses still in the military. This is not surprising given Leeward’s proximity to several major military bases. Yet none of the participants reported feeling discomfort due to socioeconomic status, educational background, or military status. Thus, these responses would suggest that all of the participants felt they had a legitimate place in this institution, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic class.

Information should never be taken strictly at face value, and several possibilities exist as to reasons for these responses. One possibility, of course, is that Leeward is doing a good job of working with diverse student populations and helping students from all different kinds of backgrounds to feel included. Again, it must be reiterated, this is not a quantitative or comparative study, so it may well be that problems of discrimination exist for many other students though not necessarily for these. Another possibility is that the participants were not sufficiently aware of the historical or current struggles often faced by women, minority, and working-class students, though it should also be noted that this questionnaire specifically asked them to respond from their own experiences. It is further possible that respondents blanked out any unpleasant experiences or simply
chose not to tell me about them, for whatever reason. Still, as Wendy Bishop points out, at some point the researcher has to decide whether to take information at face value. Since names were attached to questionnaire responses, data triangulation allowed me to consider questionnaire responses in light of interview questions, classroom observations, and writing samples. Looking at the total picture for each student would suggest that none of them have yet experienced overt discrimination at Leeward. Since this is not a longitudinal study, I will not be able to follow up to find out whether this changes once the students transfer to four-year institutions, but it would be interesting to know if these students’ generally positive experiences are sustained elsewhere.

In accordance with the self-reported confidence in their abilities as students and writers, none of the participants reported feeling discomfort in the academic environment due to their intellectual or writing abilities, though the two who reported some measure of discomfort did attribute some of their discomfort to “length of time since my last educational experience”—a factor correlated with age, which they also identified as a source of discomfort. Thus, the two few participants who did feel uncomfortable initially attributed it entirely to their age and nontraditionality.

Indeed, in response to question #4: “On a scale of 1 to 4, how challenging do you feel it is to be a nontraditional college student,” answers were uniform across the board: “Somewhat challenging.” (Other options were “extremely challenging,” “slightly challenging,” and “not at all challenging.”) Since nobody checked “not at all”—and in fact, everybody found being a nontraditional student more than just “slightly” challenging—this would suggest that the participants were aware of challenges posed by
nontraditionality. The fact that nobody checked “very challenging” may be accounted for by the fact that all the participants perceived themselves to be strong students and writers, as well as the satisfaction they reported with Leeward’s efforts to address their needs. Feeling confident in their academic skills and believing that the institution supports and attempts to accommodate them may have mitigated against a response of “very challenging.”

As for sources of challenge, the participants were given the following options, in this order: “Managing my time,” “Juggling school with work,” “Juggling school with family commitments,” “Financial difficulties,” “Gaining support from family members,” “Feeling out of place in a college environment,” “Commuting,” “Meeting deadlines,” “Writing requirements,” “Reading requirements,” “Understanding concepts,” “Remembering concepts learned long ago,” “Interacting with teachers of my age or younger,” “Communicating with faculty,” “Communicating with administrators,” “Dealing with college requirements,” and “Other—please explain.”

Figure 6 (page 170) shows responses to this question. While choices here varied somewhat, there were a few consistencies, the first being that each one of the six students identified “Managing my time” as one of the challenges. Christina and Amber both reported “juggling school with work” as a challenge; but Carolyn, Helen, Barbara and Anna reported in their interviews that they were not working while attending school. Carolyn, Helen, Barbara, Christina, and Anna, on the other hand, all cited “juggling school with family commitments” as the major challenge. Amber, who did not cite family as a challenge, was the only single as well as the only childless participant. Amber
was supporting herself by working two different jobs on two different parts of the island—the North Shore and Waikiki—and was living on the North Shore while attending Leeward in Pearl City. Accordingly, she was the only student who checked "commuting" as a difficulty (the other five participants all reported living quite close to campus, two of them on a nearby military base, and they all cited "location" as the reason they chose to attend Leeward). In short, juggling classroom and outside responsibilities was clearly an issue for all six of the participants, though the nature of those responsibilities varied depending upon individual circumstances.

Only two students, Amber (who is self-supporting) and Anna, reported financial difficulties as a challenge, and only Anna reported that "gaining support from family members" was a challenge. Anna was also the only participant who reported initially "feeling out of place in a college environment," though her interview response indicated that that feeling had largely evaporated with time. This is consistent with her questionnaire response that she feels comfortable now. She was the only student who reported feeling "somewhat uncomfortable" initially.

Two students, Carolyn and Christina, both cited "remembering concepts learned long ago" as challenges. Carolyn was at the time 56, so clearly she had experienced the longest time lapse of the six participants. In her interview, Christina reported specifically that as a nursing major, she was sometimes challenged by science courses which forced her to remember mathematical and scientific concepts learned years ago. When it came to other academic skills, however, Christina reported she was highly confident, though she also reported in questionnaire #1 that she believed writing would have been easier at a
younger age. Finally, while the oldest participant, Carolyn—who sometimes had trouble “remembering concepts learned long ago”—also cited “reading requirements” as an occasional challenge, none of the other academic or administrative options—deadlines, writing requirements, understanding concepts, interacting with younger teachers, communicating with faculty and administrators, or dealing with college requirements—were perceived as challenges, and no participants offered an “other” response. Once again, responses indicate that participants felt confident in themselves as students and were satisfied with the way both faculty and administration were meeting their needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do nontrads have special needs faculty should consider?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do nontrads bring special attributes to the classroom?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is being a nontrad student somewhat challenging?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7: Questionnaire 2: Perceptions of Needs, Attributes and Challenges

In response to my questions regarding nontraditional student needs, attributes, and challenges, all agreed that nontraditional students “have special needs that faculty should consider,” and that “nontraditional students bring attributes to the classroom”; all participants also agreed that being a nontraditional student is “somewhat challenging.” But each participant identified the primary sources of “challenge” as located outside the classroom, with the unanimous responses being “managing my time” and “juggling responsibilities.” Financial difficulties, gaining support from family members, and commuting were challenges for some. “Feeling out of place” and “remembering concepts
learned long ago" were challenges for two participants, while “reading requirements” posed a challenge for one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What strengths do nontrads bring to the classroom?</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear educational goals</td>
<td>5/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher motivation</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sense of focus</td>
<td>6/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less concern with peer pressure</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More comfort with professors</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More assertiveness</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuable life experience</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better ability to articulate experience</td>
<td>0/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better ability to draw connections to course material</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better time management skills</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better problem solving skills</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better writing skills</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (describe): “Taking it more seriously because they are paying their own way.”</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Self-perceptions of Nontraditional Student Strengths

With regard to the “strengths that nontraditional students bring to the college classroom,” participants had the option of checking twelve responses, as many as apply. The first, “Clear educational goals,” was checked as a “strength” by everyone except Amber (who, in her interview, reported being somewhat fuzzy on her own career and educational goals). “High motivation” was cited as a strength by Christina and Amber, with “strong sense of focus” cited as a strength by all six participants. “Less concern with peer opinions” was a strength for both Amber and Anna (the two youngest participants,
for whom the memory of peer pressure at earlier stages of education may have been more recent). “More comfort interacting with professors” was an advantage for both Amber and Anna—the same two who found “less concern with peer opinions” to be a strength—and Anna believed “more assertiveness” was a strength. Only Amber checked “valuable life experience,” and nobody cited “better ability to articulate experience,” suggesting that the participants may understand that a “better ability to articulate” does not develop automatically. Carolyn, however, did note a “better ability to draw connections between course content and real-life situations,” and she was also the only participant who believed nontraditional students have “better time management skills” (all participants noted time management as their major challenge). Both Carolyn and Christina believed nontraditional students have “better problem-solving skills,” but nobody believed that nontraditional students necessarily had “better writing skills,” again suggesting that writing skills do not improve automatically with age unless some effort is involved. Only one participant, Christina, checked “Other,” explaining: “Many are paying their own way, so they are more concerned with succeeding.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents completed some high school</th>
<th>1/6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents were both high school graduates</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one parent had some college</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more parents were college grads</td>
<td>2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more parents had postgrad degree</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Educational Backgrounds of Respondents’ Parents
Two items in this questionnaire were designed to ascertain the class background of the participants. Is asked students to provide level of education attained by each parent: “some high school,” “high school graduate,” “some college,” “college graduate,” and “postgraduate degree.” Is also asked “which of the following best describes the socioeconomic status of your family of origin,” as a control question to see if their self-perception of class background correlated with parents’ educational achievement level. Options here were “blue collar,” “white collar,” “military,” and “other—please explain.” (These terms are more commonly used in America, with its myth of classnessness, than “working class” or “middle class,” which would probably be terms used in more class-aware societies such as Great Britain.) I specified “military” as an alternative because of my own experience with knowing military families and understanding that they often consider themselves a “class apart.” Though there are clearly class distinctions within the military, the military is itself a culture. Given Leeward’s proximity to several military bases, many Leeward students have military backgrounds or are currently affiliated with the military, so I felt it necessary to include this as a separate category. In fact, three of the six participants—Carolyn, Helen, and Christina—indicated that their family background was military. Barbara, Amber, and Anna indicated that they had blue-collar backgrounds.
Of the three students who reported military backgrounds, Carolyn indicated both her parents graduated from high school; Helen indicated that her parents both had Bachelors degrees; and Christina indicated that both her parents had Bachelors degrees. Helen and Christina would appear to have backgrounds more white-collar than the other participants in that they are the only two whose parents completed college; the other four were first-generation college students. At the same time, Helen reported in her interview that she joined the Navy after high school because her parents couldn’t afford to pay for college, and Christina referenced the pressures of being financially self-supporting repeatedly in her interview. This suggests that neither Christina nor Helen were financially privileged despite their parents’ educational status.

Of the three self-described “blue-collar” students, Barbara and Amber reported that their fathers had “some high school” and their mothers had graduated from high school; Anna reported that her parents, both immigrants, had both graduated from high school. Thus, none of the students described themselves as coming from “white-collar” families of origin. Two of the three students from military backgrounds had parents who graduated from college; four of the six participants identified themselves as first-generation college students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent has written about personal experiences in college</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent believes writing about personal experience improved her writing</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent believes writing about personal experiences was harmful to her writing</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>6/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent said writing about personal experiences had no effect</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent found writing about personal matters intrusive</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>6/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent believes writing about personal experiences helped her connect course matter with her life</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>0/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent believes writing about personal experiences enhanced her learning process</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>0/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent appreciated the opportunity to write about personal experiences</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Participants' Perceptions of Personal Writing in College

Figure 11, above, addresses the last two items on my questionnaire, concerning the use of personal narratives in the classroom. As in the previous figures, the first number shows the number of participants who responded "yes," while the second number indicates the total participants responding to that question, since in a couple of instances one of the participants did not answer a question one way or another. As Figure 11 demonstrates, in response to the question, "Have you had the opportunity to write about personal experiences in any of your college assignments," all six participants checked "yes." In some ways this was an obvious response since all six participants had taken a class from me in which my low-stakes writing assignments specifically allowed them the opportunity to write about personal experiences if they wished to do so. However, interviews and writing samples revealed that each of the six students had had
opportunities to write about personal experience in other composition and WAC classes as well.

The final question asked the participants to interpret their reactions to personal writing assignments. Two participants, Carolyn and Amber, agreed with the statement, "I believe writing about personal experience helped me improve my writing abilities." However, while the other four participants did not specifically answer that writing about personal experience had "helped them improve," none of them agreed with either alternative—the opposite, "I believe writing about personal experience was harmful to my writing," or the neutral, "I believe writing about personal experience had no effect on my writing abilities." This may cause a validity problem with regard to this particular response, but it may also be that these students simply never gave the issue any thought one way or another. Nobody agreed with the statement that "being asked to write about personal experience was intrusive."

What effects the participants did notice, then, would appear to be positive: Five of the six students (all but Christina, who did not respond one way or another) agreed that "Writing about personal experience helped me connect the course’s subject matter with my life." The same five students also agreed that "writing about personal experience enhanced my learning process"—even though only two of those five had also reported that "writing about personal experience helped me improve my writing abilities." Is built this distinction into the questionnaire design deliberately in order to ascertain if my participants sensed a difference between improving their writing abilities, and enhancing learning in general. This discrepancy would indicate that they did perceive a difference.
Perhaps while writing about personal experience may not necessarily translate into improved writing in and of itself, it may achieve other goals such as “connecting the course’s subject matter with [my] life” and “enhancing the learning process.” This is a good reminder to those who are committed to writing-to-learn as a model—that, as Elbow states, the goal of writing instruction may not be limited to improvement in the skill of writing, though certainly most WAC and composition instructors would hope for that; but that writing can enhance learning as well. Certainly that seemed to be the perception of these students.

Finally, while Christina was the only participant who did not specifically report that personal experience allowed her to connect the course matter with her life or enhance her learning process, nonetheless she agreed with the other five participants that she “appreciated the opportunity to write about personal experiences.” No one reported that they found writing personal narratives “intrusive” or harmful to any aspect of their writing or learning.

Once again, this is not a statistically valid quantitative sample but an attempt to bring the voices of these particular students into the professional conversation. When composition and WAC scholars discuss the role of the personal narrative in academic writing, certainly the students’ own perceptions should be considered. While I do not believe students’ desires alone should be determinative of curricular decisions, teaching methods or assignments, I do believe there should be an ongoing process of negotiation and dialogue regarding what should be taught and learned, in which students participate (as Knowles describes in his andragogical model). It is a glaring omission to neglect
students’ voices in the discussion altogether; what they want to learn and write about should matter. The fact that all six students “appreciate the opportunity” to use personal writing in the classroom is worth noting, for imposing our own theoretical preferences onto students without regard for their own perceptions is both infantilizing and colonizing.

Findings: Interviews

Before turning to the answers pertaining to my specific research questions, I will briefly present the responses to my questions. Responses specifically regarding writing anxiety and strategies for overcoming it will appear in the next section.

Why did you enter college now rather than at a traditional age?

Here there were two general reasons offered: financial, and motivational. Two of the participants, Barbara and Helen, entered the military immediately after high school, both citing financial reasons. Helen stated, “I knew my parents couldn’t afford it, and knew going into the military I could get a GI bill.” Barbara had the same motivation, and also reports that she had attended a vocationally oriented high school in Brooklyn which did not promote college attendance.

The other four participants—Carolyn, Amber, Anna, and Christina—all started college initially but dropped out fairly quickly into their studies, primarily due to lack of motivation, focus, or interest. Amber did not even finish her first semester at UH-Hilo; Anna and Christina started at Leeward but both dropped out after one semester due to poor grades. Anna reports she “didn’t take it seriously, didn’t know what I wanted to do”; Christina states she “lacked focus,” and Amber says, “I just really didn’t know what
Is was doing. Is heard astronomy and thought ‘astrology,’ you know.” Carolyn completed a full year at UH Manoa before dropping out “to get married and have a baby.” At UHM, Carolyn felt she was “more of a number than Is was a person”; also, “it seemed like this can’t be that important, not in real life.” Is concluded from this data that four of the students had trouble understanding the relevance of college to their lives at age 18, lacked focus or motivation, or had other priorities. The two participants who entered the military did so largely for financial reasons. (The participants who dropped out of the study had also reported that they were first-generation college students.)

*What did you do before coming back to college?*

The two military participants, Barbara and Helen, both received technical training—Helen in computers and networking, Barbara as a medic. The other four all obtained vocational training. Amber trained as a massage therapist, Christina as a cosmetologist, Carolyn as a medical receptionist, and Anna as an office assistant. All six worked full-time in the intervening years. Five of the six were also married and raising families. The oldest participant, Carolyn, had to care for her aging parents in addition to raising many children, along with operating her own home day care after she quit her job as a medical receptionist.

*Why did you then come back to college?*

In the case of the two military participants, both Barbara and Helen decided to decommission and use the G.I. bill to complete their educations. Barbara wished to harness her training as a medic into a job as a Registered Nurse, while Helen was undecided; she had originally considered elementary education, but was now wavering.
Carolyn decided it was finally time for her to pursue a long-deferred dream of becoming a music educator, now that her parents had died and seven of her eight children were raised.

Amber, a liberal arts major planning to transfer to UH-Manoa and study visual communications, stated that her primary purpose in attending college was “to enrich my life, my quality of living, as well as pursuit of a different line of work.” Christina had discontinued her employment as a cosmetologist after getting carpal tunnel syndrome. She worked briefly for Aloha Airlines, then decided to pursue her long-held dream of becoming a nurse. Anna, who also had had a long-time wish to become a nurse, felt like “I had something more to offer; I wanted to do something more, but to get up there, I felt like I needed a degree.”

**Why did you choose Leeward?**

Here, there was consistency among responses. Convenience and cost were the two reasons. “Prime, prime location,” says Carolyn; “location and cost,” says Helen; “convenient and affordable,” says Anna; “location,” says Barbara. Christina seemed to speak for all when she summed her choice up: “It’s convenient and the price is right.” Amber lives on the North Shore and reports, “It’s the only thing that’s close, so that was one reason. The main one was financial reasons.” Amber, though, also pointed out that the community college environment was more comfortable for nontraditional students: “I was wondering if I was going to be able to like assimilate into this learning environment again, and I had heard good things about Leeward, that there was a diversity of students of different ages, and so I felt like it might be a little more comfortable for me to
assimilate that way.” Carolyn also mentioned her preference for the more intimate environment of the community college: “At UH Manoa, Is was just a number.”

**What are your long-term educational goals?**

All six participants planned to transfer to four-year institutions and obtain Bachelors degrees; Amber and Carolyn were considering the possibility of advanced degrees in the future. Three of the six participants—Anna, Christina, and Barbara—planned to become nurses. Two—Carolyn and Amber—had creative ambitions, in music and visual communications. Helen was somewhat undecided. She described her present educational goals as “open and flexible,” but she does plan to obtain a Bachelors degree.

**How did you perceive yourself initially, both as a student and as a writer?**

In terms of their identities as students, for the most part, the participants reported feeling fairly comfortable in school from the beginning, consistent with their questionnaire responses. Christina says she “just tends to fall into place at school,” while Helen deliberately “eased in part-time;” Carolyn feels “very, very comfortable as a student” even at 56. Amber felt initially “kind of confused” and “disorganized with my thoughts, study habits, everything,” but she also states that she “adjusted quickly” to the college environment. Barbara reports that “The first semester was kind of shaky, then after that, it started getting better.” Anna, who reported some measure of initial discomfort, found she got over it relatively quickly “because this time I was more mature and knew what was going on.” Most participants reported receiving “good” grades.

With regard to the writing skills with which they entered college, the participants expressed slightly less confidence. Barbara calls herself “a little lost at first,” and Helen
reports that it was “hard to get back into the basics of writing and grammar.” Amber “struggles with grammar,” and Christina “loves to write, but I do not like grammar and I can’t spell.” Anna “felt like I forgot what I knew in high school and had to learn all over again; I needed more knowledge of the structure,” and Carolyn reports herself as an “iffy, iffy writer” who didn’t totally know “if I’m doing it right structurally.” Five of the six—all but Barbara—specifically reported problems with grammar, and it should be pointed out that that was an unsolicited response, since I did not inquire specifically about grammar. Though Barbara did not self-report grammar problems in her interview specifically, her writing samples indicate that she does have them, and she described her writing as “sometimes shaky.”

*How do you perceive yourself as a student and writer now?*

All six participants reported a sense of improvement in themselves as both students and writers. Christina has gained fluency; “sometimes when you say two pages, I’m at four or five,” and Helen has learned to become “open to different types of papers, learning more of the different structures.” Carolyn says she is “better at formulating her thoughts,” and Anna is pleased to have learned “how to do a thesis, how to support it.” Amber still “hates grammar,” but believes her writing is developing in new and interesting ways: “At first I was just interested more in maybe superficial things, instead of like maybe more philosophical things.” Also, Amber says, “I think I have the concept of how to structure a paper now, and I feel I have a better understanding of how to cite things.” Amber also states she is learning “how to express myself when I really have
something to say.” Barbara states that she still isn’t a very good writer, but believes she has “improved some.” “I’m more determined, focused now, I guess,” she says.

*Do you think the writing intensive requirement is a good idea? Why or why not?*

All six participants believed that lots of writing in college is very important, but some had trouble with either the way the requirement was implemented or with its nomenclature. Amber believes that rather than simply piling another “requirement” onto an already long list of core and other requirements, it would be better to simply integrate a writing-across-the-curriculum approach into every class—an idea I found interesting. She notes that sometimes, classes not designated writing-intensive demand just as much writing as classes that are so designated, and this does not make sense to her; “The system needs to be made more rational,” Amber explains. Christina believes the appellation “intensive” is “intimidating, like oh, it’s so *intense,* but it’s really not, you know.”

Another point of criticism was voiced by Helen, Christina and Amber, all of whom called for more writing-intensive courses specific to a student’s major, rather than locating so many of the WI courses in the humanities. “Gear it toward what the student’s background is going to be,” says Helen. “At least one should be in your major so you can focus on research and get prepared,” says Christina. Amber said, “There should be writing courses everywhere, not just in English.”

A review of the LCC catalog shows that while Leeward ostensibly subscribes to the WAC idea on paper by offering and requiring writing-intensive classes, “across the curriculum” is a misnomer; of 43 writing-intensive classes offered this most recent semester, 28 are in English, four in speech, three in a history course, two in an Honors
seminar, two in journalism, one in philosophy, one in linguistics, one in religion, one in interdisciplinary leadership, and one in electrical engineering. These students were correct, then, in their perception that writing-intensive courses are concentrated in English at Leeward.

As for reasons the students believed writing-intensive classes were important, Barbara appreciates the writing-to-learn approach, pointing out that, “I like when you write a lot and have a chance to learn before you are graded. You have to keep writing to improve. When you have to keep writing, you improve more and it won’t just fade away.” Anna also focuses on writing-to-learn as a benefit: “When we get a lot of those responses, it helps you write more papers and get more ideas; it helps with my language.”

Carolyn and Helen focused more on the practical uses of writing in the real world in their assessment of writing-intensive courses. With her military experience in which writing on the job was required, Helen recognizes that writing will be important outside the academy. Educated people, says Helen, “need to learn more of how to write, because when they get out of school, that is what they will be asked to do.” Carolyn understands the complexity and role of writing in literacy: “When you’re writing, you become a better reader too, and if you become a better reader, that enhances your writing ability, so it goes around in a circle and it’s a good loop to be in.” Carolyn, like Helen, also acknowledges the real-world function: “You never know where your job is going to take you.”

*What writing experiences, assignments, or teaching approaches have stood out as particularly helpful, and why?*
In response to this question, each participant raised the point that writing about matters of personal experience and/or personal interest were what they valued the most. Christina found she wrote the best when she had “the opportunity to write in styles that don’t have to be so, I guess, academic.” She likes to “choose my writing style, and choose the topic,” and likes being able to “write in the first person.” Similarly, Barbara reported, “Writing goes better for me when it is something I can relate to. Then it is easier to do the pages, even go over the pages that are required.” At the time I interviewed Carolyn, she was working on a large project for another writing-intensive class which allowed her to connect a deeply personal experience—officiating at a friend’s funeral service—with a required paper about cultural practices. Her deep personal investment in the topic gave her strong intrinsic motivation: “All of a sudden I’m driving along and something popped into my head and I wanted to pull over to the side of the road and write it down before I forgot it . . . every time I see or read something now I say okay, I can apply that to my paper, so I keep paper with me so I can just always write.” Amber, an avid surfer, wrote one of her favorite papers on the spiritual and ritual significance of surfing among Native Hawaiians, “because it’s always bothered me that people think surfers are just bums.” Anna’s favorite class was one in which she states she was allowed to “put my real thoughts on paper.”

Other positive experiences cited by respondents included feedback from instructors, with opportunities for revision; lower-stakes writing assignments rather than a few heavily weighted papers; and instructors who communicate their expectations clearly. Christina, in particular, was having a problem with a course for which a large percentage
of the grade depended on one heavily weighted paper at the end of the semester; "That just puts too much pressure on," she says. "I prefer how you spread out the assignments." Amber enjoyed the informal, low-stakes response papers "because it gave me a chance to practice, and to use my own voice." Christina, Barbara, Helen, Anna, and Amber all reported that they appreciated feedback and revision opportunities; "Revising is what leads to improvement," said Barbara. "Being able to do it over is what helped me learn how to write a thesis," said Anna. According to Helen, "Feedback is good because it's so hard for me to re-read my own papers." None of these students used the term "process" in our interviews, but since drafting, feedback, opportunities for revision, and some low-stakes assignments are all hallmarks of the process approach to writing instruction, it appears that the process approach is something they found useful.

Carolyn also appreciates courses that are well structured and organized, as opposed to another instructor's approach of saying, "Just give me sixteen pages on anything you want, sometime during the semester." Carolyn reported, "That sounds easy, but it really wasn't." Though she appreciated instructor flexibility in that she likes to choose her own topics and be able to draw on personal experiences, she also said, "I like the schedule to be well structured." Christina echoes Carolyn, stating that she likes to know "exactly what the instructor is looking for."

*What writing experiences, assignments, or teaching approaches have stood out as particularly unhelpful, and why?*

Here, there were several answers. Five of the six respondents cited "lack of personal interest in the topic" as unhelpful. "Writing about something that's not really
interesting to me, I think that’s the most difficult thing to do,” said Barbara. “It’s a struggle to write when it’s just not an interest,” says Helen. Amber had a particular problem with an English 100 teacher who taught current-traditional rhetoric, focused almost entirely on error, and—in Amber’s words—was “more going by the book than caring about anything we thought.” Carolyn enjoys “being able to connect things I’ve gone through with things we’re learning in class,” and Christina enjoys “choosing the topic, teachers who give a bit more leeway.” Anna did not mention personal interest so much, stating that all her teachers have done good things, “but it’s just a struggle for me to try and be good at it.”

Overemphasis on grammar was a point of stress for three of the students. “I know my grammar is bad,” says Anna. “I have never been good at grammar,” says Amber. “I love English and writing, but I hate grammar,” said Christina. Grades based solely on one high-stakes writing assignment were also sources of stress for Carolyn and Christina. Carolyn also had trouble when one teacher insisted on outlines being produced ahead of time, stating, “I just don’t work that way.” Unclear teacher expectations were problems for both Christina and Amber. “You know every teacher is going to grade you differently, but you don’t always know what they want,” said Christina.

*Has being a nontraditional student had positive effects on your educational experiences? If so, what?*

Here the responses were “yes” across the board. Respondents cited higher intrinsic motivation, clearer goals, better ability to be assertive in communicating with
teachers, and life experience helping them to understand more difficult concepts. A clear sense of goals and purpose was cited by each participant. “You’re paying for it on your own, so you know that this is real, and you know you have to be focused,” said Christina; “you have different goals when you are older, and you have to struggle, so you know that you have to do well.” “I want to have the degree mean something, and have worked for it,” said Helen; “I go into classes wanting more. I get more knowledge out of it.” Barbara states, “I am now more determined to get it done; I’m focused on finishing.” Anna favorably compares her current experience with her earlier attempt to attend college: “I didn’t take things seriously when I was young, and now because I feel it, I try to do my best.” Helen, who did not enter college at 18, believes she would have been less successful: “I would have been distracted more, instead of having the discipline, at 18.” Carolyn, who first started college in 1965, would probably agree: “There’s too many distractions when you’re younger.” Amber finds being a nontraditional student is “enriching, because I can bring my own life experience into things . . . All those past things really incrementally support your writing through time.”

Another advantage to being a nontraditional student, participants reported, was a better ability to be assertive with teachers. As Christina put it, “Younger students are still in the place where that’s the teacher, I’m the student, there’s no communication, you just do what they say. Older students confront teachers a lot more with our concerns and whatnot.” Carolyn agrees: “You know you’re the only one who’s going to make it better for yourself, so you’re going to open your mouth.” “Now I am so much more motivated and assertive,” says Amber.
A final advantage is that life experience often makes it easier to connect with difficult course materials. In our class, this translated into an appreciation of difficult novelists such as Woolf and Faulkner, as well as a more nuanced understanding of many short stories we read. As one example, Carolyn made a strong contribution to her small group and class discussions when we were reading Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible," a disturbing story of a Native American Vietnam veteran, because she was old enough to remember the Vietnam War. When reading Amy Tan's "Two Kinds," a story about the conflict between a Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter, the mothers in the class reported that they were able to see it from both sides because, as Anna puts it, "I know how it feels to be a mom and a daughter both." Carolyn, Helen, Amber, and Christina all made statements during class to the effect that "I would not have appreciated Faulkner or Woolf when I was younger," and Christina asked me at one point, regarding Virginia Woolf, "How can the younger kids even get this? They just don't know!"

*What negative effects has being a nontraditional student had on your educational experiences?*

By far, the biggest hurdle these students face is time management. When I posed that question in interviews, Christina responded instantaneously: "Your time!" She then continued, "It's one thing just having a job, but at the end of the day you're done, and the kids don't go away." "It's hard, but I was lucky I didn't have to work," said Helen.

Many of Amber's time challenges stemmed from her long commute. Perhaps Anna summed it up best: "It's hard to be a nontraditional student because of family; everybody..."
has to give; it’s not just you being affected by it anymore.” At the same time, all report that they are better at time management now than they used to be. “You use the time you have because you know you don’t have very much of it,” says Helen. “You don’t goof off because you can’t,” is the way Christina puts it. Still, some participants perceived age as an advantage despite the challenges of juggling multiple roles: “I manage my time better than I would have at 18, definitely,” said Barbara. “You really have to be flexible,” says Helen.

Length of time since high school was another challenge cited by most participants. As Barbara put it, “At first I felt kind of lost.” Carolyn found that changes in technology since her last attempt had caused her to have some catching up to do: “The first thing I learned was how to use one of those computers.” At the same time, the assertiveness reported by nontraditional students provided Carolyn with a good strategy for dealing with it: “I’m not afraid to ask. I don’t care if the kid next to me is 40 years younger than I am, he’s going to answer my question because he knows how to cut and paste and I don’t.” Christina, who feels she would have been a stronger writer as a traditional student, says, “When you’re younger you’re still in school mode, which is good because you still remember everything.” Anna sometimes felt disadvantaged by her time away: “Sometimes I have a hard time going into class knowing these kids are younger and I have to compete with them.” The financial adjustment of being a student after being in the workplace for many years also posed a challenge for Anna: “I’m not rewarded with a paycheck, I get a grade instead. That doesn’t buy you much.”
Still, despite challenges, all participants focused primarily on positive aspects. “It’s just been great,” said Barbara. Carolyn, who stated she is inclined to see the best in every situation, called this “my time,” after a lifetime of caretaking others: “I’m just enjoying it.” “Although it’s stressful, it’s also the best part of my life,” said Amber. Anna, the student of this group who seemed to struggle the most, reported: “I try to view everything as positive. I look at everything as a learning experience.”

What would you suggest to educators and administrators to help nontraditional students?

For Christina, balancing family is a priority: “I would tell instructors to give leeway for sick kids or when things happen,” she says. She also feels older students are at an advantage because educators “know they aren’t trying to pull one over on them. Be available and flexible,” Christina adds. Well-organized classes can help students who face time management challenges: “Have teachers give students enough time to be able to write stuff, give stuff out in advance,” says Helen. Barbara thinks that some type of orientation specifically for nontraditional students might be a good idea, a suggestion echoed by Amber. As reported below, however, most of the participants were very satisfied with their experience so far and did not feel a lot of changes needed to be made at this particular campus. “I think that generally, professors should make people feel comfortable, especially those who are extra nontraditional,” said Amber, “and you know, I think I see a lot of professors doing it.”
How satisfied are you with the institution’s responsiveness to your needs so far?

Here there is good news for Leeward, at least so far as these six students are concerned. Christina, who believes instructors need to be “flexible,” believes they “mostly are.” Barbara agrees: “Everyone does a pretty good job so far, really.” Helen appreciates the sheer numbers of nontraditional students: “It’s nice that it’s mixed. You have a lot of young students, but you’ve older students in most classes too . . . Everybody has been real open to try to help people get back into it.” Carolyn reports, “The school is doing great; the students are treated equal no matter how old you are . . . The services are available to everyone. They don’t treat you like you’re dumb; they treat you like okay, you’re not informed yet, so let’s get you informed. Every advantage that’s supported traditional students has supported me.” Anna agrees, pointing to the Learning Resources Center, office hours, and other available resources. “They’re not just for nontraditional students, but they’re for everybody,” says Anna; “I think I am more likely to use things like that now.” Amber says, “They’re doing a great job here.”

There was some nervousness about what would happen afterward, though; Carolyn said, “Who knows what’s going to happen at Manoa; that’s a whole new chapter.” Christina changed her original plans to attend UH-Manoa because HPU offered a shorter Bachelors in Nursing Program, “and at this point I just want to finish,” she said. Amber reported after transferring to UH-Manoa that she encountered some major bureaucratic obstacles that had not happened to her at Leeward.
Do you have any long-term writing goals outside of college?

One purpose behind this question was to assess the degree to which the participants conceived of writing as purely an academic activity. Four participants report either actively writing or wishing to write outside of academic settings in the future. The two who responded “No,” Barbara and Anna, are both nursing students, focused primarily on their nursing career goals. Christina, Amber, Helen, and Carolyn, however, are all interested in doing both academic and nonacademic writing in the future. Possibilities including writing stories for and/or about their family members (Carolyn, Amber, Christina), creative writing (Helen, Christina, Amber), and creative multimedia projects (Amber). In fact, in a follow-up conversation some months after our initial interview, Amber told me she had just written and produced her first short film, which had recently played in the Hawai‘i International Film Festival. Amber, Christina and Carolyn all report that they sometimes write in journals, and Helen anticipates that she will need to write on the job in the future, whatever career path she chooses. Anna also acknowledges that as a nurse, “I might have to write more than I think I will.”

**Research Question: Writing Apprehension and Solutions**

When I first began conducting interviews, issuing questionnaires, and observing my classes and taking field notes, the research question organizing my efforts was broad: *How should the increasing presence of nontraditional students on college campuses shape both our professional discourse and our teaching practices in composition and WAC?* This question provided the starting point for my inquiry, but as my investigation continued, I realized the answer would also provide the ending point for my dissertation;
thus, this is a sort of "bookend" question that provided me the focus I needed to get started, and will provide the same kind of broad framework needed for analysis at the conclusion of my study. Accordingly, I will address my findings with respect to the second two questions first, then circle back to that original question.

Thus, I will take up the second research question first: *To what extent do these participants experience anxiety and apprehension in conjunction with college-level writing assignments, and what strategies do they develop for overcoming that apprehension?* To answer this question, I relied primarily on questionnaire responses and responses to specific interview questions on this topic, along with my observations of their performance in the classroom and consideration of the writing assignments they turned in—though it should be noted that an abstract idea like "anxiety" does not always reveal itself in written work. Sometimes confident writers can turn in poor papers, while writers who claim to be insecure about their work may in fact be excellent students. Responses, then, are admittedly subjective when it comes to the degree of anxiety experienced, but the solutions these writers offered are quite concrete.

To ascertain the degree of writing anxiety these students felt, I asked the question directly: *Do you ever experience anxiety in conjunction with college writing assignments?* Granted, there may be some limitations with this approach, but "writing anxiety" is such a subjective experience that there is no other way to assess it. Five of the six students—Christina, Barbara, Carolyn, Anna and Amber—responded "Yes" to my question, often rather quickly and emphatically. "Yes, oh, yes!" was Anna's response, and Carolyn added, "But I think if you don't, you're not normal." Even Helen, whose
initial response to the question was “Not often,” then acknowledged that it does happen to her “sometimes.” Her response went on to indicate that at that very moment, she was in fact significantly blocked on an assignment that she “just wasn’t interested in.” She then qualified that she does not consider her current writing dilemma to be typical: “But most of the time, no, because I usually can do it.” Barbara added, “It’s a mix, depending on what I have to write about; not if it’s easy to write about, but if I have to do a lot of thinking, have to worry about what I’m trying to say.”

To part B of my question, “To what do you attribute any anxiety,” Christina identified the high-stakes writing assignment as the source of her writing blocks: “I hate it when there’s lots of pressure on one piece.” She also stated that teacher expectations shaped her anxiety considerably; she had a hard time when teachers didn’t offer feedback, because “you know every teacher is going to grade you differently,” but “you don’t always know what they’re expecting or what they focus on.” Barbara found herself anxious in situations where “you have to do a lot of thinking,” or where “the topic is not interesting to me”; Helen, who normally does not experience a lot of writing blocks, nonetheless acknowledges that they happen when she is trying to write about “stuff I am not interested in.” Carolyn found her blocks usually happened at the very beginning of the process—“trying to figure out what the heck I am going to write about, or where I am going to go with this thing.”

Amber and Anna located the source of their anxiety in shaky self-concepts due to past educational labeling; both of them had been placed in remedial reading programs during junior high and high school. “I don’t know why I get a mental block sometimes,
but I do,” said Anna, “maybe because I was like in remedial classes. Sometimes it’s like my thoughts just can’t come out. I guess I’m too worried about how it sounds on paper.” Amber loves writing and says it is “very important to her,” but she worries that her grammar is “horrible, that’s why they put me in those classes.” Amber only experiences writing anxiety in academic settings.

I then asked the participants, “What are your strategies for relieving writing anxiety?” Here I was particularly interested in noting if any of the approaches they used were in any way related to their nontraditional status. Christina, who finds teacher expectations and high-stakes assignments challenging, responds by “asking the professor, give me a chance to revise it if you don’t care about it.” She had actually used this technique just a few days before our conversation. She reports that initially the professor said he would give her feedback, but several days passed, so Christina pressed him again: “Please read it and e-mail me,” she insisted, telling me, “See, I take matters into my own hands, push it through with the teacher.” (Christina used the same technique in my course when she was unclear whether her interpretation of the difficult novel *To the Lighthouse* was on track; she was proactive about scheduling conferences, asking for help, and consulting me by email.) “So you see, I have alternate ways of going around if I’m not sure,” Christina explains. Christina, then, primarily experiences writing anxiety in terms of her ability to meet teacher expectations; her strategy is to be very assertive in ascertaining precisely what those expectations are, a strategy she identifies as a function of her nontraditional status. “Younger ones are intimidated, but I just ask, you know,”
says Christina. Carolyn would agree: “When I was straight out of high school, I probably would have felt really intimidated. Now I ask for what I need.”

Helen reported the fewest instances of writing blocks—perhaps not surprisingly, given that her father once taught English and is now a journalist, “so writing was there in my life,” she explains. When she does experience anxiety, however, she usually locates its source in a “lack of interest in the topic.” She also finds she has more trouble with editing her own work than with drafting; “Reading through my own work is really hard to do.” A possible reason for this is that as a high school student, Helen relied on her writer father to “check my papers for me,” so as an adult student, she has had to “learn how to read my own stuff.” Helen’s strategy when she is stuck is to “put it away for awhile and not look at it,” then return to it later with fresh eyes. Helen believes her nontraditionality contributes to her strategy: “You know you have to do for yourself, and you learn how to be flexible.”

Carolyn has the most trouble with initial topic selection and with finding a direction for her papers. Her solution is to “just sit down and write even one good idea, then I feel relieved.” Carolyn also feels she would benefit if she could find someone to talk through the writing process with, “somebody who would be interested in listening, a sounding board who could intelligently throw a question back at you, because sometimes when you’re stuck, you can’t tell the tree from the forest sort of thing.” A second problem identified by Carolyn is “figuring out where you are going”; she often freewrites and brainstorms to solve her first challenge of generating ideas, but she has a digressive style that often takes her in several different directions. For Carolyn, her solution is
rhetorical: “Asking the questions like where am I going, what do I want to say, who am I saying this to, who’s going to read this thing, and what it is that I’d like to convey.” 

Though she did not use the terminology of rhetoric–audience, subject matter, purpose, writer’s intention–in her interview response, she covered all those rhetorical bases.

Anna also finds herself typically stuck at the beginning of the process, due to her lack of self-confidence. The solution she finds most useful is to “just start off on the computer, typing all your thoughts,” and when she gets stuck there, she turns to pen and paper: “Sometimes when I try to write with my hand, I feel like I can write more.” She says her initial efforts are typically “not very good, so I’ll put it aside for a week, or at least a day or two, then maybe add more things to it or change something in the writing.” Likewise, Amber shares some negative self-perceptions due to past labeling as “remedial.” Amber worries most about her grammar; her solution is to “put grammar out of your head until you have everything down on paper that you want to say.”

The one strategy mentioned by nearly every participant was to plan ahead rather than procrastinating. “You can deal with it if you start ahead of time,” Carolyn explains. “I start by just sitting down, focusing and just writing, expressing myself, I guess,” says Barbara, “then come back to it.” In order to use this process, Barbara reports, you must “start early.” Helen uses the same process: “Put it away for awhile and don’t look at it . . . go away for awhile and come back.” “I don’t try to do everything at once,” says Anna. “Planning ahead of time really helps,” says Amber. Most of these writers used a process of writing more freely at first, setting the draft aside, then returning to it with fresh eyes–a
strategy that, they admit, requires not waiting to the last minute. “You can’t stay up until 2:00 in the morning like when you were younger,” warns Christina.

One question I asked specifically was, “What advice would you give to a student with writer’s block?” Suggestions include: “Just freewrite, don’t worry about the grammar, don’t worry about anything, just get ideas out,” says Christina; “just write, write, write, write, write, then organize it later.” Carolyn agrees: “Try to write before the idea fully forms in your head, then look at it again and go, is this what I really want to say?” Amber advises, “If you’re having trouble writing, write more! Keep a journal. And try to put the rules out of your head long enough to get the ideas down.” “Just keep going!” says Anna. Once again, the process approach seems to prove helpful for these students. Other suggestions include “talking to the instructor if it’s grades you’re worried about” (Christina); “reading a lot improves your writing” (Carolyn); “Have somebody else check it if you know you have writing problems,” suggest both Helen and Christina, who also advises “breaking things down into smaller tasks.” Finally, given the time management issues faced by nontraditional students, they suggest forcing your way through procrastination: “Start early enough to take a break from it,” advises Helen; “don’t put stuff off until the last minute.” “Plan ahead of time,” says Christina. Or, as Barbara so succinctly puts it: “Always start early.”

**Interpretation: Solutions to Writing Apprehension**

The students I interviewed all sometimes experienced anxiety with regard to academic writing, though all of them reported it had decreased over time as they adapted to the academic environment. They had all developed proactive strategies for coping with
it which they felt were largely effective. Interestingly, their strategies also seemed to be heavily influenced by their nontraditionality. For Christina, who sometimes experiences blocks as a result of unclear teacher expectations, her assertiveness in asking for clarification from instructors is a direct function of her age. Helen attributes her ability to start “early enough to come back to it later” to her busy schedule as a mother, wife, and student: “I just can’t procrastinate. If I did, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Amber believes she has more intrinsic motivation as a nontraditional student, as well as more confidence. Having been negatively labeled in the past, she found the time between high school and college allowed her to explore and gain confidence, and she now sees herself as creative, “with interesting things to say.” Anna’s strategy is to “get her ideas down, just keep trying,” and she believes she can do this successfully now because she is more focused: “I didn’t take things seriously before, but now because I feel the need inside, I try to do my best at writing.” Anna, whose self-confidence as a writer is shaky, also finds it boosts her confidence to find other nontraditional students in her classrooms, to get to know them and discuss solutions to educational dilemmas they often share, such as writing blocks. Anna attempts to “sit by them, get to know them, because they know what I’m going through, I know what they’re going through.”

Carolyn believes her “whole life, everything I’ve experienced,” has prepared her to cope with the range of issues she faces in college; since she is typically the oldest person in her class and is usually older than her teachers (including me), she believes everyone gives her “some leeway” to speak out in class and to be assertive. Carolyn also reports that her rich store of life experiences gives her a “lot of ways to connect” to
course material; for Carolyn, who sometimes has trouble coming up with ideas initially, she explores ways to connect the "ideas from class" to some aspect of her life experience.

Of the six, Barbara is the only one who is unsure as to whether being a nontraditional student shapes her ability to deal with writing anxiety: "I feel that my writing, I'm not where I should be, but I don't know if I'd put an age on it." Having never experienced college at a traditional age, Barbara points out, she has nothing to which she can compare her previous experience. At the same time, her primary method for working through writing apprehension is to "start early" so that you have time to "write more freely at first, then go back later and try to make sense of it. Get it down on paper before you start worrying about grammar and things like that." The fact that she routinely starts early, she attributes directly to her nontraditionality: "I am better at managing my time now; it has mostly been an advantage being older." All the participants with children report that they take advantage of time when the rest of the family is away or asleep, often awakening early so that they can write when the house is quiet.

Freewriting, separating the generative phase of writing from the editing phase, allowing enough time to set a piece aside and come back to it with fresh eyes, assertively determining what is required by the rhetorical situation, and talking through blocks with others who understand were all strategies employed by these participants. The causes of anxiety were located in: unclear teacher expectations (two of the six), overly high-stakes writing assignments (one of the six), self-concept due to previous academic labeling (two of the six), being forced to outline (two of the six), teachers who were "too prescriptive"
(three of the six), and topics that were "not interesting" (all six). Though this study is not comparative, these responses suggest that while nontraditional students do face some apprehension with regard to writing, their life experiences and situations have equipped them well to cope with the demands of academia, and to devise and implement solutions that work.

**Research Question: Negotiating Academic Identities**

My observation that all six participants found "uninteresting topics" difficult to write about emerged naturalistically through open-ended questions; none of my interview questions had specifically asked participants how they felt about uninteresting topics or whether lack of interest caused writing anxiety. When I first began reading and cross-referencing the early interview transcripts, I observed that this was the one point of commonality shared by all six participants when they discussed writing anxiety. I also observed that when participants described positive writing experiences, all cited personal interest in a topic as a plus. Christina likes to "write in the first person, not strictly in an academic way," while Barbara reports that writing goes best for her "when it is something I can relate to; I even went over the pages that were required." Helen finds "it helps me to do a research paper to have a topic I really like," and Carolyn believes "you can't write well without thinking about your culture, your experiences." Amber found "being allowed to write about what I found interesting helped me become a better writer," while Anna found she learned best from "assignments that let you put your own real thoughts on paper."
At the same time, bad experiences were usually attributed to assignments that are “not interesting to me” (Barbara), “topics that are not much of an interest” (Helen), and teachers who “don’t care what I think, and who don’t try to make it interesting” (Amber). Anna finds it “difficult to write things I don’t care about.” Of the six participants, Christina and Carolyn were less concerned with “uninteresting topics” (though they did mention that they enjoy writing about interesting ones).

Most of Christina’s energies were focused on her complaints about overly high-stakes writing assignments. Carolyn, on the other hand, reports that “everything is interesting”—something that may be attributed to her exceptionally upbeat and engaged personality. For her, as for Christina, negative writing experiences usually have stemmed more from unclear professor expectations. Still, while neither Christina nor Carolyn focused on “uninteresting topics” as a negative, both reported that they do their best writing when deeply invested in a topic.

Once I made this observation, I believed I had, in Moss’ terms, found a “research question generated from the data itself,” one that resonates with many current disciplinary conversations in composition. This initial review of data then led to my third research question: How do these nontraditional students draw upon personal experience in order to negotiate their academic identities? This will be the primary question I explore in the case study chapters that follow, in which I closely examine specific assignments that Carolyn, Amber, and Christina used in this way. Before turning to the case studies, however, I will address how the participants used a particular assignment in my class that
allowed them to use personal experience to connect with a difficult text, Virginia Woolf's
*To The Lighthouse.*

**Making Connections: A Trip to the Lighthouse**

My syllabus called for the class to read three novels, *Shark Dialogues, To the
Lighthouse,* and *As I Lay Dying,* along with numerous short stories from an anthology.
During the semester, students wrote eight low-stakes assignments, which were informal
first-person reader responses to the novels and stories. These were graded Credit or No
Credit. Students also wrote three high-stakes essays, worth up to 50 points, one for each
of the novels. In order to keep the work load evenly paced, after each novel and essay we
read, interpreted, and informally responded in writing to several short stories before
tackling the next novel.

*Shark Dialogues* was the first novel we read, in September. Because it was set in
Hawai‘i, this was an easy novel for most of the students in the class to relate to. Opinions
(both inside and outside my classes) vary as to the novel’s cultural and historical
authenticity; Kiana Davenport, the author, was born in Hawai‘i to a *kama‘aina,* part-
Native Hawaiian family, but she has not lived in Hawai‘i for many years, and while some
local readers and reviewers believe she has written a “great Hawaiian epic,” others
disagree. This made for some lively class discussions, and controversies notwithstanding,
one thing I did not generally have to worry about was helping my students to relate to the
novel’s issues or understand its symbolism. When Davenport uses places like “Kahala”
and “Kalihi” to signify differential socioeconomic status, for example, my students
needed no explanation of what such place names signified. The novel discusses the
Hawaiian Sovereignty movement, a subject with which all the students had some familiarity. And the novel’s arguably most significant theme, the tensions that result from mixed marriages and the complex identities of the hybrid children of such marriages, was something most of my students understood firsthand, given how many of them were of mixed ethnicity themselves.

Therefore, when teaching this novel, I did not have to work very hard to encourage my students to connect the “discourse of lived cultures” with the “discourse of textual analysis.” Small group and full class discussions were lively, with many students sharing stories from their own experiences to elucidate points in the novel. Students wrote informal responses assessing the motives of the novel’s powerful central female character, “Pono,” then wrote formal essays, focusing on either the novel’s use of symbolism or its characterization. Whether students argued against or in support of the novel, on the whole the novel’s relevance was assumed. Most students responded favorably to the novel even when they took issue with some of its cultural and historical assumptions; by and large, most students were able to levy valid criticisms while still affirming what they saw as strong points of the novel. Even those who had much to criticize said they enjoyed reading Shark Dialogues.

According to study participants, this was an enjoyable read “because it was set in Hawai’i, and the Big Island parts were right where I grew up, so it was easy to relate to personally” (Amber); “I have a relative who corresponds to nearly every character in the book” (Carolyn); “It was easy to understand the ethnic conflicts she wrote about” (Anna); “I could relate to the characters because they all had to struggle with their identities”
"Reading this made me realize how much I’ve learned about Hawai‘i since I moved here” (Helen). Teaching this book was largely successful, then, even though it was 450 pages long.

I knew, however, that To the Lighthouse was going to be much more challenging. How can a 1920s Modernist, British, stream-of-consciousness novel be made relevant for students in Hawai‘i in 2003, many of whom who have never been exposed to either Modernism or stream-of-consciousness? My successful experience with Shark Dialogues had helped me realize that the key to understanding a piece of literature is having some point of entry or personal connection which makes it possible for the reader to somehow identify. This happened quite naturally while teaching a novel set in Hawai‘i; students connected their own experiences of living in Hawai‘i to their readings and interpretations of the novel almost effortlessly. I knew that would not be the case with Virginia Woolf, so I attempted to consciously devise an assignment that would allow students to connect “lived experience” with “textual analysis.”

My solution was a low-stakes “reading response” assignment, asking students to write at least two pages of their own stream of consciousness. They did not need to write about the novel per se, but were asked instead to write in the style of the novel, drawing upon their own experiences and perception for subject matter. Mindful of the potentially intrusive aspects of such an assignment, my assignment sheet informed students that “your scene can either be true or fictional—you don’t need to tell me which it is,” and I announced in class that in order to help everyone feel comfortable, “I will assume everything I read is fiction.” The assignment asked students to move between exterior
action and interior thoughts, with the writer being able to choose whether to do so in first or third person. Writers had a choice of staying in one character’s viewpoint, or shifting between several viewpoints. I suggested using a “memory trigger” such as a song, an object, a scent, or a food, then doing a freewrite; and to consider the internal dialogue that people undergo when they are interacting in social situations.

The point of this assignment was primarily to help students understand Woolf’s writing style by experiencing themselves not only as “stream of consciousness readers,” but as “stream-of-consciousness” writers as well. The assignment sheet also informed students that “if you find one thought leads directly into another thought which doesn’t seem logically connected, that’s not a problem; let yourself veer off in whatever direction your mind takes you rather than trying to ‘control’ your writing. Tune out all exterior censors and find out what happens.”

For responding to this assignment, I used a slightly different method than usual. All the low-stakes assignments were graded Credit/No Credit, but I typically made remarks at the end of each response, not “correcting” the writing but instead responding to the ideas presented by students and engaging in an ongoing conversation. Sometimes if students were subsequently stuck for formal essay ideas, I suggested they re-read their informal responses to see what they might have already written that held the possibility of a thesis. But with this assignment, I felt less comfortable responding to the matters discussed in the papers since the subject matter was students’ experiences, not the novel per se. Thus, I adopted a different approach: At the end of each student’s stream-of-consciousness piece, I identified several themes I noticed in the piece that we had been
discussing in the novel (for example, how passage of time changes perception of events, gender roles, the tension between caretaking others and the desire for creative fulfillment [especially for women]). When writing the formal high-stakes essay, one of the topic options I gave the students was to explore similarities between themes in the novel and the concerns they expressed in their stream-of-consciousness responses. (Recognizing that while some students may enjoy such an approach, other students may not, I also offered other topic options for those who did not feel comfortable writing about personal matters in conjunction with an academic assignment.) Because students negotiated easily (whether oppositionally or positively) with the first novel I taught yet the second novel was very far removed, both historically and culturally, from the students’ own situations, I had to create an explicit opportunity for students to connect “lived experience” with “textual analysis” in this instance.

While I had hoped that the stream of consciousness piece would assist in my students’ understanding of the Woolf novel, I inadvertently made the novel even more challenging than it already is for my 8:00 class when I botched my introductory lecture. On a Thursday in October, I provided a background lecture to both classes concerning the rise of literary Modernism, historical and literary developments in the early 20th century, and 1920s feminism, as well as biographical information regarding Woolf. In the 8:00 section, I did not time my lecture well and found myself rushed toward the end of class, so I did not have much opportunity to discuss the novel’s stream-of-consciousness style, or to introduce the cast of characters and the conflicts Woolf sets up and explores—necessary tools for interpreting this difficult novel. I worried that I had done a poor job of
preparing the class for their reading and subsequent discussion. Thus, I went into the 9:30 class more aware of time, and I skimmed over some historical and biographical information in order to make sure I had time to address the novel itself.

When I arrived at my 8:00 class the following Tuesday, my fears were quickly confirmed. As was customary, I arrived about ten minutes early to find Carolyn and three other students already there (as was also customary). Most mornings when I arrived, Carolyn, a traditional-age student I’ll call “Shelly,” and two nontraditional students, Megan and Beth (both of whom withdrew from the study), were already present, drinking coffee and engaging in lively, opinionated discussions of various matters (often, but not always, class-related). All four were good students, deeply engaged with the course material, and quite outspoken, meaning I did not have to work very hard to orchestrate lively class discussions. When I arrived, I would usually join in the informal chats, and it seemed the energy generated by this core group carried over once the class officially began.

But on this particular Tuesday after my truncated Woolf lecture, the early birds turned on me. The minute I walked in the door, Carolyn blurted, “There she is, let’s get her!” “What?” I said. “We hate this book!” the others said in unison. A deluge of questions followed. “Why did you pick this?” (As I explained in the methodology chapter describing the course, I hadn’t, but I didn’t want to give the impression I disliked the book by using this fact as a copout—especially since I do very much like the book, difficult as it is to teach to sophomores.) “What’s her point?” “This is too weird!” “I don’t get it!”

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In true Woolfian fashion, I feigned teacherly confidence while inwardly berating myself for wasting time on the loss of philosophical certainty in the Modern era and Woolf’s struggle with depression, when I should have been giving them basic reading and interpretive tools first. “If you guys can hang in there for a few minutes, I can give you some more information that might help,” I said, but the consensus of this core of good students seemed to be, “No, no, just take it away and let us read more short stories.” They offered their opinions in good humor, and I told myself at least they were engaged, however oppositionally. At that moment I decided to practice pedagogy rather than andragogy, by imposing learning material onto my students, delivering a short lecture once the class started, and spontaneously scrapping my original plans for that day’s small group discussion; for, as Megan put it, “What’s to discuss other than us telling you it sucks?”

Meanwhile, in the 9:30 section, my improved time management skills seemed to pay off. Generally this was the quieter of the two classes, and I often had to push students harder to speak out in class. The class on the whole was also less inclined toward literature, since more than seventy percent of the students were majoring in scientific or technical fields, and there were more traditional students, who tended as a group to be quieter. I had originally expected this section to have a more difficult time accessing Woolf. Yet, perhaps because my background lecture had been more well thought out, I found a friendlier reception than I had anticipated. “This is hard,” Amber said to me before class, “but it’s kind of interesting.” While one traditional-age student in the 9:30 class announced to the room, “I hate this!”, another said, “It moves really slow, but I kind
of think I see what she’s getting at.” For that class, the students worked in their small
groups as I had planned, delineating some of the oppositions and conflicts Woolf was
setting up in the novel. As in the 8:00 class, I passed out the stream-of-consciousness
writing assignment at the end of each of that day’s classes, informing students it was due
the following week.

The following Tuesday after the students did that assignment, I noticed a
perceptible shift in the 8:00 class. “I still think it’s boring,” said Megan, “but I think I
understand what she is trying to do now.” After considering Mrs. Ramsay in light of her
own personal experience as a mother of eight, grandmother of fourteen, and past
caretaker of her elderly parents, Carolyn experienced an “ah-hah” moment: “I think I
know what she’s getting at now,” she told me that Tuesday morning before class. “I still
wouldn’t read this by choice, but I think I understand what she’s getting at.”

Some of the students’ understanding seemed to shift as we moved into the two
latter sections of the novel, “Time Passes” and “To the Lighthouse.” I provided a brief
lecture on the how Woolf plays with time by structuring the novel as she does—that the
largest section of the novel comprises one day, while the latter, shorter sections of the
novel compress many years and lifeshaking events into a few pages, subverting narrative
expectations and prioritizing the minutiae of daily living over the kinds of cataclysmic,
violent events typically emphasized by the traditional, usually male, novel. “Oh, no
wonder the first part was so boring,” observed Megan, “anyone’s life would look boring
if you just looked at one day.” “But she’s kind of trying to do a philosophical thing,”
pointed out Shelly.
These new responses to Woolf seemed to result from the students’ negotiations between the written assignment, the novel itself, and information provided by me to assist in understanding and interpretation. Although I had made a major mistake and done a less than stellar job of preparing my 8:00 class the first time, the written assignments the students turned in would indicate that most of them found numerous points of intersection between their own daily concerns and the kinds of issues that Woolf writes about in To the Lighthouse: promises made and kept to children, dealing with domineering males, and especially, for my women students, the struggle between fulfilling oneself and taking care of others—experienced by most of the nontraditional women students as the juggling of multiple roles they had to undertake as students, wives, mothers, and employees.

Carolyn’s stream-of-consciousness piece began with her looking at the moon, considering it as a symbol of the female, and as a “guiding principle” that keeps the days, months and years in order. Carolyn’s reflection took her back into her own past, and to memories of decisions she made at key junctures in her life; she paused to consider how her whole life would have been different had she exercised certain options, and that perhaps some of her children would not even have been born. “I’m a lot like Mrs. Ramsay,” she told me before class one day, “but women today, they have so many more choices. You can be Lily Briscoe if you want to be. But you can also find ways to be a little bit of both of them; it’s not this either/or thing like it seemed to be back in Woolf’s time.” Thus, both Carolyn and I felt successful at the end of this unit in my course; her own attempt to write in Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness style helped her to identify with

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one of the novel's central characters, and gave her a point of entry into a novel that she
initially resisted as "just too weird." As with any assignment, students experienced
varying degrees of success in their attempts to connect with the novel. In our 8:00
section, it was apparent to me that of all the students, Carolyn was the most successful in
developing points of personal connection, "even to the point that both Mrs. Ramsay and I
have eight kids," she joked with me; "and unlike her, I didn’t have a cook—I would’ve had
to make that beef whatever-it-was myself!"

Meanwhile, over in the 9:30 class, I found the "fault line" seemed to ride largely
between traditional and nontraditional students, with the older students reporting that,
while the novel is challenging, "I really love it," (Amber) or "It’s hard to read, but I
totally know what she’s talking about" (Helen). Many—though not all—of the traditional
students (one in particular comes to mind) complained, "This is boring." Once again,
though, while most students reported that they found Woolf challenging, many also began
to notice a thematic resonance between some of the things they think about—and
expressed in their stream-of-consciousness responses—and matters that Woolf wrote
about.

Once again, it was the nontraditional students whose responses were the most
resonant and insightful. In her stream of consciousness piece, Anna begins by
considering the times she has made promises to her own children: "It’s so easy to tell
them we’ll go here, we’ll do this, then I can’t always do it . . . But I have to follow
through. As a parent, you can’t disappoint them too often. . . . You wonder what little
thing they’ll remember later that didn’t seem like such a big deal to you, but it is to
them.” While her thoughts originated with the text itself, Anna’s stream of consciousness veered into a consideration of her own multiple roles, wondering “if things for women have really changed as much as people think they have, or not.”

Amber’s stream-of-consciousness piece focused on the symbolism of the ocean and all it represents, “life, rhythms, movement, loss, time,” while both Barbara and Helen wrote about their current pregnancies. They shared similar concerns, regarding how to integrate a new member into their family, worried about whether everything would go as expected, and hoped that all would be well. They both also speculated as to whether they would have any time for themselves after the baby was born, and whether the older child(ren) would accept the new sibling.

Christina’s stream-of-consciousness piece was especially powerful. Drawing upon the memory of a recent illness that was potentially life-threatening, Christina, the mother of three, chose to identify with Mrs. Ramsay, the caretaker who dies in “Time Passes,” and wrote an ostensibly fictionalized, third-person stream-of-consciousness story about a woman on a train, interspersing dialogue with other passengers with internal reflections on her own mortality. While viewing children interacting with their fathers, Christina’s narrator muses: “Where were they going without their mother? The mother . . . She saw the father signal to the boy to throw away the lollipop. The boy looked so sad. A mother wouldn’t have done that. The mother . . . She thought of her husband. He would not be like those fathers she had seen today . . . She feel asleep with this last thought in her mind. It would be okay.” This experimentation with a new form of writing would lead Christina to attempt a similar piece of writing in another class,
described in detail in Chapter Seven. Christina also reported to me that she found it “really helped” to write this response, though she did not specify as to whether she meant that it helped her understand Woolf's novel, or helped her come to terms with a frightening recent situation in her own life. Given the sensitivity of the subject, I did not press her on this question; it seems clear enough to me that Christina believed that writing this piece “helped” in some sense, and, I speculated, perhaps in more than one sense.

I was, obviously, pleased to observe that most of my students demonstrated a better ability to understand and connect with Woolf's novel once they wrote the stream-of-consciousness responses. I also noted a correlation: the older the student, the more likely she was to do a perceptive job in this writing assignment. What was most interesting to me, however, was to note how some students—like Christina—went on to connect things learned from doing this particular writing assignment with issues raised in other courses as well. As Carolyn put it to me, “Everything feeds on everything else, and it's a good loop to be in, you know.”

**Research Question: Nontraditional Student Voices in the Academic Conversation**

*How should the increasing presence of nontraditional students on college campuses shape both our professional discourse and our teaching practices in composition and WAC?*

This broad question, I will return to in more depth in my conclusion as I examine some implications for composition and critical teaching. At this juncture, however, I will discuss my findings more narrowly. My participants indicated to me, through their interviews, classroom performances, and writing samples, that they gained the most as
writers from writing-to-learn, low-stakes assignments, especially when they were able to
write about matters of personal interest. All participants expressed anxiety about
grammar, along with occasional writer's block, experienced particularly in conjunction
with high-stakes assignments. Coping strategies they described included freewriting,
journaling, and "just drafting, then worrying about grammar later." While learning how
to write in the academic style was important to all the participants, each participant
expressed a desire to choose, or at least negotiate, topics and styles, rather than having
topics and styles imposed on them. Participants requested that teachers communicate
their expectations clearly and structure their classes sensibly, so that busy nontraditional
students could make any necessary scheduling arrangements (time management appeared
to be the major issue for these nontraditional students as a group). "Pace the class well,
be available, flexible and responsive," said Christina. "Communicate expectations
clearly," said Helen.

Some of the things these students did not benefit from were overly high-stakes
writing assignments; topics not of personal interest or relevance to them; overemphasis
on grammar (especially too early in the writing process); poor communication by
instructors; work weighted heavily toward the end of the semester; rigidity; lack of
instructor feedback; and lack of revision opportunity. As Barbara put it, "You learn by
doing it over again, trying to do it better."

In short, participants seemed to be asking for process approaches to composition.
However, while participants appreciated opportunities to write about personal
experiences, they did not seem to want simplistic approaches associated with the "old"
concept of “expressivism” (which, as I have argued elsewhere, never really existed anyway except as a construction against which its opponents could define themselves). Participants in my study did not view themselves as operating “autonomously.” To the contrary, these nontraditional students appeared to view themselves as “multiply situated” in that they recognized, in various ways, that they were juggling multiple duties and roles, within a variety of ever-shifting sociocultural contexts (even if they would not have used the kind of vocabulary we use in composition theory to describe their situations). None of the participants viewed herself as operating in a cultural or historical vacuum, as we shall see more specifically in my presentation of the case studies.

The students’ willingness to be assertive and interactive suggest that they were not passive receptacles in the “pedagogical” sense, but active agents in their own learning process—or, in other terms, more interested in a Freirean educational transaction than in the “banking” model of education. While as students they were not institutionally empowered to transform the educational paradigm from pedagogical to andragogical completely (and, for that matter, neither are we as teachers, constrained as we are by institutional requirements), these participants were nonetheless able to exercise agency in order to shift the paradigm to some degree. Taking up Knowles’ point about pedagogy and andragogy being understood as points along a continuum rather than as sharp opposition, these study participants were able to exercise sufficient agency to move the classroom dynamic to another point along that continuum, as when Christina assertively sought me out to question whether her interpretation of Woolf was on the right track; or when Carolyn, Megan and Katherine spoke back to me about my choice of text.
Case Studies: Rationale for Selection

In the next section of the study I will present three case studies—Amber, Christina, and Carolyn. My choice to focus on these three particular students was, to some extent, made for me. First, I received an email from Anna in the spring of 2004 indicating that she and her family had decided, on rather short notice, to move to Las Vegas for financial reasons. Thus, any possible follow-up would have been geographically difficult.

Next, both Helen and Barbara were pregnant during the semester of our class and at the time of our interviews. Both delivered their babies the following spring. While each of them had indicated that they would willingly stay in touch with me if I needed to conduct any follow-up communications regarding this study, I then learned from Barbara—shortly after the birth of her third child—that her husband was being deployed to Iraq. In addition to the strain of wondering whether her husband would return, Barbara would have to care for three small children, including an infant, on her own. As a result, she would have to take some time off from her nursing prerequisites before returning to college. Under the circumstances, I felt it best not to intrude upon her life any further. Unfortunately, I received similar news from Helen after the birth of her second child; her husband, too, was under threat of deployment.

Largely for reasons of accessibility, then—as well as the need to be sensitive to women going through major life challenges—I thought it best not to follow up any further with Anna, Barbara, or Helen. Because I intended to follow the feminist practice of sharing my draft chapters with my participants reflexively and dialogically, I preferred to
conduct more detailed case studies on students who were available and who were not
dealing with war-related trauma and de facto single parenthood.

Even though circumstances shaped my choices for case study more than I would
have liked, I believe the three I ended up using—Carolyn, Amber, and Christina—were
excellent choices in themselves, as well as a good cross-section. Taken together, the
three of them span a range of ages and as well as a cross-section of nontraditional
circumstances. Amber, at twenty-five, is the youngest of my participants, barely meeting
the often-used definition of “nontraditional” as “twenty-five or over.” Single and
childless, her life might seem more like that of some “traditional students.” Yet Amber
has long been independent and self-supporting. She has traveled extensively, is self-
employed, has lived on her own for years, and is designing her own major. She is highly
self-directed and internally motivated, and adopts an attitude of independence even within
the constraints of the educational system. Amber’s independence and self-direction are
immediately visible, both in her classroom interactions and in her writing.

Christina, at thirty-two, faces a different kind of nontraditionality; she is married
and the mother of three young children, juggling multiple responsibilities while pursuing
her nursing degree. She cites “time management” as her primary source of stress, and
whereas Amber enjoys some freedom to experiment in her educational process, Christina
is more focused on instrumental goals like “getting through.”

Carolyn, finally, is the oldest of the group at 57. As a mother of eight and
grandmother of fourteen, she too has caretaking responsibilities, but with seven of her
children grown and the eighth now in high school, Carolyn reports she has “much more
time to myself now” than at previous stages of her life. Both Christina and Amber are in college primarily to pursue career goals, though Amber also states she is enjoying the “self-fulfillment” aspect of college, and Christina is happy she is “improving myself.”

Carolyn, on the other hand, does not know whether her educational pursuits will necessarily lead her toward a career—“by the time I finish school, I will be of retirement age,” she jokes—and she is motivated primarily by goals of self-fulfillment; though she also told me that if it “works out” for her to have a career, she will be the happier for it.

Each of these three case studies, then, allows us to consider nontraditionality through a slightly different lens, at three different stages of life and with different kinds of “nontraditional” circumstances and goals. The three participants for whom I did not do further case study are all similar in some key respects. Anna, Barbara, and Helen are all—like Christina—in their late twenties to early thirties and married, with two to three young children at home. Two of them—Anna and Barbara—are, also like Christina, pre-nursing students. Given the demographic similarities shared by Anna, Barbara, and Christina, I would likely have chosen only one of these three for further case studies, in order to lend depth and variety to my narratives. Had Helen and Anna not faced the circumstances they did, it is possible I would have chosen one of them instead of Christina; however, even with the outside exigencies, I believe I ended up with three excellent choices for case study that allowed me to view nontraditionality along a spectrum, considering what my case studies had in common as well as what differentiated them.
Interpretive Framework: Knowles' Model

In order to analyze and interpret my data, I draw upon Malcolm Knowles' andragogical model, which, as I have pointed out previously, shares significant philosophical territory with the principles of critical educational theory and with feminist and process composition theory. In interpreting my findings, I focus primarily on two of Knowles' five hallmarks of andragogy: (1) the adult learner is self-directed; and (2) the adult learner brings to the educational enterprise life experience that is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from that of the adolescent. In my conclusion I discuss in more detail the corollaries between these two concepts and theories of Freire, Giroux, hooks, and others. For purposes of presenting my case studies, however, I focus on Knowles, since he is the scholar who most explicitly considers the role of age in the learning experience.

In presenting my three case studies, I demonstrate that each participant negotiated an educational model for herself that was more andragogical than pedagogical, even when the principles of andragogy were not consciously shaping the attitudes of the institution or the teacher. My investigation demonstrates that for these nontraditional students, education was a negotiated transaction rather than a one-way transmission, and that the students themselves exercised sufficient agency to shape for themselves an educational situation that was effectively more andragogical than pedagogical. Each participant somehow used college writing as a means for negotiating a complex, multiply situated, culturally hybrid identity; each also indicated to me that she believed her nontraditional
status gave her more agency and authority to shape her own learning and writing experiences.

As stated in Chapter Two, Knowles notes five major points of contrast between the traditional pedagogical model and the andragogical model: (1) The concept of the learner. In a pedagogical model, the learner is assumed to be a dependent personality, whereas in an andragogical model, the learner is viewed as “self-directing.” (2) The role of the learner’s experience. Pedagogy assumes that learners “enter into an educational activity with little experience that is of much value as a resource for learning” (Knowles 8), whereas andragogy “assumes that adults enter into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youth” (Knowles 10). (3) The learner’s readiness to learn. In pedagogy, “students become ready to learn what they are told they have to learn in order to advance to the next grade level” (Knowles 8), whereas the andragogical model “assumes that adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know” (Knowles 11). (4) The learner’s orientation to learning. Pedagogy views learning as “a process of acquiring prescribed subject matter content” (Knowles 9), while andragogy “organizes learning experiences around life situations rather than according to subject matter units” (Knowles 12). (5) The learner’s motivation. Pedagogy assumes students are motivated “primarily by external pressures from parents and teachers, competition for grades, the consequences of failure, and the like” (Knowles 9). While andragogy acknowledges that while adults will respond to some external motivators—such as the promise of a better job or salary—andragogy also posits that “the more potent motivators are internal” (Knowles 12).
The question of whether an instructor draws upon pedagogical or andragogical assumptions is no small matter for the compositionist concerned with issues of identity and difference in the classroom. As Knowles points out, there is a strong connection between identity and life experience: “Experience . . . becomes increasingly the source of an adult’s self-identity . . . If in an educational situation an adult’s experience is ignored, not valued, not made use of, it is not just the experience that is being rejected; it is the person. Hence the importance of using the experience of adult learners as a rich resource for learning” (Knowles 11). Though Knowles cautions against stereotyping all adult learners as “underprepared” (as often occurs in the adult education literature), he makes the further point that those adult students who truly are underprepared may have “little to sustain their dignity other than their experience” (Knowles 11). Valuing and making use of adult learners’ life experiences also enhances heterogeneity in the classroom, says Knowles, given that “the range of experience among a group of adults of various ages will be vastly greater” than among a group of children (Knowles 10).

Knowles also points out the problematic power dynamics that may ensue when the normally “self-directing” and “responsible” adult re-assumes a role typically associated with dependency, that of student. As adults, Knowles points out, we “develop a deep psychological need to be perceived by others, and treated by others, as capable of taking responsibility for ourselves. And when we find ourselves in situations where we feel that others are imposing their wills on us without our participating in making decisions affecting us, we experience a feeling, often subconsciously, of resentment and resistance” (Knowles 9). In order to prevent adult students from feeling as he describes,
says Knowles, it is the responsibility of the educator to recognize how power dynamics may be affecting his or her adult students, and to devise strategies that allow the adult learner to be self-directed. Situations where adult learners are treated like children, Knowles warns, may “conflict with their much deeper need to be self-directing,” causing energy to be “diverted away from learning to dealing with this internal conflict” (Knowles 9).

What interested me as I analyzed and interpreted the data from all of my participants (not only those selected for further case study) was that, while none of these students was learning in an explicitly andragogical environment, each of them could be seen exercising agency to negotiate a learning and writing situation for themselves that was, effectively, andragogical at least to some degree. Leeward Community College is a traditional, outcomes-focused community college that mandates tremendous uniformity. When writing course syllabi, for instance, Leeward teachers must copy course description language directly from the college catalog; learning outcomes must be consistent across all sections of a course no matter who is teaching them; and the learning outcomes have been formulated by faculty committees with no student input. Individual teachers’ approaches to the classroom vary, of course, but generally this is not an institution renowned for its innovation.

In terms of my course, my own teaching is heavily informed by process and feminist composition and WAC theory, and thus is probably more like an andragogical model in many respects. Still, I did not explicitly conceptualize or articulate my teaching approach using andragogical terms when I designed or taught the classes considered here.
At that juncture it had been over two years since my initial reading of Knowles, and I did not return to his texts until after I had gathered my data, so I did not plan my course with andragogical principles explicitly in mind (though my teaching was likely influenced to some extent by certain of these concerns anyway). Moreover, most of my participants indicated that at least some of the writing samples they provided me from other courses were written for instructors who teach according to models that sounded, to me, somewhat more “pedagogical.”

Yet all my participants, at various points in their educational process, took the initiative to create more “andragogical” learning situations for themselves, even within the institutional confines of Leeward Community College. Each participant exhibited self-direction in her learning, proactively asserting her right to “value and make use of” her life experience, both in terms of its greater volume and different quality.

For purposes of my upcoming case study interpretation and analysis, I will focus primarily on these first two aspects of andragogy—the concept of the learner as self-directing adult, and the concept of the adult learner’s life experience as different in both volume and quality. My case studies demonstrate that teaching is not a monologic enterprise where nontraditional students are concerned, for those I studied were able to negotiate learning opportunities that were more toward the andragogical end of the continuum than their teachers might have intended. To use Freire’s terms, each of these participants acted on her world as a Subject with agency, rather than passively absorbing information as an Object.
My case studies will demonstrate how three specific students exercised this agency. In my conclusion I will connect my case studies more explicitly with current discussions in composition studies and critical educational theory, presenting my analysis of what we can learn in composition studies from considering the subject-position of the nontraditional student within Knowles’ andragogical framework.

In keeping with the feminist practice of developing my research in dialogue with my participants, I offered each of my case studies the opportunity to read and respond to my draft chapters regarding their writing in the fall of 2004. Both Carolyn and Amber eagerly participated, responding with marginal comments. I have inserted those comments into my own text; the voices of my participants appear within brackets, italicized. Christina, however, informed me that because she was now in the midst of her intensive 23-month Bachelor of Science in Nursing program while raising three small children, she had no time for extra projects whatsoever. “But I trust whatever you write about,” she told me in an email; “I know you and how you teach, and I’m sure whatever you have to say will be fine.”

When it comes to dialogically reflexive, feminist research methodology, the underlying principle is that teachers and researchers must respect the wishes and voices of their students/participants. In the case of Christina, her expressed wish was for me not to impinge any further on her time. Therefore, while Christina’s chapter does not include any of her comments, I believe my decision to respect her time as she requested is, nonetheless, in keeping with the spirit of dialogical and feminist inquiry.
CHAPTER FIVE:

"YOUR CULTURAL PRACTICES
DETERMINE YOUR QUEST FOR PEACE"

A Case Study of Carolyn

Gregarious yet self-reflective, opinionated yet openminded, Carolyn is a Native Hawaiian woman in her mid fifties, with a strong presence that gave her something of a "motherly" role in our 8:00 a.m. class. She contributed vivaciously to class discussions herself, but also constantly encouraged the other, younger students to "speak up," "speak out," "ask questions," and "say what you think" (I often joked with Carolyn that she "carried" my 8:00 class). One day, she missed class due to personal reasons, and as one of the other students commented to me after class, "Gee, something was totally missing today." When we returned to class the following Thursday and Carolyn was in her seat as usual, another student remarked, "Order has returned to the universe!" That was the kind of force that Carolyn brought to our 8:00 class.

Carolyn remains one of the most vivacious and enthusiastic students I have ever worked with, not to mention one of the most outgoing people I have met in any context. Looking considerably younger than her 56 years, Carolyn always arrived to class a half hour early, and was typically already there when I arrived. She sat near the front, books and notebooks open, chatting enthusiastically with anyone who entered the room. In an attempt to avoid Oahu's morning traffic jams, I began coming to class earlier and earlier myself, but it seemed that no matter how early I arrived, Carolyn was already there. One day I point-blanked her: "What time do you get here, anyway?" "7:30," she said; "I'm
always up at 5 anyway, so I just come to school. I beat traffic, I get the first parking spot, and the room’s always quiet so I get time to study.”

Carolyn wasn’t the only eager student who typically arrived to class early; as discussed in Chapter Four, our class had a core of early birds who typically showed up by quarter to 8:00, where they engaged in lively discussion and, sometimes, debate. Carolyn never hesitated to venture an opinion, whether positive or negative, on the material we were reading, and vociferously expressed her opinions on different texts, literary characters, and writers (“Faulkner’s crazy!” she emoted as I walked in the room one morning). Her magnetic personality drew other students into lively discussions, even before class officially started, and even arguing with her was fun, since the debates were always good-natured. I also noted that in this course, students never said they were “bored” or “didn’t get it” if Carolyn was around; her presence seemed to create a tone that ensured everyone would be engaged with the subject matter (or at least would pretend to be).

Carolyn was, also, proactive about asking questions when she felt she needed to know something. As a Native Hawaiian and fluent Hawaiian language speaker [I understand Hawaiian but am not as fluent as I would like to be—am working on it!], devoted to perpetuating the Hawaiian language and culture, Carolyn always greeted and said farewell to her classmates and me in Hawaiian. If she received a call on her cell phone before class, she always answered with “Aloha,” and before class she sometimes engaged in Hawaiian-language phone conversations (though as a considerate class member, Carolyn always made sure she turned off her phone before class started).
Carolyn was returning to college after a 35-year absence. In the mid 1960s, she had begun college at UH-Manoa at the age of eighteen after graduating from Kamehameha School for Girls, then quit to get married and raise her family. She worked for many years as a switchboard operator and medical receptionist, before leaving that career to care for her aging parents and operate a home day-care center. When I met Carolyn, she was a 57-year-old mother of eight and grandmother of fourteen, studying for her Certificate of Music at Leeward Community College and planning to transfer to the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa for a Bachelor’s degree in music and a teaching certificate. Carolyn attends a Congregational church committed to the preservation of the Hawaiian language and culture, which conducts all its services in Hawaiian. She is also an ordained minister in that church, though she does not pastor the congregation.

Carolyn’s background makes her almost a textbook case of what postmodern theorists call the “multiply situated subject.” She is, for starters, of mixed ethnicity (“Hawaiian, Chinese, Scottish, and some other kind of Caucasian,” she told me), though she primarily identifies herself as Native Hawaiian. As previously indicated, she speaks Hawaiian and actively commits herself to perpetuating the Hawaiian language and culture. Carolyn is also a devout practicing Christian and ordained Christian minister, even though much of the oppression of Native Hawaiians and attempted eradication of their language and culture stemmed from Christian missionary efforts. Furthermore, while Carolyn’s father was of Native Hawaiian ancestry, he spent his entire career with the U.S. military—a source of conflict for many Native Hawaiians. Though Carolyn was born in Hawai‘i, her father’s military affiliation meant the family was frequently
transferred to various locations, including Japan, New York, New Jersey, and Italy.

When I met Carolyn, she was juggling motherhood, grandmotherhood, and her church duties with her duties as a student at Leeward, where she encountered a diverse range of ideas and belief systems. Much of the writing Carolyn showed me reveals that she often must negotiate complex relationships between the multiple facets of her identity: her Hawaiian ethnicity and cultural commitments, her Christianity, her military associations, her familial roles, and the roles she assumed in the classroom as a visibly nontraditional student.

Carolyn attributes her initial departure from college at age eighteen to “youth,” as well as to difficulties she encountered with the large, impersonal structure of the four-year university. Following a childhood spent largely in the microcosmic world of the military base, Carolyn’s family of origin had returned to Hawai‘i in 1961 when she was fourteen, just in time for her to start high school at Kamehameha School for Girls (an institution established by Hawaiian ali‘i Princess Pauahi Bishop for the education of Hawaiian children). Carolyn graduated from Kamehameha in 1965, just a year before the school changed from gender-segregated to co-educational. At that time her graduating class was considered very small, with 159 in her graduating class and an average class size of twenty or less. Carolyn enrolled at UH-Manoa immediately following high school graduation, where she encountered an educational culture vastly different from the cozy ‘ohana of Kamehameha: “All of a sudden I’m in a situation where four hundred are in a class, and it’s like, whoa, you know! It was a little overwhelming,” says Carolyn.

Feeling like she was “more of a number than I was a person,” Carolyn grew increasingly
detached from her college studies, finding that there were “too many distractions at that age.” She found herself increasingly paying more attention to parties and socializing. Soon after, Carolyn dropped out of college altogether to get married and raise children. After her first marriage ended in divorce, Carolyn remarried a man with children of his own. She and her second husband then had another child, making a total of eight, “but I don’t distinguish between mine, his and ours,” she says; “they’re all ours.”

Thirty-five years after her initial college experience, after a lifetime devoted to both paid and unpaid caregiving, Carolyn’s husband retired and they moved from the city of Honolulu to Oahu’s Leeward Coast. This life change offered Carolyn the opportunity to return, finally, to college. “I’ve always wanted to come back to school,” says Carolyn; “I just didn’t have the opportunity to do it for 35 years.” Once the opportunity finally arose, Carolyn says, “that door opened, and I just stepped right through it.” Carolyn hopes to major in music education and perhaps even receive a Master’s degree. Though she is somewhat concerned that she will be nearing retirement age by the time she completes her education, she says, “I’d still love to get into a school situation to help shape young minds . . . I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” Her approach to education is to take one day at a time, her life experiences having taught her that “nothing is certain.” Though she is visibly enthusiastic about being back in college after thirty years, she also voices some regrets at not finishing the first time. When she encounters traditional-age students in her classes, she says, she often gets “on my soapbox to tell them, you guys really have to stay in school! Someday you’re going to realize, gosh, I should have stayed in school because Mom and Dad were paying for it, you know?”
Yet Carolyn herself has come to realize that the benefits of “paying for it yourself” go beyond simple financial responsibility. As an adult student, she takes self-responsibility not only for the financial aspect of her education, but for its content. After a lifetime of juggling multiple responsibilities—raising eight children, running a day care center, caring for aging parents, actively participating in Hawaiian cultural activities, and serving her church as an ordained minister in various capacities—Carolyn deems herself an expert at “managing my time” and “prioritizing.” "If I have a paper that needs to be due and right after that paper I have a test,” says Carolyn, “I know let’s get the paper out of the way and then let’s just concentrate on the exam part.” She has excellent time management skills—a necessity, Carolyn says, for she finds that writing papers as an adult student consumes her life now in a way that it did not before. When she has a written assignment due, she will think about it constantly, even when driving, and she has taken to carrying a small notebook so she can jot down ideas as they occur to her, at times even pulling her car over to the side of the road so she can jot down an idea “before I forget it.”

Carolyn takes a proactive approach to written assignments: “What kind of questions do I need to ask myself if I’m going to write this paper? I have to really sit down and think about it.” Everything she encounters in her daily life can possibly lead to a paper idea, Carolyn told me in our interview; “This is in the back of my head, and every time I see something or I read something, I think okay, I can apply that to my paper!” At any given time, Carolyn will have “three or four kinds of paper with me so that I can just write”; later, organizing an assigned paper is largely a matter of “connecting all the dots, you know.” Whatever she reads or encounters in her everyday life, she tries to find “a
way to apply it to my essays; learning something new from whatever I read, or whatever I do... The writing is at the back of my mind all the time, all the time.”

Carolyn describes herself as “very comfortable as a student, knowing that I can always call on my teachers.” But she does not see herself as a student in the traditional pedagogical sense: “If I have a question or comment, I blurt it right out, and everybody kind of like looks at me, but I’m going, come on, you’re not going to learn anything unless you ask!” An advantage of being older, Carolyn says, is that “I don’t feel intimidated”; younger students, she notices, are often hesitant to ask questions, but Carolyn’s approach is, “If you’ve got it in your head, ask it. There’s something there for you; the teacher is supposed to be able to answer your question.” She also believes teachers sometimes give her “leeway to talk out in class” because of her age, and states that her greatest strength as a student is “refusing to be intimidated.” “You’re the only one that’s going to make it better for yourself,” she says. Crucial for her participation in college classes is a “comfortable classroom environment.”

I learned some valuable lessons myself from Carolyn when I was teaching the Kiana Davenport novel, Shark Dialogues. After introducing the text generally and allowing the students some time to begin reading this lengthy novel, I prepared a short background lecture on the concept of magical realism, a device often employed by writers in postcolonial contexts to convey the bizarre situation of the postcolonial subject. While Davenport’s novel is not as overtly magical realist as, say, those of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Salman Rushdie, Davenport does employ similar literary devices, most notably in passages where the protagonist, Pono, dives into the ocean to swim with sharks
and finds herself transformed into a shark in the process. In order to explain somewhat surrealistic passages such as this one (along with a few others), I prepared a short lecture on magical realism to deliver to the class. I was several minutes into the mini-lecture when Carolyn interjected, “May I tell a story about my family?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Some of what she writes in here,” Carolyn said, addressing the whole class, “may not be all that farfetched. You see, I had an auntie, and one day she took us down to the beach . . . “ Carolyn went on to narrate a story about her auntie, who was viewed by her family and community as having tremendous mana (power). Many Native Hawaiians view the shark as an ancestor, and Carolyn’s own family believed the shark to be their family ‘aumakua, or god. Lest anyone doubt it, on this particular day Carolyn’s auntie dove into visibly shark-infested waters, where she swam calmly as the sharks ignored her. “She had the mana to do that,” Carolyn explained, “and there is a deep spiritual connection between the shark world and our family.”

“But she didn’t actually turn into a shark like the Pono character does,” interjected another student.

“No, but couldn’t that just be a metaphor for the incredible power that Pono has?” said Carolyn. “What Auntie did was really just one step removed from that.”

At this point, my lecture on magical realism was slightly derailed. I decided, however, to go with the flow and listen to the class members discuss various concepts such as the traditional Hawaiian relationship with nature, sharks in particular; the concept of ‘aumakua; and the concept of mana. I felt it best to step aside at this point, because

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Carolyn is a person of Native Hawaiian descent, whereas I am not. This made for an interesting power dynamic between the two of us, for though I had the literary training and background as well as the institutional authority to deliver course content, Carolyn (along with others in the class) was clearly an authority on Hawaiian culture in a way that I can never in good conscience claim to be. Recognizing this, I thought it best to shelve my planned lecture, step aside, and allow Carolyn to redirect the class discussion in such a way as to allow for the possibility of *mana*, a concept outside most Western epistemological frameworks. Later, other students in the class (including some of Native Hawaiian descent and others who, though not Native, grew up in the Islands) shared family stories of their own. The focus of our class work that day shifted dramatically from magical realism to the meaning of *mana*, and how it should best be used. At this moment I felt my best use of institutional authority was to relinquish control, shut up, and step aside. As Knowles reminds us, if we assume our students are adults, that also means there are moments when the learners themselves should become “the richest resources for one another.” This was such a moment.

Carolyn’s interjection and proactive shaping of our class discussion was clearly motivated by her ethnic background, cultural heritage, and family experiences, rather than the fact that she was a nontraditional student per se. However, I also believe her willingness to interrupt the teacher’s voice—to establish her own authority and tell her own story—directly related to her nontraditional student status since, as Carolyn herself reports, “I would have been too hesitant to speak out when I was 18; now I just say what I’ve got to say.” Furthermore, there were several traditional-age students of Native
Hawaiian ancestry in our class as well, who listened patiently, without interrupting, while I lectured on magical realism. Yet they all participated vigorously in discussion once Carolyn’s interjection changed our direction.

This episode illustrates the ways in which nontraditionality can often intersect and interact with other facets of identity such as gender and ethnicity, with nontraditional students drawing upon both the quantity and quality of their life experience in order to connect to the subject matter. In Giroux’s terms, Carolyn was connecting the “discourse of her lived cultures” with the “discourse of textual analysis.” Carolyn’s cultural heritage gave her the authority to speak out and change the nature of the course discussion; her role as Native Hawaiian woman, and her relationship to her own female ancestor, gave her the insider knowledge of female Hawaiian cultural practices. Finally, her status as nontraditional student helped make her more willing and able to speak out assertively against institutional authority, in this situation as represented by me.

Though Carolyn was a confident speaker, never afraid to interject her own experiences and opinions, as a writer she experienced some initial anxiety when she returned to college as a nontraditional student. When she first returned to college, says Carolyn, she was an “iffy, real iffy, writer.” Though she found herself full of ideas for paper topics—“I kind of knew what I wanted to write in my head”—she found academic expectations caused some anxiety: “Sometimes I don’t know if I’m doing it right.” As she has gained additional writing experience, however, Carolyn says she is “better at formulating my thoughts,” and more “able to restructure my thinking” to meet academic expectations. Her written style is fluent and lively; “I write the way I talk,” says Carolyn.
"I don’t know if that’s good or what; some people say, well, you’re not supposed to write
the way you speak, but I think that seems kind of phony... so for right now, I write the
way I speak. And it works for me."

In chapter 4, I discussed at some length how Carolyn used my writing assignments
on Virginia Woolf to explore her personal caretaking experiences as a way to connect
with the novel through the character of the nurturing Mrs. Ramsay. Carolyn also
provided me with a considerable number of writing samples from other courses. The
semester following my course, Carolyn encountered her longest college writing project to
date when the professor of her 200-level intercultural communications course asked for a
ten-page final essay addressing issues discussed that semester. Carolyn was having
trouble finding a topic to write about, “although everybody else in the class was popping
up with these ideas.” In the midst of her struggle to find a suitable topic, Carolyn
experienced a personal crisis when a close friend of hers passed away. As an ordained
minister, Carolyn was asked to conduct his funeral service. While speaking of her friend
as his ashes were scattered over the ocean, Carolyn recalled various aspects of her course
on intercultural communications, and suddenly realized that as she officiated this funeral
in Hawaii, she was herself negotiating an instance of “intercultural communication” by
blending together burial and memorial traditions from many different cultures in
conducting her friend’s funeral service.

“Here in Hawai’i,” explains Carolyn, “because we have so many different
cultures, you can kind of like pick and choose whatever you do, and it’s okay, you know.
If you try to do this on the Mainland or someplace, you will definitely be frowned upon,
but here you can try to do something that would be Chinese and something that would be Christian type of thing, something that’s Hawaiian, you know, and kind of mishmash it all together and do it as a service. If you were brought up like that, as we are here, then it’s perfectly okay.”

Carolyn’s observation as an officiating minister—that Hawaii’s multiculturalism is reflected in the most meaningful rites of passage—led her to a topic for her essay. Carolyn stated to me that she was “trying to convey the uniqueness of Hawai’i,” especially its culturally hybrid approach to all rites of passage: “Because we live in Hawai’i, we are able to do this mixed cultural thing.” Beginning with observations about her own friends funeral, Carolyn then expanded her thesis to include various religious beliefs: “I want to know how do Christians, how do Islamics, how do Jews, how do Buddhists observe life and death,” she told me, “and then I was thinking, how do you connect it all culturally.”

Her essay for Intercultural Communications, entitled “R.I.P.,” was well written at the sentence level and contained a number of insightful observations. Her essay was, in my estimation, not as well organized as it could have been [You’re right—it wasn’t!], and it would have been much stronger had Carolyn developed a unifying focus to connect the multiple ideas she explored. Taken section by section, however, it was clear that Carolyn had integrated the course content with her own experiences as well as the voices and perspectives of others—an intellectually ambitious undertaking. Carolyn opened with the children’s poem, “Now I lay me down to sleep,” acknowledging: “This child’s prayer can be a little scary . . . This subject can be disconcerting to some and taboo for others.” She then turned to researching four major religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and
Judaism—and discussed what each faith tradition believes regarding life after death, and how decisions about disposal of the body and burial are to some extent shaped by this belief. Religions which teach the physical resurrection of the body, Carolyn points out, opt for “whole body burial,” whereas Hindus, with their belief in transmigration of souls, often use funeral pyres. Carolyn then turns to the question of how we philosophize the meaning of an infant’s death: “Were they cheated? Or is it we who feel cheated? . . . Do we fail to realize that their job was done and it was time for them to leave?”

Carolyn then turns to an extremely painful personal experience to illustrate what she means by that question: “My eldest daughter went through two stillborn births,” she reports. “It was a heart-wrenching experience, especially the second time around. My daughter went into a depression and I did a lot of soul searching.” Carolyn then explores facets of both her Christian beliefs and her Hawaiian cultural practices, in effect negotiating the conflict between these two systems in her paper. Because of her Christian beliefs, Carolyn and her family worried that her daughter “had done something wrong to be dealt such a blow.” Eventually, however, doctors discovered that Carolyn’s daughter had lupus. Though warned against attempting to have any more children, Carolyn says, her daughter was able to find a “very special doctor” who helped her give birth to a healthy daughter, now four years old. Carolyn has now found her resolution for the deaths of the two previous grandchildren through her Hawaiian cultural beliefs: “This child is very special in that I know she has the mana of her brother and sister,” writes Carolyn, “who never took a breath on this earth.” Because Carolyn’s teacher allowed her to incorporate personal experience into her essay, she was able to explain how she
negotiates between the two different cultural fields that shape her identity and subjectivity in order to develop a belief system that comforts her and her family, and allows her to make sense and find some peace following a family tragedy.

Carolyn briefly considers some of the philosophical issues concerning death and its randomness, citing many losses in her own life and stating, “It makes you wonder, why them and not me.” She then turns to the second phase of her research, a poll she took of fellow Leeward Community College students representing eight ethnicities (as well as mixed ethnicities) and six major religions (though her broad category of “Protestant” could be further subdivided). Carolyn inquired of each student as to how they would want their body disposed of after death. She found that students from religious backgrounds which teach the importance of whole body burial usually wished to do what was “in keeping with the family tradition,” while others preferred cremation, with many of the students, both Hawaiian and not, opting for the traditional Hawaiian practice of scattering ashes at sea. After presenting her survey findings briefly (a bit too briefly, I would argue) [I really didn’t know what to do with it. Maybe I didn’t ask myself the right questions?], Carolyn again digresses to personal experience, telling a family story that her tutu used to relate about her grandpa: “When he died he was cremated and his ashes kept in an umeke. Unbeknownst to the family, every time there was a get-together, grandma served poi mixed with grandpa’s ashes. She felt by doing this, his mana would be perpetuated in this family. Now, this may be just a family story—or it could be true.”

After briefly considering cultural differences in memorial services—“Irish wakes involve a lot of drinking and singing, as opposed to the somber services of the Buddhist
and Shinto beliefs”—Carolyn turns to what I consider the thesis or heart of her essay:

“Hawaii’s diversity of cultures enables individuals to incorporate their beliefs with whatever cultural experiences they may have encountered, so as to meet their own needs.”

She recalls attending a Buddhist service for an elderly Chinese man who, though Buddhist nominally, loved Hawaiian music, flowers, and hula, and participated in many Hawaiian cultural activities. Throughout the years he had helped his granddaughter’s halau by making lei and ti leaf skirts. Given his close association with the halau and his love for Hawaiian culture, this man’s family decided a service with “lots of flowers and Hawaiian music” would be more appropriate as a public memorial. A Buddhist service was then held for the family in private.

After considering such issues as “how you want to be remembered,” the importance of considering “who will grieve for you when you die,” and briefly revisiting the grief she and her daughter felt for the lost babies, Carolyn discusses the importance of remembering the dead, and the various cultural practices for doing so that one finds in Hawai‘i: “If you walk along our coastlines, you may see a small rock formation as a memorial to someone who drowned or was lost at sea.” She then concludes by turning to her own Hawaiian cultural roots as a way of offering a sense of hope and continuation to those who do not have physical descendants: “When I read that some people have no survivors, I feel sad . . . I wonder if anyone will remember them . . . If we are fortunate enough to have children, our life cycle continues in them. But if not, our mana may enter someone else in order to continue the life cycle.” When it comes to the highly personal
issue of grief, resolution, and fear of our own mortality, Carolyn concludes, “It is our religious and/or cultural practices that determine our quest for peace.”

Carolyn did encounter some organizational problems as she wrote her ambitious paper, stating to me that her own writing process is not conducive to outlining in advance, and that organizing is her “biggest challenge.” She also found herself thinking about the paper constantly—perhaps, she admits, because the paper was also so deeply connected to her recent experiences of losing a dear friend and being asked to officiate at his service. “Plotting out all the steps,” says Carolyn, “has been a real challenge.” I interviewed Carolyn about this essay before I actually saw it, and when I finally reviewed the writing sample, I found it interesting that nowhere in the paper itself did Carolyn mention the impetus for the paper—the recent death of her friend and her role in conducting his funeral. Still, she expressed to me in her interview that she was clearly motivated by that particular personal experience to write this paper, and though she did not discuss this particular incident specifically within the paper, she did connect both her textual and field research with her own “lived cultures,” exploring especially in depth some of the moments during which her multiple subjectivities would clash with one another. As Hawaiians, their cultural belief in mana allowed Carolyn and her daughter to navigate maze of grief following the stillbirths, while their Christian theological framework had led them to question whether perhaps Carolyn’s daughter had done “something wrong” to invoke God’s wrath. Perhaps when Carolyn discussed Hawai’i “allowing you to mix it all together,” she was speaking not only about the culturally hybrid memorial services she had both conducted and witnessed, but also about herself and her family, and how they
must continually negotiate between a complex and sometimes disparate set of belief systems: “It is our religious and/or cultural practices that determine our quest for peace.”

In other courses, Carolyn continued her practice of negotiating her relationship to the course materials through personal experience, even when not explicitly offered the opportunity to do so by the teacher. In a philosophy paper, Carolyn defined the Greek concept of *logos*, first using her expertise as a Christian minister to explain the meaning of *logos* in the Gospel of St. John: “*Logos* is a transcendent principle, a means by which God expressed himself in the world; *logos* also has a redemptive function . . . With all the different yet related meanings for *logos*, one could easily substitute the word ‘word’ in John 1:1 with ‘reason’ . . . On this premise, ‘the reason’ is why we are in existence . . . Thinking begets reasoning.” Carolyn then observes: “The Hawaiian translators of the Bible went directly back to the Greek instead of the King James version in their translations: *I kinohi ka Logou, me ke Akua ka Logou, a o ke Akua no ka Logue*. The word for ‘word’ in Hawaiian is ‘*āelo,*” says Carolyn, “but in this Hawaiian translation, the word *logou* is used. Did the translators know a deeper meaning for *logou* and therefore use it instead of ‘*āelo?’ They could have, therefore placing a greater emphasis on ‘reason’ and not just ‘word.’”

In a later essay for the same philosophy class, Carolyn asks in a short essay: “What can a bunch of ancient dead guys tell me that I don’t already know? How is it all connected?” After posing the question, she then considers her botany course and her recent project on medicinal plants, a subject she is interested in because of the important role of medicinal plants in Hawaiian culture. As she considers the potential relevance (or
lack) of Greek philosophy to a Native Hawaiian woman in the 21st century, she locates a point of connection with medicinal plants, recalling that Alexander the Great was counseled by Aristotle “to secure Socotra for its aloe production.” Observing that aloe is considered a valuable resource with healing properties even today, Carolyn observes, “That’s one connection. Maybe those ancient dead guys really did know what they were talking about. Maybe we really are all connected.”

While personal issues enter Carolyn’s academic writing, it is also interesting to note that Carolyn is finding academic issues entering her personal writing as well. She describes herself as someone who “journals every day,” and while her journaling usually focuses on personal and family issues, she has found that her academic coursework is changing the nature of her journals, helping her to reassess personal and family issues from a different standpoint. “The formal writing has gotten me to think more about different, more complicated things,” she says. She also incorporates her academic reading into both her personal and academic writing; “If I read something that interests me, then I think, how am I going to write that better.” If she doesn’t like the way something is written, Carolyn says, she will ask herself “how I could do a better job.” She describes herself as getting “more critical,” “more analytical,” “more discerning as a writer and a reader.” Some people, Carolyn observes, “don’t want to have options; they just keep repeating the same thing,” but Carolyn is finding the strength of her educational experience lies in her ability to start “seeing things from different angles.”

Throughout the semester she engaged deeply with the subject matter in our course, and though she sometimes complained (vociferously) about the experimental

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styles of Woolf and Faulkner, Carolyn admits she “came to appreciate” the different angles these authors offered her on the world. At one point she even offered her copy of *As I Lay Dying* to her cousin, telling her, “This is creepy, but you should know it’s considered an important literary work.” A lively discussion ensued after her cousin read Faulkner, and Carolyn has found she enjoys sharing some of her academic discoveries with family and friends not in college: “I’ve got a whole bunch of people looking at that book now,” says Carolyn. “It should be a movie.” As Carolyn’s academic identity has developed, she finds herself continually involved in a recursive loop of expanding literacy: “When you’re writing, you become a better reader too. If you become a better reader, that enhances your writing ability. So it goes around in a circle, and it’s a good loop to be in, you know. I think everybody should be required to take a writing intensive class, so they can find out for themselves how much better they can communicate.”

Carolyn is in many ways the prototypical 21st-century postmodern and postcolonial subject, simultaneously occupying numerous subject-positions—some of them potentially contradictory—yet moving with remarkable intellectual and emotional fluidity among all of them. *[I didn’t know I was that! You learn something new all the time.]* An activist devoted to perpetuating the Hawaiian language and culture, she is also a devout Christian and minister; as a woman returning to college and proactively insisting upon her right to speak and exercise agency in her life, she remains a devoted caretaker in her roles as wife, mother, and grandmother. Among the many subject-positions Carolyn occupies, it is her status as nontraditional student, particularly her age, to which she credits her ability to negotiate proactively and shape her own educational experiences:
"Because I'm older, I'm not afraid to speak up," she says, stating that she would not have felt comfortable doing so at 18.

Most specifically, Carolyn believes her approach to writing—choosing topics that develop from her personal experience and interests, and connecting to the course subject matter through those experiences—is directly correlated with her nontraditionality: "When I was first coming to college straight out of high school, I would have felt really apprehensive and really intimidated and really stressed out." But, Carolyn reports, "Now that I'm older and in this different situation, I see all these connections. I can sit down and ask the question to myself, where am I going, what do I want to say, who am I saying this to, what is it that I'd like to convey, you know."

Interestingly, though Carolyn cares about her audience—"who am I saying this to"—the question so often voiced by students of "what the professor wants" did not come up as one of the criteria Carolyn uses when she contemplates what to write in her academic papers. She is clearly self-directed. While teachers such as myself, as well as her philosophy and speech professors, do require her to demonstrate that she has learned certain course information in her academic writing, she clearly meets Knowles' definition of a "self-directed learner," "capable of taking responsibility for herself." She also, quite obviously, brings both additional volume and different quality of experience to her educational enterprise. Rather than being completely acted on by the curricula she encounters, she acts on the curricula as well, negotiating a stance for herself that takes full account of her rich life experiences, her "lived cultural experiences," and her complex matrix of identity. Carolyn's willingness to negotiate her own educational
experiences—albeit within the institutional confines that she must also negotiate—demonstrate that adult students often end up creating an educational situation for themselves that is more andragogical than pedagogical, even when classes and institutions are not consciously constructed with andragogy in mind.

[Aloha Kathy: Mahalo! It’s not often that a person is able to see themselves as someone else sees them. It was very interesting reading. Mahalo for allowing me to be a part of your research project. I hope all goes well for you. Me Kealoha Pumehana!]
CHAPTER SIX:

"FORESHADOWING TREMENDOUS TRANSFORMATION"

A Case Study of Amber

Though Amber, at twenty-five, was the youngest of my case study subjects, in some ways she has most experience of all my participants with being a “nontraditional student,” since she has arguably been a “nontraditional student” all her life. Amber’s educational background prior to college was a mixture that included public elementary school home schooling (both within her family and cooperatively with others), a brief stint at a public boarding school on Maui, a regular public high school on the Big Island, and an alternative charter high school. In intermediate school, Amber also had the unusual educational experience of being simultaneously placed in both a Gifted and Talented program in English and a remedial program in reading, a situation she describes as “confusing” and which she believes, still shapes her perceptions of herself as a student and writer today. Thus, for Amber, a significant part of what she must negotiate in college is her own insecurity. Amber stated to me that one of her challenges has been to learn to “trust my own intelligence” and “trust my voice,” rather than acquiescing to negative labeling. Key to success in this area, says Amber, is “caring about what I write, being personally involved in my topics.”

Like my other participants, Amber has negotiated a complex matrix of identity all her life, for she too has a multiple ethnic and cultural heritage. She is the daughter of a British woman and a Hawai‘i local man of Filipino descent. Her parents originally met in Hawai‘i, “through a religious group,” Amber reports, without specifying further. The
couple then traveled to the mother's home in England, where Amber was born. They returned to the Waianae Coast of Oahu when Amber was a baby. Her parents then separated and Amber went with her mother to the Big Island, where she and her sister were raised by their mother and uncle. Educationally, Amber was also mentored by her maternal grandfather in Canada, whom she describes as a “conservative man who, after a career as an engineer, became a school teacher.” Her grandfather kept in close touch with Amber’s immediate family and took a deep personal interest in overseeing her education.

Early in Amber’s elementary school years, she performed poorly in the educational setting because, as she described it, “I couldn’t understand the instructions. I think it was a language thing. My mother spoke British English and had an English accent, and the teacher spoke pidgin, and it seemed she spoke really fast . . . I wasn’t performing well, because it was like I didn’t understand. I couldn’t keep up.” Amber’s uncle noticed that she was under-performing and pulled her from public school. Amber’s uncle and mother then took it upon themselves to direct her in a home school program (in close touch with her maternal grandfather), and the family joined cooperatively with other home schooling community members: “It included other people’s parents; they would take turns teaching everyone’s kids,” Amber says. “It was very ‘Big Island.’”

In junior high, though, Amber and her family came to believe she would benefit from a more traditional educational setting. They enrolled her in Lahainaluna, a public boarding school located on Maui, but Amber did not enjoy that experience. She soon returned to the Big Island and briefly attended public intermediate school on the Kona Coast, where she experienced the dual academic labeling discussed previously. Amber
found this “confusing,” and she grew increasingly self-conscious about her performance as a student.

When I spoke with Amber about these issues, I was struck by the seeming incongruity, but I also could understand how it might have happened. In my class, Amber struggled with issues such as grammar and spelling in her writing; yet her ideas were unusually insightful, and she had an excellent ability to present her thoughts in a well-organized, coherent fashion, despite her surface editing problems. Amber was one of the few students who consistently received a high number of points for having a strong, valid thesis and good organization, though I also indicated that she “needs improvement” in usage and punctuation on all her draft essays. In her class discussions she was reflective and thoughtful, often making observations that no other students made and sometimes even pointing out things that I had not thought of previously. Amber’s editing problems helped me understand why the type of educator who focuses on surface error and correctness might place Amber in a “remedial” program; yet given her thoughtfulness, intelligence, and ability to conduct deep analysis, I could also understand why Amber was placed into a Gifted and Talented program.

Following her brief stint at the intermediate school where she experienced dual and contradictory academic labeling, Amber’s family moved her to a then-fledgling public charter high school with an alternative orientation, West Hawai’i Explorations Academy. “This,” says Amber, “was the best educational experience of my life.” The student body was small, and the course material emphasized hands-on learning experiences, with older students serving as mentors to younger students. Much of
Amber’s own work focused on marine science-based projects, “on location in the National Energy Lab,” as well as working on environmental studies and creating hands-on, environmentally sound, sustainable projects. Reading, writing, math and science assignments were all geared toward real-world projects on which the students worked collaboratively. “It was too small to have cliques,” Amber says, “so we didn’t have that whole high-school clique thing going on.” Thus, Amber’s somewhat “patchwork” K through 12 educational experience ended on a high note.

After Amber completed West Hawai‘i Explorations Academy, however, she lost educational direction for a time. She initially began studying at UH-Hilo the fall after graduating, but did not even finish the semester and has “almost forgotten” that she even went. “I was so out of it,” she said; “I signed up for astronomy, thinking, oh, astrology, you know. Nothing was what I expected.” Amber also reports that she came from an environment where “nobody went to college; nobody expected you to.” (On her questionnaires she indicates that she has a “blue-collar” background, and that her parents have high school educations.) With most of her friends taking jobs after high school, Amber decided to do the same thing, but she wanted to do something skilled that would pay more than a basic wage, so she trained as a massage therapist.

After working for a period of time, Amber decided she wanted to spend time getting to know her family in England, so she went to Europe and traveled for awhile. “That totally opened my mind,” she said; “it changed everything about who I was.” After a period of time in Europe, she returned to southern California, where she lived with a friend and continued to work as a massage therapist. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do
then," she says. But one Christmas when Amber returned to Hawai‘i to celebrate the holidays, she decided not to return to the Mainland. She has been in Hawai‘i ever since.

Amber found the rural atmosphere of the Big Island confining, however, and found herself “wanting to explore my potential,” so she soon moved to Oahu. An avid surfer, she took up residence on the North Shore and obtained a job as a massage therapist at the Turtle Bay Resort. Because she wanted “something more out of life,” Amber decided to begin attending school, choosing Leeward Community College due to its “location and affordability.” Also, said Amber, “I was scared to go back to school too, because it had been a few years, and I was like wondering if I would be able to assimilate into this learning environment again. I had heard good things about Leeward, that there was a diversity of students of different ages, so I felt like it might be a little more comfortable for me.”

When Amber enrolled in my class, she was in her final semester of her Associate of Arts degree in liberal studies, emphasizing visual communications. Amber told me she planned to transfer to UH-Manoa to complete her Bachelors degree in communications, and when I last spoke with her in the fall of 2004, she indicated that she was in her second semester at UH-Manoa. However, on arrival at UH-Manoa, Amber had been disappointed to find out that communications did not offer exactly the constellation of courses she wanted. She had thus decided to take advantage of UH’s Liberal Arts degree, which allows students to design their own majors. She was self-designing a major that included film theory, visual communications, and critical studies. Perhaps because of her lifelong nontraditional educational background, Amber says, she prefers “being creative”
to “having to play by the book.” She is nurturing a growing interest in critical studies, “and in developing projects where you can be creative and critical at the same time.” Her most frustrating experience as a nontraditional student so far occurred once she had to deal with a rigid bureaucracy at UH Manoa.

From the first day of our class, I found Amber to be an especially thoughtful and engaged participant in the class discussions. Our 9:30 class was somewhat quieter than the 8:00 class that Carolyn attended, with its many boisterous and outspoken nontraditional students. I often found myself working harder to get the students in the 9:30 class to talk, but Amber—on the quieter side, though I would not describe her as shy—was one person I could always count on to make a thoughtful contribution (along with study participants Christina and Helen). Amber always came to class well prepared and caught up on the readings, a good study habit reflected in her generally high quiz scores. She always sat in the front row and usually, in the few minutes before class began, she would ask me a question or make an observation about the day’s readings.

Amber was one of the few students who liked To the Lighthouse from the very beginning, “even before you explained it, and after that, I liked it even better,” she told me. “I’m a surfer, so I just really understood what Virginia Woolf was getting at with all the imagery of the ocean and everything.” She also enjoyed reading Shark Dialogues, particularly its vivid descriptions of locales on the Big Island which she knew very well herself. Finally, said Amber, “I felt like I really understood the cultural hybridity thing you talked about. Just knowing what it’s like to be of mixed ethnicity, where you kind of belong somewhere and don’t belong somewhere at the same time . . . And the symbolism
of the ocean.” Amber described both *Shark Dialogues* and *To the Lighthouse* as “deep.” She assumed a leadership role in her small discussion group and was usually one of the first to contribute to full class discussions, usually offering an interpretive perspective influenced by her personal experiences.

After I returned the first draft of Amber’s first essay, on *Shark Dialogues*, with my written response comments, Amber requested a conference. She was quite pleased with most of my comments (I told her she was one of the few who had a strong thesis and good organizational skills, and unlike many in the class, she quoted from the text to support her points). She was concerned, however, that her grammar “just does not seem to get better,” and she wanted to do a better job of “understanding what I am doing wrong.” I pointed out to her some strategies she could use to solve several errors with one simple solution; for example, changing some of her passive sentences to active voice would help with clarity. I also suggested Amber devote some time to studying common homophones, since she often had problems distinguishing between them.

In the course of our conversation, Amber told me that she “really enjoys writing—and anything creative,” but she feared that her poor command of mechanics may inhibit her from sharing her writing. In particular, Amber told me, she was very close to the grandfather in Canada who had so closely overlooked her education. When she talked with him frequently, he expressed an interest in seeing what she was writing. But Amber’s fear that her grammar was “bad” led her to resist his requests. I encouraged Amber not to worry so much about grammar, and suggested that her grandfather would likely be more interested in her ideas than her punctuation. I also told her that if she were
really worried about it, she could get editorial assistance before sending him copies of her papers. Amber seemed appreciative; sadly, when I spoke with her some months later, she reported that her grandfather had passed away in the spring. *I did send him some of my writings and am very happy that I did. It was a matter of weeks after he received them that he passed away.*

Despite her worries about grammar, however, Amber reported that she has long-term writing goals, stating she would perhaps would enjoy writing for children, or at least for herself. She knows her future major will require her to write; “I am more into the visual end of things, but you have to have a story,” she says. Grammar continues to be her hangup, but nonetheless, she says, “I trust I have something to say.” Amber’s her conviction that she has “something worth saying” became even stronger in the months following my class; when I consulted with her in the fall of 2004 to give her an opportunity to respond to my draft chapter, she told me she had just successfully written and produced her first short film, which had been entered into the Hawaii International Film Festival. Amber’s career goal, as of the last time I spoke with her, is to continue pursuing filmmaking and other artistic projects that “combine the creative with the critical.”

Amber’s primary source of writing anxiety stems from concerns about grammar and punctuation; her primary strategy for overcoming anxiety is to draw upon personal topics whenever possible, “because I just don’t worry about it so much when I really care about what I’m saying,” says Amber. When she brought me the writing samples I requested from other writing-intensive classes, she gave me some essays written for her
English 100 class with a laugh, saying, “I didn’t realize that for my entire first year here, I didn’t write about anything except surfing!”

As our interview progressed, both Amber and I began to understand more about why Amber had insisted on writing about surfing, repeatedly, for her English 100 class. Her description of her instructor and the structure of that course sounded to me very much like the “current-traditional,” error-focused rhetorical approach against which the process movement had originally sought to define itself. Amber described her English 100 class in response to my interview request to “describe your worst writing experience,” stating that her teacher was “very, very demanding and condemning, and not very supportive or encouraging.” For each paper submitted, the teacher would circle mistakes the students had made; the students then had to fill out “forms for each paper that outlined each mistake,” says Amber. “We had to write the definition of the mistake that was given, and then cite how we had made that mistake, and then rewrite how we could have rewritten that mistake. It was just out of control, where you could have like fifty mistakes.” The instructor even went to the lengths of devising a complex color-coding system for types of mistakes, with a strict protocol for how the color-coded “error forms” were to be submitted: “This color goes on top and this color goes underneath, and in order to get the grade, you needed to have those forms in that exact order,” said Amber. “Otherwise, you know, it would be returned and you’d get a late grade for not preparing it the right way.”

As someone whose training is steeped in process, post-process, and feminist composition theory, I was, of course, duly horrified by Amber’s description of an approach to teaching which most current composition scholarship assumes to have died in
the 1960s—and which is clearly “pedagogical” rather than “andragogical,” in the most negative senses of the term “pedagogy.” Under such circumstances, it was hard to imagine how any student, not just a nontraditional student, could attempt to negotiate a more andragogical learning opportunity for herself. In addition to the focus on error and the somewhat obsessive-compulsive color-coded errata sheet requirements, Amber’s English 100 teacher also insisted that essays be written in the standard rhetorical styles, such as definition, classification, cause-and-effect, and comparison-and-contrast (narrative, though included in the textbook, was not one of the instructor’s chosen styles, Amber related to me). Such a situation would not seem to create much opportunity for student agency.

But Amber had her own plan. The one thing Amber noticed in the syllabus that this teacher gave her students was, Amber says, “that the topics are up to me, as long as I prove through the writing that it’s legitimate to the writing, related to the assignment.” If all Amber could choose in this situation were her topics, then choose she would. While the teacher appeared to have obsessions of her own, Amber chose to write about her personal obsession—surfing. “I can’t really remember specific things that she would say to me,” said Amber, “but I could see her being frustrated, you know, wanting something else but getting the same topic again.” Amber, however, insisted on asserting the only option the teacher had given her: “You know, if you’re going to have all these rules and do all these things and not be encouraging, you know, then it says right here [on the syllabus] that I can write about whatever I want. It was the only leverage I had.” Amber recalled feeling “so frustrated; when you feel like that, you just have to write about
something that you want to write about, because otherwise you’ll just go crazy.” Amber
then stopped and laughed, “Well, maybe that’s too extreme.”

In a follow-up question, I asked Amber if she felt that writing about surfing had
been beneficial in any way, aside from providing her only means of getting back at the
teacher who was causing her so much frustration. “Yes,” she told me; “I think it was
important. I wanted to show people that just because you surf doesn’t mean you’re not
intelligent.” Though Amber does not have a background in postcolonial theory and does
not use its vocabulary, most of what she said could be reframed in such terms. Amber
pointed out in her interview the stereotypes that often attach to Hawai’i generally:
“People think we never study out here.” Further cultural stereotypes attach to surfers in
particular: “People assume if you surf, you’re not intelligent—you’re just this bum that
cruises around the world looking for waves.” She went on to point out, “Lots of the
surfers I know are doctors and lawyers or other kinds of educated people. And who can
afford to do nothing but surf and travel around? You’d have to be really rich to do that. I
mean, I meet people who are surprised that I surf and yet I’m in school at the same time,
you know, like you’re a surfer with goals? I thought surfers were all losers . . . You
know, it takes this certain kind of intelligence, and it’s not just a physical thing.”

In one of her English 100 surfing essays, Amber went out on a further limb by
choosing to frame her personal experience through the consciousness of a fictional third-
person narrator in her comparison-and-contrast essay. Her topic was a qualitative
comparison of the difference between summer and winter surf swells in Hawai’i
(implicitly arguing against the prevalent concept that Hawai’i is a “seasonless” place—a
concept only found outside Hawai‘i, since those of us who live here know full well that Hawai‘i has numerous, if subtle, seasonal differences).

Amber’s essay, “Hawaiian Swells,” is told through a third-person narrator, Leilani, who awakens to the welcome news of a north winter swell: “Summer had dragged on and she was glad it had passed. The south swells had left her eager for bigger surf.” Amber then leaves Leilani’s consciousness, temporarily, to admonish the reader: “Anyone aspiring to surf for a season in Hawai‘i should first consider the differences between summer and winter . . . Waves break during both seasons, yet the swell direction, size, and power greatly differ.”

Amber goes on to discuss the decisions that “Leilani” must make, faced with a north winter swell—which board to choose, which wax to use, which break to visit. “Leilani” also meditates briefly on why she has chosen to live on Oahu’s remote north shore, despite its geographical distance from her work and school: “The time-consuming, boiling drive to town was a small price to pay for epic surf directly outside her bedroom window.” She considers the power of the ocean: “She lived alongside the terror of the ocean and had seen it devour grown men in mere seconds. Surfing the north winter swells always required her full awareness.” Amber characterizes the fierce winter waves as “the northern beasts of winter,” and categorizes the waves into three different size groups: “the playmates, the bullies, the death machines.” The playmates “allowed her to try new maneuvers with a sense of security,” while the bullies “scared Leilani, yet pushed her limits incessantly.” The “death machines,” Amber writes, “are to be avoided.”

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Amber uses personification to describe the ocean: “To Leilani, the sea seemed to lie dormant during the summer as if hibernating. This initial swell wrenched the life back into the sea... In the past, Leilani had seen waves nearly part the sky, and swallow the beach, consuming boards, cars, people and houses... The death machines are a perfect example of power...” In this essay, “Leilani” surfs in the morning, returns home for lunch, then returns to the beach, to find the ocean “shaking the earth... Tourists and beach goers fled from the water, some mesmerized, some frightened, and still, everyone appreciated the power of the sea.” Leilani watches in a “hypnotized trance,” setting her board down as she decides, “Today, she would dedicate to observing and honoring the power and grace of the mighty winter swells.” As she sits on the shore reflecting on the waves, it occurs to Leilani, “Power is an unfamiliar term in the summer... The waves of summer posed no threat, and she feared her comfort would disable her abilities in time for the power of winter... Today’s swell foreshadowed a tremendous transformation.”

Amber closes her essay with a line popular in the surfing community: “Surfing is life; the rest is just detail.”

While Amber’s essay lacks the intensely personal components found, for example, in Carolyn’s essay on death rituals across cultures, I was intrigued by the way she used her personal experience, knowledge, and love of surfing to “speak back” to several levels of authority—her error-and-form-obsessed English 100 teacher, the textbook requirement of a “five-paragraph theme,” cultural stereotypes about the intelligence of surfers, and negative stereotypes in general regarding the intelligence of people who live in Hawai’i (with the implicit racism and class biases carried in such stereotypes). Amber
also considered herself a “creative and artistic” type, and stated that she used the approach of a fictional story with dialogue instead of the expected five-paragraph theme “as a way of getting around that teacher’s lack of creativity.”

As we discussed her English 100 essays, it seemed to me that Amber was still reacting to the years in which she was being “remediated” for poor mechanics while being simultaneously lauded for creativity and intellectual depth. To me, it seemed, Amber’s resistance to her teacher’s current-traditional rhetoric was deeply rooted in a lifetime of frustration at rigid and unimaginative structures. Amber’s expected “five-paragraph theme” was eight (lengthy) paragraphs long, with her “thesis” paragraph framed through a fictional scene in which “Leilani” contemplates the differences between summer and winter surf while preparing for a day’s surfing and making her board, wax, and break decisions.

As for how Amber’s more creative approach to a standard academic form was accepted by her ultra-traditional teacher, Amber reported: “I got a B for the class . . . I don’t remember her being very upset and I never got below a B on any paper. But my teacher would shut herself off to questions, and confine the students to asking questions amongst themselves in the assigned groups.” It sounds from Amber’s reports as though the teacher was not particularly punitive toward Amber for the approach she took to these writing assignments, but at the same time she closed herself off to the possibility of engaging Amber—or other students—in any dialogue. Despite the instructor’s attitude, Amber decided she would take it upon herself to create a learning experience she could find useful: “I wanted to use the assignments to learn more ways of writing, and to
explore things I was interested in, and to think about how things such as the ocean and surfing and whatnot can really be about more things than just that. When you’re talking about the power of the ocean or about nature, you’re not talking about something trivial, you know. Most surfers I know are philosophical kinds of people. They’re not these bums like everyone thinks, you know. The ocean teaches you things.” (Amber would further develop her thoughts about how “the ocean teaches you things” when writing essays in my class on Shark Dialogues and To the Lighthouse, both novels which rely heavily on the ocean for symbolism.)

Amber proactively negotiated her own relationship to her English 100 class, even going against her teacher’s expectations to some extent in order to write an assignment that she believed would be more useful to her own development as a writer than the standard five-paragraph theme. While she stayed sufficiently within the genre boundaries imposed by the teacher, within those boundaries chose to improvise, first choosing a topic that she suspected her teacher might find “trivial,” but trusting her own lived experience as a surfer, as well as her own knowledge that her topic was not trivial. Amber also displayed an awareness of all the cultural stereotypes she was writing against as she produced this piece—“the idea that surfers are not intelligent, or that people in Hawai’i are not smart.” Finally, Amber stretches the boundaries of form imposed by the teacher to write a comparison-and-contrast essay in her own style—an embodied style narrated through the voice and consciousness of a reflective female narrator, rather than the disembodied voice of “objective” authority which Amber’s teaching was expecting. Fortunately, Amber reports, “Since that class I have had many more positive interaction
with my professors that has been very beneficial to my learning experiences.” Amber refused to let her teacher’s attitude get the better of her, and used the class as an opportunity to learn and explore where she could, despite the structural difficulties.

When I inquired as to whether Amber believes her writing experiences have been affected by her nontraditionality, she responded, “Yeah, I think it has. Probably if I was a traditional student going into my first writing experience, it wouldn’t have been so challenging. I probably would have just been more accepting of the professor’s ways, you know.” Amber then paused reflectively before continuing, “But then, I wouldn’t have fought back. I don’t think I would have learned as much.” Being a nontraditional student, Amber says, has been “enriching because I can bring my own life experience into things. I also notice a difference in where you’re coming from, you know... you feel like all these past things really incrementally support your writing over time.” Amber strongly believes her older age and nontraditional status directly contributed to her ability to make the most of her English 100 class, and to structure the assignments so that she could learn what she wanted to learn even when the instructor did not seem to share Amber’s priorities.

Amber continued her extended exploration of surfing in other classes as well, such as her writing-intensive comparative religion class where she wrote an essay explaining the ritual and spiritual significance of surfing in ancient Hawaiian culture. Though surfing was a sacred activity for the ancients, Amber writes, “Today most of the world, surfers and non-surfers alike, has little or no idea of the ritual importance of surfing.” Yet some surfers, Amber says, still recognize that surfing is an “important
ritual, a daily activity, a prayer, that helps them to praise the surfing gods . . . giving thanks for the waves, and for life, in other words spiritualizing their ordinary activities . . . It is a form of praise in which the surfer recognizes the divine and gives thanks in performing the action.” In order to experience the spiritual significance of surfing, Amber writes, the ancient Native Hawaiians believed that prayer should be performed first: “During prayer one connects with the divine, for when one prays it becomes apparent what one really seeks . . . In ancient times, no sport was ever engaged in without approaching the gods with prayers and offerings first.” Amber discusses the importance of the heiau as a site for prayer and worship, then discusses how, for the ancient Hawaiians, even board selection was a sacred ritual undertaken with much care.

A more traditionally constructed essay than her third-person story on the ocean swells, Amber quotes from three different sources to support her assertions. Her introductory paragraph offers a clear and explicit thesis (“To the Hawaiians the art of surfing was an important ritual . . . today some surfers still believe surfing is an important ritual . . . that helps them to praise the gods”), and the body goes on to support, sequentially, each point she offers in the introductory paragraph, as she discusses both ancient Hawaiian and contemporary practices. Amber’s conclusion ties together all her observations: “The ritual aspect of surfing was, and still is, woven into the life of a surfer . . . The rituals which accompany surfing were, and still are, a very important part of life for those who surf.” Amber’s argument is that even today, many surfers emulate certain practices of the ancient Hawaiians even if they are not consciously aware of the long history of those rituals, or the spiritual significance that ancient Hawaiians attached to
them. Even the ritual of prayer is engaged in by many today, Amber notes: “Many surfers, Hawaiian and non, pray for surf and for protection in the surf.”

Amber takes fewer risks in this essay than she took with the comparison-and-contrast essay she wrote for her English class. Still, her continued negotiation of her academic identity through issues of personal interest is worth noting. Her religion teacher had asked for a standard essay, and Amber, once again, insisted on taking up an issue of personal interest to herself. In so doing, she appears to have educated her teacher, who wrote at the bottom of her essay, “Such an interesting paper. I never realized the religious or spiritual aspects of surfing before.” Because Amber chose to write in a traditional style and back up her findings with sources, she was able to meet the criteria set for the assignment by her religion teacher and obtain a good grade for her essay at the same time. Her decision to choose a topic of personal interest even when it took her slightly outside the established assignment boundaries presented by her teacher served to make that teacher aware of several deeper aspects of surfing—historical, religious, social, and cultural—creating a transaction which, in Giroux’s terms, connected the “discourses of lived cultures” with the “discourses of textual analysis” (Giroux 81). When presented with the framework in which she is expected to function, Amber appears to respond by working, for the most part, within that framework, but at the same time pushing—gently—its boundaries, creating enough space for herself to explore topics she is interested in, and at times educating her own educators in the process.

Like Carolyn and Christina, Amber believes herself to be “a little more willing to take the risks” than when she was 18; “When you’re 18 you just do what the teachers
say,” Amber said in our interview. Amber acknowledges that she sometimes deliberately pushes the boundaries of assignments “in order to learn what I think I need to learn”; she also believes she would have had a harder time doing this earlier in life. “But when you’re paying for it,” she said, “and you’re changing your life to make it happen, you want an educational experience that works for you.”

So far, Amber’s educational experience seems to be “working for her” very well. When I spoke with her in the summer of 2004, she told me at that time that she now considers some of her English 100 work “kind of superficial,” compared to how she saw her then-current work as “more philosophical.” When I asked Amber how she would describe herself as a writer a year after our initial interview, she told me, “I try to do more research, even if it’s just looking at other interpretations now. I feel more of a need to go outside myself, use sources.” Still, Amber insists, she still finds writing about herself useful; as she gains experience, she reports, her work is becoming “less superficial, maybe more philosophical or spiritual.” And, as previously mentioned, Amber has experienced her first success in writing for a public forum with the recent production of her short film. I was pleased to follow up with Amber and note that, rather than allow her voice to be silenced by the unimaginative, error-focused English 100 teacher who was her gateway to academic writing, instead she used the course as an opportunity to explore, to speak back, to negotiate for herself an effectively andragogical teaching situation that furthered her own writing goals—goals which Amber now seems well on her way to achieving. Like the waves she wrote about, her English 100 papers would appear to be “foreshadowing a tremendous transformation.”
[Kathy, being a participant in your research endeavors has been so interesting. Your interpretation of my writing and life experiences is articulated in ways that I have never thought of. Your insights will be useful in my academic life and otherwise, outside of academia. If anything else comes to mind, I will contact you. I hope the rest of the semester goes well for you, and that next spring is less hectic. Aloha!]
CHAPTER SEVEN:

“WHAT ARE YOU?”

A Case Study of Christina

Of the three case study participants, Christina had the most pressing demands on her time, with three young children to care for and a part-time job in addition to her duties as a pre-nursing student. When I met her, she was thirty-one and married, with children ages fourteen, eight, and two. Perhaps stemming from necessity, then, Christina had razor-sharp focus, strong goal orientation, and little tolerance for “messing around,” as she put it to me in our interview. What was most striking to me about Christina, both inside and outside the classroom, was her assertive and confident communication style. Like Carolyn and Amber, Christina shapes her own educational experience proactively, while making it clear to me that she would not have felt able to do this when she was 18.

Like all my participants, Christina has been negotiating a multifaceted identity all her life as a woman of mixed ethnic heritage. She was born in Colorado to a Thai mother and Caucasian father; like Carolyn, she hails from a military family and moved frequently in her earlier childhood. When she was twelve, however, Christina’s family settled in Hawai’i, where she has been ever since, and she graduated from Mililani High School in Central Oahu. Christina’s husband is Native Hawaiian and she took his last name, so “people often think I am Hawaiian,” she says, “because of my name and the way I look.” With tawny skin, dark brown eyes, and deep golden hair, Christina’s ethnic background is difficult to identify on sight.

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Christina initially attended Leeward Community College immediately after high school at age eighteen, but she says she was “fuzzy, not at all focused.” Christina mostly attended at that time because a high school friend wanted company at college. With no clear educational goals of her own, she soon dropped out, then attended beauty school and became a cosmetologist. Eventually, though, problems with her carpal tunnel nerve led Christina to quit her cosmetology job and take a position with Aloha Airlines in customer service, “but I couldn’t see doing that forever,” she said, “so I came back to school at Leeward, and I just decided my major to be in nursing.”

Christina initially attempted to juggle her parenting and school responsibilities with her airline job, but that did not work out, so she quit Aloha to work for her brother’s air conditioning company; “because it’s a family company, I’m able to flex my hours around my classes.” While Christina originally intended to transfer into the nursing program at UH-Manoa and do a minor in elementary education as well, she then got pregnant with her youngest child and decided “that would take too long.” After taking a year off of school to be with her baby, Christina returned to Leeward, and at the time we met, she was in her last semester of the Associate of Arts degree.

With a third child now in the picture, Christina’s rearranged plans changed. When I met her, she hoped to attend Hawai’i Pacific University, which has an R.N. Bachelor’s program compressed into 23 months. When I spoke with Christina in the summer of 2004, she had already started that program. Christina describes her educational process as “off and on, all along . . . I came here for a little bit, I had my other daughter, I stopped, came back, had another baby . . .” Given that Christina’s education
was staggered with pregnancies, she looked forward to HPU's "intense, focused"
program, stating, "I don't need to drag this out anymore, you know; 23 more months and
then I'm done!" She chose to do her first two years at Leeward because "it's close, it's
convenient, and the price is right." Financial factors seemed to loom in Christina's mind,
as she often mentioned in the course of both formal interviews and casual conversations
that "students take education so much more seriously when they are paying their own
way."

Christina is a strong student and knows it, her confidence bolstered by a high
G.P.A., participation in the Honors program, and positive feedback from her instructors.
"I just tend to fall into place at school," says Christina. This is the case despite several
difficulties. In addition to the stop-and-go schooling necessitated by her pregnancies,
Christina suffered serious health problems during one semester and was forced to drop
several classes. "The ones I wasn't able to drop, I got N's or F's or D's, so that really
brought down my GPA," she complains. "Without that, I would have stayed close to
4.0."

Like so many of the nontraditional students I met during this semester, Christina
preferred to sit at the front of the class, where she was an eager and assertive participant
in class discussions, often the first to answer a question, always taking a leadership role in
her small group discussions, and usually being the one to present small group findings to
the class as a whole in our full-class discussions. An Honors student well known across
campus, having received numerous accolades and participated in a number of leadership
activities, Christina is the kind of student every teacher enjoys having in class: genuinely
engaged with the material, eager to talk, and frustrated when peers don't share her enthusiasm. She is also a strong writer with insightful ideas and a good ability to make connections between her real-life issues and the issues raised by the texts. Christina faced a number of external challenges in our semester together, though, as she had throughout her academic career, primarily related to health—both hers and that of her children. Therefore, as I teacher I was required to be flexible with Christina and to adapt the course demands to accommodate the many life stressors she was facing.

One of the ways Christina has chosen to cope with the life stressors that have challenged her educational process is to integrate those struggles into her academic work. As discussed in chapter 4, Christina explored her serious illness and the fears it generated regarding her young children in the stream of consciousness piece she wrote for my class. (Fortunately, her own situation had ended well.) At the time of my class she was healthy herself, but she missed nearly three weeks due to her children's illnesses. She always handled her situation responsibly, however, emailing me to inform me in advance about what was happening, and requesting that I forward her the missing assignments and let her know what she needed to read. She then submitted some assignments back to me via email so they would not be late. Thus, while I missed Christina's presence and the insightful comments she made in class, as well as the leadership role she consistently assumed, she stayed on top of her class responsibilities even when faced with conflicting duties.

Though Christina reports that "I do not like grammar," she also told me, "I love to write. . . . Sometimes when you say one or two pages, I'm like at four." When Christina
is faced with a choice of topics, she reports, she often tries to pick something “not of the norm, instead of just picking the easiest one.” Christina enjoys a challenge, “trying to come at things from different angles . . . That kind of makes the writing harder, but it’s like my own choice to do that.” She used the metaphor of “investment” frequently, saying that nontraditional students who come back to the academy voluntarily are more likely to be “invested” in their learning. (In fact, she used the term both literally and metaphorically, harking back several times to the point that nontraditional student motivation in part stems from the “financial sacrifice” that many nontraditional students must make.) Christina demonstrated through both our conversations and our behavior that “investment” in her learning is a priority for her; she states that part of her decision to choose trickier topics is that “harder topics often make me feel like I have something more important to say.”

However, while Christina recognizes that her fluency increases with her interest level, she was one of the two students who did not directly attribute writing anxiety, blocks, or difficulties to lack of interest in a topic. Christina, instead, reiterated repeatedly that the two teacher practices that impinge on her writing ability are very high-stakes writing assignments, and teachers who are unclear about their expectations.

During the course of our interview and in casual conversations outside class, Christina repeatedly expressed frustration with one of her professors who had weighted an end-of-semester written project so heavily that it accounted for almost her entire grade—a technique expected in a graduate seminar, less typical for a sophomore-level writing intensive class. Christina’s frustration with this approach was clear, and she established a
strong preference for “writing to learn” techniques, “where you spread the assignments out over the semester,” and “where some of the grades don’t matter so much, and you’re encouraged to use writing to help you think.” Christina believes there should be more writing-intensive offered in classes other than humanities, however, “so that you have to have some writing intensive on your major, so you can learn how to do research a little bit more.”

While Christina enjoys classes that allow her to do a lot of writing, stating “how else do you get better at it,” she also objects to the designation of “writing-intensive,” stating that the adjective “intensive” suggests something difficult, painful and intimidating, “like, oh, it’s so intense, you know,” she said dramatically with a hand gesture, “and it’s really not.” She also complains of inconsistency from one class to another as far as what “writing intensive” means: “Some teachers don’t actually tell you what it means or how many papers you’re actually required to do,” she says. “When you have the concept, you should just explain it.” One of her teachers interpreted “Writing Intensive” to mean one heavily weighted, lengthy, high-stakes assignment; another simply required students to submit “lots of outlines.” “Every teacher is going to grade you differently,” Christina observes. “You don’t know what they’re expecting or what they focus on.”

Another source of frustration for Christina is uncommunicative professors. She told me she appreciated my method of offering extensive feedback, having students engage in peer review, offering students revision opportunities, and encouraging student conferences. In the other writing-intensive class she was taking that fall, as we shall soon
see, she submitted a draft to the professor, hoping for feedback. She did not hear from him initially. Christina, however, is very assertive about her needs. Like Carolyn, who reported that she is “more assertive” now than she was at eighteen, Christina says, “I used to be so intimidated, but now I just ask for what I need, you know.” When her professor did not respond to her initial request for feedback, Christina took the initiative of contacting him and saying, “I need your feedback. I want a chance to revise it if you don’t care for it.” After Christina essentially chased this professor down, he offered her the response: “Interesting; please continue.” While she would have preferred a more detailed response along the lines she was used to getting from me, this at least gave Christina the confidence that she was not going down a completely wrong track and allowed her to finish the paper she had started. “I just kind of push things through,” says Christina. “I think the younger ones are still very intimidated by the teachers, but I’ll just ask him, and he appreciates the fact that we’re concerned . . . He says that’s good, that means you care about what you’re doing.”

While Christina is highly focused, she is not purely “mercenary” or utilitarian in her perception of higher education or her own goals. In fact, one thing Christina has discovered through her writing-intensive humanities courses is that she loves reading and writing. She reported to me in our interview that she was “flipping out because I really enjoyed this semester and I have not had one single science class, but yet I’m a science major, and it’s like, oh my goodness!” Christina has discovered she is “really interested in writing,” and she “likes novels.” Perhaps someday, Christina reports, she would like to write in her “free time” (though one wonders, including Christina herself, when she will
ever have any). Still, Christina reports, she would like to get “published or something, it doesn’t have to be a novel, but just here and there. I’ve started being really interested in that lately.” She also reports that her humanities classes have sparked a long-dormant interest in reading and ideas: “I’ve enjoyed this class because I was actually able to read, and forced myself to read. . . I also enjoyed a class where I got to do something cultural that I’ve never done before, and write a report on that. I thought that was fun.”

The kind of writing Christina enjoys the most, she says, is when “you have the opportunity to do whatever you write, in writing styles that don’t have to be so academic.” Christina prefers to “choose her writing style, choose the topic,” and she enjoys writing when it “isn’t so strict” and when she has the freedom to write in the first person. “It’s good when the teachers give the students a little bit more leeway,” she reports.

When her teachers do not explicitly offer her that leeway, Christina is more than happy to ask for it. When Christina wrote her stream of consciousness response for my class, she discovered something new: that she enjoyed writing dialogue. This realization led her to try something she had never done before, sparking a potential solution to the problem that had plagued her all semester—the high-stakes end-of-semester essay for her intercultural communications class. Though the essay constituted a significant portion of the course grade, it was also open-ended: to explore in writing some aspect of intercultural communication. “So I decided,” Christina told me, “after doing that stream of consciousness thing in our class, that I would try to get over my anxiety about that assignment by trying something new and writing it novel style. I never really worked at
writing dialogue, and I think—especially for me not to have written in that format before, I’m not knowing what he’s going to expect of it.” Christina’s professor had not asked for either dialogue or personal experience, but she noted, “He hadn’t told us we couldn’t do something like that either.” So Christina exercised her agency to negotiated such a writing opportunity for herself, effectively creating the kind of andragogical situation envisioned by Knowles.

Rather than discuss her ideas with her professor in advance, Christina opted simply to begin writing her story, “because I wanted to write it anyway,” she explains. Her essay, “Crouching Carter, Teaching Jilli,” is told largely through dialogue, and concerns an evolving relationship between a young working-class woman of mixed Thai-Caucasian ethnicity and a young upper-middle-class Caucasian man. Though her professor’s instructions were totally open-ended—“explore some aspect of intercultural communication in writing”—Christina was nervous about her unconventional approach, “not knowing what he really expected, not knowing what he would think of it.” As previously mentioned, Christina’s strategy was to write a few pages, then submit those to her professor to see if he would agree to her unconventional approach before continuing. When he did not respond immediately, Christina kept at him until he did, giving her the green light to continue. “I would have written it anyway,” says Christina, “but I figured if I could get him to accept it for the class, that would be even better.”

The resulting essay, an examination of a multicultural relationship-in-process that encounters difficulties as both parties attempt to negotiate both cultural and socioeconomic barriers, is interesting on several levels. Christina divides her story into
twelve subheadings with Roman numerals (following Woolf). Section I opens with Carter voicing a question all too familiar to those who find themselves labeled as “Other”: “‘What are you?’ Carter asked.”

The female character, Jillian—the target of the tactless question—responds with indignation appropriate to its insensitivity: “‘What do you mean, what am I? . . . What kind of question is that, what am I?’” Christina then uses the Woolfian technique of moving between characters’ viewpoints and consciousnesses to illustrate how a speaker’s intended meaning and a recipient’s interpreted meaning do not always converge: “‘I do apologize,’ Carter stated as he tried desperately to redeem himself; ‘I merely meant to ask what nationality you were . . . I was just curious.’ ‘Oh, I see,’” sneered Jillian, ‘let me take no offense to a stupid question, just because YOU were curious!’”

In section II, Christina flashes back to explain Jillian’s ethnic origins: “Jillian’s father, an officer in the Army, was from West Virginia, and her mother, a nurse, was from Thailand. They met . . . while her father was stationed in Hawai’i with the military. They married only two months after their initial meeting. . . . Jillian has always felt a little out of place, no matter where they were stationed. . . . It was very hard for people to place what nationality she was.’” As I read Christina’s story, it became apparent that, given the life story she had disclosed to me in our interview, the story she had written for her intercultural communications assignment—though framed as fiction—was largely autobiographical. When I inquired of her later as to how much of her story was based upon her personal experience, she laughed and admitted, “I guess you could say all of it, except the names!”
Clearly, the instances of "intercultural communication" that Christina was most interested in exploring were her own—the relationship between her Caucasian and Thai parents, her experience with frequently moving around as a child and adolescent, and her subsequent attempts to negotiate successful relationships, given that her mixed ethnicity and physical appearance made her visibly Other in most communities. But Christina did not limit herself to her own perspective in this assignment. In part III, she followed Woolf's technique of moving between consciousness to explore what Carter's perspective might be: "Carter was the only child, which put a heavy burden on him to succeed . . . The family was under a microscope." Thus, Christina used this assignment as an attempt to understand the complex dynamic of intercultural communication. "Now I can make up for our first meeting and explain what I really meant," Carter muses when he encounters Jillian for a second time, while Jillian thinks, "Just keep walking."

In ensuing scenes, a romantic relationship develops between Jillian and Carter, despite both ethnic and class differences that cause them challenges when they meet one another's families. When Carter's mother icily asks, "Where are you from, dear?", Jillian feigns an innocent response: "Well, I was born in Colorado, but my father is in the military, so we moved around a lot." Christina then inserts the observation, "Jillian knew full well by the tone of voice that that was not what Mrs. Walker meant by the question," but the character Christina created, Jillian, refuses to acquiesce to the condescension.

In the next scene, Christina portrays the Caucasian upper-class male in a new cultural context that frames him as the Other. Jillian invites Carter to visit her parents, in an encounter that lasts much longer, and in which Carter learns much more about Jillian,
her family and culture than Jillian was able to learn about his. Carter’s visit begins with a quick cultural lesson: “We take off our shoes before we enter the house.” Carter does so, even though “he thought it very odd,” and on entering, Carter notes the house is filled with “many smells he was not used to.” He sees a shrine to Buddha with “items placed around it, incense lit,” observes “ornate dolls and figurines,” whose significance Jillian must explain to him: “Those are the three Chinese men. One symbolizes family, one is for long life, one for prosperity.” Carter sees an elderly couple sitting in the living room “on the floor, at a very short table, eating some very peculiar things (to Carter) with their hands.” “These are my grandparents, Jillian explains.” I took note of Christina’s choice to emphasize, parenthetically, that the food eaten by Jillian’s grandparents was only peculiar “to Carter,” emphasizing his subject-position as outsider and Other within the context of Jillian’s family, and inverting the positions each of the characters hold in dominant culture.

Some aspects of Christina’s narrative are somewhat stereotypical. Carter’s Caucasian family is depicted as upper-class and affluent, but its members are alienated from one another; this is juxtaposed against Jillian’s large, somewhat boisterous, potentially intrusive, yet close family. Such presentations appeared, to me, as potentially hackneyed. Yet Christina writes with enough subtlety and attention to detail to demonstrate that despite her occasional forays into stereotypical territory, she does understand many of the finer points of intercultural communication. Her use of the Woolfian technique to explore what Carter might be thinking shows him growing increasingly openminded, culminating in his decision to follow the Thai custom of
“crouching” before the elders, Jillian’s grandparents, even as he thinks inwardly, “How weird!” As the story reaches its conclusion, we learn that Carter has “reevaluated many of his own beliefs,” and is trying to learn “Thai customs and traditions,” with Carter even giving Jillian’s grandfather English lessons in exchange for Thai lessons. In the final scene, Carter and Jillian attend the senior prom together, “dressed in full Thai apparel . . . As all eyes turned, they walked in proudly.” Thus we Carter transform from the privileged Caucasian male who opens the story by asking Jillian the dehumanizing question, “What are you?” into a young man proudly wearing the costume of his girlfriend’s culture, in the midst of the most conformist teenage ritual imaginable.

What was most interesting to me about Christina’s “fictional,” third-person, stream-of-consciousness exploration of the dynamics of an intercultural relationship was the many ways in which the “Jillian” character triumphs, refusing to accept Carter’s characterization of her as a “what” and insisting that he respect the customs of her family and culture. Her story ends with an image of equal partnership as well as a gesture of defiance toward dominant culture, inverting both patriarchy and cultural hegemony. The character who began as another’s “what” is now a “who,” and Carter’s acquiescence to “crouching” before the elders becomes symbolic of his willingness to question his own assumed centrality; Jillian triumphs as Carter “crouches.” Nor is intercultural communication conceived of simplistically, as a two-way exchange of equals; instead, Christina displays an awareness of the power differentials often inherent in cultural exchanges.
Christina's story came into being through her insistence on a process of negotiation in which both parties—teacher and student—participated. In order for Christina to feel comfortable using this less-than-traditional approach to the term paper causing her so much anxiety, she needed reassurance from her professor that such an approach would be acceptable. As a skilled student with high self-expectations, Christina wanted to get good grades, both for her own satisfaction and because it would assist her in achieving her educational goal, gaining admittance to a competitive nursing program. Without assurance from her professor that such an approach was acceptable, Christina would likely not have bothered to continue with the project she started, at least not in the academic context. Christina conducted multiple negotiations: between her professor's assignments and her own preferences, between her personal experiences and the ideas she encountered in her classrooms, and even between the different courses she took, as when she learned about Woolfian stream of consciousness in my literature class and then attempted to write in that style for her communications class.

The result of Christina's multiple negotiations is an essay which challenges patriarchy, cultural hegemony, cultural ignorance, and even "business as usual" in the American high school, celebrating her own multiple cultural heritages as she brings male and female into partnership. In so doing, Christina continues to negotiate an academic identity for herself as someone who can move fluidly between disciplines and discursive fields, creating her own opportunities for exploration through alternative discourses. Though she proceeds with the caution of any grade-conscious student, she also exercises significant agency. Christina indicates that "assertiveness" is her strategy for dealing with
writing-related anxiety, and this particular high-stakes, heavily weighted assignment created a significant degree of writer's block. The method she chose to break through that anxiety was to draw upon an alternative discursive approach, and by being assertive enough to ensure that that approach would not work against her academically, rather than either forging straight ahead with her project or—as she tells me she believes she would have done at age eighteen—shying away from doing anything different altogether, “for fear of ruining your grade.” Christina strongly believes her ability to handle her college writing assignments proactively is directly related to her nontraditional status. In our interview, she told me she was “overly compliant” at eighteen. Also, she says, “I probably wouldn’t have understood Woolf back then, let alone attempted to write that way.”

Christina’s tactics demonstrate how the various aspects of identity interact in the formation of subjectivities. She is a woman of a mixed ethnic heritage; she is married and the mother of three; her husband is Hawaiian, making her children even more multiethnic than she is; she is from a military family; she has lived in a variety of places, though she has now been in Hawai’i for sixteen years; she has worked a variety of jobs. She is, also, visibly older than the average student, even at a campus with many highly nontraditional students such as Leeward Community College. All these factors play into who Christina is and how she sees the world. But it is her nontraditional status to which she credits her willingness to explore these various facets of her multiple subjectivities in her college writing classes. “I couldn’t have done this at eighteen,” Christina told me.
when she gave me the "Crouching Carter" writing sample. "I just wouldn't have had the courage."

**Summary: Case Studies**

Despite the previously discussed differences among my case study participants, all participants also shared significant commonalities. Besides being nontraditional students, all were from ethnically mixed families, with multiple ethnic and cultural identities. All were female; all came from working-class backgrounds, and two of the three were from military families. Thus, in addition to their nontraditional status and their roles as women in a patriarchal society, each of these women had to negotiate further complex multi-ethnic and cultural positions as well. I also noted that none of the women plans to major in English or become career writers; unlike students who choose to major in English, all these women viewed writing as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself (though all reported that they enjoy writing and have a predominantly positive relationship to it).

Despite the commonalities, there were also significant differences; each of these women also faced a set of circumstances unique to herself, and each had to negotiate a particular set of specific issues as she attempted to make her way into the academy.

It is apparent, however, that each of these women does whatever she can to negotiate her own particular set of circumstances—socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, familial—with her specific educational goals. For each of these women, writing across the curriculum assignments became an important site for the ongoing negotiation of their complex, multiple identities-in-process, including their emerging academic identities. Each of these women strongly believes and articulates that, to a significant extent, she
credits her nontraditional status for her ability to take charge of her own educational and academic writing experiences. Each of these women is, as Knowles predicts, self-directing, and each has entered the academy with significant life experience, both qualitatively and quantitatively speaking. Moreover, each of these women clearly wishes to use her lived cultures and experiences to connect with the information she encounters in her college courses, particularly in writing assignments.

As I pointed out in Chapter One, the majority of students across the country now can be categorized as “nontraditional” according to the NCES definition, at least to some degree. Leeward is a campus with an especially high percentage of moderately and highly nontraditional students. Even so, many aspects of nontraditionality are somewhat invisible in the classroom, particularly for minimally nontraditional students, for younger nontraditional students, and for those who are deemed nontraditional primarily due to life circumstances rather than to age. Those students who are significantly older than the average age in any given classroom, however, may appear as visibly “Other.”

To some extent, then, each of these women was to some degree positioned as an Other in my classrooms—Carolyn very much so, Christina somewhat so, and Amber somewhat less so (her nontraditional age was less visibly apparent, though often the content of her contributions to class discussions revealed her nontraditionality). Thus, while nontraditional status may enable a complex process of academic identity negotiation, I must point out that nontraditional status also necessitates such a negotiation. In my conclusion I will further discuss the implications of this observation for composition teachers.
CHAPTER EIGHT:
THE END OF PEDAGOGY

In Conversation: Adult Education and Composition Studies

I conclude by circling back to the original, broad question with which I initiated my inquiry: *How should the increasing presence of nontraditional students on college campuses shape both our professional discourse and our teaching practices in the field of composition studies?* Carolyn, Amber, and Christina demonstrate some of the various ways in which nontraditional students drew upon their personal experiences in college writing assignments in order to negotiate for themselves a “way in” to the academy. Participants exercised the agency necessary to establish for themselves learning situations that were more “andragogical” and less “pedagogical” in terms of power dynamics. They were able to make use of their self-direction as adult learners and draw upon both their enhanced quantity and quality of life experience, connecting the “discourses of lived cultures” with the “discourses of textual analysis” they encountered in the academy. All six of the participants reported that choosing topics of personal interest and drawing upon personal experience were important strategies for overcoming some of the challenges posed by college writing.

Nontraditional students such as those in this study may be, by virtue of their life experiences and self-direction, well positioned to negotiate such a learning situation for themselves. Yet this does not absolve the academy from its responsibility to adapt to their needs also. While each of my participants was clearly an active agent, capable of negotiating an unfolding academic identity through her writing, each participant also
struggled at various moments with writing-related anxiety, and each demonstrated that finding some way to connect to academic course material through personal experience was one of the primary techniques she used for breaking through that anxiety. A key issue for composition and WAC instructors of nontraditional students, then, is also a compelling issue in composition studies: how best to enable students to make use of the personal in academic contexts.

Closely related to the question of the “personal” is the equally vital topic of alternative or hybrid discourses in the academy (see Schroeder, Fox and Bizzell et al., 2002, and the September 2004 issue of College English). While my own study is more concerned with the use of personal experience in academic writing than with the various linguistic registers or stylistic alternatives sometimes associated with “alternative” or “hybrid” discourses, Bizzell points out that in academic contexts, the use of the personal is one such “alternative discourse”: “They [alternative discourses] have combined elements of traditional academic discourse with elements of other ways of using language, admitting personal experience as evidence, for example” (Bizzell 2002, 2).

Writing which weaves together the “personal”–Freire’s “subjective”–and the ostensibly “objective” associated with more traditional forms of academic discourse, constitutes an “alternative” in the circumscribed world of academia. Bizzell and many others, including those who participated in the symposium, “Storying Our Lives Against the Grain,” in the September 2001 issue of College English, point to the virtual explosion of academic writing that makes use of the personal in recent years, as well as a variety of new genres
associated with this type of writing—critical autobiography, autoethnography, self-reflexive qualitative research, and so forth.

But for all the ink spilled on the question of how best to use the personal in academic contexts (if at all), Candace Spigelman points out in “Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal” that: “In general, opportunities for such writing tend to be confined to those who have already paid their professional dues” (Spigelman 68). Quoting Wendy Bishop, Spigelman reports that in 1987, Bishop “recognized that such avenues were not open to graduate students writing dissertations” (Spigelman 68), and even as late as 1998, Joy Ritchie reported that one of her students “observed . . . that only those academics who had achieved ‘a certain status of establishment, respectability, and safety’ could experiment with alternative forms of written discourse” (Spigelman 68). According to Spigelman: “Indeed, the question of the personal in composition remains stunningly political. Often scholars who prize the telling of personal stories for their colleagues emphatically oppose writing instruction that would allow the same for students” (Spigelman 69).

As if to provide evidence of Spigelman’s assertion, the issue of College English in which this article appears is subtitled “Special Focus: Personal Writing,” but with the exception of some of Spigelman’s arguments as quoted above, the issue itself is devoted primarily to issues about academic scholars drawing upon the personal in their own published academic writing. The headline article, “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives against the Grain,” is a symposium featuring some of the most noted scholars in composition—Victor Villanueva, Anne Ruggles Gere, Anne Herrington, Ellen
Cushman, Deborah Brandt, Richard E. Miller, Gesa Kirsch, and Min-Zhan Lu. These scholars discuss their own use of the personal in their academic writing—not their students’. In the same issue, Hindman echoes Kamler’s call for an “embodied rhetoric” that “holds in productive tension” the relationships of writers to the various discourse communities associated with the multiple subject positions we each must occupy. Her focus, however, is once again on her own writing, though she does call for an approach that explores the use of “embodied rhetoric” and “productive tension” in classroom contexts as well.

When it comes to students—rather than academics—producing personal narratives in academic contexts, says Spigelman, some of the tensions surrounding so-called “expressivism” are still very much alive:

To many composition theorists, expressive rhetoric’s insistence on students’ private voices, visions, and ultimate authority over their texts creates an inaccurate and ingenuous conception of the composing process. It seems to suggest that language is a transparent vehicle for exposing the thought processes of a unified and consistent mind at work, a mind that, if adequately investigated, will reveal the truths about itself and about life. Such an approach, they say, overemphasizes the power of personal insight and ignores the ways that knowledge is constructed socially. . . . Still others argue that an expressive approach to writing valorizes an social, noncollective individual . . . and that it divisively pits the individual against the group . . . The dream of a free space, Bartholomae contends, blinds both students and teachers to the way that authority and power are reproduced in language and culture. (Spigelman 70)

Spigelman’s summary reveals the extent to which students’ personal narratives are suspect in many quarters of the academy. However, I and many others would argue that the assumptions Spigelman refers to—private voices, transparent language, unified selves, ignorance of the social, blindness to power formations—collectively constitute a “straw person” logical fallacy, for I would assert, so-called “expressivism” has never meant what
its opponents have claimed it to mean. (See, for example, my 1997 unpublished Master’s thesis, *Embracing Student Voices: A Journey into Peter Elbow’s Composition Classroom*; Belanoff 2003; Surman; Gradin; Tobin 1994; Elbow 1994). Regardless of whether one agrees that “expressivism” in composition truly is (or ever was) as social-epistemic theorists have claimed it to be, however, Spigelman points out how the critical scholar may consider the personal from a different vantage point: “Personal writing that serves academic purposes need not be, indeed should not be, self-disclosive; neither should its ends be emotive and self-serving . . . Experience-based writing is a method of helping students to enter the academic conversation, by bringing their own ‘extratextual knowledge’ and the authority of their own voices to the texts they read” (Spigelman 71 - Emphasis added).

For nontraditional students especially, Spigelman’s position is useful, as older students often use experiential writing to create for themselves a point of entry into a complex process of negotiation between lived cultures and academic knowledge (as demonstrated in my case studies). If we can posit the personal narrative as a “way to enter the academic conversation” for students in general, how much more so for those nontraditional students who bring with them a greater number and more diverse range of life experiences—and who, I might point out, often experience anxiety, at least initially, about being in the academy at a time other than that prescribed by prevailing social norms. To reiterate Patricia Shelley Fox: “By challenging our inherited cultural narratives—of schooling, of domesticity, of womanhood, of individual freedom—they [nontraditional students] work within and among the competing discourses in their lives
to offer us an oppositional world view” (Fox 202). My participants appreciated approaches to teaching which allowed them specifically to use their writing as a means of working “within and among” those “competing discourses.”

Fox also points out: “So much of how we have conceived of the work of first-year English . . . has been predicated upon the assumption that we have in mind an audience of traditional eighteen-year-old students, fresh out of high school. We imagine them to be callow, untested, anticipating a life as yet unlived” (Fox 202). Returning adult students bring with them a different relationship to inherited cultural narratives than do traditional-age students. When we conceptualize our students in a non-infantilizing manner, it becomes more difficult to delimit their life experiences and their personal writing as “sentimental realism,” or to limit our concept of the personal narrative to something that is purely “private,” “personal,” “asocial,” or “blind . . . to the ways that authority and power are reproduced in language and culture” (Spigelman 70). Indeed, we participate in reproducing authority and power relations as usual ourselves if we negate our students’ lived cultures and experiences in our teaching practices.

Harking back to Bartholomae’s concerns about “expressivism” in his debate with Elbow, I would agree with Karen Paley Surman that “When we invite our students to write about their life experiences, without disqualifying this writing as somehow an unwitting reinscription of a ‘master narrative’ of the family . . . we are explicitly letting them know that the experiences that have shaped them as people and as students matter to us as much as what we have to teach them matters” (Surman 198). For the critical educator, it is problematic to dismiss preemptively all students’ personal narratives as
“sentimental realism” before they have even been written. This is even more problematic when we recognize that many of our students are adults with significant life experiences—our peers. The critical educator cannot in good conscience dismiss the stories and experiences her students bring to the classroom while at the same time claiming to care about identities, difference, the social construction of knowledge, and social justice. If there is a space for the personal in the writing of published academics, then there must likewise be a space for the personal in the writing of our students also, as Spigelman asserts.

Hindman’s concepts of “holding productive tensions” and “embodied rhetoric” provide another useful framework for the teacher of nontraditional students. Each one of my case studies—as well as the rest of the participants—can be seen as holding her own form of “productive tension” between the ideas she encounters in the academy and the issues she must grapple with in other areas of her life. Each participant can be seen engaging in what Hindman calls “embodied rhetoric” in her WAC assignments—Amber’s assertion of surfer’s intelligence as well as the cultural significance of surfing; Christina’s exploration of her own dual ethnicity, as well as relationships across further ethnic and class boundaries; and Carolyn’s negotiation of her personal losses between her sometimes-conflicting belief systems as a Christian and as a Native Hawaiian.

As composition instructors and scholars, we have made some inroads when it comes to questioning what kinds of students we are constructing with regard to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class, when we plan our courses, articulate our teaching practices, and produce our scholarship. More work remains to be
done in all of these areas, of course. I would add that as we continue to consider issues of
difference and identity as raised by composition scholars, we should consider student age
and nontraditionality as well. As Quinnan points out, nontraditional and older students
are always already marginalized on college campuses, and represent a threat to the
established socioeconomic order of things under capitalism. Others, such as Fox and
Carrie Wastal, have pointed out the strong correlations between nontraditionality and
other aspects of Otherness such as gender, race, class, and first-generation college
attendance. As with all aspects of identity, then, nontraditionality cannot be considered
in isolation, without considering how it may interact with other aspects of a student’s
complex identity and multiple subjectivities. At the same time, we fall short if we discuss
such issues as gender, race or class without paying attention to how these factors may
interact with student age or nontraditionality. When we consider how best to use the
personal in academic writing, it is important to consider the present reality that many of
our students bring with them “greater volume and a different quality of experience from
youth” (Knowles 1984, 10).

Approaches to the personal such as those envisioned by Hindman and Spigelman
allow nontraditional students such as those who participated in my study to negotiate their
way into the academy, while demonstrating that making use of the personal need not
necessarily reinscribe “sentimental narratives” or posit an autonomous, isolated “self,” as
“expressivism” or “process” approaches have been said to do. It is possible, instead, to
posit a critical teaching practice which makes use of the personal in a more complex
manner, as discussed by Barbara Kamler: “The self envisaged by critical pedagogy is
multiple and social, created out of the cultural resources at hand, including experiences, languages, histories, stories. Student voice is central to the emancipatory educational project of empowering students” (Kamler 39). Kamler’s approach echoes with Quinnan: “In border andragogy, experience is credited, stories are recounted, and the lessons learned over the course of the adult’s life are valued as integral to transformative learning” (Quinnan 103). Thus, making space for the personal does not mean we must be theoretically naive.

**Process? Post-process?: Varieties of Nontraditional Student-Friendly Teaching Practices**

In 1989, Robert Sommer demonstrated numerous points of commonality between andragogy and process-based writing instruction. In 2004, it is possible to find many corollaries between andragogy and much post-process theory as well. Yet as Thomas Kent and others point out, post-process scholars “do not toe a party line regarding post-process theory” (Kent 6); thus, andragogy corresponds easily with certain strands of post-process thought, less well with others. Scholars such as Kamler, Hindman, Spigelman, and Barbara Couture discuss critically informed methods for considering the personal narrative. Others, however, such as Gary A. Olson and Joseph Petraglia, appear less interested in the personal narratives of students and instead offer paradigms which could conceivably make it more difficult for students like those in this study to draw upon their own experiences in their academic writing.

Petraglia, for instance, asserts that the “professional profile” of composition has been compromised by remaining “entrenched in the pedagogical enterprise” (Petraglia
Instead of teaching students the skills of rhetorical production, says Petraglia, we should teach "rhetorical sensitivity," or the fostering of receptive skills in students. Petraglia acknowledges: "Instilling rhetorical sensitivity . . . contrasts sharply with the traditional speech or writing-skills classroom that emphasizes students’ abilities to produce rhetorical texts" (Petraglia 62). He calls for us to "imagine professional and pedagogical frameworks that do not have the explicit teaching of students to write at their heart" (Petraglia 63). This is a disturbing vision for the educator who believes in the importance of empowering students, nontraditional or otherwise. Petraglia’s call is, in fact, eerily reminiscent of the “old guard,” liberal humanist model described by David Russell: “How, then, does education improve writing? Liberal culture answered that a proper education produces deep thoughts, which cannot but find their proper expression” (Russell 175). The only difference is that this time, the “proper education” with which the passive student is inculcated consists not of “great books” but of “rhetorical sensitivity.” Yet unlike the kind of teacher-student “communion” called for by Freire, the “sensitivity” called for by Petraglia is one-sided; in Petraglia’s model, it is the students who must be made “sensitive,” not the teachers. Petraglia’s vision reifies Freire’s “banking model” of education, with the bank remaining intact and only the currency being changed.

However, not all post-process theory is as Petraglia envisions. The contested meaning of the “post” in “post-process” brings to mind Anthony Appiah’s famous question as to the meaning of “post” in various contexts. Barbara Couture, for example, calls for a concept of “post-process” that continues to draw upon the many of the process
movement's strengths, "carry[ing] on the work of the process movement but this time with the force of a promise" (Couture 48). Couture's "post" suggests not only "later," but "more complex"—making use of the process movement's many useful insights for teaching, while re-emphasizing aspects of the rhetorical and learning situation, such as difference, that were all too often overlooked previously.

As a teacher, I continue to find process methods (and their vocabulary) useful for teaching both composition and WAC—contrary to Gary A. Olson's assertion that "the vocabulary of process is no longer useful" (Olson 9). Moreover, the students in my study seemed to be requesting teaching methods specifically associated with process approaches: extensive feedback from peers and teachers, multiple drafts and opportunities to revise, a de-emphasis on grammar in the early stages of drafting, and a number of low-stakes writing assignments. "I like when you write a lot and have a chance to learn before you are graded," says Barbara.

Yet post-process approaches cannot be dismissed out of hand especially since, as Kent and others point out, "post-process" (like process) is not monolithic. Much current post-process theory makes crucial points about issues that are of particular relevance when considering nontraditional student needs, such as the complexity of the rhetorical situation, the instability of identities and subjectivities in an increasingly complex postmodern world, and, especially, the importance of attending to difference. The participants in this study seemed highly aware of issues of difference and rhetorical complexity themselves. "What am I saying, and who I am saying it to?" Carolyn asks herself when an assignment is due.
Ellen Cushman and Teresa Monberg call for a “socially reflexive” research methodology: “We must adopt a responsible, socially reflexive approach to negotiating our authority in composition research... authority to represent others does not come de facto from an academic position, but from the reciprocal and dialogic relations shared by scholars and community residents” (Cushman & Monberg 167). “Social reflexivity” is also a useful way to consider our teaching practice as well. For those of us who identify ourselves as critical educators, who seek to deconstruct the power differentials that have so often been oppressive, we are hypocritical if we do not heed the voices of our students when we consider what writing, and the teaching of writing, is or should be—Petraglia’s position notwithstanding. Conceptualizing our students as self-directing adults with qualitatively and quantitatively valuable life experience resonates with “social reflexivity” for both teachers and researchers. Useful when our students are 18 to 22 years old, such a vision of negotiated, dialogical authority is even more crucial when we are discussing nontraditional students—“peers in our classrooms,” as Regina Logan puts it.

**Authority, the Ethic of Care, “Andragogy,” and Feminism**

As discussed in Chapter Two, many feminist scholars such as Laura Brady and Eileen Schell have noted significant problems with the “ethic of care” (articulated by feminists such as Nel Noddings and Sara Ruddick), and its potential damage to feminism because of the risk of essentializing women as nurturers and caregivers, thereby preserving traditional gender-based hierarchies. Another dilemma for feminists is the issue of shared authority. Numerous feminist scholars, including Susan Jarratt, Michelle Payne, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and others, have pointed out the problematic position in
which the feminist teacher may find herself when she seeks to negotiate and share
authority with her students. To teach through an “ethic of care” and to negotiate authority
may continue to construct and essentialize women as the “weaker sex.”

At the same time, scholars such as Flynn and hooks point out that while one goal
of feminism is to empower women to assume the authoritative roles traditionally assigned
to males, another—at least in some schools of feminism—is to transform the values of our
social institutions entirely. bell hooks is one who argues for transformation, stating:
“Authoritarianism in the classroom dehumanizes and thus shuts down the ‘magic’ that is
always present when individuals are active learners . . . Authoritarian professors often
invest in the notion that they are the only ‘serious’ teachers, whereas democratic
educators are often stereotyped by their more conservative counterparts as not as rigorous
or as without standards. This is especially the case when the democratic educator
attempts to create a spirit of joyful practice in the classroom” (hooks 43-44). hooks ties
her own project of a “democratic” education, a “joyful” teaching practice, to the need to
dismantle “existing oppressive hierarchies,” articulating powerfully how an approach to
teaching which shares authority and makes use of the “ethic of care” can resonate with
critical theory and the struggle for social justice at the same time.

Constructing our students as adults builds upon hooks’ suggestion, and may create
a possible way out of the impasse that results when we conceptualize the “ethic of care”
or “shared authority” as essentially feminine concepts. We can conceive of these ideas
not as essentially “maternal” or “feminist” teaching practices, but instead as sound
teaching practices geared toward meeting the specific needs of adult students—noting, as
do Knowles, Quinnan and Richards, that many practices which serve the needs of nontraditional students are also helpful for many younger college students, by preparing them to become more self-directing and critically reflective. As hooks points out further, such approaches also have the potential for radical transformation of existing hierarchies. To imagine that a significant percentage of our students may be our peers leads to a reconceptualization of teacher authority in which the teacher is a facilitator tasked with empowering all voices—a more “caring” model, amenable to feminists, while not being solely associated with femaleness. Such a conceptualization reconfigures power and authority as provisional and situational rather than absolute and essential, without fixing such a concept of authority as essentially “feminine.”

Schell, Brady, Jarratt and many others correctly point out how easily essentialism may result when we tether certain teaching practices, such as shared authority and the use of personal narratives in the classroom, too closely to gender. Perhaps shared authority, dialogue, and an “ethic of caring” are not essentially “female” nor indicators of female weakness, but simply good teaching practice arising from a non-infantilizing paradigm emphasizing equality, provisional authority, and inclusivity.

The End of Pedagogy

When we question the way we “reproduce authority and power in language and culture,” we must also question our own language, our own complicity in the reproduction of power. What term do we use to describe our teaching? Pedagogy—with a Greek root meaning “child.” Yet the recognition that a growing percentage of our students are well beyond eighteen (along with the observation that even our younger
students are legally adults) should lead us to question the use of this term in the college context. For adult educators whose students are also adults, close in age to their educators and perhaps in some instances even older (as was the case with Carolyn and myself), to conceive of one’s teaching practice as “the instruction of children” is to take an infantilizing stance towards one’s students.

Such an observation is particularly disturbing for anyone concerned with issues of oppression, given the historical relationship between oppression and infantilization. Oppressors, in a variety of contexts, have very often justified their dominance by constructing those they subjugate as children, incapable of meaningful agency. While many feminists, such as Adrienne Rich and Kate Millett, demonstrate that gender is learned from infancy in the patriarchal family, I would add that along with gender, we learn the hierarchy of age (primarily of necessity, since the infant is necessarily dependent). Thus, in order to justify oppression, colonial powers constructed their colonial subjects as children, incapable of self-government; slave owners constructed their slaves as children, unworthy of the supposedly “universal” human rights that attached to their owners; under patriarchy, men continue to justify their dominance by infantilizing the women in their family, and wives in traditional marriages were (and are) expected to “obey” their husbands. Within a wide range of oppressive hierarchies, including but not limited to late capitalism, the upper classes and the powerful have constructed the working classes, the poor, and the powerless as children. Thus the adult-to-child power differential, born of biological necessity, becomes the operational paradigm through which any number of oppressive hierarchies are constructed.
A key in transforming oppression, then, lies in refiguring hierarchies to recognize the less powerful as adults—self-directing, with assumed capabilities and the right to self-determination. Recently, voices both inside and outside the academy have made inroads toward drawing attention to issues of oppression and power—though obviously, significant work remains to be done, both within the academy and in the world at large (as I draft this chapter in the second week of November 2004, I am painfully reminded of how much work is yet to be done). It is essential, however, that scholars who care about issues of power and oppression do not neglect to examine the hierarchies and power relationships that sustain their own positions. The relationship of teacher-to-student has traditionally been one of adult-to-child, thus carrying with it the risk of abuse of power. The traditional academy is, like all social institutions, hierarchically structured and maintained through differentials of socially constructed and reified power.

Given the historical relationship between infantilization and oppression, the implications of infantilization are not trivial. The more I became attuned to the increasing presence of nontraditional students in our college classrooms today as well as more aware of the pedagogical/andragogical distinction, the more I became bothered by the term “pedagogy,” while simultaneously noticing just how frequently the word is invoked in composition studies. It may be one of the most often-used terms in the discipline, and at times in my research, I wondered if it ranked second only to the term “composition” itself. Yet every time we use this term, we are reinscribing a power dynamic that constructs the student as a child. How can the objectives of ostensibly
radical educators ever be realized if, as teachers, we conceive of our students in the same
Subject-to-Object, infantilizing manner as in any other oppressed-oppressor relationship?

Our choice of terminology matters. Expecting an adult to ignore the implications of this term, simply because she wishes to gain access to higher education, is somewhat analogous to asking women to ignore male appellations such as “chairman” and “policeman.” Here I am reminded of conversations I had with my mother when I was a child in the early 1970s, when discussions were beginning to occur about replacing sexist terms such as “chairman” and “mankind” with gender-inclusive terms. My mother, a very traditional woman, felt this change was unnecessary; when I, a questioning teenager, protested, “But why should we say ‘man’ if we’re not only talking about men?” Mom would respond, “Oh, honey, that really doesn’t matter—it’s just a word. When you use ‘man’ that way, it doesn’t really mean ‘man’–it means everybody.” Feminists, of course, begged to differ. Similarly, some educators may say, “Oh, when we say ‘pedagogy,’ we don’t really mean we think we’re teaching children—it’s just a word.” Here, nontraditional students might beg to differ as well.

However, I disagree with Knowles that “andragogy” is a suitable substitute, since there is a major limitation in the term “andragogy” itself–its masculinist word root, “andra,” meaning “male.” It is beyond my scope here to propose alternative neologisms, but perhaps the best solution is for those instructing at the college level to adopt Freire’s term of “praxis.” As Christopher Ferry elucidates his understanding of Freirean praxis: “Praxis denotes more than a fancy way to say practice. Indeed, praxis is a distinctly human activity that occurs only at the nexus of reflection and action. Praxis is a
dialogue—between reflection and action, yes, but also between humans to name and transform the world” (Ferry 17). To engage in praxis is to enact a teaching practice that is theoretically informed, reflexive, and dialogical; as Freire puts it, entering into “communion” with the students—or, one could say, imagining them as peers.

Beyond Terminology: Toward a Non-Infantilizing “Border Praxis”

Freire himself used the term “pedagogy” repeatedly, as it appears in the titles of nearly all his works. In light of the points I have just made, one could argue that “pedagogy of the oppressed” is oxymoronic and at odds with the “praxis” he also defines in his work. However, “pedagogy” was the term then in vogue; the fact that Freire (along with Giroux, hooks, and many other radical theorists) used the term as well does not discount the validity of these ideas, any more than every last person who said “stewardess” instead of “flight attendant” in the 1960s can be justly accused of sexism.

Quinnan addresses the potential contradiction in Giroux’s formulation of a “border pedagogy” by positing the alternative, “border andragogy,” but obviously that approach is unsuitable for anyone informed by a feminist sensibility. While I propose that the term “pedagogy” should be banished from the vocabularies of those who primarily teach adults, I would complicate my position by arguing that beyond mere terminology, the concepts of Freire, hooks, and Giroux and other radical educators—along with Knowles and other adult educators who speak of andragogy—are still useful, despite my arguments with exclusionary Greek prefixes. Here I attempt to stake out a position that is multifaceted and non-dichotomized: While I believe that terminology should be changed, I also posit that changing our terminology alone is insufficient; teaching practice is
ultimately what matters. Though I do believe we should change the words, such a change is no good if we only change the words. Nor should we discount any potentially valuable concept, such as the “andragogical” approach to teaching, simply because we disagree (for good reason) with the terminology used to describe it.

While Quinnan draws upon Giroux to propose “border andragogy,” Giroux in turn has developed many of his ideas in dialogue with such radical theorists such as Bakhtin, Freire, and hooks—a cadre of scholars cited by numerous compositionists across a variety of theoretical divides. References to this critical scholarship can be located in process-focused collections such as Tobin and Newkirk’s *Taking Stock*, post-process collections as Kent’s *Post-Process Theory*, and collections which span a range of theoretical positions, such as Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson’s *Under Construction*. Whatever theoretical and conceptual differences there may be in the field, composition scholars across the spectrum find ways to invoke critical educational theorists in support of their positions. Just as both process and post-process approaches can be used to teach writing to nontraditional students effectively by strategically using personal writing, both approaches can also be used in the service of a critical educational project.

Contrary to the beliefs of some that process and “expressivist” approaches are intrinsically solipsistic, apolitical, antisocial and naive, process approaches to composition and WAC can find validation in both critical and feminist theory. However, it is also important to remember that critical theory does not propose individualistic concepts of “voice” or “agency,” but calls for student voices and experiences to be considered critically and in light of the larger social and political contexts in which they
speak: "A radical pedagogy must take seriously the task of providing the conditions for changing subjectivity as it is constituted in the individual’s needs, drives, passions, and intelligence as well as changing the political, economic, and social foundation of the wider society" (Giroux 81). At the same time, Giroux reminds us: "Students must first view their own ideologies and cultural capital as meaningful before they can critically probe them" (Giroux 81). In order for students such as Carolyn, Amber, and Christina to begin to consider their personal experiences within social and cultural contexts, they needed assurance from their teachers that their viewpoints and voices were of value and worth exploring in academic writing assignments.

Giroux’s concept of the “border” is a helpful metaphor for conceptualizing the situation of students, traditional and nontraditional alike; for the term “border” invokes all the boundaries that students must cross and negotiate in the educational process. For nontraditional students, surely age and the cultural prohibitions against “adults” taking on “student roles,” as pointed out by Quinnan, are among those borders. The concept of “border” is inclusive enough to account for all the different points of conflict and congruence experienced by both students and teachers, including age and the challenging of socially prescribed roles along with more frequently discussed borders such as gender, race, and class. As Fox observes, nontraditional students must also undertake complex, multiple border crossings between their lived cultures and experiences and the academy—a place they enter, necessarily, as Others. In Giroux’s vision of border “pedagogy”—or what I would prefer to call “praxis”—such crossings require that the critical educator provide a space for student writing, whether in composition classes or across the curriculum, that
allows students to explore and make sense of these border crossings, inviting them to
explore in writing both the connections and disparities between the multiple discourses
they bring with them to the academy. While this holds true for all our students, I would
posit that it is even more the case for our nontraditional students, whose very presence in
our classrooms presents a challenge to a number of social norms.

**Dialogical Teaching**

According to Quinnan, “Colleges should not overshadow or oppress those they
serve . . . The emphasis must stay on inclusion, discussion, and debate in a forum that
actively pursues with equal effort the contributions of all student and academic
constituencies” (Quinnan 137). For adult students, Quinnan points out, the need for a
dialogical teacher-student relationship—what Quinnan terms a “border andragogy”—may
be especially acute: “Adults, having the benefit of real-world trial, often apply alternative
modes of apprehending knowledge that frequently skirt or supersede disciplinary
parameters. Because of this difference from younger students, postmodern educators
should plan learning interventions where adults have the opportunity to flex, strengthen,
and modify their own specialized ways of knowing” (Quinnan 102). Such an approach
does not ask students to consider their personal experiences in isolation, but to connect
them with academic concerns—“bring[ing] subjectivity and objectivity into constant
dialectical relationship” (Freire 32), as Freire suggests.

To reframe Quinnan’s observations for composition studies, I suggest that our
praxis should develop in dialogue with our students. When we ask ourselves “what is
English, and if you know what it is, why do we teach it,” we should also be asking our
students: What is your purpose in being here? Do you wish primarily to enter an academic discourse community? (Surely, helping students who wish to achieve these goals to do so is an important part of our job, though what can be accomplished in a single fifteen-week course is limited.) Those who answer “yes” may have different needs when it comes to learning the conventions of academic discourse than those who plan to move to other pastures after they complete their Bachelor’s degrees. (For an extended discussion of how English teachers often assume that what is best for English majors is best for all, see Scholes 1998.) To those who do not envision themselves remaining in academia forever, we should ask: What kinds of rhetorical strategies and writing abilities do you believe you most need to develop in order to meet your goals? As we formulate our teaching goals and articulate our professional visions, our students too deserve a voice. When our students are nontraditional, those voices can be especially compelling. While the “border pedagogy” called for by Giroux brings issues of power, identity, and difference to the forefront, Freire also reminds us that teachers must go beyond making a space for students to discuss such issues; the radical educator must herself enact and embody that process by facilitating dialogue, challenging traditional hierarchies of power by negotiating authority, and being willing to learn from her students as well.

Nontraditional students can be seen as both functions and effects of postmodernism, as they participate in culture’s ongoing scrambling of categories and challenging of norms. Quinnan points out that the nontraditional student disrupts social and economic norms by assuming roles other than those assigned to her by the capitalist system; Fox demonstrates that female nontraditional students question traditional female
roles, and I would add that nontraditional male students also challenge traditional gender assumptions by temporarily stepping away from their culturally prescribed roles as wage-earners and providers. As composition theorists and educators, we can render these and other challenges to social norms represented by nontraditional student presence in the academy even more effective by giving voice to our nontraditional students (and to all our students), by entering into dialogue with them as peers, and by creating spaces where nontraditional students can connect, through writing, the discourses we offer at the university—the “discourse of textual analysis”—with the multiple discourses of our students’ lived cultures and experiences.

As we have seen, nontraditional students in particular offer rich reservoirs of lived cultures and experiences, as well as the ability to consider and reflect upon those cultures and experiences in critically enlightening ways. Offering opportunities for nontraditional students to mine the reservoirs of culture and experience in their academic writing not only helps them to forge their emerging academic identities, but may enhance, enrich, and further democratize our professional discourse, our theoretical sophistication, our developing awareness of difference, and our teaching practices. As composition and WAC instructors and scholars, we can engage in a “socially reflexive” negotiation with our nontraditional students that takes account of their perspectives, experience and voices, altering the traditional teacher-student power dynamic and creating spaces in which nontraditional students can negotiate the multiple discourse communities they inhabit—including, but not limited to, the academic discourse community in which they meet with us. Given that increasingly, a significant percentage of our students are now
our age and social peers, this provides us with an excellent opportunity to engage in the kind of teaching practice posited by Christopher Ferry in his discussion of Freire, “transform[ing] our relationship to students” by “replac[ing] the ‘us versus them’ model that now prevails with a more collective one,” in order to “break down received power structures.” If we are successful, says Ferry, “students [may] understand composing in writing not as a required, school-sponsored task, but as integral to being human, reading in the word and the world, as Freire says” (Ferry 18).
APPENDIX I: INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MANOA
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE OF STUDY: NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC WRITING
INVESTIGATOR: Kathleen J. Cassity  808-956-7619

PURPOSE

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to increase awareness among the professional college composition community of the specific needs of nontraditional college writing students, and to add the perspectives of nontraditional students to the ongoing discussion in this field regarding the most effective methods for teaching college-level writing.

PARTICIPANTS

You have been asked to participate because you have identified yourself to the investigator as a nontraditional student who may be able to provide information which will be helpful in investigating this issue.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to a written survey with regard to your experiences as a college writing student. Following this survey, you will be asked if you wish to participate in an interview with the researcher. If you agree, the interview will take place on campus and will be scheduled at your convenience. It will last for approximately one hour. The interview will be tape recorded and transcribed.

Following this interview, the researcher will ask if you would be willing to make yourself available for a follow-up interview. You will also be asked if you are willing to provide writing samples to the researcher. If you choose to participate in the follow-up interview, you will meet with the researcher on campus at a time scheduled for your convenience. This interview will take approximately a half hour. You will be asked to provide the researcher with photocopies of several of your own college writing samples. You may choose not to provide information or writing samples at any time. You will not be coerced into providing any information that you are not comfortable revealing to the researcher. If you are enrolled in a class taught by one of the researchers, your participation in this study will not affect your grade in any way, whether positively or negatively.
RISKS

The researchers anticipate no known risks for participation in this study.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct or monetary benefits for your participation in this study. The researcher anticipates indirect benefits to the nontraditional student population across the country, as the study seeks to increase awareness of nontraditional student needs among college composition professionals. As members of the group defined as “nontraditional student,” you may indirectly realize some of these benefits.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your identity will be protected to the extent allowed by law. You will not be personally identified in any reports or publications that may result from this study. The researcher, the researcher’s supervisor, and the University of Hawaii’s Committee on Human Subjects Protection will be the only parties having legal access to your identity. The data obtained will be stored securely by the researcher in a home office and will be shredded once the legal time limit for maintaining this data has expired. If any data collected from you is used by the researcher when the findings are written up, you will be identified by a pseudonym. Any information that could identify you will be omitted or changed in order to protect your confidentiality. Any names that you mention in the course of your interview will also be changed.

If you choose to participate in the interview process, the researcher will request that you allow your interview to be tape recorded and transcribed. No recording or transcription will be made without your explicit written prior consent.

COSTS/COMPENSATION

There will be no cost to you nor will you be compensated for participating in this study. The University of Hawaii may not provide compensation or free medical care for an unanticipated injury sustained as a result of participating in this research study.

RIGHT TO REFUSE OR WITHDRAW

You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If the study design or use of the data is to be changed, you will be so informed and your consent re-obtained. You will be told of any significant new findings developed during the course of this study, which may relate to your willingness to continue participation. If you choose to withdraw, no data gathered from you will be used by the researcher when compiling written findings.
QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, please contact Kathleen Cassity at 808-956-7619, or LaRene Despain at 808-956-7039.

CLOSING STATEMENT

MY SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT I HAVE DECIDED TO VOLUNTEER AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT AND THAT I HAVE READ, I UNDERSTAND, AND I HAVE RECEIVED A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT       DATE
APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(1) Demographic information: Please state your name; date and place of birth; marital status; number of children, if any; your major field of study; current employment; and ethnic background.

(2) Why did you enter college now rather than at a traditional age?

(3) What did you do before coming to college? Why did you then choose to come back to college?

(4) Why did you choose to attend Leeward Community College?

(5) What are your long-term educational goals?

(6) How would you describe yourself as a student and writer when you began your college education?

(7) How do you perceive yourself as a student and writer now?

(8) Do you think the Writing Intensive requirement is a good idea? Why or why not?

(9) What writing experiences, assignments, or teaching approaches have stood out as particularly helpful, and why?

(10) What writing experiences have stood out as particularly unhelpful, and why?

(11) Has being a nontraditional student had positive effects on your educational experience? If so, what?

(12) Has being a nontraditional student had any negative effects on your educational experience? If so, what?

(13) How satisfied are you with the institution’s responsiveness to your needs so far?

(14) Do you have any long-term writing goals outside of college?

(15) Do you ever experience anxiety in conjunction with college writing assignments? If so, to what do you attribute any anxiety?

(16) What are your strategies for relieving writing-related anxiety?

(17) What advice would you give to a student with writer’s block?
(18) What would you suggest to educators and administrators to help nontraditional students?

(19) Please offer any other comments or insights you have as a nontraditional student in Writing Intensive courses.
APPENDIX III: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

To: Nontraditional Students
From: Kathleen J. Cassity, PhD Candidate
Department of English, University of Hawaii at Manoa
Re: Invitation to Participate in Research Study: "Nontraditional Students and College Composition"

I am conducting research on how writing is taught to nontraditional undergraduate students in the University of Hawaii system. The purpose of this research is to determine what methods of teaching writing are most effective for nontraditional students. The findings will be written up in my doctoral dissertation for UH-Manoa and may possibly be included in articles or a book for educators.

Because you have identified yourself as a nontraditional student, I would like to interview you regarding your experiences as a writing student at the University of Hawaii's Leeward Community College campus. The initial interview will take place on campus, at a time convenient to you, during the fall semester of 2003. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be tape-recorded and transcribed. If I determine that a follow-up interview would be helpful, I will contact you to arrange it. Such a follow-up interview would last for one hour or less. I may also contact you with further questions via telephone or email if necessary. With your consent, I may ask to review writing samples from various composition and writing intensive courses, or ask you to fill out a survey or questionnaire. While I hope to conclude my investigation this fall, some research may carry over into the spring. All research activities will be scheduled at your convenience.

Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. If I write about any aspect of my research concerning you, you will be identified by a pseudonym and not by your real name. Any information that could be used to identify you will be excluded or modified in order to protect your anonymity. Agencies with research oversight such as the University of Hawaii's Committee on Human Studies retain the authority to obtain research records for their purposes.

Participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You may change your mind at any time by contacting me. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate. No aspect of this study will affect any grade you receive from a course taught by me (whether positively or negatively). If you choose to withdraw from the research project at any time, all data collected from you will be destroyed. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me via email at kcassity@hawaii.edu, or via telephone in care of the University of Hawaii at Manoa English Department at 808-956-7619. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research study, you may contact the University of Hawaii's Committee on Human Subjects at 808-956-5007.
As the investigator for this research, I believe there is no risk to you by participating. While there may be no direct benefit to you individually, it is hoped that the findings of this study will help improve undergraduate education for students like you. Thank you for giving consideration to participating in this research.
APPENDIX IV: FIRST QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE:
Nontraditional University Students
and College Writing Instruction

Please answer the following questions. You may attach written explanations to any answer you wish.

(1) I believe my college educational experience has been significantly influenced by the fact that I am older than the average student.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(2) I believe I have been more successful as a college student because I am older than the average student.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(3) I believe I have been less successful as a college student because I am older than the average student.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(4) I consider myself a strong writer in the college setting.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(5) I consider myself a strong writer outside the college setting.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(6) I believe I am a better college writer as a nontraditional student than I would have been had I attended college at an earlier age.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(7) I believe I struggle more with college writing as a nontraditional student than I would have had I attended college at an earlier age.

   Strongly agree □ Agree □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree □ No opinion □

(8) I enjoy writing required college assignments.

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(9) I enjoy writing when it is not required for college.

(10) Writing plays a significant role in my life.

(11) I believe nontraditional students have special needs that college professors and administrators need to consider.

(12) I believe that nontraditional students bring many positive attributes to the college classroom.

(13) My college experience has been significantly influenced by the fact that I am older than the typical student.

(14) I believe this college does a good job of meeting the needs of nontraditional students.

(15) Most of my instructors have used effective methods of writing instruction.

(16) I believe my instructors take my opinions seriously.

(17) I believe my instructors respect the life experience I bring to the classroom.

(18) I have been allowed to express my opinions in college writing assignments.
(19) I believe I have a strong voice in my higher education experience.

   Strongly agree □  Agree □  Disagree □  Strongly disagree □  No opinion □
APPENDIX V: SECOND QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: ________________________________  Major: ________________________________

Educational Goal: ______________________  Career Goal: __________________________

Age: ______  Ethnic Background: ________________________________

1  When you first returned to college as an adult student, how comfortable did you initially feel in the college environment?

__ a. I felt very comfortable
__ b. I felt somewhat comfortable
__ c. I felt slightly uncomfortable
__ d. I felt extremely uncomfortable

2  As an adult college student today, how comfortable do you feel in the college environment?

__ a. Yes, I feel very comfortable
__ b. Yes, I feel reasonably comfortable
__ c. No, I feel somewhat uncomfortable
__ d. No, I feel extremely uncomfortable

3  If you marked anything other than “a” on either question 1 or question 2, to which of the following would you attribute your sense of discomfort? Check all that apply.

__ a. My race or ethnicity
__ b. My gender
__ c. My age
__ d. My marital status
__ e. My parental status
__ f. My socioeconomic status
__ g. My educational background
__ h. The length of time since my last educational experience
__ i. My intellectual ability
__ j. My writing ability
__ k. My military status
__ l. Other (explain): ________________________________

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4 On a scale of 1 to 4, how challenging do you feel it is to be a nontraditional college student?

____ 1. Extremely challenging
____ 2. Somewhat challenging
____ 3. Slightly challenging
____ 4. Not at all challenging

5 If you answered 1, 2 or 3, which of the following pose particular challenges for you? Please check all that apply.

____ a. Managing my time
____ b. Juggling school with work
____ c. Juggling school with family commitments
____ d. Financial difficulties
____ e. Gaining support from family members
____ f. Feeling out of place in a college environment
____ g. Commuting
____ h. Meeting college-imposed deadlines
____ i. Writing requirements
____ j. Reading requirements
____ k. Understanding concepts
____ l. Remembering concepts learned long ago
____ m. Interacting with teachers my age or younger
____ n. Communicating with faculty
____ o. Communicating with administrators
____ p. Dealing with college requirements
____ q. Other (explain): ____________________________

6 Please provide the level of education attained by your parents:

Mother
____ Some high school
____ High school graduate
____ Some college
____ College graduate (Bachelors)
____ Postgraduate degree

Father
____ Some high school
____ High school graduate
____ Some college
____ College graduate (Bachelors)
____ Postgraduate degree

7 Which of the following best describes the socioeconomic status of your family of origin?
Blue collar
Military
White collar
Other (explain)

8 Do nontraditional students have special needs that faculty should consider?

____ Yes ____ No ____ No opinion

9 Do nontraditional students bring special attributes to the college classroom?

____ Yes ____ No ____ No opinion

10 If “yes” to #9: What do you feel are the strengths that nontraditional students bring to the college classroom? Please check all that apply.

____ Clear educational and career goals
____ High motivation
____ Strong sense of focus
____ Less concern with peer opinions
____ More comfort interacting with professors
____ More assertiveness
____ Valuable life experience
____ Better ability to articulate experience
____ Better ability to draw connections between course content and real-life situations
____ Better time management skills
____ Better writing skills
____ Better problem-solving skills
____ Other (explain): ________________________________

9 In your college career so far, have you had the opportunity to write about personal experiences in any of your college assignments?

____ Yes ____ No

10 If you answered “yes” to number 10: Which of the following statements best describes your experience with personal writing in the college setting? Please check all that apply.

____ I believe writing about personal experience helped me improve my writing abilities
____ I believe writing about personal experience had no effect on my writing abilities
____ I believe writing about personal experience was harmful to my writing
I found being asked to write about personal experience was intrusive
I appreciated the opportunity to write about my personal experience
I believe writing about personal experience helped me connect the course’s subject matter with my life
I believe writing about personal experience enhanced my learning process
I believe writing about personal experience harmed my learning process
I believe writing about personal experience had no effect on my learning process
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www.adultstudent.com


www.antshe.org


www.back2school.com


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http://clinton.senate.gov


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