

ESTABLISHING STORY, ESTABLISHING ETHOS: COMMUNITY COLLEGE,  
COMPOSITION, & THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

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## ABSTRACT

ESTABLISHING STORY, ESTABLISHING ETHOS: COMMUNITY COLLEGE,  
COMPOSITION, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

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This thesis explores the concept of story and its potential use within the community college composition classroom. Story is everywhere; it is how we as human beings make sense of our existence and our role within the world. While we are all carriers of story, community college students carry unique stories of hardship and adversity that have led them to enrollment. Previous educational experiences and negative rhetoric about their past has the ability to shape or limit what they see themselves as capable of both in their present situation and their future. If left unchallenged, the rhetoric used to describe our stories (or how others have described them) limits what we see as possible for ourselves. Providing space within the community college classroom challenges the negative rhetoric and affords a unique opportunity for instructors to provide support and guidance to their students. This thesis discusses how story ownership and authorship, when encouraged by an instructor, communicates more than simply the telling of stories, fostering both trust and the development of ethos. Story ownership and authorship fosters a fully established ethos that refuses to require students to compartmentalize the academic and personal parts of their sense of self. Instead, story

invites all parts of the self and attaches value to both lived experiences and knowledge obtained from such experiences. By doing so, it heightens instructor awareness and allows for a level of humanization and connection between instructor and student that may not otherwise be possible. By establishing the ethos of both student and instructor as carriers of story, students experience a heightened level of trust and open communication with their instructor. In doing so, instructors are able to provide a sense of support and mentorship inside the classroom- rather than relying on external support services to take on that position. By recognizing the power of story and advocating for more of its inclusion within the community college composition classroom, instructors can capitalize on the transformative power of story to engage students and foster both success and support.

## CH.1: COMMITTING TO COMMUNITY: MY STORY

*Making our stories sacred involves an interior odyssey where we learn to embrace our own inner demons.... Making our stories sacred means consciously acknowledging the experience of personal struggle, ordeal, or quest, where little by little we broaden our scope of consciousness, experience a symbolic “death”, attain a greater inner freedom, and then enter into the grace of rebirth.*

-Robert Atkinson, *The Gift of Stories*

### **Standing in the Present**

Writing this thesis has been one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my academic career. I have never felt so involved or a part of a piece of writing. What I have to say and the moments of lived experience I have shared have never felt more important and necessary. Even still, self-doubt and fear of inadequacy sweep over me *every single time* I sit down to write. Then again, I never expected to make it this far, to have persevered for this long, for something I didn't know if I was even capable of. It has been through deep reflection and consideration of my own academic experiences, my own story, that I have uncovered truths about myself. Perhaps one of the most important but equally devastating discoveries was that the self-doubt and fears I have had in regards to writing stem from a fear to include all parts of myself in my work. I have kept the academic and the “regular” parts of my selfhood separate.

It has not been until my Master's program, and more specifically this thesis, that I realized the transformative power of inserting myself into the conversation. Not only that, using my voice and speaking up is expected of me, which communicates that what I have done up until this moment, that what I think and have to say not only makes sense, but it matters and should be shared. I would not feel this way if it hadn't been

communicated to me time and time again by two inspiring educators and mentors. The most valuable lesson they have taught me, and arguably one of the most valuable takeaways from my graduate school experience, is that I don't have to erase myself in order to be integrated into the world of academics. My story matters. I can be included and I can be myself. But, this lesson extends beyond me. When an educator or mentor treats you like a human being, a legitimate citizen of your education, you feel more competent, worthy, and capable than any grade has ever made you feel. When they hear you, genuinely listen and encourage you to insert *yourself* and *your story* into the writing, the entire game changes. When they tell you what you have to say matters and that it is meaningful to the world around you, your sense of purpose changes, and you begin to dream just a little bit bigger than you did before. My mentors validated my story while also stirring an awareness inside of me about the importance of story within my own classroom and pedagogy. I want to be more aware, more willing to invite the stories of my students into my classroom, just as my mentors have done so with me.

### **Carriers of Story**

We are living stories. Our past, our experiences, are all stories of who and where we have been. My academic story started with my parents, for their story began mine. Community college was not one of my many options to consider when committing to enrollment in higher education; it was the *only* option. Going to college was never a choice to be made, but a future I felt obligated to fulfill; it was the life my parents spent their entire lives building the opportunity for.

While the earlier years of my life had their difficulties, both my mother and father spent their youth working towards rising up and out of the poverty that consumed their

reality. Living in a singlewide trailer on a plot of land in the flatwoods of Indiana was not the future they saw for themselves or for the family of three they were supporting by age 22. They recognized that their reality, their lives, and the reality they constructed for their children could be bigger than what they faced. Without the determination, perseverance, and immense work, the self-doubt, uncertainty, and fear my parents endured through my adolescence, my recognition of the need for liberation through higher education would have never been constructed into a full-blown reality or possibility. Witnessing the struggle they faced head-on, the epic amount of setbacks and perceived failures (though falls during such a strong rise are no failure at all), opened my eyes to how difficult overcoming societal and socioeconomic pressures can be. It also made me aware of the power of one person's struggle, and when supported by a partner, the amazing resilience and strength that rises from such a connection. The hard work of my parents and their constant reassurance that I was capable of anything, no matter how many times I was told by my public education that I was simply *average*, built a launching pad for me that they never experienced. My parents worked their entire lives to give me mine.

My story truly began when I was ten years old. The year my parents moved our family up and out of Southern Indiana, was the year we began "restorying" our lives. Moving to North Carolina erased some of the stereotypes and expectations placed on my present and my future. Our future was ours to write. The past stories of pregnancy at fifteen, of dropping out of high school and living in a trailer on a relative's back property, of working hard and barely making ends meet, were no longer the ever-present fortune-tellers of my future. No. My parents sought to start things over for all of



us, no matter the struggles they knew they would *continue* to endure for years to come. They wanted one of the houses at the top of the mountainsides, the ones that spackled the night sky with their porchlights, for all of us. “The people who live in the stars,” my mother enthusiastically described them from the hotel room we lived in for the first two weeks; that was what moving to North Carolina could be for us. The only way I knew how to do that was to do well in school.

We lived in a cramped space on Panther Creek for our first three years in North Carolina. While I remember being thankful every single day for waking up in the mountains, I also remember hating the close-knit quarters of our two-bedroom house. My sister and I shared a room, my brother had his own, and my parents slept on a pullout couch in the living room. But, I now see that it was in these close spaces that the beautiful moments of encouragement and support lay. It was at the kitchen table doing homework that my parents would plant seeds of possibility. My mother would tackle science, language arts, and math questions as my brother, sister, and I huffed and puffed, leaning over our crammed books and folders that littered the aged wooden surface, whining about how hard “stupid homework” was. Dad would walk around us, listening as Mom explained photosynthesis to my brother, insisting my sister keep writing just a bit longer, and pointing to my math homework while pushing me to try again. Countless times, as our family huddled at the table for homework, working together to get through “just one more hour,” my Dad reminded us of how the hard work would pay off and what working through high school and going to college would afford to us. “You can decide whatever you want to be, whatever you want to do. College will let you do that. You are young enough that you can decide; you can make anything

happen.” His belief in school was, at the time, frustrating. In retrospect, his belief in both education and his children was intoxicating.

It is ironic that my father, the one family member who at the time never dreamed they would go to any post-secondary schooling and was the only member of his extended family to receive a GED, would be the one to firmly insist and believe in the power of education. It is a belief that led me to the love and joy of teaching. If I had listened to the nay-sayers who pushed for me to sign-up for a vocational track, steering me away from the Honor’s classes I desperately wanted, I would have let such lofty dreams evaporate, extinguishing the fire I felt for instruction since the age of eight. My parents countered the idea that I was not capable. My dad, along with many other Americans – youth, parents, grandparents – firmly believed that if you “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” and you work hard for it, you can achieve it. As educator Mike Rose suggests, “American meritocracy is validated and sustained by the deep-rooted belief in equal opportunity,” whether that belief be sustained by what is provided from the institution or not (*Lives on the Boundary*, 128). Even through the setbacks and rejections, I continued to believe in the power of written language and education. I kept a journal every day. I did my homework. I followed the rules. I played it safe and did what teachers asked of me. I entered the vocational track when I was encouraged to do so because I assumed that my educators knew what was best for me. Besides, I knew I was *only* going to community college anyway. I wasn’t admitted into the AP classes I hoped for, and after one missed assignment I was placed into a lower-level math course. It was communicated throughout my primary education that I was not exceptional. I was average. And where do average kids from the lower-class assume

they should go to college if they attend at all? The message to me was loud and clear; Haywood Community College was where I would aim my sights.

My junior and senior years of high school further cemented my ideas of community college enrollment. In the winter of 2005, my mother underwent major brain surgery to repair a Chiari malformation on the back of her skull casing. A piece of cadaver was inserted to act as a hammock for her brain, otherwise, the malformation left such a large hole that if left unrepaired, her spinal cord could potentially pierce her brain, leaving her paralyzed or with severe brain damage. My family went from living in a four bedroom home to the unfinished basement of a family friend. I would attend school for eight hours, work my shift at Burger King, and come home to complete homework. When she was awake and not groggy from the medications, my mom would always ask how assignments were going. Even during the worst of times, my education was a top priority.

By the fall of 2006, both of my parents were out of work and my dad was scheduled for back surgery. Working as a server in a local restaurant, I became responsible for the mortgage payment. I became responsible for my family. Not having a job had never been an option; I have been employed since the age of fifteen. However, at this point in my life, when senior year was ending and entrance into college was quite real, a job was more necessary than it had ever been. The local community college afforded me the ability to enter higher education “on time,” without taking a semester off securing significant student loan debt. Due to both its location, literally within a one-mile distance from my backdoor, and a Pell Grant to cover all of my tuition expenses, community college was my only key to enter higher education; it was the *only*

foreseeable option and the only opportunity for change that was within my reach, and not going was not an option.

Not only was it my only reasonable option, it was the only option I thought myself capable of. A four-year university somehow never entered my sights. Even as a lover of learning and someone who saw themselves eventually finishing with a four-year degree, going anywhere but the local community college seemed to be discouraged by my educators. During the only memorable visit to the guidance counselor, I was encouraged to enter the vocational track. I can still recall the first and last time an instructor ever asked me about my future plans and seemed genuinely serious about getting an answer. Sitting at a row of bubble-backed computers, eight of my fellow seniors and I lined up one-by-one, watching snowflakes begin to dust the parking lot of Tuscola High School. Mrs. Sandra Garland, our short-statured but firm Foods instructor, insisted we “fire up the machines” and get started. After the screen finally loaded and access to the dial-up internet was secure, she asked, “where do you want to apply to college”?

I had never seriously thought about it. With all of the barriers placed before me, before my family, Haywood Community was the one place that seemed willing to take my story and work with it. My two jobs, my mortgage payment, my family, my need for a local institution, these were all just facts about me. They did not keep me from enrollment. I carried their stories, the stories of my parent’s struggle, with me when I started college, and used them to push me forward. I still carry them. I carry the stories of my childhood, those I remember and those I have been told. I carry the stories of my best friends, my husband, my mother-in-law, and my brother, who entered into

community college to pursue higher education against all of the odds. Their stories stir courage when I am convinced that I will fail.

When I think about my dad, who at the age of thirty obtained one of the few GED's within his immediate family, I think about strength. He thought he would be able to work for a decent wage to support his family. This plan worked for the majority of his adult life; he was a custodian, a Wal-Mart manager, and a direct-care provider, all supporting our family and putting food on our table. We lived modestly, but we lived better than he had in his youth. It wasn't until after two decades of hard work and long hours that these occupations took their toll on his health. After back surgery due to an injury obtained at work, my father, for the first time, could no longer utilize one of his most valued assets in the work force, his body. Nerve damage required that he sit for short periods, and he could no longer do the heavy lifting that was required of him. With only a GED and area-specific prior experience, he was no longer an eligible candidate for the only jobs that would hire him. After several consultations, he was advised to re-enroll into college for "career-training" in an effort to retrain him for re-entry into the workforce. I have never again witnessed such excitement and fear. He struggled, was labeled learning disabled and needed accommodations for hearing loss. He was considered a non-traditional student, an adult-learner, learning disabled, underprepared, at financial hardship; still, he braved the new world of campus life. When I've thought about stopping, of dropping from my graduate studies because I *still* feel like I may not be good enough, may not be smart and strong enough, I think about my Dad. I think about the perseverance it took to face a house fire, moving an entire family, back

surgery, job displacement, facing foreclosure, and still he was willing to walk into the arena of community college.

While Haywood Community provided me the means to obtain college credits, it did not afford me the college experience I needed to transition easily into a four-year university. I was, as one instructor called me “a big fish in a little pond”. At the time, his insistence that I “didn’t belong at the two-year” and instead should have gone on to a four-year was a compliment. It told me that I was smart and soon enough, I would have my place at a real university. It implied that this was the in-between, the fluff before the real thing and that perhaps bigger and better things did lay ahead of me.

When I graduated from Haywood community college and took a huge leap, entering a four-year, feeling fully aware of my inadequacy and underpreparedness, I kept perspective by honoring the stories of my parents. I had planned to pursue my BA, but was full of self-doubt and concern regarding my ability to succeed. Thus, I enrolled in another local college that I felt safe entering, UNC-Asheville. I experienced, first-hand, the toll that self-doubt can take on your concept of self. Sitting in my first “Socratic Seminar,” I remained silent while what seemed like a sea of literature majors and masters freely shared how they interpreted Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. I enrolled in “The Art of the Novel” because I still needed to fulfill some general education requirements, and I excelled in previous English and Literature courses. However, this course was different. I felt more and more inadequate, jotting down vocabulary words to look up when I got back home after working third shift. It marked one of the first times I felt pushed but capable at the same time. While this was one of the most intimidating courses I had

participated in, it was also one of the most empowering experiences of my academic career.

After overcoming my fear of the conversation and thick terminology, I realized that not only was I invited into the conversation; I could and should be a part of it. This was largely in part to the instructor. By conducting a respectful and constructive learning space, I felt safe enough to speak and feel that what I said would not be judged. Instead, it mattered. Never had I witnessed a classroom led by student input *and* instructor commentary. During my enrollment, UNC-Asheville was three times the size of my Alma Mater and required a new level of coursework I felt utterly unprepared for. But, I rebounded, compensated for my lack of know-how in literature analysis and terminology, and pushed myself harder than I ever had to succeed. Not everyone's first experiences with facing their perceived inadequacies provides such moments of growth, however. Many internalize the labels given to them as personal failures, failures that insist they don't belong in a system they took a chance entering. I almost succumbed to my perceived failures when, in the same semester, an instructor left me with no guidance, no feedback, and low grades on assignments. He was sterile, cold, and unapproachable. He never learned our names, gave scolding feedback, and acted as the only active participant in the room. If you answered, you were belittled. If you were silent, you were mocked.

I felt distant from the school. At the time, I was working third shift, taking care of an elderly couple. Some shifts were 12 hours and others were over 26. I went to school, went to work, and repeated. After receiving a failing grade on a large writing assignment, I sat on the back hill at my mother's, exhausted, crying and asking her if

she was sure I was supposed to be in college. I insisted that I didn't belong and felt that maybe I should withdraw. I could always get a \$10 an hour job somewhere and say forget it. At least I had the Associates degree. She never told me that I couldn't. She never told me that I had to stick with it and that it would pay off. But she did tell me that I was one of the most hardworking and dedicated people she had ever known and that regardless of what an instructor said, I would do something big. I had a purpose. All of the struggle, all of the doubt, it would pay off. And, if I dropped, I would regret it because deep down, she knew that I knew I could do this. I firmly believe that it was in these moments of vulnerability, of shame and feeling ready to give up, that their willingness to believe in my future, to keep the dream alive for me, gave me the push and support I needed to carry through. Their belief in my story, of the one before and the one to come, was the empowerment I needed to believe in myself.

I of all people know that while other people can tell me what I am worthy of, what they see me achieving, they do not write my future. If I had accepted the plans laid out for me, for the future I was expected to inherit, I would not be edging near a master's degree. If my parents had listened and never left the confines of southern Indiana, I would not stand where I do today. I had parents that helped me dream bigger than the world told me I should. I dreamed for a way to take care of my family and to make them proud enough of me to make the sacrifices, the falls, and the stories worth it and to have purpose. When I lost focus, when I felt like I needed to give up or that I didn't belong, I had the perspective of the past that brought me to my current standing. The stories of my family, of house fires and loss, of struggle and perseverance, of sticking together as a unit and of pushing past the setbacks, these were the lessons of my past



that forced me to cling to the idea of a degree. Knowing that one of the biggest hopes for both of my parent's lives was that they could see one of their kids graduate college, gave me purpose from the past. I felt desperate to make the life they sacrificed to give me, the opportunity to rewrite the story of my future, matter. The stories of their past, along with mine, gave me grit.

I had people to dream with me and sometimes, to dream for me when I couldn't. As an educator, I want to not only learn with, but dream with my students as well. Their stories tell me where they have been. Their stories tell me where they stand in the present. They have the power to create their reality and to write their future. If we don't encourage and foster story ownership and authorship, the outside rhetoric, the stereotypes and assumptions others place upon them, will dominate their view and conception of their future. We must first dream into existence, to truly see and believe it, before it can become a reality.

## CH.2: TO SEE IS TO DREAM: THE LENS OF EDUCATION

*The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account.*

-Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

### **Introduction**

This thesis explores the concept of story and its potential use within the community college composition classroom. Story is everywhere; it is how we as human beings make sense of our existence and our role within the world. While we are all carriers of story, community college students carry unique stories of hardship and adversity that have led them to enrollment. Previous educational experiences and negative rhetoric about their past has the ability to shape or limit what they see themselves as capable of both in their present situation and their future. If left unchallenged, the rhetoric used to describe our stories (or how others have described them) limits what we see as possible for ourselves. Providing space within the community college classroom challenges the negative rhetoric and affords a unique opportunity for instructors to provide support and guidance to their students. This thesis discusses how story ownership and authorship, when encouraged by an instructor, communicates more than simply the telling of stories, fostering both trust and the development of ethos. Story ownership and authorship fosters a fully established ethos that refuses to require students to compartmentalize the academic and personal parts of

their sense of self. Instead, story invites all parts of the self and attaches value to both lived experiences and knowledge obtained from such experiences. By doing so, it heightens instructor awareness and allows for a level of humanization and connection between instructor and student that may not otherwise be possible. By establishing the ethos of both student and instructor as carriers of story, students experience a heightened level of trust and open communication with their instructor. In doing so, instructors are able to provide a sense of support and mentorship inside the classroom—rather than relying on external support services to take on that position. By recognizing the power of story and advocating for more of its inclusion within the community college composition classroom, instructors can capitalize on the transformative power of story to engage students and foster both success and support.

### **The Stories They Carry**

How do we define or group the “typical” people who enter community colleges? They are my brother, my fifty-two year-old father, my best friend, and myself. They are the majority of my immediate sphere; they are the people I would consider some of the biggest-hearted individuals with the most colorful backgrounds, experiences, and outlooks on life. They are hardworking, determined, and restless in the lives they have been living, and are looking for some form of change. They have an idea of a dream for their lives and are willing to risk ostracizing themselves from everything they have ever known in order to make permanent change for their future. They are your neighbor, your gardener, and the mail carrier’s son. They are not *just* economically underprivileged individuals who are seeking life transformation. They are a diverse sampling of our

democratic society. They are everyone, everywhere. There is no “typical.” These are the people who enroll in community colleges.

Community colleges enroll a significant number of students into credit and non-credit coursework. According to Columbia University’s Community College Research Center, “the most authoritative recent analysis of community college year-round enrollment (as opposed to fall enrollment only) is from 2012–2013. The analysis indicates that in 2012–2013, 10.1 million undergraduates were enrolled in public two-year colleges.” Often referred to “everyman’s college,” community colleges are open to all who enroll. This was made possible by “open-access” agreements that require acceptance of all applicants, so long as they meet the minimum requirements, which often include a high school diploma or GED. Essentially, no matter the skill-level or prior experience of the individual, acceptance and enrollment into higher education is guaranteed with no questions asked and “without apology” (Rodriguez, 17). Open-access, also known as the open door, “influences admissions and enrollment processes, curricular structures, faculty hiring, the relationships between community colleges and four-year institutions, advising and counseling activities, and colleges’ responses to the needs of the K-12 sector, as well as those of the local economy” (Shannon 16). Open-access affords the right and ability to attend college to any citizen, no matter their story or prior defeats.

In addition to open-access, our current national conversation includes plans of “free access for all,” meaning free two-year college for all who apply and qualify. With retention rates continuing to decline, President Obama has also proposed that by 2020, the United States should aim to reclaim the number one ranking in post-secondary

attainments amongst all other countries, as we did in 1992 (“Higher Education”). Ideally, the pairing of initiatives would construct a prime place of enrollment, free of student loan debt for all qualifying citizens.

### **The Oppressive Barriers They Face**

While open-access and the proposal of free open-access certainly allows for a wider net of students to enroll in community college, certain barriers will continue to restrict or oppress students if left unrecognized and untended. While the door is open to students, having the *ability* to enroll and having access to the institution do not ensure *equal* access to an education.

To assume that all students have equal access to college simply because the enrollment and financial barriers are removed is to omit the personal and situational barriers that restrict students. Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, defines barriers to education as “oppressors” in his widely recognized book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which discusses the existence of humanization and dehumanization of individuals, specifically within the realm of education and literacy. While his studies and considerations were based on his work in Brazil among an illiterate population who he worked as a partner in literacy obtainment, his theories have been widely accepted and utilized within the educational framework of the United States as well. Freire theorizes that in order to achieve alleviation from oppressors barriers that individuals face, and in turn to become humanized, the oppressed must first recognize their oppression and seek transformation and liberation.

Many students enrolling in higher education seek transformation and liberation from the barriers and oppressors that Freire describes. In order to do so, they view their

key to success, and thus liberation, as degree obtainment. According to Schuetz & Barr, “85 percent of freshman enrolling in community colleges,” sought to obtain an Associates degree (1). Those entering the new world of higher education have expectations of what the college experience will provide them both in intellectual and economic growth. With such a diverse population, however, comes diverse prior-knowledge, experiences, and restraints that limit individuals in their daily lives. Many of those who set their sights on community college and are brave enough to challenge all of the voices, situations, and barriers by signing the final documents for enrollment are aware that hard work lies ahead. Hard work and hard times already lay in the stories behind them. But, what they also know, according to the tales passed down by many before them, is that college can break down many of those barriers and provide different opportunities for their future, so long as they work for it and complete it. To the oppressed, education acts as a means of humanization, of being seen as an equal and contributing citizen.

Economic gains and new job opportunities are certainly a welcomed incentive for college education, but one of the key take-aways from the college experience is the experience itself. Involvement and engagement on campus and within the classroom provides the experience and knowledge necessary for entry into the workforce and to transition from one socioeconomic class to another, thus providing societal rewards. Through education, students expect to enter a new society and, as suggested by President Obama in his 2015 State of the Union Address, entry into the middle-class for those who graduate: “Whoever you are, [free access] is your chance to graduate ready for the new economy, without a load of debt. Understand, you’ve got to earn it – you’ve

got to keep your grades up and graduate on time.” Obtaining a degree means moving up and out of their current status, transcending from one income level into another of higher economic success. In order to do so, students need grooming for the workforce, socialization through interactions with peers and instructors, and skill obtainment through practice and coursework. Community college educator Melissa Juchniewicz characterizes three key expectations of post-secondary students as follows: “seek[ing] a general education to extend... maturation and general knowledge, or to take steps toward independent living... employment and specialized training,... [and/or] expansion of knowledge for their own enjoyment or edification” (205). Indeed, while some desire a complete transformation in all three areas, some desire only specialized and/or vocational training. Those like my husband, who straight out of high school, enrolled into machining classes and exited as soon as a job offer was extended, enter with the hopes of entering the work force as quickly as possible, degree completion or not.

While students enter with high expectations that they will be liberated from their current socioeconomic class and enter into a more comfortable existence, they may not fully see the barriers and oppressors they carry. If, as Freire suggests, the oppressed must first be aware of their oppression in order to seek transformation and liberation, students must first see their current state as oppressive and seek to make changes accordingly. Student enrollment into community college was a level of awareness and recognition that life change was necessary and “The struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation” (Freire 29). Simply enrolling, however, is not full liberation. While education has been heralded as

the means for socioeconomic transformation, this does not provide the full liberation and transformation that education can and should provide. Students must recognize the oppressive nature of the labels and perceived deficiencies that primary education has communicated. They must see that what they have been told by previous experiences and oppressors, are not truths and that the oppression they face is not permanent. Students who trust the word of educators and institutions as being “truths” and not oppressors, “hav[e] internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, [and] are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (29). To be liberated and “surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity”(29). In order to become fully human, to become agents of their education, students must see the entire scope of their oppression in order to re-see their reality and the reality of their future.

In addition to the socioeconomic and personal barriers that students face, previous educational experiences and backgrounds oppress students by communicating unworthiness and unintelligence. The stories they carry can feel limiting or oppressive and communicate a lack of self-worth. While some enroll and persist through the system with ease, others have negative educational experiences that shape how they view themselves in the role of student. This vision of themselves then effects how they see the authoritative roles of both institution and instructor. Within the scope of their education, situations or negative exchanges with authoritative figures can oppress an individual’s concept of self-worth, placing them in the role of the oppressed and the



institution or instructor in the role of the oppressor. Often, students internalize previous perceived educational failures as a reflection of their “self;” if they failed or were negatively labeled within the framework of education or within their own personal lives, they internalize this failure as a direct reflection of their own self-worth and value. Freire describes the oppressed as untrusting of their own intelligence, discrediting the information they have learned through lived experience as meaningless. He defines this idea as “self-depreciation,” and elaborates as follows:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end may become convinced of their own unfitness. (45)

These experiences shape or tarnish the reality that they can see for themselves while also constructing or deconstructing how they view themselves as capable and intellectual human beings. When entering the community college, these internalized ideas, based on several factors within the institution, can be negatively reinforced or positively deconstructed in order to reshape and reconstruct a new reality concerning personal capability and the role of education in the liberation process.

Rhetorician Kenneth Burke, in his work *Grammar of Motives*, describes the ways in which humans view and make sense of the world as revolving around our use and understanding of language. Burke’s rhetorical theories encompass the drive behind human motivation. Our interactions with one another and the responses they elicit in

turn shape how we view our own realities and the realities of others. In his book of essays *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke constructs a metaphor for the “lens” in which we see the world. The lens or “terministic screen” is comprised or colored by the “terms” or language used to perceive or construct our reality. Certain words or phrases elicit specific reactions based on our previous experiences and presuppositions, acting as “a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality, and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality” (Burke 45).

Essentially, the use of particular words or terms elicit differing reactions. Our screens are in a sense colored by the selected stereotypes and labels placed upon us based on portions of our realities and stories. Every word we use, every phrase or stereotype, has its own connotations and presuppositions that they communicate, thus selecting a reality or terministic screen. When others make assumptions about what we as students are or are not capable of, for instance, it has the ability to reshape how we view the world around us, and our participation within it. Our previous experiences act as lenses or screens that color or reform our sense of agency and purpose.

We could posit that a significant number of students enter the community college with “colored lenses” perhaps due to negative past histories with education. In her book *The College Fear Factor*, Rebecca Cox elaborates on several “fear factors” that restrict or paralyze students in relation to the community college atmosphere. Throughout her book she highlights the power of the educator and their ability to reshape or form how students view their own role within the classroom. Cox’s work is influenced by the notion that students enter community colleges already fearful or anxious about their success due to previous educational experiences and labeling. These experiences have

negatively “colored” their screen or lens in which they view education and the idea of starting out with a clean slate or lens is motivational. Starting the college journey means starting a new life goal, one that should have no preset limitations. A large number of new students, however, find that this notion of a clean slate is not necessarily an option for them. Instead, students face a different reality. According to Regina Deil-Amen, director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, “two-thirds or more of community college students enter with academic skills weak enough in at least one major subject area to threaten their ability to succeed in college-level courses” (60). Essentially, a majority of students are marginalized in one form or another, thus eliminating the possibility of a “clean slate” that many enter hoping for.

Of the many students seeking higher education, a large majority of those entering are labeled “underprepared.” Being underprepared, or not “college ready” based on national benchmarks, is a label given to nearly 80% of all entering students (Deil-Amen 59). Often, depending on the institutional expectations and testing, students are then required to enroll in remedial coursework. Because Pell Grant loans and financial aid no longer cover the financial responsibility of remedial coursework, students must assume responsibility for payment. With financial burden ranking as one of the top barriers to student success, remedial course work can stand in the way between those aspiring to go to college and those who *can* go to community college (Rodriguez 15). Being placed in remedial courses requires students to remain in college longer; depending on the number of subject areas and courses required, students could be delayed by several semesters. When you add this to the amount of credits already

required for their desired degree in addition to the need to go part-time, a two-year degree can quickly become a six-year commitment.

Due to the expectation to graduate within a two-year span, or even one of a longer duration, this realization is often discouraging for students to continue pursuing degree completion; often, a result is withdrawal or shortened-term goals (Green, 22). While college has been presented as a feasible option, students often respond to such setbacks as a sign of their own failures. University of Chapel Hill professors Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski state that previous educational experiences that elicit negative emotional responses such as shame and hopelessness can have adverse effects on individuals, potentially deterring them from participating in similar academic situations in the future (6). Just as their pasts shape or color their terministic screens, so too do the past screens shape their current reality and construction of self. When students enter with high hopes of easy transition, they are willing to see the potential that college offers as a “new lens” from which they are able to view education. Such labeling, however, can cause students to turn back to their original screen of education. This can in turn allow for a resurfacing of previous emotional responses and experiences to oppress them; labels placed upon students upon entry can act as reinforcements of the self-depreciation they already experience.

While labels clearly impact how we view ourselves and others, the ambiguity in how students are tested and labeled misaligns with the severity of labeling on the student’s perception of self. According to Deil-Amen, those labeled remedial are perhaps closer to being prepared for college-level course work than the institutional labels imply. She describes the inconsistency of entrance examinations and testing for

placement and the enforcement of required remedial courses as being so great that one student can enter one institution as “remedial” and enter a neighboring institution as “average” (16). What is unconsidered, however, is the impact that this form of labeling upon entrance has on the students grouped into these categories. As composition theorist Peter Elbow suggests, to dichotomize is to construct unnecessary binaries. In this situation, students are placed in two perceived categories, “the capable” or the “incapable”. By placing students in an either/or classification, they are perceived as either ready for *or* not ready for regular course placement, thus placing, as Rose describes, “a bar” on what they expect from themselves (*Lives on the Boundary* 11-37). Shame is also associated with being labeled remedial, for the stigma around the term implies or reflects deficiency or below average abilities. Deil-Amen insists that in order for students to be treated fairly and equally, “practices and policies should perhaps be aimed at dismantling old remedial-focused based dichotomies in favor of a broader approach that encompasses the common challenges faced by all underprepared students, regardless of their institutional label/designation as remedial or non-remedial” (61). If we allow for what Elbow describes as “both/and” thinking, embracing the contrary placed upon students and consciously stand in the middle, we no longer view them as either capable or not, but instead as pursuers of education. It is when we fail to do so that we perpetuate a sense of inadequacy to those deemed “insufficient.”

While being considered “underprepared” is a separate consideration from being labeled “remedial,” the notion of being deficient in one area or another before ever participating in coursework may have adverse effects on how students perceive their abilities, or in this case, perceived disabilities. Entering aware of your potential setbacks

can cause immense self-doubt when placed into coursework and, without proper guidance and advising, can cause such fear and anxiety that students leave the institution. Rose, for instance, describes his own constant feelings of inadequacy when navigating higher education. Through his own personal accounts and descriptions of encounters with students after completing his degree, Rose highlights the difficulties students face when aware of their perceived inability. He advocates for instructors to open a mode of communication with students and to encourage their best efforts. If student fears and doubts are left unchallenged, educators and institutions can reinforce the very stereotypes and feelings of inadequacy we wish to liberate students from.

The motive behind enrollment for many students is life transformation; their purpose is liberation. According to Burke, human motive is best understood through the implementation of his “dramatistic pentad.” He considered the elements of our lives in the form of a “drama,” thus calling his consideration of human motive “dramatism.” Humans are actors within the drama, and the pentad makes sense of the motive behind human action. The pentad is constructed by five key components, all of which influence and change one another. The five components include: act (what), agency (how), purpose (why), agent (who), and scene (place). Essentially, the community college is a scene constructed by agents with varying purposes. If, for instance, you place the student as the agent, their purpose for attending the scene (community college) will differ greatly than the purpose of an administrator as the agent.

The community college itself, as a structure, provides the physical space for students and faculty to collaborate with the potential to establish learning spaces and communities. While the physical space to do so is necessary, it is the sense of

community and collective experience provided through interpersonal relationships and guidance from faculty that truly construct the community college. Students rely on faculty members to establish an inviting space and scene within the institution, making students feel like active and integrated agents within the educational scene. Burke's pentad serves as an excellent metaphor to consider and establish the relationship between students, instructors, and the scene of the community college. In this instance, instructors act as agents within the scene, guiding and supporting students. Depending on how they view their role within the scene (their purpose), instructors are capable of reconstructing student expectations from, and experiences with, education. If, for instance, instructors do not see their purpose within the scene as aids or assistants to students *inside* and *outside* of the classroom, their willingness to participate in conversation, attempt to connect with, and assist students may be limited. It is when instructors separate themselves, whether through lack of availability or inability to relate with students, that alienation, self-doubt, and fear of participation further marginalize and exclude students from the learning and self-growth process.

Just as separation and disconnection from instructors can communicate self-doubt and perpetuate alienation and/or fear on the side of the student, so too can lowered expectations within the classroom. Students respond to lowered expectations from their instructors as implying incompetence or inability. When enrolling in coursework, hard work and growth through experience and practice are expectations. In fact, Vincent Tinto, author of *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* and professor in the School of Education at Syracuse University, argues that if students are given clear and high expectations of what they are to learn and to achieve, they will

positively respond and are more likely to stay enrolled in coursework (10-11). When these expectations are not met, however, and are instead met with watered-down coursework, students lower the effort they are willing to expend. In addition, lowered expectations communicate that students are incapable of “average” coursework. I had a similar experience in several courses at my Alma Mater; although I was not enrolled in remedial coursework, the notion that we were *just in community college* was made on more than one occasion and within more than one course. While we were, in fact, enrolled within a community college, the level of coursework was expected to prepare me for transfer and beyond. Instead, it often felt like an extension of high school with the same rules and regulations within the room. Open dialogue and Socratic seminars (as described in a previous section) were rarely practiced until entry into a four-year institution. While this certainly is not true about every community college institution, it is not an uncommon assumption.

Cox describes the types of biases above from an instructor to instructor standpoint, describing how faculty members judge “over-achieving” professors as “four-year wannabes” who settled with community college instruction because they could not obtain four-year employment (117). This notion of “settling” with community college instruction diminishes the work of those who consciously selected community college instruction as their passion, causing stigma within the workplace for those who work hard to help student’s master information and succeed. To be called a “four-year wannabe” implies that your hard work and dedication to students is simply showing off or overachieving, when in reality, their “over-achievement” is beneficial for student success. This reinforces the notion that it is *just* community college and implies that



there should be a difference between community college coursework and four-year university coursework. The criticism that instructors receive from other instructors within the institution can change how they see their students. By accepting the criticism as truth, instructors accept this notion of “just community college” and their terministic screen is colored and changed. Similar judgements are transferred onto the student as well, assuming they too are *just* community college students and incapable of university level work, creating a stigmatized separation between those who are vocational and those who are academic.

The assumption that community college is a sub-par education communicates what Rose coins as “setting the bar.” Rose insists that instructors are able to “set the bar” of achievement within their classrooms. When they set the bar at a higher standard, students are willing to push themselves just beyond what they perceive as possible in order to succeed. When given encouragement and feedback along the way, this method does not discourage students from trying harder, for the bar stays within arm’s reach. Cox insists that instructors act as “validation agents,” not “professors” who profess the knowledge to the unskilled masses (127). Freire describes validation agents as “co-agents” and the latter as the “banking method” of education, warning against the “narration sickness” from which our schools are suffering (55). When using the banking method, whether knowingly or unknowingly, instructors act as holders of “true knowledge” that they must filter and deposit into student receptacles. This type of instruction limits the collaboration and connection amongst instructor and student, placing a divide between those who hold the knowledge and those who are only capable of receiving and memorizing such information.

While there are a great number of excellent educators who align with Rose and Cox's teaching philosophies, there are still a number of educators who rely on the banking method of instruction, whether they are aware of their actions or not. It is when the instructor aims to prescriptively "fill" students with knowledge they see as "obtainable" (thus "setting a bar"), never inviting students into the conversation, that negative repercussions arise. This method denies students the ability to "critically consider [their] reality" because they are never required to critically think about and consider their situation, and are instead assumed incapable of becoming "beings for themselves" (Freire 56). To trust students to be full participants is to require they come to a heightened level of critical thinking and awareness of both their own realities and stories. When required to sit and be passive accepters of information, students feel no sense of agency and will not actively participate in their education. Instead, they feel incompetent or mistrusted, that they are unable to do for themselves. The educational "experience" is limited to the instructor, for no other individual is trusted to provide "true knowledge" in the classroom.

Students need to be active participants in their education and to feel a sense of agency in their coursework. In order for this to occur, students must feel challenged *and* trusted to work through and practice skills. When students feel challenged, they feel more engaged. When instructors lower the bar, however, the adverse is true. Students disengage and disconnect in response. "Lowering the bar" for students takes place in several forms and can be communicated in several ways. If, for instance, instructors make the assumption that because students are remedial or underprepared they are

unable to participate in group discussions and instead need formalized, lecture-driven classes, this is an oppressive assumption.

Just as instructor assumptions about student capability have the ability to oppress, so too does negative feedback. When neglected or overseen, students internalize low expectations and negative feedback from instructors and/or isolation from the institution as a product of their own wrongdoings and missteps. Intrinsic motivation is established when students feel engaged, competent, and connected to their place of study, fostering self-worth and heightening perseverance in degree attainment (Guiffrida 121). Fostering intrinsic motivation through relationships increases student relatability to the campus and the participants within it. It is arguable then, that if left without positive affirmations and what Burke describes as consubstantiation through conversation and guidance, negative past experiences and prior terministic screens will diminish student's ability to see themselves as capable participants within higher education, further perpetuating the negative stereotypes and ideologies they have previously internalized (*Grammar of Motives* 174). If the institution fails to address the need for students to connect with and "consubstantiate" with others, oppression, self-doubt, and alienation continue.

If instructors acted as participants in learning with their students, acting as both learner and instructor, the instructor would be an agent for liberation for their students. Cox suggests if we do not "come down to their level" and treat them as equal participants in their education, instructors will be unable to act as liberators and instead continue as educational oppressors. But, we should not "come down" to their level. Instead, we should never be separated or dichotomized by "levels" in the first place. The

language of “coming down” implies that instructors inhabit a space of elevation, one that excludes the uneducated masses and instead permits entry only to the academic elite.

If instructors do not stand on level ground with their students, students will continue to fear their instructors as an “other” and not as a validating or co-agent. While we cannot coddle every student, we can humanize them and recognize that situational oppressors and personal barriers often interfere with coursework. Assuming that they are incapable or “don’t care” creates a separation between educator and student. By allowing them to own both their experiences and their current situations while, in a sense, meeting them in the middle, we extend our hand as both educator and mentor. Without such connections, the power of the classroom and the instructor are lost.

If students are unable to “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation they can transform”, persistence and liberation will not occur (Freire 31). In this situation, if students are left to their own devices to navigate the system and are not provided with *consistent* mentors or agents of the institution to act as liberators from previous educational experiences that have elicited great self-doubt, feelings of alienation and separation are likely bi-products. This reinforces the concept that they do not belong with those that are “capable” of excelling within the college atmosphere. If this occurs, Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski claim that shame and self-doubt are of the most common emotional responses, leaving students at a heightened level of vulnerability (9). If this occurs with no positive affirmations through instructor or advisor communications, negative self-concepts reinforce the idea that the student should exit the institution. If this occurs, they carry the ideology that they are unworthy participants within the framework of higher education outside of the

institution, influencing how they view themselves within their personal lives. This leaves students feeling as if they are “sub-par” citizens within their community and are incapable of elevating themselves from one social or socioeconomic class to another. Accepting these systematic failings as an internal deficiency reinforces previous societal oppressors and perpetuates ideas like “I will only ever be a service industry worker,” ideas that they are no greater than the terminologies or lenses their social status and the stereotypes surrounding their story, reflects.

### CH.3: THE FULLY ESTABLISHED CLASSROOM

*If we want more students to succeed in college, then we have to turn full attention to teaching. Students spend more time with their teachers than with all other institutional agents combined, and as a community college administrator I know puts it, students succeed one class at a time.*

-Mike Rose

Support matters. While support services on campus are an excellent resource for students, those that could use these services the most do not. Whether it be because of lack of know-how when navigating the college system or the stigma surrounding their use, these services go underutilized. According to Rose, “Though some type of orientation and counseling and advising are typically available, their quality and effectiveness vary, and counselors’ case load—1,000 students per counselor is not uncommon—works against any substantial contact. And many students don’t utilize these services at all” (“Reforming the Community College Pt. 2”). There is a wide variety of support services equipped with counselors for the extremely diverse student body. Reaching and providing services for every individual student is impossible, however. Substantial contact occurs outside of support services, more specifically, within the classroom. Because substantial contact occurs within the sphere of the classroom, educators are capable of providing support and guidance that counselors and other agents on campus cannot. Life obligations and other time constraints restrict students from accessing supports and social avenues outside of the classroom that they otherwise may need and benefit from. Because some students experience a lack of family support or peer role models, the need for the instructor-student relationship is that much more important. The one place that students are required to enter and

engage on campus is the classroom. Instructors serve as the one true educational agent we can guarantee students will encounter and have equal access to. No matter who enrolls, no matter what experiences they carry or presuppositions they have about higher education, the common link between students and the composition classroom instructor provides a transformational space for learning and self-growth, if only we as educators recognize and become more aware of what I am calling the “fully established classroom”.

A fully established classroom requires that instructor and student share the same purpose: to learn from and teach one another. In order for this to occur, students must feel invited into the conversation and integrated into the learning experience. Instructors cannot act as a “best friend” to their students, but in order for a classroom to truly accomplish its purpose, they must work together as co-agents. Instructors must set up the “scene” of the room, setting up the overall tone and perception of its purpose. Based on my own previous experiences within college classrooms, and now with teaching my own composition courses, I recognize instructor participation and full integration in to the room as a whole is equally important to student participation and engagement. If I, as the instructor, am not involved, active, and listening, students zone out and lack involvement. It is when I act as a participant within their conversation, and extend offers of help and support that are genuine, that students genuinely respond. A fully established composition classroom is even more powerful, for the communication amongst instructor and student is more than oral feedback or written responses on one to two major assignments; it’s a continuous conversation about improvement, success, and development. When my students and I discuss their writing and writing process, it is

much more personal and exposing than say, a multiple-choice test. When students truly engage with their writing, they feel that they have exposed themselves onto the page. In order for them to do so, my students have to trust that I am not in the room with them to judge their story, but instead to guide and assist where I can. The composition classroom, when fully established, fosters interpersonal communication and collaboration.

One of my most memorable pieces of feedback from a student came during a one-on-one writing conference in the early stages of drafting. John<sup>1</sup>, one of my most bright and outgoing students, was not turning in the introductory pieces to the large paper we were committing to for the semester. He no more than sat down in front of me before apologizing for missing assignments, expressing how deeply sorry he was for putting my class “on the back burner” to the classes within his major. After several minutes of conversation, John expressed how terrified he was about the “big fat paper” I assigned and that, if not for my speech about working together and constant repetition of “we are in this together, and we will do this,” he would have dropped my course. He made mention of how important this was to him, to feel like I was committed to working with him personally and to guide him through each step. These moments of connection, these moments of raw trust, are key to constructing a fully established classroom.

Trust is necessary for a sense of community within the classroom. This requires what Burke would describe as identification and consubstantiation. Students identify with one another and are able to work toward a common goal or purpose. Feeling like an individual while also feeling like an integrated part of the group and learning

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<sup>1</sup> Name of student has been changed to protect his privacy.



community allows for a heightened sense of connection or “consubstantiation”, raising student engagement and involvement with the class and peers. According to Burke, “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (Burke 21). In this scenario, Teacher A and student B can relate with one another while also being able to identify as individuals. A sense of shared purpose allows for students to break away from the common assumption that instructor and student are dichotomized, instead allowing for a partnership in the learning process. Feeling like an integrated part of the classroom combats feelings of isolation and alienation that the institution itself can perpetuate. When feelings of support supersede feelings of self-doubt, students are more likely to engage, participate, and continue to persevere.

Instructors are capable of providing guidance and support within the classroom through identification and consubstantiation. By sharing their own experiences and knowledge of higher education, instructors become more human and personable to students. If we, as Rose suggests, shift our focus from “scheduling courses and services to accommodate working adults, developing more online learning, easing the ability of students to transfer, and a host of other sensible solutions to the many barriers” that students face, and instead “turn our full attention to teaching,” the relationship and bonds between instructor and student can provide a new form of support (“Teaching: The Missing Ingredient in College Success”). Pedagogical styles and interpersonal relationships between instructors and students act as powerful means

of identification and connection for both teacher and student where each individual must “try on the lens” and understand the perspective of the other.

Based on the assumption of two-thirds of students entering “academically underprepared” (as stated in previous sections), the English instructor is more likely to come in contact with the majority of entering students. Because so many enter underprepared, it is more likely that they will not test out of freshman or sophomore composition coursework. The majority of students who enter are required to take one or more English courses, depending on the institution. Take Haywood Community College for example. According to their 2015-2016 course catalog, unless students are enrolled in a certificate program (where no English coursework is required), at least one English course is mandatory. In degree seeking programs, for instance, two English courses must be completed to meet graduation requirements. This places composition instructors at a prime place of interception, meeting face-to-face with a large portion of entering students. Those who enter carry needful, worried, heavy-hearted but hopeful stories of hard-work, failure, success, and fear. They carry important testimonies of their past that have shaped them as they are today. Their stories, if shared, allow for a point of connection from student to student and instructor to student.

There are several factors within the classroom that make or break the possibilities of connection and collaboration between student and instructor. Tinto, describes four key components to student success that the institution must provide in order for students to persevere and be successful. He claims that the institution itself must provide clear expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement to students in a clear fashion that they can access and utilize. He describes these

components as “an obligation to do what it [the institution] can to help the student[s] stay and graduate...by focusing on its own behavior and establishing conditions with its walls that promote those outcomes” (6). While it is certainly the responsibility of the institution as a whole to provide these four crucial components for success to students, I argue that these four things can and must be achieved within the four walls of, specifically, the composition classroom where connections and exchanges between instructor and student are so influential. All four components are required to construct a fully established classroom, providing a sense of community and support for students that may otherwise feel alienated or distanced from the institution. These elements are important in every classroom, but if as Tinto suggests, these elements are most needed during the first year of enrollment, remedial or introductory composition courses are crucial spaces for such elements to be employed.

The act of writing is intimate and requires a level of vulnerability and exposure from the writer that is unparalleled in other coursework. At a time of such uncertainty, writing coursework and interactions amongst students and instructor, and student to student, provides opportunities for self-reflection and growth. This is especially true for underprepared and self-conscious students that are aware of their perceived deficiencies, as defined by their previous and current institutions. Each of the four above-mentioned items provides a sense of guidance and support to students that are necessary for perseverance.

### **Assessment & Feedback**

One of the key modes of communication between instructor and student is assessment and feedback. Tinto describes feedback and assessment as necessary for

both student and institutional growth, stating that “students are more likely to succeed in institutions that assess their [students] performance and provide frequent feedback in ways that enable students, faculty, and staff alike to adjust their behaviors to better promote student success” (7). Indeed, students and institutional agents alike can learn through constructive feedback and assessment, highlighting areas that need improvement and growth. Having a clear line of communication between instructor and student is necessary for student success.

It is “the nature of instructing writing” that, unlike other courses, “where exchanges between teachers and students can be reduced to as little as one or two objective tests a semester” that the production of writing is an ongoing communication between instructor and student for the bulk of the semester (Shaughnessy 234). Writing courses require students to participate in extensive writing where instructors must then “read what is written and write things back and forth and every so often even talk directly with individual student about the way they write” (Shaughnessy 234). Indeed, the writing course requires much more “exposure” of the self on the side of the student, and in turn, response and engagement through feedback and engagement from the instructor. The level of feedback students receive is, arguably, unique to the composition course due to the heavy emphasis on and amount of writing produced.

For instructors, delivering constructive and positive feedback that both point to errors in writing while also encouraging development can prove difficult when keeping the feelings and needs of students in mind. While one cannot limit their feedback to only positive commentary, it can be delivered in a way that both encourages and aids the student in revision and growth. If commentary is overly prescriptive and corrective,

students feel inadequate and incapable, thereby reinforcing oppression and further coloring the screen in which students view education and themselves. Littering the page with red pen and corrective marks communicates “insufficiency” while side commentary or oral feedback provide a clearer line of communication explicitly providing modes of improvement and sections of praise. Ken Hyland, lecturer in the Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Technology, in Papua New Guinea, discusses the need for what he calls “interactive feedback” through minimal marking and taped commentary (279). Interactive feedback requires conversation or interaction between instructor and student. Instructors can require one-on-one conferences during any stage of the writing process in an effort to humanize the experience and make students more comfortable. In this scenario, oral feedback replaces written feedback. Students then have the opportunity to respond to feedback and ask for clarification or further guidance. Minimal marking is just as it sounds, a minimalistic approach to written feedback. If instructors provide an overabundance of feedback, students are overwhelmed and/or shut down. By providing a few key pieces of feedback through minimal marking, the instructor is able to provide positive commentary about strong portions and reasonable modes of revision or expansion.

The writing classroom provides several spaces for feedback from peers and educators. Peer-reviews, collaborative writing assignments, writing groups, and learning communities are just a few ways that the composition classroom can provide varying levels of feedback and assessment while also providing a humanized social exchange. These social connections are beneficial for social and emotional support. Through one-on-one conferences during drafting, for instance, instructors are able to carve out time

dedicated to the specific needs of each student. Even if these sessions last only 10-15 minutes, making the time for the meeting, molding it directly to student needs, and providing undivided attention to address concerns, students feel more engaged and involved in the process. In addition, one-on-one conferences are one of the few moments during the semester that instructor and student are able to collaborate and converse on a personal level. One-on-one feedback and assessment provides a space of comfort and relatability for the student while also forcing the instructor to be mindful and more aware of the student as a human being. Students will feel more empowered and validated if instructors collaborate on writing assignments through all stages of the writing process. Knowing that they are not alone in the process and that their capabilities are not “fixed” allows for students to act as more involved and engaged participants.

Just as students need to feel involved and engaged with the institution and classroom, so too must instructors. With nearly 58% of all community college faculty at part-time status with limited resources, their level of commitment and engagement with the institution may be compromised (Fain). News editor of *Inside Higher Ed*, Paul Fain, discusses the need for awareness surrounding the issue of hiring part-time over full-time faculty. He states that part-time faculty “lack the job security, credentials and experience of full-time professors – as well as the campus support their full-time peers receive.” If we expect our instructors to support and guide our most vulnerable population, they too must experience support from the institution. If community colleges expect instructors to make the necessary time to conference and engage with students inside and outside of the classroom, they must provide the resources to do so. At

Haywood Community College, for instance, all general education adjuncts share a single office. In fact, upon reflection, I do not recall ever going to my composition instructor's office for office hours or one-on-one conferencing. Could this be because they did not have their own office or space to do so? With the large percentage of instructors being adjunct or part-time, it seems more likely than not. How is it that these instructors are to hold the necessary conferences and office hours students need? Indeed, this conundrum heightens student vulnerability while placing instructors in a difficult position of deciding when and how to make time for their students' needs.

### **Involvement & Engagement**

Involvement and engagement are arguably the two most important influences on success: the more students become academically and socially engaged with faculty, staff, and peers, the more "social emotional support" and learning they will experience (Tinto 7). Schuetz & Barr, in *Are Community Colleges Underprepared for Underprepared Students*, define engagement as "as a state of interest, mindfulness, cognitive effort, and deep processing of new information that partially mediates the gap between what learners can do and what they actually do" (18). Ideally, all students would be able to actively participate in groups and social activities outside of the classroom. With the majority of students within the community college identifying as "non-traditional," this idea simply cannot become a reality (Schuetz & Barr 3). But, social engagement often takes a back seat to feeding one's family or working enough hours to pay for basic living expenses. Life and school barely align as it is, let alone finding more time for more engagement with the campus community. Such constraints keep students

from being able to engage in the activities that, although they may be interested in joining, fall outside of the timeline of their course and work schedules.

Asking students to be active participants in their learning experience through open-dialogue and ownership of story provides a sense of belonging and connection that will go unmatched in other academic settings. Consider, for instance, Rose's reflection on his own academic journey. One of the pivotal moments that helped him to feel he was capable and worthy was his interactions and engagement with mentor and instructor Jack Macfarland. Macfarland treated him like no other instructor ever had, as an equal. Rose describes the power of that semester, and how the fact that his mentor believed he was smart and capable of more than what was expected of him empowered him to become actively engaged in learning. Through the relationship and encouragement, Rose found a love for literature and, as a result, found a new sense of purpose for his life. It was through this relationship and engagement with his instructor in and outside of the classroom that he felt able to pursue higher education and now advocates for the kinds of relationships and engagement that he experienced.

The composition classroom provides a heightened level of identification and consubstantiation through the intimacy that the writing process requires. Because the majority of students are required to attend such coursework, the composition classroom provides a space for support *inside* of the classroom; this requires no additional time or appointments for students. Instead, through the intimacy of writing, the need for direct feedback on papers, and the requirement of the course, the composition classroom serves as the only space for the community college to intercept and integrate their students into the learning process while also providing the necessary supports for



success. The course requires no extra commitment, time, or money from students. Instead, they can confidently rely on their instructor's willingness to construct a fully established classroom and space where they can be fully supported, guided, and inspired.

### **Expectations**

Expectations, in this context, are based on what students expect of themselves and what is expected of them. Tinto describes student expectations as being "directly influenced not only by the clarity and consistency of expectations but also by their level" (7). Awareness of the level of dedication the course will require, in addition to clear and achievable expectations are helpful for students. Clear and high expectations communicate a level of trust on behalf of the students, insisting that the instructor has faith in what they can and should accomplish. Having high expectations of students communicates that the instructor finds their students both competent and capable. It is when students feel that they are incapable that they begin to doubt their own abilities further, sometimes to the point of great anxiety and fear of complete failure. Rose describes this concept of higher expectations as "setting the bar" for students. When instructors set the bar high with clear expectations, students are more likely to push for success. In addition to setting the bar, Rose insists that all students, no matter what skill level they enter with, are capable of the mastery of the written language. By believing in their capabilities and setting the bar accordingly, we encourage and inspire our students to try just a bit harder than they thought possible.

Heightened expectations aid students in the development of necessary skills while heightening their sense of self-confidence in regards to what they perceive

themselves capable of as well. Consider, for instance, the contrast between the instructor who insists students find purpose in topic selection and collaborate with peers and their instructor through the writing process, versus the instructor who expects little input from students and prescriptively assigns topics and five paragraph essays. The latter situation implies a level of distrust and lack of confidence in student-ability. Students are responsive to the goals you set in front of them and will equally respond to a lack of rigor. When instructors are inspired and dedicated to the learning of the material, so too will students! Just as Rose suggests, “setting the bar” for our students can and will impact the level of hard work and commitment students are willing to expel. The effectiveness of “setting the bar” and providing clear and heightened expectations are also dependent on how the instructor handles coursework and delivers assessment and feedback however.

Having clear and high expectations of students shapes the way that students perceive the functions of the composition classroom. While having clear goals is necessary, students must also feel confident and competent in attempting to reach said goals. Tinto describes feelings of competence as a key indicator and influence of “the amount of effort [students] will expend on those tasks and how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles” (27). He concludes that this is “particularly true for those who have struggled in the past to succeed in school and college”, emphasizing the importance for those who enter feeling underprepared to be able to see themselves as capable and competent (27). Feelings of uncertainty, self-doubt, and fear can be crippling for students when attempting to complete coursework and participation in class. If they feel the coursework is impossible, they will feel hopeless and

unresponsive. By providing students with writing assignments that require effort but also remain within “arms reach”, instructors push students just hard enough to get them out of their comfort zone; the goal, however, stays within sight and tangible. Having heightened goals alone is not enough.

Cox discusses the pedagogical strategies of community college composition instructors Julie and Beth as deeply encouraging while providing a sense of capability and competence through clear expectations and positive reinforcement. Both instructors serve as prime examples of both Tinto’s suggestions for what I describe as the fully established classroom. Julie and Beth evidence what supportive and encouraging professors are capable of achieving and providing for their students. Cox describes their approaches as “hinged on student’s perceptions. It was not the classroom dynamics that mattered, as much as *student’s perceptions* of the classroom’s dynamics” (117). Both instructors emphasized the importance of collaboration and communication amongst student and teacher, thus providing the four key-components to a fully established classroom. Student participation and engagement heightened in response to feeling capable and competent. Julie and Beth accomplished this by recognizing that the majority of those who withdrew from the course did so in response to the immense self-doubt and fear that the first assignment evoked.

In an effort to combat this issue, Julie and Beth made distinct efforts to make students take agency and control of their writing early on, encouraging them that regardless of what they submitted, they *could* do the work, and so long as they put forth the required effort, they would make it through the course. In addition to the positive affirmations and support they provided in an effort to assuage fear, both instructors

required students to attend a one-on-one conference in the early stages of writing and again before the paper was submitted. During the first conference, students were able to verbalize their uncertainties and to get the feedback and assistance they needed to *begin* writing. One student described the process as follows, “When we did the research paper, that scared the hell out of me. I was freaking out. Julie could just tell by looking at me. She’s like, ‘You’ll do fine. Calm down.’ She encouraged me like nobody has ever encouraged me. I made a very direct point to get her again next semester” (121). Essentially, it is not a difference in assignments or rigor. Instead, students respond to the belief that instructors communicate, a belief that often students do not have in themselves. By setting up their classroom in a way that student’s perceived inclusion and capability, students responded favorably.

Cox elaborates further by describing three “related dimensions” that strengthened trust and participation in the classroom. Through establishing trust by exemplifying expert knowledge of the materials while also clearly explaining it, instructors were able to establish ethos with their students. Secondly, Julie and Beth “epitomized a form of authority based on interpersonal relations that students perceived as more confidence-inspiring than traditional professing” (117). Julie and Beth provided what will be described in the next section as “support” in a form that is, sadly, underpracticed and seen as more inspiring and beneficial than “traditional” professing. In this instance, lecture-driven classrooms are described as the “traditional” or “norm” in college classrooms. Julie and Beth provided a more inclusive approach that I argue is necessary for success. Both instructors were willing to be conversational and “human” with their students, or as one student described, “on [their] level.” Students trusted Julie

and Beth's expectations because they guided them with clear instructions. By opening up communication and dialogue and allowing for students to be full participants, Julie and Beth provided a sense of autonomy while being clear about what was expected of their students in regards to participation and effort expended. It is when students feel alone that they begin to question their authority and ability. Providing clear expectations in addition to hearing and listening to the expectations and needs of students allows for a heightened sense of relatability and engagement. Julie and Beth actively participated in the learning experience while also clearly communicating what they needed from students in addition to listening and responding to student needs.

In summary, Julie and Beth were willing to become participants within the learning process and meeting their students at their level. By getting to know them and "reaching them," they were able to inspire much more than rote memorization and perfected grammar. By working closely with their students, both instructors provided self-confidence to overshadow self-doubt. The expectation from the coursework was rigorous and challenging. However, a key element to their strategy was clear and explicit instructions that made the assignment feel more "approachable." Students felt they were more than capable of accomplishing the work because their instructors met them at their level with clear and student focused instructions. By approaching the writing material in way that seems both feasible and achievable, students are more likely to engage and feel involved. Feeling capable and competent means more meaningful exchanges amongst students and teachers and peer to peer because students feel their participation is both earned and respected. When students feel comfortable with their peers and within the classroom, they are likely to be more

confident in their skills and contributions. When an instructor trusts their skills and capabilities, students are more likely to trust themselves as well.

Establishing ethos and trust amongst instructors and students through identification and consubstantiation allows for a heightened level of interpersonal relations. In order for students to feel comfortable and to communicate and share the uncomfortable truths of their current situation or story, they must first feel that they can trust their instructor to not judge or shame them, but instead help and guide them. Consider, for instance, Kelly Anderson's story. I met Kelly during her senior year of high school. We worked together at Sagebrush Steakhouse and I had just started at Haywood Community College. Shortly after graduation, Kelly joined me at HCC. Starting college directly out of high school seemed like Kelly's only option. She was 18, trying to move out and live independently, and diabetic. In addition to working at Sagebrush, Kelly had to take on a full-time job that provided health insurance in order for her to pay for her prescriptions.

Going to school was another full time job. When it came to activities on campus and staying "engaged" and connected to campus life, however, Kelly's time was limited. She faced not one barrier to her education, but several. Every single day was a constant struggle to overcome not only situational barriers, but physical limitations as well. The effects of Kelly's medical condition forced her to miss school, work, or both. Even on good days, getting through the school and work day in between stomach sickness and low blood sugar was a serious struggle. Sometimes, the effects of her gastroparesis were so bad that she was forced to stay home, even when she was insistent that she could make it through the semester, causing her to get behind on

schoolwork and life responsibilities. Even with me by her side, hosting long homework nights, camped out next to each other in adult footy pajamas, she struggled.

Making it to class was often only part of the battle. When the cards were stacked against her and her illness was so intense that she could barely push through, she would choose attending class above all else, for fear that she would be dropped from her coursework. Her struggle was a silent one, for the only person she felt she could fully share her story with was me. When she could not carry herself through, I tried to compensate, to piggyback her through the rest, providing notes for classes she missed and studying for tests on our shared night shifts. It was only when she went over her allotted absences and was forced out of her English course that she felt she “failed.” But, Kelly is one strong-hearted individual. I never saw any of the setbacks as failures, but more misunderstandings of what Kelly truly represented. Often, I felt she inspired me much more than I could ever inspire her. Her story, her battle to fight through all that she could not control, was beyond motivational. It was heart wrenchingly beautiful to watch her develop and become the woman I know today. Her story, along with many others, influenced the writing of my own.

For Kelly, many instructors wrote her off as incapable. Being ineligible for accommodations did not mean that she didn’t need an accommodating and compassionate instructor. In the courses in which she received a “Withdrawal Fail”, a heightened level of transparency and understanding could have changed the outcome. The willingness of instructors to humanize exchanges amongst themselves and their students provides a means of support and understanding that can act as the one thing students need to keep pushing through their hardships and continue to persevere in

coursework. Situational barriers occur, and sometimes instructors have to alter the experience and expectations of their students in an effort to support and assist students in their academic journeys. For Kelly, absences communicated a contradictory message of complacency and lack of commitment to her instructors. In reality, Kelly stayed committed to the dream of working one *regular* job that would pay her bills and afford her the insurance she needed. She never felt she could share the truth behind her *story*.

It was only after her enrollment at HCC and her transfer to WCU, that her story was exposed to an instructor within her major. That is exactly how Kelly felt, exposed and vulnerable. In her perspective, her illness communicated weakness and would evoke pity, not compassion. Instead, Kelly wanted respect for the hard work and drive she exhibited. But, when one of the instructors from her major found her violently vomiting in the bathroom between classes, she had no choice but to share her story. Upon reflection, Kelly stated, "I've never felt so embarrassed. I'd been in the program for over a year. I knew all of the teachers. But, not one knew about me. No one asked questions about why I'd missed a week's worth of class. Not until they caught me in the bathroom." According to Kelly, the instructor was kind and meant well, but when she said that, "we all [the instructors in the program] thought that maybe something was off with you, but we didn't know what," Kelly felt frustrated. "Why would some of them fail me if they 'thought something was off'? Why did I have to out myself? I don't want to beg for mercy for something I can't control. I don't want it to be a reflection of who I am either." When Kelly's GPA was affected due to withdrawal fails, she was kicked out of the social-work program. When she aimed to re-enter, the same instructor that heard her story told her to exclude it from the required letter for re-admission into the program.



“She told me that they would find reasons to not let me back in, that my illness and my struggles would be reason enough to reject me. My history was a red flag for them for some reason. I thought it would help me get back in if they knew me, really knew what was happening. Apparently not.”

Julie and Beth, the instructors described above, naturally supported their students by constructing a classroom that both invited and encouraged self-exploration by getting to know students’ histories and stories. Through one-on-one conferences and continuous attention to the individual, Julie and Beth invited their students *and* the experiences and barriers they carried with them, into the classroom. They acted as both mentor and instructor to their students. If Kelly had experienced this type of sharing and acceptance of story, perhaps she would have felt more empowered by her struggle than crippled and alienated because of it. If space had been provided for Kelly to come to a heightened awareness of her own experiences, and in turn was able to share them in a safe and conducive learning space, perhaps her feelings toward educators and her own “disabilities” would have changed. In response to her educational experiences with educators, Kelly felt dehumanized and separated.

Students like Kelly, my father, my brother, and myself, needed an instructor to find ways to reach out and connect to us. Whether this be through writing activities or one-on-one interpersonal exchanges, the invitation needed to first be extended. To us, our stories often feel blemished or inadequate. To share them without invitation feels forced, like we are asking for excuses for ourselves and the work we produce. Trusting our own ethos in the composition classroom requires that we first trust the ethos of the instructor, the guide. In order for us to share our stories, we must first identify and

consubstantiate with others to form a connection that we can trust. Without trust, students will not come to instructors for fear of judgement of their story. When they connect and feel that their instructor too is a carrier of story, that they can share and trust the space within the composition course, a fully established classroom is born.

#### CH.4: AWARENESS OF STORY: FOSTERING GRIT IN THE CLASSROOM

*The irony is that we attempt to disown our difficult stories to appear more whole or more acceptable, but our wholeness- even our wholeheartedness- actually depends on the integration of all experiences, including the falls.*

-Brene Brown, *Rising Strong*

#### **Our Stories, Our Lives, Our Strengths**

Community college students begin their educational journey with a mixture of emotions, concerns, excitements, and fears. They enter with a common purpose in mind: to change their present existence through education. Students seek liberation from the oppressors they have faced up until this moment, the here and now. Upon doing so, they often seek to shed their pasts, to remove them from their being in order to make space for their new identity, their new self. They seek what has been promised to them, a way to go from living paycheck to paycheck, as many have experienced or witnessed their parents struggle through, to a comfortable and enjoyable life both economically and emotionally. Entry into a new socioeconomic class is a key motivator for students; why else would they put portions of their life on hold in order to obtain a certificate or degree? Students enroll seeking entry into a different life, one free of the stereotypes and stories about them that have repetitively communicated unworthiness and inadequacy. Students hope for transformation from their past in order to step into their future. They assume that the purpose of coursework and enrollment is to break away from their past, to leave it behind, in order to be fully accepted and integrated into academia.

The “middle class” mindset that some students share, the idea that living a good life means entering a middle class world away from the working class they have known, insists that their past, their *stories*, are blemishes to be corrected and existences worth forgoing. The clean slate they seek upon entry is one stripped of their roots, pitfalls, and perceived failures, their struggles before their triumphs. While the stories of adversities faced have been difficult and vary greatly from student to student, the value in the lessons learned through such trying times have helped shape and build their ethos.

Our stories should not limit or constrain us, instead, they should take part in forming us as human beings by providing insight into “what is important to us, what our greatest struggles are, what our greatest triumphs are, where our deepest values lie. Our stories tell us what our potential is...what our quest has been, where we have been broken, where we are whole, and where we are most authentically us” (Atkinson 11). To deny ourselves of the richness in our story, no matter the consequences we have encountered or the times we have fallen on our faces and failed, is to deny us of recognizing and taking ownership of our strength and bravery. Our stories of perceived failure and shortcomings are actually stories of our strength, our resilience, and our courage.

Although students wish to begin a new life and work towards a new lifestyle, the aim of higher education, both on the side of the institution and the side of the student, should not and cannot be to sanitize existence of the past in order to make room for a new future. Stories of who we were and where we have been have the ability to shape who we will become. But, recognition and appreciation of past stories as liberating and transformative can be difficult and requires a level of awareness or consciousness of

experience. In her essay “Writing on the Bias,” composition theorist Linda Brodkey reflects on her own working-class narrative and considers how, in her early years, education served as a way up and out of her current socioeconomic class. She describes the essay as a narrative that “breaks tradition” and allows for a level of experimentation and reflection that academics rarely give themselves permission to do. Brodkey dared to insert herself into the writing through reflection upon her own literacy narrative. By considering and reflecting on past events, Brodkey documents her story of obtaining literacy while “tell[ing] a story about a white working-class girl’s sorties into white-middle class culture” (30). Through the process, Brodkey uncovered “uncomfortable truths” about her literacy and sense of self.

Brodkey describes her desperation to exit her working-class status for one of middle-class luxuries, luxuries she assumed were only granted through following the strict rules and guidelines on writing that primary and secondary education applauded. Success academically translated into entrance into the middle-class, just as it does for a number of entering community college students. Her self-worth was measured by her ability to write or “color within the lines” and the numeric value instructors placed on her writing. In turn, this caused great self-consciousness and distrust of her own ethos as a writer. So often, education places emphasis on the value of writing about others, about research and inquiry, that we forget the importance of authorship and ownership of our own lives and lived experiences. Our desire for integration into academia and middle-class status overshadows integration of lived experience as being trustworthy, valuable, and informative.

Brodkey examined the stories that led to her literacy and desire to excel in academics. What she found surprised her. Her working class narrative included stories of her family; she tells of tight living quarters and of how her mother, sisters, and neighbors gathered around the table storytelling while they prepared meals. In her adolescence, these moments were frustrating, were indicators of her cramped and working-class identity. But, through reflection, she saw the stories as powerful means that sustained her and ultimately helped to develop her “self” as a being.

The title of the essay “Writing on the Bias” is a metaphor that encompasses the memory of her mother’s love for sewing the family’s clothing and Brodkey’s fear of writing “out of the box” or ordinary. Upon looking back on her educational experiences, she reached a heightened level of awareness of the negative impact that her desire for perfection and following the rules required. By writing within the box, she limited her writing and convinced herself that the inclusion of “I” was against the grain. It was just as her mother had always insisted about life in general: to live fully, we must be willing to “write on the bias.” In order to fit into the middle-class world, she felt the pressure to conform to the “standards” that academic prose required. To write properly was to remove the self of writing from the equation.

To write on the bias is to forgo the limitations that have been set on composition and to invite the self into the writing. After years in a system that has asked students to remove “I” from the writing equation and to forgo their own identity in their work in order to sound “academic,” it is no wonder students feel uncomfortable taking ownership of their story or including themselves and their experiences in their work. Instead of feeling the need to separate or remove oneself from the writing process in order to seem

“academic,” composition courses should encourage the inclusion of experience and foster a more fully established ethos.

Having an awareness of story and the impact it has on our lives is a key component to growth, for if we never pause and reflect on these experiences, we do not integrate and make sense or meaning from them. Atkinson defines the recognition of pivotal experiences in our pasts as “ the kind of moment that we can recall at any other moment because its meaning has really penetrated our being... it is always there for us to reflect on and be enriched by over and over again. Our task is to become conscious of such moments before they disappear from our existence” (40). Shedding or sanitizing ourselves of our past robs us of the deeply transformative power of our story. By owning and becoming fully conscious of our story, we harvest from the struggle, recognize and contend with the adversity behind and before us, and draw strength from the ups and downs of our existence. It is our willingness to observe and reflect, to acknowledge and become fully aware, that allows for integration of our stories into our present being in order to live authentic and wholehearted lives and to persevere through the guaranteed struggles and hardships that life will throw our way.

### **Owning Our Stories**

Our stories are how we, as human beings, make meaning of our existence and of the purpose behind our perseverance. The vulnerability in showing up and trying again, even after the previous educational experiences express that you are not intelligent, that you are not worthy, takes courage. But, students have to recognize and believe in this philosophy. They have to not only believe in the purpose behind their education, but that they are capable of future successes, as well. I believe that it is through awareness of

our stories and through ownership and authorship of what comprises us that we find strength. By providing space within the composition classroom, by asking students to bring their histories and stories into their writing, instructors and students alike can find awareness about themselves as beings connected to all other beings.

Reflecting on how we have interacted and engaged with the world before, and how the world has in turn changed or shaped us is necessary to fight through the self-doubt and fear that accompany enrollment. Dr. Brene Brown, research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of social work, has spent over a decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. In her most recent work, *Rising Strong*, Brown celebrates the power of the vulnerability it takes to step out of our comfort zones to face our fear of failure head on. She philosophizes that in order for people to live authentic lives, they have to recognize the power of “stepping into the arena,” or stepping into an uncomfortable situation that forces us to be courageous, be strong, and dare to be seen in our existence, even if it means failure (4). To live authentically is to buck against “staying within the box” or within our comfort zones and to challenge what is expected of us. In order for individual’s to “rise strong,” as the title of her book suggests, people need to stop pushing away or attempting to erase their past. In place of erasure, our stories must be honored, accepted, and integrated into the whole.

To live an authentic and wholehearted life, we must know and recognize the truths of our past experiences. Our stories are the truths that lead us to our present understanding of our lives. By acknowledging and becoming aware of our truths, we become more whole. Atkinson describes authenticity through acceptance of our story as



“the act of going with our truth” (11). In doing so, storying our lives “takes us to a deeper level of psychological well-being, it also validates our own experience and allows us to feel more connected with others. Discovering this on our own can be a very powerful and ‘valuable lesson’” (11). Owning our truths allows for a more authentic existence, one that aims not to remove the imperfect, but to build from our falls in order to stand stronger in the future. Our stories are our truths; they are what makes us authentic beings. To live “authentically,” is to be willing to find your voice and to “write on the bias” in order to tell your stories, to own and reflect upon them, and to find strength from the falls in order to stand up and try again. Of the many individual’s Brown interviewed for her research about the vulnerability of owning our stories and integrating all parts of ourselves, a commonality amongst participants was the “importance of feeling genuine, authentic, and whole rather than always compartmentalizing their lives or hiding parts of themselves or editing their stories. The tools they used to integrate their stories of falling are readily available to us all because they are deeply part of our wholeness: storytelling and creativity” (41). To live authentically is to write our story, to find our ethos and claim our voice, and to write from all parts of our self.

Brown argues that it is the fear of failure, the shame attached to the struggles, that prevents us from “rising strong” and daring to go into the arena again. In order for us to live authentic lives, we must dare to be greater than what our past experiences and other people have told us we are. For the community college population, entering into higher education was an arena. Finding the courage to step onto a community college campus was a level of vulnerability many have never known. Just showing up, however, does not sustain them, does not keep the fear, the panic, or the self-doubt

from slipping back in only to insist that they cannot do it, that they will fail, again. Their stories of perceived failures haunt them instead of empowering and strengthening them. In the “rising strong process,” Brown discusses the need for reckoning with emotion and integrating *all* of our stories into our being. In order to do so, we must first become aware of the story and, second, be brave enough to acknowledge it, reckon with it, and write it down. By reckoning with our stories, we build strength from them, we place value on the experience. To ask our students to reflect on stories of their educational past, whether they be positive moments of mentorship or success, or of their perceived moments of shame or failure that breed self-doubt, is to provide a space for self-growth and support.

### **Awareness of Story, Awareness of Grit**

A key component to the “rising strong” philosophy is to “rumble” with our story in order to learn and grow from the vulnerability and shame attached to it. In order for students to find the courage to show up, be seen, and find strength to push through the difficult times, they must first be aware of the hard times that lay behind them. They have to take ownership of the struggle, and in order to do so, they also have to see the moments of vulnerability, those moments that led them into the “arena,” as positive experiences, even when they fell or failed.

Stories of vulnerability are not always stories of shame. Showing up and enrolling was an arena. Putting themselves out there and speaking up in class is an arena. Writing and owning one’s story is a terrifying arena. But, it is only through the awareness and *equal* ownership of the positive and negative pieces of story that we reveal the truths behind our experiences. By pulling back the curtain and allowing for

reflection and integration of all of our stories, we feel more whole and authentic, and in doing so, we find the strength and courage to show up again, to enter the arena again, to persevere and trust that we are worth being heard and seen. We place value on ourselves by placing value on our story.

Brown's work focuses on the whole of humanity, aiming to benefit those who have struggled to persevere through hard moments in life; the rising strong way is one worth admiration and implementation. Brown's entire philosophy revolves around one question: what makes humans choose to rise strong after falls and failures? Brown argues that it is dealing with and reckoning with the scary and difficult parts of our past through emotional reckoning and reflection. What if, when invited into the classroom, story can serve a similar purpose for self-awareness and reflection amongst the vulnerable, underprepared, marginalized, diverse-in-adversity, community college population? What if within my own classroom, by becoming aware of and integrating concepts of story and allowing my students to explore their own ethos in relation to their writing tasks, that a bi-product of such instruction fosters the ability to persevere and find meaning and purpose for the difficulty of their academic journey? A more important question, it would seem, is what *could* happen for my students and myself, and how would it change the way I see them and the way they see themselves as participants in their education and their world? I fear there is more danger, more potential lost, if we fail to invite story, fail to invite their past histories, baggage, vulnerabilities, and emotions into the room. By ignoring their stories, we fail to guide them in finding their voice and in turn, finding their purpose.

What is it that makes some able to persevere through difficult experiences or trying situations while others crumble under the pressure? What makes one person capable of pushing through when things seem out of reach and impossible? Angela Duckworth, psychologist and founder of the Duckworth Lab at the University of Pennsylvania sought out to answer such questions. At the age of 27, Duckworth left a high-profile consulting position to become a middle school math instructor at a New York public school. It was during this time period that she became curious about why some of her most bright and outgoing students were not the ones with the highest IQ's and test scores. In fact, the students who spoke up and tried the hardest in her course were often failing. She noted that doing well in school and doing well in life had nothing to do with IQ or the ability to pick things up quickly.

Duckworth's curiosity about what gives students the ability to push through difficult tasks and have the willingness to fail and keep trying led her to leave her teaching position and go to graduate school in order to study what she identifies as "grit" or the "passion and perseverance for very long term goals. Having stamina, and sticking with your future." What she noted during her research into what makes us "gritty" is that the students that had grit were more likely to succeed in life and in their long-term goals. They were willing to fail and go at the task again. Grit "exists" and allows individuals to fight through and struggle toward their goals without backing down or giving in to their own self-doubt. To be gritty is to stick with commitments and to flail through until the goal is achieved. But, what wasn't uncovered in her research was how to build grit and foster grit in children. What we do know is that grit is intangible, but real. And what Duckworth claims as the "best idea we have about building or forming grit is a growth

mindset.” She describes this as a belief that failure is not a fixed condition; we are not predestined to fail. Our IQ’s, our socioeconomic status, they do not indicate or dictate who will and will not be “gritty.”

The growth mindset that Duckworth describes is similar to Rose’s pedagogical belief in all students as being capable of mastering anything. Rose has a belief in his student’s potential, but students must also believe in their own potential to succeed as well. What if the secret ingredient to building grit in community college students is to provide spaces within the composition classroom for story ownership and authorship? By reflecting on the struggle and perseverance that has brought them to their current understanding of literacy and higher education, students become more aware of their capabilities. What if assignments, such as literacy narratives or “storying” your future after graduation, encourages the establishment of ethos and fosters a belief in one’s own potential? Even more than that, perhaps through such reflection and consideration of their past and present, students can imagine a future that is much greater than the sum of what they perceive themselves capable of.

By taking ownership and authorship of our previous defeats, students are able to see the truth behind their perceived failures, inadequacies, and struggles. They HAVE persevered until this moment. They have shown up into the arena and dared to “rise strong.” I believe that the awareness of our stories, reflections upon them, and integration of them allows for grit; it is the secret ingredient. The key to rising strong, the key to perseverance and grit, is an awareness of the stories that have brought you to your current existence and awareness. Our stories are where our grit lies, and without reflection and awareness, hides.

To persevere we must recognize the beautiful disasters that have led us to this decision, to this school, to this classroom. To see that we are competent, that we are capable, and that we are stronger than what everyone assumes; the stories of our past are more valuable and truthful than the stories that others have *told* and *assumed* about us. All too often, we confuse the latter as truths, as indicators of our capability and our self-worth. Recognizing that our perceived failures and inadequacies are actually where our grit stems from is key to perseverance, for if we have made it through the storms before, surely we can triumph again. Students have to believe in themselves, to trust their own ethos as worthy, to believe in their grit. In order to do so, they need someone else to believe in them, to believe in their stories, and to believe with them that they are bigger than they think they are. Inviting and sharing story within the classroom affords this space, and allows for a heightened awareness of the self, and the way the self is interconnected with others, for all participants.

### **Becoming Aware: Finding Ourselves, Our Voice, & Our Ethos through Story**

Our stories have the power to transform or destroy us; it is how we view our stories and the rhetoric we use to describe and reckon with our stories that determines how we make meaning from them and in turn, how we shape our own realities. American literary critic and rhetorician Wayne C. Booth describes how our contingent realities are made through the rhetoric used to make or remake our reality. Essentially, how we construct meaning about our existence is contingent upon the rhetoric we use to describe and make sense of our past, our present, and our potential future realities. Booth builds from Aristotle's three distinctions of how rhetoric shapes our conception of our contingent realities. According to Aristotle, the three distinct contingent realities that

humans perceive their existence through are deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. Deliberative rhetoric is an attempt to conceive or make meaning about the future. A forensic-made reality “attempts to change what we see as truth about our past” and epideictic “attempts to reshape views of the present” (Booth 17). As Aristotle suggests, rhetoric has the ability to shape our contingent realities, impacting how we perceive and potentially re-conceive our past, present, and futures. The rhetoric that we use to decipher meaning from our past impacts how we stand within our present moment.

Just as the rhetoric of our past shapes our present, so too does it dictate what we see as possibilities for ourselves in our future. Furthermore, the way we “story” or reflect on our past shapes what we perceive as possible for our future selves. Just as our own storytelling constructs our reality, so too does the rhetoric that others use about our story. If, for instance, a previous educational experience has communicated that a student is incompetent and is “no better” than community college, this rhetoric, if taken as a truth, will shape not only how the student sees their past and their present self, but places limitations on what they see themselves capable of achieving in the future.

Booth takes the notion of contingent realities and the rhetoric of constructing such realities a step further, establishing that “when our words and our images remake our past, present, or future, they also remake the personae of those of us who accept the new realities” (17). In order for students to remake their future, as they so desire, they must also accept and remake the realities of their past and present as well. They must believe in their stories in order to accept and remake them. If “you and I are remade as we encounter [the] remaking” and integration of our past and present, our ethos and our concept of our “self” is changed (Booth 17). When we are willing to re-see

or re-shape our past, present, and/or future, Booth claims that our “character” and our “ethos” are established and changed.

Creating space for story allows for students to reconsider the rhetoric of their contingent realities. Students are able to accept their contingent realities as a new truth, making new meaning from the struggles and adversity they have faced until the present moment. It is through integration and awareness of their story that brings them to new truths about their past, their present, and their future. It is not until you have an understanding and awareness of your past that you understand the ability it has to shape and impact your present and your future. It is through awareness that they recognize the strength in all parts of their story, stepping comfortably into a newly established ethos, a new form of confidence in writing and existence. All three forms of rhetoric, the past, the present, and the future, construct the new self. All three must be accepted in order to truly establish a new self, the new self that our students desire.

Inviting story into the classroom allows for this type of awareness and places value on a student’s ethos. By encouraging students to connect themselves to their writing, to utilize their experiences, to use “I” in their papers, instructors are able to place value upon their story. Just as Brodkey suggests in “Writing on the Bias”, trusting ourselves and our stories as credible and worth being heard is difficult. After years of public education and being “properly trained” to write an academic paper, my own ethos felt displaced or absent. Our education teaches us that what the “academics” have to say matters. Students are instructed to trust research and the voice of others over their own. What they are not taught, however, is that their connection to the topic, their own



past experiences, can establish as much ethos and credibility in their writing as those that have been “accepted” into academia. Their stories matter.

When I began college, I entered knowing that I had a lot to learn. Going to college meant growing, changing, and becoming a more educated person ready for the world. I did what was asked of me, wrote about what others said and argued, and trusted the word of my instructors as the gospel. What I had to say, what I brought to the table, didn’t matter. It was the word of the academics that I needed to imitate and recreate, for my voice and my experience were not nearly as credible or useful. If I planned to succeed, I had to listen to what they told me was proper. I was to be molded and trained by those who knew best. To imitate was to be integrated into the fold of the intelligent and academic. My voice was not part of the conversation, for those who had succeeded in the world of academics were the only people who could tell me how to be great.

By denying story, we place a contrary upon our student’s identities. They feel forced to choose between their academic identity and their concept of self. To encourage ownership of story *and* the use of research in their writing, we reserve a space for their identity while encouraging exploration and consideration of their story and themselves. As Elbow suggests, placing an either/or dichotomy on anything forces us to “choose” between one or another and creates a watered down middle ground. We do not have to choose between one side or another, one self or the other. To be whole beings, and as Freire suggests, to humanize the educational experience and find liberation from our perceived oppressors, we must remove the dichotomy between our

past selves and our academic selves. The sharing of story amongst instructor and student, and student to self, can be liberating.

By inviting story into the classroom, we aim to remove the dichotomy between instructor and student. Instead, we are partners in learning. Freire insists that this is key to a liberating education, for we must continuously learn from each other in order to come to a better understanding and to evolve. All too often our students distrust what they know as useless, never realizing “that they too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men” (45). These moments of lived experiences count as knowledge and establish our ethos. Instead, they distrust themselves and their intelligence. What my students know, what their backgrounds have taught them, affords them key insights and understandings about things that I could not possibly imagine. As Burke would suggest, my students see the world through a different lens than I do. Their experiences, their stories, have helped to shape and construct the lens from which they view the world. Our stories act as points of similarity and difference, of connection and differing perspective.

Acceptance and awareness of the impact of our stories on our present and future is what Atkinson describes as making our story sacred and Brown calls owning our story. Ideally, composition coursework provides social and cognitive development for students that transcends beyond classroom application. By reflecting inward and making connections with one’s own story and the coursework required, students are invited to connect with themselves and others. Through such reflection “We make our stories sacred by identifying the events and experiences in our lives that have made us into someone different than who we were” (Atkinson 46). Our stories are gifts when

shared, acting as points of connection and understanding. While we must share and speak our truths, we must also listen to and acknowledge the story of others as well. By making our stories “sacred” we take ownership of them; by committing them to paper, we take authorship. Atkinson takes ownership of story a bit further, describing our sacred stories as follows:

Making our stories sacred involves an interior odyssey where we learn to embrace our own inner demons.... Making our stories sacred means consciously acknowledging the experience of personal struggle, ordeal, or quest, where little by little we broaden our scope of consciousness, experience a symbolic “death”, attain a greater inner freedom, and then enter into the grace of rebirth. This is a process that every human being can know firsthand, every time we leave behind an old status, an old image of ourselves, or an old worldview, and take on a new view of ourselves or the world. This understanding not only gives us a clearer view of our own life, it also helps to make our own life experience feel more special, important, and even sacred, too. When we can clearly identify the movement from order to disorder and back to order in our lives and the resolutions of our own conflicts, we have found the universal in the unique and the sacred in the personal (46-7)

By making story sacred, by acknowledging and becoming more aware, Atkinson claims that we experience a new form of “individuation,” of consciously coming into awareness of our past, present, and potential future story. Freire describes this type of awareness as part of liberation. By becoming aware or conscious of the positive and

negative elements of our past, we become more aware of our selves as “uncompleted being[s] conscious of [our] incompleteness” (26). We must first be aware of and reckon with our stories before we can be liberated. It is only integration of, not sanitation of, our past that allows for transformation and liberation. Separating our past, present, and future selves is a form of oppression in and of itself, for it removes and ignores key parts of our being. Instead, through recognition and reflection upon pivotal moments of experience, “we are able to see things the way we want them to be,” to see a future beyond what has felt predetermined or destined for us (Atkinson 34). While aware of the oppression faced in the past, failure to “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” results in continued oppression (31). If they cannot accept the past, integrate it into their present, and consider their future as able to be transformed, their dreams and aspirations stay within the limitations of what they perceive themselves worthy of. The rhetoric others tell us about ourselves and the rhetoric we use to tell ourselves what we are not worthy of can be damning.

But, the positive rhetoric that can stem from inviting and validating story within the classroom could be great. I already see where it slips into my own room and how, when we find points of our story that connect us, we feel more comfortable and willing to participate and engage in meaningful conversations. When I tell my students stories about myself, whether about my writing process or what I experienced in my own educational path, I become less “instructor” and more human. My story humanizes me for them and brings us all to even ground because I too am a learner. We become partners in learning together. I am no longer seen as judging their story, but a teller and

carrier of story as well. When they feel that we are all part of this story together, by “sharing personally significant stories in groups like this,” our partnership “sustains hope for the future” (Atkinson xiii). Through the act of telling our story, whether orally or in the form of writing, we “gain new insights into human dilemmas, human struggles, and human triumphs... in this way, the story of one person can become the story of us all” (Atkinson 4). When I explain to my students that I still struggle to start my papers, that I too feel anxiety about my writing, my story tells them that I, too, am learning. My story and their story align; we all struggle to push through the storying of our lives together.

Their stories tell me where they have been and where they want to go. By fully listening to and sharing our stories, together we humanize the classroom. I learn about them as authentic beings; their stories tell me about their values, their hopes, and their anxieties, and allows for a level of awareness on my part that can help shape my classroom in order to best support them. By asking my students to connect themselves to their writing, to reflect on and explore the purpose and connection they personally have to the topic they have chosen, I ask them to story parts of their lives. I encourage they bring all parts of themselves, not compartments or fragments.

I see story in our conferences, in our writing assignments, in our everyday dialogue in class. To hear their story is to hear them, to see them and to validate them. Their stories help me to guide them and support them when they enter one of their life’s biggest arenas. Their stories are my stories, and I will gladly aid in carrying them.

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