UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ATTEMPTS TO INITIATE AND MAINTAIN WRITING CENTER-FACILITATED WRITING GROUPS: A NARRATIVE AND SELF-REFLEXIVE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ATTEMPTS TO INITIATE AND MAINTAIN WRITING CENTER-FACILITATED WRITING GROUPS: A NARRATIVE AND SELF-REFLEXIVE STUDY

Jessyka Anne Scoppetta

This qualitative, narratively orientated study explores the perceptions of undergraduate students' interpretations of their experiences as they voluntarily attempt to start and maintain writing center-facilitated writing groups. During the spring 2014 semester, undergraduate writing tutors at a small, private, women's, liberal arts university attempted to start four writing groups through the institution's writing center. Only two of the four proposed writing groups formed, and of those two, only one writing group maintained consistent membership and met regularly throughout the semester. Data for this study were collected from February 2014 to May 2014 and consists of 11 interviews, with four individuals, three of whom were the undergraduate writing tutors who founded the writing groups.

Noting the impossibility of generalizing a small, contextualized study like this, the author suggests it may be useful to writing directors to consider writing groups as a viable writing center program for undergraduate students, particularly if viewed as a

vehicle for tutor training and leadership development. Other issues for writing center directors, writing center administrators, and teachers of writing at the college level who are interested in how writing groups function to support writers are discussed as well.

Moreover, this dissertation examines the author's own experiences wrestling with a research study that became vastly different from what she intended because of participation constraints. The author's attempts at self-reflexivity regarding her subjectivities, epistemological contradictions, and other issues raised by her interpretation of her research experience are included as data and discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Origins

College. That was all I wanted. As a middle and high school student, I pined from afar waiting patiently for the day when I would wave good-bye to my loving parents, trading my posh room in our family home for a 10x10 room in a brick and ivy clad building. As an (almost) straight A student, with a long list of athletics, extra-curriculars, and community service on my application, not to mention years of solid emotional, developmental, and financial support from my parents, college was not a question of if, but where. That is not to say I did not realize I was in a very fortunate position: though both my parents held advanced degrees – my father is a doctor with a Harvard education and my mother was a special education teacher before becoming a stay-at-home mom – they were the first in their families to attend college and, my father in particular, had to fight tooth and nail for the opportunities he earned. Nevertheless, I looked at college as the ultimate experience: it was where I would learn, experiment, explore, develop, enrich, find my path. I can now articulate that I had a classical view of the purpose of higher education: of course, it was necessary for employment, but more importantly it was germane to becoming a well-rounded citizen. And I was ready to make the most of what college had to offer me. As a result, I was a model college student: prepared for the rigors

of the academy, confident enough to navigate the unknown, open to new ideas and challenges, comfortable feeling uncomfortable. Already an avid reader, writer, and scholar, unafraid to voice her views, but respectful of the rules of the game, I slid into college life and academics like Cinderella into her glass slipper. I felt at home. As I always knew I would, I fell deeply in love with college.

Of course, I am idealizing my college experience. There were bumps along the way: one or two tearful phone calls home, a failed economics course, an atrocious Shakespeare professor, that semester when my social life caused my g.p.a. to take a massive nosedive, the two weeks I thought about transferring because that is what two of my closest new friends were doing, along with recurring feelings of doubt, wondering if my ideas would be accepted by my professors; but these relatively minor incidents ultimately served to strengthen me. I thrived in academe, and this sense of belonging shaped the rest of my academic and professional choices: graduate school, college teaching, academic research. It also underlies the choices I make now in the courses I teach as a university instructor and programs I run as a university writing center director. I want others to feel the same way about their college experience as I did about mine. I want them to see college as a place to sharpen their thinking, question their worlds, take risks, explore ideas, and, to use a delightfully trite phrase, expand their minds.

But, the truth is, my academic narrative is one of substantial privilege, and many college students are not prepared for academic study the way I was or confident enough to roll with the punches until they are. They do not feel like they belong. Maybe college is a hoop to jump through, a step, towards employment, so they are less likely to engage, to join in. Or maybe the academic culture is so foreign because of differences in factors

such as race and/or socioeconomic status, that they do not know where they fit or even how to participate. Faculty are then frustrated by what they perceive as students' lack of writing and reading skills, undeveloped thinking, poor study habits, and appearance of apathy. So what can be done to address at least some of these issues, especially within the contexts in which I teach and administer?

Scene: Six students are clustered in a corner of the student lounge, just after 7 pm. The Thursday Night Writers Circle begins. One student pulls up a document on her iPad and begins to read. The others comment. They ask questions. They offer feedback. The next student does not have a paper, but she has an upcoming assignment and lots of questions, which she poses to the group. Another student pipes in: she has written a paper for that professor before. They gripe and groan. They relate. They debate. They share resources. They offer their personal stories. They bring their own expertise. After everyone has shared, the group disbands for the evening. They will meet again next week.

At this moment, they are their version of what some would call (or even idealize as) an academic community. They support each other. They challenge each other. They share certain dominant discourses that frame and even construct what they think they *should* be doing in particular courses, for example. They help each other navigate the academy, creating knowledge that they find helpful, as well as necessary, as a group. And week after week, their writing gets better. They feel more confident as scholars. They think about things they had not considered previously. They become more engaged students, negotiating academic identities.

This is a romanticized scenario, crafted with unbridled promise. There are abundant underlying assumptions, such as those about talking and sharing leading to stronger (what is "stronger" anyway?) writing and thinking, about the value and nature of community, the constructing of shared knowledge, the creation of identities, the idea that confidence equates results, and the willingness of undergraduate students to participate in such a group and glean value from it. There is much to critique, some of which is known, and other parts that are unknown or even unknowable. But what if?

Proposed Study Aims

This study's general intent is to better understand, as much as is possible, the perceptions of undergraduate students' interpretations of their experiences as they participate voluntarily in a writing-center facilitated writing group. As well, my dissertation research aims to better understand these students' perceptions of how their participation in a writing group has affected or perhaps not affected their writing. I wanted to enact this study as one specific means of learning more about the possible and perhaps impossible effectiveness of writing groups as a useful and productive writing center activity for undergraduates that, in turn, can further the general mission of writing centers to develop stronger writers. As a writing center director, I am invested deeply in exploring how the writing center can best assist students become stronger writers and thinkers. Therefore, another aspect of my research must involve self-reflexive approaches to analyses of my own investments, assumptions, expectations, hopes and desires and how these affect, influence, and shape my interpretations of all data I collect for this study.

As noted in the conclusion of the forthcoming literature review, other studies of writing groups have often focused on graduate student writing groups, writing groups as a component of a graded course, or groups of professionals who benefited from sharing in a writing group. Largely, these studies tend to present cheerful conclusions – writing groups ARE beneficial – without much detailed examination of what counts as "beneficial" and why. What sets this study apart is four-fold: one, it examines undergraduate students and their interpretations of their experiences and perceptions; two, it explores the writing center as loci for the groups, thereby rendering the groups voluntary and ungraded; three, this study has involved a rigorous examination of students' interpretations of their experiences and perceptions in an effort to offer insights on how writing groups function; and four, this study simultaneously concentrated on my self-reflexive inquiries into my own assumptions and biases that I brought to this study as means of offering in-depth analyses of my interpretations of all study data. Possible insights gleaned through this study may have potential implications not only for writing center work, but also for those who teach college writing, those who administer writing programs, and others interested in writing groups as a form of educational practice at the college level.

Research Questions

I initially framed my dissertation research with the following questions, ones in which I was and remain vitally interested. At the same time, as the study progressed, I had to pay attention to differing emphases, unanticipated events and variations on these initial questions that framed the design of my overall inquiries:

1) What happens when I interview voluntary participants in an undergraduate writing center-facilitated writing group?

1a) Prior to the start of the writing group, what are participants' individually reported expectations for and reasons for participation in the group?

1b) What are their reported experiences as participants in the group in mid-point and end-of-semester interviews?

2) Within the mid-point and end-of-semester interviews, what are participants' perceptions of how their participation in the groups has affected or not affected their writing and writing practices?

3) What are their reported definitions and perceptions of "effectiveness" of participation in writing groups in pre-group, mid-point, and end-of-semester interviews?

4) What might my reviews of my videotaping of a randomly selected sample of writing center -facilitated writing group sessions contribute to my understandings of these participants' interpretations of their writing group experiences?

5) What do my self-reflexive data, gathered over the course of this research study, contribute to my understandings, questionings and problematizings of my own interpretations of all study data?

Research Beginnings

The Long and Winding Road

Often it is hard to pinpoint where an idea begins. I suppose I could argue that I started on the path to my dissertation topic ten years ago when I was given my first composition classroom as part of a graduate assistantship while working on my Masters

in English at the University of Rhode Island. As that eager, but naïve, graduate student, I thought I was on the road towards teaching literature, Victorian literature, to be precise, but my teaching experience during the graduate assistantship I obtained there redirected my priorities. My first day as a graduate student was also my first day as a university instructor. Though I had no prior teaching experience, and had never even taken a college composition course myself (I placed out), I was unceremoniously shoved in front of 25 freshmen and told to teach them how to write. I was confident in my own writing, but apprehensive about my new role: how was I supposed to help them learn to be successful academic writers?

The inevitable missteps, laughable blunders, and occasional triumphs characteristic of a green teacher need not be detailed here, but what is important is that my understandings and interpretations of this experience helped me to discover that I was keenly interested in learning more about how students learn to write: so much so that I abandoned the quest for a Ph.D. in literature, and instead began to seek out prospects that co-mingled writing, teaching, and academia. My search led me to take numerous adjunct positions teaching writing at various institutions of higher education. Eventually, I took a position at a small, private, women's university in its writing center, referred throughout this document under the pseudonym SPWU, which grew into a directorship with teaching responsibilities, meaning that I also currently teach a variety of writing classes for SPWU.

Further, the desire to learn more about how students write and how to teach students to write also led me to the English Education Program within the Department of Arts & Humanities at Teachers College, Columbia University. As all these venues

merged, I began to think seriously about what direction I wanted to commence as a disserting researcher. I knew it would focus on the teaching of college writing, but I was not sure in what form. Further definition finally came while writing my "5504 paper," a required and in-depth qualitative research project within the English Education Program, which ironically helped me to hone not what I wanted to learn more about, but what I did not.

Lessons On Highway 5504

For my "5504 paper," I conducted five hour-long, semi-structured, individual interviews with five composition instructors, a convenience sample among my colleagues at SPWU. My research question was: "What will I learn when I interview five college composition instructors, who are employed or have been employed by SPWU, about their approaches to teaching writing in the college composition classroom?" My expectations for this project were as follows: Through the proposed interviews, I expected to have conversations with my colleagues about how they approached the teaching of college composition. I expected that I would be able to identify commonalities among my interviewees that might offer insight into what composition instructors in general typically find important about such teaching. I expected that what I learned during the interviews would help me to hone my dissertation topic.

Each of my expectations was focused on the content of the interviews themselves. I assumed that those data that I gathered and analyzed would lead me to insights about teaching college composition. Each of these expectations and assumptions was challenged as I worked on the project and reflected upon my experiences. Additionally, I

learned more about the qualitative research process, including many lessons that would shape future methodological choices and hopefully create a stronger sense of awareness of my own biases as well as issues of power differentials among "researcher and researched," for example.

My first expectation was that I assumed I would have conversations with my colleagues about how they approached teaching college composition. In interviewing my colleagues, I did learn about how they approached teaching college composition and what they valued as writing instructors. Through their answers to my questions, I learned about the activities that go on in their classrooms, what they believe is important to teach, the assignments and texts they utilize, and how they perceive they interact with students.

However, in general, I did not have "conversations" with my colleagues, despite my best intentions. I define a conversation as an exchanging of ideas that often produces understandings or knowledge about a subject: in this case, teaching composition. Instead, for the most part, I asked them questions, and then they answered my questions. There was very little impromptu back and forth or discussion of ideas except when I pitched the occasional follow-up question when I did not quite understand the idea he or she was putting forth. Largely, I followed the script, i.e. my interview questions. I attribute this change of format to several factors. To begin, I found that having a conversation during an interview is incredibly hard, especially if you are taking notes during that interview. I learned that if I were to conduct interviews again, I would resolve to use an audiotape or video recorder so I could engage more fully with my subjects, rather than be focused on taking notes. Additionally, to prompt conversation, rather than having a series of prescribed, detailed questions, if I am seeking a conversation in a future research project,

I would consider instead crafting one or two overarching questions to guide the conversation, rather than a list of questions. Within qualitative research interview approaches and designs, I now will consider what are deemed semi-structured or even unstructured interviews.

Another barrier to my conceptions of "conversation" was a perceived conflict I felt between my roles. On one hand, I was a researcher, trying to be as "objective" as possible, gathering data for my research project. On the other hand, I interviewed five people with whom I closely work, some of with whom I socialize outside office walls. In an effort to be a "rigorous, serious researcher," I wanted to follow the interview questions as closely as possible. I did not want to appear to lead my interviewees or somehow skew the results because I asked one person something I did not ask the others or because I agreed with one and not the other. I now know that this was a futile concern: my experiences, relationships, and interpretations will shape everything I do and write. I would never, will never, can never be objective. However, all of these academic understandings even then did not stop me from being concerned about such issues during the interviews.

Moreover, the desire to be rigorous led me to try to take notes on everything, which contributed to the aforementioned lack of conversation because I was furiously scribbling. In addition to recording the contents of the interviews, I also tried to simultaneously report on surroundings, facial expressions, body language, and silences as well as to reflect on my actions during the interviews. I thought notes like these would help me to recreate the experience of the interview, and they certainly provided a record of my own concerns and insights during the interview. However, as the interviews went

on, I found myself making fewer and fewer reflective notes like these, simply because of the practical difficulties I faced in writing down everything I was thinking and hearing. By the time I got to the final interview, my note taking was solely focused on what the participant said. It is also noteworthy to mention that I am close with this participant socially, and I would characterize our interview as the most conversation-like. There were points where I commented on her responses or told her I agreed with her observations and would offer a corresponding example from my own classroom experience. At times, I was engaged in what I considered to be a dialogue with her, in that we were exchanging ideas. But as a result, my note-taking suffered. By the time I transcribed my notes, I was unable to recall the details of our interactions beyond the words I wrote down.

This particular research experience suggested to me that engaging in a "true conversation" would require planning a methodology that allowed for enhanced interaction with participants without sacrificing recording the details of that interaction. Additionally, in the future, I realized that it would be helpful for me to hone the scope of my inquiry through carefully defining the methodology and my expectations of that medium beforehand. Had I thought further about my definition of a conversation vs. an interview, or decided I was only going to focus on certain parts of the interview and elucidate that in my methods, I might not have found myself caught awkwardly in the middle between interview and conversation, scrambling to capture detail and silence, words and thoughts.

My second expectation was that I would be able to identify commonalities among my interviewees that might offer insight into what composition instructors find important.

All of the instructors I interviewed are staff members in the same academic support department; tutor writing across the disciplines, which provides exposure to the variety of writing assignments students encounter in other classes and insight to the areas with which they struggle; evaluate writing portfolios against the faculty approved common writing portfolio rubric, a graduation requirement; and as part of their positions, have teaching responsibilities that include teaching freshman composition. Therefore, I assumed that I would be able to identify some commonalities among the instructors.

Indeed, in retrospect, this was a foolish assumption from the start, given the way composition courses are structured where the participants teach. At SPWU, the basic composition course is a three-credit course required for all first-year students called "The Art of Effective Writing." The course catalog describes the course very broadly as: "Practice in exposition, argumentation, and the methods of research based on the study and discussion of creative, critical, and factual works." There is no training for this course, no professional development, no suggested syllabus, or course structure. Instructors are allowed to conduct the course as they see fit. The course is traditionally taught by members of our department, who usually hold advanced degrees in English, Education, or Rhetoric and Composition, as well as by English department faculty, and a handful of adjuncts. Perhaps it is the open-ended nature of composition courses at our institution that caused me to struggle to identify commonalities among each of the five instructors I interviewed. In fact, the only two commonalities that I could readily identify among all five instructors were that they all promote revision to their students as an essential activity when writing and that they all value critical thinking, itself a broad term with many conceptualizations, as a key component to strong writing.

Rather than finding the commonalities interesting, I was more intrigued by the differences among my colleagues, which were vast. On one hand, the differences were not unanticipated: their answers represented what I already assumed I "knew" about them as people, teachers, professionals and individuals. However, when my interpretation of the data showed such a wide range of values, pedagogies, and practices, it was a little shocking to me. Because of the commonalities we share in our positions in the academic support department in which we work, I assumed our values and practices would be more analogous.

Further, while I saw myself in some of the others' ways of approaching teaching composition, many seemed dissimilar to my beliefs as an instructor, which, in turn, was and is important for me to realize and be mindful of in my role of researcher. For example, there was one instructor with whom I identified closely: we have known each other for many years. Given our similar world views and our friendship, it is not surprising we would also have comparable approaches to teaching composition. However, it is important that I recognize this bias as the researcher.

Analyzing my data for commonalities also highlighted the difficulties of using a convenience sample. As I reviewed the transcripts of the interviews, I found myself filling in gaps or explaining connections based on my relationships or knowledge outside the actual interview data. For instance, two of the instructors discussed how it is important to teach students how to write in a way that will help them succeed with other assignments that they encounter in their majors at the university. I know that both these participants were graduates of the university for which they now teach and therefore, at one point, actually took the writing classes that they now teach. With this information,

their aim to structure their classes and assignments so students learn writing skills that will be useful to them in their other classes seems logical, perhaps because they felt that there was a disconnect between what they learned in their composition classes and what was expected of them as students later on. I connected these dots because of my prior knowledge about these two participants and their backgrounds.

To offer another example, these two participants also stressed during the interview that it was important for there to be commonalities and universal objectives among writing instructors at the same institution. Again, this desire might stem from their experiences as undergraduates. Or it could be a product of a conversation the three of us had prior to the interviews, where the three of us concurred that, while we like the academic freedom of teaching whatever we want, we believed that it would be beneficial for students if there were common objectives. We also lamented that there were no professional development opportunities for composition instructors, and agreed that we would like to participate in activities that stimulate discussion among those who teach composition. These examples demonstrate how it was difficult to separate prior knowledge from data gleaned from the interviews, and this is something I need to be attentive of whenever using a convenience sample.

Moreover, I realized that, for my dissertation research, I needed to consider what it was like for my interviewees to be interviewed by someone they know and to be aware of the biases they (and of course, I) may bring to the interview because of this arrangement. I realized that I needed to become crucially aware of how my participants perceived me and how that might affect their responses or behaviors. I also had to be attentive to the fact that I already had developed assumptions, biases, and perceptions of

each of them prior to my research. For example, power differentials certainly must have been a factor – no matter what, I also serve as the administrator of the writing center. At the time I was interviewing, most of the participants and I were colleagues "on the same level." However, I was one participant's direct supervisor in department, in that she reported to me in her role as a part-time professional writing tutor for the writing center. Though I do not evaluate her in her role as a writing instructor, I still do evaluate her on a related level. Therefore, her responses during our interview may be consciously or unconsciously shaped by this relationship and my interpretations of her responses are colored as well.

Furthermore, because the personal and professional relationships I maintain with each of my participants, it was clear that each wanted to assist me with this project. Often they would end their replies to my questions with queries like, "Was that what you were looking for?" or "If you need me to say anything else…." I tried to assure my colleagues at the beginning of the interviews, during the signing of informed consent forms, and throughout the interviews that I was not seeking specific answers, if they responded as described above. But, in retrospect, I had to consider that some of them may have, deliberately or involuntarily, chosen responses that they thought I wanted to hear or that they thought would be valuable for my project. Reflecting on using a convenience sample made me more aware of the challenges associated when participants in a research project are people whom you know. I would not necessarily shy away from recruiting a convenience sample in future studies, but this research choice certainly adds another layer of contemplation when assessing results, intentions, and methodology.

Thirdly, I expected that the data I gathered and analyzed would lead me to insights about teaching college composition. In reality, I only interviewed five people, all of whom teach or have taught at the same college. With such a small, homogenous sample, I cannot claim that I gleaned insight to teaching composition in ways that are meaningfully generalizable, an urge I need to acknowledge here, even though I have studied qualitative research parameters and theoretical commitments that posit generalization as an inappropriate goal for this paradigm of inquiry. This should not have been a new revelation as it was structured to be a very small study, but it somehow still was. I think I was expecting to have an "a-ha" moment about composition after interviewing my colleagues, something meaty that I could latch onto and run with in a future research project. Instead, by the time I started to write, the content of the interviews was no longer my primary focus. Instead, the interviews provided an opportunity for me to explore my own decisions as a first time researcher and reflect on methodological choices and challenges. In the end, I was not even interested in my own research question anymore!

Finally, I expected that what I learned during the interviews would help me to hone my dissertation topic. I think of myself as an efficient person and, given that I work full time and am attempting to complete a doctoral degree, I wanted to ensure I was maximizing opportunities in my studies. Therefore, I looked at the "5504 paper" as a way to get started on my dissertation. I was hoping that the research I performed for this course and program requirement could be incorporated into my dissertation. While it certainly qualified as a sort of pilot study, it did not totally serve this function. At the same time, the 5504 experience was still immensely helpful in preparing for the dissertation process as it helped to shape the methodology laid out later in this

dissertation. Furthermore, it made me realize that I needed to go deeper into qualitative methodological literature to scrutinize issues regarding the crisis in representation in research, power dynamics between the researcher and researcher, how to wrestle with researching what may be unknowable, and complexities when examining experience as a research subject. Lastly, then, this pilot project did lead me to a major conclusion that served as the foundation of this dissertation topic and inquiries.

Learning about how instructors approach the teaching of writing made me very curious about how students respond to these methods devised by their instructors. Each instructor believed that he or she was helping students to develop their writing, or to understand the expectations of academia, or to build confidence, or to critically read texts. But, I wonder, are students actually *doing* these things? For example, when one participant asks her students to call her by her first name, uses humor, and acts casually in class, do her actions actually help remove her students' stress and fears? Do they feel comfortable making mistakes, as she hopes? Are they even stressed or fearful, as she perceives? Teacher intentions and perceptions are important, but they can be rendered meaningless unless students "are" what and whom instructors perceive them to be and respond in ways that are in line with the instructor's expectations. Therefore, I began to become interested in examining students' experiences in the writing classroom.

Merging Lanes

As I was finishing writing my "5504 paper," a number of other experiences converged to shape and narrow my path. First, in the fall of 2011 I took a Historical Methods class. For my semester long research project, I examined historical texts and

archival information that detailed the experiences of women in college writing courses within American colleges in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, one book, Katherine Adams's (2001) *A Group of Their Own: College Writing Courses and American Women Writers, 1880-1940,* piqued my interest with its discussion of writing circles. Adams examines the first generation of women undergraduates who went to college and graduated with aspirations of becoming professional writers. Specifically, Adams looks at the educational opportunities afforded to women for the first time in the U.S., and celebrates how some women parlayed their experiences writing in college into writing careers. In her book, Adams argues that the different types of experiences women encountered in college writing courses and during other collegiate writing activities, such as participation in writing circles, were instrumental in creating a community of women writers.

About the same time I was reading Adams's book, I was asked by the Social Work Department at SPWU to review and possibly reinstitute a one-credit course called Social Work Circle (SOCW 208), which has historically been offered through the writing center. The course catalog description is vague:

> *Social Work majors gain supplemental instruction and academic support as they prepare assignments, explore the writing process, and strengthen writing skills. Based on individualized learning plans, students enroll on a Pass/Fail basis for 1 per semester for a maximum of 3 credits during the student's college career. Ordinarily 1 hour per week of individual or small group tutorials for each credit earned.*

In the past, this course had been used to enroll struggling writers in supplemental writing tutoring through the writing center, which does not seem much like a writing circle to me, specifically because it carries credit and students receive a grade from an instructor.

However, the course description did get me thinking further about writing circles and opportunities to build a writing circle through the writing center.

Finally, a conversation with a student brought these perhaps initially divergent avenues together for me. Because of partnerships with community colleges and a commitment to expand the Program for Adult Learners, the Social Work department has doubled in the past year. Many of the students they accept, especially those in the Program for Adult Learners, are first generation college students who often struggle with their writing and frequent the writing center. During tutoring appointments, students will often express their frustration with writing. While meeting with one particular student, she informed me of a group of Program for Adult Learners who meet to support each other with issues they face as adult students with families, jobs, and outside lives, trying to make college work. She reported that the group meetings were incredibly helpful as they were spaces in which they could freely discuss issues and help each other find solutions. She said sometimes they talked about writing, but they covered a lot of other topics as well. One of the points I took away from this conversation was that there could be potential student interest for a group to discuss writing, potential among students who are developing writers and relatively new to academic discourse.

Exit Ahead: Writing Groups

These three experiences led me to ask myself the following questions: would a writing circle be helpful for college writers? Could a writing circle create a platform for discussions about writing, as well as a place to further develop confidence in writing and writing skills by talking about and sharing writing? Would talking and writing about their

struggles help them to become “better” writers? What could I learn from these students that would help me as an educator? What can I learn from these students that I might share with my colleagues who also struggle with how to assist students with their writing? These broad questions launched my inquiries into available literature on the subject of writing circles.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Groups

The difficulty in reviewing how writing circles have been used at American colleges and universities in writing courses and writing centers is that very little literature surfaces in an initial search for the phrase "writing circles." But, when one broadens the search to "writing groups" or "peer review groups," the body of literature expands immensely. However, complexity remains as each new search uncovers other monikers, each carrying its own slightly different definition. To shed light on this dilemma, Gere (1987) explains how writing groups are referred to by many names: writing circles, response groups, peer tutoring, peer review, the socialized method, and collaborative writing, just to name a few. The composition and goals of the groups can be as disparate as the names. For instance, Elbow (1973), who was influential in popularizing writing groups in the 1970s, refers to writing groups as the teacherless writing class and outlines the following guidelines: 1. It is comprised of 7-12 people; 2. The group meets at least once a week; 3. Every member reads the other members' writing; 4. Members offer their experience when reading each other's writing. The goal is for writers to come closer to understanding how others experience their writing (Elbow, 1973, p.77). Elbow has continued to promote peer writing groups as opportunities for collaboration in subsequent publications such as 1989's *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing* (Elbow & Belanoff).

Nevertheless, writing groups can be governed by a variety of guidelines, depending on the group and its aims. Some groups are voluntary, some involuntary. Some are large, some are small. Some groups exchange feedback orally, some written. Some are instructor driven, others student driven. Each group must negotiate its own identity and establish its own set of guidelines (Highberg, Moss, & Nicolas, 2004). To simplify, though, Pointek (2004) clarifies that most writing groups function as follows: a writer is working on a composition that she shares with the group and the group then responds to her writing. For the purposes of this literature review and for this dissertation research, writ large, the term "writing group" will be used and defined as a group of individuals who meet to share and discuss writing.

The aim of this literature review is to situate my research in a larger body of knowledge of writing groups and provide context by highlighting histories, common (as well as uncommon and perhaps even disparate) theories and practices, influential individuals and texts, and assumptions and understandings of writing groups. Gere's (1987) comprehensive text *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* offers a useful foundation, while other historical texts and case studies from various composition or writing center related publications present examples of the variety of ways colleges and universities use writing groups. It should be noted that these case studies are not necessarily exhaustive, but meant to represent a sampling instead.

A Brief, Broad History of the Origins of Composition in American Higher Education

Modern composition, or the teaching of writing, grew out of rhetorical study, an age-old discipline (Berlin, 1984) with its roots in ancient Greece. Crowley (1998) argues

that composition is actually one of the oldest courses taught at American institutions of higher education. Early institutions of higher education considered the teaching of writing, or rhetoric as it was called, to be the responsibility of all educators because improving students' speaking and composing skills was of the utmost importance in molding a literate, well-educated individual (Crowley, 1998). However, as the purposes and functions of writing and writing instruction shifted along with the changing landscape of American higher education, composition, or the teaching of writing, as a specialized, individual discipline would not be realized until much later.

The first institutions of higher education in the United States took the form of the colonial college. To understand the colonial college, it is necessary to examine its purposes and its population. Because access to higher education in pre-Civil War America was limited to a very select few, college students were mostly wealthy, white males who were being groomed for religious or public service. Lucas (2006) maintains the colonial college was rooted in religion, and thus, one of these institutions' principal aims was to educate the ministry, thereby spreading the teachings of God. The second main function of the colonial college was to prepare men for civic duty. The colonial college was designed to create leaders, whether guiding the masses in matters of church or state. Curricula were highly theoretical, steeped in classical teachings designed to mold ideal civic and religious leaders who could be considered both gentlemen and learned scholars. Students typically studied Greek, Hebrew, logic and rhetoric, philosophy, mathematics, and Aristotelian metaphysics. Students were taught through recitations, in which students memorized and repeated information given to them; knowledge was not questioned (Lucas, 2006).

Lucas (2006) argues that around 1870, post-Civil War, institutions of higher education experienced a shift, and the purposes of higher education began to change, as did the institutions themselves. Several factors contributed to this change. First, growing secularism led to decreased emphasis on religion, thereby effectively moderating one of the original purposes of higher education: creating a literate ministry. Second, mounting industrialization and urbanization created the need for more institutions of higher education that covered a greater variety of subjects. Further, the U.S. government passed the Morrill Act, designating land and funding to institutions of higher education that offered more technical educations aimed at producing an effective workforce, as opposed to the classic education offered by colonial colleges. One final reason for the changes in the purposes of higher education in America by 1870 was the influence of European educational models, in particular, German universities. Many college and university presidents, such as Charles Eliot of Harvard, had studied in Germany and brought back the ideas of graduate seminars, specialized disciplines, and the creation of knowledge through free inquiry. The ideas imported from Europe launched the rise of the university in the United States. Advanced graduate study and research was becoming part of the landscape of higher education. These research universities encouraged using the scientific method to create knowledge, rather than relying on the institution to convey one truth to its constituents, as was the method of the colonial college (Lucas, 2006).

Inspired by this European model of education, after 1870, the research university was on the rise in the United States, as the colonial college, with its outdated purposes, faded into the background. All the changes lead to fresh purposes for higher education: to conduct research, create new knowledge, and offer students advanced study in

specialized, modern, and technical disciplines. Additionally, higher education opportunities were now available, on a very limited basis, to more diverse populations including Black Americans and women (Lucas, 2006; Rueben, 1996).

These changes in American higher education in the period after the Civil War also transformed how composition, still called rhetoric at this point, was taught in these institutions (Berlin, 1984). Brereton (1995) outlines four important events that led to the founding of modern composition, which focused on the teaching of writing by way of mechanical correctness and written skill development. First, was the adaptation of the European/German model of teaching. As outlined previously, this model of education privileged the creation of knowledge through inquiry, rather than the method of instruction favored by the colonial colleges, recitation. As Connors (1997) notes, as recitations fell out of favor, methods of instruction expanded to include labs, lectures, and seminars. As a result of changes in format, many classes became larger and the types of assignments to assess learning changed. Professors found themselves with large classes where individual attention was difficult and papers piled high. Therefore, students were often asked to write assignments that could easily be scanned for obvious flaws. This created a new emphasis on correctness (Connors, 1997).

A second event outlined by Brereton (1995) was the expansion of knowledge in the sciences, which served to align college studies with the tenants of the scientific method and also placed emphasis on specialization and utilitarianism, rending a classic, overarching class like rhetoric obsolete. As Berlin (1984) purports, in adapting rhetoric to the scientific method, much of writing instruction, formerly a relatively unquantifiable

processes based on the Aristotelian tenants of invention, arrangement, style, and argument, was reduced to strictly writing skill development.

Third, Brereton (1995) cited the increase in college enrollments as a catalyst: with a more diverse group of college enrollees, with varying levels of writing skills, new methods of teaching had to be adapted to specifically address problems with the skill level of incoming college students. For example, Berlin (1984) references a report out of Harvard in 1895 and 1897 that described perceived written skill deficiencies in their freshman class.

Finally, Brereton (1995) argues that educational reformist Charles Eliot, President of Harvard and staunch supporter of the European model of education, exerted tremendous influence in the way writing was taught. In particular, Eliot championed the elective system, offering students a choice in their own studies for the first time, which promoted specialization. However, with these choices came some universal requirements, including the implementation of freshman composition at Harvard. Referred to as "English A," the two-semester course required students to write a series of daily themes. The course was a reaction to the Harvard reports of 1895 and 1897, designed to bridge a perceived gap between preparatory school and college. Eliot's influence was extensive and by 1900, freshman composition was a staple at most American institutions of higher education, with a variety of other composition classes offered as well (Brereton, 1995).

At the turn of the 20th century, the teaching of writing at the college level, bolstered by changes in higher education post-Civil War, focused on correctness and mechanics. This skills-based approach, commonly referred to by composition scholars as current-traditional rhetoric, dominated most composition classrooms until the 1960s.

Connors (1997) clarifies that this focus on formal structure and mechanical correctness was practiced as teaching by correcting. Teachers of writing relied on corrections made on daily themes, lectures disseminating information about the correct way to write, and textbooks that did the same, as their tools of instruction. In this skill and drill way of teaching, the focus was purely on the student's product, rather than her processes.

It should be noted that not all writing instructors subscribed to current-traditional methods of teaching. Turn-of-the-century professors such as Fred Newton Scott and Gertrude Buck published documents promoting activities such as peer review and group conferencing. These pedagogical approaches would later be thought of as socially constructed, process-oriented strategies (Connors, 1997). Scott and Buck believed that correctness was important, but not the most important part of writing. Both argued that good grammar did not equate good writing. Writing was a rhetorical act by which truth could be discovered. In fact, Buck advocated against standards of grammar, framing them as elitist (Allen, 1986).

Despite outliers like Buck and Scott, current-traditional methods of teaching kept the field of composition static for close to a century. However, changes in thinking, as well as additional population changes in higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, broke current-traditional rhetoric's hold on composition classrooms, creating a space for more diverse and critical methods of instruction. In terms of higher education, Lucas (2006) maintains that 1947-1970 marked a period of rapid growth, fueled by the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill, which increased access to higher education for servicemen returning from the war. Other factors that strengthened higher education enrollment included the post-war population boom and

augmented funding for colleges and universities from industry and government because of the Cold War (Lucas, 2006). The climate in the U.S. was such that education was thought of as an increasingly powerful tool if we were going to beat the Russians. Harris (2012) also notes that in the 1960s and 1970s, policies of higher education such as open admissions, the increasing number of community colleges, and augmented financial resources, provided opportunities for even more diverse and non-traditional populations including adults, English Language Learners, students from working-class families, and people of various races, who previously were denied access to higher education. With myriad new students, with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, a call was issued for fresh approaches to teaching writing.

Key Influences and Voices in Composition

The current-traditional model was finally substantially challenged by emerging pedagogical and philosophical movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many scholars of composition nostalgically place the apex of this change at what has come to be known as "the Dartmouth Conference." In the summer of 1966, regarded by most composition scholars to be a turning point in English, Language, and Composition studies (Parker; 1979; Hairston, 1982; Berlin, 1987; Mayher, 1990; Brereton, 1995; Connors, 1997; Crowley, 1998), 50 American and British teachers attended a three week seminar on the teaching and learning of English, organized by the Modern Language Association, the National Council for Teachers of English, and the British National Association of Teachers of English. The goal of the conference was to define English as a subject and outline the best practices for teaching English. At the conference, Blau (2012) explains that the British instructors argued for a student-centered approach to teaching that

focused on experience and growth, a model that John Dixon expounded on in his 1967 published report on the conference called *Growth through English*. Mayher (1990), citing Dixon's report, explicates that this personal growth model advocates fostering students' capabilities to make meaning through their experiences, which are mediated by language. In this sense, meaning is created by students through the discovery process, rather than through grammar drills and repetitive exercises. However, although Mayher (1990) also clarifies that the growth model had a profound effect on him, and perhaps other graduate students, and may have had some impact on teaching practices in the United States, the Dartmouth conference did not revolutionize American education. Harris (2012) echoes this sentiment when he characterizes Dixon's report as "eloquent, influential, and highly skewed" because of the idealized picture it paints regarding Dartmouth's influence in English Education. The following excerpt from Harris (2012) details how Dartmouth is often remembered:

> The participants at Dartmouth proved in fact unable to agree on much in theory or practice, but this lack of consensus did not limit their impact on the work of many teachers then and since – for whom Dartmouth has symbolized a kind of Copernican shift from a view of English as something you *learn about* to a sense of it as something you *do.* After Dartmouth, that is, you could think about English as not simply a patchwork of literary texts, figures, and periods (*The Fairie Queen*, Swinburne, the eighteenth century) but as the study of how language in all its forms is put into use – from gossip to tragedies to advertising to the writings of schoolchildren. An old model of teaching centered on the transmission of skills (composition) and knowledge (literature) gave way to the growth model focusing on the experiences of students and how those are shaped by their uses of language (p. 1).

Harris instead argues that recommendations stemming from Dartmouth were vague and did very little to sway American educators to revise teaching practices to favor the growth model.

Instead, Harris (2012), Blau (2012), and Mayher (1990) all argue - Blau and Harris with the most detail - that the ideas at Dartmouth did help to shape the growth model's most influential advocate, James Moffett, who championed the model in his 1968 *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Moffett was one of three American K-12 teachers in attendance at Dartmouth (Blau, 2012), and Harris (2012) reports that Moffett has discussed how he was unacquainted with the British growth theorists until Dartmouth. As composition began to emerge as a distinct field of study, Moffett became the theorist to cite (Blau, 2012). Moffett's theories helped to shape the process movement, wherein composition classrooms privilege discussion and academic communities are organized to discuss readings, share writing, and encourage collaboration during research and drafting. Blau (2012) also argues that one can see Moffett's influence in learning community projects such as the National Writing Project.

Another major influence on the field of composition was Janet Emig, whose 1971 study on the composing processes of twelfth graders is often credited as a seminal voice in the process movement, a way of thinking about writing that focuses on a writer's processes. Emig's research observed how writers produce texts; her methods of data collection involved standard qualitative, ethnographically oriented processes of observing others as they completed various writing tasks and asking them questions about their composing processes so they were vocalizing their thoughts about their writing as they were writing. Through this methodology, she was able to produce evidence about writer's internal composing processes. As Harris (2012) notes, not very many scholars were interested in the composing processes of writers before Emig, but after Emig is a different story. Emig's composing aloud method drew immediate attention from the

composition community for its practical uses and flexibility as a methodological tool. Her research also challenged the idea that a writer first knows what she wants to say and then writes it. As Harris argues, (2012) this attention to writers' processes helped aligned well with the growth model's emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of students.

Another powerful voice, and perhaps one of the most quoted scholars in the process movement, was Donald Murray. In a 1972 article, he famously advocates for teaching writing as a process, outlining three overlapping stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting, in which the student must be free to explore her own processes. This student-centered approach views all writing as experimental and unfinished, arguing that when it does come time to submit a piece of writing to an audience, that mechanics should be the last step in that process (Murray, 1972). Likewise, Mina Shaughnessy's 1977 study of "basic writers" helped her conclude that instructors cannot teach students to write by correcting. Students need to be taught the "why" along with the "how." She argued that instructors need to evaluate a student's process, not the product (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Under the process pedagogy umbrella, different veins of thinking were vocalized and researched. Expressivists, or writing process theorists, like Murray and Elbow, investigated student voice and proposed teaching techniques that examined the writer's individual process through journaling and other ungraded, low-stakes writing, such as Elbow's freewriting exercises (a term coined by Macrorie) (Elbow, 1973) and Murray's version of the writing-to-learn approach, which involves a series of writing tasks designed to develop writers' abilities to discover what they know and share those understandings with others (Murray, 1998).

The origins of the writing-to-learn movement is credited to Emig (1977) and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975). Emig (1977) argued that writing is a unique way of learning. Britton et al. (1975) defined three functions of writing: expressive, which is thinking on paper to find out what a writer knows and what she must still learn; transactional, the kind of writing that addresses an audience, holds a writer accountable, and accomplishes a task; and poetic, which is creative writing. Expressivist writing represented the writing-to-learn philosophy. Cognitivists, such as Flower and Hayes (1980), examined the composing process, building upon Emig's "think aloud" protocol from her 1971 study, by asking writers to record their thought processes as they composed their writings out loud. Studies like this suggested that instructors should pay attention to invention and teach strategies to help writers in the pre-writing stages (Kennedy, 1998).

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, composition moved beyond theorizing individual writers' processes, and, drawing from cultural studies, began to explore the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they write and how those contexts shape what and how they write. Social constructivists, like Berthoff (1980) and Bruffee (1984) argued that writing happens in a social context and therefore students need to think about the larger socio-cultures in which they are writing and how these frame and affect how and what they feel they can write. Dialogues, taking place within particular social and cultural contexts and discourses frame and appear to create meaning, and these meanings are constantly shifting (Berthoff, 1980). Bartholomae (1985) was a great influence in ushering in what is known as "the social turn" in composition studies with his essay "Inventing the University," which argues that writing is social, context-specific, and

situational. Scholars like Bizzell (1993) used the ideas of theorists like Stanley Fish to discuss how language, in the forms of dominant discourses that frame, to greater or lesser extents, how and what one can even think about self and other, for example, creates meaning. She argued that writing is always for some purpose that can only be understood in the community and discourses in which it was created. She urged instructors to look at composition classrooms as places that are politicized, and socially and culturally situated, and name them as such, even if this work is uncomfortable (Bizzell, 1993). As Trimbur (1994) writes, the "social turn" represented post-process, post-cognitive theories that embody composing as cultural activities where writers are constantly (re)positioning themselves in relation to others and to dominant discourses that, in turn, affect how and what writers think and write. Trimbur (1994) further argues that process theory was conceptually inadequate because it failed to address the instructor's authority and favored student authority and internal processes, which was made problematic by social constructivists who argue that writing is a political event, dependent on social and discourse communities and dialogue with others as well as always circulating power relations that affect how and what individuals think they can say in dialogue with others.

Trimbur's definition of the social turn in composition as post-process and post-cognitive can be misleading, as the wording seems to suggest that composition scholars dropped their interest in process and cognition. Instead, research like that of Glynda Hull (1989), and others whom she cites, demonstrate how writing can be framed as "a complex cognitive process embedded in social context" (p. 105). Hull summarizes that writing research in the 1970s and 1980s helped scholars to view writing as a complex cognitive process, advocating for pedagogy that offer students opportunities to both

discuss the process and experience it. The next foundational step in thinking about writing comes from seeing writing as a process that is bound by context:

> Our new understanding of writing is found outside individuals and individual cognitive acts, situated within a broader context of institution, community, and society. And this new understanding carries with it different notions of how writing is acquired and by whom and…different notions of how to carry out research on literacy acquisition" (Hull, 1989, p. 109).

Another significant area of composition studies that pinpoints how writing fits into a social structure is genre theory. Genre, as a rhetorical study of writers with implications for the field of composition, is often traced to Miller's (1984) "Genre as Social Action" and much of North American genre scholarship has been built upon her definition of genre (Devitt, 2004). Miller (1984) defines genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (p. 159), suggesting that understanding genre requires understanding a rhetorical situation's social context. In this sense, genres are not fixed forms, but are mutable: they grow out of social necessity and experience, and change over time. As Devitt (2004) explicates: "A genre constructs and is constructed by cultural values, beliefs, and norms as well as by material culture (p. 29) and that "genre is based on what people already know and do" (p. 32). Writing instructors who approach genre as representative of dominant social and rhetorical actions help students to understand the audiences, purposes, contexts, and roles that they take on as writers when they chose a genre and likewise how the genre will reciprocally construct their writing actions.

Early History of Writing Groups in Higher Education

Gere (1987) argues that because of the variety of names and constructions, even though myriad books and articles detail some aspect of having writers meet together and respond to writing, publications on writing groups are scattered and the result is that

writing groups are often seen as a new phenomenon in composition pedagogy. Instead, she maintains that writing groups are both old and new. While a resurgence of writing groups occurred in composition with shifts in focus to process pedagogy in the 1970s, writing groups were also present in early institutions of higher education. Gere's text details a rich history of groups throughout higher education institutions in the U.S., as early as 1719 (Harvard's literary club, The Spy Club), that met to advance writing, speaking, and reading skills. Many early groups were formed voluntarily by likeminded individuals meeting together on college campuses seeking feedback on their writing. Eventually, these groups found their way into the classroom. For instance, in 1897 at Iowa University, a creative writing class called Verse-Making utilized the peer response model (also called the workshop model) used in auxiliary literary societies and writing clubs as the foundation of the course. Additionally, at the turn of the 20th century, it is documented that University of Michigan composition professor Fred Newton Scott often asked his students to read their work out loud in groups for critique (Gere, 1987).

In her book examining the first generation of women undergraduates who went to college (1880-1940), Adams (2001) supports Gere's findings and confirms that writing groups were utilized at early institutions of higher education, including women's colleges. Adams argues that the different types of experiences women encountered in college writing courses and during other collegiate writing activities created a community of women writers whose successes helped carve a space for professional women writers. Adams begins and ends her book with what she considers to be a well-known image of woman as an isolated outsider, fostered by writings like Virginia Woolf's 1929 *A Room of One's Own.* In her text, Adams seeks to offer an alternative to that image: women who

were encouraged by their college educations and the relationships formed in college writing classrooms and writing circles to feel as though they were part of a community of female writers. Adams's examination of archival information confirms that writing circles for women did exist; however, what is lacking are specific details regarding the writing groups such as their construction, pedagogical underpinnings, methodologies, and operations. Instead, the groups are discussed broadly as tools of empowerment and encouragement for women writers at institutions of higher education

Post-1970s Writing Groups in Higher Education

As noted previously, prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s, much of composition pedagogy was based on a current-traditional model, which focused on skills-based writing, with their emphases on correctness and mechanics (Berlin, 1984; Brereton, 1995; Myers, 1996; Connors, 1997; Crowley, 1998). In the years after Dartmouth, composition scholars began to operate under the idea that writing happens in social and cultural contexts and therefore students need to consider those larger (and often differing) contexts when they are writing. They also should consider the influences of audience, and how writing can only be understood within the community it was created (Berthoff, 1980; Bruffee, 1984; Bartholomae, 1985). Two years after the Dartmouth conference, three books were published promoting writing groups: Macrorie's (1968) *Writing to Be Read,* Moffett's (1968) *Teaching the Universe of Discourse,* and Murray's (1968) *A Writer Teaches Writing.* Only Macrorie's text was written specifically for college composition instructors, but all three were significant for composition instruction at any level (Gere, 1987). Other influential texts that included the use of writing groups in and outside the classroom would follow.

For example, Elbow's (1973) *Writing Without Teachers* is what Howard (2001) refers to as a flagship text for collaborative group work in the writing classroom. Elbow advocates for pedagogical strategies for teaching writing in small groups that need not be directed by teachers. Elbow (1973) sets up his text so that it can be useful to groups of writers who are not enrolled in a composition course and, therefore, is teacherless; but Elbow's model also conceptualizes a writing process strategy for teachers and students of the university who are willing to try something different. He stresses that teachers can use writing groups in a classroom setting as long as they are willing to follow the procedures he outlines – the teacher must be willing to participate as a member of the writing group and not simply as a facilitator (Elbow, 1973).

Elbow (1973) argues that the philosophy behind the teacherless writing class is for writers to recognize that writing is both an isolated and social activity. Writers must get their thoughts on paper, but they must also recognize that often the purpose of putting their thoughts on paper is to reach an audience. Writers must know how others perceive their writing to improve. Elbow maintains: "Writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else's head. If you wish to improve your writing you must also learn to do more business with other people. That is the goal of the teacherless writing class" (p. 76).

Likewise, Bruffee (1984) argues in his essay on peer tutoring as collaborative learning, "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind," that working in groups allows students to improve their writing processes as they engage in the social aspects of writing. In this sense, they supposedly are able to better negotiate academic conversations and construct meaning together in their groups (Bruffee, 1984). Bruffee's is a landmark

essay for writing center theory and practice, but also is influential in promoting writing groups.

While writing groups may have been invigorated by the growth movement in composition, scholarship by Gere (1987), Adams (2001), and others demonstrate that they are by no means a modern pedagogical strategy or curriculum design mechanism. What is important to remember is that in all their iterations, past and present, writing groups function to reduce the distance between the writer and the reader, thereby highlighting the importance of audience and the generative nature of collaboration.

Composition classrooms. In college composition classrooms, writing groups are most commonly manifested as peer response groups (Highberg et al., 2004) where students are placed in groups and prompted to share writing assignments with each other and offer feedback that is meant to be used by writers during the revision process. The ideal peer review groups are summarized by Sullivan (1993) as: "Students help students, everybody participates, the writing process is illuminated, products improve dramatically and the community thrives" (p. 58). While the ideal is not always attainable, peer response groups are a staple in many composition classes and promoted as an essential tool for teaching the writing process in composition texts (for example, see Elbow and Belanoff's *A Community of Writers*; Ramage, Bean, and Johnson's *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing;* and Trimbur's *The Call to Write*).

Piontek (2004) details his experience employing writing groups in a first-year composition class. He organized his students into writing groups for the first half of the semester in which they wrote individually and shared their writings with their groups for

feedback; for the second half of the semester, the same groups collaborated to produce one common text. Piontek provided group critique sheets to help facilitate feedback in the groups, a common pedagogical strategy educators use when introducing the peer review process to students to offer guidance, but one that inserts the instructor into the group rather than offering the group members a chance to direct feedback. While he notes that some students resisted the peer review process, Piontek generally reports what he assesses to be positive results: writers who paid close attention to feedback and made revisions produced more sophisticated arguments, a perceived increase in self-confidence regarding critical thinking amongst his students, and greater attention to the importance of textual evidence when crafting a strong argument. For example, one student's feedback indicated that she had become a better reader and stronger critic during the group experience, which in turn helped her with her own writing (Piontek, 2004). These are benefits that are commonly attributed to the peer review process.

While Piontek's article suggests his use of peer review writing groups was generally successful, he ultimately advocates for writing groups to collaborate to produce one text. He believes the messiness of the collaborative writing that occurred in the second half of his class was a more constructive learning experience for his students, prompting him to call upon educators to consider innovative ways to use writing groups, expanding beyond traditional peer response groups. Hessler and Taggart (2004) answer this call as they demonstrate how writing groups offer the opportunity to collaborate with others in unique ways. Their article details how they paired a college composition class with a third grade elementary school class for a community service writing project. Groups from each class exchanged letters, pictures, and stories in an effort to create

community and glean different perspectives on school, audience, and writing. For example, for one assignment, the college students wrote memoirs about their childhood experiences and asked the elementary students for help in crafting their stories: the elementary students helped the college students to remember what was important to them when they were younger and helped to sharpen the telling of their experiences through younger eyes. In turn, the college students helped the elementary students with a project where they had to develop their own theme park by posing critical questions in letters that helped the third graders to concretize their imagined places. As Hessler and Taggart explain, community service writing groups are different from traditional writing groups because they expand the group to include members that may not see themselves as peers. This shift enables opportunities for what Hessler and Taggart call critical consciousness, intercultural exchange and action, and social change as disparate groups come together through writing and learn from each other's expertise.

Non-composition classrooms. Writing groups need not be limited to the composition classroom and some researchers have found them to be beneficial in other disciplines of study. For instance, Fassinger, Gilliland, and Johnson (1992) are respective sociology, history, and anthropology professors with self-described feminist epistemologies who formed a writing circle to discuss writing, hone their writing skills, and develop submissions for publication. These experiences led them to note an irony in writing: academic writers seek to communicate ideas to an audience, but often do not seek feedback from others until the final stages of development, if at all. They believe writing circles are one way to correct this, and also function to build community among writers and provide an incentive to write, even a small amount, because of the

responsibility he or she feels as a member of the writing circle. Fassinger et al.'s self-identified feminist philosophies led them to approach the formation of this writing circle with goals of process-orientated production, cooperative and non-hierarchical relationships, and opportunities to empower each other even though critiquing an individual's writing and thereby exposing one's insecurities can be unsettling. In general, Fassinger et al. believe that their experiences in their writing circle helped them not only with their writing, but also with their perceived abilities to be more empathetic to their students who were writing for their classes.

Her experience in her faculty writing circle also encouraged Fassinger to employ a writing circle as pedagogy in her classroom by orchestrating four-person writing groups that met once a week for 10 weeks to share and discuss writing assignments in her class (Fassinger et al., 1992). Fassinger noted a perceived increase in self-confidence among her students, and several students reported in written reflections that the writing circles helped them to better understand course material, including critical arguments, because of discussions that occurred in the writing circles. While Fassinger was generally enthusiastic about the outcomes of the writing circles, she was disappointed that students did not seem to engage in the revision process as much as she expected. Subsequent student drafts revealed little changes or lower-order changes (grammar, sentence structure) rather than changes to organization or logic. Some students reported in written reflections that the lower order changes were easy to make, but questioned whether or not to make more substantial revisions based on their peers' recommendations because they were peers and not the instructor. Overall, though, Fassinger et al. support the use of writing circles for faculty and students of all disciplines and offer their experiences as

evidence that writing circles can enrich not only writing skills, but professional relationships and pedagogical practices as well.

Writing centers. Group tutoring itself is often considered a form of a writing group, under a broad definition. However, for this literature review, I also sought instances of writing groups beyond the standard group tutorial. A 2012 study by Jackson and McKinney researched the kinds of work writing centers engage in beyond tutoring activities. Of the 141 responses they received from college and university, community college, and high school writing centers, 14 (10%) reported holding dissertation or thesis writing groups, 11 (8%) reported facilitating faculty writing groups, and 19 (13.5%) reported being involved with some type of "other" non-specified writing group (Jackson & McKinney, 2012). While their study did not go into any details about these various writing groups, Jackson and McKinney reveal that a small percentage of writing centers do utilize writing groups. The following scholarship features two possibilities for how writing centers may use writing groups to further writing center work.

Anderson and Murphy (2004) write about implementing writing center generated writing groups in composition classrooms as part of an outreach program to bridge the difference between the writing center and the classroom. Tutors from their writing center would join faculty in their classrooms to facilitate what Anderson and Murphy called writing workshops, where students worked in groups to share writing assignments, with assistance from tutors. As writing center theory discourages direct instruction, tutors encouraged peer discussion and critique in the groups rather than offering feedback themselves. In this sense, the tutors guided, and at times, modeled the review process, usually through asking critical questions, all in an effort to foster autonomy and student

authority in the groups. Anderson and Murphy suggest that this program was successful in attaining multiple goals: they maintain that student's authority as writers increased as well as other benefits, such as an expanded relationship between composition classrooms and writing centers and additional pedagogical opportunities for tutors as they navigated teaching in the classroom.

Phillips (2012) discusses writing center-facilitated graduate writing groups as an efficient way to provide graduate students with long-term support as they progress through lengthy, high-stakes writing projects like theses and dissertations. Phillips highlights two groups of multilingual graduate students whom he observed: one was composed of five doctoral students in either Cultural Studies or Communication Studies programs and the second was comprised of three Master's students in Linguistics. Phillips describes the doctoral writers as advanced and competent: their needs were more global focused (development, clarity, methodological concerns), rather than localized, sentence-level issues. The Master's group was generally still struggling with the English language and therefore displayed a variety of writing difficulties, both local and global. Through analysis of the "language of negotiation," which Phillips describes as "the talk that happens between two speakers who are working to clarify understanding" (p. 4), recorded during the writing groups, Phillips draws conclusions about the benefits of these graduate writing groups**,** including increased confidence as writers, improved critical thinking skills, developed scholarly ethos, and augmented reading skills.

While brevity of this section on writing groups in the writing center highlights the gaps in research regarding writing center-facilitated writing groups, one should not conclude that writing centers are not doing work with writing groups. Writing centers do

not necessarily formally research and publish findings about all the programs and educational practices that occur within (or outside) their walls. In fact, in discussing the high expectations, Brannon and North articulated for writing center research to make "great new discoveries about the learning and teaching of writing" when the field's now preeminent publication *Writing Center Journal* debuted in 1980. Gillam (2002) argues that "opinion varies over the current state of writing center research although most agree that this great promise remains as yet unfilled…" (p. xv). Therefore, to augment the published literature on writing center-facilitated writing groups, I here am including information gleaned from an informal survey I administered where I asked writing center administrators to share information about their use of writing groups in their writing centers.

Writing center-facilitated writing groups: An informal survey. This survey was distributed as part of a project for the College Teaching of English course at Teachers College in the fall of 2012. The goal of the survey was to learn more about writing center-facilitated writing groups. I decided to distribute the survey on the Writing Center Listserv, known as WCenter, an online discussion forum for writing center professionals that has been in existence since 1991 (Gillespie, 2002). The International Writing Center Association [IWCA] (2012) details that "WCenter is used by numerous writing center professionals who ask for advice and post research queries and writing center-related announcements to the writing center community." As noted by IWCA, many subscribers use WCenter as a site for both formal and informal research purposes; therefore, often the listserv serves as a way to access the writing center community's knowledge, and at times create that knowledge through discussion (Gillespie, 2002).

I posted the following message and link to WCenter, asking my writing center colleagues for their participation:

> *Hello all,*
> *I am currently reviewing research on writing center-facilitated writing groups and while I have found some literature on the subject, I wanted to check in with the listserv as well. I am defining "writing group" very loosely at this point: a group of students who voluntarily meet at regular intervals to discuss and share their writing. If this sounds like something you are doing in your writing center, I would greatly appreciate it if you would be willing to take a few minutes to fill out this survey about your writing group(s): https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/MCCF5FY*
> *If you have any questions, would like more information, or would like to talk further with me for any reason, please feel free to contact me via email (jscoppetta@SPWU.edu) or by phone (860.231.5328).*

The link took participations to a 12 question survey posted on the password protected online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. Questions 1-7 and 12 are open-ended questions, and questions 8-11 are closed, yes/no questions. For questions 8-11, if the participant answers yes, he or she will be directed to the proceeding follow-up question, which is open-ended. The survey questions are as follows:

1. What do you call your writing group(s)?
2. How many participants comprise your group(s)?
3. How often does your group(s) meet?
4. Who from the writing center facilitates your writing group(s)?
5. Who participates in your writing group(s)?
6. What is the purpose of your writing group(s)?
7. Generally, what is discussed in your writing group(s) (i.e. specific topics, types of writing)?
8. Do you target specific student populations for participation in the writing group? If yes, which student populations do you target?

9. Does your group(s) follow a pedagogical theory or model? If yes, which pedagogical theory(ies) or model(s)?

10. Does your group(s) function under a specific set of guidelines? If yes, please provide a description of the guidelines?

11. Do you assess your writing group(s)? If yes, how do you assess your groups(s)?

12. Would you be willing to be contacted for follow-up questions via phone or email? If so, please write in your contact information.

Over the 25 days the survey was open for completion, nine people elected to participate. While the very small number of participants and the informal survey methodology places limitations on drawing conclusions culled from the results of this survey, the information provided by the participants helped to begin to paint a picture for me of how and why these nine writing centers were utilizing writing groups. To begin, several commonalities were readily apparent regarding writing group participants and purposes for forming the writing groups.

Eight of the respondents reported targeting graduate students for participation in the writing groups, generally with a purpose to support these students with thesis or dissertation writing. The names of the writing groups reflect these aims, with titles such as "Graduate Writing Retreat," "Graduate Writing Group," "Dissertation/Thesis Graduate Writing Group," or the more creative, "Propositioning Dissertators!" and "Getting Your Proposal Done…Before the End of Time." A few of these eight respondents also reported holding other types of writing groups in addition to graduate writing groups for faculty and community members, including faculty writing groups, creative writing

groups, and community creative writing groups. Additionally, most of the participants reported an average group size of 3-5 students, though two of the groups reported larger groups of 7-10 students.

Of note was that only one respondent reported offering writing groups for undergraduate students. This respondent explained that their center's writing groups are designed for first-year composition students. In these groups, the writing groups are facilitated by a writing tutor who has been paired with a first-year composition instructor. Both the instructor and the tutor encourage students to attend the groups as a way to strengthen their commitment to the writing process and continue the work started in the composition classroom. However, in general, the writing groups were largely geared towards helping support graduate students with high stakes writing such as theses or dissertations.

While there were commonalities, the participants' replies also reflected Gere's (1987) assertion that writing groups operate under myriad guidelines, depending on the specific function of the group and the individual group members' goals. For instance, some groups met twice a week, others once a week, and others once a month. Five participants responded that they follow specific guidelines, while the other four reported not following any guidelines. Specific guidelines varied from when to submit drafts to group members (two days before), to how long and what structure group time should take (three hour block: first hour for peer review, next two hours for writing), to guidelines for providing feedback, such as no negative commenting. Moreover, six of the respondents replied that they follow a specific pedagogical theory or model in their groups. Their written comments revealed that these theories and models vary widely. For example, one

respondent reported using directive frameworks, while another offered a pedagogical theory of non-directive instruction. Unfortunately, most of the comments were overwhelmingly general and brief. However, one respondent specifically referenced Lave and Wenger's work with communities of practice (discussed in-depth later in the conceptual influences section of this dissertation), which was helpful in understanding this respondent's rationale for the writing groups.

Finally, each of the respondents reported different focal points of discussion in the writing groups. Five referenced group participants actually sharing their writing during group meetings and then asking the group to respond to the writing. For example, one respondent wrote:

> Participants sign up to present their work in half hour segments. We ask the participants what they want the group to focus on. They bring their work on a flash drive and we project it onto a screen and the participant reads it aloud, pointing out parts they are uncomfortable with. Sometimes participants just want to talk about their work or practice their defense, and that's fine too.

Four others used the term "genre" to describe the discussion content of the writing groups, meaning that the groups were a space to discussion conventions of written genres (literature reviews, proposals, research writing, theses, and dissertations) and the group participants' concerns about writing in specific genres. Other respondents referenced discussing how to best facilitate parts of the writing process such as brainstorming, planning strategies, outlining, revision and citation techniques. One respondent noted that "international students often want to talk about how to reconcile their home and US writing cultures" as part of group discussion, which shows that the writing group is not necessarily focused only on discussing a writer's written product, but also all aspects of the process of writing. Likewise, another respondent shared that "we talk about goals,

problems they had reaching their writing goals that week, what's working for them and what's not." Only one respondent detailed that the group members generally determine the group's focus. Other groups may also take this tactic as well, but I was unable to determine that from the written responses provided by the participants. Once again, while this cursory survey offered a glimpse into what writing centers are doing with writing groups, the results of the survey are certainly not exhaustive. But they do provide inklings of variations, as well as commonalities, in assumptions that frame designs for and uses of writing groups in (varying) U.S. education contexts.

Outside higher education. While this literature review generally focuses on the use of writing circles at American colleges and universities, Gere's (1994) written version of her 1993 *College Composition and Communication* Conference Chair Address reminds teachers of writing that auxiliary writing groups have and continue to offer outlets for writers beyond the walls of higher education, and that composition studies would be remiss to ignore them as a place to extend writing practices that instructors strive to promote in the classroom. In this spirit, I here include some literature regarding writing groups outside higher education. For example, Whitney's (2008) study of teacher transformation during the Summer Institutes of the National Writing Project trumpets the use of writing groups for the encouragement participants reported the groups provided; these participants also reported a greater awareness of the necessity of self-reflection in their writing. Additionally, Whitney's conclusions suggest that "writing and interactions with colleagues around writing seemed to initiate and/or enhance the effects of experience at each stage of the learning process" (p. 177).

Johnson's (1989) article details how she has students in her cross-cultural women's history course examine writing and study circles as an entry point to studying women's cultural and historical experiences. One of the texts Johnson's students read is Tsurumi's (1970) *Social Change and the Individual* which analyzes the experiences of 50 female Japanese factory workers who met in writing circles to develop an understanding of their post-war role in a changing society. Through the writing circles, the women discovered that they shared common issues, including difficulties navigating family relationships amongst evolving expectations. The writing circles offered a space for the women to share their experiences, identify commonalities, and discuss solutions to collective problems, such as how to reconcile feelings of admiration towards their hard-working mothers with feelings of frustration towards them because of their blind following of patriarchal demands, which often left them feeling stifled and miserable in their domestic roles (Johnson, 1989). Johnson uses the experience of the Japanese women to demonstrate to her students that women's groups, like the writing circle, can enable participants to feel less isolated and develop greater awareness of their surroundings and circumstances, which may ultimately lead to increased self-confidence and opportunities for change. Johnson also favors exposing her students to research that suggests the transformative nature of these groups because the groups demonstrate a collaborative model of learning rather than an authoritative, hierarchical model often associated with formal academic education.

Furthermore, especially for groups whose access to higher education was nonexistent or limited -- such as women in 19th and early 20th centuries -- formations such as writing circles, study clubs, and literary societies have functioned to promote

reading, writing, and intellectual habits of mind for those without access to formal education. Gere (1987) posits that women's clubs offered 19th century women a way to educate themselves without abandoning their domestic roles, which would have been socially unacceptable. While the intellectual activities fostered by these clubs mirrored those in college-sponsored literary clubs for men, the female club members could participate without triggering social outrage for leaving the domestic sphere (Gere, 1987).

The educational benefits of these groups, though outside the classroom, were readily apparent. Hobbs (1995) further explains that working in these collaborative groups helped women to improve and refine their reading, writing, and speaking skills. For example, Elizabeth Buffum Chase wrote about her women's group called the Female Mutual Improvement Group, which met weekly so members could discuss books and share original writings. She explained that one of the skills she worked on with the group was grammar (cited in Gere, 1987). In fact, based on her historical research, Martin (1987) believes that study club movement of the 19th century facilitated the increased number of women enrolled in college in the 20th century. Martin's (1987) findings, as well as those of Johnson (1989) and Gere (1987), demonstrate that writing groups can be beneficial outside of the arena of higher education in promoting literacy skills, among others, including social and cultural resistances to "the natural order of things," for example, and could potentially encourage individuals to seek additional educational opportunities.

Opportunities for future study in writing centers. Save Gere's (1987) text, much of the scholarship on writing groups has been scattered: an instructor trying peer review groups in her classroom and publishing her experiences, a writing center director

embarking on writing workshop outreach and sharing the results, or a historian coming across evidence of writing circles in the 1880s at Smith College and contextualizing its meaning for students at the time. Those studying writing circles certainly have ample support of their existence, as do other types of writing groups in higher education institutions in the United States, but rigorous examinations of their potential role in higher education are absent. Most authors suggest writing groups are highly beneficial, even transformative, to their participants. But, again, deeper analysis of what and who constitute transformational within differing social and cultural contexts; why such transformation is beneficial; and why and how these transformations occur is warranted.

Moreover, Nicolas, Moss, and Highberg (2004) claim, in the afterword to their compilation of essays titled "Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom," that since Gere's "groundbreaking study on writing groups in 1987, the scholarly discussion on writing groups has been slow to emerge" (p. 249), prompting the publication of their collection. Additionally, Phillips (2012), in discussing graduate writing groups in particular, maintains that "we still know very little about how writing groups work" (p. 1). Overall, these researchers believe there is scholarly work to be done in terms of studying and writing about writing groups, specifically with regards to writing groups whose genesis is in the writing center. The informal study I conducted supports this assertion as well. In addition to the nine responses to that survey, I also received six emails from colleagues who were interested in any follow up to my survey, as they too were interested in forming writing groups at their writing centers. For example, one colleague shared that he was thinking of starting a writing group for Korean graduate students and faculty who were looking to publish in English in international

interdisciplinary journals (A. Turner, personal communication, Dec., 7th, 2012). These additional emails suggest that there is interest in the writing center community about writing center-facilitated writing groups and that the writing center community would welcome additional research focused on such groups.

Finally, the informal study I conducted highlighted an interesting characteristic of writing-center facilitated writing groups: the majority of reported groups were designed for graduate students working on high stakes writing assignments such as theses and dissertations, rather than undergraduate students. The one participant who reported creating writing groups for undergraduate students did so in collaboration with a first-year composition course instructor to supplement the teachings in that particular class. However, while it was reported that participation in these undergraduate writing groups was through the writing center because the writing groups were led by a writing center staff member, the connection to a course and the presence of a faculty member's encouragement to participate to augment the course take this particular writing group out of the sole scope of the writing center. Therefore, the lack of information on writing center-facilitated undergraduate writing groups presents the opportunity for in-depth research on these groups.

Additional Conceptual Influences

In addition to the literature on writing groups, the following ideas have influenced my conceptions of this research project and also offer a foundation upon which my ideas about writing center-facilitated writing groups are built. They highlight some of my

assumptions and beliefs* about the nature of education that I brought to this research project, including:

- Meaning-making is a social process.
- Knowledge is constructed by humans, most often in relation to one another.
- Education can be "transformative."
- Participants in a community may feel agency over and within that community.
- Participation can lead to knowledge creation.
- Talk and collaboration, especially among peers, can lead to learning.

These assumptions and beliefs can be squarely situated within constructivist and social constructivist philosophies, as theorized by Dewey and Vygotsky respectively. Dewey's 1938 *Experience and Education* emphasizes the need for education based on experience. The value of experience and its educational significance depend on both continuity and interaction, meaning learning occurs over time and through experience, constructed with and within various environments and situations (Dewey, 1938). Vygotsky's (1978) theories, as compiled in *Mind and Society* emphasized the collaborative nature of learning and the importance of social and cultural contexts: knowledge is not individually constructed, it is co-constructed. Vygotsky also emphasized the role of language in

*In addition to these articulated beliefs, there are a host of unconscious assumptions and biases that I may not be able to name that affected my thoughts, actions, and positionings throughout this dissertation research.

cognitive development as a mechanism for thinking and a way to make sense of the world.

Like any researcher, and more specifically following many others who work in and research writing centers, I must cite philosophies I see interacting with and informing the topic of my inquiry: the nature of writing, writing groups, and writing centers. I consider those philosophies articulated by Stephen North and Andrea Lunsford as paramount when envisioning any kind of teaching that has its origins in a writing center, philosophies that also fall under a constructivist/social constructivist umbrella. North's seminal 1984 article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," highlights divergent expectations and misunderstandings amongst those in the writing center community and other members of academic communities regarding the nature of writing center work. While many erroneously consider the writing center as a fix-it-shop for basic writers, dealing only in grammar, skills, and mechanics, North argues what writing centers are and should be places where talk defines the methodology of writing center work. North expounds: "Nearly everyone who writes likes – and needs – to talk about his or her writing, preferably with someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and who knows how to talk about writing too…A writing center is an institutional response to that need" (p. 440). Further, North maintains that writing centers embrace a true student-centered philosophy and draws on Moffett's (1968) suggestion in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* to focus on the learner rather than subject when teaching, or in this case, tutoring writing. In this sense, tutoring sessions should focus on what is happening with the student during the writing process, rather than on the paper that is the product of the student's processes.

Lundsford's (1991) article, "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," builds on North's manifesto, focusing praise on the practice of collaboration, calling it the embodiment of a shift in epistemology from the idea that knowledge is exterior, knowable, measurable, and transferable to a view that holds knowledge as socially constructed, mediated through language, and situated with specific context. Through this constructivist perspective, knowledge is the product of collaboration. In embracing the theory of collaboration as a meaning-making activity, Lundsford describes the idea of writing centers as centers of collaboration, or aptly named Burkean parlors, a term inspired by Kenneth Burke's metaphor of how ideas are generated and discussed in an unending conversation in his *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941). She explains:

> Such a center would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group. It would engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only working as a group but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity (p. 113).

Theorizing writing centers as sites of collaboration thereby privileges educational practices and modalities that recognize and capitalize on group activities and the knowledge created by such groupings, such as writing groups.

Also built upon the assumption that learning is a social practice is Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of peripheral participation – the acquisition of a skill through engagement of the practice as an expert, rather than being offered a body of knowledge that the learner will later apply – as a way of understanding learning and a condition for effective learning. In their analysis of apprenticeships, Lave and Wenger conclude that apprentices (or newcomers to a particular practice) appear to learn mostly in relation to

other apprentices, and that when peers and near-peers can come to together in a learning community, knowledge spreads "exceedingly rapidly and effectively" (p. 93). Another point specifically relevant to writing groups is their discussion of talking within in a practice. They distinguish between *talking about* and *talking within* a practice:

> Talking within itself includes both talking within (e.g. exchanging information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities) and talking about (e.g. stories, community lore). Inside the shared practice, both forms of talk fulfill specific functions: engaging, focusing, and shifting attention, bringing about coordination, etc., on the one hand; and supporting communal forms of memory and reflection, as well as signaling membership, on the other…For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation (p. 109).

Thus, writing groups have the potential to be spaces of legitimate peripheral participation as new academic writers (peer and near-peer apprentices) learn to talk about writing, and thus learn about writing, by engaging in and with the group. The application of Lave and Wenger's concept to writing groups is not an original idea: For example, Phillips's (2012) research about and discussion of graduate writing groups heavily cites Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning. Further, Phillips proposes that the success of graduate writing groups is reliant on the negotiations that occur within the communities of practice (i.e. writing groups). Ultimately, Phillips concludes that graduate writing groups function as low stakes communities of practice that help writers on their way to full participation within their disciplines' communities of practice.

Finally, at the heart of this research is a concern Blau (2010) raises in his chapter "Academic Writing as Participation: Writing Your Way In." Blau notices that most college students do not aspire to or even expect to become members of academic communities, nevermind to meaningfully participate and become experts in their

disciplines. As a result, often academic writing assignments reinforce the message to students that they are on the outside of academic communities rather than participants. Blau considers this picture as not just bleak, but as downright menacing, as it discourages students from developing academic identities and threatens their success in academia, especially the most at risk students (underrepresented socioeconomic and ethnic students, English as a second language students, and students who are the first in their families to attend college). To meet these challenges, Blau offers a workshop model in which students write, share, and discuss literary commentary as a way to help initiate students as participants in academic discourse. I see undergraduate writing center-facilitated writing groups as a compliment to Blau's classroom practices to foster legitimate participation.

In a kindred vein, Graff's (2003) critique of higher education, *Clueless in Academe*, posits that, save a high achieving minority who become "insiders," most college students are strangers to academia, peering in from the outside. Like other educators, including Mike Rose and Deborah Meier, whom Graff names, and arguably Blau, Graff sees his goal as an instructor to "demystify the 'club we belong to'" (p.24), by helping students to become members of the club of academia. As he lists routine higher education practices that foil students' entry into the academic club and explains how they are exclusionary, I began to see the potential for writing groups as one way for institutions of higher education to help students gain access to the academic club by offering a space where they could converse about academics (specifically their writing assignments), promote intellectual inquiry through commitment to an academic group, and together translate the mixed messages ("Write like this! No do it like this! You have to have a thesis! No thesis, just explore!") sent by faculty. Perhaps writing groups could

even become spaces whereby students could also begin to become aware of the social/cultural politics that maintain hierarchies by controlling what counts as "the club," and maybe even critique what it means to be part of this "club." Through these corrective practices, students may begin to see themselves as members of an intellectual community and thus truly participate in creating the circumstances and processes for their own learning.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Ideas and Theories That Influenced This Study Design

This qualitative study is a form of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience, or as defined by constructivist scholars Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "the stories people live and tell" (p. xxvi). The prologue to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) *Narrative Inquiry*, revisits the importance of conceptualizations of experience – they specifically draw on Dewey's notions of experience being both personal and social and growing over time in continuity, changing, and building upon previous experiences -- to social science research, particularly in relation to how educators are interested in lived experience. I agree with Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who purport that "the idea of experience has been lost" (p. xxiii) in educational research, sadly reduced to numbers and statistics. Further, as an educator, my own experience has taught me the value of listening to individuals' stories to gain "insight" from them and also the ways in which describing, or attempting to describe, and reflect on our experiences help us to make sense of our lives, which are two other reasons I am drawn to narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry seems to reassert the importance of experience, though not without its own set of problems in representation of said experience, because each narrative is a creation of experience rather than the experience itself, wrought with myriad issues of representation. Narratives – their constructions, their representations of individuals' re-countings of supposedly intact memories and their interpretations -- are complex and messy (Chase, 2005).

While the conceptualization of this study is informed by constructivist frameworks and theorists such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Chase (2005), I am keenly aware of how these constructivist representations have been challenged by issues erupting from what anthropologists Marcus and Fischer (1986) identified as "the crisis of representation," which posits that dominant paradigms of representation cannot adequately describe or explain social reality. Constructivist frameworks have also been confronted by post-structural thinkers who reject a correspondence theory of language – that is, that words have exact and fully agreed upon meanings; these disruptions also include Lyotard's (1987) analyses of "the postmodern," which posits there is no single "meta-narrative" that positions a universal version of the truth. "What is called postmodernism entails rejection of the idea of language as a medium expressing or representing what pre-exists" (Greene, 1994, p. 208).

Indeed, these post-structural tenants resonate with me: the experiences of the participants which I seek to study are mediated through memory and language, both theirs and mine, rendering them already interpretations and in need of interpretation (Scott, 1991). "Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain" (Scott, 1991, p.797). This way of thinking about experience is in direct reference to post-structural emphases on the discursive in how "experience" is constituted.

Further, like Britzman (1995), I believe narrative inquiry is not about "capturing" truth or knowledge that is out there waiting to be understood. Instead, "it is about constructing particular versions of truth, and thus pushing the sensibilities of readers in new directions" (Britzman, 1995, p. 237). Questioning how regimes of truth become

neutralized as knowledge and become solidified as normative, thus constituting who and what counts as normal must be emphasized if engaged in post-structural work. It will be important when engaging in self-reflexive work to attempt "to disrupt my own retelling" (p. 234), ala Britzman (1995) in her study of student teacher narratives, as a way to gesture towards the instability of experience as a construct, a point Miller (1998) emphasizes as well. Miller (1998) problematizes representations of experience that are packaged as "unitary, fully conscious, universal, complete and non-contradictory," which are then used as evidence of "progress" or "success" (p. 51), instead arguing for "defamiliarization" and "revising" (p. 54), concepts named by Greene to help challenge what has become normative.

Though many of my beliefs align with a constructivist framework and this dissertation generally works within this framework, I am also conscious of post-structural cautions that scholars like Britzman, Scott, and Miller pose as they help me to complicate and interrogate my own assumptions throughout this dissertation research. Though post-structuralist theory makes "sense" to me (for example, I am aware of dominant discourses and regimes of truth that have constituted what I can and do perceive as "making sense") and is something I can explore and gesture towards, the methodology and epistemology of this dissertation are fundamentally constructivist because that is still my most comfortable mode at this point in time and in the context of this dissertation research project.

Greene (1994)'s (re)framing of the crisis of representation offers an analogy of reality as a slippery pig: Drawing inspiration from a scene in Julius Barnes' novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, Green describes that there is a pig out there (a reality that people live),

but, like a little piglet covered in grease, it is impossible to catch: "'It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and we were made to look ridiculous in the process'" (Barnes as cited in Greene, 1994, p. 207). I would like to build on this literary image offered by Greene to further describe how I situate myself epistemologically and methodologically for and within this dissertation. Though I understand and appreciate that the pig is slippery, like the characters in Barnes' story, these recognitions do not mean I am not going to stop trying to catch the pig, even in the face of impossibility, because I believe trying to catch the pig has value. But, in my attempts, I will pay attention to not only why the pig is so slippery, but also to how I and others may view the pig, how I am interacting with the pig, and what forces are at play that make me want to try to catch the pig in the first place.

Other Awarenesses Regarding This Research

There are some fundamental points regarding this research project I needed to consider and be aware of throughout the research process. A chief consideration was the relationship dynamics at work between me (as researcher) and the participants (the researched). As the researcher, I understand that I am in a place of power. What is more, because I used a convenience sample, some participants may have known me or known of me as a university instructor or as SPWU's writing center administrator. Furthermore, I maintained a relationship with the founding members as a group, and with each of them individually as well, because I was their supervisor when tutoring and I taught the one credit class they were enrolled in as a condition of their employment with the writing center. I was responsible for these students' hiring, training, and for providing ongoing verbal feedback. They came to me to troubleshoot issues with writing tutoring and I also

facilitated weekly group discussions about writing tutoring. Thus, the four founding members may have felt pressured to volunteer to start writing groups that were sponsored by the writing center and studied for my dissertation research because of my relationship with them and/or because of my supervisory and faculty "power" in terms of determining their future employment/status, as well as in terms of submitting a grade for class in which they were enrolled with me. For the duration of the dissertation research, I continued to support them as their supervisor and instructor in their regular duties as peer tutors and also as founding writing group members.

However, Scheurich (1997) also highlights that while researchers must pay attention to the power they hold over their participants, the researched have found numerous ways to resist dominance in power relations. Scheurich describes spaces in interviews where participants have found ways to control the interview by pushing back on the researcher's questions, meanings, goals, and intentions. "In other words, interviewees are not passive subjects; they are active participants in the interaction. They, in fact, often use the interviewer as much as the interviewer is using them" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 71). Further, Scheurich invites researchers to think of the interview paradigm not just comprised of dominance/resistance binary, but as one that includes that of chaos/freedom, which includes anything that is not part of the dominance/resistance binary. Thinking of power in this way presents both researchers and the researched with a wider variety of options regarding performance that exceed the focus of the research (Scheurich, 1997). In this light, it is possible that some of my participants were actively resisting my "power" within the interviews or perhaps were even using the opportunity of

the interview to achieve some other goal of importance to them that participation in the interview could satisfy.

Another point I put up for consideration is an awareness of multiple ethical and methodological issues in researching people's interpretations of their experiences and reported perceptions. Doing so assumes that there is a "personal" authority established by the very nature of "having had that experience." Further, there is an assumption that people understand their experiences and can share them with others, who in turn will understand what is meant. For example, if a participant reports a positive experience with the writing groups and claims that she is a more effective writer, is she? (I do not know). Will I think she is a more effective writer? (I do not know). Will I have understood her experiences and perceptions in the way she intended them? (Probably not). Does she know how she intends them? (Probably not). How will her intentions at one moment be different the next? (Very different). How do I represent this all? (I do not know). Should I be representing it? (I do not know, but I am going to try).

These all are issues that permeate any research endeavor, but within qualitative research, these issues and more are not avoided as in quantitative research, but rather are directly addressed as aspects of the continuing "crisis in representation." Therefore, as part of my overarching researcher commitments, I engaged in self-reflexive interrogations of my assumptions and biases coming into and throughout my study as well as how these frame my interpretations throughout this study. Reflexivity is a qualitative method that is used to "legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations" (Pillow, 2003, p. 175). Pillow categorizes four types of reflexivity, including reflexivity as self-recognition, which I believe can be identified in my work in

this dissertation. Part of reflexivity is examining my own subjectivities, which I attempted to do throughout this dissertation in sharing my interpretations of my ontological and epistemological stances, personal experiences, and notes that focus on my feelings, ideas, challenges, and musings regarding my role as the researcher, my interactions with participants, and what has shifted or been problematizing as a result of my experience during the research process. "Reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference" (Davies as cited in Pillow, 2003, p.178).

Further, I, like Ellingson (1998), chose to do reflexive work to demonstrate just how "contaminated" (p. 494) my representations of other's experience are with my own experiences. I hope that, akin to Peshkin (2000), I can clarify the intersection of my subjectivities and the interpretations I present not as mode of confession or self-indulgence, which some have reduced self-reflexive work to, but clarify and strengthen what I have learned and why. However, Pillow (2003) cautions against reflexivity that functions to "cure" the problems regarding representation and thus solve the problem of the crisis of representation. She posits that reflexivity must push us towards uncomfortable, something I hope I have done in some small way, at certain points, in this document. Especially given the power roles that I hold in relation to study participants – to a greater extent with the founding members who facilitate the individual writing groups than with the undergraduate participants – the self-reflexive work that I engaged with throughout this study is paramount.

Participants and Their Selection

Initial potential participants in the study were four SPWU undergraduate peer tutors, who will serve as "founding members" and participants in the writing groups. Two of the four initial potential participants were writing tutors who expressed interest to me in starting a writing group after a discussion of writing groups in the EDUC 201 class that I teach and in which they were enrolled. The other two potential participants approached me about starting a writing group after hearing about my writing group project from other staff members. These four undergraduate peer tutors assisted in recruiting additional writing group members/potential study participants to form four writing groups for the semester. Their recruitment methods included: flyers placed in the writing center and on community bulletin boards around the SPWU campus; word of mouth among the founding members to tutees, classmates, and friends; and postings on the SPWU internal website, MySPWU. Additional potential participants were any SPWU undergraduate students who voluntarily joined the writing groups and who also consented to be participants in the study as well. The inclusionary criteria for all participants is that they were SPWU undergraduate students during the timeframe of this research. Data from SPWU's Office of Institutional Research and Planning shows that in the spring of 2014, there were 1049 potential participants, i.e. SPWU eligible undergraduate students from both the Women's College and the Program for Adult Learners. Of those 1049 students, 1028 were female and 21 were male. Males are not admitted to the Women's College, but can be accepted to the Program for Adult Learners. Additional demographic information was as follows: 556 students identified as White, 125 as Hispanic/Latino, 124 as Black or African American, 27 as Asian, 16 as two or more races, 4 as nonresident alien, 2 as

Native American, and 2 as Native Hawaiian. Additionally, 193 students' race was classified as Unknown. Federal Pell grants were awarded to 394 students and 375 students reported they were the first in their families to attend an institution of higher education. Only 37% (396) of students resided on campus, with the rest commuting. The mean SAT scores for current SPWU undergraduates were 476 for Math and 487 for Critical Thinking/Verbal (K. Neal, personal communication, December, 2, 2013).

Once writing groups were formed, I contacted students via email to inquire about participation in the study. Students could decline to be part of the study, but still be included in the writing groups, as the writing groups were a CAE writing center initiative that was separate from this study. Once the writing groups were organized, each group dictated their particular group's meeting schedule, practices, guidelines, and norms.

Intended Data Collection

My initial plans were that data would consist of unstructured interviews, videotaped writing group sessions, and a researcher journal. Each participant was given an Informed Consent form (see Appendix A) and each signed a Participant's Rights form (see Appendix B) upon agreeing to participate in the study. Copies of both forms were given to the participants. The data collection for this research project was scheduled to be as follows:

- January 2014: recruitment for writing groups participants through on campus advertisement and word of mouth in the writing center by undergraduate peer tutors/founding group members, who will be considered key informants, if they consent to participate in the study. Once writing groups have formed, I will recruit study participants through email (see Appendix D).

- Early February 2014: individual pre-interviews with writing group participants
- Mid-February 2014: writing groups begin meeting
- Late March 2014: individual mid-point interviews with writing group participants
- May 2014: post-group interviews with writing group participants
- Mid-February to May 2014: three videotaped writing group sessions, randomly selected
- On-going researcher journal

Interviews

All interviews were conducted in my office on the SPWU campus. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. An audio-recorder was used for pragmatic reasons: I wanted to be able to engage with participants, rather than focusing on taking notes (Raply, 2004). However, I should address, as Rapley (2004) does, that an audio-recorder may make the participants nervous, but arguably the audio-recorder is just one of "multiple possible influences on the interaction and trajectory of the talk" (p.19).

The interview followed an unstructured format, beginning with an overarching question (see Appendix C), as to follow the participant's talk rather than rely on a strict set of questions, as Rapley (2004) recommends. To this end, I saw myself as following Kvale and Brinkmann's (1996) analogy of the interviewer as traveler, wandering through landscapes, entering conversations, fluidly, open to change, as opposed to a miner, unearthing precious pieces information hiding below the surface with just the "right" questions. With this description, Kvale and Brinkmann seem to posit interviewing as a journey, though perhaps the destination is unknown. However, despite their traveler

analogy, they do maintain that, technically, any qualitative interview is not an open conversation because of its function as an interview for specific purposes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 1996). Further, Rapley (2004) suggests that "interviewing is never just a conversation," because of the power the researcher maintains to make decisions about how the "conversation" will go (p. 26). Rapley uses the term "conversational" instead, which is a term I will adopt as well.

Rapley's (2004) suggestions were helpful in planning initial "procedures" for the interviews, and Rapley, and Kvale and Brinkmann (1996) for defining the "conversational talk" I hoped to have, but it is important to complicate both of these notions via Scheurich's (1997) postmodern criticisms of interviewing. Scheurich offers a perspective that takes into account the idea that both researcher and the participant have multiple conscious and unconscious desires that are constructed through language, which is unstable and slippery. Meanings and understandings shift and change across people, time, and contexts. But, as Scheurich points out, "even holding people, place, and time constant, however, will not guarantee that stable, unambiguous communication in all or even most of interview" (p. 63). A list of questions or the "perfect" opening question makes various assumptions, including that the researcher and participant will understand questions in the same way. Because there are always layers, tensions, and ambiguities that are both conscious and unconscious, anticipated and unknown, in any communication, "stability" is not possible. Therefore, researchers must bring attention to those layers, be willing to constantly question their own assumptions throughout their research, and then to possibly experiment, as well as continue to question assumptions and interpretations when interviewing, and when attempting to, first, analyze specific

interviews and then, second, to (imperfectly, and with lots of ethical issues and questions attached, so to speak) represent interviews (Scheurich, 1997). In service of these vital interpretative challenges as described by Scheurich, I attempted to highlight, throughout this dissertation, some of the "baggage" I brought to these interviews and to the written representations of them.

Videotaped Group Sessions

While I am most interested in students' perceptions of their experiences, which the interviews were designed to address, I thought it would also be interesting to observe, from the perspective of a teacher of writing, a sampling of the writing group sessions to juxtapose, interrogate, and problematize what I considered and re-constructed as "the narratives" of the students. Working with images can be powerful and they can "thicken" interpretation (Reissman, 2008, p. 179). Of course, observing does not grant access to truth (Britzman, 1995). Reissman (2008), too, cautions against the assumption of truth or authenticity ("seeing is believing") when performing a visual narrative analysis. Images should be treated like any other text: at once an interpretation and open to interpretations.

Researcher Journal

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) put it, in narrative inquiry, it is impossible for the researcher to stay silent: the researcher must confront herself as a co-participant in the research space. Narrative researchers must attend to the research relationship (Chase, 2005). I brought my own set of assumptions, biases, and values to this research; the research journal was a tool towards transparency (total and complete "transparency" is

impossible) and as a space to name and question my research practices and representations.

Research Site

This research was conducted in the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE) at SPWU. SPWU is a small, private, women's, Catholic institution of higher education located in the Northeast. SPWU was founded in 1932 by the Sisters of Mercy with the goal of making higher education accessible to women who might not be able to afford to enroll at other private women's colleges. Current enrollment includes 873 undergraduate students, 1598 graduate students, and 176 Program for Adult Learner students (Fagan & Scoppetta, 2013). The university maintains a strong commitment to developing the writing skills of its student population as evidenced by: a first year writing course requirement within the English department; multiple courses throughout the disciplines designated as writing intensive; the Interdisciplinary Writing and Reasoning Program, which administers SPWU's writing portfolio program, a graduation requirement for all undergraduate and Program for Adult Learner students; and the CAE, which houses the University's writing center and the Writing Associates Program, a writing fellows program that pairs CAE writing staff with writing intensive courses.

While the CAE strives to enhance scholarship in all academic disciplines and thus offers a variety of academic support services for both students and faculty, including content and study skills tutoring, the SPWU community equates the CAE as the locus for writing support on campus. For instance, SPWU students say they are going to the CAE for writing tutoring, rather than the writing center, and likewise faculty send students to

the CAE for assistance with writing skills rather than telling them to go to the writing center. The culture of SPWU is that the CAE is synonymous with what might simply be called the writing center on another campus.

The CAE's full time staff includes the Director, the Writing Center Administrator, the Academic Success Coordinator, and the Administrative Assistant. Augmenting the full time staff are 5-7 part-time professional writing tutors, 2 graduate assistants who tutor writing, 5-6 undergraduate peer writing tutors, 1 part-time professional nursing tutor, and 25 undergraduate peer content tutors. These numbers are approximate because part-time staff and student staff fluctuate from semester to semester. Additionally, it should be noted that the 2012-2013 academic year was the first year the CAE employed undergraduate peer writing tutors; previously writing tutoring was conducted solely by full-time staff (save the Administrative Assistant), part-time professional writing tutors, and graduate assistants. The Director and the Writing Center Administrator intend to continue to build the undergraduate peer writing tutor program.

The CAE is located on the second floor of SPWU's library, in a newly renovated space designed specifically for the CAE. The space is comprised of a large open waiting area surrounded by six individual tutoring offices; three administrative offices for the Director, the Writing Center Administrator, and the Academic Success Coordinator; a conference room/computer lab with a dozen computers for student use and a flat screen television and projection system; and a large classroom, also equipped with a projection system, for workshops and large group tutorial sessions. Students are encouraged to use the classroom and conference room/computer lab for studying and other academic work when they are not booked for formal CAE events, such as workshops, meetings, or

review sessions. To this end, the classroom and conference room/computer lab are unlocked at all times. It is not uncommon for students to be using the CAE space for academic activities during times when the CAE is officially closed, such as on Sundays or evenings after 8 pm.

In the 2012-2013 academic year, 76% of undergraduate students, 59% of Program for Adult Learners students, and 4% of graduate students voluntarily elected to use CAE academic support services (Fagan & Scoppetta, 2013). Most college learning centers typically see between 10-30 percent of student populations (U.S. Department of Education as cited in Fagan & Scoppetta, 2013). Additionally in the 2012-2013 academic year, the CAE offered 513 workshops on a variety of topics such as documentation style, source integration, thesis statement construction, critical thinking, effective research notes, close reading, professional writing, and content-area issues (Fagan & Scoppetta, 2013). Total attendance across the workshops was 3271 non-unique students, meaning some students attended multiple workshops and therefore are counted multiple times in the total attendance numbers (Fagan & Scoppetta, 2013). These numbers, published in the CAE's 2012-2013 annual report, demonstrate a key aspect of SPWU undergraduate student culture: that academic support services, such as those offered by the CAE, are seen as tools to foster a robust academic career, rather than remediation activities designed only for developmental writers. At many institutions of higher education, there is a stigma attached to utilizing academic support services because the belief is that one only visits a writing center if one is struggling with assignments or lacking writing skills. Writing centers are often looked upon as places where students play catch up, rather than a space of academic "rigor."

While the CAE certainly assists struggling and developmental writers, the 76% of the undergraduate population electing to meet with tutors, 59% of Adult Learner Program students, most of whom are nontraditional students with full-time jobs and families who only attend campus once a week for classes, and the large number of students opting to attend workshops suggest that the CAE is a normative component of the SPWU experience. This culture of academic support as a step to academic excellence is embodied in the mission of SPWU, which is reflected in the CAE's mission as well:

> In concert with the SPWU mission of providing a rigorous education for a diverse student population within a caring environment that promotes the growth of the whole person, the Center for Academic Excellence serves as a resource for SPWU and the Greater XXX community that fosters the academic success and growth of learners and future community leaders. To embody the University's values of compassionate service, academic excellence, respect, integrity, and diversity, the Center for Academic Excellence offers a range of services that contribute to a vibrant academic community (Center for Academic Excellence, 2012).

In fact, often, the CAE is perceived as a hub for academic leadership on campus. The undergraduate peer tutoring program is robust, employing approximately 30-35 undergraduate tutors each semester. New tutors take EDUC 201 (Peer Tutoring in the Content Area or Peer Tutoring in Writing), and they continually engage in various professional development opportunities during their tenure as tutors, including teaching workshops, conference presentation and attendance, and events that offer team building experiences.

This setting, like any other, is unique and fluid: some more overt characteristics include the culture regarding academic support as described above and the single gender environment. Therefore, any "conclusions" drawn from this study certainly will not be generalizable to another setting, to other writing groups, or even to the same group at a

different time, as group as well as individual identities can shift and change. At the same time, I do believe that this study contributes and adds to the rather meager body of research thus far conducted with undergraduates who participate in writing groups. The in-depth nature of qualitative research provides opportunities for specific, local and always contingent insights into human interactions and processes that, within the contexts of this study, may provide opportunities for others to both consider and to extend needed inquiries into this topic.

Actual Data Collection

While designing this study, one point of concern was whether or not students would want to participate in a writing group: if the founding members failed to form writing groups, I would certainly have difficulty studying students' experiences in writing center-facilitated writing groups. I was right to be concerned about this issue. In the end, only two of the four proposed writing groups formed, and of those two, only one group maintained consistent membership and met regularly throughout the semester. The other group met once, with very minimal attendance, and then disbanded, which will be discussed in depth later in this dissertation. However, what I had not anticipated, an event that necessitated a revision of focus and methodology to this study, was that I would have difficulty recruiting participants from the writing groups and garnering their consent to participate in the study.

Recruitment and Participants

In December and November 2013, I had spoken with four undergraduate peer tutors who were interested in starting writing groups that would meet over the course of

the 2014 spring semester. Therefore, when the tutors returned to campus in late January, I met with those students about proceeding with the writing groups. One tutor, Serena (a pseudonym), had already begun putting together her writing group, so the other three tutors decided to work together on advertising and recruitment for their writing groups. Depending on the response they got, they would split into separate groups later on.

Serena quickly put together her writing group and gave me a list of names of her writing group members, so in early February, I sent a study recruitment email (see Appendix D) to Serena and the six other members of her writing group, as well as the other three tutors who were still attempting to put their own writing groups together. Only three individuals responded to my email, consenting to participate in the study: Harper, Camilla, and Serena (all pseudonyms). None of Serena's writing group members wanted to participate, and only one of the seven students who joined Camilla's writing group, Maria (a pseudonym), consented to participate. Moreover, one of the tutors decided not to participate in the study and also to withdraw from the writing group project. While I was nervous about losing a potential writing group and study participant, I also looked favorably upon this situation because I believe it demonstrated a lack of coercion in my role as researcher. Because I supervise the undergraduate peer writing tutors and was transparent about the fact that I would be seeking their consent to study them and their writing groups as part of my dissertation research, I was concerned that these students would feel pressured to agree to start a writing group and/or participate in the study. My reasoning was such that if the fourth undergraduate peer tutor felt comfortable dropping out of the project, then even though power relations are still present between myself (researcher, supervisor, mentor, instructor) and the tutors (potentially

researched, supervisee, mentee, student), they were not interfering with the tutors' agency regarding their decision to start a writing group or to participate in this research study.

The ramifications of the lack of participation from writing group members were tremendous. First, I was unable to follow through with the proposed methodology, which included videotaped writing group sessions, as this action was only possible if all members of a group consented to be both in the study and filmed. In losing these data, I had to rely solely on interviews and my researcher journal as texts for interpretation. Second, because three of my four participants were founding members and undergraduate peer writing tutors, my line of inquiry for this project necessitated a shift, a shift that was crystalized when neither Harper nor Camilla was able to sustain their writing groups. Despite her efforts, Harper was unable to get a group together and Camilla's group, which included Maria, disbanded after the first meeting. Therefore, the data I was collecting during the interviews became focused on the experience of attempting to start a writing group and/or sustain a writing group and I adjusted my over-arching interview probes to reflect this change after the first round of interviews.

In short, of the four undergraduate peer writing tutors who volunteered to start writing groups, only three followed through, and of those three founding students, only one actually got a writing group off the ground that, in turn, met all semester long. All those founding students/peer writing tutors consented to be interviewed (whether or not their group took off), but only one of the other 13 writing group participants agreed to be interviewed. Therefore, the data collected from February 2014 to May 2014 consists of 11 interviews, with four individuals: Serena, Harper, Camilla, and Maria. Serena completed the proposed series of three interviews because her group continued to meet.

Camilla, Harper, and Maria were all interviewed twice: the final post-writing group interview was eliminated, as the mid-point interview effectively served as both a mid-point and post-group interview as their groups had disbanded. No group consented to be videotaped.

Based on this participation (or lack thereof), I had to modify my research questions:

1) What happens when I interview voluntary participants in an undergraduate writing center-facilitated writing group?

1a) Prior to the start of the writing group, what are participants' individually reported expectations for and reasons for starting the group and/or participation in the group?

1b) What are their reported experiences as participants in and/or founding members of the group in mid-point and/or end-of-semester interviews?

2) Within the mid-point and end-of-semester interviews, if they participated in a writing group, what are their perceptions of how their participation in the groups has affected or not affected their writing and writing practices?

3) What are their reported perceptions of the "value," if any, of participation in and/or experiences trying to start a writing group at mid-point, and/or end-of-semester interviews?

4) What do my self-reflexive data, gathered over the course of this research study, contribute to my understandings, questionings and problematizings of my own interpretations of all study data, as well as my experience collecting that data?

Methods of Representation, Analysis, and Reflexivity

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. However, I did not consider the transcriptions particularly helpful alone: I found them to be cumbersome and incomplete, a series of words on a page. In order to interact with the data, I had to listen to interviews and work from the audiotape rather than the transcriptions. To begin, I listened to one interview, maybe 3-4 times in a single sitting, stopping, rewinding and re-listening within each listen. During these listening sessions, I typed notes on what was that said by the participants in the interviews and I also made a few notes about tone, inflection, and other verbal cues, such as laughter. All these notes were colored black. I also included reflections about my own interjections as the researcher and thoughts about my feelings and behavior during the interview, which were colored in blue. Finally, I typed, in red, observations that I made about the interview while listening that I thought might be something to consider more deeply at a later date. I repeated this process for each interview, until I had a color-coded set of notes for each interview.

However, I needed to keep listening and decide how to represent the layers I was exploring (what was said, what I thought, and what it might "mean"). I decided the first step was to create narrativized representations of the interviews, focused on what the participants said or what Reissman (2008) refers to as "the told – informants' reports of events and experiences" (p. 54). To construct these narratives, I pulled up the notes on one computer screen, began to type on my other screen (I have a two-monitor set up), and once again began to listen. As with the note compilation, I would listen to each interview 3-4 times, with stopping, rewinding, and re-listening within a single listen, while creating the narrative of each interview. Once I was finished with a set of interviews from a

particular participant, I repeated this process of listening, this time adding to the narratives details about my comments, concerns, questions, musings, and observations of myself, the participant, and my interactions with the participant, which are set apart from the initial "told" narrative by italics. I also wove data from my research journal about my thoughts into the italicized narratives. The italicized sections are my reflexive work, designed to challenge and disrupt (Pillow, 2003), and are further examined in Chapter V. This in-depth listening, in combination with taking multiple layers of notes, was how I began to develop some "themes" from this data and thus further analyze and interpret, in Chapter V, the constructed representations of the participants' experiences, my experiences, and our shared experiences, as the representations were already interpretations.

Chapter IV

DATA: REPRESENTIONS/INTERPRETATIONS OF EXPERIENCE

Participant Profiles

These profiles are designed to offer basic interpretive snapshots of the four study participants. They begin with basic demographic information about each participant, but I also included some observations I have made that I believe to be relevant in painting a more robust picture of these individuals. Because I know them in my role as the CAE's Writing Center Administrator, the observations I present are a product of this relationship with them and my interactions with them in this capacity. Camilla, Serena, and Harper were all writing tutors, so, at the time of the interviews, I was also their supervisor/instructor for the work they do peer tutoring. At the time of these interviews, I had been working with Camilla and Serena for one semester. Previous to these interviews, I had not met Maria, but had heard positive comments about her from colleagues who observed her in the MERCY Bridge program the previous summer. Harper is the participant I have known the longest and with whom I had the most developed relationship: At the time of the interview, she had been tutoring for the CAE for three years and is a constant presence in the department.

Maria

Maria is a first-year, Iranian-American female student. She is a member of the MERCY Bridge cohort, which is a grant-funded, five-week, summer program aimed at promoting college-readiness for incoming students who have been assessed as "at-risk"

because of low SAT scores. A Biology major with 3.7 GPA, Maria has impressed those around her despite some of her academic skill shortcomings and shown herself to be a leader. In her first semester, she organized a very well-attended and well-received women's leadership event for students. Maria avails herself of the resources available to her to help her develop as a student and strengthen her writing and math skills, in particular. Maria is the only writing group participant who is not a writing tutor and founding member to agree to be interviewed for this research project.

Camilla

Camilla, an African-American female, is a second-semester sophomore at SPWU and a first-generation college student. She is a declared Psychology major and maintains a 3.5 GPA. In her short time at SPWU, she has immersed herself in various social and academic activities. In addition to being a second-semester writing tutor, she served as peer mentor for SPWU's MERCY Summer Bridge Program, she is currently a writing coach in a partnership with a local high school exposing students to college-level writing, and has been hired to be Residential Assistant in the fall. Despite the fact that she is excelling academically and socially at SPWU, Camilla has disclosed to several CAE staff members that she, at times, feels guilty for the opportunities with which she has been presented when she considers the struggles of her family. She feels a tension between where has come from and the promise of the path she is on now, and has considered dropping out of school as a result. Thus far, faculty, staff, and other students have been successful in convincing her to stay.

Harper

Harper is a second-semester senior, and also the CAE's most senior writing tutor. Harper, a White student, began her higher education career at a local community college, transferring to SPWU as a sophomore. She is an accomplished poet and scholar, majoring in both English and Psychology. She carries a 3.9 GPA and has been the recipient of many academic awards, is a member of several collegiate honor societies, and is involved with many other academic leadership activities on campus, including editing SPWU's literary magazine *Interpretations* and serving as a writing coach in the CAE's high school college-readiness partnership. As her supervisor, I believe Harper to be the CAE's strongest writing tutor in terms of technique and also with her interactions with tutees. Harper knows how to build relationships and earn tutees trust and respect. As a result, she often serves as a mentor to her less experienced peers. She has immense potential to excel in academia as she is deeply intellectual and inquisitive. However, because of deep-seeded family-centered issues, Harper has struggled with her mental and physical health that have, at times, necessarily forced academics to take a back seat.

Serena

Serena, a White female, is a second-semester senior and just beginning her second semester as a writing tutor. Usually, writing tutors are hired in their sophomore or junior years so they can maintain the position for several years, but Serena came highly recommended from her English professors. An English major with a 3.8 GPA, Serena enjoys creative writing and, at the time of the study, was waiting to hear from MFA programs. Serena's role as a writing tutor is her first foray into academic leadership despite her strong academic background as an honors student.

Maria

Pre-Interview

Maria begins by telling me that her writing group has its first meeting this afternoon, though she must miss it because of a pre-scheduled reception. She does not know anyone else in the group except the group's founder, Camilla. However she is excited about participating in the group. Maria reports that she feels she struggles with her writing and felt joining the group would be a good way to improve her writing skills. Camilla approached Maria by texting her, which makes Maria laugh. Maria recounts that Camilla told her that: "There was going to be a writing group going on. We are going to be helping each other with writing. Bring a positive attitude and Camilla was my peer mentor over summer and so I already know her and know she is an amazing writer so I said yes."

Maria hopes that joining the writing group will help her streamline her writing process: she wants to be able to sit down and write a paper more quickly. She wants to be able to better organize her ideas and get them into written paragraphs more quickly. Maria elaborates on her writing struggles, explaining that, for her, writing is a long process. She describes how when she first is given an assignment, like the reflective and argumentative papers she has this semester, she immediately comes to the CAE because she has problems with reading and does not always understand the writing prompt. Actually, first, she says she goes to her professor to make sure she understands the assignment and then she consults with a writing tutor about her ideas to develop a thesis and outline ("ten thousand times," she says), which she will then show her professor for approval. Then, the writing begins: Maria describes a laborious process that often ends in

a product that "isn't the best." She goes back and forth about wording because she claims her vocabulary is not that broad and she also maintains she has problems with grammar. To combat this, she does a lot of revising and editing, and more revising and editing, before she finally turns in a paper. Maria has a strong desire to shorten this process. She explains that as an undergraduate she has all these resources at the CAE to help her with the process, but she plans on getting her Masters and she understands that she needs to be able to write without so much support. Part of the reason Maria has joined the writing group is because she wants to see how others write:

> Sometimes when I watch other people, I'm like oh, I never thought about writing a thesis like that. And everyone has their own ideas on how they write so I kind of want to observe and see what I can do better…And also shows you you are not alone and you can grow together. Growing by yourself is not as, I don't know: Teamwork is better than being alone.

Laughing again, Maria tells me how she does currently like writing. But explains that because it is so hard for her right now. "I want to be able to love it and I know I can do it. It's just going to take some time."

I began this interview in a way that sounds awkward when I listen to it because of the juxtaposition it conveys: I tell Maria that I heard her writing group was meeting soon, but that she could not make it because of a workshop. She corrects me that it is a reception that is keeping her from the meeting, and then we both laugh after I say "Oh, a reception" in a tone that suggests "excuse me for not knowing you will be attending such a fancy event." What I think is awkward is that I feel compelled to begin the interview asserting a familiarity with both Maria and the writing group's process. I believe I acted in this way to establish a friendly report, but it also reveals to this participant that I am very closely monitoring the progress of the writing groups and that I have been in

communication with Camilla, who started Maria's writing group. In this sense, I am also perhaps (re)establishing my authority not only as the researcher, but also as an administrator in the CAE who supports writing tutors and writing projects. I continued this tone of encouragement throughout the interview and also used it as a way to get Maria to expand on initial answers. For example, I often used phrases such as "Go on! Tell me about it!" and "you tell me!"

After Maria tells me about her lengthy writing process, I immediately make moves to encourage her that what she is doing is fine. I tell her that I think her writing process is a good one, and I truly mean it: she has identified what works for her, which is commendable. In my experience, not many college students are as in tune with their own processes as Maria seems to be. I see a self-awareness in Maria that is often not as advanced in other students her age. She is thinking about developing as a writer, not for the sake of a better paper, but to truly progress as a student. Also embedded in my praise is the idea that the goal of academic support, like tutoring, is to eventually foster independent learning. This praise exposes a contradiction in some of the very foundations of writing tutoring philosophies (and educational philosophies in general). On one hand, learning is social process and working with your peers is a useful part of that process; on the other hand, often the goal of such learning is to be able to do something independently.

When she quickly counters my praise by asserting that she wants to try to shorten her process and write with less support, I try to further support her by commenting "that's an excellent point" and assure her that her goals to work on her writing now (before graduate school) are very worthy endeavors. I also use this point as an

opportunity to bring the conversation back to writing groups and ask her how she sees her participation in the writing group working to fulfill her goals. Once Maria explains that she is interested in joining the writing group to see how others write, I corroborate her thinking by saying, "A writing group is a great way to get insight on how others work." However, I also stress that working in a writing group it is different from a one-on-one tutoring appointment. Though Maria does not suggest a similarity, it seemed important for me to delineate that difference, given the struggles some of the founding members were having at that particular with their recruitment, which I had learned about in previous interviews. I saw this as an opportunity to clarify expectations to Maria, even though she seemed to be wanting to join the writing group for exactly the reasons an instructor of writing/writing center administrator might hope.

Mid-Point/Final Interview

I began the interview by recapping with Maria where she was when we last spoke: her writing group, founded by Camilla, was just about to start. In a soft-spoken voice, Maria describes how her group had decided that they would meet every other Wednesday at noon. Maria could not attend the first meeting because she had a previously scheduled reception for the MERCY Bridge Program, which she is careful to point out she cleared with Camilla who said it was okay. Camilla rescheduled the next meeting for the following Wednesday. Maria describes how she and Camilla waited, but no one else showed up, so they decided to cancel the group because everyone was so busy. I asked Maria if she was upset that the group got cancelled. She explains she would not say she was upset, but she was a little sad because she was looking forward to participating in the

group and working on her writing. “It would have been nice to have it, but it worked out like this, so…” she trails off.

When asked what Maria thinks could have been done differently in the future, Maria suggests going and finding people who actually will be able to participate, though she is not sure how that could happen. She suggests recruiting in writing classes or offering a survey gauging interest through the CAE and find people who are truly interested: “I think what happened here was that we were kind of asked and I guess some people probably said yes, and didn’t realize oh I can’t make it, and that’s why the group didn’t end up well.” She stresses the importance of finding people who are interested and have the time to devote to the group.

At the time of this interview, it is clear that Maria is going to be the only writing group participant who has not founded a group who has agreed to be interviewed. Though I am grateful for her participation, I cannot shake this nagging voice that tells me that this interview is not as important as the others, which is probably why this is the shortest interview of this research project. While I ask her about what happened with the writing group, to discuss any suggestions she had for trying to get a writing group off the ground, and ended the interview by asking her if there was anything else she wanted to tell me about her experience with “the writing group that never happened” (there was nothing), I did not elect to go any further in my questioning. At this point, I had already necessarily refocused my line of inquiry to focus on the founding members and their experiences trying to start a writing group. But in dismissing Maria’s interviews, what might I be overlooking?

What is interesting to note about Maria's second interview is that she consistently refers to a "we" (ex. "I don't know how we can do that") when talking about the logistics of the group and recruitment, rather than referring to Camilla, "you," or the CAE. This language could suggest that Maria has identified as part of the writing group despite the fact the group did not meet. Or, as Maria is a student who regularly seeks support at the CAE, perhaps her identification is with the larger academic community of the CAE. Either way, "we" can be read as a connection Maria has formed, which I view as a positive outcome.

Camilla

Pre-Interview

Camilla is literally sitting on the edge of the chair across the desk from me. Bright-eyed and nodding frequently, she gushes about how much she loves writing: "It is my biggest, biggest passion and I want everybody else to love writing too." She elaborates that she is interested in starting a writing group because she believes that she can get people excited about writing and help them to develop stronger writing skills. She frequently references her advanced writing class. It was her advanced writing professor who recommended her as a writing tutor and it was that class that helped her to be more "open" to other's feedback about her writing. Camilla explains that there were only six people in that class so they often utilized in-class writing groups to share writing and offer feedback. This was a process she found immensely helpful, and over the course of the class she believed her writing got stronger. She does note that, at first, she felt discouraged when her classmates offered her feedback because she thought that meant she was not a good writer. She admits that she was sensitive about her work and was

unsure of how other people's suggestions could help her. But that changed after she saw herself excel in her other academic writing classes and she now welcomes other people's feedback.

The excitement in Camilla's voice and face when discussing her love of writing quickly fades to trepidation when she details some of the difficulties she has already faced trying to start a writing group. She is nervous about this project, a nervousness she attributes to several factors. First, she feels discouraged by her experiences recruiting students for the group. She originally put together a group of four students: three were students she knew wanted to work on their writing and one was a student who responded to one of the advertisements about writing groups Camilla disseminated on campus. However, scheduling a time to meet proved difficult. Exasperated, Camilla describes her efforts, including requesting availability through Doodle, an online scheduling tool, with limited response. In an effort to find a common time, Camilla gave out her cell phone number and encouraged students to call or text her and she also emailed them multiple times. No one responded to her attempts. Camilla was discouraged that this first group failed to meet and states that she did not think the students were fully committed.

She hypothesizes that the lack of commitment stemmed from her perception that some students "only said yes because they felt like they had to." Camilla also notes that three of the students were adult learners and worked full time and she has found that adult learners, because they are part time and not on campus a lot, do not check their email, which was a factor in not being able to plan the group's first meeting. Camilla found three other students, and one from the previous group, who were interested in being part of a writing group and this group is scheduled to meet next week. One of the new group

members was in Camilla's advanced writing class and was recommended by another tutor. She texted that student and she was excited and talked in person to two others. She admits, "That should have been my first group because they were people that I know. It was kind of a brain blast last minute." However, Camilla is still nervous because she felt she put the group together last minute, scrambling after her first group fell through. She is also concerned because she is unsure about her writing group's expectations. She reiterates that she just wants others to feel comfortable and passionate about writing.

While much of my interactions with Camilla in the interview was asking questions about her experiences, when Camilla was describing the challenges she faced with recruitment and scheduling for her writing group and how nervous she was about the project in general, I took on the role of cheerleader, confirming that it is hard to get participation for writing programming, even when there is interest for a program. I empathized with her scheduling problems and validated her reported disappointment by sharing a story about my own struggles scheduling undergraduate tutors and high school students for our high school writing partnership program, calling the experience "a nightmare." I commiserated:

> *I know, it's frustrating because there's clearly an interest, but scheduling becomes very difficult. We find that even with programs here at the CAE. I know you are part of the [high school college-readiness] program, like that has been a nightmare to schedule. Well, I don't what to say a nightmare, well, you know what I mean, like, we could do a lot more if we didn't have the constraints of trying to negotiate basically 20 peoples' schedules, you know…I'm sorry that you felt that way, but I also understand. I know I've tried to do things here where it's like oh this is not going to work out because people are not participating.*

I also assured her that the failed group was a good experience, despite her frustrations. These assurances and camaraderie seemed to help her open up and it was that this point

she elaborated on some of the strategies she attempted in efforts to get the first group together such as giving out her cell phone number and texting.

Because Camilla was trying again with another group, I needed her not to be discouraged about her first experience so she would give the second try her full effort. At this point, I already knew that Harper's group would not be running, so without Camilla's group, there would only be one group in this study. As her supervisor, too, it is my job to encourage and support her, especially when overcoming challenges, which also accounted for some of my lengthy sets of advice and empathy. In my work with both professional and undergraduate writing tutors, I often use empathy to strengthen relationships. I started at SPWU as a professional writing tutor before becoming an administrator, so I like to talk about experiences I had when I was tutor to let them know that I understand how they feel – or if not ever fully able to understand, at least, I am able to position my interpretations of my experiences and feelings in relation to theirs. In this way, I feel like I am positioning myself as a peer, though I am not. I assume that discussing my own experiences as a tutor makes me more relatable to tutors, but they may not feel the same. Further, just because we were both writing tutors, does not mean our experiences, and our interpretations of said experiences, in that role were similar as this would assume a single, static identity and experience associated with the role of writing tutor.

Mid-Point/Final Interview

I began this interview recapping how at our last interview, Camilla's group was just about to meet. Though I could anticipate her answer, I asked, with a laugh, "How is

the writing group going?" Camilla, also letting loose a somewhat sheepish laugh, replies, "It's not going. At all." Camilla goes on to explain that everyone "bailed" on her. Though she switched around groups, no one showed up, except once, when one member came and they ended up talking for about ten minutes. Camilla assesses that the group wasn't really interested anymore so they just stopped coming. When asked if any of group members gave her reasons for dropping out of the group, Camilla notes that one student's internship had to take priority, while another student cited that the group met during her only break (lunch) during the day. Other students said they had homework to do, so they could not come. Camilla calls these reasons "little excuses" for why they could not come, save the student with the internship, which she concedes is "totally understandable." Camilla surmises that the students did not take the group seriously: "They probably didn't think it was a real thing. They probably just thought it was little group I was putting together just because." Her tone suggests a clear disappointment with the lack of participation, despite her best efforts.

To follow up, I asked what she thought we might do differently in the future to make students take a writing group more seriously. Camilla's answers spoke to issues of recruitment. She believed that more flyers to advertise would help so more students would seek out the group, instead of her recruiting for it, as she mostly reached to out to people to join either through email or in-person conversations. The students Camilla asked to join the group were mostly tutees of hers, except one student from her advanced writing class who Camilla knows loves writing and thought the group would be good for her. She also suggested more advanced planning – maybe the semester before the group meets instead of the beginning of the semester. "When I was sending out emails to recruit

them, they didn't really know what it was about, kind of felt like it was some stupid little group." Camilla concedes that maybe the informal way she recruited led to the lack of commitment. Though she approached students saying that she was starting a peer-to-peer writing group that would hopefully help to strengthen students' writing, she did not emphasis the importance of the commitment to the group and her goals for the group. She believes that if she were able to have a first meeting where everyone attended, that would have gone a long way in sustaining momentum and building a successful group.

Ultimately, Camilla feels she missed out. "I wish I would have had one," she giggles. "I feel like I would have grown as a writer too if I was in a writing group. I take my writing really seriously so I wanted the opportunity to get feedback from others and have that communal experience." At this point I comment to Camilla that there seems to be interest for writing groups, but it is hard to get people to commitment. "Exactly," she exclaims.

When I ask Camilla what she learned from this experience, she again talks about the messages she sent about the group to potential participants in the beginning. She learned that she had to do a better job "selling" the group as a worthwhile academic endeavor to encourage students to commit: "I could have been a cheerleader for it. I could have done more of that." This surprised me because Camilla generally seems like an enthusiastic person, so I asked her to elaborate. She clarifies that she should have been more enthusiastic about the group and its potential benefits rather than just saying, hey join this group. Camilla also wanted to stress her sense of frustration throughout this experience. She talked about her frustration because she felt like she was doing something wrong because students were not coming to the group meetings. She told me

she felt better after we [she and I] talked and I encouraged her not to take the lack of participation personally. Camilla admits that she still did see the lack of participation as her fault, and it took a little bit of time for her to let go and realize that she could not be upset at people for not coming.

I spent the first part of the interview asking Camilla a lot of logistical questions, digging deeper into how she contacted her group participants, who they were, and why she thought the group was unable to get going. My responses at this time were mostly "uh-huh" and "yes." Camilla seems demoralized by her experience and I empathize with Camilla, showing that in some of my longer comments. For example, we had a little conversation about how we don't want people to feel pressured to join, but we do want them to join the group and this is a tough, contradictory position to be in. I am feeling this way about this research project: I cannot be coercive in getting participants, but I do need people to participate.

I also feel this way about writing center work: we want students to take advantage of writing programming, but we do not want them to see it as mandatory. This comes from the belief that people should have agency to choose, rather than be forced to do something they do not want to do: if they feel they have a choice, they will be more invested in that choice. This is a long-standing idea that has permeated writing center theory and practice, and one I have clearly bought into in both my everyday professional practice (I generally discourage professors from mandating a student make an appointment at the writing center; no wait, I'm lying. In certain contexts, I'll think it's a great idea and support the professor in setting it up, but the general rule is no) and also

in the methodology of this study (the writing groups in this study were specifically labeled as "voluntary").

But, let me poke at this idea a little further. So it is preferred that students elect to use a writing center because if they are forced to, then writing centers cannot claim to be the non-traditional, marginal spaces of learning that they often claim to be. McKinney (2013) has done some very interesting work challenging some of the grand narratives of the writing center, including this idea that writing centers are iconoclastic places. She also interrogates the narrative of the writing center as a cozy home, and the writing center as a place that serves all students. I see this issue of voluntary participation as a branch of what McKinney identified as the narrative of writing center as iconoclastic. Like McKinney, I am wary of and trying to be more conscious of interrogating long-standing, coherent, totalizing stories about what writing centers are and what they do. As McKinney notes, it's not that these narratives are not true, but it is problematic when they are presented as universal, and not a version of a representation of a writing center. McKinney equates these narratives with tunnel vision: if all that is seen is the one narrative, what else is being missed? When I focus on writing center work only as voluntary, what am I excluding as a possibility? What am I devaluing?

As Camilla started to discuss factors that she thought influenced participation, I knew I wanted to try to get more critical reflection from her about this experience and what she might do differently in the future. In my mind I was thinking, more flyers as a solution? I want to push back on that! But I don't. As her supervisor or instructor, I would have. But as a researcher, I was not sure how to do it or even if I should do it

because I would not want her to think I was criticizing her thinking and then have her feel uncomfortable, which might affect her willingness to answer future questions.

Later in the interview, I began to talk about what I learned, which was not a calculated move, but in listening to audiotape and thinking about how I was hoping Camilla would do more in-depth reflection on her experience, I might have unconsciously modeled what I wanted from her. I said:

> *I think what I have been learning about this experience is that there is interest, but it is hard to get the commitment. And it seems like the one group that had run was Serena's group and she said that once she was able to get everybody to that first meeting it grew from that but if she hadn't gotten to that first meeting…we just had to get everyone in the room and then people started to gel.*

I used this comment as a way to transition into rather bluntly asking Camilla what she learned from this experience, which is a massive assumption on my part and one in which I am deeply invested as an educator. The assumption embedded in this question is that one learns from experience, so even an event that is characterized as a "failure" can still be of value, if one takes away an understanding that can be applied or shared in the future. This narrative of failure as an opportunity is omnipresent in American society, seen in trite phrases such as "learn from your mistakes," widespread celebratory stories of innovation by way of failure such as the invention of penicillin, or even the common research convention to identify a study's limitations and make suggestions regarding what researchers might do differently if reproducing the study. The message an individual receives is that you <u>should</u> learn from your mistakes, and, extrapolated more broadly, from your experiences. And I certainly reinforced this notion to Camilla with my questions and closing comments to her.

I ended the interview by offering Camilla advice about how I thought she should view her experience, which certainly was me completely shedding the role of researcher and stepping into my supervisory role. I felt like I had to take this action based on some of her final comments about how upset she was about the group being a "failure." I had to make her see there was value in her experience. I reiterated that we were trying something new, which is difficult, but I did not want that to be a license to dismiss the experience or her role in the experience. Instead I encouraged her to think: okay, so this did not work, but what can we do next time? What might we do differently? I reemphasized the importance of taking what might be considered a failure and learning from the experience. After all, I have to buy into this idea myself to help me make sense of this dissertation research.

Harper

Pre-Interview

Harper comes in and sits in a chair across from me, drawing up her knees to her chest. When I ask her why she wants to start a writing group, she pauses at first, and then explains that as a writing tutor is she always looking for ways to foster a better writing community and students' love of writing. She thinks, that based on what she understood from my explanation of writing groups, that the writing group will be even more informal and peer-to-peer than writing tutoring:

> We can rant if we want. We can have fun together. We can help each other. My hope would be that if we can get a good group going is that people can in supporting each other and working with each other some students will begin to like writing, or at least not resent it as much. That's what I would hope would happen.

Starting a writing group is actually something that is not a new experience for Harper. She started a creative writing group on campus called The Writer's Society that met regularly for about a year and half before group members' schedules caused them to disband. Harper stresses that the group are all still friends and still share writing sometimes, but they no longer formally meet. She also describes some of the group's norms: They met every week or every other week and everyone was encouraged to bring a piece of writing. At meetings, group members would take turns sharing their writing and offering critiques to other writers. Harper explains their procedure:

> We would usually have the person read their piece out loud and then it would either be passed around or they would have brought multiple copies and then we'd point out strong areas in the writing and then we would give the writer ideas as to how to make it a little stronger. Sometimes we'd just talk about writing in general, you know some of the struggles of say trying to set up the plot of a story or choosing the right words in a poem.

Ultimately, Harper believes her time with The Writer's Society was valuable:

> It was beneficial to everyone in that it helped us to become better writers, I think, and we had places to share our work because a lot of writing is kind of done in a solo capacity and it was really good to have a community where we could share that and not just be alone in our rooms writing.

Though she had a positive past experience with a writing, Harper is tentative about trying to start a writing group this semester because she does not see a clear outcome: "I could see it going many different ways." She seems hesitant to explain what her concerns are, but I encourage her to elaborate. First, Harper believes it is going to be difficult for people to commit. She notes how people often show interest in something, but then do not follow through. She is also worried the writing group might peter out as semester progresses, as students get busier, schedules change, and generally things get more difficult. Second, Harper is curious to see which students will join the groups and

how that will affect the groups. She wonders, will it be struggling students who want help? Or strong writers who are motivated students? Average people?? Harper thinks they are harder to get interested in anything. Harper is also curious about the majors/areas of study of potential group members. She thinks the writing groups will attract mostly students from the humanities. She hypothesizes that nursing students will not join because they do not have many papers to write. But, she is hoping to attract students in the social sciences. Harper, a psychology major, claims that most other psychology majors do not think about writing as much as they should. Finally, Harper admits she is a little worried that the students are going expect that she will edit papers. She elaborates that she tried to be really clear about what the group does, but she relates that she already had a conversation with a student who was interested in the group because she wanted one-on-one tutoring. I tell Harper that I am concerned about that as well, but the hope is that the writing group will be another type of writing practice that students will find valuable in addition to one-on-one tutoring. Harper picks up on this idea and elaborates, saying: "I think particularly if you are struggling, well even if you are doing well, the more ways you come at something as far as learning the better you are going to be, the more well-rounded you are going to be."

When I ask Harper about her writing practices and feelings towards writing, she asks if I can be more specific. I tell her no, because I tell her I want her to interpret the question in her own way, but I do repeat the question and break it down into two separate questions to make the inquiry more digestible. So, first she discusses her writing practices. Harper starts by telling me that writing is one of her strengths: "A lot of it, most of it, comes really easily to me, but I'm always looking for the next way to make it

better. So I always, as far as academic writing, I take comments on essays and papers really seriously and I'll ask questions." At this point, Harper trails off, so after a bit of silence, I interject a question, asking Harper if she thinks she learns from the students she works with who are struggling writers. She, after a very long pause, she comments: "That is an interesting question. I know I learn a lot about teaching." But, Harper has to think more before responding because she had not considered the question before. However, she thinks she would say, yes, she does grow in her own writing by working with struggling writers. She articulates that helps her to be clear in her writing because she sees so much writing that is unclear and she wants to avoid that messiness. She also states that the work she does with struggling writers encourages her to look at her habits ("good, bad, or something I want to bury") with writing because of what she sees in other's writing.

From there, we move into discussing Harper's writing practices, which she says include procrastination, especially with academic writing. Tying her writing back to writing groups, Harper says: "That's one thing I like about writing group is that you are forced to bring something." Harper also relates how her writing practices are not ones she recommends to students in tutoring sessions. She does not like to outline or plan; she just sits down and writes as she goes. She elaborates on her process and she and I have a brief conversation about how our writing processes are similar. We discuss how, as strong writers, we tend to bend the rules we might recommend to others when teaching/tutoring writing. I offer an analogy about learning to play music: at first you learn to read, and do scales, and practice, but once you become proficient, at a certain point, you freestyle and jam: "do your own thing." Harper likes my comparison and she feels that way as well.

Though, she does note that with a harder writing task, such a large research project in psychology, she returns to a more step-by-step process that she would teach other students and is forced to be more aware of her process.

As Harper describes her feelings towards writing, she begins by stating that writing excites her and clarifies that she is referring to both creative writing and academic writing. Whether it is a new idea for a poem or a paper assignment, writing makes Harper happy. Sometimes she might not be initially jazzed if the assignment is on a topic with which she has no interest or if the professor has given a particular format that is stifling, but eventually, once she gets writing, she'll get into it:

> It makes me happy and get excited and as I write I discover things. If it's creative writing I discover things about myself and if it's academic writing, I discover new ideas. I just think that writing is such a discovery process and I love learning. I always prefer papers to tests, that kind of thing. If I'm overwhelmed with papers with a lot of classes, you know, I kind of lose some of the joy there, but if I can get into a paper, even if I'm crazy stressed with homework, I still enjoy it. I don't know, I think my feelings towards writing are all positive. So I'd love to share that with others. I want other people to feel that. I know I might not make them obsessed with it, but maybe if I can at least get rid of some of the dislike of writing, I'd love to see that happen.

I interject, noting to Harper that inherent in what she just said is the idea that most students do not like writing as she does and that she is not in the norm. She agrees with my observation, elaborating that based on what she has seen as a writing tutor, or just in hanging out with her friends who are not "English nerds," writing is just about getting a paper done, turning it in, and trying to get a good grade. For Harper, though, she explains that the actual writing is the important part. Yes, she cares about grades, but she also enjoys writing. Most of her friends and the students she has worked with get the grade and move on. Harper reveals that even if she gets an A, she will look at the professor's comments and want to do better the next time she writes. She does not often see others

feel the joy she feels when she writes. More often she sees resentment, frustration, or apathy. "I rarely see people excited about it." She ends the interview by emphasizing her curiosity about how the writing groups will turn out. She is hopeful, but that hope is certainly mixed with apprehension.

I felt invigorated after Harper's first interview for several reasons. First, I know Harper well. She is an excellent student, model writing tutor, and a thoughtful, conscientious person. I thought she would be the perfect student to try start a writing group: she had participated in a writing group previously so she had experience, she excels in the academic endeavors I have witnessed her embarked on (independent studies, her coursework, editing SPWU's literary magazine, tutoring high school students, etc.), and she is a seasoned writing tutor with a lot of experience. Moreover, Harper has a keen understanding of the importance of writing within the larger context of learning. For example, rather than simply stating she loves to write, as another student might, Harper makes statements like "It makes me happy and get excited and as I write I discover things. If it's creative writing, I discover things about myself and if it's academic writing, I discover new ideas. I just think that writing is such a discovery process and I love learning." Her language here demonstrates her understanding of concepts that are foundational in composition and writing studies about discovery and writing-to-learn. Generally, I was very thankful that she agreed to participant in this study. I expected that she would be able to put together a solid writing group, be a dynamic writing group leader, and potentially help to create an environment that would foster experiences that would prove interesting to study.

Second, I was also excited by how the interview played out. While some of it was me asking questions and her answering my questions, there were other parts of the interview where we were dialoguing back and forth, meaning were exchanging ideas, thoughts, and feelings. For instance, when Harper was discussing her writing process, I completely related to her process because it is very similar to mine, so I felt compelled to jump in and tell her my music metaphor, which she thought was apt. I also feel a kinship to her generally because I see myself as a student reflected in her. Harper and I are very different people with very different backgrounds and experiences, but we do share some common identities and philosophies (through my perspective) when it comes to learning, academic writing, teaching/tutoring writing, and academic prowess. Some of these similarities were highlighted in this interview, strengthening my feelings of identification and camaraderie with Harper. But, it would be irresponsible of me not to take a closer look at this relationship with the following questions: While I was feeling very warm and positive towards Harper, how was she feeling? And how do her feelings about her interactions with me factor into her version of her experience? And how do my feelings about her color my interpretation of her represented experience? Beyond feelings, how do our roles (tutor/supervisor) factor in? What is she unable to say to me? What have I silenced?

In re-listening to this interview, there is one spot that made me cringe. At the very beginning of the interview, I asked Harper why she wanted to start a writing group. In her answer, she used the phrase "from the way you explained the groups to me…" to describe what she hoped the groups would be. My reaction to her phrasing exposes several tensions that I have contended with throughout this process (and beyond). One

was the tension between my roles as a supervisor/mentor and researcher. Because I was supporting the writing tutors who were starting the groups, but then also studying their experiences, I felt awkward, at times, during the interviews that I classified under the research role umbrella, when something I discussed in my role as supervisor/mentor came up. I understand that one's various identities are entangled and fluid and any separation would be false, but it is hard to shake the classic, positive image of the researcher as unbiased observer, demonstrating how embedded these positivist assumptions are in my consciousness. This type of research, has been so pervasive that it is still difficult, despite my stated epistemologies and countless experiences, texts, and teachers who have offered contradictory and alternative views, to be open to other possibilities in research. I almost see myself as backsliding into a positivist, "objective," mode in some my actions as an interviewer, at times.

Embedded also in Harper's phrasing is a tension I often feel as an educator between being directive in my instruction and letting students find their own way. When discussing the potential of the writing groups with potential writing group founders, I told them that the groups could be whatever they wanted: that the group's values and norms could be set up by the group. However, this vagueness did not sit well with some of the potential group members, so I elaborated, vaguely ("I could be this, or you could do that…"), but what I took away from Harper's comment was that she took a set of expectations away from our conversation that she was then trying to replicate. In that sense, she is following instructions from me, rather than discovering what works for her and potential groups. On one hand, I liked what she had to say about her vision of

writing groups, but I'm less comfortable with it when I realize that her vision probably was a vision I offered her, rather than one she created on her own.

Mid-Point/Final Interview

I begin the interview by asking Harper how the writing groups are going and the answer is "not so well, for me anyway." Harper describes how she was initially very excited about the groups. She explains how she used word of mouth to let people know she was starting a group and gauge their interest. She also screened emails from students who contacted the CAE about the writing groups in response to other advertising. In describing the other types of advertising she did, Harper tells me how she sent an email publicizing the writing groups to the whole SPWU student body, created a slide that ran on all the television screens around campus, and distributed flyers in some classes. The CAE's administrative assistant would forward inquiry emails to Harper and then Harper would get back to interested students, asking them about times they were free. But then, she did not receive return emails.

Harper admits that the emails from students whom she did not know were frustrating. As she put it, "They would come to us. They would send these emails and say I'm really interested in this and I'd like to have more information, then I'd would email them back and then nothing would happen," her voice getting higher on the last three words. Of the eight or nine students who contacted Harper via email, only one got back to her. Harper describes in detail what she did each time she got an email and the kinds of communication she had with potential writing group participants, talking very quickly. She relates how at first she was pleasantly surprised by the initial interest in the writing

groups. But she reports her enthusiasm waned as only one person got back to her. Her voice gets soft and slow as she reiterates that nobody responded to her efforts.

Though, generally, this was not an unexpected turn of events for Harper: she was worried from the beginning about participant follow through, but she was more worried about the people she talked to about the groups in person. She says she expected fading interesting from the people she talked to in person, but because the inquiry emails were enthusiastic, peppered with phrases like "I'd really like to join this group," "this sounds really helpful," or "I'm really looking for more support outside of the classroom"), she was hopeful. That hope turned to befuddlement when they didn't get back to her. Harper articulates that they asked for the help, so it felt really "weird" to her that then they never followed up, placing stress on the "they." She seems very confused as to why someone who sought out the group voluntarily would not want to follow through and participate.

In reflecting on this lack of follow up, Harper says that she understands that people have busy schedules and that it is difficult to fit things in. Further, in hypothesizing why the groups did not work, she notes a possibility might be the connection to the CAE. She thinks it is possible students were looking for study tables or extra tutoring when they emailed about participating in the groups. Harper describes that she got that feeling with at least one of the students who emailed because the student revealed that she was not doing well with her writing and she was looking for extra support. Harper wonders if the student thought the groups were "a tutoring situation" and then decided that was not what she was looking for. She explains: "I told them that they were going to be peer led groups. I said I was a tutor, but I wasn't necessarily going to be tutoring. I said it would be a place where we could share our work and get feedback and

where we could vent if we wanted to and, um, discuss ideas and writing and all that. Basically, all the stuff we talked about as a group before we started this whole project." But ultimately, nothing panned out.

Harper repeats that she was disappointed she did not get the opportunity to participate in a group because she was excited and wanted to see what would happen. She then pauses for a while in reflection and admits that she had doubts about the project from the beginning: she was not sure how this experience was going to work out. Harper elaborates that she has seen a lot of lack of follow through by students in her years at SPWU. She stresses, though, that she is actually disappointed she did not get opportunity, but at the same time she was like "oh well, one less thing I have to do, I guess." She extrapolates that maybe students felt the same way about making the commitment to the group. She emphasizes the word commitment. The commitment seemed to be what stopped people. "At the CAE, you can make an appointment and come whenever it works instead of committing to every Wednesday or every other Thursday or something." Harper thinks that commitment might be a difficulty for people.

When I ask Harper what she might do differently if she were going to try to run a group again, she pauses for a while. Then her speech slows down and becomes softer and more deliberate. It is as if she is very carefully choosing her words or working through ideas. Harper says she might try more posters and flyers to advertise, even more than what she did, at the beginning of the semester. Another recommendation from Harper was to get faculty on board and have them help with the advertising. Harper suggests we could give faculty flyers to hand out in class. She notes that we do this for tutoring

appointments, so maybe students would respond better if the recommendation to join a writing group came from professors:

> In my experience as a tutor, that's been the biggest draw for students is when either I go into the classroom and say 'I'm a tutor and this is what I can do for you' or when the professor has the information and says 'Harper works at the CAE and she can, she can help you with this part of the process or this and then they kind of got that as a resource and its coming from within the classroom and that kind of motivates students.

By doing this, faculty would endorse a writing group as something useful. Harper clarifies that faculty would have to differentiate that it was a peer-lead group and not a study table or tutoring sessions. "But I think we could get that kind of almost group work culture within multiple departments from faculty with the students that might be more likely to draw people in." Again, Harper elaborates. She poses the scenario that if a student is struggling or wants to become a better writer, and they have the option of going to the CAE or a peer-lead group, a student might trust a tutor rather than a group to best help them. But if a professor endorsed the group, the student might view the writing group in a different light.

Harper believes ultimately she probably missed out on a learning experience, though she says, very softly, that this experience still was one:

> It's always interesting to me to watch dynamics among peers, especially when it comes to academics and supporting each other and all of that. Maybe it would have been helpful to me with my writing, I don't know. You know, as a student who usually does just fine without asking for any help, it would probably have been good for me to kind of be forced to go to this group and have something to share because I am being forced to kind of grow outside of my own, um, outside of what I already know. Because it's always good to get other perspectives.

When I ask Harper about what she learned seeing as she did say it was a learning experience, she tells me that this experienced reinforced to her that "the biggest battle"

with any event on campus is just clever advertising and inspiring people to participate. "That is the most important part." She explains that it has been her experience in the past, once you can "corral" people, you can work on a common interest. "But, it's hard to do that when they are just seeing little snippets of advertising." Harper takes a long pause. **"**You have to be really creative with the advertising."

After another long pause, I noted that it seemed like the advertising worked and people knew about the groups, but the commitment was missing. Harper initially agrees, but expresses suspicion about using email to recruit participants. She believes other writing group founding members had better luck asking people face to face to join: she claims committing to something over email is different than committing to something face to face. In Harper's eyes, email does not create a strong enough obligation.

When I ask Harper if there is anything else she wants to add before we close this interview, she thinks for a while and then tells me that she thinks that it is interesting that her experience can help my research even though "it seems like a negative, it can still, still gives you information." I respond by saying that: "Even when things fail they yield..." I trail off without finishing my sentence because Harper begins to speak. Talking over me, she agrees: "Yes, that's important too."

In the beginning of this interview, most of my questions were aimed at digging a little deeper into the procedures Harper employed trying to get her writing group started, such as "The people that emailed – how would they have found out about the writing group?" or "How many responses did you get via email" or "So then…you did…tell me more about that…". In re-listening, it almost seems as though I am conducting an investigation, trying to reconstruct Harper's steps so we can then reflect on what went

wrong, and by wrong, I mean why the group never started. After I get those questions out of the way, I moved onto questions that were aimed at reflecting on her experience such as, "How did that make you feel?", "Talk to me more about that disappointment…," and "what might you do differently/what did you learn?"

I have to admit, I was disappointed in what she told me she learned from the experience. I'm not sure what earthshattering insights I was expecting, and this kind of pressure now seems completely unfair in hindsight, but I thought Harper might have something else to say beside that it is hard to get students to participate and that advertising is key. This disappointment led me to push back on her observation when I told her that it seems like the advertising worked because students did inquire about the groups, but that exchange did not yield much further discussion other than Harper adding that she did not think email was the more effective way to communicate about a project like this. In a last ditch effort to somehow get Harper to make a more meaningful observation (my goodness, I sound so obnoxious, but that was what I was thinking at the time – what is "meaningful" anyway???), I asked her if she had anything else to add about her experience and that's when she told me that she thought it was interesting that her experience can "help me" in my research, despite the fact that the writing group was not a success. I wrote in my research journal afterwards that I felt like there were points in the interview that Harper was "telling me what she thought I wanted to hear," and that observation stemmed from this last part of our interview.

I would categorize Harper as a person who likes to please others and given our close relationship, I'm not surprised that she agreed to participate in both the writing group project and my research study. Even though I told her multiple times that her

participation in both was completely voluntary and it did not matter to me either way, I got the sense that she wanted to participate because, at least in part, because she knew it would help me. I feel very uncomfortable about this motivation because I did not want to be coercive in any way, but I certainly understand it and think that it is unavoidable when researching other people. The other reason I feel uncomfortable is because thinking about Harper sends me down a postmodern rabbit hole, which makes it difficult to then reconcile the current work at hand (e.g. narrativizing and analyzing other's experiences). For example, at first, I thought, if she is telling me what she thinks I want to hear, doesn't that invalidate her presentation of "her" experience? But, continuing along those lines, don't we all adjust what we say based on who we are saying it to, so then isn't this uncomfortable feeling really about the slipperiness of language and the unknowability of, well, everything.

One point of dialogue that stood out to me was how, in discussing Harper's suggestion about faculty recommendations, I made sure to clarify that what she meant was that faculty would recommend the groups to students as another way they could engage with writing and their practices, but that participation was voluntary. When I interjected that point, I did it because I felt I needed to reiterate the voluntary nature of the groups "on the record." Now, my insistence on having that point on audiotape and thus part of the record of the interview seems foolish because I know that Harper understood that the groups were voluntary. I believe that interjection was my own insecurity regarding how the writing groups were perceived for this study. As noted before, when I envisioned these writing groups, I saw them as something students would elect to participate in of their own free will and desire to work on their writing and

discuss their writing. I did not want students to think they were required to participate. The importance of choosing to participate is part of a deep-seeded writing center ethos that I noted and interrogated previously: a student should choose to visit the writing center, not be mandated to work with a tutor. Part of this focus on the voluntary can be connected to the iconoclastic nature of writing centers, but another has to do with relationship building between students and tutors. Often, forcing a student will only cause her to resent working with a writing tutor and the writing tutor will have to work even harder to tear down the barrier created by the dreaded mandatory appointment. Willingness and openness are two ingredients to a successful writing tutor-student relationship. Therefore, I felt a responsibility as a writing center director to make sure that these concepts translated to the writing center-facilitated writing groups that this study sought to examine.

Another quick piece of dialogue that jumped out at me upon re-listening was when Harper told me she was disappointed that her writing group never happened, but also a little relieved because it was "one less thing" for her to do. During the interview, I laughed when she said that, because I completely understand that sentiment. Harper was a busy student, she was in her second-semester senior year, and she had multitude of other projects she was working on. However, once again, a part of me was a little disappointed by Harper's brief utterance, even though I initially chuckled at it and identified with the feeling. Read one way, it's a benign, throwaway line. Read another, it's the musings of an overscheduled student, who welcomes crossing off yet another task on her to-do-list. Read yet another way, it's an admission that maybe the writing groups were not a priority for her, which I tell myself (and I would have also told her) is fine.

But this highlights a difference in my expectations for Harper as juxtaposed to the outcome of her involvement in the writing group project. Bluntly, if you had asked me at the beginning of this project who would get a writing group started, I would have put all my money on Harper. She had previous experience starting a writing group, she is a stellar writing tutor and student, and I've seen her head up other academic projects, such a poetry readings or literary magazines, with zest and gusto. So I was surprised that a Harper-founded writing group failed to materialize for this project. But, as Harper noted at the end of the interview, I still have plenty of material to work with for my research project, it is just not the content I thought I would have.

Serena

Pre-Interview

Serena appears a bit nervous to start the interview, but once she begins talking, she seems to relax. I find her tone to be warm, genuine, and earnest. One can see her eyes light up when she discusses writing and she seems authentically excited about her own writing, others' writing, and the writing group project. Serena describes why she was interested in starting a writing group by expressing her passion for writing: "I'm really passionate about writing – all types of writing, but specifically creative writing." Therefore, Serena apparently thought that starting a writing group would be not only a good way to share and review her own writing, but also would serve as a way to start a dialogue with others about writing, make an impact, and share her expertise as an English major. "It would be a good experience to just kind of get out there and interact with

people because I don't always get a chance to do that with my own writing, at least not in school." She elaborates that most people just write their papers and turn them in and do not have to opportunity to talk about their writing.

Serena is very nonchalant about how she recruited participants for her writing group: she details that her group members are just "some people that I knew." She notes that they are mostly sophomores and they are not part of her normal circle of friends. But, she thinks it is a group that will have something to share. The group is composed of students from a variety of majors. Serena tells me there is an Art History major, a Business major, and only one English major, other than herself. "They are people who like to write in their free time or obviously have papers and assignments." Serena emphasizes that she thinks the group is an "interesting mix of people." I tell Serena that I like that her group is comprised of diverse students – not all English majors – because it will be helpful to get a variety of perspectives from people writing in different disciplines. I explain to her that I was expecting that English majors might be drawn to a writing group, but pleasantly surprised to hear that other majors were interested as well.

When I ask Serena about her expectations, she pauses at first, and tells me that her first expectation is that it will be a lot of fun. "I'm excited for it. I think that this group of people is a pretty open group, so from what I can tell they are going to be fine working together and comfortable sharing and stuff." Serena clarifies that she is thinking about her role as writing group leader when answering this question. Therefore, she is also expecting that it might be difficult to get the group to stay on track because everyone does seem so open, so as a group leader, she is already thinking about ways she might redirect if conversation veers off topic. Serena is also expecting more creative work than

academic papers, but she admits that she might be surprised. Finally, Serena wonders if whether or not they might end up talking more about specific pieces of writing rather than writing in general, which she describes as complaining about writing or discussing issues with writing. She makes this assumption based on her knowledge that many of the other group members write as a hobby or as a mode of personal expression.

Because Serena mentioned that she expected that as the group leader she might need to help focus the group, I ask her if she is feeling responsible for this group. She pauses in thought, but then decides that she is not anxious in a concerning way, but she does feel a certain pressure:

> I think at this point, in terms of responsibility, I feel responsible for being a strong leader and I feel that my job at the moment, going into the first meeting, is to be motivating and really positive and to show that I am excited about this. And bring a piece of my own writing in right away because I think if I do that then it's going to break the ice and I'm going to get other people to really stick with it.

Serena is quick to note that she does not think anyone is going to leave the group, but she describes how she does feel responsible for building a team and sees herself as a team captain. At this point, I tell her I am going to put on my writing center administrator hat to reassure her that while it is smart for her to model behavior that she hopes the group will embrace, I do not want her to feel responsible if the group goes awry. I stress that part of the beauty of the groups being a pilot initiative is that we can see where they go, implying that there is no one right way that she should be pressured to follow.

In describing her writing practices, Serena explains that while she loves to write, she believes it has taken her most of her college career to figure out how she writes. She describes how she made the shift from thinking about having to get papers done to becoming more relaxed, calm, and draft-orientated. She understands now that a paper

does not have to be perfect on the first try. Serena thinks the evaluation of her process is a good one and she is looking forward to bringing rough drafts to the writing group for review. In particular, she gives an example of how she might construct a paragraph:

> In that paragraph, say I can't decide on the word I want to use describe something, I will just list them with slashes in between, almost like this really bizarre listing prose poem, all the ways I could write a sentence one right after another. I do that because if I read it over I can hear which one sounds better, which I think would be really interesting to explain to my writing group and bring to them and say, 'okay will you read these out with me and tell me what you think sounds better.'

She stresses that she is still figuring out her process, but that generally, "it's a lot of collaging things together."

Serena giggles when I ask her about her feelings toward writing. She responds by clarifying that she is extremely passionate about writing:

> When I was little, my mom and grandmother too would read books to me and to me that was a really huge thing because that was one of the ways they showed me that they loved me because they spent time doing that. So when I write, I write to show other people that I love them.

I could not contain myself here as I teared up a bit, so I blurt out to Serena that her response was the nicest answer to that question I ever heard, and then we both laugh.

I move to close the interview, but Serena asks if she can add something, to which I reply, "Absolutely!" Serena admits that she "comes on really strong about this writing thing," but one of her expectations is that she will learn a lot about how to successfully communicate her ideas to a group of people who aren't English majors and maybe not looking for symbols or over-arching themes or may not be interested in what is being written. She notes that writing is so much in one's own head, so she thinks it would be helpful to share her thoughts and ideas with others. Serena also elaborates on her motivations for starting the writing group:

> I think another reason why I am drawn to this is because I like that leadership, club, forming a team thing. But, I've never really done anything official like that before so I think it will be interesting to learn how to be the captain of a ship like that where you have to do emails and keep everyone together and in the loop…I'm really excited to be that person. It will be a good new experience all around.

At this point, I offer her an example of this "captain" role with my book club: while everyone participates and the book club is egalitarian, the founder of the group does take on a leadership role in terms of scheduling and making sure everyone has the booklist for the year, and making the reservation when we do our yearly meeting at a restaurant.

I then think to ask Serena if she has ever been in a writing group before, which she has not, though she has done peer review in classrooms. She explains that writing tutoring has really been her only experience with talking about writing with someone else. She confesses that until she started tutoring, she did not see how talking with someone else about their writing could help her with her own writing. She hypothesizes that participating in the writing group will most likely be helpful too, but she is not sure in what ways yet. She is not sure what she will learn.

Serena also wants to add that one thing I told her group was that they could bring any type of writing, and she thinks that took off a lot of pressure: "It doesn't have to be, 'oh, this is the novel I am working on.'" She told them it could be funny or unpolished. Serena wonders if the perception must be that the writing group had to be a serious practice, and she thinks students were excited to join when she told them it was not. Serena questions whether or not this is a common perception of writing groups. She admits that if someone approached her about being in a writing group, she would have assumed that the group would embody a serious, rigid tone where she would have to bring finished drafts and copies. In response, I reiterate the idea that the writing group is

whatever you and your group mates want it to be. There are groups that have specific expectations and procedures, but that has all been agreed upon by the group. I stress the idea of choice and deciding upon norms as a group. Serena is excited to see what her group comes up with and I tell her I am too.

Overall, I was pleased at the end of this interview and even more pleased when re-listening to it. Serena actually started a writing group – yes!!! She also seemed authentically invested in its success – double yes!!! Moreover, she made an absolutely beautiful statement about her reasons for loving writing that actually brought tears to my eyes: "When I was little, my mom and grandmother too would read books to me and to me that was a really huge thing because that was one of the ways they showed me that they loved me because they spent time doing that. So when I write, I write to show other people that I love them." Maybe it is because I was a new mom at the time and I knew that as I was interviewing Serena, my own mother was at home with my 9-month-old daughter, maybe even reading to her at that moment, but that statement resonated with me and endeared Serena to me. Serena and I had very limited contact before this interview. While I am her supervisor and hired her as writing tutor the previous spring, I was on maternity leave for a good part of the fall semester, and she is one of the writing tutors I was getting to know now that I was back. Working on the writing group project with her and interviewing her for this research project helped me to get to know her better and I took her sharing that very personal underlying reason for her passion for writing in this interview as an invitation to open up a little about myself as well.

This desire to start to build a relationship with her can be seen in several points of conversation during this interview. For example, I talked to her for a bit about my

book club, revealing one of my extracurricular activities and a little about my life outside of how she knows me. However, while I hope these actions functioned to help her get to know me a little better, I admittedly have no idea what, if anything, she made of my interjections and stories. Once again, I have to keep in mind that there are various dynamics of power at work throughout our interactions, especially given the supervisor/tutor roles that are at the foundation of any relationship I have or may build with her.

At points, I also spent time explaining to Serena why I was asking her certain questions, which I did not do with any other interviewee. I explained to her why I was asking her about her expectations for the group: "I'm interested to see how your group goes too because who knows how it is going to go. That's exactly why I am asking you about your expectations because we'll see at the mid-point, and at the end too, what it actually turns out to be." In addition, when I asked her about her writing practices after she answered and described her process to me, I told her that the reason I asked her about practices was because I was interested, in this study, to learn more about what she was doing, writing wise, before the groups to see if anything changes because of the writing groups. Again, I did not explain the reasons behind my questions to the other interviewees. Further, I specifically disclosed to her that I was "putting on my writing administrator hat" to encourage her efforts in modeling what she hopes will become group norms, but also to drive home to her that she does not need to shoulder the responsibility of policing the group's behavior if they get off topic – off topic can be valuable too. While I certainly played that role during other interviews, I did not outwardly name it as such to another interviewee.

I am not sure why I made my questions and actions more transparent in the interviews with Serena. Perhaps it was also a way in which I was establishing a relationship with her, especially given that it looked as though she has a viable writing group started and would complete the intended interview set. At this point, I might have to consider that some of the relationship building I attempted to do was to my advantage. If she likes me enough, might she work harder to keep this group going so I am not facing studying three failed writing groups (which actually, may have been very interesting, but even further removed from my original research intentions). And then in thinking about that last embarrassing line-of-thinking (manipulating others to like me enough to perform a task is generally not a mode I would like to think inspires my actions, especially not professionally and who knows if that is even an effective strategy), I also had to consider, was Serena feeling any increased pressure because she quickly formed a group when the other founding members were floundering to do the same? Was she even aware of how important her group was to me?

Mid-Point Interview

Serena reports that her writing group is "going really well." The group is getting along and she believes they are very supportive, especially when a member of the group is nervous about sharing her writing. Serena relates that the group is comprised of five people, three sophomores and two seniors, and that they have met three times, which equates to a meeting about every other week. The group decided on a few guidelines, including that each member would try to bring in a piece of writing to each meeting or a couple thoughts, or at the very least, what Serena refers to as "your game face," meaning you are coming to the group ready to be involved and actively listen, even if you do not

have a piece of writing to share. The group also discussed that the writer will try to sit back and listen to the comments first and try not to jump in to clarify what she meant. Generally, the group meets for about an hour and a half in one of the dorm lounges. As Serena notes, "most of them live up there, so it's easy for people to find and get together."

I ask Serena to remind me again how she recruited people for the group because I was not quite clear about her process from our last interview. In doing so, Serena discloses that she only has one close friend on campus, her roommate, and this semester she "ran into some people" with whom she had common interests –"reading, writing, dorky things," and with whom she was starting to become friends. When the idea to start a writing group came up, Serena immediately thought of these budding friends. Serena feels like she has been learning more about them through their writing. So far, the focus of the group has been on creative writing rather than academic writing. As Serena puts it, "I get the feeling from this group that they really see this as a way to get away from school writing from a bit. As a way, a place, where they can express themselves and work on personal projects that are really meaningful for them."

Serena explains that a typical group session goes like this: Everyone will come in and chat about their day and what they brought. Then she will see if anyone wants to go first. Serena reports that most people bring multiple copies of their work, so they will pass them out and maybe have others share and then the writer will read what she brought out loud, with the others in the group following along on paper, listening. The group will pause for a moment or two to reflect before commenting. Then, the group will start giving feedback; the writer will jump in later. Serena clarifies that because the group is so

supportive, the first comments are always positive ("I really like this or I like that"), but then the comments get more critical ("what did you mean by this," "I got a little lost here"). Serena offers an example of how the group helped a member with dialogue in a story to make her character more realistic and help her convey her vision. Generally, Serena would characterize the feedback the group offers as global feedback that the writer can consider later rather than "nitpicky" points. The types of writing the group has critiqued have varied: one group member is working on a novel; others have brought in short stories or poems.

Serena's expectations are being met by the group, and she describes the experience of being the group leader as "smooth." "I'm really proud of our group. I'm just proud." She continues: "I like this opportunity because I like being in a leadership kind of role, but I don't know that I always have as much time as I'd like to devote to being the head of a club. And this is sort of a happy [medium], have it be really relaxed." Serena details how she sends out emails about scheduling meetings and then reminders about meeting and that this level of leadership is a good fit for her. Serena does note that it has not been hard coordinating because people in her group are very willing to carve out the time because it is something they care about. She adds, "but it's nice to see other people get excited over something I am passionate about, something I could help start."

Even though Serena says her job as been easy, she expresses trepidation now that they are moving into the final month of the semester, as people's schedules are going to get busier and priorities may change. To be proactive, Serena has already discussed moving the writing group online so that they can stay in touch even if they are not able to meet in person. She describes a website called Camp NaNoWriMo, which stands for

National Novel Writing Month, where the goal is to write 50,000 words a month. But, writers are able to create their own groups, create their own word counts, and link members together in their own private "cabin" so only those users can be part of the group. Online, groups are able to post about their progress, share excerpts from their writing, and offer feedback to group members. While Serena maintains the group is committed to trying to meet in person, Camp NaNoWriMo is a supplemental option: "it's cool to be able to have that contact outside the group as it gets busy."

Because Serena mentioned that academic workload might be affecting the group's meeting, I ask if any group members would consider bringing academic or school-related work to the group. Serena explains that she always encourages her group mates to bring whatever writing they wanted, including academic work, but no one has brought an academic paper to group yet. However, she does reveal that there have been some conversations about academic writing in the group. For example, some students might vent about being stressed out that they have an upcoming paper or what Serena refers to as "I can relate stuff," such as someone saying "I don't have a thesis, I don't know what to do," and then other members of the group will commiserate by sharing similar experiences with difficulties they have had writing thesis statements. Serena herself has talked to the group about her intensive coordinating seminar paper and maintains that kind of talk has been useful: "And that has been helpful to hear others be like I had that same issue with that class, or I know what you mean, or you are a good writer, you'll get through it; it will be okay."

Serena refers to the group as an escape. When group mates have had stressful weeks and don't have anything to share or think what they have is "crap," Serena purports that the group is very soothing:

> It's been interesting to see how people come in and they haven't been having a good day and what they have been working on isn't good and it's a reflection of themselves and just being in an environment that is relaxed and not have to worry about being graded or terribly scrutinized by their work as a final project, removing that pressure has really lifted people's spirits. And we laugh a lot in our group. It could start, 'oh this day hasn't been great and this piece…but it ends up something fun.

Serena feels as though she is learning to be a better writer and tutor as the group progresses. She has had to push herself to give "real," which she qualifies as comments more substantial than just "oh, I like it," which was her go-to phrase because she did not want to be mean to other writers. However, she has come to recognize that her group members care about writing as much as she does, and that realization has prompted her to want to give more meaningful feedback. Serena has also learned to look at her own writing in a fresh way. She explains that when she offers feedback to others, she often realizes that she should review the same issue in her writing. She feels as though she is a more observant writer as she is writing. She finds herself asking herself questions while writing that she might ask other people. "I feel like I have more strategy." Serena also admits that she feels more comfortable as a tutor. Participation in her group helps supplement her tutoring and gives her an opportunity to hone skills that are useful during tutoring, which works well because she does not always have tutoring appointments booked.

> I have become more confident in presenting myself as someone who I know what I'm talking about with writing and that I can be helpful. Yesterday, I noticed specifically when I was talking to the different students that I was tutoring I wasn't worried like I was in the beginning.

Serena reported being less nervous about asking questions and more comfortable with silence. Generally, questions seemed to be coming more easily when in tutoring sessions and she feels less "on edge."

Overall, Serena purports that she has been "pleasantly surprised and somewhat honored" that people have brought to the group things that they care about so much. Serena relates how it's been rewarding that people are bringing things that are so personal and important to them and that the group is taken seriously, even though they all have fun. Serena does hold concerns that sometimes the group gets off track into discussing "social stuff," and when that happens she sometimes has to bring them back to writing ("not in an aggressive way," she notes). She is encouraged, though, because everyone has been receptive to Serena's redirecting. Serena points out a parallel in her tutoring practice and claims sharpening that redirecting skill has been helpful in both areas.

The general feeling for me that permeates this interview is one of coerced enthusiasm. I qualify with coerced because while I read a lot of promise in Serena's reporting of her experiences in her still meeting (yes!!!) writing group, and can already begin to identify reported experiences that might provide me with something interesting to say about writing groups as a vehicle for academic leadership opportunities, I cannot help but feel that I am grasping at straws, forced to retroactively spin a new line of inquiry because my initial research plan failed. On the other hand, I also have to consider that this new line of inquiry is not something I was forced to do, but rather shaped by current influences in my life that then made sense to apply to this research project. At the same time I was conducting these interviews, I was also taking an educational leadership course at TC. Therefore, I was reading, writing, and discussing

topics regarding developing educational leaders and finding ways to support and challenge yourself and others. Further, the Director of my department had recently made the move to reframe some of the work the CAE does as explicitly offering student's leadership experience. Writing or tutoring centers often focus on how the center can help other students, rather than on how opportunities presented by the center can help tutors themselves. This refocus was an attempt to rebrand what a writing/learning center can represent to a campus: it is a student support, but also a hub of academic excellence and leadership. I imagine that both these influences helped me to quickly re-conceptualize this dissertation research, as educational leadership was in the forefront of my mind at this particular point in time.

I also wrote in my research journal after this interview that I felt a little angry. Looking back, I think disappointed or frustrated would be better words because angry denotes a certain violence to me and that is definitely not what I mean, at least not now. In listening (and re-listening) to how well Serena's group is going, how proud she feels, and the different activities she describes, I WANT TO HEAR MORE! I am ***so*** *deeply frustrated that none of her group mates consented to be interviewed, never mind videotaped, for this dissertation research. So here is what I start to explore. Yes, it is a way to make myself feel better at first, but then it became an idea I legitimately think warrants further exploration: should I (or anyone) be studying these groups?*

Serena previously described her group as "an escape" and uses the same words in this interview. She also states in this interview that: "I get the feeling from this group that they really see this as a way to get away from school writing from a bit. As a way, a place, where they can express themselves and work on personal projects that are really

meaningful for them." My reading of Serena's characterization of the group, its goals, and attitudes is that this group is a place for students only. I am not surprised they did not want to share it with an outsider (me, the researcher, the instructor, the administrator). I can only speculate why Serena agreed: I am sure part of it (if not all of it) had to do with the fact that I am her supervisor and teacher, though I think I could also present evidence to make the argument that she was sharing her experiences because she was proud of what she put together and that could have been a motivating factor as well.

Recently, I went to a storytelling event at the Mark Twain House. I had a pleasurable experience, heard some wonderful stories, and decided I would look forward to attending an event like that again. On the way out of the auditorium, I was handed a survey in which I was asked to evaluate the event. My enthusiasm for the superb experience I had just had immediately waned. I understand that the Mark Twain House needs these surveys to justify their programming and also most likely values the feedback procured on the forms to tweak their offerings. But, what I was thinking, was can't I just do something I like without having to talk about it with someone else? I have to consider that someone had that very same thought about my request for an interview about their writing group as they deleted my email and I honestly cannot be mad about that. In fact, it makes a lot of sense to me. (Note: I recycled the Twain House survey).

Final Interview

When I ask Serena to update me on her writing group, she states that due to finals and the end of the semester craziness, the group has not met in person in the past few weeks of the semester, but they have been sharing writing and offering feedback online

through the Camp NaNoWriMo group. At their last in-person meeting, no one brought writing in, so Serena started a conversation about what makes good writing, and they discussed that question. Specifically, the group members discussed what books they liked and what about the writing they liked including reasons like characterization, realism, universality, imagery.

In reflecting on her experience over the semester, Serena characterizes the experience as positive. She asserts that she had a lot of fun. But, she also highlights that it was a challenging experience as well. To clarify, she states:

> It's an interesting challenge to make sure everybody can be in one place at one time and be on the same page. I think I said in the first interview that I have never done anything like this before, never been the leader of anything like this before, so it was good, but it was a challenge and I wonder if there are things that I might do differently if I were to do it again.

When I ask Serena to address the question she just posed, she pauses for a bit, but then answers that next time she would set a specific time to meet. She explains how she wanted to be flexible and that generally the group was able to find a common meeting time, but there was a lot of potentially unnecessary back and forth regarding scheduling. But, Serena concludes that she would rather set the dates in advance in the future. Serena hesitates before discussing her next suggested revision because she feels conflicted about proposing it:

> I don't know if this sounds strange, because one thing that was important to me with the group was that they felt it was their group and it wasn't just me entirely leading them through this extracurricular thing, but I think that I would personally try to think of things, just because I'm an English major and I'm used to talking about writing and books, to talk about and make a list of things that I think it is important to address.

Serena goes on to clarify what she means by offering an analogy about writing tutoring. Sometimes a student comes to an appointment asking for help with grammar, but really

the student needs help with organization. The student is unable to identify or communicate what they would like help with. For the group, she would like to generate conversation starters to offer some structure if a group member is struggling to verbalize their feedback or a question for feedback. Serena notes that this list could just be in her head, so she could jump in if there was a lull and say something to a group member to help refocus their thinking.

Serena was very clear in previous interviews that she had not held a leadership position before, so when I asked her how she felt now that she had this experience, she replies:

> It was good, it was a challenge. But it was [and she breaks into a big smile] something I felt really comfortable doing. I think my personality is such that I'm not afraid to be a leader, I've just never been in that position for a group or a regular thing, so in a way it was easy, and I don't know if this is going to make sense, to be the loudest voice in the group and be the one who tries to tie things together. I had a lot of fun organizing things and trying to think of ways to try to get people coming back and that got people excited about writing.

Serena reports this experience changed her writing practices as well. She expounds that she is more observant and conscious, asking herself questions such as: am I moving too fast with this, am I explaining myself, or does this organization actually make sense. Before, she knew she could quickly write a paper, turn it in, and do fine. But now she scrutinizes her work more thoroughly, thinking her writing is okay, but it is not the best she could do. This consciousness comes from her experience looking at other people's writing. "Because I looked at all these other people, it's easier to be more critical about myself."

Serena concludes that she would definitely start a writing group again. She will be enrolled in an MFA program in the fall, and she hypothesizes participation in another

writing group "would be a good way to meet new people and put my writing out to a different audience."

I tell Serena that I am going to ask her to speculate about how her group felt about their experience, even though I know she cannot speak for them. She guesses that some found it more helpful than others, but that depends on how seriously they took it. She gives the example that one group member, who does like to write, joined the group as a no-stress activity: she joined to socialize and have fun. For another student, who is considering pursing creative writing, Serena ventures that the group was probably more meaningful because she gets nervous about sharing her writing, getting feedback, and reading out loud. Serena imagines that the group helped her to be more open, to increase her confidence, and to accept feedback.

Serena sums up her experience in the following way: "For me, this was a confidence booster in writing because it allowed me to get out of my head a little bit and just hear what others had to say, which more often than not was positive." The critical feedback Serena received was helpful, and she felt supported and encouraged by her group mates. "It was an encouraging atmosphere." Serena also would agree that she made friends and built a social community through her group:

> I'm going to miss all of them a lot when I graduate. I think just because the nature of the group forces you, not in a bad way, to show something that I think is kind of a vulnerable piece of people because I think that writing is so, so personal, especially depending on what you write about. So I think it forces you to put your trust in someone in a good, safe way, and I think through that I was able to make a lot of friends really quickly in the group because everyone was in the same position and we were all putting that in someone else's hands, saying 'don't break it.'

I ask Serena, qualifying that I know I asked her this in previous interview and that I understand her writing group mostly worked on creative writing, if academic writing

was ever a topic of conversation. Serena purports that while no one brought a large academic assignment to group, there was a lot of talk about assignments for class and professors. For instance, someone might say: "The assignment is this, I was thinking about writing about this, do you think I'm on the right track?" Or "am I the only one who doesn't get what the professor is looking for?" There would not be a draft presented to the group, but the conversation would happen, especially when it seemed like someone was worried about an assignment. Serena speculates this was because of the supportive nature of the group: students would bring up their academic assignments because they felt supported in this group and wanted to run it by the group. Serena also notes something she found interesting: that conversation would arise about an assignment in the context of "this is a stupid assignment, I don't want to do it," and the group would brainstorm what a better assignment would be. Serena illuminates: "It was just interesting to hear people talk about here's what I have to write about, here's what I'd rather write about, and here's how I feel it would be more beneficial to write about this in a certain way."

Ultimately, Serena states that she was very happy she made the choice to start a writing group. She reveals that when I first talked about the program in the fall semester, she did not think she wanted to participate because she was new to the CAE and did not know a lot of people, but decided to give it a try. She is thankful for the opportunity because it pushed her out of her comfort zone ("well, not entirely, but it was a push.")

When I wrote about this interview in my research journal, I wrote about feeling a mixture of relief, terror, uncertainty, and excitement. This was the last interview of my dissertation research, which meant I was one step closer to graduation. That said, I had a

lot of work ahead of me. In regard to the specifics of this interview, on one hand, I had conducted three interviews with Serena about her experiences participating in a writing center-facilitated writing group, which is what I had set out to do. On the other hand, she was the only participant who met this criteria and I knew a lot of my data was different from my initial expectations and I would have to reconcile that fact at some point.

In re-listening, the internal tensions I was feeling at this point in the dissertation process seem to be reflected in the questions I ask Serena and the comments I make. For example, I think my interview questions are all over the place. At this point in the research process, I have recognized that my focus necessitates a shift because I did not get the participation I was expecting. Three of my four participants were the students who started the writing groups, so a logical revision was to investigate the experiences of attempting to start/sustain a writing group, rather than the experience of participation in a writing group because only one of the participants actually participated in one. In interviews with Harper and Camilla, this shift was easy because they did have the experience of participating in a writing group, so therefore they could not share this experience, only their experience in trying to start one. However, Serena could discuss her experience both in the group and as the founding member. What I read in my own questions during this interview was that it was hard for me to let go of my original research idea. In thinking about Kvale and Brinkmann (1996) traveler analogy, I was not being a very good traveler. I resisted relinquishing control over where the interview was going based on Serena's answers, and kept backtracking. As the interviewer, I realize I am always in the position of power and control over the interview, but my intention was to try to play the role of wandering traveler. However, I ended up asking Serena about

changes in her writing practices and her feelings towards writing, questions that were part of my original final interview over-arching probes. I also asked her to speculate about how her group felt about the experience, which seems like a very desperate attempt to somehow get at the experiences of other potential participants who never responded to my call for participation. I mean, why would I ask her that? Why would I ask her to speculate about others' experiences when it is hard enough to represent your own experience to another individual or even to yourself.

Moreover, in re-listening, I believe I missed some opportunities to ask her to reflect upon her experiences in the founding member role. For example, when she said, " I had a lot of fun organizing things and trying to think of ways to try to get people coming back and that got people excited about writing," I wish I had asked her to tell me more about what she did to get people coming back and get them excited about writing. I also wished I had asked her what shifted from the fall when she thought starting a writing group would not be for her to the spring semester when she decided to give it a try. Although there is no perfect question, these are questions I wished I had asked because I would be interested to hear her responses and also because I think the answers would have helped broaden my "understanding" of her experience.

I also asked her a question towards the end of the interview that feels very disjointed in hindsight. I asked her, with a lot of qualifying because I knew the question seemed out of place, if her group ever talked about academic writing, academic assignment, or professors. She ended up revealing that they did, in fact, talk about academics on occasion and she elaborated. At that point, I was glad I pushed this line of question, because I was fascinated by what she divulged: that even though this was a

mainly creative writing group, it also became a space to discuss academic writing. The type of talk that occurred – commiserating about assignments, encouraging each other, and offering insight about a certain professor's expectations – are all very much in line with my own vision of a writing circle, as idyllically presented in the introduction to this dissertation. Her description also aligns with the spirit of Graff's (2003) club demystification, which was a conceptual influence for this research project. What was even more invigorating was Serena's disclosure that sometimes her group would brainstorm alternate assignments that they thought were better than what their professors crafted. To me, this was an example of students engaging with the discourse of academia, but on their own terms, by questioning accepted academic conventions and practices and offering their own ideas as to what would better constitute a representation of learning. While they may be not be in a classroom, just a small group in a dorm lounge, they are still engaging in the conversation amongst themselves, which I think is compelling and important.

Furthermore, thinking about this question and Serena's answer forces me to think about my role as a co-constructor of the narrative of Serena's experience. As the researcher and writer of this dissertation, I am not only crafting representations of Serena's experience, which are representations that she has offered to me, but my questions have shaped the content I then seek to represent and analyze. This is an issue that I discussed as an awareness in my Methodology section, and one that requires continued consideration and attentiveness. What about her experience did she perhaps not share with me, not because I did not ask (again, there are no right questions), but

because my line of questioning placed importance on other areas, effectively silencing something she found significant and wanted to share about her experience.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTINUING THOUGHTS

Issues of Interest for Writing Center Directors

Based on the experiences of participants in this very, small, highly contextualized research study, I would recommend writing center directors consider writing groups as a viable writing center program for undergraduate students, particularly if viewed as a vehicle for tutor training and leadership development. I had originally hoped, once this study was complete, that I would be able to make recommendations to writing center directors regarding the value of writing groups as an experience for undergraduate students, focusing on the writing groups as an activity that supports writing practices. The results of this study leave me underprepared to make any claims about how students' experiences participating in writing groups affected their writing processes and practices, as Serena was the only participant who actually worked in a writing group and thus was the only participant to discuss her experiences and perceptions of change during her interviews. However, because Camilla, Harper, and Serena were all founding members and their discussions of their experiences often focused on this responsibility, I was able to reframe this study to highlight the experiences of students trying to start writing groups and therefore, use these experiences to comment on writing groups as an academic leadership exercise.

Serena's writing group was a "success," meaning she started and maintained a writing group that met for an entire semester. Her experiences in the group also had

several reported positive effects. Serena spoke extensively about the benefits of her writing group experience in helping to offer her an opportunity to be in a leadership role and sharpen her skills as a writing tutor.

In terms of leadership, Serena seemed to use this role as a stepping stone, as she claimed she did not have any prior leadership experience. She characterized her experience as challenging, but also comfortable. Serena referred to her role in the writing group as a good level of leadership for her because it was not a high stakes medium: she expected to have to help focus and motivate the group, but she also expected to have fun in a relaxed environment. She viewed herself as a team captain and thereby conducted herself as such. As the founding group member, she coordinated meetings, sent out reminders and encouragement to group members, demonstrated her expectations for the group by being the first to share writing, and facilitated the group's move online when she realized that scheduling the group to meet at the end of the semester would be too difficult. Just in these sample activities, vital leadership skills such as organizing, learning to foster confidence amongst others, creating a supportive environment that allows others to grow, modeling, and creative problem-solving, are exhibited (Berger, 2004; Drago-Severson, 2012; Parks Daloz, 2005).

Another aspect of her role as leader was that Serena took it upon herself to bring the group back on track when their conversation turned from writing to socializing for an extended time period. She referred to this action as "redirecting" and noted that this is a practice that she uses in one-on-one tutoring as well. This is one skill Serena claims was honed by her participation in the writing group. Another tutoring skill she felt she refined by participating in her writing group was how to offer specific feedback. She concluded:

> [Because of the writing group,] I've felt more comfortable as a tutor. The writing group helps supplement my tutoring (because I don't always have appointments consistently). When I do have appointments, I noticed I wasn't nervous about asking questions…I am more comfortable with silence and the questions seem to be coming more easily when in tutoring sessions.

Serena ultimately reported feeling more comfortable as a writing tutor because of her experience in the writing group.

Conversely, both Camilla and Harper "failed" to start a writing group. Their "failure" is important in that it is a defining characteristic that highly influenced their reported experience, but, I surmise from my various perspectives, assumptions, and roles within and without this study that, the "failure" to start and participate in a writing group offers no less opportunities for experiences that would help to strengthen them as academic leaders than if they had succeeded in starting a writing group. For example, part of their reported experience with the writing groups was frustration and disappointment. Camilla discussed being discouraged when she was unable to get potential group members to respond about meeting times and then had no one except Maria show up to the first group meeting, while Harper discussed the frustration she felt when students who got in touch with her about joining a writing group then would not respond to her emails. Camilla, especially, seemed to personalize this failure as something she was doing wrong. She discussed being angry at her group for what she perceived as apathy, but also reported being upset with herself because she thought she could be doing something different, specifically, being more enthusiastic.

Whether or not increased enthusiasm would have changed the outcome of Camilla's group is unknown, but her acknowledgement of her own perceived shortcomings regarding her role in this project and of her proposed revisions to her

efforts in the future demonstrate reflection, a key component in a constructivist framework for any type of personal development, including leadership development (Brookfield, 1995; Dewey, 1933; Drago-Severson, 2012; Heifetz, 1994; Marsick & Sauquet, 2000; Rodgers, 2002). As Camilla discussed her frustrations and how she felt about what she believes she could have done differently to make the group a success, I (as her supervisor) was provided an opening to converse with Camilla about learning from failure, management of emotions in a leadership role, and flexibility as a leadership characteristic. Camilla was exposed to these lessons through experiential learning: in this case, Camilla was in the midst of an experience that provided context for and an opportunity by which to have conversations about various components of leadership and learning.

Writing center directors who are interested in potentially starting a writing group program may also find parts of the participants' experiences useful to consider as they raised some logistical issues. To begin, commonalities of Harper and Camilla's experiences included difficulties associated with trying to start and sustain a writing group, not because of a lack of interest in the group, but because of problems with scheduling amongst potential group members and a perceived lack of commitment to the group. In fact, one of Camilla's recommendations upon reflection of her experience was to emphasize, during recruitment, the importance of commitment to the group. Writing center directors should be prepared for this hurtle and take into consideration how best to foster both interest and sustain commitment to writing groups, given the specifics of their writing center environments and student populations.

Another commonality between Harper and Camilla's experiences was how they were perceived by potential writing group participants. Camilla and Harper were well-known as tutors and they both reported differing expectations from potential participants who were seeking the expertise of a tutor rather than the experience of participation in a learning community. Seemingly, just the presence of the tutor, even though not in the tutor role, was enough to invoke a different set of expectations from their peers, which in turn may have affected the success of the groups. Serena, a newer tutor, did not seem to have this experience. Perhaps this is because she was not identified by students as a writing tutor yet, a factor which may have also been bolstered by her recruitment methods. Serena asked acquaintances to join her group, while Camilla mostly asked tutees, and Harper tried to organize students who responded to advertisements with the writing center's name on it. Writing center directors should prepare writing group leaders about differences in perceptions and expectations and workshop with them how these perceptions and expectations may or may not affect recruitment for, and the direction of, the writing group.

Though I have recently argued that all three of these participants' experiences were useful writing tutor experiences for varying reasons, writing center directors who are interested in creating a robust writing group program with multiple "successful" writing groups, may find these concluding ideas salient. I assumed when embarking on this dissertation research that writing tutors who were experienced and comfortable, both as writing tutors and academic leaders, would have an easier time assembling a successful writing group. However, this (again, very small, contextualized) study's results suggest that this activity was most successful for a newer writing tutor, who could

use the writing group experience to hone her tutoring techniques and also begin to develop as an academic leader. Serena, a second-semester, relatively shy tutor, thrived in this role. The two outgoing veteran tutors, Camilla and Harper, who came with a long list of academic accomplishments and previous leadership activities, did not fare well (according to my aforementioned criteria of success in starting a writing group – that a writing group was started and maintained). While there were certainly lessons in their failures as discussed previously, I am not confident they gave this activity their full attention, perhaps because they were both already involved with so many other projects. As Harper put it: "Oh well, one less thing I have to do, I guess." Serena seemed to have both the time and the desire to ensure her writing group started and then continued to meet.

Moreover, Serena's stated motivations for starting a writing group may have played in a role in her group's success. Each participant cited noble reasons for wanting to start a writing group, but Harper and Camilla's reported motivations were centered on changing students' minds about their feelings for writing and their writing practices, henceforth performing a service for, and onto, others. For instance, Camilla stated that her reasons for wanting to start a writing group were to get other students excited about writing and to help them develop strong writing skills. She wants other students to feel as comfortable and passionate about writing as she does. Harper cited her reasons for starting a writing group were to help students like writing more and build a stronger community of writers on campus. Conversely, Serena's reasoning for starting a writing group differed from Camilla's and Harper's in that she included herself in the group and discussed herself as someone who would benefit from a group. Serena thought the group

would be a good way to share and review her writing and also to have the opportunity to talk with others about writing.

Perhaps, then, it was Serena's reciprocal mindset that helped to make her group a success. She viewed the writing group as a way to communicate with others about writing and to help herself: in this sense her motivations were inclusionary. Because Harper and Camilla were focused on what the writing group could do for others, immediately they categorized themselves as separate from the group in some way. Therefore, a final recommendation would be that writing center directors pay close attention to tutors' motivations for and their attitudes regarding their role towards writers when starting a writing group. Keep in mind that assumed strengths of the founding members, such as readiness and experience, may not be mitigating factors in the success of a writing group.

Issues of Interest for Teachers of Writing or Writing Program Administrators Considering Writing Groups as an Educational Practice at the College Level

In the introduction to this dissertation, I articulated to readers that many previously published studies on writing groups presented generally "cheerful" conclusions about writing groups, lauding them as a beneficial practice. Serena's reported experiences and perceptions corroborate this established supposition, adding to the body of research that recommends writing groups as an effective educational practice. While my "conclusions" about the benefits of writing groups are being drawn from the reported experiences and perceptions of a sole participant, it would be unfair to categorize them as much different from the "cheerful" studies I criticized. That said, I believe some of Serena's comments are worth examining further, as they do offer details about what she

found beneficial and there is room to analyze, on a small scale, how this particular writing group functioned to support Serena and her writing.

In the pre-group interview, Serena discussed how her writing practices and processes have changed in her four years at college. She described becoming draft-oriented and that revising, sometimes one sentence or word, over and over again, was normal for her. She reported that she was interested in sharing her writing with her writing group so her group mates could help her make choices about her writing. Because of her role as a tutor, she has experienced how talking about writing with others can help her own writing, and she believed participation in a writing group would be helpful, but she was unsure of the exact ways in which it would be helpful.

In her mid-point and final interviews, Serena was able to articulate several ways in which her writing has been positively affected by her participation in a writing group. First, in offering feedback to others, Serena reported being more mindful and aware of her own writing. She was able to identify the very same writing issues she noticed in a group mate's writing in her own writing, and thus began to correct those mistakes. Serena also felt she was more observant and conscious of choices that helped her to look at her writing in fresh ways. She reported asking herself questions about her own writing that she might ask a group mate. This increased reflection on her writing and increased questioning are two specific benefits that Serena reports as direct effects of her participation in the writing group. A final benefit reported by Serena was increased confidence. In sharing her writing with others, she often received positive feedback, which validated her writing skills. She also reported feeling confident in the face of

critical feedback because the criticism was offered in what she perceived was a supportive, encouraging environment.

Another expectation Serena reported in her pre-interview was that she would have "fun" participating in a writing group. While Serena does not explicitly discuss fun as a benefit of participation in a writing group, she does discuss, in subsequent interviews, several experiences and perceptions related to "fun" that can be analyzed as benefits, such as making friends and relieving stress. For instance, Serena used the writing group to build relationships with her peers, in a small amount of time. Serena reported that she felt that she made friends in her group quickly because they were sharing their writing, which Serena characterized as "personal," rendering her and her group mates "vulnerable." This vulnerability quickened the relationships that were formed. Additionally, there were opportunities to build camaraderie through identification. As students learned that they were not alone in their difficulties and feelings about writing, they felt bonded.

Serena also discussed how the writing group functioned as a calming force for her and her group mates. Group meetings where characterized by Serena as including lots of laughter, which helped students to decrease some of the stress they were feeling about writing assignments or other academic pressures. Serena attributes the supportive environment to this outcome: in a space where students are not being graded, and are instead offered supportive criticism by peers, they feel more relaxed about sharing their writing. For example, Serena discussed feeling relief after talking with her group about her high-stakes coordinating seminar paper and hearing them identify with her struggles, praise her writing skills, and assure her that she would get through the writing process.

Finally, the writing group appeared to function as a source of pride and accomplishment for Serena. Serena used words like “honored” and “proud” when discussing how she felt about her experience in her writing group. In terms of student engagement and success in academia, recent research has found that when students feel appreciated and see themselves as valued members of a community, they report an increase in confidence and connectedness, which are traits that have been linked to increased student well-being and institutional retention (Shelly, 2014).

Given Serena’s reported experiences and perceptions and culled functionalities of her experiences and perceptions, teachers of writing might consider the following factors and think about application within their specific contexts. First, writing instructors might consider writing groups as a medium by which students can reflect on their own writing practices and processes through working with others on their writing. In addition to thinking of writing groups as a practice that encourages reflection and revision of writing processes and practices based on working with others, writing instructors might also envision writing groups as a tool to build relationships amongst students. In this case, the “learning” that might occur within the groups would be tangential to how the students felt about their experience interacting with peers and the potential benefits associated with community building.

To close, much of the positivity reported by Serena stemmed from cultivating a group environment that was relaxed, supportive, and enjoyable, and, in this case, functioned outside of the walls of the classroom. In analyzing possible factors that created this environment, it is hard to ignore the absence of instructors, grades, requirements, and formal assessments. As Serena illuminated: “I get the feeling from this

group that they really see this as a way to get away from school writing a bit. As a way, a place where they can express themselves and work on personal projects that are really meaningful for them." At another point in her interview set, she referred to the group as an "escape" from academics, despite the fact that academics were a repeated topic of conversation and students were fostering skills, through participation in the group, that are valued in an academic setting. The prominent challenge for any writing instructor is how to foster such an environment: one that is supportive, encouraging, meaningful, and that offers the possibility of fun.

Continued Issues of Interest for Me (and maybe others)

This section is not intended to synthesize data and make recommendations, as the other two sections of this chapter have done, but rather to serve as a representation of another layer of self-reflexive work. The deliberations presented here are persisting thoughts, feelings, questions, problematizings, and realizations I have engaged with, and will continue to wrestle with, as a result of this research. These ideas are complicated, at times circular, and, to paraphrase Miller (1998), necessarily incomplete. Therefore, as with my other self-reflexive writings, they will be italicized.

I always have assumed that a researcher maintained a certain level of power and authority. For example, I knew that participation was an area I would not be able to control, but I felt naively confident in my agency in other areas: I chose the topic of inquiry, controlled the design and execution of my study, and would ultimately make decisions about how to represent the data I collected and the insights I drew from said data. But, I have come to recognize that this vision of complete autonomy in and over any part of the research process is an illusion. For instance, there were innumerable

conscious and unconscious forces shaping my line of inquiry and methodological design. Some of forces that I was conscious of, or have become conscious of through this self-reflexive work, include: my own interpretations of previous experiences, some of which are outlined in Chapters I and II of this dissertation; my advisor's influence through her feedback, suggestions, questions, leanings, and nudgings; my proposal committee's suggestions for revision; two institutions' IRB approval processes; time and space considerations; the desire to research a topic that would be useful to the fields of composition and writing center theory and practice, and thereby offer opportunities for publication; and perceived relevance to my current professional position as the administrator of a writing center, so I could feel justified calling my dissertation work professional development and have it be credited as such when evaluated during my yearly performance review. Further, when representing data, given my epistemological beliefs and desire to complete my dissertation and graduate with my doctoral degree, I had to consider issues of representation, including how to construct an individual's interpreted experience, which has been mediated through memory and language, in a document that will ultimately follow both the American Psychological Association's and Teachers College Office of Doctoral Studies' formatting and style guidelines. These forces I have named, and many more, hold control over me in various ways and influence my decisions and actions to varying degrees. Recognizing their influence helps to disrupt the idea of a researcher who exerts power over others, but is not controlled herself.

Along similar lines, I noticed that I was very concerned in my previous self-reflexive notes about my perceived potential power over participants. While wrapped up in thinking about my actions during my interactions with participants, I forgot to

consider Scheurich's (1997) suggestion to rethink the dominance/resistance binary and view interviews as a spaces where there are a variety of options for both researchers and participants to perform in ways that are dissociated from the focus of the research. In thinking about power as one-sided (what was I doing to them?), I did not pay attention to what they might possibly be doing to me, and I did not think to consider other possibilities that these interviews may have presented participants. Where was I met with resistance in these interviews? Where might something else (i.e. a participant's agenda aside from the research) have been in play? For example, Harper, often asked me to rephrase questions or would repeat questions back to me, but with slight modifications before answer. Were those questions and revisions her acts of resistance against my authority as the researcher? For that matter, she often remained silent for significant time before answering questions. Was that her taking time to think, or was that a way to shift the balance of power to highlight that she was in control because I waiting for her answer? Or both? To look at another example, Serena often spoke with immense pride about her writing group. In this sense, could Serena be using the interview as a stage to share her accomplishments, knowing she would most likely receive praise and positive feedback from me, which she, in turn, could use to build her confidence? These are all questions I will not be able to answer, but nevertheless, it is important that I consider them.

Moreover, I am just starting to be able to think about theorizing power. I speak of power here as this generalized concept that one either has or has not, or thinks she has or has lost, or is struggling with, but power is a discipline onto itself that has different meanings depending on the theoretical, social, cultural, and political contexts in which it

is discussed. But, I'm not ready to dive into that pool just yet. But I can say more about what I have noticed, and what stands out to me is just how uncomfortable I am with the power I perceive I hold. All the questions in the previous paragraph, as well as many others throughout my self-reflexive work, speak directly to this uneasiness. This is such a source of discomfort for me that when asked to think about where I might go next with this research, one of my ideas was to continue to study writing groups, but do so using student researchers who I posited might be more accepted by writing group members as peers and, thus, the writing group members would be more apt to consent to participant in interviews or focus groups. This was not a harebrained idea: I came to it after an overwhelmingly positive experience advising an undergraduate student research project last fall that culminated in the two students presenting their research at the International Writing Center Association conference; I had readily available literature to support merits of undergraduate student research, especially in disciplines outside the sciences, as a high impact practice (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013); and I truly believe it would be a beneficial learning opportunity for students, as well as a satisfying teaching experience for me. However, as the idea marinated in conversation, it also became apparent to me that student-to-student research would effectively remove me from a position of power and likewise provide an escape from the arena of my discomfort. I'm a bit embarrassed by this realization, but I also cannot help but think of my recognition of this personal struggle as a badge of honor as well because if I am identifying these thoughts and feelings, then I believe I am answering Pillow's (2003) call to practice uncomfortable reflexivity.

Finally, in thinking further about resistance and power, I keep coming back to the lack of participation that necessitated a refocusing of my dissertation research. In previous self-reflexive writings, I noted that I was not necessarily surprised that writing group members did not want to participate in this study, perhaps viewing my interaction with the group as an intrusion, given Serena's repeated reported characterizations of her group as an "escape." To extrapolate this logic, I have to wonder if her group members actively resisted participating in this study because of their desire to have the writing group function as a fringe activity, untouched by mainstream academic culture, and likewise, a researcher who is firmly embedded in academia by way of her status as an instructor and the director of the writing center. Additionally, they chose to meet in a dorm lounge, rather than in the equally accessible and newly renovated CAE spaces, where all other CAE-sponsored events take place. Potentially, these choices could suggest that this writing group is a group that sought to operate in the margins.

Now, marginality is a loaded term, and carries a substantial history, specifically within writing centers (McKinney, 2013; Murphy & Law, 1995; Shelly, 2014); as McKinney (2013) puts it, "no other word haunts writing center scholarship more than marginal" (p. 39). Writing centers have combated marginality in efforts to be seen as part of the essential academic core, rather than as a supplemental, as thus expendable, academic activity. "Writing center professionals still seek to explain and validate their work; they still battle to avoid marginalization" (Murphy & Law, 1995, p. xv).

However, with 76% of the undergraduate student population availing themselves of tutoring services, a robust staff and budget, a large newly renovated space, and generally strong support from SPWU's faculty and administrators, SPWU's writing

center, the CAE, is distinctly not marginalized. The CAE has positioned itself, and academic support in general, as very much central to the SPWU experience. Thereby, in theory, as a CAE program, this writing group did not start out on the margins. So if this writing group did, in fact, move to the margins, it was the group's choice. In embracing this marginal status, it is possible that the writing group did so as a way to resist the higher education establishment of SPWU. Now, I am not suggesting that this group was revolutionary. In fact, according to Serena, quite the opposite: the students mostly talked about writing, talk that would benefit them in their endeavors within academia. But, I am suggesting an active resistance fueled by a desire for a space outside of academics, where students could meet on their own time and in their own space, set their own agendas, and voice their unencumbered opinions that may critique the university's agents and practices, without a representative from the university present.

This the goal, right? Students helping each other navigate the university, benefiting from talk amongst themselves about their writing. So why does it feel a little threatening? One answer might be that if they are thriving in the margins, perhaps that means they do not need the writing center. I can read in my researcher journal and previous self-reflexive notes the internal tension I felt as the writing group moved further and further away from me, the one who created, promoted and supported the writing group project and sought to study it. I say tension because on one hand, I was invigorated by what Serena was reporting to me was going on in the groups; on the other hand, I was disappointed I was not a part of it. Further, now that I have done some work interrogating the illusion of control, I can see that was very uncomfortable with the realization that I had no control over the outcomes of the project. What I had to remind

myself was that my sense of control did not matter. Instead, the important thing is that Serena's writing group was doing what I had hoped and that conversations about writing, among other things, were happening.

It is hard to realize that you have lost control, and then even harder to accept it. At least, it certainly was for me. I was terrified when the research plan I had conceptualized never happened and unsure about what would come next. But, only in this period of uncertainty was I able to see the writing groups as a vehicle for academic leadership and ongoing tutor training, an idea that came into focus when three of my four participants were the writing tutors starting the writing groups. My reconceptualization of writing groups as a form of writing support for undergraduate students to an academic leadership opportunity for writing tutors is a move that was able to happen once I was willing to let go and tried to embrace the tenuous position I found myself in. Let me be clear, this was not a seamless transition. There were times that I clung my previous research agenda; the questions I asked Serena about her perceptions of what her group mates might say about how their writing practices have changed because of the group are evidence of this struggle. But, even though it was difficult, I did try to see this shift as an opportunity to rethink what I thought I knew and (re)position writing groups in what I hope is a fresh and innovative way.

In my "Advanced Narrative Research" class I took at TC, when discussing the how to reconcile the impossibility of representation with the current push in education for quantitative data to assess learning outcomes, we lovingly adopted the inspirational song "Climb Every Mountain" from the classic film The Sound of Music as our mantra. In this spirit, I would like to close this dissertation by referencing another optimistic

blockbuster musical that anyone associated with a child under 10 will know well, the omnipresent Frozen. As Elsa sings in her seminal song, let it go. Now, as the mother of an almost two year old who has heard the song a million times, maybe the repetition has commandeered my consciousness and I am ascribing much too meaning here, but, to me, right now, Elsa's words make a lot of sense. Let it go. Embrace the loss of control --- and see where it takes you. You might just be pleasantly surprised. I know I was.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000
www.tc.edu

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH: You are invited to participate in a research study on the experiences of undergraduate students in writing center-facilitated writing groups. The research methods consist of three unstructured interviews. You will be asked to answer questions regarding your expectations and reasons for joining a writing group, your experiences as a writing group participant, your perception of how participation in the writing group has affected or not affected your writing and writing practices, and your definitions and perceptions of "effectiveness" regarding the writing groups. In addition, and only if you grant me your permission, the interview will be audio-taped.

Additionally, with the consent of you as well as all members of your writing group, I may video-record and review one or more of your writing group sessions.

The research will be conducted by myself, Jessyka Scoppetta. The research will be conducted on the SPWU campus.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The research has the same amount of risk participants will encounter during a usual school day. The possible benefits associated with this study are a chance to share and reflect upon your academic experiences, particularly your writing experiences. If you do not want to discuss a certain topic, please let me, as the researcher, know and the interview will continue in a different direction. If you do not want to be videotaped in your writing group, let me know and your group will not be chosen for observation.

PAYMENTS: There is no payment for your participation.

DATA STORAGE TO PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY: The information in the study records will be kept confidential. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Access to the tapes of your interviews will be limited to myself, the principal investigator. Typed transcripts of these tapes will be made and kept in locked files on my laptop. In those typed transcripts, pseudonyms will be used for all names of persons. At the conclusion of the study, audio and video tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my SPWU office. Only I, as the researcher, will have access to the data. The data will be kept for three years after completion of the project. Three years after

completion of the project, written data will be destroyed in a document shredder and tapes will be erased and destroyed. You should be aware that the SPWU IRB may inspect study records as part of its mission to protect the safety of research participants.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 1.5 hours, .5 hours per interview.

HOW WILL RESULTS BE USED: The results of the study will be used for dissertation research in the English Education Program within the Department of Arts & Humanities at Teachers College, Columbia University, and therefore will be shared with my dissertation committee and published as a dissertation at Teachers College; in the future, the results could be used in a conference presentations and/or other scholarly publications. Because all study participants will be given pseudonyms, there will be no way to identify you in the publication of the research data.

Appendix B

Participant's Rights

Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th St.
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000
www.tc.edu

Principal Investigator: Jessyka Scoppetta

Research Title: Studying the Experiences of Undergraduate Students in Writing Center-Facilitated Writing Groups

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to employment, student status or other entitlements.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his/her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The investigator's phone number is (610) 248-1545.
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people that reviews research studies and protects the rights of individuals who agree to participate in research studies. The phone number for the IRB is (212) 678-4105. Or, I can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY, 10027, Box 151. Additionally, I

can contact the Small Private Women's University Institutional Review Board at 860-231-5213.

- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- I ( ) consent to be audio/video taped. I ( ) do NOT consent to being video/audio taped. The written, video and/or audio taped materials will be viewed only by the principal investigator.
- Written, video and/or audio taped materials: ( ) may be viewed in an educational setting outside the research ( ) may NOT be viewed in an educational setting outside the research.
- I have read this information and have had the study purposes, procedures, risks and benefits explained to my satisfaction. My signature indicates my informed consent to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form

Participant's signature: _____ Date:____/____/____

Name: _____

Investigator's Verification of Explanation

I certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to _____ (participant's name). He/She has had the opportunity to discuss it with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and he/she provided the affirmative agreement to participate in this research.

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Interview Probes

Pre-interview over-arching probes:

1. Tell me about why you decided to join your writing group.
2. What are your expectations for your writing group this semester?
3. How would you characterize your writing/writing practices and your feelings toward writing?

Mid-point over-arching probes:

1. Tell me how your writing group is going.
2. Have your expectations for the writing group changed in any way? If so, how?
3. Have you noticed any change in your writing/writing practices or feelings about writing since joining your writing group?

Final interview over-arching probes:
1. Please reflect on your experience in your writing group this semester.
2. How would you characterize your writing/writing practices and your feelings towards writing now that your group has concluded?
3. Would you participate in a writing group again? Why or why not?

Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Dear SPWU student,

I am conducting a study to examine the experiences of undergraduate students in writing center-facilitated writing groups and I would like to invite you to participate as a member of one of the CAE's undergraduate writing groups.

If you participate, I will interview you three times over the course of this semester, for no more than a half hour each interview. In these interviews, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your expectations and reasons for joining a writing group, your experiences as a writing group participant, your perception of how participation in the writing group has affected or not affected your writing and writing practices, and your definitions and perceptions of effectiveness regarding the writing groups.

If are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email and we will set up a time to go over additional specifics of your possible participation in this study. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Best,
Jessyka Scoppetta

IRB Protocol #14-131