

IMPROVISING ROLES: WRITING INSTRUCTION
AND PROVOCATIVE DISRUPTION

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ABSTRACT

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How to teach writing is a consistently complex problem in the field of English education. This qualitative narrative research project seeks to further complicate that problem by suggesting, through improvisation theories, two shifts in understanding writing instruction: that texts themselves do not fully constitute the wholeness of the work and thus involve the meanings we ascribe to them (as writers, readers, teachers, and students); that our role as writing instructors is as disruptors and must be improvised (altered, shifted, adjusted) based on the meaning ascribed to the written work by students and teachers. This project explores the following questions:

- (1) If texts do not fully constitute the whole of the written work, then how do students and teachers explain and understand what writing is about? This question is addressed in two ways:
 - (A) How do students understand what their writing is about?
 - (B) How do I understand what they report to me?
- (2) What might it mean to improvise our role in writing instruction? How might student explanations provide the context to improvise our roles as writing instructors?

The participants were three high school seniors. As the sole researcher, I interviewed each of the three participants, two males and one female, over the course of the first semester of their senior year. Through qualitative research, with dimensions

of narrative research, this study suggests that provoking crucial disruptions in the students' writing is an approach to writing instruction that involves dialogue with students, and reflection on practice. It is a collaborative approach between students and teachers. This study further suggests that how we prompt students is crucial to their writing experiences. And, through dialogue with students (which can be conceived of as a form of writing instruction), we can inform, explore, and question when and how we inspire students in their writing. This dissertation proposes that writing instruction is continuously and simultaneously inquiry and practice.

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A dissertation is a constant refrain in your life. As a child, my parents were always writing or drafting ideas. Whether it was my father, with graph paper, designing the next building project or my mother, at the kitchen table, writing her master's thesis, their modeling taught me to sit down and generate ideas at least once a day. And so I want to thank both of my parents for demonstrating that consistent practice of building toward something.

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Chapter I

CREATIVE PRODUCTIONS

Disrupting My Role as a Teacher

It was the beginning of my third year teaching, and I was certain that I knew how this game was played. I had the lesson plans, the handouts, the Delaney book, and the strategies to spark interest and quell boredom. I understood how to hit the ground running in the beginning of the year, how to answer all of those unasked questions students have when they begin a class: What are the expectations of this class? Can I get away with this or that? As the saying goes, I had learned a thing or two, and I thought I had this whole career figured out.

I did my usual introduction on the first day, and the year seemed to be proceeding predictably and comfortably. On the second day, in a senior Humanities class, we began to discuss Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. I began with my first question, "What do you think of the first sentence of the novel? 'It was a pleasure to burn'" (Bradbury, 1953/1991, p. 3). This was just to warm them up; maybe I would get two responses and proceed through my next 18 questions. Darren raised his hand and began, "Well, it seems to me that Montag is in a conflict with himself." Darren set forth his points, raised other possibilities, then Monika jumped in, followed by another student and another. Two-thirds into the class and I glanced at my lesson plan. None of what we were discussing was written there. None of what was in the plan was anywhere near as good as the way in which that discussion proceeded.

That marked the first day in a year during which my two morning senior humanities classes taught me about teaching. The Humanities program at The Lyceum High School (a pseudonym) kept two classes of students together in Social Studies and English for all four years of high school. Several of the students in that cohort had coincidentally known each other from as far back as sixth grade. Unknowingly, I stepped into a class that had learned how to learn together, how to engage in inquiries and generative class discussions. They would build off each other's comments, moving through the discussion via improvisation. Their fluidity and aliveness made me question my previous understanding of what it meant to teach. As time went on, I learned to be more in the moment. I had come to realize that teaching was not so much about *my* lesson plan but about the ways in which I could moderate the improvisational class discussion of the students. This shift in my role was a disruption to my previous understanding of teaching. It was a good disruption, a "provocative disruption" that required me to improvise (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 10).

While I had moderated open-ended and improvisational class discussions previously, there were several things about this class that made my role different. Students had learned how to work together in ways that I later realized could be explained in terms of improvisation. They had already developed what Bernstein and Barrett (2011) call "dynamic capabilities" (p. 1). Students initiated premises of discussion (either in the form of questions, claims, or even offering up multiple possibilities) as a continuous part of the class. Later I realized that this was a way to "Leap in and take action" (p. 18). It was evident through their participation and regard for one another that students saw one another as sources of content for discussion and had ease "alternating between soloing and supporting" (p. 30). Students seemed to enjoy not only expressing their own ideas, but also the process of having their ideas altered, picked up, moved around, and played on by other class members and thus engaged in that crucial "yes to the mess" tenet of improvisation (p. 8). And part of their ideas being moved around and

played on was how uninhibited they were in participating. Unlike so many students I have taught who seemed to want to only share fully crystallized claims, this class was willing to learn during the class discussion and thus saw “errors as a source for learning” (pp. 8, 24). This open attitude to both successes and errors allowed exciting discussions to ensue in which both I and the students made insights and enjoyed the mysteries of inquiry.

The fact that this class was already able to do this when I started teaching them placed a rapid and dramatic disruption on how I proceeded in my role. Sometimes I was distinctly a moderator, keeping my own thoughts at bay. During these times, I was connecting, summarizing where I noticed they did not, paraphrasing, questioning, in the service of moving the discussion forward, backward, or to another dimension entirely. Other times I was a participant, jumping into the discussion with them, offering my analysis. I paid attention not only to the content of the discussion but also to the emotional atmosphere. There was so much that the class was able to do on their own, and yet it seemed there was even so much more I could potentially do for them. I grew more watchful, always on the lookout for what students offered up that I could find a way to return to. I was also looking for a way to derive a new and unplanned discussion question premised on a culminating idea in the discussion. I learned to summarize some of what was said; realizing that the *content* of the discussion would inevitably be provided by the students, I focused much more on how I would moderate the form of class discussion than ever before.

But none of this could be planned. These approaches that I was developing could be practiced but could not be decided on in advance. My role as orchestrator, moderator, listener, *as educator*, was constantly improvised. And there was another aspect to this kind of teaching that I found fascinating: there was no one “right” choice in any moment, but there were preferable or better choices depending on the context. It was not a matter

of just “doing whatever” or making it up. Improvisational teaching, I realized, involved balancing, orchestrating, and alternating between educational priorities.

I was learning more complex iterations of an important lesson on teaching I had learned from an interview with Maxine Greene just before I started teaching. The lesson from Maxine Greene was more fundamental. This class at the Lyceum helped me develop deeper understandings of this improvisational teaching stance.

Starting with an Improvisational Teaching Stance

On my last day as a publications assistant at Teachers College, I had the opportunity to sit in on an interview with Maxine Greene. This was the end of the summer of 2001. In two weeks I was to begin my career as an English teacher. I never had the opportunity to take a course with Maxine Greene, but I consider this interview I observed to be the last official lesson I had before I started my career. I do not remember much of what was said in the hour-long interview, but one thing stuck with me. Greene was describing a moment in the early days of her teaching. She sensed that the class was not so interested in what she was talking about. She altered the subject, raised a different line of inquiry, and realized that the class was more focused. And then she said to the class, “Is that it, have I got it?” She held her hands out when she said this, as if poised to catch something, maybe the best passage of inquiry for those students, in that moment. I remember thinking to myself, that is what I have to do. If I do not do anything else as a teacher, I have to make sure I am attentive to what is the most intriguing pursuit for the students.

At first, it seemed to me that Maxine Greene was talking about one kind of improvisational move teachers can make. We can be receptive and realize that some kind of change (in topic, in inquiry, in tone of voice) will allow us to engage the class more. That is one kind of goal and one kind of strategy, and it informed my teaching well for

two years. My learning from the class at the Lyceum two years later focused on another challenge related to how to build on and extend the fluid form of discussion that had been cultivated by students' experiences together over several years. My role now needed to be honed as both improviser as teacher and as a moderator *toward* and *with* their improvisation.

Defining Improvisation for Myself

I then realized that Maxine Greene's question was not merely a single improvisational move, but a premise to an entire approach to teaching *with* improvisation in mind. I turned to improvisation theory to augment my understanding of how my role as teacher might be to learn more about how to teach-and-learn in-the-moment, in-the-making *with* students.

It is important to recognize that the word "improvisation" has varied meanings. Sometimes we use the word to mean to "make do" in an emergency situation. Other times we mean that someone is carrying things out unprepared, or completely unplanned. These are definitions of casual use. Albert Murray (1998) reminds us that "by improvisation, of course, I most definitely do not mean 'winging it' or making things up out of thin air. The jazz musician improvises within a very specific context and in terms of very specific idiomatic devices of composition" (p. 112). Murray is telling us that improvisation has two premises from which it works: the specific context of the improvisation *and* devices used in improvisation. While he has not defined what the act of improvisation is, he tells us something crucial about that act: that it is situated in a specific context, and devices of composition.

In order to develop Murray's (1998) premises and consider what they mean for teaching, a definition of the act of improvising is needed. Dean has a definition: "A very simple definition of artistic improvising is that it is the simultaneous conception and performance of a work" (Dean, 1989; Dean, 1992, as cited in Smith & Dean, 1997, p. 3).

Taken together, improvisation is to compose and perform at the same time in ways that are situated in context, and devices of composition.

Greene's question could be seen as an underlying premise used to understand the context. "Is that it, have I got it?" is not merely a question to be asked when a teacher realizes that a class's attention is drifting; it is an intentional employment of a readied awareness.

With that question in mind now as a premise, and with the deep lessons I had learned from the Lyceum class, I found myself trying to cultivate in each class the same rapport and fluid ability that the class from the Lyceum had. My practice as a teacher was concerned with arriving somewhere that emerged out of the context of what the students provided and what we could create together in-the-making. This is not to say that planning was not crucial. Choice of text, of inquiry, and of the order of the curriculum were crucial, but how the students responded and how to choreograph the class discussion became the central focus of my teaching practice.

In looking at my becoming an improvisational teacher, I began to realize key differences in definitions that required me to piece meanings and experiences together so that improvisation as an approach could make sense for teaching as I understood it. First, there is a difference between the kind of improvisation that Maxine Greene spoke about and that I experienced with the Lyceum class. I started to expand that initial question. By itself, "have I got it?" seems finite. I began to improvise on it in order to develop my own notion of what improvising meant. In trying to explain the kinds of practices I enacted with the Lyceum class, I thought, what is the "it"? Certainly not the same thing at all times. It is contextual, like Murray tells us. It is about the moment. If the "it" is altering, then there are subtler questions immediately preceding or underlying: Right now, what seems to matter most? What can I provide in the service of the students' learning and in the service of the discussion? An even subtler series of questions precedes those: *What do*

*the students seem to be telling me? How am I interpreting what they are communicating?
What can I do about it?*

These three questions are a representation of what are very complex and difficult-to-represent decisions. They are not always consciously thought. They represent the fact that improvisation is a stance of wondering and curiosity, and then being poised for action. Specifically, in teaching, it is a stance that involves an awareness of what students communicate implicitly and explicitly in order to be *with* them, in-the-moment, in-the-making.

What are Improvisation Theories?

When I returned to Teachers College in 2011 to pursue a doctorate, I wanted to know how improvisation had been theorized and explored as an academic concept. I wanted to know if others had explored the idea in relation to teaching.

Improvisation theories helped me articulate my definition above, which is initially derived from Maxine Greene's question. As I read further into improvisation theories, I began to realize that there are many ways to use these theories. I say *theories* because there is not one cohesive theory or one cohesive field of improvisation. For some, improvisation is one of many topics within their research; for others, it is central. For instance, for R. Keith Sawyer (2011), improvisation is central to his work both as an academic and as a well-sought consultant. He has done extensive research with improvisation in connection to creativity and innovation and edited the book *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*. Guelph University has the "International Center for Critical Studies in Improvisation," which hosts an academic journal, *Critical Studies in Improvisation* ("Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques en Improvisation," n.d.). In that journal, there are many who research improvisation as just part of their larger body of work (Backstrom, 2014; Basu, 2013; Labaree, 2014). There are also those

who study improvisation in its usually known contexts: jazz music (Berliner, 1994), improvisational acting (Johnstone, 1991, 1999). There are those who look for it in other realms of life: teaching (Sawyer, 2011), the dramatic play of children (Sawyer, 2002), and politics (Fischlin, Heble, & Lipsitz, 2013), just to name a few. Paul Berliner's (1994) *Thinking In Jazz: the Infinite Art of Improvisation* is an in-depth ethnography of professional jazz musicians and their practices as improvisers. Keith Johnstone (1991, 1999) is a central thinker and teacher in the field of improv acting. It has become very popular, outside of the academic realm, to use improv acting as a consulting approach to facilitate teamwork among employees in organizations. These latter communities function as places to share practice and, to my knowledge, have not yet entered the realm of research. All of this is to illustrate that improvisation is abundant in research and practice but not cohesive as a field.

The Implications of Improvisation as a Non-cohesive Field

This presents an interesting predicament to someone like me who is attempting to be an improvisation pedagogue (someone who uses improvisational theories to explain education, writing, and teaching as well as acting those into some version of improvisational meaning). There are many ways to approach a study using improvisation theories. And these ways are not always in line with one another in terms of the assumptions they espouse about knowledge and reality.

For instance, let us use the above two stories from my experience as a sample site of study just to illustrate the various approaches that could be used. I could use the technically delineated terms from Smith and Dean's (1997) work and closely examine the ways in which teaching moves and student discussion are improvisational. In such a study, I could try to define teaching practices or student practices according to Smith and Dean's nomenclature. For instance, "referent" and "non-referent" improvisations are terms that help define the role of structure in improvisation (pp. 19-30). Referent

improvisations take place within some preconceived or recognized structure (improvising along a scale within a pre-determined chord progression; playing an improvisational acting game within pre-determined rules of the scenario); they are, in a sense, referring to, or referent to, a structure. Non-referent improvisations create the structure as they go and therefore do not refer to any structure throughout their creation. We could attempt to classify improvisational teaching according to these terms. Our purposes and our assumptions would steer the use of the theory. If our purpose were to construct an improvisational model of teaching, this kind of study might be more in line with constructivist approaches. If our purpose were to argue that teaching is in fact improvisational, we might be more in line with positivist assumptions, whereby we assume the explicable order of activities in the world.

Other approaches to using improvisational theory might involve converging different theories. I could attempt to create an improvisational description of teaching relying on Smith and Dean's (1997) ideas and the ideas of other thinkers. I could incorporate a metaphoric extension of the concepts outlined by several people who studied improvisation directly, including Derek Bailey (1993), and Paul Berliner (1994). This kind of study would be about constructing a theory of improvisation that is unique to classroom teaching. However, I could take a far less technical approach and use Hallam and Ingold's (2007) contention that all of life is inherently improvisational. In this kind of study, the goal would not be about clearly articulating and delineating improvisational terms or techniques. It would instead be used as a grand metaphor to explore the experience of teaching. This study might move beyond the classroom and consider personal experience, narrative, and memory. For instance, Nayanee Basu (2013) explored the ways in which prison workers improvised in connection with a performance program in a Bengali prison. Basu explored how improvisation could describe the decision-making processes of her participants without limiting the discussion to work-related

activities. These are just some examples of the very different ways improvisation theories can be used to look at education.

Improvisation theories, therefore, do not advocate for a particular set of assumptions regarding knowledge or reality. It seems to me this researcher must ask himself: What kinds of explorations do I want to do in my research? What kinds of definitions of improvisation would I work with? What do I want to emphasize and explain? And after that, he must consider: How can improvisation assist in those explorations? And more importantly, what really seems to be drawing me to improvisation?

A Central Thread in my Interests: What is Our Role in Teaching Creative Production?

When I took a step back and looked at all of my imagined applications of improvisation in research, I saw that what they had in common was my interest in how we learn and teach creative production. Creative production is a kind of producing that requires individual invention as well as some adherence to conventions. I did not come to that definition so easily. I had to trace through my previous research projects and see where my interest really was. In the above example from my learning at the Lyceum, my own teaching was disrupted by the students. I had to learn more complex ways to enact my role as teacher. This was about my self-learning in improvisational teaching, which is creative production.

For my “5504” research paper in the Teaching of English, I conducted a self-study in order to identify and name the concepts of the improvisational moves I made while teaching. The goal there was to see how plausible it would be to describe such teaching approaches for beginning teachers. It was a self-study aimed at advancing my work as a teacher educator. My interest was in how I learned the creative production of teaching and in how a study of those experiences could help me teach beginning teachers. So I realized that the broader concerns I had could be summed up as follows: How do we

teach creative production? Given that creative production invariably involves some original choice on the part of the creator, what is our role in teaching creative production? In what ways might teaching creative (in this case, writing) production complicate the collaboration between teachers and students?

The challenges of creative production. All creative production presents a challenge to anyone who has to teach it to others. Whether we are talking about learning to teach, learning to write, or learning to improvise in a jazz ensemble, how we learn creative production is complicated for many reasons. Because creative production is not procedural, you cannot simply model and allow someone to copy. Because it is not simply an assembly of smaller skills or abilities, you cannot simply plan what will be learned in advance, and in what order. It involves stirring the spirit. But it is not about total freedom. There are conventions to operate within. And yet, a great creative producer can eventually alter the realm within which he is working. As a teacher of creative production, you are able to do what you are teaching, but you cannot do it *for* your students. You do not want them to do what you would do. You want them to do what *they* would do.

We can learn from improvisation theories about teaching creative production for a few reasons. First, teaching creative production is about teaching people to be ready and able for that which they do not yet know. And improvisation is concerned with how we respond to and work with what we did not know in advance would happen. Improvisation theories such as Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) notion of "dynamic capabilities" (p. 1) offer us suggestions about how to provoke such a readiness. Their theory also suggests that we take on the role of disruptor.

Improvisation theories are also well suited to help us explore the teaching of creative production because of what is unique about improvisation: the product and the process of composition come into existence simultaneously. On the other hand, other forms of creative production have compositional procedures that can occur beforehand.

For teaching, there is the lesson plan. For writing, there is the outline. In teaching either of these two forms of creative production, we can spend much of our instruction on creating the plan or the outline. We can teach someone how to plan a lesson, or we can work with students in how to outline and prepare their writing. Because an improvisation teacher does not have this option, he must focus solely on how to lead, coach, and educate for those moments of production (moments during which he cannot be involved).

Improvisation Theories and the Research Site

In clarifying a research site, I wanted to see how my improvisational approach (represented in the three questions: What do the students seem to be telling me? How am I interpreting what they are communicating? What can I do about it?) would work when applied to a *different kind* of creative production. I shifted my interests toward the form of creative production we are sometimes uniquely charged with teaching in English education: writing. In class discussions, students were implicitly and explicitly communicating to me the directions for my teaching and for their learning. But, with writing, I would need to discuss their writing with them. In order to apply my questions, I would have to hear from the students about their writing because the written works alone would not provide enough of an explanation.

There is a basis for this in improvisation theories. In Bruce Ellis Benson's (2003) philosophical analysis of musical composition, he argues that the process of musical composition is inherently improvisational. Furthermore, Benson contends that the notion of *Werktreue*, the idea that creative products are complete unto themselves, is a misunderstanding of creative products. Creative products are not just the text (either the musical composition or, in the case of this project, the written works) but our understanding of them (the meaning we ascribe to them; what we believe they mean and what we believe went into their construction). In more than one way, improvisation

theories (my own questions in my improvisational teaching stance, Benson's contention about *Werktreue*) suggest that we hear the students explain what writing means to them.

In my reading of research on the writing process, I noticed that, given the various contentions and disparities, much of the research shared the idea that the researcher structured the knowledge. In other words, it was the researcher who determined the area of focus when looking at the writing process. For instance, in "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," Flower and Hayes (2009) look specifically at what they call the "rhetorical problem" and how writers define and work through what they perceive to be the problems they are solving in their writing (p. 469). The data collection approach was a think aloud protocol in which students explained their reasoning for making writing decisions while writing. While the data came from the participants, the researchers used their terms to explain the data at the exclusion of the students' terms. This left me posing such questions as: Did the students think they were defining a rhetorical problem? What terms might the students use to explain what they did in their writing? How might they compare to what the researchers interpreted? In my study, while realizing that I, ultimately, structure all of the knowledge, I am looking at how students structure and describe the meaning of their experiences writing. This is where I realized that my entry point to the discourse would be the students' perspectives of their writing processes.

While I did not want to force the writing process into an improvisational framework or argue that writing ought to be conceptualized as improvisational, I thought back to the Lyceum students and how they ended up teaching me about transforming my role and augmenting my understanding of what being an improvisational teacher meant. I realized that this research project could serve to transform how I view my role as a writing instructor. While the Lyceum students actively engaged me in a transformation of teaching practices, because it happened in the course of class discussion, the discovery in this research project would work differently. Here it involves interview, discussion, and

analysis; it involves my explanation of what I believe the implications are for my role. If the meanings students and teachers assign to written works are contextual, what might this mean for our role as writing instructors? What, really, does it mean to “instruct” students how to write? And, how can improvisation theories help us understand that role? I understood what it meant to improvise in my role as a classroom discussion moderator, but I did not know what it meant in my role as writing instructor.

This is where the work of Bernstein and Barrett (2011) became crucial. Using improvisation, they clarify ways in which leaders can use the kinds of leadership approaches that jazz leaders like Miles Davis used. Two key ideas from their work—that we function as disruptors and that we enable the development of “dynamic capabilities”—address many of the dilemmas involved in teaching creative production (p. 1).

In reading Bernstein and Barrett’s (2011) work, I realized they shared something with the work of writing instructors: they were concerned with an outcome, with efficacy. The efficacy, however, was not a final product, as in producing “good work” or “getting results.” In their case, it was a suggestion for managers to act as Jazz Leaders to allow employees to develop “dynamic Capabilities” (p. 1). In other words, the abilities to be responsive in the face of unpredictable demands. In the practical, day-to-day lives of writing instructors, we are concerned with helping our students become better writers. But I do not think our concern is so simple. Being “better writers” does not only mean producing texts that we, as teachers, think are good. The “results” we want as writing instructors are not so easy to define. Dynamic capabilities could be one of many ways that resonate with the complexities of writing instruction.

I realized additional possibilities for the idea of jazz leadership to alter our understanding of what writing instruction is. To begin with, there are the terms that Bernstein and Barrett (2011) use that could foster interesting parallels in the teaching of writing: What kinds of “dynamic capabilities” are involved in writing and writing

instruction? How might the many ways of “provocative disruption” be used to cultivate these abilities? (pp. 1, 8). We can wonder with the following question: How might the exploration of such terms for writing instruction open up new possibilities for what it means to teach writing? But we can also wonder about the extent to which such terms are even applicable. To what extent might we need to revise an approach to provocative disruption that is premised on the specific contexts of our students’ writing experiences? For instance, what might a “yes to the mess” attitude about writing look like? (p. 8). And, more broadly, what can the notion of being a disruptor do for a pedagogy of writing instruction? Does it necessarily mean that we are disruptors instead of instructors? Might it instead mean that *disruptor* is one additional way we can work?

Major Research Questions

How to teach writing is a complex problem in the field of English education. The goal of this project is to further complicate that problem by examining writing from an improvisatory stance. This stance has two major premises. The first is the idea that texts themselves do not fully constitute the wholeness of the work and thus involve the meanings we ascribe to them (as writers, readers, teachers, and students). The second premise is that our role as writing instructors is an altering one that we develop and improvise from our understanding of what writing is about. Taking those premises, this project explores the following questions:

- (1) If texts do not fully constitute the whole of the written work, then how do students and teachers explain and understand what writing is about? This question is addressed in two ways:
 - (A) How do students understand what their writing is about?
 - (B) How do I understand what they report to me?

- (2) What might it mean to improvise our role in writing instruction? How might student explanations provide the context to improvise our roles as writing instructors?

These questions are premised on the improvisational teaching stance discussed above: *What do the students seem to be telling me? How am I interpreting what they are communicating? What can I do about it?*

Because this project is focused on how students explain their writing, it is important to consider the ways in which writers communicate what their writing means to them. It is also important to note that there is a lack of research that considers how students construct the meaning of their writing.

Communicating What Writing Means to Us

A quick survey of some recent dissertations into the writing process shows a concern for what can be effective for instructors. There is research into how the writer's attitude correlates with effective writing (Phillips, 2007), and how students use feedback (Van Horne, 2011). There is also research into high school writing education and the ability to synthesize multiple sources in college writing (Massengill, 2015), as well as research into how "self-regulation" and "self-efficacy" correlate with first-year college writing success (Sieben, 2013, p. iv). We see the continuation of the trend from the groundbreaking research of Emig (2009) and later Sommers (2009) with the concern for effectiveness in writing instruction and student practice. For Emig (2009), the concern was with developing an empirical and systematic description of the writing process in the hopes of more effective instruction. For Sommers (2009), the concern was with delineating the differences in revision approaches between novice and advanced writers. While the concerns of research vary, effective outcomes are a common purpose. What seems to be less prominent in the research is hearing how students construct meaning for the sake of complicating the role of the instructor.

There are many ways writers communicate their understanding of their writing. One way is through context. Sometimes writers provide the context of their writing within the text. When writers invite the reader to hear the context of the writing, some powerful effects might be rendered. In James Baldwin's (1955/2004) "Notes of a Native Son," he begins his narrative by telling us about the day of his father's death. In the next few sentences, he continues to contextualize this life-altering event by telling us about riots that had just happened in Harlem, and how his father's last child was born on the day of his death; how the day of his father's funeral was also Baldwin's birthday. What Baldwin does in amalgamating the personal contextual reference points for us is effectively contextualize the story. He tells us, through narrative, the multiple ways in which the story is in fact a story. But he also complicates our sense of what the story means to him. Baldwin invites an open-ended exploration of how we think he felt about his experiences. In complicating our sense of his experience, he helps us complicate a sense of our own experience. Writers can remind us of the richness of uncertainty.

Krakauer (1996), in *Into the Wild*, a book chronicling the journey and eventual death of 24-year-old Chris McCandless, includes a chapter detailing his own ascent of Devil's Thumb when he was in his early twenties. Krakauer initially published this same narrative several years prior in a collection of essays, but the context was different (Krakauer, 1992). The collection of essays, *Eiger Dreams*, dealt with Krakauer's successes and failures in assenting to great physical feats. When he republishes the narrative in the context of the McCandless story, Krakauer begins with a two-page introduction in which he explores the ways in which his present self is more aware of his former shortcomings than his former self was. Krakauer positions his narrative as a way of further understanding the puzzling question of why a well-educated and business savvy young man (Chris McCandless), would consistently put himself in harm's way in the middle of the wilderness. The story behind Krakauer's story is one situated in mutual inquiry with the reader. In his second telling of the story, Krakauer takes what was

previously a physical adventure story and turns it into an existential and psychological adventure. He illustrates for us that our stories mean in different ways throughout our lives.

These are just two examples that illustrate writers communicating the context of their writing within the texts themselves. While these examples provide a brief illustration of how writers can communicate the meaning of their work, these are very different examples from the stories of student writers. Baldwin and Krakauer are established writers who chose writing as their form of creative production. The entire context is different from the contingencies students face. Students may not want to write or may not be certain of the role of writing in their lives yet. Most of the writing students do is in the form of assignments for class and, in the case of this research project, the college application essays. Student writing assignments tend to come in smaller assignments. My understanding of their writing experience is also different from my understanding of the explanations of professional writers. In hearing from students, I am interested in informing my practice. These are just some of the contextual implications facing student writers, and these are just my explanations. What else might I learn from listening to what students think the contexts are?

The Context of the Study

I believe the relevant positions of contexts for this project are: the broader educational context; the school where the research is taking place; my position on improvisation and creative production; the participants.

As the research is gathered, it is 2016 in the New York City Department of Education, and we are in the fourth year of using the Danielson rubric to evaluate teachers. As a veteran of some 15 years, I still begin with a tabula rasa each year, to be observed a minimum of four times. The evaluator comes in with a rubric in hand, or on a

computer, and enters brief descriptions corresponding to a score on a scale of 1 to 4 (ineffective to highly effective) for several criteria or “domains” of teaching. This conceptualization of teaching is premised on the notion of replicable phenomena. It regards effective teaching as a practice that can be identified in abstraction.

We are also several years into the common core standards, emphasizing that there is essential knowledge about literature and writing that all students can be taught. While the goals of the standards are indeed laudable, they come at the idea of writing instruction with a finalized set of standards, serving almost as a declaration, of what matters most. For instance, we can just look at a writing standard for eleventh and twelfth grade: “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.” This is a laudable goal because it values clarity of communication and indicates areas for growth (students can work on deciding what “well chosen details” are and how to create “well structured events”). But nowhere in the writing standards is there room for accommodating for the students’ understanding of what writing is. And nowhere in the standards is there room for accommodating for the complexity of the teacher’s role in the students’ writing. In this model, writing is just another skill, or set of skills and procedures that can in fact be taught and learned (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Regardless of the position of these premises, what matters for the context here is that both the teacher evaluation system and the common core standards emphasize a view of ideas and intellectual and social actions that are finite and definable. Many of the descriptions in these measures are laudable. But the entire emphasis is on identification of repeated phenomena, not on discovery, nuance, or variety. And, most importantly, there is no space given to continuously learning about what it means to write and what it means to teach writing.

This does not mean that the current climate in education or even in the school where this research takes place is juxtaposed to the kinds of things I am researching. But, in the broader context, there is not an overt recognition that creative production (in this case, writing) is mysterious and requires continuous discovery.

In this study, I propose that along with our certainty about writing instruction we have questions. For instance, students sometimes develop strategies for writing that we might view as a hindrance to their process. Sometimes we teach what we regard as a better strategy, so that they can proceed without the hindrance. But might it sometimes be better to discuss with students how they developed their strategies and why they continue to work with them? This kind of question asks that we consider our role as both direct instructors of writing as well as guides in helping students understand how they are strategizing, working, and thinking about writing.

I have chosen the pseudonym National High School for the school where this research takes place. In part, there is an irony to this name. There cannot be, insofar as I can conceive of it, a high school in the United States that represents the nation as a whole. And yet, what I think is true about this school, where I have been a teacher for nine years, that is probably true about every other high school in the country is that you do not know what is going on there until you are there. One of the biggest problems in discussions about education today is the assumption that we actually know what is going on in schools. The worse assumption—that we actually can know—is what is driving so much of the need for big data.

This National High School, a public high school in New York City, is open to all students who are residents of the city. Students have to take a standardized admissions exam in order to be considered for admission to the school. The school shares its admissions process along with several other public schools in the city. This matters because one of the things that sets National High School apart from many other schools is that students try very hard to get into the school.

The students in the school are academically serious. Being a “super senior”—staying on for more than four years—is not allowed. The daily attendance rate is usually above 95%, and it is this percentage of students who go to four-year colleges.

The school has dozens of student-led clubs and organizations as well as a student government, a weekly TV show posted to YouTube, and a wide range of sports teams. Students get accepted to schools such as Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, and McGill, as well as CUNY, SUNY, and a large variety of small liberal arts colleges.

There are four grades, ninth through twelfth, and about 700 students per grade. The graduations are so large they are generally held in large theaters in Manhattan, such as Avery Fisher Hall.

The school functions on a rare model for public schools in New York City and has an “Open Campus.” This means that students, if they have a lunch or another free period, can leave the building or even be in areas of the building such as the halls, the cafeteria, the library, or the lobby.

All of the above information is well known among faculty, such as myself, who have been in the building a number of years.

I have been a teacher in the school for almost ten years. I began my career in a school in Harlem, which I will refer to with the pseudonym, The Lyceum. When I began my career there, it was still quite an impressive place. With only a thousand or so students, even during passing time, the halls were quiet. In fact, for the first few months of my career, I noticed the immense silence of the halls. It was the quietest school I had ever been in as a student or as a teacher. Over the years, that changed, and the population of the school increased. The vision and leadership altered and, sometimes, faltered. When I transferred to National High School, I was part of a beginning cohort of teachers who were making an exodus from The Lyceum.

This was not done in celebration on my part. I deeply missed the school, and I still think of the great moments I had there. I owe the bedrock of my teaching paradigm—an improvisational approach—to my students there.

To sum up the context of the school and myself in it thus far, I entered the school as a relatively seasoned teacher. I left my previous school because of dramatic and drastic changes in its day-to-day operation and long-term vision (another story entirely, too long to tell here). I felt immediately comfortable at National High School and, over the years, have grown to see it as a second home. The students are second to none, and teaching there is so remarkable that I am often in awe that this is actually something I get paid to do.

My enthusiasm for teaching at the school is a huge part of the context here. I truly admire the students and how they are able to juggle so many extracurricular activities and complicated subjects and still keep their wits about them. In large part, I attribute my own motivation to pursue a doctoral degree while working full time and being a parent of two young children from the constant example around me set by the students at National High School over the years.

Promises of This Study

Teaching writing is no simple task. I propose that complicating, rather than clarifying how we understand the teaching of writing can enrich and enliven our practice. Specifically, I suggest we complicate how we understand our role as writing instructors. If we take a cue from improvisation theories, we can arrive at some interesting shifts in our role. If writing is not just about the finished text, and the student's understanding is crucial, then maybe sometimes our role is as listener. Creative production is a complex kind of experience. It is filled with mystery, opportunity, and disappointment. It is not a finite kind of experience that clearly works in set ways. Our role, therefore, in being

“instructors” in creative production ought to be continuously developed, questioned, and reconceived. But examining the writing process might not be enough. Hearing from the creators is important. Hearing from students about where they ascribe meaning is one part of augmenting how we understand our role. Improvisation theories can further provide questions and concepts that can further amend our understanding of that role.

This study suggests that improvisation might shine some interesting light on the difficulties involved in understanding the writing process. Improvisation can offer us insights into understanding the way we create in the act of writing. It can also offer some ways of understanding how our actions as practitioners can influence the experience of students as writers.

In this study, I attempt to illustrate rather than generalize what an inquiry into student explanation can provide in order to avoid the problems of generalizability in writing process research (North, 1987). Additionally, writing process researchers have suggested that the writing process is non-ordered. Improvisation offers many concepts to help illuminate our understanding of the non-ordered workings of writing. Improvisation also offers some ways of understanding the role of the teacher in facilitating students’ writing.

The Arrangement

In Chapter II, I begin with a review of the literature on the writing process. This first part of the review takes us through the types of research conducted around the writing process. The promises of the research on process reside in the conceptualizing of writing as a non-ordered process. The second part of the review is concerned with the ways in which the ideas of Benson (2003) and Bernstein and Barrett (2011) can amend our understanding of the writing process.

In Chapter III, I set forth the ways I worked through the research. This constitutes the practical methods of the research. I then move into the more theoretical notions behind the research, including the ways in which improvisation was involved, the ways in which narrative was involved, the way I conceived of the interview, and how improvisation and “Writing and Inquiry” were useful (Richardson, 2000).

For the practical part of the methods, I interviewed three high school seniors five times each. Each interview was about 30-40 minutes long and centered around a different piece of writing brought in by the student. Interviews were one-on-one, in a classroom. I provided students with a laptop enabling them to view the writing they brought in as well as respond to some of my questions. Interviews were not audio recorded. The procedure I used to capture what students said involved my own notes on my own laptop, and, at several points during each interview, I would ask participants to produce a written version of what they just said or respond by writing first. I also wrote immediately following each interview, allowing memory to be part of the data. I began to analyze the data immediately. Each day that I conducted an interview, I spent time that evening writing an analysis. I kept all of the entries of that analysis in the order in which they occurred.

I began the research project with conceptual understandings of Scheurich’s (1997) postmodern notion of the interview, and other ideas from the field of narrative research. In the methods section, the key thing I explore is how exactly such methods played out for me. I explain the premises that I worked with and then refer to research notes and provide a preview of the discussion in order illustrate how the research occurred in this instance.

In Chapter IV, I discuss each of the three participants separately and examine the lessons and questions that each case raises. I then conclude with a cross-case analysis.

In Chapter V, I discuss the data in terms of three broad categories. The broad categories that I have defined, which will be discussed later, all point to the ways in

which writing is deeply connected to context. The first category is explanations about the creation of writing. These are the explanations we provide about the production of a work of writing; what happened within the context of the act of writing. The second category is explanations about accomplishment. These are the explanations we provide about our own satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a work pertaining to various kinds of goals we have for the writing; this is about the writing and its intended purpose; it is about what requires or compels the writing to come into existence right now and the extent to which we feel accomplished with it. These explanations are tied to context in multiple ways: the purpose we perceive the writing as having; our current criteria for achieving said purpose. The third category is explanations surrounding how we view the prompt and being prompted to write. These explanations are concerned with how open or closed we feel in regard to the call to write. The prompting is contained in context because of chronology (the prompt or call comes first, the response or writing second) and because how we feel about the prompt is uniquely tied to where we are in our understanding of ourselves as writers now. Additionally, the prompt is situated in a context and emerges for a reason, or given set of reasons.

While these three categories are not offered up as findings, they are meant to function as organizing structures to allow for the discussion of data as well as to develop the ways that context is at the heart of how we make meaning of the writing process.

In Chapter VI, I address the research questions directly. While the research questions guide the entire discussion of the previous chapter, I find it is also purposeful to address them directly. In this chapter, I discuss the participants in relation to one another and in terms of considerations for writing instruction and the extent to which improvisation illuminates the writing process. In this chapter, I explore how provocative disruption can be crucial for teaching practices. I explore the possibility of improvisation to form a sense of teaching ethics for writing. Finally, I provide implications for future research.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review is organized into four parts. This first part presents an overview of key research on the writing process and attempts to place the current project within that context and explain the use of improvisation theory as a lens for the data of this project. The second part of the review considers two key theorists and their ideas from improvisation theory: Benson (2003) and Bernstein and Barrett (2011). I will unpack the ideas from these theorists and explain their relevance to the research on writing and composition in English education.

In the third part of the review, I will explore some broad dilemmas with improvisation concerning issues of definition. This serves the purpose of illustrating how improvisation theorists have grappled with the dilemma of the imperfection of the improvisation metaphor. While the ideas in this section might not be directly applicable to everything I discuss here, it is important to carve out certain definitional dilemmas about improvisation. For instance, some theorists regard improvisation as a fixed activity with technical parameters, while others are far looser in identifying which actions they deem to be improvisation.

There is not one clear cut definition of what improvisation is. But given that it is concerned with creative production, some of the dilemmas of terminology could be

illuminating to us in English education as a way of re-envisioning the kinds of things we grapple with.

In the fourth part of the review, I discuss important implications from studies on narrative and improvisation. I highlight narrative and improvisation for a few reasons. To begin with, in my research into improvisation theory, I have only found this one cross-sectional topic to have robust literature from various fields. While still not a formal collective, in some organic way, researchers seemed to be onto something in looking at narrative and improvisation together. Narrative, like improvisation, is has varied definitions. Despite varied meanings, narrative is crucial to English education and the field often deals with inquiries into what narrative might be. While so much of what is studied in literature classrooms is nonfiction or fiction narrative, there are more complex inquiries about what narrative actually is that are part of the kinds of inquiries English teachers explore in their classrooms with students every day. Additionally, narrative is a way of telling, and thus it resonates well with what I am asking students to do in this study. This study looks at writing and how students explain what they understand the experience of writing to be. Studies on narrative and improvisation provide examples of how improvisation can be used as a lens to examine ways of making meaning; in so doing, such studies raise crucial questions that can be used for analysis. This particular part of the literature review is intended to demonstrate possibilities for improvisation theory to conceptually augment ideas in English education.

For each thinker who looks into improvisation, the scope of his or her inquiry greatly determines what is included and what is not. And because improvisation theory is not a cohesive field of study, using improvisation theory involves the convergence of different thinkers. Benson (2003) provides the premise for the inquiry into the meaning students ascribe to their experience writing, but he does not address how improvisation is particularly crucial for social organizations, i.e., schools and, in particular, classrooms. I agree with Faigley (2009) that we ought to understand writing in its social context.

Bernstein and Barrett (2011) offer insights into the importance of improvisation in social organizations; they offer a framework, a set of concepts that can be used to analyze, explore definitions of, and even create research questions for improvisatory practice in a social setting. However, Bernstein and Barrett do not delve into the conceptual dilemmas of talking about improvisation. Therefore, I will take up a review of several researchers from varying fields to illustrate the ways in which improvisation has been used as a lens and has been complicated conceptually.

Part I: Process in English Education

This part of the review of literature focuses specifically on the writing process in English education and serves the following purposes. First, we will understand the different kinds of research approaches that have been taken. I will begin with the work of Stephen M. North (1987) and his *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*. What we will see is that North provides categories for the kinds of researchers that have existed in English education and a good explanation of the dilemmas of various approaches. Additionally, North's description of how practitioner knowledge is made up of professional "lore" provides a good foundation for why research ought to be suggestive and illustrative (pp. 24-25). North himself does not expressly make the connection, but I believe his discussion of practitioners can explain the dilemma of generalizability. Then, to deepen the ways we can understand researchers of the writing process, we will consider Lester Faigley's (2009) "Theories of Process: a Critique and a Proposal." Faigley proposes that writing process be considered as a contextual understanding.

To understand the ways in which various players have acted within the field of English education, I turn to the work of Stephen M. North (1987) and his *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*. I use the term *players* and not *educators*, *researchers*, or *scholars* because, as North portrays the field, it is made up of players who take on various

roles: practitioners, historians, philosophers, critics, and researchers. This portion of the literature review will be primarily concerned with the researchers and the four kinds of researchers that North identifies. But before discussing the researchers, it is important to understand North's discussion of "lore" on the part of the practitioners (pp. 24-25). Lore is made up of the informal discussions among practitioners. There are three key features to lore that North identifies: that anything can become part of lore; nothing can ever be removed from lore; contributions to lore "have to be framed in practical terms" (p. 25).

Here are important implications about lore. Lore is not like a critical scholarly system in which we can look at the proclamations of the past and realize how more recent insights prove them antiquated. Lore does not exist as a written document or series of written documents the way scholarship, philosophy, and research can exist. Lore exists as lore, as knowledge within individuals, as ideas expressed in discussion at faculty meetings or in the teachers' lounge. And so, this first feature of lore, that anything can be added to it, is such because lore is not an official realm or system. The second feature, that nothing can be removed from lore, is a counterpart to this non-official status of this realm of practitioner knowledge. The third feature, that all contributions must be practically framed, is probably the most significant one for the scholar and researcher to bear in mind.

Because lore is practically oriented, all contributions, whether they come from a teacher or from a well-known researcher, must have practical usage. This means that popular techniques and approaches are altered to fit each individual educator's unique educational purposes and needs at that time, within that context. If we read about a period of English education during which, for example, pre-writing was popular, we cannot assume that it was enacted according to the same method in every classroom or that most teachers were even using it. Further, given that nothing is ever removed from lore, we cannot assume that antiquated ideas, for example, focusing on grammar and usage, are out of use among practitioners.

I find this to be one of the most important points about practitioners precisely because we can never know what is actually happening within English classrooms. If we ever create grand narratives about English education, we must remember North's (1987) point that practitioners use research and scholarship in ways that matter to them. Similarly, in my research, I explore the ways in which students describe the writing process in their terms. We can say that there is a parallel to lore between practitioners and students. Of course, it is not a complete parallel. The important reminder that North provides us with is that those who are doing the things we are researching and writing about work according to their own needs and their own terms—whether they are teachers or students. For my purposes, I do not believe that students as writers have what constitutes lore. However, I do believe they, like practitioners, are working through their writing in terms that are contextual and contingent on their current experiences. Further, North's insights about lore inform the ways in which I anticipate this project being relevant to practitioners: that it serve as an illustration of possibilities rather than as a prescription.

The point that we can never know what educators are doing may seem obvious, but in any discussion where we try to trace the development of a particular idea in English education, we must remember that we are tracing the development of ideas in research, not in practice. Research can sometimes be viewed with chronology, and categories, but practice or lore cannot.

Even understanding research as having a collective movement can be a difficult task. North (1987) provides categories and uses them to hash out various trends. He tells us that there are four modes of research, and, to each mode, there are types of researchers that correlate: experimentalists for the experimental mode, clinicians for the clinical mode, formalists for the formal mode, and ethnographers for the ethnographic mode. North characterizes the first three as positivists having the “fundamental faith in the describable orderliness of the universe: that is, the belief that things-in-the-world,

including in this case people, operate according to determinable or ‘lawful’ patterns” (p. 137).

The experimenters seek to discover generalizable laws for how given phenomena work. In line with the tradition of natural sciences, these researchers are concerned with extracting generalizable laws. The clinicians are concerned with particular cases and “the ways in which a particular subject does, learns or teaches writing” (North, 1987, p. 137). North characterizes “The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders” by Janet Emig (2009) to be the prime example of the clinical mode because of “its efforts to examine a very small number of subjects in considerable depth” (North, 1987, p. 138).

It is important to unpack the reasons why Emig employed this clinical mode. The bulk of Emig’s (2009) “The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders” is concerned with a literature review that establishes the justification for her approach. Emig tells us that “most of the data about the composing process occur as three broad types” (p. 228). They are: “(a) description by a writer of his own methods of working; (b) dialogue, usually in the form of correspondence, between a writer and a highly attuned respondent, such as a fellow writer or a gifted editor and (c) analysis by professional critics or fellow writers” (p. 228). There are three problems with these sources of data, according to Emig: they cannot be systematized, they are contradictory, and most important to Emig is that these data are not focused on how students actually write with “adequate theoretical or empirical depth” (p. 228). We see that Emig is entering a research narrative and identifying a need that she sees as warranted. What I would add about Emig is that, while her research approach can be described as clinical, she introduces it with a categorization and discussion of the research that has preceded hers. Her study takes place in the context of a research discourse.

But that discourse, according to North (1987), is not entirely certain of what it wants to be. North characterizes this kind of research as having a kind of “schizophrenia” and “identity crisis” in regard to how clinicians view their findings (p. 233). On the one

hand, the researchers have a “modesty” and do not want to claim that their insights say anything beyond the cases they have studied (p. 234). And clinicians “go ahead and present Practitioners with generalized implications” (p. 236). The dilemma here seems to be one of deciding upon a distinct paradigm of knowledge.

Next, we have North’s (1987) discussion of the formalists who have a similar dilemma, but it is not one of identity but rather a confusion of purpose. The formalists, “build models or simulations by means of which they attempt to examine the *formal* properties of the phenomena under study” (p. 137). Flower and Hayes (2009) are the most prominent example of formalists in writing research. The problem with this kind of research is how the initial purpose, to build and present a model and analyze and describe its forms, gets confused with empirical knowledge (North, 1987, p. 271).

While the dilemmas North (1987) points out about formalist research are worth noting, the content of the research of Flower and Hayes (2009) gives us important developments in the understanding of process. One of their contentions was that there are aspects to the writing process previously thought to be mysterious that are definable. In “The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem,” Flower and Hayes look specifically at what they call the “Rhetorical problem” and how it is formed (p. 469). They begin by declaring that discovery is a metaphoric way of understanding writing and that “writers don’t find meanings, they make them” (p. 469). In their contention that “process is not a creative accident,” Flower and Hayes make a clear assertion that they intend to deeply unpack the specific considerations involved in process (p. 468). Further along, I will discuss Flower and Hayes’s notion of the rhetorical problem and its significance to inform this study. Here, we are looking at North’s (1987) depiction of their particular kind of research and its dilemmas while acknowledging its contributions.

In the fourth category of researchers, ethnographers are described as follows: “peculiar concern is with people as members of communities” (North, 1987, p. 137). Unlike the previous three kinds of researchers, who are positivist and seek to create

generalizability, “ethnographers are essentially in the business of collecting multiple versions of what is *held* to be real by the people they investigate” (p. 279).

The major takeaways from North’s (1987) characterizations of research in English education are:

1. That research functions differently according to the conventions of different genres of research.
2. That the problem of generalizability is a recurring one.
3. That practitioner lore and research discourse are separate discourses.

While North (1987) characterizes the forms of research, Faigley (2009) looks specifically at research on the writing process and distinguishes different kinds of views presented. Faigley identifies three “views” on the writing process: the expressive view, the cognitive view, and the social view.

Faigley (2009) cites the emergence of the expressive view as having started with Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke’s (1964) “Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing.” (as cited in Faigley, 2009). Faigley says that the latter’s definition of good writing “includes the essential qualities of Romantic expressionism—integrity, spontaneity, and originality” (Faigley, 2009 p. 654). Faigley critiques each of these three essential qualities and explains their shortcomings as values for writing. Integrity cannot be assessed because it is not about the student’s writing but about the extent to which the teacher believes the student is sincere about the writing. Spontaneity was most espoused by Peter Elbow (1973) in *Writing without Teachers* (as cited in Faigley, 2009). Elbow broke with Roman and Wlecke’s contention that thinking happens before writing and argued for an “organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the very beginning—before you know your meaning at all” (Elbow, 1973, p. 15, as cited in Faigley, 2009). But Elbow’s insistence on an organic writing process is contradictory, according to Faigley. Faigley (2009) contends that if writing really were carried out in such an organic way, “the resultant piece of writing

would then seem fragmentary and unfinished” (p. 655). As Faigley reads it, in Elbow’s view of spontaneity, revision is still a part of the process of finalizing a piece of writing, and therefore spontaneity is not truly part of the writing of the piece. It is as if Elbow is arguing for a different form of pre-writing in which pre-writing looks and feels like writing. We can look at Faigley’s criticism as a dilemma in defining terms. However, it is possible to read Elbow’s contentions another way. I would suggest that Elbow’s emphasis on revision does not cancel out the benefits of spontaneity that he espouses. Claiming that writing ought to emerge spontaneously does not preclude later alterations from happening. What really matters here is that Faigley’s contention with Elbow’s approach illustrates a problem with talking about the writing process: definition of terms.

I contend that terms about the writing process ought to be varied and mean different things in different contexts. The goal of this research project is to explore how students explain their experiences writing and to explore and delineate those explanations from how I explain their experiences.

Finally, the last romantic quality, originality, plays out in the expressive view with an emphasis on how writing can serve to foster the individual development of the person. Faigley cites Giroux in saying “that expressive theory came as a reaction against, to use his word, the ‘technicization’ of education,” and the emphasis on “‘personal growth’ is a turning away from the relation of the individual to the social world” (Giroux 1983, p. 219, as cited in Faigley, 2009, p. 656). The expressive view’s major flaw, it seems, is that it is disconnected from the social reality of the writer.

In my study, I would argue that I share some values with and yet differ from the expressive view insofar as Faigley (2009) has described it. In asking students to explain what they believe matters in connection with their writing, I am allowing for the exploration of the social context. This is because the writing that currently matters to students arises out of their current assignments, their current coursework, and the fact that the college application essay dominated their experience with writing during the time of

the research. The exploration of the college essay and my discussion of how students feel about being prompted are situated in a social context, specifically in the social context of them, as high school seniors, experiencing the highest stakes writing assignments they have ever had. On the other hand, my own reading of the data resonates with the expressive view in two ways. First, given the fact that I am using improvisation as a lens of analysis, I can appreciate Elbow's valuing of spontaneity. While spontaneity is not a synonym of improvisation, improvisation does provoke and value spontaneity. Second, in my reading of the data, my category of "accomplishment explanations" resonates well with the expressive view's emphasis on the development of the person. My concern with accomplishment and reading it as part of the data was not something I brought to the study as a lens. Instead, it was an insight about what I value in my teaching practice that I had as I analyzed the data.

Despite the drawbacks of any approach to understanding the writing process, there are simultaneously worthwhile ideas and worthwhile goals. It is not a discrete progression of discovery where newer studies cancel out misunderstandings of previous ones.

What researchers like Faigley and North provide is some sense of a larger story that helps the field of English education make sense of the trajectory of discourse. Recall North's characterization above that the clinicians have a dilemma of identity and the formalists have a dilemma of purpose. Emig was a clinician and Flower and Hayes were formalists (North, 1987). With Faigley, we have both Emig and Flower and Hayes together in the cognitive view, and they are each, respectively, connected to the major sources of the cognitive view; those sources are English education and psychology. The cognitive view stems first from English education and Emig's research in response to the 1966 Dartmouth conference. Faigley says that Emig's critique of Rohman and Wlecke's pre-writing set the stage for the cognitive view of writing: "Emig provided not only a new methodology but an agenda for subsequent research, raising issues such as pausing

during composing, the role of rereading in revision, and the paucity of substantial revision in student writing” (Faigley, 2009, p. 657). What Faigley is highlighting here is Emig’s examination of the behavior of the writer and her illustration of the fact that writing does not happen in one discrete order for all students. He notes that her critique of prewriting became a consistent refrain throughout subsequent cognitive research. The cognitive researchers were reacting to two major things: a contention that the writing process happens in a given order and research methods from the social sciences including “the case-study approach and think-aloud methodology” (Faigley, 2009, p. 657). In their attempt to debunk one positivist approach, however, they brought in a whole new one. Faigley tells us that many writing teachers, in their acceptance of Flower and Hayes’s depiction of the writing process, do not realize the underlying implications of cognitive psychology: that cognition can be simplified into separate functional pieces and can be replicated with a computer. Here we see a resonance with North’s characterization of Flower and Hayes and formalists more generally as having conflicting purposes: gaining an understanding of a hypothetical model of the writing process versus uncovering the truth of how it works.

The third view of composing that Faigley (2009) describes is the social view. It represents another alteration in the continuing discussion of the writing process. There are different brands or, as Faigley calls them, four “lines” of research in the social view “poststructuralist theories of language, the sociology of science, ethnography and Marxism” (p. 659). However, the social view can be understood “on the basis of one central assumption: human language (including writing) can be understood only from the perspective of society rather than a single individual” (p. 659). The shift with the social view is from viewing writing as a discrete individual activity to viewing writing, reading, and all relationships with texts as contingent upon the social context of the texts and the individuals in relation to those texts.

Faigley (2009) implores us to move toward a synthesis to explore the writing process while insisting on the contention of context.

Part II: The Relevance of Improvisation

We have seen from the previous literature that, while the problem of generalizability has been part of some research approaches, many researchers have contended that the writing process does not function in a set way and therefore involves unpredictability and variability. The trend in the literature is to look at the writing process not as disordered but as non-ordered. These descriptions of the writing process resonate with some ideas from improvisation theory. And improvisation theory can possibly augment our inquiries into the writing process.

Flower and Hayes (2009) contend that the writing process is a problem solving process and that “people only solve the problems they give themselves” (p. 469). The rhetorical problem is a self-defined or self-constructed problem, and it steers how the writer moves through the writing. Their study looks at how writers develop the rhetorical problem. To use their terms, my study looked at how students *explain* their rhetorical problems. Flower and Hayes sought to describe the actions of the writer. I sought to elicit the explanations of the experiences students had with writing.

Sommers’s (2009) research into experienced versus novice writers suggests that wanting problems is a more advanced way of considering the revision process. Sommers tells us, “But these revision strategies are a process of more than communication; they are part of the process of *discovering meaning* altogether” (p. 329, italics in original). And because writing is a process of learning, “we can see the importance of dissonance” (p. 329). Experienced writers want there to be dilemmas in their ideas; they want there to be things that are dissonant and difficult to figure out so that they can go through the process of figuring out what they are communicating in the first place. Dissonance in the

writing process is a sign that things are moving toward depth; it is a welcome complex set of dilemmas.

The improvisation mindset views “errors as a source for learning” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, pp. 8, 24). Combining the language of Flower and Hayes with Bernstein and Barrett, we arrive at a view of errors in writing as only wrong *in relation to* certain goals. It might be possible that errors lead to a redefining of goals. The idea of “yes to the mess” is an attitude toward performance that is about preferring the ambiguity and lack of clarity of the performance and composition process (p. 15). These two concepts are part of a larger framework in which the writers advocate for a “jazz mindset” approach to leadership (p. 1). The point is not to demonstrate that the writing process research fits neatly into improvisation theory. Rather, we see that some of the major contentions on the part of major researchers can resonate with improvisation. What I think is more compelling are the ways in which improvisation theory can augment the study of the writing process. In the next section, I will explain how Benson’s (2003) contention with *werktreue* gives rise to this inquiry into how students make meaning around their writing.

What Can *Werktreue* Do for Understanding the Writing Process?

To begin a discussion of how we construct meaning, let me provide an example from theater in my own experience as reader, educator, and viewer. I had taught and read *Fences* (Wilson, 1988) many times. I had some notion of what the play was about, what its symbols and metaphors were concerned with. And then I saw Denzel Washington’s performance on Broadway, and I have never read the play the same way again.

Washington brought about for me the humor in the play. I heard, as well, the swish of the baseball bat as Cory took a swing at his father. Had the actor been one inch too close, he would have certainly hit Denzel Washington. Now, these examples could parallel the difference between hearing a work of music performed by the best in the business and reading the score privately. That is one way of looking at it. But my understanding of

what that play is is a conglomerate of my reading, my viewing of a live performance, and my discussions of it. My understanding of it, my interpretations, are discursive; they are shifting, living, and unstable. What I am exemplifying here is the condition of continuously changing meaning. Yes, there is a plot to *Fences* and, yes, over time you open to a specific point in the story, the same thing happens. In that sense, *Fences* has an ideal existence. But what about that function of art that draws us to the art in the first place: meaning?

Bruce Ellis Benson (2003) analyzes musical composition in order to make the claim that the process of composing is inherently improvisational. The implications for understanding the writing process are not so much in adopting an improvisational view of the writing process but rather in borrowing one of Benson's key concepts: *werktreue*. *Werktreue* is the idea that the piece is a finalized entity and that performance serves the purpose of faithfully rendering it, of being "true" to the work. But Benson argues that a composition is merely finished for reasons of happenstance: there is a deadline, or the writer is just finished with writing this piece for now. The musical work, on the other hand, is always being reinvented.

Benson's (2003) proposition helps illuminate why describing the creative process is so difficult. To oppose the notion that the work has a final existence is to open the possibility that composition can sometimes be the work itself. This possibility throws into question the distinct boundary between process and product. What is unique about improvisation is that it is a kind of work and simultaneous composition.

So, if written works are not things unto themselves, complete, finite, and whole, then what are they? As I see it, challenging the *werktreue* conception of writing has two major parts to it: challenging the finality of the content of the work (the incarnation that it is currently taking now) and challenging a fixed sense of meaning regarding the work.

So we have a challenge to finality on two fronts: that the content need not be final and that all of the meaning we attribute to the work need not be final. I am concerned

with the latter challenge. And the entire inquiry of this dissertation is premised directly on this challenge: if our written work does not have fixed meaning, then how do we make meaning of it?

Smith and Dean (1997) do not agree with Benson's (2003) claim (which is his major claim) that improvisation is how musical composers compose. They use the term "applied improvisation" (Smith & Dean, 1997, p. 28) to refer to improvisation used in the act of composing. And their treatment of it is merely an improvisation recorded and then re-presented to an audience. Benson's (2003) improvisation is not the kind of improvisation that is winging it when we do not know what else to do. Rather, Benson claims that improvisation is what we do when we know what we are doing. In other words, it is intentionally part of the composition process. It is not an emergency method or technique that is used when all else fails; rather, it is the fundamental way in which we compose.

For this inquiry, the most important takeaway from Benson is the premise that the meaning we have regarding a composition is never fixed. What I wonder is: What can we learn from that continuously changing meaning that students make of their writing?

While we understand the opportunities that Benson (2003) provides, I would like to borrow North's (1987) terms and consider him a formalist. Benson (2003) is concerned with the form of the composing process and with asserting a fundamental claim about it. My inquiry, being concerned with student explanation and its potential to inform teaching practice, is a response to Benson's contention about meaning not being stable. Bernstein and Barrett (2011), as I will explain in the next section, provide terms that can illuminate how those student explanations could be considered.

Understanding Student Writing In Terms of Provocative Disruption

Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) work on improvisation and leadership holds a space within improvisation studies that is worth noting: their ideas are both applicable in

analysis while being open and fluid. They provide a set of concepts but do not argue for strict adherence to a particular system or approach of understanding. They provide both clarity and suggestibility. If we consider some of the dilemmas with researchers outlined by North (1987) above, we see a tendency to prescribe to practitioners. Additionally, the difference between practitioner discourse and researcher discourse teaches us that practitioners use ideas discursively and according to practical reasons. For these reasons, Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) ideas are particularly useful for discussing the practitioner's role in the writing process.

Bernstein and Barrett (2011) are from the field of managerial studies, concerned with the way business leaders can be more like jazz leaders. They begin by talking about "dynamic capabilities," which are the abilities to be dynamically responsive to the inevitably unpredictable world of work. Dynamic capabilities are necessary for leaders to develop in business because there is not one set approach that will always work (pp. 1-4). Leaders will have to be responsive to all kinds of unpredictable factors. This in itself is not improvisation. The improvisational work of jazz leaders provides a way to develop the dynamic capabilities that much management literature espouses but does not offer solutions to creating. Bernstein and Barrett suggest that the work of jazz leaders can offer insights into how leaders in organizations can foster dynamic capabilities. The authors are seeking to fill a void where there is much talk of "what" dynamic capabilities are and not much talk of "how" to develop them (p. 1). Dynamic capabilities present an organization's intentional and learned ability to adapt to what is unpredictable. As the authors explain, dynamic capabilities are a collection of intentionally learned strategies for working with the inevitably unpredictable elements of an organization's given work (p. 4). What is crucial to the authors' claims is that these dynamic capabilities are intentionally acquired on the part of the organization. Their argument is that the leader of an organization ought to adopt a "Jazz mindset" as the best way to go about fostering these dynamic capabilities (p. 4).

So far, the following things are crucial from Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) work. To begin with, they clearly delineate a kind of flexible responsiveness from the act of improvisation. They are not saying that dynamic capabilities are improvisation; rather they are saying that a jazz mindset on the part of the leader, which would involve certain aspects of jazz improvisation, is an optimal way to foster dynamic capabilities. Further, these dynamic capabilities are important because of the necessity for organizations to continuously respond to the unpredictable. Let us pause here to recall the kinds of insights researchers into the writing process have had: "Dynamic capabilities" can be a good descriptor for the kinds of ideas researchers in the writing process have espoused. Whether it is the contention that students invite dissonance (Sommers, 2009), or have a complex arrangement of varying goals throughout the process (Flower & Hayes, 2009), the process researchers are espousing a non-fixed, non-linear and, most importantly, non-ordered approach to writing. They espouse that students have an approach to writing that works well with and invites dilemmas and celebrates complexity. This is not to say that dynamic capabilities is the answer the process movement has been looking for. We must remember the warnings from both North and Faigley that we not slip into the trap of generalizability. Rather, dynamic capabilities can provide us with an additional lens that can further illuminate and augment how we understand the writing process.

The seven practices that provoke efficacy in work are:

provocative competence (mastering the art of unlearning), affirmative competence ("yes to the mess"), leaping in and taking action through full-bodied engagement, minimal structure and maximal autonomy, errors as a source of learning, hanging out in a community of diverse specialists, and alternating between soloing and supporting. (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 8)

One of the most interesting concepts we can borrow as practitioners from Bernstein and Barrett (2011) is their notion of "disruption" (p. 10). They delineate between "provocative" and "noxious" disruption (p. 10). Provocative disruption happens when a leader provides some kind of experience where employees are disrupted in compelling

ways. Noxious disruption is when employees are disrupted in negative ways. I like the idea that educators are disruptors for students. If we use the notion of disruption as a way for reading how we teach writing, then how do we make sure we provide provocative rather than noxious disruption? What does that look like for each student? How can we get students to let us know what provocative disruption looks like for them? It is also possible that embracing a truly provocative form of disruption in teaching might allow both students and teachers to facilitate such disruptions.

In addition to these questions, being a provocative disruptor requires a given stance toward students. Miles Davis is the prime example of the provocative disruptor because, as a jazz leader, he “believed in their overall potential and capacity to perform successfully” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 10). But it was not just about belief or attitude; Davis “created alternative pathways for action” (p. 10). Part of a jazz facilitation involves showing students that there is not one major or right way of proceeding.

“Affirmative mindset: ‘yes to the mess’” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 8). The “mess” of improvisation, whether in music or writing, is in the combination of the fact that performers are composing while performing. The mess is really the comprehension of the immediate past and future with the present. The notion of “yes” is a sense of faith, a belief that great decisions and moves can be made within the mess and that, on some level, the mess is even a contributing factor to the greatness that emerges. “Jazz players look back at what has happened with an affirmative assumption that there are positive opportunities to be gleaned, that something sensible and coherent can be distilled if one pays close attention to what has been happening” (p. 16).

A key part of the faith involved in the yes to the mess is in being on the lookout for “the subtle opportunities that emerge” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 16). The attitude that something of value will present itself seems to be key here. In improvisational theater, the famous “yes and” tenet requires participants to accept the scenario of other players and only alter it by adding to it, not by denying it. And in jazz music, “they

[musicians] cannot stop to problem solve or put situations in order or say to other players, ‘I do not like those notes you played. They didn’t match with what I had in mind’ (p. 17). Similarly, as we try to compose what we want to say, we have to somehow work with what arises. In this research, the emergence of the subtle has had the following roles. First, as method as an improvisational researcher, I regarded student input as potentially subtle. Their choice in which piece to bring to each interview was a subtle way of communicating what mattered to them in their writing. But I did not stop with that assumption. If students communicated something subtle to me about their writing, I followed up more directly. Second, I was interested throughout the research to hear various articulations from the participants about how they work the subtle opportunities into their writing.

“Leap in and take action: learning through full-bodied engagement and ongoing experimentation” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 18). Leaping in involves letting go of planned participation. Leaping in demands of the performer (the student) that she must work with something surprising and, what is a problem for so many students, inevitably make mistakes. The emphasis on leaping in recognizes how crucial mistakes are to learning. Full-bodied engagement is about bringing every part of your being into the work. While there is a risk involved with leaping in, the flip-side is that the organization must accommodate for full-bodied engagement. In other words, improvisatory management demands a substantial space for autonomy. What might be the ways this plays out in the experience students have with writing? It is possible that the leaping in takes the form of having to just start somewhere and write.

In my preliminary studies conducting writing workshops based on Keith Johnstone’s (1999) improv work, the leaping in has taken place through students’ participation in small group activities. In one workshop activity, students are required to come up with a brief explanation of a story they might possibly want to write about. They tell just a few sentences to their peers, and then their peers ask only yes or no questions.

This is derived from Johnstone's (1992) attempt to get a reluctant improv student to create a story on the spot (pp. 114-116). In Johnstone's instance, he tells the student that he has a story and that he will only answer yes, no, or maybe questions about it. By the end of the exercise, what is clear is that the story was the culmination of his student's questions and his responses. I find this approach to be rich in its potential to illustrate many important things about the writing process: that we write in relation to an audience, that we can co-construct what we tell, and that approaching writing from a place of inquiry leads to interesting places. In this activity, the student must leap in and take action. The experimentation arises when students hear the questions their peers ask of them. Because they can only answer yes, no, or maybe, they become filled with the need to explain and clarify; the single-word responses, when using this with *real* stories, are insufficient. It is precisely that incompleteness that makes the activity effective because it creates a sense of wanting to explain. Additionally, this activity allows students to get ideas about directions for their writing that they had not considered. The activity is a form of experimentation that allows students to discover multiple paths that their narratives can take.

In this research, I have found that students feel adept at leaping into their writing when they perceive a receptiveness on the part of whoever is prompting them, whether it is a teacher or a colleague.

“Minimal structures and maximum autonomy” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 21). This facet of the framework involves contrasting elements that work together: structure and freedom. What allows them to work together is their degree, hence “minimal” and “maximum.” It is important to note that the “guiding structures are nonnegotiable, impersonal limitations” (p. 21). In a jazz piece, there will be an order to the solos, a set number of bars for the solos, and chord changes that will happen.

On the other hand, the maximum autonomy allows participants to “express flexibility” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 22), meaning that, within the set structure,

students can move the ideas in a different direction, much the same way jazz musicians can impact the entire movement of a piece with their solos. Another important feature of autonomy is “temporal diversity” (p. 22), which is the notion that set-ups and approaches are not strictly adhered to at all times.

What are the goals or proposed outcomes of this approach? According to Bernstein and Barrett (2011), “maximum autonomy for localized innovation” (p. 23). What can this mean for writing instruction? In this research project, localized innovation has meant a few things. First, it is innovation, within the writing process, that is initiated by the student. I have looked for and tried to describe the ways in which students seem to be describing innovation within their writing. Second, I have ascribed another quality to the notion of localized: a sense of accomplishment. An entire category of the research discussion is devoted to exploring the extent to which students did or did not seem self-satisfied with their writing.

“Error as a source of learning” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 24). In a jazz improvisation performance, the players are compelled to continue and to treat errors as part of the process. “They see the affirmative potential in every musical utterance, even errors” thereby changing the meaning of what an error is (p. 25). Instead of looking to trouble-shoot the error, the jazz mindset accepts not only the inevitability of errors, but is intrigued by the potential they offer.

How effective is it to allow errors to be a source of learning? The alternative approach, which is actually the more business-as-usual approach, is to avoid errors, find their source, and place blame. The problems with this are many. To begin with, viewing errors as weeds to be removed does not allow the organization to learn from errors (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 26). It merely furthers the capacity to avoid having one’s errors known or noticeable. Additionally, the opportunities for innovation that develop when we view an error not as a problem, but as an outlying occurrence that contains positive potential, are lost.

If we bring back the juxtaposition of provocative and noxious for a moment, I would suggest that there are two kinds of errors in writing: provocative ones and noxious ones. And this all depends on how well received we believe our writing will be. As I will discuss further in Chapter IV, students can feel limited by the overall writing prompt and even by the prompter. In such instances, they are over-aware of every possible misdirection in their writing. On the other hand, if they feel invited by the prompter, they are willing allow errors to emerge, to play and take chances.

“Hanging out in communities of diverse specialists” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 27). I would describe this facet of the framework as a merging between Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate, peripheral participation and learning improvisation. While Bernstein and Barrett (2011) mention Lave and Wenger, they do not go into a deep discussion of the literature. What the latter are concerned with is more about the role of apprenticeship in learning. I do not think that what Bernstein and Barrett are talking about is an entirely different kind of community practice, but there are some variations. I do not think a deep review of Lave and Wenger is necessary, but I am familiar enough with their work to explain the differences between what Bernstein and Barrett mean by “hanging out” and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation. The latter look at how learning (whether a trade, like butchers, or a community of practice, like Alcoholics Anonymous) in a community that has an apprenticeship built into it (either formally or informally) is more productive and effective than a formal education in how to operate in said community. For instance, there is one example provided illustrating how an apprentice in a butcher shop learns more legitimately than from the lessons he learns in butcher school. More importantly, what Lave and Wenger illustrate is the tiered system, often informal, of learner-to-learner education that happens in an apprenticeship community. These kinds of learning scenarios are what Bernstein and Barrett (2011) are saying happen within the jazz community regarding things that go beyond actual musical performance, like how to

dress (p. 27). The difference is that the learning in the jazz community is also between peers and is not just about various stages of newcomers learning from each other and from veterans; this is about everyone learning from everyone. This is not to say that this does not happen within the kinds of communities Lave and Wenger (1991) examine; rather, the focus of their study is on the role of learning for the various stages of newcomers. “Hanging out,” as Bernstein and Barrett (2011) describe it, is a permanent part of the process of being in a jazz community. Members of the community have the opportunity to learn from one another outside of the occurrence of the performance.

“Alternating between soloing and supporting” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 30). This facet of the framework would probably be most relevant if students were discussing their essay in peer groups. I have also designed a few writing workshops, such as the one mentioned above, that facilitated a soloing and supporting experience for students in relation to their writing. I am interested that this can be set up by a facilitator or it can play out naturally in students’ experiences with writing. Some of the improvisational workshops I conduct position students as soloists and supporters. While I wonder if this plays out informally among students, this is probably more researchable as it happens and not in recall.

Leadership is also an important consideration, and Bernstein and Barrett (2011) add the notion of “team leadership,” which is leadership oriented toward the overall capacities of the team (p. 30). Team leadership emphasizes the notion of civic responsibility in that it requires each participant to partake in shepherding the greater sense of movement of the group. This is key in considering how an improvisatory approach might challenge how teachers and students perceive education and some of the larger notions that we define along with education. For instance, if improvisatory practice leads us to be more concerned with the greater sense of the group, might we need to interrogate the kinds of meanings we attribute to success, assessment, and achievement in schools? This kind of inquiry could be the premise of an inquiry that seeks to complicate

the notion of individuality and individual success. This is just an example of the potential for using improvisational theory in education.

Conclusion

Improvisation theory can augment the discussion of the writing process in a theoretical sense (from Benson's *Werktreue*) and in terms of how we can proceed as practitioners (from Bernstein and Barrett's provocative disruption). Benson's (2003) contention with *Werktreue* provides the premise of one of the major questions of this inquiry: that the meaning we make about our compositions is not fixed. I propose that, if we look into how students explain their writing, we can deepen our discourse about the writing process and deepen our understanding as writing teachers.

Bernstein and Barrett (2011) define facets of jazz leadership that can act as lenses that can augment our understanding of our role in students' writing experiences. They advocate for the intentional employment of a jazz leadership so that members of an organization develop dynamic capabilities. Their ideas can provide a lens to explore the extent to which students experience the writing process as provocative disruption and the extent to which they demonstrate dynamic capabilities with it.

Part III: Dilemmas and Possibilities of Improvisation Theory for English Education

The field of improvisation is a loosely held together interdisciplinary topic. It is not a topical study filled with established literature, inquiries or milestone insights. It is still emergent and quite scattered. For instance, as I will discuss more in depth here, there still is not a seminal text that deals thoroughly with the ambiguities surrounding the definitions of improvisation. Often, writers will go through the motions of debating with the reader all of the various forms and limitations of the term without reference to similar discussions elsewhere published. This is not a sign of insufficient reading but rather a

sign of a non-cohesive field. I do not view the absence of cohesion as a lack. I view the whole of improvisation studies as a festival devoted to a concept. This festival has multiple performances happening simultaneously to one another and in contradiction to one another as well as out of time and space from one another. The opportunities this affords a researcher is that he must attempt to perform his own, even if temporary, divisions and limitations in order to illustrate where he stands in the mix of things.

One way I seek to make sense of the various concepts is to view the festival of improvisational theories as an emerging of terms and definitions in attempts to explain and read the act of creative production. Rather than argue that one particular reading of creative production is right, I think it is the case that more fluid readings, with concepts that are blurrier around the edges, are more connected to the mystery of creative production. Other readings of creative production are more declarative and attempt to provide a more distinct nomenclature for improvisation.

At various points in this review, I attempt to show the potential that improvisation has for English education and the education field more broadly. At times I will provide sample questions or explain hypothetical inquiries. I will also point out dilemmas in order to acknowledge and illustrate the limits of improvisation as a theory.

Ethics, Social Action, and Improvisation

The social implications of performing while composing are as limitless as improvisational melodies are. In *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights and the Ethics of Co-creation*, Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz (2013) explore the broader political implications of improvisation rather than delving into what improvisation is and how its intricacies might be defined. The title of the work is an allusion to the resounding call to action of Martin Luther King, Jr. during the “I have a dream” speech. Furthermore, the “urgency” of now is precisely “why we can’t wait,” which is also the title of one of

King's books. The now as an urgency for social action politicizes improvisation, making it a necessary mode of construction for social alteration.

Improvisation as a musical form can serve as a symbolic representation of impromptu social change. One could explore the role of improvisation during times of heightened cultural revolution, observing, for instance, the improvisational solos of many rock musicians of the 1960s, even homing in on the improvisational performances of the first Woodstock. What might be said of Jimi Hendrix's famous rendering of "The Star-Spangled Banner" as a rock improvisation? It is filled with the free-spiritedness and the revolt of the age; it is a new anthem, one crafted in the spirit of the festival—both the actual festival of Woodstock and the metaphoric festival of politics and the cultural revolution. The singularity of the guitar solo asserts a new individuality while uniting us in imagination.

Improvisational music can also be seen as an illustration of the banality of the formalities of what is old-fashioned, of the structures of the establishment, of the procedures of bureaucracy.

One could look at the encroachment on the autonomy of teachers (the mechanizing of evaluations, the redundant insistence of the "common core") as an imbalance of form and freedom, as a deprivation of improvisation. We could even inquire into the language of what is considered good teaching and good learning. One could pose the following questions: how are improvisational approaches in education treated in the broader discourse, in the policy discourse that is pertinent to English education? To what extent is the Common Core amenable to improvisational approaches? An exploration of these kinds of questions might warrant a more thorough reference to Fischlin et al.'s (2013) work. The dilemma of such an inquiry, however, involves the question: Why use improvisation to explore an issue of policy? This kind of inquiry tends to involve more of a metaphoric use of improvisation rather than improvisation as a lens to alter what we understand.

Other writers have explored the ethical implications of improvisation and improvisatory practices. In “The field of cultural production and the limits of freedom in Improvisation,” Backstrom (2014) advocates for an ethical improvisation, which seems to be a sense of responsiveness and inclusion of the audience. He uses the Grateful Dead and Sun Ra as examples of improvisatory artists who are responsive to the audience. He positions this against the notion of the modernist avant-garde performer who completely challenges the audience’s sense of understanding. Whether the characterization is entirely accurate or not, the distinction Backstrom draws between ethical improvisers and avant-garde performers is important because of the difference in how both performers position the performance in relation to the audience. This distinction illustrates an important paradox of teaching. The avant-garde performer is unresponsive to the particularities of a given audience and instead seeks to challenge the audience’s perception, whereas the ethical improviser makes the attempt to alter the performance to reel the audience in. I believe that a teacher tries both to ethically respond to her class and to pose challenges of perception. These actions, when applied to education, might not need to be so mutually exclusive. But the terms of avant-garde and ethical improviser can be seen as different ways in which the educator can be a disruptor, to connect back to the concept of “provocative disruption” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011).

Backstrom (2014) explains how the Grateful Dead predicted certain aspects of their audience, intentionally starting off less experimentally because they thought a younger audience would be less familiar with their experimenting. This is the *artist’s perception* of the audience, not an actual participation of the audience. What I am delineating here is the notion that an ethical improvisation could involve some audience awareness; whatever that may mean is contingent on each performer’s expectations, perceptions, and judgments. This is in contrast to a co-constructed melody or musical composition during the performance, which is not what Backstrom is describing. However impossible it may be to imagine for a musical performance, it certainly is possible for students to be the

improvisers in a classroom dialogue. An important question to consider is: How does a teacher who positions students as improvisers articulate the ethics of this approach?

While Backstrom (2014) illustrates how the performer takes the audience into consideration, the performer and audience are still clearly separate entities. Sawyer (2011) points out that a shortcoming of the improvisation metaphor for education is the notion that teachers are performers and students are the audience. Monson (1996) reminds us that a lot of the ethnomusicology of jazz improvisation tends to emphasize the soloists and not the rhythm or the back-up artists. Both of these thinkers point out the dilemma of homing in too much on improvisation at the loss of the other supporting factors that enable it.

A look at improvisation in music can identify different approaches to performing, as described above. For a while, I was working with the idea that the teacher is the improviser, and I was interested in how the teacher improvises within his practice. One small but important point from Backstrom (2014) could help me explain how I shifted my focus. Backstrom provides a good discussion of how the Dead defied genre in part because of their improvisatory music. The parallel in genre for teaching is open to interpretation. Genre can be the content of the subject or the teaching approach, or both. When I was just considering the improvisation of the teacher, I was still working with a standard genre of teaching, in which the pedagogy and actions matter in relation to the teacher. All the while, I was concerned with the practical question: Where is the improvisation for the students? But more deeply, the question worth exploring is: How does improvisation alter the notion of the genre, of the identifiable category within teaching? Or how does it problematize it? In other words, something in the more usual roles of teacher and student could possibly alter as a way of looking at improvisation in the classroom. Something I wonder is: If we position students as improvisers in classroom discourse, or in their writing, to what extent are we pushing the boundaries of the “genre” of teaching? Bernstein and Barrett (2011) help solve this dilemma by

delineating between the jazz leader and the players. A jazz leadership teaching would still maintain the typical role of teacher and student.

We can consider an ethical improvisation and the ethics of improvisation. The famous “yes and” tenet of improv acting is the idea that you can change the narrative by building from it, not by negating it. In some sense, this is an ethical improvisation. More deeply, we can look at the ethics regarding human affairs that improvisation provides us with. This is the ethics of improvisation. Kindler (2010) provides a very vivid hypothetical of how not having a “yes and” approach in psychotherapy (which could more appropriately be called a “yes but” approach) could hinder a patient’s ability to develop a narrative with a therapist (p. 224). In this case, the ethic is about a practice that opens up meaning-making for the patient and allows him to work from what he provides as content to his therapist, rather than having that content negated and steered toward a framework the therapist has in mind. The “yes and” approach to psychotherapy is founded on the assumption that the patient’s presentation of reality is valid. The rules of dramatic improvisation that support this practice are:

1. The play space is sacred
2. Follow the lead of the other participant
3. Do not challenge or deny
4. There should be unconditional acceptance of the other’s reality
5. Listen and watch carefully
6. The actor must clarify, enhance and facilitate the action so that the scene can move forward. (Chaplin Kindler, personal communication, as cited in Kindler, 2010, p. 225)

Kindler’s (2010) conceptualization is an intentional way of being with a patient that communicates to the patient a sense of receptiveness. This approach borrows tenets from improvisational acting. While this might allow for a receptive practice, it is difficult to see this in action as it is not, as it is in improv acting, performed. Further, the actors in dramatic improvisation are, theoretically, all equal in relation to one another. Once again here, we have the dilemma surrounding roles that improvisation brings up. What we can

learn from this is that some practitioners have used improv acting as a way of thinking about their role in their practice.

Some important inquiries can be made around the kinds of ethics the above rules would bring about if applied in an educational setting. At the heart of the above tenets is a practice that is completely concerned with the growth and care of the individual. But it is also a mutual set of rules. There is not necessarily a hierarchy maintained in the teacher/student and therapist/client relationship, but the roles are still separate and clearly intact. In looking at any professional practice through the lens of improvisation, we have to remind ourselves of the limits of any given metaphor. In jazz and in improv theater, there is a collegiality of roles, there is equity. In education, the teacher is always the teacher; the student is always the student. I wonder if, to some extent, an improvisatory approach might dissolve those roles or possibly question some classic parameters. A new definition of ethics or an amendment to them would make for an interesting discussion around the idea of who is supposed to learn in the classroom. The classic role of teacher and student has it that the student's learning is central. Might that goal actually be more fervently obtained if it included the teacher as well?

Improvisation theories offer interesting pathways into questions of ethics and social action in education. It is possible to use improvisation as a broad metaphor to read entire movements. It is also possible to look at the notions of soloing and supporting and how standard roles in teaching and learning can be altered or suspended. An ethics of improvisation can also involve developing an open and accepting regard for students and their work and how they make meaning of it. For this study, I have tried to maintain such an open regard to allow for as rich a response as possible from my participants. I have further seen that students do respond to how receptive they believe their prompter is of them and their writing.

Is Improvisation a Way of Life or Is It a Performance Act?

In other words, is improvisation a metaphor that can fundamentally explain all experience, or is it limited to specific kinds of actions and conditions?

From the field of improvisation studies, there is disparity on just how broadly or specifically improvisation is defined. And this disparity is not part of conversations necessarily. These different speakers, with their different contentions, are not talking in response to one another. There is not a formal tradition of debate over this issue. This is one invocation of the festival. There are many approaches occurring simultaneously.

A lot of definitional explorations run in various ways through the work of writers in the field. In “Living with the I-word: Improvisation and its Alternatives,” Labaree (2014) problematizes the use of the word *improvisation* as a catch-all for anything that is not composed. He begins with what he calls a “cartoon” where I-people and non-I-people are standing on opposing sides of different roads. He illustrates some of the commonly held simple distinctions between improvised and composed music. But this divide does not allow us to see important nuances, does not provide “access to the living poetics of each situation” (p. 9). He suggests some alternative terms. He begins with the term *musicianship* but does not develop it as much as the term *variability*. Maybe the term *musicianship* is a concept about being a musician, which is necessary for his introducing the idea of variability. The other terms he refers to are *poesis* and *mouvance*. The latter develops a bit more conceptually but lacks in terms of definition. *Mouvance* means the tendency towards variability. *Variability* is the term he explains the most, and he does a great job explaining why, if we look at variability in music rather than the I-word, we can envision the notion of musicianship differently. We can look at each culture’s *mouvance*, its tendency toward or away from variability, rather than the striking difference between improvised and composed.

It is important to look at Labaree’s (2014) essay as an insightful illustration of the ambiguity of the term *improvisation*. Additionally, when examining improvisational

practices, it might be beneficial to closely compare the variability, rather than the improvisation, of different works or producers in a given arena. For instance, I might look at a teacher's work and ask: How does variability arise in teaching this text, this lesson, this inquiry? Variability is one of the things that improvisation does. But Labaree tells us that variability (in fact, none of these alternative terms he offers) is not a synonym for improvisation. For me, the question I am left with is, when is variability improvisation? I think it primarily has to do with purpose and intention. If students are charged with collectively moving a class discussion through some sense of structure, while allowing for a sense of play and exploration, then the intention is for them to improvise within those expectations.

While Labaree (2014) complicates the definition of improvisation by cleverly calling it the I-word and illustrating similar but non-synonymous concepts, other writers like Hallam and Ingold (2007) argue that improvisation is the very essence of life. They would be at the opposite end of the spectrum as Smith and Dean (1997) who intricately define very specific types of improvisation. While their structure and nicely formed definitions might offer a good vocabulary with which to analyze any improvisational practice, they do not arrive at the rich dilemmas in understanding improvisation that make an inquiry into such practice worthwhile (at least from the standpoint of wanting to delve into open-ended inquiries). These rich dilemmas occur in a lot of the work that comes out of the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, which is based in Guelph University. A lot of the really deep dilemmas arise from contrasting the ideas of writers who have yet to address one another. For instance, should we look at improvisation as a complex concept that can be defined or as one that is a pervasive part of existence? What I think matters more is the question: How is improvisation a part of this given inquiry? Certain kinds of inquiries might naturally warrant a more detailed and technical treatment of improvisation, whereas others might warrant a definition that treats improvisation as a pervasive part of living. Further, what might be more interesting in an inquiry in English

education is: How do improvisation and its surrounding concepts illustrate a deeper understanding of a given area of inquiry? For instance, in my interest in studying narrative and improvisational processes, I am wondering: If we treat the process as improvisational and create workshops and prompts derived from improv theater and premised on Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) notion of "provocative disruption," how might such approaches facilitate the writing process? In other words, rather than engaging in a technical definition of what is variance versus improvisation, it might be more purposeful to look at how new concepts can revise understandings of persistent inquiries. The persistent inquiry in English education that I would like to explore with improvisation as a lens is: How do writers experience the process of writing? Transformed, with improvisation in mind, this becomes the first research question: If texts do not fully constitute the whole of the written work, then how do students and teachers explain and understand what writing is about? What kinds of insights can be gleaned from considering writing to be an improvisational process? In the larger sense, this is the inquiry. I am homing in on writing as a way of specifying the inquiry to a particular kind of purpose in writing. The purpose of the final product in writing could alter the ways a writer thinks when composing. I am wondering how students define the larger rhetorical problem of writing. And, more specifically, what rhetorical problems are present in a given piece?

Hallam and Ingold's Framework

I learned about Hallam and Ingold (2007) and their book, *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, from a lot of the work I have read in *Critical Studies in Improvisation*. Thus far, theirs is the only work that resembles a framework I have seen referenced in more than one place. I have seen the work of Gary Peters (*The Philosophy of Improvisation*, 2009) used in pivotal ways as well as frequent citations of Derek Bailey's (1993) writing on improvisation.

Part of this claim about life being improvisational has to do with the “ongoing alignment” that we’re always doing in our activities (Hallam & Ingold, 2007, p. 5). An interesting idea Hallam and Ingold offer is the notion that tradition is improvisational (p. 6). Improvisation is relational (p. 7) and, being so, it involves relating not just people, but concepts and considerations. They offer the suggestion that “rather than speaking of ideas, concepts, categories and links ... we should think of flows, contours, intensities and resonances” (p. 14). This is an interesting contrast to Smith and Dean’s (1997) work, which arguably looks at ideas, concepts, and categories. It is also a point that raises the concern of focus for exploring improvisation. Conceptual focus seems to be as important as ontological focus. In other words, how you look at the ideas of improvisation seems to be discussed as much as what you choose to look at regarding improvisation.

Nayanee Basu (2013) performs a wonderful analysis with Hallam and Ingold’s ideas in “Improvising Freedom in Prison.” She looks at the development of performance programs in a Bengali prison. This is a rich text, with many different implications and layers to it. She examines improvisation as a concept particularly in the decision-making and actions of two people: a prison official and a famous dancer who works with the prisoners. What is interesting is that the activities that are called improvisations were decisions that were made throughout the course of life, not particularly in any performance capacity. This is a broader extension of improvisation than I have looked at thus far because I have been limiting my lens of improvisation to particular activities: teaching, reading, writing, and the like. But here, Basu is exploring the ways in which improvisation occurs in any capacity. It is an interesting exploration because she looks at the improvisation of two people within the same institution. This is an explorative analysis and not so much a permanent set of conclusions. Basu’s work illustrates the potential to look at improvisation more broadly in human activity as opposed to a more technical, work-specific analysis.

In my inquiry, I am less technically inclined toward analysis and more interested in the ways provocative disruption might be relevant to understanding how students make meaning of their writing. At the same time, the research methods are informed by improvisation. Unlike Basu's (2013) work, I am keeping the scope of improvisation to a more limited role.

How Important is Defining Improvisation?

One thing I wonder about exploring these texts is: To what extent is the definition of improvisation important to these writers on the subject? Some of the authors are deeply exploring and turning over improvisation, putting it against similar terms, delineating and distinguishing it as a concept, complicating it. Others are looking at implied sub-concepts of improvisation. But for others, the definition matters less than the manifestation and effect of; and for others the way people improvise, and other activities surrounding the improvisation are more important concerns than definitions. There also seem to be certain definitions that people need to get out of the way.

Some writers have worked with definitions of improvisation at their blurred boundaries. Anne Douglas (2013), in "Altering a Fixed Identity: Thinking Through Improvisation," writes with a great deal of tentativeness and reflexivity. Douglas conducted what could be described as a blend of participatory action research and art inquiry. And this activity, or series of activities, was inspired by Kaprow's (2003, as cited in Douglas, 2013) suggestion that we not consider art as a definite thing, or rather that we doubt a certain definition of art. Douglas (2013) deals with a paradox of definitions—one from Hallam and Ingold, where improvisation is the continuation of a response to life, and the other from Kaprow, where improvisation is the discontinuity, the break from routine. This is a wonderful paradox to point out in the definitive terms. The former is looking at improvisation as a very performance of life itself. The latter is looking at it maybe in a more purposeful sense. Douglas illustrates how delving into a problem with

defining improvisation can offer interesting complications. It may be that an inquiry warrants complicating terms and understandings rather than clarifying them.

Improvisation and Narrative

The boundary conflict. Iyer (2004) suggests that “structure is merely a consequence of a greater formation.” When discussing Coltrane’s improvisations, Iyer suggests that the whole creative approach Coltrane takes is what emerges in a semblance of structure. Iyer says, “As a musician, I personally believe that the improviser is concerned more with making individual improvisations relate *to each other*, and to his or her conception of personal sound, than he or she might be with obeying some standard of coherence on the scale of the single improvisation” (p. 400). What Iyer calls the “sound” of the musician is really the style or voice of a writer. It has to do with how the individual’s conceptualization of the world and of himself and who he is gets communicated through his art. In looking into how students make meaning of their writing and the process of writing, I have tried to understand the kinds of concerns they describe. My category of creation explanations arises out of hearing the many ways students discuss how they created their pieces of writing. The following questions helped me unpack the analysis of these descriptions: To what extent is the writer following her own notions of who she believes she is as opposed to story and essay conventions? To what extent are we conscious of other directions as we are writing? To what extent do we think the content of our writing is part of a larger body of content?

Iyer’s (2004) conception of the “*exploded narrative*” is that “[narrative] is conveyed through a holistic musical personality or *attitude*” (p. 401). The belief in the concept of *werktreue* brings with it the underlying question: What is the true work that is being created, performed, or otherwise represented? The notion of the exploded narrative rejects the premise of that question. The story is not just one thing being told, but a whole

understanding of what the teller represents. Style and attitude are just as important as content here.

The participants' descriptions of themselves as writers played a recurring role in their explanations. A difference in applying such a concept as exploded narrative to understanding students' writing is that much of their writing is happening not as creative professionals, but as students who are required to fulfill given expectations. And so the overall style does not necessarily play out the same way from piece of writing to piece of writing. Rather, students did express certain concepts or self-characterizations of themselves as writers. To them, they have some understanding of the continuous exploded narrative of who they are as writers.

The merging of Iyer and Benson brings about a complex set of claims and questions that have to do with a rejection of clear definition as being the primary or only way of understanding composition and production. This is in the broadest sense, and it represents an ongoing conflict that is present in teaching and learning. For my purposes here, I will refer to this conflict as the conflict of boundaries. There are those on the clear side and those on the ambiguous side. Those on the clear side see the component parts of process, production, and even learning as distinct and definable. Those on the ambiguous side see the definitions as contextual and tend to look for holistic descriptions rather than universally applicable terms. I am on the ambiguous side.

I have found both through my experience as a writer and as a teacher of writing (as well as my forays into other modes of composition: musical and artistic) that distinct phases do not well explain how the creation process occurs. Benson's (2003) contention with *werktreue* articulates well a dilemma that I have always felt about the comprehension of complete artistic products. There is a joy in the ambiguity of such inquiries as: What is the given work of art? Is it the last thing the artist worked on? Is it the piece that happens to be more recognized as such? Is it the conception of the piece that I, the artist, have in mind now? Is it the conception of the piece that I, the viewer,

have in mind now? And, in terms of this inquiry, what, right now, do I believe about a given work of mine? How do I explain its formation, my participation in its construction?

The final draft could be seen as a lens through which creative production is read. It is the point at which the creator decides there is no more to be done to the work. And if improvisation is work that is performed while it is composed, then it is final during composition. Benson's (2003) contention with *werktreue* offers its best contention to the idea of singularity rather than finality.

While each creative product may in fact be its own unique work, might there also be reiterations of given incarnations of a work? Iyer's (2004) exploded narrative could be read as the work being a constantly culminating production.

The conflict of boundaries extends as well to key terminology and notions of truth. *Purpose* is an important term that I approach ambiguously when setting out to compose. The idea that the purpose comes first is in line with a linear conception of composition process. Indeed, one major contention with many of the process researchers was that the notion of pre-writing posits that ideas come before language (North, 1987).

In this project, I have been concerned with the extent to which students view their writing process as having distinct boundaries or as being more fluid. While previous writing research is concerned with advocating for a specific view of the writing process, I have been interested in understanding the terms the students use to describe their writing.

The problems with the term “performance.” Prominent ideas on improvisation that work well with writing use metaphors derived from other arts; in the case of this inquiry, primarily music. It may be that writing only has features of composition, whereas music has both composition and recitation. It might be easier to understand that improvisation happens during a performance. Writing is an art that seems to lack a performance or recitation. It is the case, then, that if there is improvisation at all in writing, it must be in composition, because there is no performance known as writing.

Sawyer (2002) defines improvisation as “an oral performance, not a written product” (p. 321). Here, his emphasis is on the thing performed or created. Sawyer has a view of the improvisational performance that I would classify as a clear view. The clear view distinctly defines improvisation as one thing and not another. This is not the same thing as the clear side of the boundary conflict mentioned previously. This has more to do with how those who study improvisation view the meaning of the term and of associated words. Benson (2003) is more in line with an ambiguous view, which opens up the notion of what things actually are to discursive possibilities. In Benson’s school of thought, a process of creation can be improvisational regardless of whether the “performance” is of a certain quality or not. When Benson questions the *Werktreue* value of a piece of music, he is raising a question about how we perceive all written works. The idea of *texttreue* (Benson, 2003) is the idea of being true to a written text. This has a parallel to the “strong text” approach to reading (Brandt, 2011). But reading can constitute a performance (Benson, 2003) as well as a kind of social interaction (Brandt, 2011). I am more in line with the ambiguous schools of thought surrounding the definition of improvisation.

What this brings about is the difference between collaborative (with an audience and/or other players) improvisation and singular (without an audience and/or other players) improvisation. Although it is possible that composing can still be a performance even if an audience is not present at the time of composition, the composer can certainly be influenced by the fact that at some later point, there will be an audience for the composition. This is particularly true in writing, which is usually never created in front of its audience but delivered later. Erving Goffman (as cited in Riessman, 2008) suggests that we are not communicating “to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience” (p. 107). What Goffman illustrates is the power of purpose over how we compose communication. While he is talking about this purpose in spoken communication, I believe we can extend Goffman’s proposition to writing. Writing can

be conceived of as a dramatic performance in which the writer seeks to convey some aspect of himself in a certain way to an audience.

Regardless of whether a performance can be conceived of as a solitary act or one that necessitates a live audience, improvisation is an activity that can be seen as a part of a given composing process. I do wonder: What is the purpose or benefit of distinguishing different genres of improvisational action? The most important distinction would be on where you place emphasis within an inquiry. If we are looking at the composing process of writing, does it matter whether we consider the potential of that process as improvisational to be an “applied improvisation” (Smith & Dean, 1997, p. 28)? Does it mean something different to intentionally acknowledge and reject a definition? I cannot speak for all cases, but, in this particular case, I think it matters inasmuch as the rejection of the more technical treatment of improvisation speaks to a certain kind of view of reading, of texts, and of finality of a given work. The problem, as I see it, with *werktreue* is that there is not anything to be true to in the first place. The final thing in itself never really is.

This does not mean that a sense of completion never abounds for the creator or that the final products do not actually exist. This is a position more about the nature of the mind, of language, of socializing, as they relate to the artistic product. There is no finalized and stabilized notion of any given work. There is no abstract noun that is the understanding of the work. There is the verb of understanding.

Part IV: Important Considerations from Studies on Narrative and Improvisation

Research on narrative in improvisation has considered narrative outside the bounds of the written word: in jazz performance, in computer simulation, and in the play of children. The research here might offer insights in looking specifically at narrative writing or at writing more generally. What is interesting about these studies is that these

researchers are not working in the same field and are not culminating a discourse together. Unlike the writing process researchers in English education, there are not trends that culminate in the literature. But in looking at this subtopic in the literature, I have carved out three considerations in the form of questions. These questions are my interpretation of how this sub-category within the literature on improvisation might provide me with directions for analysis.

The questions are: What considerations regarding form and content would make this inquiry into improvisation and narrative formidable? What about the form and content of what is being studied must be uniquely considered? How might one concept (either improvisation or composition) alter the definition and conceptualization of the other or of each other?

Baumer and Magerko (2009) studied the decisions of an improv theater group in order to understand their approach to constructing narrative. They propose a set of vocabulary to describe both the improvisational decision-making considerations of the players and the components of a narrative. Their research purpose is utility. They seek to uncover usable concepts that can be employed in the development of digital interactive programs. I could imagine role-playing games or educational software and even a kind of artificial intelligence developed on the idea of improvisational decisions that construct a narrative. While their work is not immediately applicable to my inquiry, it does reveal that there are a plethora of considerations to be discovered when looking at improvisation and narrative, which could be considered a type of composition. The major analytical question their work provides me with is: What considerations regarding form and content would make this inquiry into improvisation and composition formidable? In other words, improvisation and narrative can be merged to study the improvisation of many types of compositions: dance, theater, storytelling, sports, just to name a few. All of these activities and products can be considered to contain narrative elements and can be considered to offer improvisational decision-making opportunities to the players. Form

and content are important in considering how the compulsory nature of student writing influences the process for students. Additionally, the connotations, learned expectations, and other histories and experiences the students have with writing assignments will certainly influence the current mindset students have about their writing. This is to say that the context of this assignment is different from, say, students being in a book club and sharing written and spoken responses and insights to literature with each other.

Baumer and Magerko (2009) conduct formidable research on the merge of improvisation and narrative. Because their purposes involve enhancing the development of software, their focus is on practical and usable concepts. The concepts themselves do not have applicability to the research I am doing because they are more in line with the clear view of improvisation mentioned above. But their research does illustrate both the rich discoveries that can be uncovered while researching improvisation and narrative as well as important ideas to consider in such research.

Sawyer (2002), in his study of improvisational play of children, sought to understand the ways in which improvisational play could bring about a narrative. To highlight the beneficial insights from Sawyer, I will use the question I extracted from Baumer and Magerko's (2009) research above on Sawyer's (2002) work: What considerations regarding form and content would make this inquiry into improvisation and narrative formidable? The form that Sawyer is looking at is collaborative improvisational play of children. The content is the things they say and the actions they take over the course of the play. Sawyer is defining the play as improvisational at the outset, and his inquiry is concerned with the extent to which the production of play creates what can be considered a narrative. Sawyer calls this kind of narrative an "emergent narrative" and says that "emergent narratives cannot be fully explained by analyzing the actions of mental states of the participant individuals." Sawyer contends, "Collaborative emergence thus describes the connection between unstructured improvisation and the resulting narrative structure" (p. 341). The considerations of form

that influenced Sawyer's study of improvisation and narrative in children's play was the collaborative nature of the play—the fact that the collective voices and decisions and turns of each child collectively moved the narrative. Sawyer's emphasis was on how the collaborative efforts must be uniquely considered. In any study of improvisation and narrative, it could be beneficial to ask: What about the form and content of what is being studied must be uniquely considered? This would serve as a follow-up question to the one above.

From Iyer (2004), I am led to a different question, in this study: How might one concept (either improvisation or narrative) alter the definition and conceptualization of the other or of each other? Iyer suggests that the narrative developed in jazz improvisation is not “the traditional linear narrative sense; an *exploded narrative* is conveyed through a holistic musical personality or *attitude*” (p. 401). In Iyer's conceptualization of narrative, the narrative embodies far more than what is being told in any given particular narration. The larger narrative is the continued culmination of a musician creating a sense of his being through his music. In this case, the concept of narrative is redefined in the context of jazz improvisation. But improvisation is also redefined implicitly here as well as being a practice whereby musicians create these holistic narratives.

Chapter III

RESEARCH METHODS

The Setting

Room 204 has a special meaning to me in National High School. Ten years ago, I conducted a demo lesson in room 204 to a class of seniors. The lesson was on a poem by Yeats titled “The Wilde Swans at Coole.” I was given the poem and 40 minutes to prepare a lesson in the teachers’ lounge. I am not even sure I understood most of the poem, but I made certain to raise all of my questions with the students. I worked tirelessly during the lesson, being observed by the assistant principal of English as well as three other English teachers. I filled the board with notes and, according to one of my future colleagues observing the lesson, called on every student in the class. Because my performance in that demo lesson was crucial in getting hired at National High School, the room has always had a good vibe to me. These many years later, I am assigned this room for most of the day. This is the setting for the majority of the interviews with my three participants into their experiences as writers and with writing. The windows face north and have a view of the neighboring school and its several athletic fields.

Along the back chalkboard, which is still the original red slate (having not been covered up by white dry-erase boards, the way the front is), there is a bulletin board with posters of authors: Walt Whitman and John Updike are placed next to a photograph of Bob Dylan. A student-drawn rendition of Dorian Gray dominates the center of the bulletin board next to a subtle still life by Cezanne.

My eyes would wander during the interviews, and I would drift from the Cezanne to Dorian Gray, to the football field in the distance. I would do this while one of my participants was writing down something at my request.

Albert, for instance, would speak so eloquently about his writing, but if I went to the keyboard and started to capture what he said, I sensed a bit of uneasiness. So I listened, tried to retain as much as I could, and then I would say, “Could you write down a version of what you just told me?”

During those moments of silence, I would sometimes write as well. Other times I was trying to figure out what to ask next. This was one way in which I was attentive and willing to respond, to improvise, during the research. I was on the lookout for the various ways in which I could see the occurrences of the research within the context of the research focus: exploring writing *with* students.

Meet the Participants

Albert is a well-known student in the school. He is a leader on the debate team and an editor of a student-led politics journal. The students on the debate team can be easily recognized in a class in National High School. As part of debate, they practice the art of quickly developing arguments. I would often say that Albert “spoke in essays” in class discussion.

But he would also talk about his essays. Albert would often interject in the middle of something that he was saying in class, “I actually wrote about this in my essay.” Discussing writing was part of his repertoire of personal reporting in class discussions. However, Albert seemed to want to bring about completed works rather than talk aloud about the writing process. One of the common suggestions I would give Albert would be to delve deeper into textual evidence. His writing was strong when it came to explaining his ideas in summation. However, I was often urging him to define his terminology and

spell out how his concepts worked specifically in connection with the text he was writing about.

Writing, for Albert, seemed to be about proving arguments. I would often suggest ways for him to take on more exploratory types of analysis as a way of expanding his approach to writing. One suggestion was for him to carefully consider his word choice when it came to the crucial concepts in his analysis. Given that Albert was such an adept thinker, it is understandable that he wanted to go with the initial.

On the afternoons in room 204, when I was conducting interviews, Albert would often stroll in without his books, bag, or coat. They were stored in his locker or stowed away in the headquarters of one of the many clubs he is in. It was clear that Albert viewed the school as a second home.

Similarly, Harper treated the school as a second home, being a member of several sports teams. As a student of mine, Harper would often bring about questions in class discussion that started with the phrase, “So if I’m writing about this in an essay.” Having taught her for ninth and eleventh grade, I witnessed a writer who seemed to distinguish between talking for writing and talking for talk. In other words, she participated frequently in class discussions and would often check the relevance of her comments to her own writing. It seemed natural for her to talk about her writing.

My impression of her writing was, from the very beginning, that she had a distinct sense of voice. There were times in her writing where it seemed the concern for overall structural cohesion steered her from exploring ideas that might be more difficult to explain but might offer richer meaning. She demonstrated in her writing the need to tie everything together.

Harper had a few free periods a week that coincided with my lunch. For these midday interviews, we conducted them in one of the study rooms in the library. The glass-walled room looked out onto the library, filled with students studying, working on projects together, or walking around looking for books. When the door closed, the visual

life of the library became amplified as the seemingly sound-proofed room muffled the conversations.

In ninth grade, Harper was one of the first to volunteer to read aloud as we studied *Julius Caesar*. “Which part would you like?” I would ask. “I’ll read any part, it doesn’t matter,” she would say. Her willingness to jump in and be a part of the class culminated at the end of her freshman year, during a sunny afternoon in June. Harper was the ringleader in persuading me to allow the class to watch the World Cup soccer game in class.

While Harper showed leadership skills for such impromptu requests, my third participant, John, took on a leadership role by forming his own club about humanitarian awareness. Though John did not talk about his writing in the same way as Albert and Harper, he frequently told me about his independent learning ventures. He had a deep interest in learning about history, politics, and foreign languages. During his junior year, he would often come up to me after class and tell me about new words and phrases he had learned in Arabic.

As a ninth grader, I recall John eagerly telling me about a protest he helped organize in junior high school. I saw it as an early sign of the leadership he currently displays. He is the founder of a club and has leadership roles in another student organization. He is one of the most politically conscientious students I know and has a passion to share his knowledge. The club he leads takes place in the room where I have my office hours. Once a week, John arrives early to set up. In those minutes, he often spends time talking to the co-leaders of the club about college applications. The club centers on humanitarian political issues. When John recently wrote “Aleppo” on the board, I told him that I only had a cursory understanding of the issue. He proceeded to draw a map and explain the complexities of the conflict in depth.

One of John’s strengths in his writing was the ability to take the reader on a tour of various points of view. He was able, even in ninth grade, to present the perspective of a

literary critic and evaluate it in light of his own point of view. Given these strengths, John would often not expand his interpretations too far. My most common suggestion to him was to develop his points more.

All three participants in the study were strong class participators when they were students of mine, and beyond class they have roles in the community that reach far beyond that of student. They are community educators. They are leaders within various student organizations as well as eager sharers of knowledge.

They were my students in ninth and eleventh grade and were all seniors during the study. I chose high school seniors for a few key reasons. Students have four years of instruction in high school English to contextualize their understandings of how they write. Students will be attending college soon and can reflect on their current understanding of what it means to write as they transition into a different academic setting.

Data Collection and Interview Approach

I interviewed my three participants five times each. The interviews ranged from 30 to 40 minutes. For each interview, the discussion centered around a single piece of writing produced by the student.

Over the course of the first four interviews, Harper brought in essays and supplemental writings for her college applications. Her first essay explored how taking risks in sports can lead to a more open approach to life. Her second essay depicted ways in which members of a community center contributed to her transforming point of view. Her third writing was a shorter piece exploring a humorous episode between Harper and her mother. In this piece, the prompt urged her to think beyond the normal boundaries. In contrast, for her fourth piece, she was limited by the prompt. In their call for students to share personal experiences, the university asks students to share experiences that are,

“perhaps related to a community you belong to, your sexual orientation or gender identity, or your family or cultural background” (Duke, 2016). This wording, to Harper, seemed to imply a preference for these topics and not a mere suggestion of them.

For Albert’s first piece, he brought in a four-page play that he wrote for English class. It was a co-written piece in which one of the two main characters is a mime, and therefore lacks a speaking part. For his second piece, Albert brought in his college essay. His major concern for the essay was that it was over the word limit by 400 words. As we discussed the essay further, something in the prompting was not inviting to Albert. In contrast, his third piece was a supplemental where the university prompting him gave him a sense of freedom in exploring the prompt. In Albert’s own words:

I felt like writing this was more fun than my Common App Essay since I had a lot more freedom. For the Common App, there is a much clearer purpose to what your essay must accomplish, which makes you feel pressure to achieve those "goals," but with this prompt, it's far less clear exactly what the goal of the piece is, which gives you the freedom to just write. I feel like that freedom allowed me to have a lot more fun with the essay.

Albert brought in two pieces for his fourth interview: an essay for social studies and an essay for an English class. He wanted to explore the crossovers and contrasts in the expectations of both subjects.

For his first essay, John brought in his college essay, in which he explored his interest in humanitarian work, using Darfur as an example. His second essay was a supplemental where he further explored his interest in humanitarian work. His third essay was a supplemental where the prompt was to explore a recent headline. John took liberty and wrote about a headline about the Little Rock Nine. His fourth essay was a rhetorical analysis essay for his English class. The assignment was to analyze the rhetoric of anything; he chose to analyze the rhetoric involved in the Arab spring.

While there was one central piece of writing in each interview, in some interviews, we discussed previous works in connection with the central work. In the last interview, we discussed the overall experience of discussing their writing. Interviews took place

from mid-September 2016 to the end of October 2016 on the premises of National High School.

I took notes on my own laptop and supplied students with a laptop on which they wrote at my request. I would sometimes start the interview asking participants to write an explanation of producing this work of writing. Sometimes there were certain things they said during the interviews that I wanted to capture in their words rather than render them from my own notes.

Of course, when they typed, they invariably worded things slightly differently than they said them. At various points throughout the interviews, I would ask students to write a version of what they just said. I anticipated that in my written discussion of their interviews, their voices would assist in illustrating my understanding of what transpired. For instance, after discussing with Harper her decision to remove a portion of her essay, I wanted to see how she would put that process into writing. She wrote the following:

Why I didn't include the other story:

When I was thinking about the essay and planning it in my head, I thought that the other story fit the theme of my essay. I thought it would work. But when I wrote it out, I realized that it didn't fit. And this is the same thing with when you speak your ideas out loud. It sounds good in your head, but when you make it concrete (either by writing it or speaking it), you recognize the flaws.

I also used a continuous document for each participant so that they were able to see everything they had written from previous interviews. When we were discussing works, they also had the copies of what they had written either on their working document or as a paper copy in front of them. These two choices stemmed from my wish that the entire research experience culminate as a collective experience rather than as separate interviews with clear boundaries. Practically, I wanted students to have as much at their disposal as possible to have a learning experience while also being able to view our discussion as taking place across several sessions. I wanted them to be able to make

comparisons in their own writing experiences so that we could explore the complex processes of creative production in addition to exploring individual works of writing.

I chose not to record interviews because I wanted them move as comfortably as possible. Recording dialogue could have had the effect of making students feel like the discussion was higher stakes than a comfortable discussion. I was also interested in what emerged from our interaction and not in an exactness in their responses.

As far as how the interviews proceeded from the writing, sometimes the participants emailed me their writing before the interviews, and sometimes they showed up with their writing. I would usually begin the interview by asking the student to tell me the story behind the piece of writing they brought in. I explained to them that I wanted to hear what they believed went into this particular piece of writing both in terms of writing approaches and the surrounding situations, their thoughts, and whatever else they thought mattered.

To describe how the interviews proceeded might be the most difficult part of explaining the methods. Conceptually, I looked at Scheurich's (1997) explanation of a postmodern interview. On talking about the notion of the "decontextualized interview" Scheurich argues:

The claim of accurate or valid representation, especially in terms of such techniques as line numbering, identification and quantification of comparable meaning monads, statistical techniques, or even discourse analysis, simply serves to hide the overwhelming absent presence of the researcher and her/his modernist assumptions. (p. 63)

Scheurich (1997) prompted me to ask myself: "How am I present in this research?" While "discovery" is possible, at least in coming to some preliminary questions, understandings, and reflections for both the students and me, there are other motivations, experiences, histories, and contexts that are much more illusive. In this project, I am trying to explain how I as a teacher and my participants as students understand what writing is about. Given that texts do not fully constitute the meaning of written works and

that the creative production of writing constitutes more than the processes and products of writing, how do we (my students and I) understand their portrayals of their writing experiences? Like Scheurich, I am recognizing that whether it is an interview or a work of writing, our presence informs what we interpret is happening. In the design of my inquiry, I am cognizant that I am informing and forming my understandings rather than discovering or finding out what happens. I would suggest this was the case for the students, too. It was in the process of interviews, storying, and discussion that they informed their sense of themselves as writers.

That is how I approached Scheurich's (1997) promptings in the design. In terms of carrying out the interviews, I tried to include as much of the context as possible in my discussion of the interviews and my interactions with the participants. For instance, when Albert discussed his first piece of writing with me and explained that his background in improv acting helped him write the piece, I was certain to explain that I knew that Albert was involved in the improv club and that he knew my dissertation was about improvisation related to the writing process. This is one example of how surrounding factors are worth considering in the unfolding of the data. What is not captured are the moments when the interview proceeded more like a discussion than an interview. There were times when I told the students why what they were explaining to me was particularly interesting to me and my study. For instance, I spoke to John, in later interviews, about the fact that many students feel hindered or very inspired by prompts, whereas, with him, he seemed to not be steered by the prompt and seemed to move according to his own dictates. My sense of wanting to make the interview feel less clinical, less procedural, and less about a study and more about an exchange of ideas is difficult to capture and even more difficult to explain why these exchanges occurred when they did.

Practically, I began each interview by asking the participant to tell me about the piece of writing. If I had not read the piece already, the participant would write an

explanation while I read the piece. If I had read it before, we would sometimes go into the interview right away, and other times I would ask the participant to write. It depended on whether the participant seemed immediately eager to discuss the writing. At other times, it depended on energy levels; after a day of teaching for me and classes for them, writing would be a way to settle in and focus on the interview.

As I reflect on it now, the interview approaches that I took were concerned with ensuring that students had what was necessary to discuss, explore, and learn about their writing with me. This included a comfortable sense of the interview as a discussion as well as access to their previous notes and written materials. The data collection was influenced by the premium I placed on the experience of discussion in the interviews. I did not want the interview to be an exercise in data collection. At the same time, I attempted to write out the data collected while being conscious of the fact that it is an interpretive act.

Improvisation as Method

Improvisational Assumptions

As I discussed in the first two chapters, a definition of improvisation is no simple task if we are to consider the robust provisional and theoretical implications of the concept. As a method, I can explain two major ways in which we can see improvisation as a research approach. There are the assumptions about improvisation that I had going into the research, and there are the ways in which I can attribute, after the fact, improvisational features to how I conducted the research.

This was my first time conducting a formal research study with participants. I decided to approach the interviews with a similar outlook that I used in my teaching. My thought process in conducting the interviews could be described with the same underlying questions that are part of my improvisational teaching practice: *What do the*

students seem to be telling me? How am I interpreting what they are communicating?

What can I do about it? What questions do their responses raise for me as writer and as

teacher? The difference between this kind of thinking for teaching and for research is that teaching is primarily concerned with cultivating interpretations and discussion in the moment with students. With research, interpretation happens both during interviews and after, in the process of writing and interpreting. I was therefore concerned with finding meaning with students and with walking away from each interview with the sense that the interview provided me with something toward further interpretation later. I would approach each interview with the following assumptions in mind:

- That I have to listen closely and on many levels in order to find the paths forward in the discussion. This kind of listening is like a jazz improviser listening to the soloist who precedes him for subtle themes to continue to play on and develop. The multiple levels involve listening not only to the words participants provided but also being receptive to the emotional state: to body language and facial expressions.
- That the students and I create the content of the discussion as we go much the same way a jazz piece takes on meaning over the course of its performance. While we can listen in at any given moment to a solo when we are the audience to an ongoing arrangement, each melodic expression is carrying on in response to what has occurred in complex ways. What this means for an interview is that there are not necessarily distinct questions followed by answers. The nature of discussion is discursive.
- That I must be aware of my eagerness to find the “right” data and quell that eagerness. Instead, the goal is to see what the participants provide. In improvisational performances, there might be structure (the tenets of a game for improvisational theater; the chord changes in a jazz performance), but the structure is in the service of the new emergence, of what is provided in the

inspiration of the moment. Improvisation is about what happens that we could not predict in advance.

Seeing Improvisation after Stepping Back

In addition to the assumptions that operated, there are other ways I can now identify in which improvisation was at play in the research. The most important thing to understand about these research methods is that they unfolded in ways throughout the research and I had to take a step back and consider how they were enacted. I began the project with a *conceptual* notion of ideas, but I was not entirely sure of how each of these ideas would play out for me in this project. For instance, writing as inquiry, as Richardson (2000) tells us, is a way to “learn something that I did not know before I wrote it” (p. 924). The writing itself is an act of research. Here is how this played out for me. Each day after an interview, I wrote an analysis of what happened. Sometimes I would start writing in the classroom as soon as the participant had left. Other times it was not until the evening. Initially, I was looking for insights that would steer the next interviews. Although I had a protocol, I treated it as a guide for possible questions. What I was most interested in during each interview was if the discussion flowed well and not in a discrete back-and-forth movement. I wanted it to be as if the students were speaking as comfortably as possible and really explaining their writing rather than responding directly to an ordered set of questions; and most importantly, I wanted to be exploring the understanding of their writing with them. My belief was that comfort and a pace to the interview both meant that the participants would really be thinking about their writing in their responses rather than thinking about providing answers to a researcher. Like in my improvisational teaching, I wanted to create the effect that the participants and I would be exploring their writing and their writing processes *together*.

The following entry I wrote at the end of the first interview with Harper. I tried to piece out where Harper ascribed meaning in subtle ways. This is not to say that she stated

directly what was important to her. It was *my interpretation* that, at the beginning of the interview, Harper saying, “I’m not going to use this for the college essay,” mattered a lot to her. Here is what I wrote at the end of the interview:

Started with promptings from Harper, that it wasn’t going to be used. Seems to me, this is the most important aspect of this. The teacher’s ethos, saying something completely valid; something I could see myself saying, altered her perceptions of this essay’s primal possibility: to be used for college admissions.

Here, we have my attempt to react with improvisation to the use her of her writing by picking up on the subtle communication about it. Here, we have a downgrading of how a piece of writing might be used; that it might not be used for the college essay. Here, we have the sense of audience coming from an experienced educator, influencing. It’s like if Miles Davis tells the crew that the blues scale has been done too much.

In the entry here, I was trying to make a connection between Harper’s experience and ideas from jazz improvisation. What I was trying to do was both capture my initial interpretations and write my way into new ones.

I was looking for the “subtle opportunities” that might emerge (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 16). What I want to also illustrate here is the way this eventually continued to inform the research. As I constructed the narrative of this research, here is how I wrote about this:

As Harper handed me the above essay, I asked her to write what the story of writing the essay was. As she began to write and I began to read, she gave me what she called a “disclaimer,” and said that this essay is not going to be the one she submits to colleges.

You will see the above sentence in its context in the next chapter. Here is what her “disclaimer” turned out to be about: her English teacher told the class that writing about sports for the college essay could be seen as cliché. Because her essay involved being on a team, she was worried that it would be cliché. Had I just carried on with my interview and not asked her what she meant by her disclaimer, we would not have discussed this aspect of how she viewed her essay. In addition to the insights that would have been lost,

it was also a lesson for me that I needed to listen differently during these interviews. I needed, I realized, to look for subtle cues from the students about what matters to them in their writing in the same way musicians listen to one another's solos to pick up on subtle phrasings that could be brought more to the surface. Part of this method stems from a view I have about students more generally from teaching: that in some ways, either directly or indirectly, they hint to us what they want to communicate. But I did not know this would become part of my research approach.

Looking for subtle cues from the participants became my way of working at an understanding of the participants' writing *together* and *with* them, as I had done in my improvisational teaching. In my teaching, it often brought about the most interesting and surprising avenues of inquiry. With writing, it could have been because I know more about writing and writing instruction that I was able to see opportunities in many aspects of their responses. It is also part of my sense that the work is not the text alone. My stance in both kinds of improvisation (teaching and research) was that playing on the subtle communications from students could lead to deeper insights. But the need to form an interpretation on my own is also at play, as we can see in the following excerpt. I wrote the following excerpt at the beginning of interview two with Harper, while she was writing about the experience of writing the second essay.

These are the things I want to address:

Why she chose this piece, since that's turning into a crucial direction in the research.

What the story of the piece is

And what she meant last time by "quality" as a consideration in writing
And whatever else she wants to explain.

I also want to say that, over two personal essays, I see a theme of learning something that is self-transformative/ing and, these self transformations have to do with ... how would Harper describe it?

Are these two works part of a larger exploded narrative?

The crucial direction in the research that I referenced was my sense that *what students chose to bring to the interviews* was, in some sense, an act of communication

about their writing. My initial plan for research involved having students bring in pieces of writing for the first two interviews and then prompting them to write during the second two. However, I saw how all three participants enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their college essays and supplemental essays in depth with me. I had the sense that I would learn more about their experience as writers if I allowed them to choose what to bring because what they would bring would be most crucial for them at that time. Additionally, it changed my original thoughts about procedure, which was exciting to me. I wanted their agenda-setting, by bringing in the piece each time, to provoke “dynamic capabilities” in me as a researcher and educator; in other words, the ability to respond to unpredictable variability in meaningful ways (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, pp. 1-4). I wanted to say “yes to the mess” of what might transpire during the research process (p. 8). I wanted our discussions to cause a “provocative disruption” in our thinking about the writing process, the composition mindset, and improvisation (p. 10).

In the additional notes above, you can see that I was looking for some way to build a narrative about Harper’s writing through interviewing. In wanting to ask her whether she saw a thematic connection, I was interested in what kinds of insights and comments from her that might bring about. The theme did not offer an interesting direction for the interview. What was interesting in the second interview was how Harper told me about a paragraph that had previously been in the essay but that she removed because she sensed it did not belong.

What I want to illustrate here is how I worked while interviewing and between interviewing. This is the crucial difference between improvisation as teaching method and as research approach. Constructing meaning from research happens both with participants and on one’s own. With teaching, in my case anyway, it happens almost solely in the classroom. For teaching, the thinking afterwards and the planning before are all in the service of exploring meaning with students. I wanted to construct some

semblance of material to interpret while also allowing for explanations to unfold in the course of the interviews and possibly arriving at interpretations with participants.

The notion of “alternating between soloing and supporting” has been relevant in a variety of ways (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 30). Throughout interviews, the participants often directed the course of the interview. Also, there were times where I told participants the story of my research and of what I was writing as a way to prompt them. There were times when I would think aloud in response to what they told me as a way to make sense of ideas. This was also a way we could deepen our understanding of their writing together.

How these improvisational terms play out is difficult to capture. Interviews have what Scheurich (1997) calls “indeterminate ambiguity” (p. 73). There is no actual truth to what happens in an interview. It is our models of understanding truth that inform what we think happened. What happens in an interview is contextual and “is fundamentally indeterminate—the complex play of conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, fears, power, desires, and needs on the part of both the interviewer and interviewee cannot be captured and categorized” (p. 73). To further complicate how indeterminate the meaning is, we are often making meaning while the interview is occurring. In other words, it is not possible to distill the difference between the experience of the interview and the interpretation of the experience. As Schuerich puts it: “The crux of the issue is the interpretive moment as it occurs throughout the research process” (p. 73).

What, if anything, are we supposed to do about the interpretive moment? Reflexive inquiry asks not only how do I interpret what happens in an interview but also why do I interpret it this way? It serves as a reminder that insights are interpretations.

But the solution here is not to solely have the knowledge of the situation of indeterminate ambiguity. Scheurich (1997) calls for: “some new imaginaries of interviewing that open up multiple spaces in which interview interactions can be

conducted and represented, ways that engage the indeterminate ambiguity of interviewing, practices that transgress and exceed a knowable order” (p. 75).

Here is how I believe some of these things played out for me.

I ascribed importance to a sense of flow in the interviews. Fluid discussions do not proceed question by question, with the intention of getting a response to each question. This sense of flow is the research version of what I had learned in my teaching to hone my role as improviser *toward and with* students’ improvisations. Like my improvisational teaching approach, oriented toward learning in the moment with the students, I valued the same approach as a researcher.

This was not something I articulated during the process of research. It is only now, as I reflect, that I realize that this is where I placed a premium. I was also thinking of what would provide me with material to discuss in my later analysis. These insights can be categorized into three broad categories: there were those things I deemed best said in the student’s words; for these things, I asked them to write a version of what they had just told me; there were things that I knew for a fact I would not forget and I did not either take notes or ask students to write a response. This tended to happen less frequently and toward the end of the interview and usually concerned a major interpretation that I was making. Finally, there were things I wanted to get down in notes; for these things, I sensed that I would not remember what was said and what I thought. I also thought that, for some reason, asking the students was not preferable. This was either because I did not want to break their flow in speaking to me or I was more concerned with recording my ideas rather than their exact words. It seemed to me that, once participants were on a roll with talking about their writing, the more purposeful explanations would come about, rather than their attempt to address my question. I wanted to make sure they were given the space to carry on for a while, to improvise in their thinking aloud *about* their own writing, and possibly to become narrators.

In addition to Scheurich's (1997) call for researchers to complicate their understandings of the interview, Chase (2005) suggests that "to think of an interviewee as a narrator is to make a conceptual shift away from the idea that interviewees have answers to researchers' questions and toward the idea that interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own" (p. 660). Chase describes a phenomenon in which interviewees, "would break through my structure by offering stories about the background of current circumstances" (Czarniawska, as cited in Chase, 2005, p. 660).

There are a couple of instances in which I believe the participant broke through my structure. In one interview, I was certain that Harper's work of writing was a successful reworking of another piece. I was gleeful that I would be able to make an improvisational analysis of a sense of an "exploded narrative," which is the idea that narrative is created over the course of a lifetime's body of work (Iyer, 2004). However, as it took me 20 minutes to realize, Harper was greatly dissatisfied with her writing and with her experience of the prompt. I could have continued on my trajectory, gathered my data as I first saw it, but I would have missed out on the far more interesting path that ensued.

Collectively the students broke through my structure of research by bringing in writing that was for the college essay. My initial structure was to have participants bring literary analysis essays that they had done for their English classes for the first two interviews. Then, in interviews three and four, I was planning to provide prompts to students and have them write fiction (in interview three) and poetry (in interview four). The intention there was to explore possible differences in writing for analysis and writing for fiction and poetry. However, the students demonstrated a strong interest in wanting to bring in the writing on their own. In fact, even though I explained the entire initial intention to the participants, they steered invariably to wanting to bring in the piece of writing for discussion.

The questions underlying my improvisational teaching stance were helpful here in understanding this. *What do the students seem to be telling me? How am I interpreting what they are communicating? What might I do about it? How might I respond?*

They seemed to be telling me the college admissions essays were dominating their writing experiences during the time of the research. It made sense to me to let the participants break through this design in the research, given that I was looking at how *they explained* what their writing was about. What better writing to discuss, I thought, than that which is most crucial for them at this moment in their lives?

Narrative Research

My research approach is informed by both improvisation theories and narrative research. One of the most important concepts from the field of narrative research is “the crisis of representation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, pp. 18-19). The crisis poses problems of representation on many fronts, most of which stem from dilemmas around how to represent what happened or what we think happened. For interviews, there is the problem of how to know what we can only partially intuit. We are also faced with the dilemmas in how to portray participants and ourselves in writing. There are broader issues as well. To begin with, the notion that something actually happens is thrown into question. Further, the notion that reporting what happens is a clear-cut activity is also thrown into question. These ideas are important in my research approach in that I acknowledge the crisis in representation and declare certain problems about representing experience, particularly in research. I did not have two discretely separated phases where I collected data and then interpreted it. Interpretation was continuously happening. In the course of my research, “fieldwork and writing blur into one another” (p. 19). The data are not only made up of the content of the interviews or what participants say. The data and the interpretation

grow up together. This means that I am cognizant of my very present, yet very subtle role in constructing the representation of “what happened” in this study.

Here is a sample of how this played out. The following text is from my notes before an interview with John (he provided the work of writing to me in email, before the interview):

Prep:

What strikes me here is the control over the story through the seemingly nonlinear movement

Was he comfortable with that?

He moves through paragraphs and drops them when he feels like it—I think it’s impressive, does he? Was that difficult?

The only thing I think could make this better would be one or two sentences describing the Arabic songs—I want to hear them! Or feel what he felt when hearing them! But it is so difficult to do

I also know some of this story

I recall in class when he would write Arabic on the board during group work

How have you experienced the process of writing these applications and prompts?

These notes craft possibilities for inquiry. But, as we see in some of the notes from the interview, other things develop:

Comfortable b/c he has a sense of his future and where he wants to

There is a certainty

Natural for him to talk about these interests....

The story has unfolded

So the story of these writings is in conversations

He talks about this all the time

He’s already talking about this, hanging out in groups of....

Already has experience improvising with it....

Hanging out in communities of diverse....

The preparation question that was addressed was whether John was comfortable with narrative writing and why that might be the case or not. Toward the bottom of the notes, I am trying to see if some of the explanations from the interview can connect to improvisational concepts. I was wondering if John’s comfort with narrative writing can be explained in terms of his “hanging out in a community of diverse specialists”

(Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 8). This is the idea that improvisers develop a repertoire from the informal discussions among their peers. But it did not seem to me that this was happening for all of John's peers, necessarily. It was a situation he had created for himself. He was able to derive an approach to writing after having had such discussions. It was only after some time with the data that I was able to see that John worked his role among his peers *like* a jazz improviser in this particular respect and *not* that the entire community he was in was necessarily functioning this way.

Later during the interview, while John was writing, I took the opportunity to attempt to form an interpretation:

When they explain their writing, they are self-assessing, we get to see how they view themselves as learners, as writers, as readers and tellers of their experiences. We learn the terms that are meaningful to them and can use that knowledge to have a good insight into how to proceed in educating them.

In the sample above, I was reaching for claims that I was not sure I could justify. It might not be that students self-assess when they explain their writing. Later, I realized that while writing such notes, I was using whatever terms I could think of in the moment to hold down some kind of interpretation. In this particular example, I realize now that it might be simply that students sometimes characterize themselves as writers within their explanations. What this illustrates in my research process is two things. First, there is how I needed to make some interpretation along the way and even during interviews. Second, and more crucially, there is how I needed to return to my initial ideas and reinterpret the data for better articulations.

Being Cognizant of Dilemmas with Narrative Research

Scholars in the field of narrative research have sharply noted important dilemmas that researchers need to be aware of and work out or, possibly, resolve. Riessman (2008) continually raises certain criticisms in her evaluation of narrative researchers: the lack of a definition of narrative on the part of the researcher; no explanation of how decisions

were made to include and exclude data; little to no inclusion of data that present a problem to the researcher's assumptions; a lack of space for the reader to interact with data and form conclusions that might be in contrast to those of the researcher.

The discussion and representation of data presented here constitute one way of working with the data. How did I try to address some of Riessman's (2008) criticisms above? In addressing a definition of narrative, my discussion of the interview in the previous section serves to recognize that I do not believe I merely ask questions and the participants provide responses. Further, I know that the interpretations in the course of the research are open to revision, reconsideration, and alteration. How we interview and how we report the data are part of the process of narrative. I explained in the previous section how I worked during interviews. My major focus was on how students explain or otherwise make meaning about their writing and their experiences with and while writing. The emphasis was on their perspective of the experience, but, of course, this presents a problem related to my assumptions as researcher. To help mitigate this situation, I try to address, in the discussion of research questions, the ways in which improvisation both is and is not a fruitful lens for this project. Additionally, in this chapter and in the next one, I first tried to match data with certain expectations but soon realized that this was not possible. To mitigate this and to leave space for the reader to experience the data, I have attempted to provide an exploratory discussion rather than a didactic argument.

Reflexivity as a Concept in Narrative Research

Reflexivity is about interpreting within a tentative space. Working with students to explore the meaning of their writing helped move me into working within this tentative way of interpreting. Throughout the research process, I was aware of my wanting to fit things into place. Whether I was looking for ideas that connected to improvisation or whether I started to narrate the day's research as if I understood it thoroughly and it

happened in the past, it was only after spending time with the data and working through a draft of the dissertation that I really understood how I enacted reflexivity.

On the conceptual level, I knew what it meant well enough. I drew from Richardson (2000), Scheurich (1997), and Qualley (1997) in constructing my definition of reflexivity. I started by defining reflexivity by looking at the implied metaphor in the word; I took it to mean that we have “reflexes” for something. But there seem to be more complex possibilities if we look a little into the history of the word according to the OED. As a verb, the entry reads, “To reflect (a ray of light, heat, etc)” (OED Online, 2015). Of course “reflexive” is an adjective, and, interestingly enough, according to OED a noun that means: “capable of turning, deflecting, or bending something back” (OED Online, 2015). And the adjective can also mean: “Chiefly *Philos.* and *Psychol.* Of a mental action, process, etc.: turned or directed back upon the mind itself; involving intelligent self-awareness or self-examination; introspective” (OED Online, 2015). There are several other definitions as well. What seems to be a common recurrence is the idea of going back, either on the part of an individual, or the ability to illuminate from the source of the light. When we narrate in the course of research, reflexivity means that the first telling is revisited. Metaphorically, light from the first telling is shined back on the telling itself. It seems to be about looking for sources of emergence. While reflecting might be a process that happens at a distinctly different time, reflexivity is a continuously cultivated habit.

One of the major ways reflexivity worked for me was in writing to uncover what I was really inquiring about. When I started the research, I was using the question: How do students story their writing? I had a sense that student responses would be constructing narratives about their work. As I wrote about the data, however, there seemed to be a variety of explanations that were offered. Yes, the students gave me stories and narratives about a conversation with a teacher or a parent in relation to the writing. But, much of what I was attempting to describe as story was really my pulling together of many different aspects or descriptions of what students were reporting to me. Further, as I

thought more about what my inquiry was really about, I realized that I was after what the students can offer as testimony about their understanding of writing at this particular moment in time, recognizing that they are also offering temporary and ever-changing reflections and points of view.

Consider Albert's explanation of what writing one of his supplemental college essays was like:

I felt like writing this was more fun than my Common App Essay since I had a lot more freedom. For the Common App, there is a much clearer purpose to what your essay must accomplish, which makes you feel pressure to achieve those "goals," but with this prompt, it's far less clear exactly what the goal of the piece is, which gives you the freedom to just write. I feel like that freedom allowed me to have a lot more fun with the essay.

What Albert emphasizes above is the purpose of a particular writing prompt and the way it affected his experience with writing. Albert spoke at other times about the purpose of particular writing assignments. In my research notes, I wrote the following comments about Albert's decision to bring in two essays and explore them in tandem:

The student sees writing in multiple ways, multiple purposes—academic proof of skill and knowledge—self-expression and being viewed as a thinker.

He is able to operate comfortably in these realms and represents what would be the ideal.

Albert bringing these two pieces in represents his concluding statement in the research participation.

The prominence of exams in the story of the writing, of performance tasks (college essay, assignment...) areas for further research: students who write on their own, who self-identify as writers outside—what, how, what motivates, etc...? Here the story was about what could have been with various works of writing and about the various expectations of different subjects.

At the end of this entry, while I use the word "story," it is clear that I was using the word but not looking at stories necessarily. The word functioned as a place-holder to allow me to explore interpretations. It was part of my own writing as inquiry. My

interpretation here was really about the kinds of concepts Albert was concerned with in this interview about the purposes of writing. There is also my assessment of him, my interpretation about what it means that he brought in these two essays and compared them.

As I started to take my notes and write early drafts of the dissertation, I began to doubt that what was happening was a construction of a story. That was when I realized, in my own writing, that the word was a helpful starting point, but not a genuine part of the inquiry. This is one important way in which reflexivity allowed me to deepen my understanding of what my inquiry was really about.

What Narrative Meant to Me in This Research

I chose to be cognizant of the above outlined dilemmas of representation because I knew that throughout this project I was capturing and selecting moments of what occurred in research. The most important idea is that nothing happened as a matter of fact but, instead, I as the researcher was continuously choosing, consciously or not, what to include and how to present what was included. Further, the interview was an interaction where I interpreted during and, afterwards, from memory. The interviews, in my understanding, did not function as pure question and answer sessions. Finally, I attempted, in being reflexive, to try to include my intentions and doubts inasmuch as they seemed apparent to me and relevant to the discussion.

Limitations

The amount of time spent in the research process (interviewing participants, interpreting data, and eventually producing a work of writing about the research) is always a limitation; so too are the focus and the selection of participants.

The students I worked with are high-achieving students in a high-achieving school. They are excellent writers and are quite strong in several rigorous academic subjects. They are very active in several demanding extracurricular activities. Having taught each of the participants in their ninth and eleventh grade years, I knew they were quite able to provide complex responses to questions relating to English. It is important for a reader who works with a different age of students or students who are in a different situation academically to be aware of these characterizations.

I did not inquire into the matters that concern identity with the participants. I worked with two males and one female. Nowhere throughout the study do I identify them beyond those terms. With the exception of the excerpts they provided to me and have allowed me to quote, I do not refer to such things as race, nationality, ethnicity, etc. Some of the samples of writing do reveal some cultural affiliations as well as political ones. While I will not argue against an identity politics here, I will state my reasons for intentionally not illustrating these factors or exploring their possible connection to the data. The primary reason is the scope of the inquiry. I do not dismiss the idea that, say, a study specifically into how someone from a working-class background might explain their writing as a result of their class consciousness, is laudable. But that is an entirely different dissertation.

Let us just say that the three participants are savvy New York City teenagers. All three of them attended public school for their four years of high school. They take public transportation on a regular basis and have done so from at least ninth grade. They are highly cultured, well read, extraordinarily intelligent, and wonderfully creative. The identifier that I believe matters most is that they are students in a high school where competitive academics are a mainstay of experience. It is not cool in National High School to fail a class, to be late, to get low grades. Students take their work very seriously and need very little, if any, convincing that their lives in high school can influence and direct much of their future.

A study with students who felt very disengaged from their academics would be a worthwhile inquiry, where one might discover ways to reignite a motivation for academics and the stories behind becoming disengaged.

Age of the students poses another limit. The same question, “How do students explain their writing?” would be a worthwhile study with elementary school students as well as with adult students.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to represent some of the practical aspects of the research and the conceptual complications. The practical aspects involved such things as: how I took notes on a laptop, where interviews took place, and the pieces of writing the students brought in, just to name a few.

The conceptual complications involve several areas of concern. First, most of the dilemmas stem from the “crisis in representation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, pp. 18-19), which includes there being a blurred rather than a discrete boundary among things. For instance, there are the ways in which interpretation is a continuous, rather than a discrete part of the research process. There is also a postmodern sense of the interview that demands that we realize that an interview is more complex than a mere unfolding of questions and answers. Included in this are the ways I made decisions throughout the research process. I have tried to represent this here by providing and explaining samples from my field notes.

There are also the ways in which improvisation was a way of working in the research process. I was aware of improvisation both in advance, as an intentional approach, and after revisiting and interpreting my process. My approach in research was premised on improvisation in teaching, but I realized that research involves the additional time spent interpreting outside of the interview setting.

This is where reflexivity became crucial. It was through this process that I realized that my inquiry was about how students explain what writing means to them.

In what follows, I am guided by the research questions:

- (1) If texts do not fully constitute the whole of the written work, then how do students and teachers explain and understand what writing is about? This question is addressed in two ways:
 - (A) How do students understand what their writing is about?
 - (B) How do I understand what they report to me?
- (2) What might it mean to improvise our role in writing instruction? How might student explanations provide the context to improvise our roles as writing instructors?

Chapter IV explores the three participants in depth and considers their writing, their voices, and the lessons I can learn from them about writing. In Chapter V, I explore some thematic ways to interpret the data. In Chapter VI, I address the research questions in a more direct way and explore further possibilities of how we might improvise in our role as writing instructors.

Chapter IV

LESSONS FROM LISTENING

After talking to students about their writing, I realized I can potentially learn many lessons and pose many questions. I realized that a crucial part of leading students with jazz principles in mind, in a way that would provocatively disrupt them, would require first a deep listening to the ways in which they each uniquely could benefit from such an approach. Each student offers individual lessons to me about writing instruction. These lessons offer a range of issues for reflection, from how they define themselves as writers and learners to their descriptions of their ways of working, and their processes. And the inquiry also raises questions about how we have a role with students in cultivating an understanding of writing with them. For instance, as you will see in one discussion I had Harper, one question I arrived at was: Can a writing conference be considered part of the writing process?

The lessons can sharpen some of the ways that we converge with and diverge from students in understanding writing. We can question which choices we enact when we diverge from the students' understandings of their writing. There were times, for instance, when a participant had a much different perception of a piece of writing than I did. There were also times when we worked off of each other's perceptions and ways of seeing their writing. It is important to unpack these lessons for each of the participants in order to explore the ways in which they each experience writing. Understanding the individual experience might enable a better approach to teaching creative production and

to leading students further along the path of what *they would do*, rather than what *we might do* as writers.

Sometimes a participant would explore the ways certain assignments influenced his or her approach to writing. For Albert, a creative piece for English class, written with a partner, allowed him to go beyond the usual boundaries he has for himself. For Harper, while one university prompt limited her sense of space in the writing, another prompt opened up that space.

Participants also presented concerns for being able to portray what they wanted to portray. Albert wanted to illustrate something about himself via his role on the debate team. Harper wanted to communicate her sharp sense of wit and insight through word choice and phrasing. John expressed difficulty balancing the need to make himself a viable candidate to colleges in his essay, while not seeming like he was bragging.

In what follows, I will present a discussion of each of the participants, starting with Harper, then Albert, and concluding with John. I will conclude the chapter with comparisons between these three cases.

Harper: Spontaneous Ringleader, Avid Participator, and Strong Narrative Writer

I first got to know Harper as a student in my ninth grade class. The personality of the class as a whole is worth discussing in order to illustrate my understanding of Harper. It was my last class of the day and the ninth graders had far more energy by that time than I did. Early in the year, I inadvertently went off on a mild rant about my dislike of whiteout—something about how it symbolizes a false belief in perfection. My seriousness brought the class into stitches. Their laughter immediately augmented the environment of the class. It became a space where laughter and deep intellectual insights were bound up together. About seven students in the class had attended the same junior

high school together—Harper was one of them. It was a small progressive school in a well-to-do neighborhood in lower Manhattan. This group of students was particularly outgoing, jovial, sharp and witty. In many ways, their comfort in working with one another was a strong contributing factor to how outgoing this particular class was.

I was also in the throes of experimenting with ways of conducting class discussions, ways to make class a more improvisational space. I instituted a new approach where students did not have to raise their hands. This allowed for exciting student-to-student responses and it kept me on my feet. Harper used this allowance at will. Her participation came from a place of real inquiry and wanting to learn as well as from a place of adding humor to the class. It was a comfortable class, filled with energy and Harper was a strong contributor to that environment.

Two years later, Harper was a student in my eleventh grade Advanced Placement class. Her sharp insights had grown sharper and, while still witty, the sense of asking was a more common refrain than the contribution of humor.

Harper was one of those students whose participation you could count on. When she was absent, something crucial was also absent from the class. This factor is true for each of the three participants involved. I chose to ask students whose participation sculpted the very pace of the classes they were in.

Harper is an avid athlete, and quite a serious soccer player. She is someone who is not afraid to speak and is not afraid to express her lack of understanding. While she is a high-achieving student in several aspects of her life, she is quite humble and willing to help others. When she speaks in class discussions, she does so with a clear and distinctive voice.

Harper's participation in class revealed a willingness to jump in, a willingness to interrupt in a positive way. Her sudden questions often cleared the way for complex directions in class inquiry. She often took on the role of being the re-director.

“I was out of my element in every way”: Harper’s “Taking Risks” Essay

To get a sense of Harper’s voice as a writer, let us consider the essay from her first interview, which was for her common application:

I was out of my element in every way: in a foreign locker room, feeling like I was about to throw, and in Staten Island, which, for a Manhattanite, feels like another country. My basketball team was up against the number one ranked team in New York City. Only a sophomore, my coach informed me that I was starting at forward in our playoff game, and I couldn’t get myself together.

“No one’s expecting us to win,” my coach reassured me. “We have nothing to lose.”

I was deaf to his attempts to calm me. Breathing slowly wasn’t working. Listening to my pre-game playlist wasn’t working. My body wasn’t working. I did not want to leave the locker room.

In spite of that, I played the whole game. And, in spite of that, we lost. But that game became representative of the fear preventing me from giving basketball—and other pursuits I took on—my all.

Months later, I attended a talk given by New York Yankees pitcher Mariano Rivera, during which he spoke about dealing with nerves when he’s brought in to save a close game.

“Every game has a winner and a loser,” he said. “You can’t always be the winner. In the scheme of things, it’s just one game.”

His words, unlike my basketball coach’s, made sense. I even told my soccer coach to remind me before each game that “it’s just one game.” And it worked. The more I stayed present for each game, the better I played. Soon, excitement replaced fear.

But that was only on the court and on the field. When I stepped off of the airplane in Quito, Ecuador for a month-long service trip, I found it hard to apply Rivera’s advice to what was, unlike Staten Island, actually a foreign experience.

With all my peers on the trip speaking Spanish fluently, I felt excluded and useless. They were quickly making connections with the local kids while I stood off to the side. To turn things around, it literally only took just one game. I grabbed a soccer ball and kicked it toward a nine-year-old named Oscar. He kicked it back. With that, we had a game going as my peers and the local kids joined in. I could have given in to the anxiety the language barrier created. In fact, that’s what would have felt safest. But I got off the

sidelines because I was beginning to understand that being safe is not the same thing as being satisfied.

Over this past year, I've realized that in not taking risks, the only thing I'm losing out on is a meaningful and rewarding experience. Nothing better encapsulates this idea than my time with Literati, my school's literary magazine. I first attended the club's meeting as a freshman and was too paralyzed to offer a comment on the writing up for critique. This scared me off from showing up in sophomore year. By the end of my junior year, however, I was back in a Literati meeting willing to take a risk that people would want to hear what I had to say. While that's not the same as being confident, it was a start. I walked into that meeting with Rivera's words in mind. I wasn't in the club to win or lose. I was there to learn and to write and to try speaking up even when it didn't feel safe to do so.

This year, I'm a full member and a regular contributor to our discussions. I've even submitted my own writing for open critique. The worst that can happen is that my piece won't be selected and—like in a game—I won't be victorious. But, getting nervous about what can go wrong only drains the experience of its potential richness and stops me from enjoying it. Getting my hands dirty with ink or my shoes ruined with mud is what's important because that's the proof that I did win—over anxiety.

Consider Harper's explanation of writing this essay:

I had to come back to this piece more than 5 times because when writing it. I would get "tunnel vision." It was really hard for me to write consistently. I would write a few paragraphs, leave, come back the next day, edit/add any new ideas, leave, come back, etc. Sometimes during random times in the day while doing random things, I would get an idea for the essay and take out the notes section on my i-phone and jot down the idea. When sitting down to write, I would go on tangents of thoughts, and then the next day I would organize the thoughts. So the process became just like a flow on consciousness on the first day, then coming back and adding organization or editing it the next time.

In her description above, Harper places value on having her own multiple perspectives while writing a piece. Harper describes her perception as becoming limited while writing: "I would get 'tunnel vision'." She depicts her writing system as one where evaluation happens at another time, separate from construction. The emphasis on the "random" times when ideas emerge, reveals a sense that conceptualization is not an activity that happens within a set time or set location. The use of her iPhone to record ideas depicts a system for working the muse, the unpredictability of inspiration. The idea

here is that composing does not begin and end when we say it begins and ends. Rather, Harper is aware of variations in perspective. There are two articulations of this here. One is about the ability to see the work differently. The equivalent of stepping back from the canvas for the writer is time itself. The other articulation has to do with being always ready to capture inspirational ideas when they emerge.

“Disclaimer: I will not submit this essay”

As Harper handed me the “taking risks” essay, I asked her to write what the story of writing the essay was. As she began to write her explanation and I began to read her essay, she paused and said that she had a *disclaimer*: this essay is not going to be the one she submits to colleges.

I wondered why she wanted to let me know this. I wondered if something about the purpose of the essay was crucial to her.

Her major concern was whether the essay was cliché or not. The backstory of the essay is that she was confident in it until her English teacher, Mr. Castro, told the class to watch out for certain cliché topics, like the sports essay. I assured her that the essay was not cliché because she was using sports as the example for a life lesson. Her concern, more specifically, was that the fact that the essay begins with a discussion of sports might signal a cliché type of story to a reader.

The various merits that the essay could have in her consciousness were solely concerned with its function for the college admissions. In other words, she knew that the essay had merits as a class assignment and as an essay on its own. She was still uncertain about the genre of the college essay. I raised the possibility that the essay could have value as a publication. She might want to write a book or submit the essay somewhere.

But purpose was at the forefront of the discussion of this piece. It seemed that the stakes for the essay to serve as the college admissions essay were so high that they took precedence over any other plausible incarnation that the essay could have.

Harper gave credence to her English teacher, Mr. Castro, in his discussion with the class about cliché topics. At the end of the interview, as we were discussing the theme of the essay, to break out of comfort zones, she had an insight that using the essay, despite her new fear that it might be cliché, might actually be a form of stepping out of her comfort zone. In a sense, Harper, through our discussion, reassured herself of her initial valuation of the essay.

I wonder, can we call what happened here “process”? We were in a discussion about the piece of writing for the purposes of my research. Harper brought her purposes with her: to get feedback on the essay. Through our discussion, she shifted her own perspective on the piece which in turn could affected whether she revised it further.

“But when you make it concrete”

In her second essay, the “Community Center” essay, Harper depicts an experience at her community center feeling intruded upon by the senior citizen members, who seemed to view her as a granddaughter. She felt no communal connection to the place and, as she put it, “this defined my membership: it was all facilities, no faces.”

Harper’s perception begins to change when she works as a counselor in the camp at the community center. The willingness and openness of the children to engage with the adult members leads Harper to see a new way for her to be in the community center. A conversation with a senior citizen about the wonders of childhood further encourages her transformed view of her role in the community center.

As in the first essay, Harper portrays herself as a learner in the world. She is interested in depicting the epiphanies in her navigation of herself in the world. In her first essay, she broadens her sense of winning to include taking risks by participating. Her second essay too, is concerned with participation, but in a different way. Here, she explores how both the children and the senior citizen members of her community center

defy what she sees as a more usual going about of one's business without having to socialize.

Here is Harper explaining why she removed a part of the essay that she realized did not belong:

When I was thinking about the essay and planning it in my head, I thought that the other story about Morris fit the theme of my essay. I thought it would work. But when I wrote it out, I realized that it didn't fit. And this is the same thing with when you speak your ideas out loud. It sounds good in your head, but when you make it concrete (either by writing it or speaking it), you recognize the flaws.

Harper distinguishes here between the “sounds good in your head” and “make it concrete” versions of a work. In the imagination, before the work is written down, the judgment of quality cannot be made so easily. The idea of “making it concrete” seems to be a call to bring the work into existence. It seems to favor the idea of trying a concept out and then evaluating its effectiveness. Here, outlining or planning in abstraction fall short. She must go through her first phase and then figure out a solution to whatever textual dilemmas she sets up later.

“Was I right to leave this out?”

On her second go at her second essay (the Community Center essay), Harper attempted to write a new paragraph to add to the essay. She showed it to me and asked if she was right in leaving it out. I agreed that she made the right choice. What is revealing here is that she prompted this discussion of the history of this piece. She was sure enough of her own decision to follow through with it in drafting, but wanted to raise it with me to see if there were other insights I might have. I realize that part of Harper's approach to decision making in her writing involves taking the considerations of adults whom she views as competent writers.

In the discussion of the “Taking Risks” essay, she was influenced by Mr. Castro's warning that sports can seem cliché in an essay. During both interviews, she asked me for

input on a few matters. In the second essay, she was inspired to pursue the topic because, in a casual conversation about the idea, her mother told her that it was funny and that she must write about it.

In Harper's explanation of her writing, the input from adults whom she sees as seasoned in writing (Mr. Castro and I are both English teachers, her mother works in the publishing industry) is crucial in checking her own choices. While she is certain of her own choices on most matters, there are what she considers crucial decisions where she wants confirmation.

“Take a risk and go somewhere unexpected”

In my third interview with Harper, she presented me a piece that was written for a prompt from Tufts that had the instructions, “Think outside the box as you answer the following questions. Take a risk and go somewhere unexpected. Be serious if the moment calls for it but feel comfortable being playful if that suits you, too.” Students were provided several choices. Harper chose the topic “There is a Quaker saying: ‘Let your life speak.’ Describe the environment in which you were raised—your family, home, neighborhood, or community—and how it influenced the person you are today. (200–250 words)” (Tufts, 2016).

Here is an excerpt from Harper's response:

“Did you brush your teeth?” I wish you could hear my mother's voice asking this. Not only is she the quintessential Jewish mother, but...she was raised on Long Island, so it sounds like she was sent from central casting to play the part. I stare at her without responding. As a seventeen-year old, I'm annoyed, but amused at the same time. I can travel from the Upper West Side of Manhattan to the depths of the Bronx on the subway. I can take care of young children. And I can cook myself dinner. Yet my mom still thinks she needs to remind me to brush my teeth nightly. I could write a novel recounting the many times my mom has acted this way. While at summer camp, she regularly sent me letters containing a reminder to wear sunscreen. Did she know I wasn't?

Harper quickly ties the piece up by characterizing her mother's urging as a form of care. She attributes her ability to see criticism and guidance as positive to her mother's care for her. She sums up the piece, "In my personal life, I always choose to look for the love."

In this short piece, Harper is able to relay a strong sense of voice, illustrate an aspect of her relationship with her mother in both a humorous and profound way and both directly and subtly communicate things about herself as a person. She communicates that she is attuned to the way people speak, that she sees the positive intentions of people where others might not.

After reading two of her other essays, I immediately felt much more of the presence of the writer in this piece. The piece has a lot of life to it. It is moving and powerful. As we discussed this work in the interview, Harper was clearly more confident in this piece than she was in the other two pieces. She attributed this to the way the university phrased their prompt. The fact that they urged her to be playful opened up her process and made her more willing to falter.

Tufts worded their prompts in an inviting way allowing Harper to feel uninhibited as she wrote. The result was a sharp piece of writing rich with voice and meaning. In the next section, we will see a different experience with Duke's prompt.

Duke as Limiting Prompter

Harper brought a short piece for a 250-word supplemental prompt for Duke University. She described the piece as combining pieces from her first essay. If you recall in her "Taking Risks" essay, Harper discusses her difficulties with accepting loss in sports. An inspirational quote from Mariano Rivera aids her in embracing that she will not always win. She ends the first essay by telling us about how she ventured into *Literati*, the school's literary magazine. For this shorter prompt, Harper took the quote from Rivera and connected it directly to her inspiration to gain the courage to participate

in *Literati*. In the piece, Harper positions herself as an athlete who ventures out of her comfort zone by taking part in a literary community. The prompt from Duke, reads as follows:

Duke University seeks a talented, engaged student body that embodies the wide range of human experience; we believe that the diversity of our students makes our community stronger. If you'd like to share a perspective you bring or experiences you've had to help us understand you better—perhaps related to a community you belong to, your sexual orientation or gender identity, or your family or cultural background—we encourage you to do so. Real people are reading your application, and we want to do our best to understand and appreciate the real people applying to Duke. (250 words maximum) (Duke, 2016).

Harper took her cue in approaching this prompt from Duke's seeming emphasis on community. But she was not certain that her piece accommodated Duke's meaning of the word "community."

Here is Harper's response to the prompt:

As a dedicated athlete, I suspected I might be out of my element joining my school's literary magazine, *Literati*, in freshmen year. On the court and the field, I was always confident. But in that classroom, giving unfiltered opinions about others' work and exposing my vulnerabilities through my writing, scared me off. I never bothered to show up sophomore year.

Some time after, though, I attended a talk with New York Yankees pitcher Mariano Rivera and gained a new perspective on life outside of the game.

"Every game has a winner and a loser," he said when asked about nerves. "You can't always be the winner. In the scheme of things, it's just one game."

His words stuck with me. By junior year, I was back at *Literati* willing to take a risk that people would want to hear what I had to say. I wasn't in the club to win or lose. I was there to learn and to write and to try speaking up even when it didn't feel safe to do so.

This year, I'm a full member, I speak up often, and I've even submitted my own writing for open critique. The worst that can happen is that my piece won't be selected and—like in a game—I won't be victorious. In not taking risks, the only thing I'm losing out on is a meaningful and rewarding

experience. Getting my hands dirty with ink is what's important because that's the proof that I did win—over anxiety.”

As the interview began, Harper seemed disconcerted about something. I started off by explaining how interesting this piece of writing was and how it connected nicely to the ideas that I was working with in the dissertation.

She responded that she tried to portray a community she belonged to by her prompt. Her intent was to show that she was already a member of the community of athletics and used that community membership as a basis to understand and partake in the literary community.

“What are two to three of your greatest memories throughout the time spent working on this piece?” I asked.

I was certain that I would hear a nice victory narrative about the ingenuity involved in her repositioning her story here. Below is what she wrote and I did not see the response until after she wrote it:

I think that this prompt was much more difficult than the previous (Tufts) prompt because this prompt had pressure to do it. For this prompt, I keep wondering, is this what they want? But in the tufts prompt, they tell you to be free, which ingrains in your head that you can pretty much talk about whatever you want as long as it's well written. For this prompt though, I feel the pressure to talk about some deep meaningful life experience that I've had, and how it's given me a perspective on life. But I don't really have any answers since I'm only 17 and haven't had any big life experiences yet. So for this prompt I guess it's like I'm looking for what they want to hear more than what I want to say, but for the other prompt because they give you freedom, I feel better just writing more genuinely and honestly.

Still not having read her response, we began to discuss the piece. Gradually, Harper expressed more and more dissatisfaction with how she executed the piece. We spoke about how her sense of what they wanted was disconnected from what she thought she could provide them with.

In her explanation of how she feels about the piece above, she expresses a sense of a prompting that is so narrow it ends up excluding her. The irony in how Duke worded a

prompt where they want to hear about diversity is that they end up alienating a student who feels she will not offer the diversity they are looking for.

I had to agree with Harper that the wording of Duke's prompt was uninviting. I read it aloud and considered what might be a problem with it. There was repetition but not seemingly done in a literary way: "Duke University seeks a talented, engaged student *body* that *embodies* the wide range." Nothing specific was asked for and, to my knowledge, there seemed to be too many expectations stuffed into a short prompt.

When comparing it to the Tufts prompt, there is a marked difference in how open and inviting it seems.

Together, we speculated, what seems to be the crux of what this Duke prompt is asking for? I thought it had to do with that last sentence: "Real people are reading your application, and we want to do our best to understand and appreciate the real people applying to Duke." It seemed to me to overemphasize the scariest part of writing a college essay (that someone who decides your fate will read it) and did so in a tone that is distant and brittle. Harper thought it was the sentence that read "perhaps related to a community you belong to, your sexual orientation or gender identity, or your family or cultural background." She sensed that the university was not sincere in the word "perhaps" and that they actually wanted students to write about one of the four things presented. Also, the fact that they placed sexual orientation and gender identity first made it seem as if they were specifically privileging narratives about those experiences, in Harper's view. Whether we can interpret the implicit meanings, if there even are any, of Duke's wording, an immensely important takeaway for me as a teacher is to consider how even a well-intentioned prompt, if not well-considered, can stifle a writer's response. In the next section, I discuss the rest of the interview where I tried to help Harper re-envision the prompt in order to have a freer experience responding to it.

“You are not a number, you are not a GPA; who are you?”: Re-imagining a Limiting Prompt

In seeing how dissatisfied Harper was with her own response to the prompt, I offered the suggestion that if she were to illustrate, with just a sentence or two, why joining Literati was so difficult, maybe she would appreciate the emotional power in the writing more. I was thinking back to her response to the Tufts essay prompt, the one she was satisfied with. I was also thinking about her second personal essay, “Community Center,” the one she decided to use. Both works bring the reader vividly into her experience. In taking a step back and looking again at this new piece, I saw Harper’s dissatisfaction with it at least in comparison to those others rather than in terms of whether she fulfilled the prompt.

I asked Harper to explain to me what it is like attending a meeting of Literati. She explained to me the following. Here is what you have to do if you want to submit a piece to the magazine. You email it to the editor who then prints it up, without your name on it, and distributes it at the meeting. You are there, but you are anonymous. Everyone discusses your work, but you cannot defend it. At the end of the discussion, the group votes on whether the piece will be published or not. This experience was trying for Harper both in having her work critiqued and in participating in critiques, not knowing whose work you are talking about. Harper put the emotional dilemma of the experience succinctly thus: “How do you be respectful and critique something at the same time, without coming off as mean?”

Here we have something, I thought. Here, we have a way to illustrate to the reader what it feels like in this experience.

I suggested to Harper to try to illuminate the experience for us in various ways. What if you told it in second person, so that we are in the shoes of someone being critiqued?

She liked the idea and even wrote down a few notes to use in revising.

My intention was to enable Harper to see another path, another avenue for direction but I did not want to confirm anything negative about the piece. The difficulty for me was in validating her valuation of her writing and offering a strategy to revise it without confirming some factual valuation of it. I still thought that the piece had accomplished well what the prompt asked for. But what matters here is that Harper expressed dissatisfaction with the piece.

It occurred to me to explore how she might approach the piece if she imagined it to be prompting her differently.

“What if Tufts wrote the prompt?” I said. “How would they word it?”

She responded immediately: “You are not a number, you are not a GPA; who are you?”

What I noticed here was how immediately Harper was able to take on the voice and the mind of an audience she felt connected to.

You can hear in Harper’s hypothetical prompting above the same kind of openness and energy that Tufts communicates in their prompt. One way of reading this is that Tufts presented an attitude of receptivity through their phrasing. It was not merely the words but Harper’s perception of the attitude of the audience that enabled her positive writing experience. I wonder if it would be plausible to teach students to develop a way of prompting themselves for when they feel stuck by the phrasing or receptivity of how they are prompted. On the other hand, the struggle of having a limiting prompt does not necessarily mean that the experience was noxious in every sense. In terms of flowing with the writing and feeling sure about it, Harper did not have a provocative experience with Duke’s prompt. However, I believe that her repurposing of a previous essay was still a valuable writing experience.

I wanted to know the extent to which this brief exercise that occurred in an impromptu would be beneficial for Harper.

As our interview came to a close, I asked Harper if she felt confident in proceeding to produce another version of this piece. Here is how she described she would approach it:

To rework this piece, I'm definitely thinking about going more in detail about what it actually feels like (and looks like) to be sitting in the room during a Literati session, whether you are an author or a critiquer. I also am still trying to think of a completely new answer to this prompt because if I do make the changes to this answer, I still don't think it's good enough yet. So I guess I'm still trying to come up with a completely new way to answer the prompt.

My earlier suggestion, that she bring to life what Literati was like, seemed to be helpful to her. But the idea of re-imagining the prompt did not seem purposeful to her. Maybe the urgency of the college application made re-imagining the prompt less plausible. Or maybe it is not a legitimate strategy after all. It might be more purposeful to consider as practitioners how we might re-state our prompts rather than instilling the ability within students.

Provocative Prompt and Receptive Audience

The piece Harper brought for the final interview was a supplemental essay for a university. The prompt asked students to explain how the university would serve the applicant's interests. The prompt set the parameters that the other parts of the application already communicated plenty about the applicant. The clear intention of the prompt was for the applicant to directly explain how the college would serve her educational interests. The prompt limited the response to 300 words.

In her response, she begins with a question that she had been wondering for some time; she wanted to know why a student who loves science and humanities must choose between the two. The university, it turns out, offers her the opportunity to study both. What follows in the remainder of the response is a free-flowing discussion of Harper's

interests and how she would carry them out in the university. She highlights a few programs and clearly reveals that she understands how she would be involved in them.

She ends her essay with a return to how the university solved her question that she was puzzled with in the beginning: “While my weekend at the University answered one significant question, it raised many more that I’m now eager to start answering come next September.”

Here, she is able to take the idea of the question and carry it through as a thread for where she has been and where she will go.

Upon reading this piece even before the interview, I was struck at the seeming ease and confidence that came through in the voice and the construction of the piece. I recalled our last interview and how Harper was perturbed by the way that Duke university had worded their prompt in a limiting way, making her experience the process as constrained.

Harper was able to speak with an admissions officer who told her to make certain that in the prompt she address, “Who you are now, who you want to be in five years and how the university gets you there.” This structure combined with her experience enabled her to have a smooth time writing the piece. It is important to note that Harper decided that this university is her major choice and that she will choose the early application option for this school. This adds another layer to the story. Harper’s comfort with the prompt rested heavily on the dramatic sense of relief she felt when she realized that this university was her top choice. The multiple ways in which the university resonated with her were clear to her after her weekend visit. The prompt was something she was able to easily address because it asked for the written expression of what she was already expressing verbally and thinking.

In this last interview with Harper, there was a definite sense of relief on her part. It was palpable that she was clearly pleased with not only this piece but the fact that she had found her college and knew that the work culminating was oriented towards going there.

At the beginning of our interview, Harper mentioned to me that the process of being interviewed had been helpful. I explained to Harper that one of my explorations in the research was to figure out what the benefits might be for the participants and to explore ways to work them into my teaching. Harper responded verbally and then I asked her to produce a written version of what she said. Here is what she wrote:

In English class, students can work in small groups and do similar things to what was done in these interviews. I think it's really beneficial to do something like this in school because you get to see how you yourself write and learn about yourself in a new way. Also, after doing these interviews, if I ever am struggling while writing, I can think about a new way to approach the writing because I've analyzed my different methods of how I write. In other words, I learned through these interviews all the different ways that I write, so now if I'm ever stuck on something, I can approach it with a different method of writing.

When Harper says "the different ways that I write," we could look at this as her own awareness of the various systems, considerations, practices and preferences that go into how she works with writing. She seems to be saying that the experience increased an awareness for how she works and for explaining how she works.

Not Really Out of Her Element: Concluding the Discussion of Harper

In the discussion of Harper's "Taking Risks" essay, the interview ended with Harper having more confidence in the possibility of using the essay for her college application. Similarly, in the discussion of her response to the Duke prompt, we saw that Harper was able to see a new way of approaching the prompt by illustrating what actually being in a Literati meeting was like.

We saw in her "Taking Risks" essay that Harper is a skillful narrator, able to portray herself in the process of becoming, of learning to move beyond her comfort zones. When she described the experience of writing this piece, she offered a keen sense of her own approaches to writing. The fact that her understanding of this essay was

influenced by Mr. Castro only emerged in the interview because I wondered why she wanted to tell me her “disclaimer.”

In her second essay, we see a continuation of her ability to explore and portray her own learning experiences. Harper’s exploration of her “Community Center” essay brings up the contrast between thinking about writing and executing it.

In the culminating interviews, we saw the contrast between inviting prompts and limiting ones. This contrast can be crucial to understand in exploring writing with students.

Albert: Prominent Debater, Creative Experimenter

To gain an understanding of Albert, it is important to understand the role of debate in National High School. The debate team, at its peak, had about 300 students on it and was one of the largest in the country. The way in which the debate team pervades the lives of its members cannot be overstated. Having taught in the school for several years, I have developed the ability to spot debaters quite quickly when they are in my class. They tend to participate frequently and, when they do, they often apply an argument, complete with a structure, to what they say. Their incessant practice at extemporaneous speech, at outlining and at speaking rather quickly, supplies them with a unique practice at participating in forum style discussions.

From his time in my ninth grade class, Albert was an avid participant. For a ninth grader, his diction and syntax as well as his tone seemed far beyond his years. In terms of social issues and political topics, he was more advanced than most students. He would often connect his discussions of literature to various political topics.

As an eleventh grader in my Advanced Placement course, his avid participation had become a finely honed craft. He had learned, over the years, how to be profound while incorporating some humor into his ideas.

The role of debate in Albert's participation did not mean that he always looked to argue. This is sometimes true of students on debate. With Albert, he liked to analyze. He enjoyed taking the core of ideas apart and showing interesting contrasts. He enjoyed being the tour guide on a discovery of interesting insights.

“What an interesting contradiction it would be”

Albert's one act play depicts a conversation between a mime and his wife. I will quote some of it below, so that the reader can get a sense of the artfulness of the piece. The mime character never speaks, but there is detailed stage direction. What begins comically, quickly moves into an everyday tragedy. Albert co-wrote the piece with a classmate. For the assignment, his English teacher allowed students to work together. Here is how Albert explains the system they used to write the play:

To produce this play, my partner and I tried to think outside of the box. Since it's rare that we get the opportunity to write creatively in an English class, we tried to think as outside of the box as possible for this project. As we thought about different topics to write plays about, we kept coming back to the idea of mimes as a concept. There is something interesting about the concept of a mime—somebody who can't talk, but can still express themselves and entertain people. The more we thought about mimes, the more we realized what an interesting contradiction it would be to place a mime in a play, where the normal mode of expressing information would be language. As we developed the idea, we thought less about plot initially and more about how we could use action to convey ideas, with the plot following the lead of the physical action and stage directions.

In his story above, Albert has a keen awareness for the various turns in the idea development stages of the piece. His emphasis on ideas over plot is the notion of having some parameter within which to play while allowing the structural components to naturally take care of themselves. Albert, in his own description of the four-page play, says that the plot itself is not so remarkable. It is an argument between a husband and wife. But by placing a crucial limit on one of the characters (not speaking), the entire form of the play was challenged. Albert and his writing partner set up a situation of

provocative disruption for themselves. They gave themselves a way to push the boundaries of the form.

The artfulness of the writing all came about as a result of the playing with ideas that Albert and his co-author did. Rather than emphasizing classical elements, like the intentional creation of a plot, with a conflict, they focused on the responsiveness of the characters within the limits and possibilities of the ideas they set up as parameters.

“I’m not somebody who writes very freely”

Albert and his writing partner for the mime play had both been members of the school’s improv club for several years. Albert said that the experience in the improv club and the fact that his writing partner was in it with him were crucial in constructing this piece.

I substituted for the improv club advisor on a few occasions, so I can describe briefly the kinds of activities that take place there.

It is an entirely student-led effort. The head of the club leads the twenty or so participants through several warm ups where everyone participates. This goes on for about twenty minutes. Then, there are sketches in which volunteers come up to participate. The remaining hour or so of the club moves through many sketches in which students have chances to participate.

In addition to being in the improv club in the school, Albert has been involved in improv acting for seven years. His story serves as a testimony that improv acting can offer pathways to students when they are working through decisions in their writing.

I will put here Albert’s own words, which he wrote, describing what improv has done for him:

I think that what improv has allowed me to do in writing is think a step ahead. While you usually assume that improv is in the moment, you are always, instinctually, thinking about how to set up the future—how to set up a relationship in a scene, how to move music forward. This idea applies to my writing because, while I’m not somebody who writes very “freely” (I

always have clear outlines and idea development), I am always thinking about the future of a piece when I write. I constantly consider how an idea will relate to a larger concept or how a paragraph will synthesize with other ideas. I think this big picture thinking comes directly from the idea of thinking for the future that I have instinctually in improv.

“Big picture thinking”

Albert’s challenge to the assumption that improv is solely about presence reveals a deep consideration of the concepts of improvisation. Indeed, having studied the concept myself for years, his point here about the estimation of the future never occurred to me. What he also describes is a form of improvisation that requires no audience, per se. In his conceptualization, improv is all about the intent of the actor, not about whether there is a surrounding audience or not. The claim that the estimation of the future is continuously under consideration opens up many ways to clarify how improvisation can be considered a veritable part of the story of one’s writing. The “rhetorical problem” is a continuous consideration of where one is headed in one’s writing (Flower & Hayes, 1980/2009). Albert also describes an alternative to outlining with the “thinking for the future” operating while composing. Outlining would separate the thinking for the future from the composition process. Albert describes simultaneity of composition and future estimation.

This is a strategizing for a vision that is happening so quickly that to call it strategizing is almost too technical. The notion that it is “instinctual” is that the purpose is conscious, but its inner workings are immediate and intuitive. What I find particularly promising about Albert’s testimony on improvisation, is that he tells us he places a premium on clarity and direction. Improvisation has allowed him to embrace the inevitable dissonance of writing in his own terms.

“This work was an outlier in my writing”

The explanation of this work involves how unusual it is in the repertoire of the author’s history of writing. Albert uses the word “outlier” to describe the piece. It is also unusual in the history of the kinds of things he is usually assigned in English class.

I do wonder, given the dexterity with which the piece was written, are we not missing out on some wonderful works of literature by not assigning creative writing more often? Albert explains that he does not voluntarily write creatively. Most of his writing is analytical. A member of the school debate team, he often deals in reasoning and evidence.

The explanation also involves insights about collaboration. Albert's established creative work with his writing partner allowed for a writing collaboration that moved fluidly. He attributed the flow of the co-authoring process of the one act play to his and his co-author's mutual experience together for years in the improv club. While they have never co-authored anything together before, they had been in dozens of improv scenes together. In that respect, they co-authored drama. In this regard, his co-authoring could have constituted a form of "Hanging out in communities of diverse specialists" (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 27).

Excerpt of the play. Here is the opening of the play:

Mime: (Walks into house, with wife seated at dinner table).

Wife: Hello honey.

Mime:(Waves back).

Wife: How was work today?

Mime:(Lifts up thumb in neither thumbs up or thumbs down to indicate mediocre-ness of the day).

Wife: Why are you not talking. I know that pure a mime, but we always talk when you get home.

Mime:(Shrugs his arms to try to hide the issue. His face shows that something is wrong but also that he is trying to avoid conflict).

Wife: Honey, talk. You need to tell me what's wrong.

Mime:(Points at his wife, eyes full of anger).

Wife: Me? What did I do?

The “Obsessive Drafting”

As I discussed his writing with Albert, I was struck by how dissatisfied he seemed with the next piece in contrast with the mime play.

To explain, let me begin with Albert’s own words about his college essay:

I wrote this essay over a long, long time, and it is not even done yet. Because the common app essay for college is easily one of the most important things that I will write as a high school student, I began this essay in August and am still writing it now, in late September. I started with the premise—how I worked with middle school debaters and the organization and built up from there, first writing an outline and then drafting the essay and revising it. What this obsessive drafting did to the essay was bring out new layers of the essay. Every time I would edit the essay, I would think of something new to highlight or discuss. What this allowed me to do was create an essay more complex and in depth than it would have been without the editing, which ultimately tells the reader more about me as a person.

Comparing the description here to how he described the experience with writing the play about the mime, we already see a difference in certain word choices. For the play, Albert emphasized the notion of playing with ideas. Here there is the term “obsessive drafting.” Whether this characterizes how he proceeded in the production of the essay or not, what is clear is how he feels about his actions in writing this essay. Some works have such a prominent purpose in the course of our lives that the purpose dominates the experience. Also note that Albert begins with a discussion of the amount of time he spent and the seemingly exasperated, “it is not even done yet.” The sense of need to complete, the sense of the looming deadline and the high stakes of the piece condition so much in his description here.

But where can we see an explanation that is not concerned only with the high stakes? I think it is in Albert saying that, each time he returned to writing the essay, he would “think of something new to highlight or discuss.” The discovery in the return is important here. He is after a “more complex and in depth” depiction of himself. As he emphasizes in the last sentence, he views the essay as an opportunity to communicate a sense of who he is.

“Have I got it?”

At the time of our second interview, Albert’s essay draft was 400 words over the prescribed 650 word limit for the common application essay. As he described, he figured it would be a better approach to write more up front and figure out what to remove than to build towards an amount.

Albert expressed that the major thing he had left to do with the essay was to figure out where to remove the 400 excess words. He said this would be done two ways: by changing wording and taking out examples. His essay, the opening paragraph of which is below, describes his experiences teaching debate to younger students. While on a debate trip, he realizes that most schools in the debate league are either private schools or from wealthy suburbs. It occurs to him, a student in a public high school, that there ought to be ways for students who cannot otherwise afford debate (it is expensive because of tournament and travel fees) to participate. This launches a career throughout high school in which Albert works with junior high school students and teaches them debate. The organization he mentioned above is one such organization that offers assistance to disadvantaged students to participate in debate.

I asked Albert if he were to look at the essay now and find something to remove, without any consideration for word count, just with the emphasis on what the essay is concerned with, what might he remove? He responded immediately, realizing that the extensive paragraph describing how he initially became interested in debate was less germane to the larger issue of his desire to help others learn debate.

He was able to make such a swift decision because I suggested he focus on the cohesion rather than on word count. At least I hope so. This is where my “have I got it?” comes into play. I hoped that I could use my insights into writing to provide at least an improvisational solution to reorient his thinking about the piece.

It would have been possible to keep everything in his essay by removing words from all around. But this would also remove a sense of voice and authenticity. In raising

this question, I was not only trying to help Albert, I was exploring the extent to which he was connected to the sense of what this essay was, the extent to which he could reply to the “have I got it?” question.

This might parallel how an improviser just knows that there are certain melodic styles that he plays and that a quick trill, though it may sound good, is not in the same family, is not part of the same heritage as the larger song that the current improvisation is rendering.

“I want to say more than simply ‘I do debate’”

At my request, Albert highlighted some phrases in the essay that he was particularly proud of. His choices and explanations reveal the desire to communicate a sense of self.

I will put the first paragraph of the essay here, as it contains one of these sentences:

8:00 a.m., Saturday morning. Sitting in a desk built for a twelve-year-old, I drink a cup of lukewarm coffee while two middle school students in front of me try to “debate.” I’m judging a round of middle school debate, but how exactly did I, a high school senior who loves math and science and was once afraid of public speaking, end up here?

Albert is particularly proud of the sentence detailing the lukewarm coffee and the smaller desk. At another point in the essay, the sentence, “I was able to travel across the country to exotic places like Westchester and Iowa, sampling fine cuisine from Waffle House,” is one he is particularly pleased with. In the first instance, he does a great deal of showing. We see Albert, uncomfortable in the smaller desk, drinking the unappetizing coffee that he so clearly needs on a Saturday morning. In the second example, we get a good sense of Albert’s personality through humor. The examples where Albert was particularly proud of his writing are places where he was able to communicate more than just the content of the words. Albert repeated many times in the interview that one of the goals in the essay was to avoid saying “I do debate.” It is not a simple rendition of the old adage “show don’t tell.” It is a sense that this essay must in some way render a self-

portrait. Albert is struck with the rhetorical problem that there is no formula to communicate who you are.

Accomplishment and the Stakes

I asked Albert to explain to me what he believed were the differences in the writing experiences between the mime play and this essay. He said that, with the mime play, the worst that could go wrong is that he would get a low grade on that specific assignment. He was willing to risk failure with that piece. The high stakes of the purpose of the personal essay inhibit the willingness to even make errors, let alone learn from them. It inhibits the willingness to fail in the final product. Albert did report that he spent a lot of time removing things he wrote from this essay and reconfiguring, altering. There were errors, insofar as he defines them on his own terms. The difference is that the embracing of the errors was inhibited. I wonder, how might it be possible to enable the embracing of errors even when the piece is so high stakes? I also wonder if maybe it is not even necessary.

Explanations of the Prompt

Albert's University of Chicago supplemental essay brings out several features of the way prompts can influence a student's experience with writing. As we will see in this instance, the prompt was bizarre enough to throw typical rhetorical considerations into question, thereby freeing Albert up, providing a "provocative disruption" (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 10). In this provoking, we see that Albert takes the latitude to be guided by his own sense of what quality is. The story here is a stark contrast to how Albert experienced the common app essay, discussed in the previous section. The well-established conventions of the common app essay, combined with its high stakes, can be a kind of noxious disruption when compared to the more playful kinds of prompts, particularly the one from Chicago.

The prompt reads as follows:

Once, renowned physicist Werner Heisenberg said: “There is a fundamental error in separating the parts from the whole, the mistake of atomizing what should not be atomized. Unity and complementarity constitute reality.” Whether it’s Georges Seurat’s pointillism in “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte,” the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls, quantum physics, or any other field of your choosing, when can the parts be separated from the whole and when can they not? —Inspired by Ender Sahin, Class of 2020 (The University of Chicago, 2016)

“I had a lot more freedom”

In his response to the prompt, Albert takes the reader through a series of examples. He begins in narrative, talking about a scooter accident when he was a child. One part of the scooter became disconnected from another part. He then moves to his family’s overuse of parsley. He settles into a humorous tone but moves the meaning in an interesting direction. It seems that even though he is pleased that they run out of parsley for one dinner, he strangely finds himself missing it. He then moves onto the topic of acrobats and how, individually, they are entertaining, but not nearly so much as when they are together. He makes a particular parenthetical joke about teams not working together. The sentence reads, “Even when a team does not work well together, and leaves all the work to a single group member (looking at you, my 9th grade chemistry PowerPoint presentation group).”

I see a fluid sense of control here, a confidence with the writing and a sense of efficacy.

Albert attested that it was all in the wording of the prompt. The fact that the prompt was “weird” freed up his sense of the purposes of the piece. As Albert explained, everyone is so well aware of the purpose of the common app prompts that the knowledge of the correct way to proceed acts as a hindrance. It is precisely because this prompt is a one time thing, with a purpose that is unclear, that Albert felt the freedom to maneuver as he did in the writing of the piece.

As Albert put it:

I felt like writing this was more fun than my Common App Essay since I had a lot more freedom. For the Common App, there is a much clearer purpose to what your essay must accomplish, which makes you feel pressure to achieve those "goals," but with this prompt, it's far less clear exactly what the goal of the piece is, which gives you the freedom to just write. I feel like that freedom allowed me to have a lot more fun with the essay.

The explanation Albert offered here is about the open-ended purpose of the prompt. There is more to it than just the wording and the purpose of the prompt, as we will see in the next section. Albert has a view of the University of Chicago as being a receptive audience.

“These weird prompts”: Receptive Audience, Innovative Performance

It came up in the interview that it is also well known that University of Chicago tends to have, as Albert called them, “these weird prompts.” What is important here is the perception of the audience and their expectation of open possibilities. They have established themselves as open-minded prompters, as an audience that is receptive to innovation.

Albert was comfortable maneuvering in the first piece (the mime play) because the teacher provided the leeway. With the second essay, Albert was concerned with what he perceived to be narrow and stifling expectations.

Here, he was still concerned with quality, but in a less specific way. There was not, as Albert put it, “a set goal,” instead he worked with the question, “what can I tweak to make it more interesting?” In this way, the qualifying consideration came from his own sense of what was worthwhile. While it is a laudable goal to bring students to be able to keep in mind several points of view regarding value, I suggest that with writers who have a good sense of effectiveness with writing that they also are guided by their own sense of values while writing.

Albert’s experience with the third prompt may not be a universal one for all students. Many students might, in reverse, be stifled by the open-endedness of the

prompt. The point here is not so much about prompts, but about hearing from the students and allowing them to explain their experiences with the various prompts.

Albert's explanations here offer us insights about how to allow students to feel free enough to make errors in their writing, free enough to take risks. There are certain beliefs that readers have about what ought to happen in the college essay. Currently, the students in the school may at any time get feedback from their own English teachers, their peers and a private company hired by the school to provide such feedback. Often, this feedback steers students towards certain refrains: talk about yourself; tell a story through showing and not through didactic writing. With the word limit below a thousand words, it is often difficult for students to develop a narrative (a genre they tend to have little experience with) and somehow communicate a purpose to the narrative without being too direct. These technical expectations, grounded in advice from well-meaning sources, take on the role of expectations that hover in the minds of the students as they produce these pieces.

The expectations that are part of an established social milieu can serve, as it does in this case, to stifle students when they write. I do believe that a similar stifled sense of expectations occurs with other forms of writing, particularly the academic essay.

Regardless of the specific expectations, it is valuable enough to be aware that this may be a significant feature in the experiences students have with writing: that if we, as the teacher, portray the presence of a receptive audience, we can allow for innovative writing performances where students adhere to their own sense of quality and are freed up by the experience.

Weird Prompts Make Sense: Concluding Discussion of Albert

We started the discussion of Albert by looking at his mime play. Albert and his writing partner set up creative limits for themselves by having a character in a play who would not speak. Albert was willing to play with ideas in creating this piece because of his experience in improv acting. Albert's in-depth experience with improv acting

provides one interesting illustration of the possibilities of using improvisation within a writing course. His mime play also illustrates how co-authoring can allow student writers to work together to facilitate one another in being open to errors and in being more experimental in their writing. In his accomplishment explanations, we see a very different take on the writing experience. The factors in Albert not feeling entirely satisfied with his essay are the well-established norms combined with the high stakes of the common application essay. Finally, the open-ended purpose of University of Chicago's prompt combined with Albert's sense of the university as a boundary pushing and receptive prompter made for a provocative disruption experience.

Albert's portion of the study allows us to consider how we portray ourselves as prompters. For Albert, "These weird prompts" communicated that the prompter was open to hearing something different. This suggests that prompting students is not only about the words we use but about the attitude towards reading their work that we communicate in our prompting. Of course, the university, with its application prompt, has far less of an opportunity to communicate an attitude of open-receptiveness to weirdness, to out-of-the-box thinking and writing. How many more opportunities does a teacher of writing have? It might be worth exploring within individual practice and possibly as a research project unto itself: how can teachers present themselves as receptive readers to their students? This is a line of inquiry where the larger context in English education, with the expectations of standardization and the common core, could act to influence how well an educator could develop this sense of being receptive. In what ways might the common core standards provide room to present oneself as receptive to students' writing? In what ways might the expectations of the standards pose a challenge? These are some worthwhile research and practice inquiries that can be derived from the study with Albert.

The discussion with Albert also illustrated the kinds of things we can uncover if we confer with students about contrasting experiences with writing. Albert was willing to take risks with the mime play assignment because he figured the potential for loss was

not so great. Whereas with his first college essay, he had a markedly different experience. While just the idea of conferring with students and allowing them to explore such varying experiences might be beneficial for them, it would also be purposeful to enable students like Albert to approach a higher stakes writing situation with as much of a sense of freedom as he did the mime play. Or, it is worth debating whether such an approach is even necessary. In looking at how improvisational students are willing to be, at how free they are willing to be in their writing, maybe it makes sense that they will not take chances when the stakes are high. What we can consider are the extent to which they are enacting some semblance of “dynamic Capabilities” in the face of a higher stakes situation of writing (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, pp. 1-4).

John: Humanitarian, Natural Narrator, Confident Writer

As a ninth grader, John impressed me with the depth of his political knowledge. He would frequently talk to me about the problems with multinational corporations like Monsanto. He would proudly tell me about demonstrations he had participated in.

As we will see from the content of his essays, John is committed to a life working in humanitarian politics. While not being of Arabic descent, he has been learning Arabic on his own for over a year. I recall several times last year when he would excitedly show me new letters he had learned.

John is very serious but has a unique sense of humor. He is able to see the humor in how serious he sometimes becomes. He is a leader among peers, but not in a classical commanding sense. He is able to rouse his peers to action through his passion. As we will see in the stories that follow, John founded a club in school concerned with humanitarian action.

He is well versed in politics and is an incredibly adept debater and speaker.

As we move through the stories of John's writing, what is different from those of Harper and Albert is the sense of assuredness that John has throughout the process. We might be able to view John's experience with writing as a model for what we can aim for in adding value to students' experiences with writing.

“I realized I needed a story”

This was definitely not my first idea for a college essay, this was probably idea 100 and the 10,000th reformatting I've done. Thank God for Google Docs or I would've destroyed countless trees trying to come up with an essay that will be so crucial to my academic career. There's always one critical issue that comes with writing a college essay; you want to tell an accurate portrayal of your accomplishments but you don't want to come off as braggadocios. This was a problem I immediately knew that I had to address. Talking about me volunteering for Obama's campaign, too self-centered. Talking about the influence my parents had on me, a college essay for mom not me. Talking about my trip to china, too cliché. I read countless narratives and listened to endless TED talks, until I realized I needed a story. (John, in a written explanation of the story behind the writing of his college essay)

John's college essay begins with an epiphany he has while watching a documentary on the genocide in Darfur. He realizes a passion he has for humanitarian politics. This begins a voracious self-study and participation in several clubs at school and the eventual creation of a club specifically focused on Darfur. The essay navigates his own development brought on by this passion: he becomes less afraid to participate in clubs and eventually emerges as a leader among his peers.

John's description of his essay contains many of the values he discusses in the essay. His gratefulness for Google-docs so that he can save trees shows an awareness for his impact on the world. Just like Harper, he sees the purpose of the essay as trumping all other concerns: “an essay that will be so crucial to my academic career.”

In his description here, John manages to clearly define a rhetorical problem: “There's always one critical issue that comes with writing a college essay; you want to tell an accurate portrayal of your accomplishments but you don't want to come off as

braggadocios. This was a problem I immediately knew that I had to address.” He also does so by alluding to Donald Trump’s use of the word “braggadocios” in the previous evening’s debate—a way of signaling both a sense of humor and an impeccable awareness for politics.

The rhetorical problem is one of satisfying a necessary need of the genre (to sell one’s self) without seeming like you want to satisfy that convention too much and without coming off as bragging.

The use of the word “problem” was John’s own choosing. As with Harper and Albert, John is an advanced student who has an impeccable insight into writing and his own approaches to writing.

When he says, “Talking about me volunteering for Obama’s campaign, too self-centered,” he is providing another example of his own political activities, one that could have been a similar topic but that would not have helped in dealing with the particular rhetorical problem posed by the proposition of the college essay.

In response to his saying this was the “100th idea” he had come up with,” I asked John exactly how this became the idea that he would choose for the college essay. He explained to me that he chose the Darfur story as a way to give chronology and tell a story in order to illustrate his interest in politics and humanitarian action.

“I can tell thousands of such stories”

As our discussion deepened, John told me about how the interest in politics really began at the beginning of junior high school, years before the Darfur story happens. But, to go back to the start and try to tell it all would not work for the scope of the essay. His choice was in getting across one instance, one representation of himself as politically conscious. There were many stories he could have chosen from.

What John describes is that the story of the essay is not only within that essay. That essay about Darfur is merely one instance of the larger story; the Darfur essay does not

constitute a *werktreu* rendering of the story (Benson, 2003). The story is a continuous and “exploded narrative” that can possibly take shape in many other possible stories (Iyer, 2004).

What John is trying to capture in the essay is a very evasive experience to represent: how one develops a passion for something. So much of the activity of developing a passion is a mixture of the internal and external. John chose one example that could illustrate with external examples. So the Darfur story, in John’s own terms is not really one story at all, but a vehicle through which, for this particular rhetorical purpose, he is able to illustrate a much larger and more evasive story. And his ability to “tell thousands of such stories” as he said he could, is that continuous voice to illustrate what is an experience that does not have one clear defining moment.

But in John’s essay he portrays certain movements in the story as having stable meaning. When narrating his transformation into a more extroverted participant in the Amnesty International club, he says, “My kindling—that had been a dormant fascination—now struck fire.” Here he is giving some sense of demarcation to what is actually an ongoing story.

Rhetorical Achievement

Interested in his satisfaction with his writing, I asked John to highlight sentences from the essay that he was particularly satisfied with. It seemed to me that the ways in which he was satisfied with his writing was a part of the creation story of the writing.

One thing was clear in what he valued in these sentences: how the sentences were able to powerfully depict what he was trying to get across. When I pointed this out to John, his eyes lit up with interest. In these interviews, I am realizing that I am helping students craft additional perspectives into the story of their writing as I suggest my interpretations and ask my questions. What I found so interesting in John’s explanation of why he chose to highlight certain sentences was that he valued their ability to render.

There was not a mention of word choice, of structural impact on the essay, or on any other rhetorical or stylistic outcome. Consider some of the sentences that he chose:

 Their plight was my push.

 It created a problem that I felt obligated to tackle

 I recall holing up in a library in middle school

Stylistically, they offer a lot to be applauded. There is alliteration in the first one. There are vivid verbs and unique diction. John's emphasis on the value these sentences brought in their delivery of his message reveals that, for this essay, the story for John has to do with communication. His biggest underlying question here was, "Am I getting across what I want to say?"

What is also interesting to me is that John mentioned the experience of writing the piece but did not offer up or delve into any deep explanation of the systems he used, what we often call the process. Rather than inquire about it, I was interested in where he placed emphasis. The story behind the narrative portrayed in the Darfur essay was a more important part of this first interview.

At one point in the interview, I inquired about how this essay relates to the things he might want to study in college and to a possible career trajectory.

John had a lot to say on the topic, explaining that even after college he was looking to work in the humanitarian realm and possibly the peace corps. After listening to him explain the career possibilities, it occurred to me that this story is not only taking place in the past and the present, but in the future as well. The Darfur story represents John's sense of self through the past and is a premise for future intentions. The story about this piece of writing arises out of John's unfolding sense of who he is in relation to the drive to work in humanitarian politics.

These sentences, with their rhetorical finesse and clarity, are crucial in how they connect to both the exploded narrative and John's own consideration of the rhetorical

problem. His characterization of the rhetorical problem for this essay is how he is going to portray what is a larger narrative for him, what Iyer (2004) calls the “exploded narrative,” in a shorter essay. It seems that John had a sense of his larger narrative and saw the challenge in trying to represent that larger narrative in just one essay.

A Sense of Certainty

What stood out to me about John was his confidence with not only writing but also with the entire college essay writing experience.

For one of his supplemental essays for a college, John takes us through his journey teaching himself Arabic. The prompt asked the students to share something they derive joy from. Not a native Arab speaker, John starts the narrative with unenthused experiences learning languages in school. He remarks that one course was more about geography and memorizing conjugations than about studying a language. He moves discursively, seemingly out of chronology, signaling to the reader that the experience is a fluid one. Until we come to one distinct point in his experience. He hears an Arab pop song that a friend plays for him. Immediately, he is drawn in.

This is the beginning of what turns into an enjoyable obsession with learning Arabic.

Before even discussing the piece with John, there were several things about it that struck me. That he had such a sense of control over the story and enjoyed a sense of nonlinear movement. I wondered whether this was a rhetorical achievement, something he tried to craft, or whether he was immediately comfortable in this form.

He paragraphed freely, using frequent paragraph breaks and several one-sentence paragraphs. There was a sense to the flow of the piece that communicated both a playfulness and a certainty in movement.

The only thing that I thought could improve the essay would be some semblance of a narration of what the music sounded like. I knew this would be difficult because he

would be talking about music in Arabic and we would have to assume that the reader of the essay would not know the words. John did do a good job of describing the music's effect on him, but I felt a sense, as a reader, that I wanted to hear the music in some capacity.

“But I scrapped it after reading it.”: Confidence in Proceeding

I also recalled when John had told me, at various times over the previous three years, about his joy for learning Arabic. I remember one time when he wrote some of it on the board and several students gathered around to appreciate its beauty. John would often come up to me after class and eagerly tell me about what he was learning in Arabic and how it was becoming a learning journey for him.

So the backdrop of this piece of writing begins even before I discuss it with John. There are things I know about the content—the story he tells—that help illustrate the reality for me.

Here is John's explanation of what he believes the story behind this essay is:

Many of the activities that I do for fun are very oriented towards what my extracurriculars already tell admissions officers. I wanted to choose reading the news or planning for my clubs, but decided that although I wanted to focus on my strengths, I also wanted to demonstrate how I learn and interests that are not so directly related to the topic. I decided that writing about my interest in foreign languages would be an effective essay for three reasons: 1. It demonstrated what kind of student I am, 2. It was related to the field that I was interested in and 3. It let the admissions board know my interest goes further than just policy but also in culture, learning about new places, and a general fascination with different communities. At first, I had a very long essay about how useful foreign language could be in a career but I scrapped it after reading it. I wanted a more well-rounded picture of me. I decided to place the focus on how I struggled with foreign language before learning to love it, and how learning to love it helped me find out the way I learn and the way that I take in information.

In the first few sentences, we see a concern for the content of what he communicates to his audience. There is a nuanced sense of various things that he could focus on and how his choice in topic can influence those areas of focus. He starts off his

story of the writing in terms of a larger rhetorical problem posed by these college admissions essays: to communicate something about the applicant.

He then outlines three reasons for why his choice of essay topic was effective. He wrote this in just a few minutes. While I wrote some preliminary notes, I paused to check in with where John was and was impressed to see that he had carved out three reasons and was proceeding to detail them. There is a sense for organization surrounding the communication about his writing. He has many systems that he can rely on, in this case an organizational feature, to use in telling me about his writing.

Reason three is a unique elaboration of reasons one and two. And so it seems to me that with this response, reasons one and two were not merely organizational, they were ways of helping John compose his response. It was a form of outlining within the piece. He flows in the last few sentences there as he takes us through another essay he wrote: “At first, I had a very long essay about how useful foreign language could be in a career.” Here we see that he used some of the same experiences but positioned the story differently. He tells us, “but I scrapped it after reading it.” There seems to be an embracing of the experience of tossing an entire attempt to the side and not using it. There is a seeming confidence in how he proceeds with the whole process. This other version of the essay could be read in any number of ways. It could be an “error as a source of learning” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 24). What he learned in this case was how inappropriate the story was positioned. He had to create it in order to see it. It also paved the way for him to position the next narrative in a way that he would be more satisfied with. He did want to include a mention, however brief, of this other essay because he sees it as being part of the production of the current one. He does not call this other essay a draft. It is a distinctly different essay that he views as somehow related to the whole production of the one in question. The story of this work involves the production of another work. It is also possible that he had to play and riff and flow with it

for a while before he was able to see clear and have the possibility that he finally went with.

“Find out the way I learn”: Building a Repertoire

Finally, we get to the message or the illustration that he values in the essay: that it illustrates his “learning to love it [language learning] helped me find out the way I learn and the way that I take in information.” This essay, as he sees it, is a story about how he learns. He went on to tell me that he learns better when there is a connection. This is why he believes the humanities subjects are his strength.

I remembered how in John’s previous essay, he made the choice to portray certain experiences through the use of epiphanies. He chose, in the essay about Darfur, to select from among many instances that which would illustrate a more elaborate experience. I asked John if the same was true for this essay or, if as he narrated, there was one distinct moment in which the desire to study Arabic emerged. For John, it was the one distinct moment that he narrated in the essay.

It was at this point that I told John that I only had the one suggestion of trying to bring to life what the music must have sounded like. I iterated that it is very difficult to describe music but that a sentence or two might illustrate for the reader some of what he experienced. I was interested in doing some improv work with John about this and so I asked him to access the song on the computer and play a bit of it for me.

Was the song played, I said, “Do you understand what this means?”

“Some of it,” he said.

I then had the idea that I might try to describe the song, given that I did not know what any of it meant.

It sounded to me like the singer was very attentive to each syllable. What I also noticed was how each sound was distinct and unique. I actually heard the different parts and could probably repeat a few of them, without knowing what they meant. It seemed to

me that the sound was both foreign and familiar. John agreed with these descriptions. Though he did not have additional descriptions to add, he found my descriptions to be interesting and to portray some of the same perspectives he had when he initially heard the song.

What I was trying to do here was to communicate to John that I thought there was a part of this story that, once illustrated, would add an inestimable power to the piece.

“Now that I have heard the song,” I said to him, “I know this story in a much better way.”

“OK,” he said, in a way that seemed to mean he might take a serious consideration into how to amend the depiction of the song in the essay.

What was striking to me is that John was confident in the essay and in the whole experience with writing the application essays in a way I had rarely seen. I told him that, after years of working with students on this part of the application, I had rarely seen someone as comfortable as he was with the process.

“What can you tell me, so that I can help other students?” I said.

He explained that it was natural for him to talk about the kinds of things the essays prompted: what you are interested in, how you learn, what you are passionate about. He said that he is always talking to people about the things he is passionate about. I thought back to the times when, after class, or right before class started, he would tell me about a political article he had read, or an issue he was taking up. I saw how true this was. He had made exploring and expressing these aspects of his experience an ongoing practice. The essays were merely a different form. In a sense, he had created a situation for himself where he got to practice various riffs. It is almost like Bernstein and Barrett’s idea of “Hanging out in communities of diverse specialists.” The difference seems to be that not all of his peers within these various communities benefitted in the same way. But, his social world served, for him, as a way to talk about his learning. He also sees the prompts as an avenue through which he can employ this content. It is important to note that many

students at National High School, just like John, talk about their learning interests. The school is abuzz with stories of self-learning and exploration. The difference with John is not only in that he has had practice at the kinds of prompts that these essays ask for, it is that he believes that these prompts connect to what he has had practice at. This, to me, is a very advanced way of looking at rhetorical problems. John is able to position what he already has so that he can leverage a response to what is asked of him. It is as if he hears the tune and knows that he has a form, a way to proceed, that can groove to the expectations. This is about a perceptual condition of how he views his own rhetorical repertoire, not about a fact of whether he is right or wrong. If more students could see their own efficacy in their repertoire, they might proceed as confidently in their writing as John did here.

Breaking the Boundaries of the Prompt

Here is the supplemental prompt for Macauley Honors College that John responded to:

Pick a story of local, national, or international importance from the front page of any newspaper. Identify your source and give the date the article appeared. Then use your sense of humor, sense of outrage, sense of justice—or just plain good sense—to explain why the story engages your attention. (CUNY, Macauley, 2016)

I was particularly taken by the final sentence of the prompt in which the students are invited to consider their various “senses” in relation to the headline. I was wondering whether or not the phrasing had an influence on John’s written response.

What I first noticed John’s response, I was taken by the way he steered his discussion toward something that he wanted to write about. Rather than discuss a recent headline, he discussed a headline involving the Little Rock Arkansas nine, from 1957. A sentence at the start of the essay, explaining a book he had read that chronicled the most prominent headlines of the century, allowed him to situate his essay around this iconic story.

I was intrigued by his willingness to take license with the prompt and his ability to break beyond the seeming boundaries of the prompt but I wanted to begin the interview with what he wanted to tell about the piece.

He began by telling me about how he wanted to stand out from the other essayists. He knew that most would be following the prompt and referring to any number of recent headlines that connected with some prominent issues. His explanation of the writing begins with a concern for audience. He was emphasizing the strategy, the goal in breaking the bounds of the prompt. I was interested in his willingness to do so and in whether or not this extended to other forms of writing.

Working Through a Rhetorical Problem

John explained that this was particular to narrative writing for him. It is with narrative writing, because of its difficulty, because it is so discursive and nuanced, that he needs to open a pathway for himself. He used the subjects history and science as examples of subjects where he rarely feels the need to open the avenue for himself. There, the content and expectations, as far as he is concerned, operate in a way where he feels a sense of efficacy in maneuvering within the bounds set by prompts. What I find fascinating is that John was able to provide himself fearlessly with a solution to a rhetorical dilemma. If the prompts that students are given are not inviting, how do we enable them to provide resources for themselves to open up avenues of rhetorical opportunity? In other words, how do we enable students to develop their own capacities to cultivate a vision for their writing on their own terms?

John's confidence in the direction he took with the essay is a level of self-assurance that is a laudable goal for all students to have. Inquiring further into what he meant by narrative writing being difficult, it turns out that John was not satisfied with the initial vision that he had for an essay he could write if he followed the prompt to the ledger. He was guided, in a sense, by his own valuation of the anticipated product of his writing. The

story here is one of speculation and estimation. It is an estimation rooted in his own meta-knowledge of his writing. His repeated refrain that he both enjoys narrative writing and sees it as a challenge are part of this meta-knowledge, this self-concept, this way that he characterizes himself.

Much of the story of the writing is connected to the sense of writerly self that the writer has. This includes the anticipation of rhetorical outcomes and of one's own efficacy in the face of a challenge. John's explanation here involves anticipating the reader's perceptions in seeing the admissions officer sitting there, reading a stack of essays about current headlines.

“To turn the prompt on its head”

I was interested in whether the language of the prompt invited an openness to its treatment for John. He did not find it too remarkable in that way, but he was taken by the idea of being guided by, as the prompt put it, his “sense of justice.” Here, he saw an entry point, the ongoing story. The ongoing story is his own interest in politics and wanting to work in humanitarian efforts.

I was particularly taken by John's final paragraph:

Seeing the image of soldiers confronting protesters immediately pulled me in—it was a picture trapped in pain, conflict, and what has always made America great—the spirit of the frontiersmen, the soul of the explorer, the perseverance of those who seek a recourse to injustice. In a way, I want to be that. I know I will never be the same like the Little Rock Nine but 60 years later from that article, the world is still wrought with human rights violations and attacks on basic dignity. I hope that in some way, whether or not I become featured in my own front page, I can do as much good for as many people as possible.

In his second sentence, John moves from pain, to conflict to a broader concept “what has always made America great.” He uses an allusion to Trump's campaign slogan but means it in an entirely different way. The examples he provided build on one another. The frontiersmen are explorers and he parallels them with the seekers of “a recourse to

injustice,” connecting the notions of westward expansion, to the grander notion of metaphoric expansion. It is with this metaphoric expansion that he makes the connection to the plight for justice. I was impressed with this paragraph and asked John about how its production played out. I wondered if there was any extra care given to it, any extra crafting.

John reported that the paragraph just flowed; that he had a sense of the ideas as they emerged.

Here is John’s explanation of how he wrote the piece:

Much of my thought process in writing this essay came with choosing the topic of the writing. Many of my friends were applying to the Macaulay Honors Program and were faced with the same prompt, and because most college essays are written within the span of a few weeks or month, numerous essays featured the same headlines from newspapers like the New York Times. I really wanted to use headline from a serious and acclaimed newspaper like the NYT but I didn’t want to repeat some of the same notions as my peers. While pondering about what to do, I noticed my book of NYT headlines from 1850-2012 that I had received from my friend, and I knew exactly what I wanted to write about. Little Rock High School in Arkansas, in the vanguard of the battle to end segregation. In this, I sought to turn the prompt on its head and steer the writing to the direction I wanted it to go in.

I want to pay particular attention to John’s last sentence and his phrasing here. He exhibits a confidence in taking poetic license and an ingenuity in how to allot himself more latitude. John faces multiple factors in the consideration of the rhetorical dilemma: that he wants to refer to a “serious and acclaimed” newspaper, like the New York Times, that many of his friends will be doing the same prompt and he will thus have to distinguish himself from them. One might think that his noticing his book from his friend is a stroke of serendipity. I would interpret this as a readied awareness to rely on whatever is within one’s repertoire. While I am tempted to make a connection to improvisation (and I do believe improvisation might facilitate the development of such a confidence) I am not sure that improvisation is what cultivated this quality in John. I am

more interested in making some sense of how he positions his decisions, of how he places himself in the role of adept writer.

“The Spirit of the Frontiersman”: Concluding Discussion of John

We saw that John began with a description of his own rhetorical problem: to construct a narrative wherein he portrays himself without making his purpose seem too forceful. We then explored the possibility that a larger story about John developed over the course of more than one work of writing: his interest in working in humanitarian efforts. What was distinct about John in relation to Harper and Albert was John’s seeming confidence in narrative writing about his interests and, in the last discussion, his willingness to break the boundaries of the prompt.

John had a sense of certainty on several fronts. He used his experience discussing his passions as a way to approach narrative writing. He was willing to “scrap” an earlier draft of his writing. The word choice indicated an ease in letting an early iteration of a work of writing go. Finally, his willingness to break the boundaries of the Macauley prompt displayed a confidence in his writing decisions that I rarely see. These differences with John do not have to do with how he works with his writing or how effective his writing is. Some process writing research does look at the difference between experienced and novice writers (Sommers, 2009). What I am noticing here has more to do with how John is experiencing his writing and not with whether or not his actual writing or writing process are functioning better. The study with John, it seems to me, raises questions about how self-satisfaction could play a role in writing instruction. For instance, should we strive to bring more of our students to have the kind of certitude that John displayed in some of his decisions? Is the ability to celebrate one’s own writing accomplishments as important as the abilities involved in achieving those accomplishments?

John also illustrates what it looks like when a student is already working with what we could call the “exploded narrative” (Iyer, 2004, p. 401). John used his interest in working in humanitarian aid as continuous material in his personal essays. Additionally, he reported that he “could tell thousands of such stories.” He was able to view one aspect of his experience as a wellspring from which he could continue to draw material.

To Disrupt or Follow?

In this concluding cross-case discussion, I want to simultaneously do two things. I want to highlight some of the commonalities and contrasts that the participants demonstrated in their writing experiences. And in doing so, I want to complicate a premise that I thought I was operating with all along. While I thought that “provocative disruption” could be one way of taking on the role of writing instructor, as a researcher in this project I did more listening, observing and following. If we read the interviews here as a possible illustration of how writing conferences could go, then such an approach would require quite a bit of listening and allowing the students to lead in addition to and even before any disruption might occur.

With Albert and Harper, we saw that they were dismayed by the experience of writing essay at different points. Harper was dismayed by the idea from her English teacher that sports-centered essays can seem cliché. She was also uncertain by Duke’s wording of their prompt. Albert was dismayed by the whole expectation of the common app essay. John saw dilemmas in the experience but he did not seem to be running up against the same sense of dismay that either Albert or Harper had.

While John stood out in terms of seeming to be less dismayed by the experience, in terms of writing quality, all three participants wrote well. All three participants were adept in terms of being able to describe their writing process, their procedures and to report a sense of confidence and success with their writing. I do not think that trying to

figure out why John was different in this matter is a worthwhile pursuit so that all students can have an experience like his. I think what matters far more is to understand, in John's explanations, why this might be the case. John said he has experience and comfort in discussing what interests him and was able to steer the responses to the prompts in that direction. This arose out of his discomfort with narrative writing. In needing to move away from narrative and towards discussing his interests, it is possible that the stress of the college essay became diminished.

The idea of the "exploded narrative," that we construct a sense of unique expression (including voice and style) over the course of several creative productions, did seem to be a way of understanding Harper and John's writing (Iyer, 2004). We saw my attempt to see a narrative building over the course of several essays for both participants. Albert reported that his experience with improvisational acting gave him a good foundation in working with his writing. While not enough to make a general claim about the benefits of improve acting, John's explanation in this chapter can serve at least as a testimony that, for him, it was beneficial.

In terms of the conceptual ways of framing the discussion, what mattered in my discussion was that we do not see the whole of writing at once. This was particularly evident with Harper and Albert. We saw this with Albert and the draft where he went over the word limit first and then looked to trim down what belongs. With Harper, we saw her removal of an anecdote that thematically connected but did not seem to fit with what the whole essay was about.

Seeing the prompting as a provocative experience mattered in the discussion as well. I am not certain that all promptings need to be provocative. We saw with Harper that she was able to produce a good derivative piece from a previous essay even though Duke University's prompt did not enable a sense of joy in the writing process. While it may be the case that we can be aware of how we prompt students, our attitude insomuch

as we are receptive to them, I am not convinced that it needs to be a constant refrain in our practice as writing teachers. Rather, it is one additional thing that we can be aware of.

Collectively, the work with these three participants raises questions about how individualized writing instruction ought to be. Is the universalizing of creative production a problem? Here are some of the ways this came up in the research. Harper characterizes herself as less able to craft great phrases during her first phase of writing. As a writing instructor, is it best to let this be? After all, Harper is a good writer and a successful student. Might she be missing out on some aspects of invention if she continues to think that the great phrases always come later? What is crucial here is my perception of efficacy on Harper's part. If she were not a successful student and good writer, might I feel more compelled to alter the ways she works as a writer? How far, ultimately, should our disruption go as writing instructors?

These are not questions to be answered once and for all. I think they are compelling propositions from which to teach writing. In this study I worked individually with students. Applying the insights into the classroom requires a kind of translation. We could view these interviews as illustrations of the types of ways we can confer with students individually about their writing. Furthermore, the participants brought in writing of their choosing. How might writing conferences be different if the instructor chooses which works to discuss?

I worked with the three themes of accomplishment, creation and prompting because it seemed to me that these were the ways in which the participants were understanding their experiences with writing. I realize now that my own interest in augmenting my practice as a writing instructor was constantly at play. And what was underlying this was a question about purpose that I could not quite state until now: What might "dynamic capabilities" in writing look like? And, more importantly, how do we allow students to develop them?

Bernstein and Barrett's notion of "dynamic capabilities" is the individual's ability to adeptly deal with the unpredictable challenges without needing continuous guidance in how to proceed. My three participants had to rely on whatever they had in their repertoire as writers in order to write the college essays. The stakes of these essays were unlike any writing assignment they had encountered before. In some sense, the college essay challenge tested their dynamic capabilities. But I am thinking about the relevance of "dynamic capabilities" in more everyday terms as well. How can we make the enactment of dynamic capabilities a continuous part of the writing experience of high school students? And, how might it be possible to be a jazz leader writing instructor and balance that role with the role of follower of and learner of students' writing practices?

Chapter V

WAYS OF EXPLAINING

The writing seminar course I teach is a one semester course. As I take it through its second iteration to a new group of students, I am placed in an ironic predicament: here I am, the proud purveyor of all things improvisation, gleeful that I have the plans set in place. Although today, in the middle of February, 2017, as I introduce the students to a group writing activity, I realize what I am already learning from my research participants. The writing activity is for the students to work in groups to create a fictional scenario. They are only to agree upon the major plot points of the fictional scenario. They will later work out the details when they write their version of the scenario independently. Together they must improvise and construct the major plot points of a fictional narrative. Individually, they will solo, taking the narrative in their own direction.

I provide an example for the students in order to begin. “Begin with a question,” I suggest. For example: what happened at the lunch table today? Maybe James was flipping a half-filled bottle with water when it spilled on Vanessa’s lunch but she does not notice because she is trying to get a song on her cell phone. Maybe the others at the table are playing cards or studying for a physics exam. I tell the students to outline the fictional scenario the way they would roughly outline an essay. But then I realize how unexciting that description is. The whole purpose of the activity is to lead the students to learn about writing without reminding them of having to outline for essays. “Write it as if you’re planning a vacation together,” I say. “It’s a vacation of the mind. A fictional

vacation.” The next part of the task is for each student to independently write the fictional scenario in a different genre. So one student might write a series of haikus, another might write in the form of a crime-scene report, and the third might write “a rap,” a student yells. “Yes, a rap,” I say, as I write it on the board. The class mutters; they are disruptive but engaged. I can see that what remains of explaining what to do is the only thing standing in the way of them and their work. They are motivated by the prompt.

I did not change the fundamentals of the assignment. The overall structure of the assignment mattered here. The planning mattered. This is what the assignment is all about: the students will each write out a scenario in a different genre, workshop their writing and then reflect on the ways in which different genres bring about different aspects of the story they constructed together. The larger curriculum vision did not need revision. But a slight alteration in how I prompted them changed their entire approach to the activity. This is not to portray a victory narrative where I was once approaching the work clinically and then suddenly learned to breathe life into it. Rather, my research participants taught me that it is continuously important to them to be prompted in a provocative way, in a way that invites the possibilities of the prompt and sets the students up for possibilities. And I began to wonder the extent to which this awareness could alter my teaching and the experiences of my current students. For instance, comparing the activity to planning a vacation and my emphasis on not worrying about getting the whole thing right were just some of the moves I attempted as a writing instructor as a way of making the experience more inviting.

It became apparent to me throughout the research that my inquiry was as much about my learning as a practitioner as it was about my analysis as a researcher.

As I listened to participants and tried to interpret their understandings, I looked for ways of discussing their explanations at the meeting places where both teachers and students of writing can partake. For students, the concern is in their experiences and how they discuss those experiences with writing. For teachers, the concern is with how we can

respond to students' concerns with a sound practice. What I have tried to do here is to explain and provide a name to my ways of interpreting what I have learned from my participants so that I can inform my teaching and the field of English education more generally; so that, as a jazz leader does, we can lead students in creative production *as they would proceed*. My participants seemed to be concerned with the ways they created their pieces of writing, the extent to which they felt accomplished with their writing, and the ways in which they were prompted.

Creation Explanations

There are three purposes in calling these explanations “creation” explanations rather than “process” explanations. First, I do not contend that creation is something larger than process or that none of these explanations has to do with process. Rather, it is to locate these explanations in terms of the participants' perceptions of the creation of the writing instead of honing in on the process. Second, there were many explanations that participants provided that had to do with the production and creation of the writing but did not necessarily have to do with the process. Finally, it is possible that concerns for accomplishment and prompting can also be related to the writing process. In that respect, “process” can happen in relation to creation, accomplishment or the experience with the prompt. Furthermore, process seems to be more about how we create whereas explanations about creation seem to be how we understand various factors that matter in connection to our creation.

If we recall in the literature review on the writing process, process studies are often concerned with what the writers think and do while writing, whereas my inquiry is concerned with how writers understand and explain what they have experienced with writing and how teachers can respond. This is not to say that they were not describing a writing process. However, they provided narratives and explanations that had to do with

the creation of the writing that were not necessarily part of the writing session during which a process might have happened and often revealed how they felt about the experience writing.

For instance, consider Albert's explanation with my italics:

I wrote this essay over a *long, long* time, and it is *not even done yet*. Because the common app essay for college is easily one of the most important things that I will write as a high school student, I began this essay in August and *am still writing it now*, in late September. I started with the premise -- how I worked with middle school debaters and the organization and built up from there, first writing an outline and then drafting the essay and revising it. What this *obsessive drafting* did to the essay was bring out *new layers of the essay*. Every time I would edit the essay, I would think of something new to highlight or discuss. What this allowed me to do was create an essay more complex and in depth than it would have been without the editing, which ultimately tells the reader more about me as a person.

We see that Albert emphasizes, more than once, that he thinks this piece of writing has taken him a long time: "long, long time." We can hear in his tone a sense of exacerbation: "am still writing it now," and "not even done yet." He depicts this approach as "obsessive drafting," suggesting that *this* approach is distinctly different from how he usually works. We can get a sense of how he understands the purpose of working in this way as allowing for "new layers of the essay" to emerge. None of this is exclusively concerned with what he *did*, with process. But all of it is relevant to what he thought and felt about how the essay came to be, about its creation. We can use these insights to continue to respond to the particular avenues for writing instruction that might matter to Albert. We could explore creation experiences where he did not feel the drafting was obsessive. Alternatively, we could explore the extent to which Albert feels successful with his writing, albeit seemingly exhausted with how long it was taking him to complete the single essay. The purpose here is to respond in an improvisational way to the kinds of things that Albert specifically brings up.

In addition to how they feel about the writing experience and their depictions of certain aspects of process, participants also characterized themselves as writers within

their creation explanations. These characterizations can offer writing instructors pathways to work with individual students and can sometimes reveal how students arrive at working with a certain process. Self-characterization, in other words, may in fact influence the writing process. For instance, Harper characterized herself as not being good at having crafty word choice during her first phase of writing. Her process involves writing freely the first time around and then revising for word choice in later writing sessions. What we have here is a process that is premised on how she understands herself as a writer. This is not merely a way of working for her. We could further explore with Harper whether or not her own characterization of herself is limiting and whether she might benefit from trying to weave in her word choice and crafty phrasing during a first draft. It could be that she is missing out on some unique discoveries because of this belief about how she works. It is also possible that Harper's way of working could suggest a common occurrence among adolescent writers: that some parts of their writing process are premised on antiquated self-characterizations that may very well be limiting them from exploring a variety of ways of working. At the same time, we can see Harper's process in this case as solution that she created. We would explore with students how they create their own solutions not just in response to understanding themselves as writers but in response to how they view other aspects of writing: maybe the prompt, the rhetorical purpose, or their perception of a given audience. The point is that we can see many possibilities from one single explanation if we explore with students not merely *how* they work but *why* they work in such ways.

Creation explanations also have the potential to raise interesting lessons into the unique dilemmas that any creative production, particularly writing, presents. This is one way in which we can learn about writing *with* students by considering deeply how they explain their writing experiences. All forms of creative production present their own unique challenges. When Sawyer studied the narrative improvisation of children's play, it was the collaborative narrative of the children that distinguished this kind of creation

(Sawyer, 2002, p. 341). With writing, one interesting dilemma is the difficulty of being able to view the whole at once. But this dilemma did not occur to me until I studied Harper's responses with her "Taking Risks" essay (with my italics):

I had to come back to this piece more than 5 times because when writing it. I would get "tunnel vision." It was really hard for me to write consistently. I would write a few paragraphs, *leave, come back* the next day, *edit/add any new ideas, leave, come back*, etc. Sometimes during *random* times in the day while doing random things, I would *get an idea* for the essay and take out the notes section on my i-phone and jot down the idea. When sitting down to write, I would go on *tangents of thoughts*, and *then the next day* I would *organize* the thoughts. So the process became just like a flow on consciousness on the first day, then coming back and adding organization or editing it the next time.

In this description, Harper does not characterize herself but instead depicts writing as an experience that contains aspects that cannot be simultaneously perceived, requiring her to "leave, come back" as she emphasizes more than once. While she does not articulate what all of those aspects of the writing experience are, we see a definite emphasis on the idea that attention can only be paid to certain things at certain times. For instance, making amendments and inventing new ideas happen at different times than figuring out how to add those ideas to what was already written.

Unlike her characterization of herself as unable to invent crafty phrases while generating the foundational content of a piece, this dilemma is not one that an instructor necessarily needs to solve entirely for a student. Rather, it seems to be a dilemma about writing as creative production and we might benefit from further inviting students to explore the many ways this dilemma influences how they write.

Albert reported dilemmas in seeing the whole in a subtle way. His experience with improvisational acting allowed him to get some sense of the whole during the process. While he did not report a particular dilemma of seeing the whole, he explained that improvisation gave him a way of working between future predictions and the demands of the present. This was Albert's way of explaining some of the experience within his mind

while writing. Similarly, Harper discussed the difference between the ideas in the mind and the writing once it happens in the Chapter IV section, “but when you make it concrete.” We can explore with students the ways in which thinking while not writing becomes part of writing. In what ways might thinking about writing be part of the construction of writing?

A second dilemma of wholeness that seemed to be involved in Harper’s creation of writing had to do with the dilemma of knowing what belongs in the piece of writing and what does not. This dilemma of what belongs may offer interesting invitations for improvisation to provide writers with direction in how to accept their decisions. In her “Community Center” essay, she removed a paragraph where she interacted with a camper. Unlike writing, which has the opportunity for countless revisions, one advantage to improvisational performance is that we cannot go back. If we have an idea and choose to include or not to include it, there is no possibility to return. Harper had a strong sense that leaving out the anecdote was the right thing to do but she was still uncertain later.

We might improvise *while* writing but, because writing is not a one shot performance, the fact that we can change it offers not only tremendous advantages, but ample opportunity for doubt about our own choices. This is one way in which improvisation might actually serve to illustrate to students the occasional value in sticking with their initial choices. It could be possible to have certain writing assignments where the spontaneity and even incongruity are valued above organization and order as a way of allowing students to “Leap in and take action” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 18).

This dilemma could also be about clarifying the purpose of a given piece of writing. John was certain that his “Darfur Essay” provided a story that would illustrate the aspects of himself that he wanted to portray. It could be that, in Harper’s case, the sense of purpose for the piece of writing changed during the writing. She might not have realized that her anecdote about the camper was a necessary step in the creation of the piece in order to arrive at her more crystallized purpose of how the community center

transformed her sense of belonging. In a way, writing her essay was a form of “writing as inquiry.” However, John reported that he was used to discussing his humanitarian interests with friends, teachers, and mentors. In a sense he had created his own version of “Hanging out in communities of diverse specialists” by continually discussing his interests and thereby creating a repertoire of stories to illustrate it (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 27).

A third dilemma of wholeness is the extent to which a larger work of writing was being authored by students over the course of several works. This is a dilemma because, as instructors of writing, we might want to steer students to develop that larger “exploded narrative” (Iyer, 2004). Might steering students in such a direction constitute a kind of “provocative disruption” because, without our steering, they might not have noticed such a direction? It could be that as more experienced writers, we see possibilities that our students might not. The dilemma of steering them toward such possibilities is to wonder whether we are steering them that allows them to still develop a sense of originality and do as they would do, not as we would.

Over the course of a few personal essays, Harper depicted different instances in which her perceptions about life were augmented as a result of interacting with others; there seemed to be a theme of self-discovery through others. This was a theme that I saw in her writing and, had these conferences been between teacher and student, rather than between researcher and participant, I could have derived specific prompts to further direct her down that path of portraying her self-discovery in narrative.

I could have posed questions like, are there times when maybe she caused self-discovery in someone else? Might there be times where a transformation proved more or less worthy after some reflection? These are just some ways that an instructor could provide personal prompts that are geared specifically towards particular students. Such a conference would involve the teacher responding to those improvisatory questions I set

forth in chapter one: *What do the students seem to be telling me? How am I interpreting what they are communicating? What can I do about it?*

On the other hand, John directly said that he “could tell a thousand such stories” that portray his humanitarian interests. How could we provocatively steer John, given his sense of certainty? I have wondered whether this would be the question for John. The interesting thing about John’s confidence is that it raises the question about whether we ought to disrupt any student’s sense of certainty when they seem to be having success with their writing. I do not have a resolution to this dilemma other than suggesting that a robust response might actually involve employing both approaches. For instance, I could envision encouraging John to continue writing “a thousand such stories” but occasionally complicating his sense of ease by asking him to expand on what did not make sense to him, or to expand on times when he might have doubted his interest in humanitarian work. These possibilities are not intended to illustrate that writing ought to always have some component of struggle to it. Rather, I want to emphasize just how difficult it is to figure out what to do for the student who already seems to be thriving in the ways we want most of our students to thrive. Another solution might be to ask students more directly about what they believe the next direction could be in writing instruction for them.

Albert provided such insights seemingly without being prompted by me. While there did not seem to be a continuous narrative in Albert’s writing in this research project, he was keenly focused in each interview on what the writing assignment did for him as a writer.

What could the role of student creation explanations be in the practice of writing instruction?

It is possible that the practice of asking students to articulate their experiences with writing could be a way of allowing them to gain insight into their own ways of working. We could also see, as educators, the ways in which students define their own problems

with writing and the ways that they work such problems out. It is possible that students can be invited to find interesting ways to take on problems in writing production. For instance, Albert was intrigued by the conflict in using a dialogue-based genre centered on a mime, a character who does not speak. How can we provide for assignments for students where, like Albert, they set up their own compelling problems to address in writing?

Explanations about Accomplishment

Accomplishment explanations are those explanations, stories, and descriptions that relate to the students' sense of whether they accomplished what they set out to do and/or what they perceived they were supposed to do. Additionally, it concerns those explanations that have to do with the participants having a sense of or a lack of a sense of the criteria or expectations for a given genre of writing. Accomplishment is also about who we believe can judge or evaluate our writing. Given that most of the works we discussed were part of the college admissions applications, accomplishment also had to do with whether participants were concerned with how the essay might get them admitted to a university and whether they were concerned with the essay's grade in the class. How students explain accomplishment can allow us to explore what individual students value in their writing.

The accomplishment stories that played out here had to do with the students feeling both a sense of satisfaction as well as a sense of disappointment. I decided to call them "Accomplishment" explanations because they are narratives and descriptions that pertain to the overall notion of accomplishment, not because they always depict accomplishment.

Accomplishment explanations have to do with students' concern for the extent to which they achieved something with the writing. This has not only to do with their own satisfaction but with their perception of how various audiences might perceive their

writing. These considerations may influence some of the procedures involved in writing. In that respect, these accomplishment explanations can be a part of the student's writing process. Again, the focus is not on how accomplishment in fact plays a role in the writing process but on how the students seem to explain and understand the role of accomplishment in their writing experience.

Harper's "disclaimer" about her "Taking Risks" essay teaches us something interesting about accomplishment from the student's point of view. She thought the essay was good enough to submit to her English teacher for the assignment of writing a personal essay. And she thought it was good enough to discuss with me in my research. But she was certain to tell me that she was not going to use it. Part of Harper's concern grew out of her attempt to understand the judgments on quality for a piece of writing *outside* of the school setting Her English teacher telling the class that sports narratives can come off as cliché was the best measure of judgment for her. How well, I wonder, do English teachers address the modes of judgment placed on writing in contexts *outside* of the school environment? Even more broadly, I wonder, how do we communicate to students what accomplishment means with writing in a way that gives them a meaningful space to grow in their writing? This might be one way where community partnerships with professionals in various fields of creative production (jazz, acting, and writing, maybe) can enter the classroom space and discuss their own sense of what accomplishment means. In this way, students would learn from the real world context of how we make sense of what accomplishment is.

Throughout the research, I grew increasingly aware of my own interest in when the students wanted direct leadership from me as educator versus when they seemed certain of their own decisions. I remember Harper wanting to confirm with me that she was "right" to leave out a short anecdote from her "Community Center" essay. In this instance, Harper had done the necessary strategizing in writing and revision and was then looking for confirmation about her choices. Sometimes students carry the uncertainty in

their writing decisions on their own. As Albert described his approach to his common application essay as involving “obsessive drafting.”

It might be that the high stakes of the essay magnified for Harper the potential successes and failures that could result from her choices in writing. The choice to leave that anecdote out and Harper’s uncertainties in doing so could be the kind of thing that a writing instructor would want to further explore with a student. This is because the student exhibits simultaneously individual strategizing and a strong need for teacher input. We could even approach writing instruction from the point of view of looking for the ways in which students simultaneously show some sense of efficacy while wanting some approval, the way a jazz soloist might be conscious of audience engagement. In order to move students to this kind of experience, it might involve teaching in ways that alter students’ valuation of approval. It could be the case that the real disruption in writing instruction is about moving students beyond the need for approval or to see approval dialogically rather than as a finite transaction. These are particularly interesting occurrences as they might provide those places from which the student will grow by leaps and bounds within her writing practices.

There are also those instances where participants put accomplishment in their own terms. For Albert, he knew that he wanted to communicate beyond saying “I do debate,” and instead portray a story about his experiences. John, termed his rhetorical problem as being about the need to balance the idea of portraying himself well without bragging about himself. I think an important question for the practice of writing teachers could be: What are other ways in which conferencing and working with students can bring about opportunities for students to phrase rhetorical problems in their own terms?

This question is related to a deeper question: How can we use improvisational methods of teaching to allow students to construct the terms of what it means to accomplish their rhetorical purposes? For John, his question to himself in writing his essays was, “Am I getting across what I want to say?” This position of John’s might have

contributed to the certitude he seemed to display in his writing. He could have been certain of the development of his own “exploded narrative” (Iyer, 2004, p. 401). John reported that an earlier draft of his writing was “scrapped” when he realized it wasn’t working. Maybe this certainty was part of his clear understanding of purpose, a well-developed understanding of his own style and voice with writing, or possibly both. This could indicate that accomplishment is about students having their own terms for what accomplishment means, not for them to always be accomplishing while writing. Furthermore, the development of their own repertoire of maneuvers, of their own sense of stylistics, may very well contribute to having one’s own distinct sense of accomplishment.

In writing instruction, we could invite a collaborative approach to defining what accomplishment means in writing. Such discussions could be a way of improvising with students to explore the complexities of accomplishment in writing. It may also be that the freedom involved in the act of improvisation can both be a product of a confident foundation and can possibly continue to fortify such a confidence.

Explanations about Being Prompted

This category was something that I realized throughout the research process when I saw just how inspired or uninspired students could be by the difference in the way in which they perceived the wording of a prompt. As I worked with this idea more, I realized that wording was only the beginning. It could be a matter of how the prompter is portrayed through their words and the extent to which the prompter seems to be a receptive audience. It could also be how well the prompter inspires the creative sensibilities of the writer.

Explanations of the prompting are connected to accomplishment stories in that both involve perceptions of audience. But there is a marked difference. Accomplishment

stories surround what other people think of the writing or whether or not the student senses that she accomplished the purpose. Explanations of promptings have to do with the actual way in which students are prompted and how that affects their working with the writing. It has to do not with whether they have achieved certain criteria but how the prompt affects their experience with writing.

This distillation of terms can provide very interesting pathways for exploration in English education. Giving students writing prompts could be one way in which we, as writing teachers, disrupt them, either positively or negatively. It occurred to me throughout their explanations that they experience the prompts sometimes provocatively and sometimes noxiously, to borrow Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) terms. What is unique to writing is that prompting is not only about the exact prompt we provide, it is also about the extent to which students might view us, the prompter, as being receptive to what they have to offer in response to the prompt. If we consider some of the features of an improvisational experience from any of the theorists: that we "leap in with full bodied engagement" (the willingness to fully engage without hesitation) or "say yes to the mess" (the willingness to accept the inevitable lack of certainty in the process) (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 8) or that we develop our voice freely across several works (Iyer, 2004), or that we lose concern for the finality, for the *werktreue* (Benson, 2003) (that we are willing to see any work of writing as open to reinvention), what we realize is the emphasis is on a certain kind of willingness. We can help students broaden their sense willingness for any aspect of writing if we recognize how important a sense of audience is to them. What can we learn from improvisation in this respect? The audiences of improvisational performances are often people who are receptive to improvisation and know what such performances entail. They are there to be entertained and not necessarily musicians themselves. Our purpose as educators is distinctly different. We know more about writing than students. We are leading and facilitating them in the development of creative production. Our regard for students is more difficult to explain and qualify than

the language with which we prompt them or considering our role of readers as parallel to that of audience, but such considerations are worth exploring as transformative factors in writing instruction.

For Harper, Tufts could be thought of as a provocative prompter when they urged students to “take risks and go somewhere unexpected” (Tufts, 2016). Her experience of Duke as a limiting prompter seems to me to be more about a lesson for instructors of writing to understand what a noxious disruption to writing might look like for students. While any number of other students might have actually enjoyed Duke’s prompt, it is important to look at how Harper responded. To Harper, Duke wanted only certain kinds of responses. And these were responses that she did not feel able or inspired to provide. The fact that she was able to restate the prompt in the voice of Tufts (*you are not a number, you are not a GPA, who are you?*) suggests that the *content* of the prompt was not the issue so much as her understanding of *who* the prompter was. If we compare Harper’s experience to Albert’s, we can see further emphasis on the idea that the prompter is a kind of audience for the student writer. Albert tells us that he “had a lot more freedom” with Chicago’s “weird” prompt. “These weird prompts” indicate an openness, a willingness to hear words and ideas that go beyond the typical boundaries that students might understand. In the University of Chicago prompt particularly, students were invited to see parallel connections between seemingly disparate topics (sports, art, and science, for instance) and were asked to re-evaluate, and possibly throw into question, their own content knowledge (University of Chicago, 2016). Such prompts are invitations to students to enjoy going beyond their usual comfort zones with writing and can possibly serve as disruptions to students’ usual perceptions of their own knowledge.

Understanding how much of an impact we can have on students through our prompting might be one very powerful entry point to provoke “dynamic capabilities” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011). These capabilities in writing instruction might not be clearly defined skills, and that could be beneficial to writing instruction. These abilities might

involve the willingness to alter an approach, in other words, to work dynamically in connection to a rhetorical problem. It might be the ability to enjoy the experience of writing without worrying about how others might read it. In considering new ways of prompting, we could possibly transform our definition of what abilities are for writing. The shift seems to involve moving from a sense of *what* students do (language concerns like: using sentences or words in certain ways; or structural concerns: how paragraphs work and how essays are structured, for instance) and instead move to expanding their approaches to *how* they could work. This shifts the focus of writing instruction from the product (the piece of writing) to production (the process *and* students' explanations of how they work).

The Difficulties of Jazz Facilitation

Throughout this research, I was increasingly interested in the certitude John seemed to display in his attitude towards his experiences with his writing. There could be a few explanations for this. John could have chosen to portray the experience as more victorious than it was. It could also be that, for this particular kind of narrative writing, he had more ease. Whether John's depiction of his confidence with writing is accurate or not, we can view John as having the sense of certainty that we might want to cultivate in Harper and Albert. Further, we could view John as representative of students who present their writing experiences to us as seemingly problem-free and we can pose crucial questions. Is it necessary for there to always be a problem in whatever we may be teaching? How might we be able to disrupt while allowing a student the space to continue in her or his certainty?

How do we get students to see their own writing in the following way: "They see the affirmative potential in every musical utterance, even errors" (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 25)? So let us consider Harper's uncertainty about her response to Duke's

prompt. It was a smaller and reworked version of her “Taking Risks” essay. We could first acknowledge all of the complexities involved in producing the piece: an ability to see multiple purposes to the various parts we write and an ability to re-situate those parts to create new meaning. This requires that a writer have a very sophisticated understanding of the work she is producing and the various audiences who are reading it. It might very well be a challenge worth pursuing to even get students to be able to take a longer work and re-situate it for a different meaning. This does work with my initial excitement in seeing the piece, that it demonstrates how we can view pieces as not having a finality, a *werktreue* to them. And even if that is the case, Harper was dissatisfied with the piece. And so the importance of the work having that flexibility of not being *werktreue* only matters inasmuch as we are pleased with our own performance. This work was an error in *Harper’s terms*.

It might also be worth looking for those times when students seem less concerned with our valuation of their writing than with their own. How they experience a prompt could be a response to criteria of good writing that they are in the process of developing. In this way, creative production is now only about how they work when writing but also about giving students space to explore their own criteria for what makes good writing. The “exploded narrative” might be about more than an individual style; it might be about a vision for creative production more broadly (Iyer, 2004).

Chapter VI
DISRUPTING PRACTICES

Introduction

As I learned from my participants, I looked for ways in which my learning was evidenced in my teaching. At the start of the last chapter, I discussed the ways in which I attempted to make a prompt sound more interesting for my writing seminar students. In that situation I was informed by just how important my participants' experiences with being prompted were. The prompt was for students to draft an outline of a fictional scenario together surrounding a premise; for instance, what happened at the lunch table. They then had to individually write their version of the fictional events in a genre of their choosing. One group wrote about buying lunch from the food truck outside. By using rap, haiku and a crime-scene report, the class heard about the purchase of French fries smothered in barbecue sauce and about inevitably sharing with the friend who forgot his wallet.

When I had taught the lesson the prior semester, I transitioned into a unit on writing in the four modes of discourse: description, narration, exposition, and argumentation. We then explored the question: are these modes genres unto themselves or are they somehow different? But after working with my participants and making meaning of their writing experiences with them, I arrived at a more important inquiry about my own teaching choices. I saw interesting questions that I could pose to myself regarding

my choices: why else am I teaching this multi-genre experiment? What else might the students and I get out of this exploration?

I saw a new pathway to understanding what I really wanted to explore with the students and I attempted to open up the exploration so as to explore the meaning with the students. I said to the class, “we just looked at how genres have conventions, how else are conventions at play in writing? How many of you have your own conventions in the processes and systems you use to write? How would you best explain your writing process? Directly? Using symbols and metaphors? Using poetry?”

I was inventing a writing prompt on the spot that was connected to the deeper implications of what I was learning in my research: that teaching writing is about exploring the meaning of writing *with* students. And so, rather than “introduce” students to the notions of genre and various conventions, I was inviting students to creatively explore what genres and conventions are already at play in their own writing. In this way, provoking their thinking and discussion to explore and evaluate the uses of genres in their terms.

Part of the exploration of writing with students also involves the difficult inclusion of my understanding of established conventions in writing and how that understanding might have a place in students developing their own such understandings. In one respect, we could say that there are broad conventions and particular conventions. We might have larger expectations about what writing ought to do and how it ought to look and sound. And each writer has his own processes of working, his own ways of characterizing himself, and his own ways of framing what s/he is doing. And here I wonder, how do we make space for both the broader conventions (whether of genre, of standards, of our own expectations of our students) and for the individual development and alteration of conventions? Connected to this question is the more simply phrased but no less complex question: when do we disrupt and when do we listen?

**Listening—Return to Research Question:
How Do Students Understand What Their Writing is About?**

Students explain their writing in myriad ways. They do so in terms of their writing systems (how they plan, organize, work with and around dilemmas of memory), their perceptions of the reader, their conceptualization of the purpose of the particular prompt and of writing more broadly, the sense of how dire the purpose is for the particular piece of writing, their own sense of satisfaction with how they have performed with the given piece, what their peers are doing with writing, and what their teachers tell them about conventions and purposes.

The sense of efficacy in the face of the prompt mattered tremendously for the three participants. John seemed to have the least trouble in this regard. He felt confident all the way through in how to proceed with the prompts. At various points, Harper and Albert experienced their own dissatisfaction with how they responded to certain prompts. The invitation that seemed constricting made it difficult for them to see a sense of pathway, a way to emerge within the writing.

When they perceived the audience as open and accepting, both Harper and Albert felt a sense of freedom in their ability to respond. We could interpret the role of the prompts in such situations as a “provocative disruption.” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, pp. 1-4). It is a disruption because of the often crucial role that an essay can take in a student’s life, as we have particularly seen with the college essays. It is provocative in the sense that it leads them to surprising places allowing a performance that the student is enhanced by.

What could be worth exploring in the future would be how to allow students to develop their own sense of freedom in the face of a seemingly closed-ended prompting. This kind of ability could be explored through student explanations of how they tackled a rhetorical problem that a writing instructor gave to them. Returning to the example above, at the start of the chapter, I could have followed that assignment up with an

exploration of what was difficult for students and how they worked through and with that difficulty. In this way, the exploration of writing as an improvisational and responsive approach to rhetorical problems could become a consistent part of class. The role for the teacher might be one of interviewer, listener, and possibly fellow writer sharing his or her own ways of tackling such difficulties.

This could be expanded to include the students' understandings of rhetorical problems as well. When students explain their writing, they sometimes provide their sense of what might be a rhetorical problem (Flower & Hayes, 1980/2009). Often, this rhetorical problem is concerned with the ways in which they are prompted and the ways in which they conceive of their purpose as writers for that particular piece of writing. If prompted in freeing and open ended ways, the students can act as improvisers.

The participants explained their writing in terms of how the adults in their lives conceptualized writing for them. We saw with Harper how she was dismayed by her essay because her English teacher warned that sports-centered essays can often be cliché. We also saw her confidence in her own writing and how she disagreed with her mother's view on whether to use a particular anecdote.

The notion of the "exploded narrative" (Iyer, 2004) was part of the way the students storied their writing. It was most noticeable for John who was able to explore various parts of his experience (his love of learning Arabic, his desire to do humanitarian work, his joy for political discussions) in several different works of writing and see that they were all emerging from the same larger story.

Students explain their writing in terms of their self-concepts as writers and learners. John, for instance, reported that narrative writing was not a strength of his. He intentionally steered prompts to material that he was comfortable with in order to gain a sense of control in producing narrative. Albert considered his mime play to be an outlier because he primarily writes when assigned. Harper, from as early as the first interview,

expressed interest in one day writing a book of personal essays. She sees the personal essay as a form within which she can thrive.

Whether it is part of their self-concept or another issue entirely, the extent to which the students were satisfied with their own work was part of their explanations. Extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction often had a crucial place in how they viewed their writing. This can have implications for writing instruction in many ways. First, it could throw into question the idea of teachers assessing student work. While self-assessment is nothing new, I find it worthwhile to emphasize how crucial the students' own self-satisfaction was in how they understood their work. Further areas for inquiry could include a comparison between the criteria that students consider versus the criteria that teachers consider when assessing whether written work is satisfactory. I think that, in this research project, the self-satisfaction piece became most apparent in their college essays. I believe the dire purpose of the college essay is the likely reason for this. The challenge for writing instructors is to provide that same sense of urgency around every work of writing, regardless of the actual stakes. This is where the *provocative* part of "provocative disruption" becomes particularly challenging for English teachers (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 10). The outside stakes cannot be what we rely on to make these deep explorations of writing with students. Students explain their writing in terms of what is compelling in their writing lives in the current moment. Somehow, we have to invite the possibility that writing for students can be compelling beyond external achievements like college admissions or grades. Improvisational performances could offer us a model here in that improvisers are motivated by their own compulsion to express creatively. That may be one of the most important "dynamic capabilities" of all.

Interpreting—Returning to Research Question: How Do I Understand What They Report to Me?

I had a lot of influence over the direction of the research. While I knew in theory the various caveats of Scheurich's (1997) contention that interviewing is fundamentally a complex proposition, it was only as I conducted the interviews that I lived the experience of how true this was.

There are always going to be the subtle movements that a researcher does, either in the mind or in communication or action, that steer the course of the data. My goal here is not to somehow uncover each of those things. Not only would that be impossible, it would not illustrate beyond its own classification. Further, I might be perpetuating a myth of being continuously self-aware, which I certainly was not during the research.

So there is memory and there is the writing; these are the places from which I can draw when I am answering this question. Memory is sparse and imperfect and I find that I reinvent what happened the more I think about it. I was eager to move the research along. Over the two months during which the interviews took place, I found myself trying to figure out ways to speed up the process. My own writing story, just like my participants, involved a sense of urgency to complete my writing project, the dissertation. Organizing a discussion around each participant, I found, limited the depth of what I was able to say. I initially had three separate documents and tried to write an analysis of each interview after it took place and consider it only in connection with that participant and the participant's previous interviews. But each interview presented me with something that allowed me to reinterpret several ideas and things that had already happened.

Their individual writing stories became part of a conglomerate story in which I was the narrator. Furthermore, each interview and subsequent analysis steered the way I proceeded in the next interviews. I interpreted, I declared what mattered and then I proceeded with what I found meaningful. I am under no illusions that the participants had the same level of influence over either the interviews or over the way in which I

interpreted their interviews as I did. Even by allowing them to bring the works of writing that they deemed important and allowing them to tell me what they wanted, I still had far more sway over what occurred. This will always be true in research, I believe. If this kind of inquiry were to be carried out as part of pedagogy, it would be true there as well. It appears to me that the teacher inevitably has more sway in the development of the narrative of the learning.

One way in which my interpretation steered the story was in my fascination with the way in which the prompt affected the participants. This was not true with all three participants. John seemed able to proceed in whatever way he wanted to regardless of how the prompt was worded or other factors that influenced Harper and Albert, like how a teacher characterized the purpose of the essay or what a fellow student said. John's apparent confidence could be explained in several ways. It is possible that he was more comfortable portraying only what worked well for him in the process and preferred not to offer up aspects of the writing experience that were difficult. At the same time, it could be that he had particular experience with sharing his own personal narratives.

What I discussed above are the ways in which my research decisions steered the ways I analyzed the data.

I found the analysis of the students' language to be particularly useful as well as including portions of the students' texts. For various reasons, I chose not to include all of the writings the students brought in. These reasons include: the students may one day use the writings for other purposes and when I initially asked them to join the research project, I explained that I would ask to use specific pieces but not that they would commit to letting me reprint every work they brought in.

I explained their writing within the context of my career as an English teacher who had a class load of five classes of 34 students each. This context is crucial in how I framed the findings here. The value of having these deep conferences with these students is immense. It is also, in my current capacity and the capacity of many teachers in the

public school system, not a feasible option on a regular basis. I believe students would benefit tremendously from a teacher discussing their writing with them several times over the course of the school year. While it may not be practical in many school settings to enact the research activities here as a pedagogical approach, it could be laudable to employ them as part of classroom and peer work. Beyond the value of the process for students, there is rich the potential for the teacher's insights about how students view writing.

I also interpreted their writing with an eye towards how they characterized their own writing. I became aware that what mattered to me was the various ways in which they revealed an awareness for a complex conceptualization of writing.

In addition to being interested in their awareness for the complexity of their writing, I was also interested in the subtle signaling that each participant provided me in communicating the importance of the piece they had brought. From the first interview, when Harper provided me with a "disclaimer" that the essay was not going to be used for the admissions process. The unprompted communication seemed to carry deep meaning in its understatement. My response here was part of the improvisational way in which I explored their writing with them. By valuing these subtle communications, I allowed my interest in them to steer the interview and to direct the interpretation. I realized that I was operating under the subtle assumption that during conferences, writers, and particularly students, communicate some of the most important things in very understated ways. Improvisation is concerned with listening not just to the content of the communication but to the form as well. Improvisers in a jazz ensemble may listen not only to the notes and melody being played, but to the ways in which their fellow musicians alter such things as pace and attitude. Keen listeners can then pick up on these subtle shifts in their own solos in a responsive melody, thereby creating a solo in dialogue with a previous solo. What I tried to do in my interpretation of their experiences, was arrive at this

convergence of solos into dialogue. In this way, I reflected on my own assumptions and deepened my interpretations of what the students seemed to be communicating to me.

Another way in which improvisation influenced the process of interpreting was in the extent to which I used a preconceived plan. I was simultaneously on the lookout for things but also willing to abandon what I thought I might have been realizing. The fourth interview with Harper is the place where this became most crucial. I proceeded through a large portion of that interview completely thrilled about Harper's essay, considering its meaning in a totally different light. I thought her shorter essay would have proven an example of Iyer's (2004) "exploded narrative." But when I realized her own dissatisfaction with it, I followed that course; that melody of the research. I came to deeper insights about the impact of the ways we invoke students and invite them via our prompts. But, in this instance, I was not aware of the subtlety right away. My perception was influenced by the need to arrive at a conclusion that would have worked well with my theory. In some respects, there is a lesson here for how I can proceed in writing instruction: in what ways might our plans limit our perceptions of those understated, yet important, communications that students have about their writing?

This question is really connected to the difficulty involved in a research approach or an instructional approach premised on making meaning *with students*. An additional way in which collaboration influenced my interpretation and interviews was in how I would tell the participants about the research. I engaged them in the discussion of what I was exploring for several reasons. I could sense that the students were often stressed during the tenuous period of the college admissions process. To have to attend anything extra during this time, like my research interviews, adds to the already numerous things that they were partaking in. I told them casually about the kinds of things I was looking into as a way of giving them more of an understanding of what my purposes were all about. I wanted them to be as comfortable with the research process as possible. But I also tend to teach this way too. I teach in a way where I value a sense of intellectual

honesty with students. I am fortunate to teach in a high school where students are interested in such talk. I also told them about what I was researching to see what they had to add and to allow them to learn from what I was learning. These instances of telling them about the research might have altered the course of the interviews in subtle ways.

I interpreted by exclusion too. What I chose not to tell and the ways in which I chose not to narrate are crucial in my representation. I chose not to narrate the interviews as if they were neatly occurring episodes. I decided this for several reasons. Having studied narrative research, I am of the mind that neatly told stories of interviews present a reality that is just too convenient to be plausible. More importantly, I believed throughout this process that the story was always about the interactions with participants and the interpretations I was making and not about some notion of “what happened.” Similarly, whenever I offered up direct data, like the exact written words of the students, I followed it up with interpretation. I do not believe in the idea, at least for this research project, that the reader will form his or her own conclusions as if the data speaks. Readers do form their own conclusions but the data does not purely speak. There is always interpretation. There is also the fact that I am the selector of what to provide and selection is an act of interpretation.

My interpretations were influenced by the following constructs: that there is not an absolute of something that happened; that I am the narrator of the research and, as such, I was partially aware and partially not aware of all of the factors steering how I proceeded. I understood their writing with those various notions in mind and in their myriad ways, those notions influenced how I wrote. I wanted to allot for several openings, several possible meanings as I made insights. I did not want to close off the meaning of any one interview. I preferred to open up as many possibilities as seemed reasonably plausible.

I tried to develop interpretations based on their understanding of what they chose to bring to the interviews. For instance, I asked Albert about the differences between his mime play and his college essay. My concerns for the contrasts in these assignments that

he brought in was about exploring what he thought the differences were. By distinguishing between the college essays and the class assignments, I brought out in Albert the idea that the stakes for the class work were not nearly as high and that experimentation, therefore, was more inviting in those kinds of essays.

Coupled with my interest in what participants chose to bring in was a deeper sense about how we allow students to develop their own values for writing.

I think, most often, English teachers are understanding the writing of their students either within their own minds, in the comments they give students, or in the discussions they have with colleagues. This last part is crucial. Teachers can co-construct larger narratives about students' writing. Teachers can agree and disagree with one another. An area ripe with potential for further study would be exploring the various ways that informal teacher communities construct meaning about various aspects of student performance, in this case, writing. I would suggest that an improvisational approach to writing instruction emphasizes a unique responsiveness to each student so that students can develop their own values regarding writing. However, the teacher, like a jazz leader, will still be assisting students in some of the ways of valuing writing that are conventional. A crucial dilemma is how do we teach writing (or any kind of creative production) in such a way so as to allow students to both learn the conventional values while still developing their own vision for what they value in writing?

I think one benefit of an improvisational responsive style of writing instruction is the opportunity for experimentation. During the research, I was on the lookout for the ways experimentation seemed to be at play in how students spoke of their writing. What was interesting to me was how the compelling nature of the prompt dominated their view of writing and could often dictate their willingness for experimentation. This was particularly true with Albert and Harper. This tendency was not something I anticipated. I wanted to discover something that threw some sense of surprise into my discussion. I understood their writing in terms of the kinds of interesting discoveries that I could make

for the sake of research. When I sensed that things such as the willingness to experiment were not always at play, things that resemble improvisation, I steered my insights more towards what the students seemed to be presenting (either directly or implicitly) as being of central importance to them.

Return to Research Question: What Might It Mean to Improvise Our Role in Writing Instruction?

The effectiveness of improvisation as an analytic lens, in this study, can be understood as a way of amending and altering our understanding of the writing process. I found that the notions of “dynamic capabilities” and “disruption” could be helpful in understanding our role in students’ experience with writing (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 1). Additionally, the concepts that Bernstein and Barrett outline can be helpful though I found that not all of them were immediately applicable in this study. As a conceptual tool, the idea that writing does not have a *werktreu* value seems to be less valuable in terms of considering actual works of writing but purposeful when considering the meaning attributed to a work of writing (Benson, 2003).

When Harper was uninspired by the Duke University prompt, I suggested that she imagine that Tufts had written the prompt. She even had a sense of how they would word it: “You are not a number, you are not a GPA; who are you?” Tufts, with their open ended prompting had communicated to Harper a sense of being a receptive audience. My prompting her to use her perception of them was for the purpose of illustrating the various ways that we can get ourselves out of ruts as writers. While it was an improvisational maneuver on my part, the goal was more concerned with the focus on the student’s increased sense of efficacy. I can read Harper’s difficulty with the Duke prompt in improvisational terms and see that my role as writing instructor would be to allow the experience to be more provocative of a disruption than limiting. However, this is not the

exact truth of the situation. My advice that she illustrate the experience of working in Literati seemed to be more interesting to her. On one level, as writing instructors, we probably often do this kind of brainstorming with students to help dislodge them when they seem stuck with their writing. In this instance, the idea of improvisation provided me with one additional suggestion for Harper and a consideration in my creation of prompts for my students.

My interest in the potential to enable students to develop their own pathways to work through difficulties can be understood through the notion of “dynamic capabilities” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 1). If one of the goals is “localized innovation,” in the classroom, that might take the form of students developing their own strategies to work with getting themselves out of stuck places (p. 23). This is an important consideration in writing instruction even with the kinds of students that participated in this study. As sophisticated as my participants were, we saw that Albert and Harper reported difficulties in their writing experience. While John seemed not to report similar difficulties, he did say that he used his experience talking about his interests as a way to work around that he does not prefer narrative writing. Might he have benefitted from developing a system of his own to work with narrative writing? My point is that there is a continuum of how “dynamic” the capabilities in fact are. I would argue that John’s strategy served him well for the task that he was presented with but, as he continues in his development as a writer, he would benefit from additional and possibly more sophisticated strategies in encountering narrative writing.

How might this study illustrate some possibilities for allowing students to further develop dynamic capabilities? Three things matter here: allowing the students to articulate their current values in writing, providing students with avenues to increase the efficacy of their writing maneuvers, and making the practice of explaining their writing a continuous part of the writing experience. My participants articulated their values in many ways: in terms of the works they chose to bring in, revealing that the most

compelling works mattered more; in discussing their own satisfactions and dissatisfactions with their works. They also articulated their values in how they defined what they believed the purpose of various kinds of writing are. When Albert, in the last interview, brought in two essays to compare social studies to English, he reported that he accepted that writing as a performance act to be evaluated was perfectly legitimate. He expressed that there would be other cases in which a student could pursue writing as a creative or expressive act. This view of writing as having different purposes and functions in our lives as learners and creatives reveals a complex value system about writing on Albert's part. This view is part of Albert's larger construction of himself, learning and education more broadly. This is just one example of the fact that students are developing an articulation of their values of writing and, in so doing, developing values about themselves in the world they live in. What matters to me, as an educator, is that my students are able to increase both their satisfaction and effectiveness in dealing with the variety of problems that writing will invariably present to them. Whether they value writing as a central creative outlet is secondary in this production.

Providing students with avenues to increase the efficacy of their writing maneuvers can happen in both the form of specific techniques to present to students as well as in the overall experience of realizing that it is possible. For instance, in the example given above with Harper, one discreet technique would be to state a perceived limited prompt from the point of view of an audience we feel very comfortable with. This is a technique that might work in a variety of situations to allow students to emerge from writing situations where they feel stalled. Students could create a library of techniques to use in various situations. On a broader level, we can provide students with the overall experience of realizing that the mobility to situate themselves in alternative ways in relation to writing is ultimately something that resides within themselves. Both approaches in conjunction work towards strengthening students' efficacy in dealing with writing challenges.

Making the practice of explaining their writing a usual part of the writing experience communicates to students several complexities about writing: that writing involves not merely the act and products of writing but also our perceptions; that writing is connected to various aspects of our present experience (including what is most compelling for us to write, what we are going through in our lives, the role of writing in the world around us); and, most importantly, that we learn about writing from our own articulation of our experience with it.

These possibilities are not directly derived from improvisation. Improvisation (whether from Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) framework, Johnstone's (1992, 1999) improv acting workshops, or the general tenets of the "yes and" approach) merely provides one way of understanding how to interact as writing instructors in assisting students in these dynamic capabilities.

What improvisation can highlight is how difficult it is to define and redefine our roles as educators.

Writing Instruction as Provocative Disruption

The big questions that I am left with about how writing instruction can facilitate a provocatively disruptive experience for students surround issues about how I view the goals of writing and how students view and develop an understanding of what writing is about. The biggest question seems to be: how do we lead them *as they would proceed*, while still facilitating an understanding of what *we believe matters* in writing? In other words, when should we disrupt and when should we listen? There really are not bright line answers. But there is a major purpose to writing instruction as jazz leadership. It begins with the proposition that "dynamic capabilities" for writing have to do with more than the activities of writing. Such capabilities are not only the use of words, sentences, and organizational skills (the conventional "skills" and "abilities" explored in English

classrooms to teach students to write coherent essays), but encompass an entire way of being in the face of the opportunities and problems posed by writing. Furthermore, such capabilities work better *as explorations with students* than as pre-defined skills that a teacher determines. How, for instance, does a particular student exhibit the “yes and” facet of the “Yes to the mess” aspect of Bernstein and Barrett’s (2011) framework (p. 8)? This inquiry can be posed as a way of interpreting how students explain their writing. The interpretations can provide an individualized way to develop writing instruction with specific students rather than for all students.

For Harper and Albert, who were both perturbed by prompts where they viewed the school and the wording as not being entirely receptive to what they had to offer, the sense of the prompter’s receptivity, expressed in the prompt’s wording, phrasing and overall attitude, had a tremendous impact on their willingness to say yes. An approach with Albert and Harper could be to improvise with them (as I did in one interview with Harper when she rephrased the limiting prompt) to explore how they could respond just as passionately even when prompts are not as engaging. Such discussions would serve to foster their own specific dynamic capabilities.

On the other hand, John seemed to carry the “yes to the mess” approach more throughout his whole experience. Maybe the disruption for a student like John is to find ever increasingly challenging prompts for him to employ this capability.

It seemed that John had developed an angle in connection to the entire task of writing his application essays which was grounded in the larger story of his interest in humanitarian politics. John’s capability seemed to leverage his own version of an “exploded narrative” as a way to envision the task of writing several essays about himself.

Exploration as Explosion

Such a profoundly high stakes task as the college essay, however, is not always a part of students' writing experiences. Another question I am left with is: How do we make all writing as compelling as such high stakes writing? This is really about the *provocative* part of jazz facilitation in writing. Again, there are no bright line answers but something in the discussion of creative production with students might provide directions. Could it be that developing nuanced articulations of our ways of working in any form of creative production is a type of dynamic capability? More directly, I believe that one of the best ways to cultivate passion in student writing is to continually engage them in opportunities to explain their experiences with writing. In this way, not only is their actual writing their own, but so too is their way of working, their way of describing and, quite possibly, their broader aesthetic visions and values regarding what writing is all about. This is one of the more exciting ways in which writing instructors can facilitate students to explode the narrative of what writing means to them.

Strengthening the yes. The provocative part of jazz facilitation in writing seems to also be inherently part of the "yes" part of "yes to the mess" (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 1). I do not think that it is easy to distill the various ways in which the experiences surrounding writing are indeed a mess. It might not be necessary to do so in a universal sense. The mess could be unique for each of us. Maybe the exploration of the mess is a beginning way of saying "yes" to it. By discussing what is complex about writing, by giving distinct names to our own ways of working, we are explaining the mess and our ways of working through it as a kind of process. By facilitating such explanations in students, we could possibly strengthen the attitude of courageousness that is inherent in the "yes."

Expanding the mess. The actual systems we enact, whether cognitive, or inspirational, are messy. In that regard, I would say that all three participants seemed well accustomed to the various messes that the act of writing brings with it. But the mess is

also in the entire lived experience surrounding their current situation with writing. There are essays due in different classes, multiple personal essays due to various schools. These messes are functional but require a certain sense of clarity and organization to work through. There are also the messes of memory itself, of understanding the expectations of several different colleges, of trying to predict what an unknown admissions officer will think upon reading a personal narrative. The whole conglomerate of realities that contribute to the stories of the writing constitute one big mess. The attitude of yes is one of not resisting what is. But there is a problem in ascribing this attitude when considering so many factors. By being critical of the way certain things are unfolding, are we saying no to them? And, in so doing, saying no to the mess? For instance, when Harper was uninspired by Duke's wording in their prompt, was that her version of saying no to the mess? Is Duke's poor or uninspiring wording merely a part of the mess?

Improvisation as inherently messy. If we recall in the review of literature, theories on improvisation vary in how they adjust the scope of improvisation. Some theorists assume improvisation as a function and examine how it unfolds while others explore the minute technical differences between spontaneous acts that are not improvisation and those that are. For the purposes of understanding how improvisation can illuminate writing instruction, it might make sense to adjust our scope as we go. For instance, it is simultaneously possible that Duke's limiting prompt was not a provocative disruption *and* that we can enable students to say yes to the mess of it anyway. In other words, improvisation cannot be used as a neat and consistent metaphor, with each part always in alignment. It must be used and adjusted as a tool for highlighting.

"Leap in and take action" seems to be a counterpart to the "Yes to the mess" attitude (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p.1). Where the one is an attitude, the other is the active behavior of the attitude. I believe that, at various points, all of the participants experienced a sense of full-bodied engagement while writing. Again, there is a dilemma when considering that writing often involves a sense of meta-thinking. We might be

engaged in the act of writing while simultaneously aware of several other factors. Is that awareness an embodiment of not being fully engaged? Or is it part of the whole of writing, and therefore we can be fully engaged, even if considering what the reader might think and being concerned about it along the way? When improvisational musicians are playing, they do not stop. There is not stopping to consider the structure of the piece while creating it. But this does happen while writing. An improvisational conceptualization of the writing process could lead to the generalizable problems North outlined: that we prescribe to educators how to proceed. Remember that the problem with an idea like pre-writing is not that it is never a valid approach; it is the practice that this is the best way to write for all situations (North, 1987).

As a concept, improvisation does not fit neatly into describing the writing process and yet it resonates well enough to produce some interesting questions. The important thing here is not to answer these questions once and for all. These dilemmas are what this study has brought about.

But maybe the dilemma comes from trying to find the ways in which Bernstein and Barrett's framework can be directly applied to an analysis of the data here. It might be better to consider the ways it could draw out hidden corners of meaning rather than apply some direct revelation.

Therefore, rather than assert that the facets of improvisation occur when students are writing most optimally, I wonder what happens when I consider some of the insights in connection with these concepts of improvisation.

Where does this leave us if we are to employ some semblance of this in our instruction?

I think each of us has to ask ourselves where we are rooted and where we might have uncompromising beliefs. It is not so simple as knowing our parameters and then proceeding from there. We can return to Maxine Greene's "have I got it?" as a refrain to ask ourselves.

In the next section, I will explore the ways in which these assertions have implications for the larger setting of education and in terms of a kind of ethics for writing instruction.

Ethics and Pedagogy

The yes of improvisation, whether a “and” or “but” kind of yes is not about agreement. The yes is about not denying what is, not resisting what is. It is the acceptance that the response that we have is in reaction to what is. The “yes and” approach is suitable when playing together. It is suitable for class discussions. It is suitable to building an understanding in connection with our former selves. But we are also allowed the option of the “yes but” approach. Improvisation values our potential to steer things in a new direction. In terms of pedagogy for writing, I believe that this research has taught me that students thrive when they experience a yes approach. Specifically, they thrive when they sense that the teacher is prompting them in exciting ways and that the teacher wants to hear from them. The yes of improvisation affects students’ writing because if they hear the yes from us, they are free to maneuver within their writing. A wonderful dilemma is how do we effectively employ this while also helping students refine their writing? We may in fact question their ideas, question their reasoning, question their wording, their insights, their assumptions. The murky dissonant challenge is to maintain the yes first, even if it is followed by a “but.”

Playing Writing

This is a pedagogy of continuous engagement, not of following a formula. Play is a concept from improvisation that can serve as a helpful additive in moving in such a pedagogy. Play proposes action whose purpose is about the action, not necessarily about an end result. The word play is used not only to describe what children do, but to describe

what musicians and actors do. The activity of play implies a carrying out with a sense of attention, a sense of style, a sense of self development. This is where we may be able to make the emotional stakes (the passion that genuinely drives the attitude of yes) more prevalent in students' writing experiences. We can regard writing as playing with the dual sense of play (the way children play and the way musicians play).

Implications for Future Research

Throughout this study, I have become aware of many ways of studying alternative, parallel and offshoot inquiries. I have pooled these ideas into three broad categories: varying the research paradigm, varying the research setting, varying the participant profile.

A quantitative approach or at least an approach concerning a broader sampling of participants would be crucial in varying the research paradigm. Research into perceived student satisfaction with how promptings are worded or with how students experience writing in a course when they perceive that the teacher is open and perceptive to experimentation could be fruitful. These kinds of inquiries might lend themselves well to questionnaires. Inquiring into pedagogy could also be beneficial. Asking teachers about the way in which they phrase their promptings could prove to provide an interesting set of data for analysis. This could be done on a smaller scale but a larger sampling of teacher promptings could also lead to multiple kinds of analysis. I am imagining a study where we gather sample writing prompts from a few dozen educators and then ask as many students to rate the prompts in terms of how inviting they seem to be. We could then explore more deeply how prompting invites us to diverge from conventions and the ways in which such a divergence benefits our ability to work within conventions. There are many possibilities to look at the ways in which teachers prompt and students perceive the prompting.

In terms of the effects of having students articulate their writing, a larger sampling could prove fruitful if the definition of what they were explaining was narrowed down sufficiently. For the kinds of things that I explored in this research project, I enjoyed a latitude of ambiguity that few participants afford. For instance, we could question fifty students about their experience writing in an English class where, after each writing assignment, they would be invited to produce written or oral accounts of their experiences with writing.

Varying the research setting could allow inquiries into how this might play out in the classroom. A research project involving classroom observations of educators who try out different improvisational approaches could illustrate what “dynamic capabilities” and “provocative disruption” look like in practice.

Varying the participant profile could be done in many ways. My three participants were high school seniors. They are all high-achieving students who enjoy writing and have developed sophisticated systems of their own for writing. Alter any of these variables and you can gain other kinds of data with other kinds of insights. How might this inquiry proceed with students who are disengaged from school? Or, possibly, students who are several years younger? It is also possible to do a comparative study of students who identify as very interested in writing, students for whom writing is their passion, versus students who view writing merely as something done in school.

The previous recommendations are more directly taking off on this study. In larger terms of using improvisation as a lens in English education, I think it is key to use improvisation as a highlighting tool in order to augment and challenge our understandings rather than as a way of declaring some essential truths.

Implications for Practice

While this study does not advocate for a specific approach to writing instruction, I do suggest that writing instruction, if conceived of as a collaborative practice with students, can provide interesting challenges for students and instructors of writing. When we think of instruction as collaboration, we look for ways to inspire, direct, prompt, and explain. We also might challenge some of the standby approaches that many of us are used to using. For instance, if we invite students to develop their own terminology for their writing, we might also struggle with our tendencies to label and define various aspects of writing that we want to define for them. But in creating the tensions about when to allow students to develop their own style and when to refer them back to conventions, we generate an approach to writing that is specific our students and to our current understandings of writing.

Such a contextual approach to instruction requires that dialogue with students about their writing is crucial in writing instruction. Students can be invited to explain, in their own terms, what they do in their writing. I have found that one-to-one dialogue with students, while productive, is not practical for all teachers. I teach around 170 students. There are other ways to invite students to explore what writing means to them. I have found that student-to-student dialogue can be fostered well when students write in tangent to one another. For instance, if a group of five students takes on a current events issue and each student writes about it in a different genre. The discussions of writing afterwards would be grounded in their sharing of the topic.

In helping students develop their own explanations of what they do in their writing, we may be facilitating students in developing ownership of the writing process and furthering their sense of investment in writing. Writing instruction, therefore, goes beyond how to write and moves towards helping students develop why they write.

In this study, I defined three areas of meaning that seemed to be at play in student explanations (accomplishment, prompting, and creation). But these were explanations that seemed most relevant to me insofar as how I understood my participants. Teachers would benefit from asking themselves how they are defining their students' experiences with writing and search to develop those explanations with students. Furthermore, teachers can invite students to develop their own categories of how they discuss their writing. Teachers might need to explain with some examples of what kinds of categories can exist. This might involve the teacher sharing writing with the class.

I am proposing that writing instruction is a type of creative production. This study further suggests that how we prompt students is crucial to their writing experiences. Like writing itself, writing instruction has both conventions and personal stylistics. A teacher's style in writing instruction would be relevant in developing enticing ways to prompt students. In my own practice, I have explored how just spending a few minutes revising an essay prompt can dramatically transform how inviting of a prompt it seems to be.

Finally, this dissertation proposes that writing instruction is continuously and simultaneously inquiry and practice. This means that we are continuously exploring while doing. Very much like improvisation, which is composing and performing within specific contexts, we are enacting instruction while learning about what it means to instruct in writing.

Conclusions: The Questions I Now Ask

This study complicated writing instruction by proposing that writing is a form of creative production and that the teaching of creative production involves an improvisatory responsiveness to student explanations about their writing. This study suggests that the development of "dynamic capabilities" for student writers greatly expands what might typically be thought of as skills and abilities. Dynamic writing

capabilities are the following: students' abilities to explain (or even the grappling with explaining) how they wrote something; the strengthening of a "yes" attitude about writing; the capability to view problems in writing as opportunities rather than blocks; and whatever approaches individual students employ as they work through their writing. This study defined some dynamic writing capabilities but suggests that the exploration of such capabilities rather than the definition of them is at the heart of a jazz facilitation of writing instruction.

This study proposes that both terms of the phrase "provocative disruption" be considered heavily for their implications in writing instructions. Furthermore, this study suggests that these terms be considered as foundations of inquiry rather than as discreet methods. It might be possible that the inquiry is the method. We might ask some of the following questions about disruption: How and when do we disrupt? Are there times when listening is better than disruption? How do we enable students to view disruption favorably even if the disruption is not provocative? In terms of the "provocative," we could ask: how do we create a writing classroom that fosters provocative writing experiences? And how can we make such experiences compelling even when the academic stakes are not high? To what extent might students' own visions (which they develop through explanation) of what they value in writing fuel a compelling writing experience for them?

This study illustrated an approach to writing instruction and the writing process when considered as a form of testimony and explanation. We heard the explanations of the writing process from three student research participants and from myself as researcher and educator. Improvisation served the role of providing a foundation for the inquiry as well as an approach for interpretation.

In addition to the questions above, I now see several important dilemmas about writing instruction from this study. To what extent should we encourage and allow the individual and unique development of students' own writing processes and

understandings? On what grounds should we provide disruption? Sometimes we do so because of efficacy, because we think a student will write better. Other times it might be because we think they will have a better experience writing: they might possibly enjoy the experience of writing more or work in alternative ways and arrive at unexpected places. Improvisation theory allowed this dilemma to surface because I worked in an improvisational way as a researcher, allowing myself to follow and listen to the students. I also considered the ways we could disrupt students in provocative terms. More simply, the act of any improviser involves a combination of listening and disrupting; when to do which, and to what extent, is a compelling question.

And with that question is the question of how to teach the development of the individual writer when they are part of a class. Improvisation theory can serve as a premise for how to view creative production that can offer ways to explore individual ways of understanding writing. The idea of *werktreu* suggests that the meanings of creative products are not fixed (Benson, 2003). The discussion of the interviews demonstrated some possibilities for exploring the understanding of writing with students rather than solidifying and declaring an understanding of it.

This study illustrated how having students explain their writing can offer us insights into how they create their written works and how the context influences their experiences. These insights might enable us to better approach writing instruction. Contexts will steer the expectations and understandings of students and teachers in different ways. We might be interested in certain approaches to writing because of developments in our own teaching, our reading of research, or the ways we negotiate the demands of standards. Students, as we saw in this study with the college essay, are influenced by their own situations. How can we make a place for distinguishing between instructor interpretations of writing and student interpretations? And, how can we do so in ways that allow us to lead students to what we think matters while allowing them to explore what they think matters with writing?

Improvisation theory suggests that we can continually select from a variety of goals and principles. Bernstein and Barrett's (2011) framework is intended to be loosely applied and adapted. While I think that many of the facets of their framework are adaptable to writing instruction, we might need to articulate our own improvisational concepts that matter to the work we do. And this is done with the understanding that provocative writing disruption is a way of challenging the way students work in the act of creative production.

But writing is only one kind of creative production in English education. There is discussion, reading, and even the process of thinking, all of which can be conceived of as creative production.

Improvisation ought to be more considered in not only inquiries into writing, but into all aspects of English education. The field of English education concerns creative production continuously. Whether we are looking at writing or reading, we are working with how we construct creative products or with how we come to understand them. Improvisation theories offer pathways into understanding and further complicating how creative production works. In this study, we saw how the notion of *werktreu* can allow us to inquire into the ways that a sense of wholeness enables or interferes with our writing (Benson, 2003). We saw how the notion of "disruption" can provide descriptions for our roles in students' writing (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011). "Dynamic capabilities" can be helpful in defining the kinds of things we want students to learn (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011).

While improvisation can enhance our inquiries, the lens ought to be treated as a lens to allow practitioners to explore the illustrations that research provides and make sense of them on their terms.

How can these three categories help our understanding?

There are certainly more than three ways of defining how we explain our writing. I want to emphasize that these names are placeholders and are my way of understanding

what these three students were experiencing. It does seem to me that as researchers and writing instructors, it is easier to distill certain activities of the writing experience than when we are writers. I must emphasize the fact that the experience of being prompted is something that can be separately considered as a matter of writing instruction, as a matter of my discussion here as a researcher, but not necessarily that we as writers separate these facets while we are writing. This is to say that analysis is one way of understanding experience and is useful insofar as it helps us to further our inquiries and better our practices. It might be the case that what the instructor and researcher can distill, the writer cannot or does not distill while writing.

Finally, I end with the inspiring moment of instruction from Maxine Greene on that day in August of 2001: Have I got it? Sometimes we do and sometimes we do not. The purpose of the question is not about getting a “yes” but about being willing to ask in the first place. The spirit of improvisation reiterates the beauty of working with both errors and successes, of responding to the iterations of others.

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Appendix A

Questions about Pedagogy

- In what ways might thinking about writing be part of the construction of writing?
- What could the role of student creation explanations be in the practice of writing instruction?
- How can we provide for assignments for students where they set up their own compelling problems to address in writing?
- How can English teachers address the modes of judgment placed on writing in contexts *outside* of the school environment? Even more broadly, I wonder, how do we communicate to students what accomplishment means with writing in a way that gives them a meaningful space to grow in their writing?
- What are other ways in which conferencing and working with students can bring about opportunities for students to phrase rhetorical problems in their own terms?
- This question is related to a deeper question: How can we use improvisational methods of teaching to allow students to construct the terms of what it means to accomplish their rhetorical purposes?
- Is it necessary for there to always be a problem in whatever we may be teaching? How might we be able to disrupt while allowing a student the space to continue in her or his certainty?
- How do we get students to see their own writing in the following way: “They see the affirmative potential in every musical utterance, even errors” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 25)?
- How do we make space for both the broader conventions (whether of genre, of standards, of our own expectations of our students) and for the individual

development and alteration of conventions? Connected to this question is the more simply phrased but no less complex question: when do we disrupt and when do we listen?

- In what ways might our plans limit our perceptions of those understated, yet important, communications that students have about their writing?
- How do we teach writing (or any kind of creative production) in such a way so as to allow students to both learn the conventional values while still developing their own vision for what they value in writing?
- How do we lead them *as they would proceed*, while still facilitating an understanding of what *we believe matters* in writing? In other words, when should we disrupt and when should we listen?
- How do we make all writing as compelling as high-stakes writing?
- Could it be that developing nuanced articulations of our ways of working in any form of creative production is a type of dynamic capability?
- By being critical of the way certain things are unfolding, are we saying no to them? And, in so doing, saying no to the mess? For instance, when Harper was uninspired by Duke's wording in their prompt, was that her version of saying no to the mess? Is Duke's poor or uninspiring wording merely a part of the mess?
- We might be engaged in the act of writing while simultaneously aware of several other factors. Is that awareness an embodiment of not being fully engaged? Or is it part of the whole of writing, and therefore we can be fully engaged, even if considering what the reader might think and being concerned about it along the way?
- How might this inquiry proceed with students who are disengaged from school? Or, possibly, students who are several years younger?

- How and when do we disrupt? Are there times when listening is better than disruption? How do we enable students to view disruption favorably even if the disruption is not provocative? In terms of the “provocative,” we could ask: how do we create a writing classroom that fosters provocative writing experiences? And how can we make such experiences compelling even when the academic stakes are not high? To what extent might students own vision (which they develop through explanation) of what they value in writing fuel a compelling writing experience for them?
- To what extent should we encourage and allow the individual and unique development of students’ own writing processes and understandings? On what grounds should we provide disruption?
- How can we make a place for distinguishing between instructor interpretations of writing and student interpretations? And, how can we do so in ways that allow us to lead students to what we think matters while allowing them to explore what they think matters with writing?