English 315, Special Topics in Writing, is a course number at UNC–Wilmington under which department faculty may propose “a focused study of a theme, issue, or genre in writing or rhetoric.” It serves as a writing elective for English majors at this growing comprehensive state university of approximately 10,000 students, situated in an historic coastal city.

ENGLISH 315:
WRITING AND PERSONAL IDENTITY
Don Bushman
University of North Carolina–Wilmington

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Writing and Personal Identity
ENG 315-01
MWF 9:00-9:50
Morton 204

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REQUIRED TEXT:

LIBRARY RESERVE READINGS:
Excerpts from:

ABOUT THE COURSE:
In ENG 315, "Writing and Personal Identity," we will be exploring the relationship between writing and the self. What does that mean, you ask? Well, there are a couple of ways we can address this question. First (and simplest), we’ll explore the ways that writing about our lives and our experiences helps us come to a better understanding of who we are, why we believe what we believe, and why we act the way we do. Second (and on a more theoretical level), we’ll explore the sense in which language determines our identities; that is, we’ll consider whether there’s any better way to define our selves than through an analysis of the language that each of us uses, whether through the influence of family or region or schooling. (In this sense, one’s identity is a matter of "talking the talk" as well as "walking the walk.") As an example, consider the argument that what really makes someone a biologist or a carpenter or an accountant is one’s ability to communicate on a professional level with other biologists/carpenters/accountants. Others go so far as to say that language is instrumental in creating our existences. It’s similar to that old if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest question: if we didn’t have a language to communicate our thoughts to others, would those thoughts actually exist? And, likewise, would we exist?

COURSE POLICIES:
Most days in this class will be spent either discussing required readings or working in small groups, where you’ll be reading and responding to one another’s written drafts. Your taking an active role in these activities will help determine your success in this class. Here then are my policies:
• each absence after your fourth will lower your final semester grade by a full letter;
• paper grades will be lowered a full letter for each day the paper is late (or, for the drafts that will end up in the portfolio, one letter for each day a draft is late).

BREAKDOWN OF GRADES:
Four response papers (3-4 pages each) 20%
End of semester portfolio, which will include:
Two exploratory essays (6-8 pages each) 40%
Researched report (10-12 pages) 30%
Portfolio introductory essay 10%

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DAILY ASSIGNMENTS:

Week #1
M—Introduction to class and to one another
W—Further discussion of issue of identity; discussion of writing assignments

Week #2
M—Read Identities chpt. 1 ("Name")
W—Continue chpt. 1
F—Read Identities chpt. 2 ("Appearance, Age, and Abilities")

Week #3
M—Continue chpt. 2; Response paper #1 due
W—Read Identities chpt. 3 ("Gender and Sexual Orientation")
F—Continue chpt. 3

Week #4
M—NO CLASS (Labor Day)
W—Read Identities chpt. 4 ("Ethnic Affiliation and Class")
F—Continue chpt. 4; Response paper #2 due

Week #5
M—Workshop to develop topics for Exploratory Essay #1
W—Conferences
F—Conferences

Week #6
M—Workshop drafts of Exploratory Essay #1 in class
W—Workshop drafts of Exploratory Essay #1 in class
F—Drafts of Exploratory Essay #1 due; Read Identities chpt. 5 ("Family Ties")

Week #7
M—Continue chpt. 5
W—Read Identities chpt. 6 ("Education")
F—Continue chpt. 6; Response paper #3 due

Week #8
M—Read Identities chpt. 7 ("Beliefs and Religion")
W—Continue chpt. 7
F—NO CLASS (Fall Break)

Week #9
M—Read Identities chpt. 8 ("Nationality")
W—Continue chpt. 8; Response paper #4 due
F—Workshop to develop topics for Exploratory Essay #2

Week #10
M—Conferences
W—Conferences
F—Workshop drafts of Exploratory Essay #2 in class
Week #11
M—Workshop drafts of Exploratory Essay #2 in class
W—Draft of Exploratory Essay #2 due
F—Library Reserve reading #1 (Goffman)

Week #12
M—Library Reserve reading #1
W—Library Reserve reading #1; Response paper #5 due
F—Library Reserve reading #2 (Gergen)

Week #13
M—Library Reserve reading #2
W—Library Reserve reading #2; Response paper #6 due
F—Library Reserve reading #3 (Bronowski)

Week #14
M—Library Reserve reading #3
W—Library Reserve reading #3; Response paper #7 due
F—Conferences

Week #15
M—Conferences
W—NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)
F—NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

Week #16
M—Workshop drafts of portfolio essays
W—Workshop drafts of portfolio essays
F—Final Conferences

Week #17
M—Final Conferences
W—End-of-semester portfolio due
CRITICAL STATEMENT

W
riting and Personal Identity (WPI) is a course I developed and have taught three times since the fall of 1996. In it, we read works (mostly non-fiction essays, but also some short fiction and poetry) in which authors explore their identities and how their past experiences have contributed to their present senses of who they are. We also read some theoretical works on the issue of selfhood. Students then write personal essays that explore some facet of their own personality in order to reflect on why they hold certain beliefs (e.g., specific attitudes toward school or towards gender roles) or why they possess certain tendencies (e.g., specific character traits or habits).

Engaging in written self-exploration, especially in an academic setting, is a novelty for most students at my university. I want them to see this form of writing as potentially serving a valuable purpose in their lives. For one thing, this sort of personal writing can serve the therapeutic function of helping people clear their heads. Along with their schoolwork, college students often juggle jobs and relationships and anxieties over their futures, and they rarely get the opportunity to grasp hold of one part of their lives—whether a significant memory or some present concern—and to think clearly about it. The reading and writing they do in WPI is intended to promote the habit of introspection, a practice that will serve them well not only in their often-turbulent college years, but in their lives beyond college. Additionally, asking students to engage with significant memories serves to underscore the power of past events to shape their lives, and it provides an avenue into the important concept of selfhood. Through practice writing in the personal essay genre, writers develop a “capacity to identify critical disjunctive moments that trigger self-reflective growth” (Newkirk 22). Experiencing this sense of growth helps one to understand that the self is dynamic and malleable, not stable and unchanging. I wish to impress upon students that, by extension, if our sense of self implies a particular sense of agency, if it defines how we are capable of interacting with the world, then a new sense of self opens doors for a new sense of one’s agency.

Paying this sort of sustained attention to oneself and one’s experiences means treating oneself as an object of one’s perceptions. In such self-exploration, one is “taking the attitude of the other” toward oneself, as the American pragmatist philosopher and educator George Herbert Mead puts it (Mind 175). Mead’s pragmatist theory of mind and self is useful to a discussion of the essay genre because he sees the “life-process” as “a series of adjustments and readjustments” wherein one “is never in a state of equilibrium, but is striving and living ‘in a future’” (Miller 30). That
is, we’re always experiencing forms of physical and emotional tension, big and small bumps in the road, and so we use our intelligence to find the easiest way over or around these bumps. As a pragmatist thinker, Mead conceives of life as a struggle to overcome obstacles and to gain equilibrium. This conception illustrates a key source of Pragmatism’s understanding of human behavior: Darwinism. The acts of perceiving and thinking, according to pragmatists, are not merely matters of apprehending a pre-structured world, but instead constitute ways of interacting with and adjusting to the challenges of one’s environment. Writing in the form of the personal essay is particularly useful in aiding one’s thinking in the ongoing search for personal and social equilibrium, and it is useful to conceive of the urge that prompts a personal essay as a need or a longing to gain some sort of equilibrium in one’s life.

The personal essay form overlaps with the principles of Pragmatism in other ways, as well. For example, another key influence on the development of Pragmatism was the increasing importance at the turn of the last century of the scientific method. In keeping with science’s emphasis on experimental validity, the Pragmatists underscored the power of personal experience as a way of determining an idea’s proof or validity. The scientific strain of pragmatist thought is seen most clearly in William James’ notion that an idea is simply a hypothesis, the test of which is found in its working. Thus, Pragmatism is a philosophy that equates thinking and action, in which “to think is to prepare oneself for doing something” (Miller 153). Or as Mead puts it, the purpose of thinking is “to enable you to reconstruct your environment so that you can act in a different fashion” (Movements 350). This form of “reconstruction” is the aim of the essays students produce in WPI. I ask students to conceive of their identities as dependent upon their past experiences, and we talk about how exploring memorable experiences in an honest and earnest fashion can help them to transform their identities, to see their “selves” as potentially open to change.

In WPI, I suggest to my students that if I can come to see how certain past experiences have shaped me for good or for ill, then it makes sense that I must see others as having been similarly shaped—especially those in our society who are different from me, whose lives I might be unfamiliar with and whom I might be inclined to see as irredeemably bad or lazy or uncultured or whatever. Likewise, I must see that I, too, am a person open to revision, that I am not “hard-wired” to behave in a particular fashion. If I can be reminded that one’s behavior is attributable not to some essence but to one’s past experiences and social interactions, then I’ve gone a long way toward becoming a more tolerant and understanding person. This way of thinking is at the heart of Mead’s social psychology. Mead’s pragmatist ideas are also relevant to this class in the way that they intersect two
conversations in our field that have been important during the last decade. These conversations are about theories of selfhood and the place of personal essay writing in the English curriculum.

Critiquing the Idea of “Self”

In asking students to explore their identities, I am moving them toward a critique of the concept of “self” and an understanding of the difference between the notions of, on the one hand, an “essential self” and, on the other, a “constructed” or “emergent self.” Pragmatists like Mead tend to hold a strong reflexive view toward the concept of self; for example, Mead theorizes that one’s self emerges only when the “I” (the self-as-subject) and the “Me” (the self-as-object) intersect—that is, when one becomes an object to oneself, looking at oneself from the perspective of another. Mead believes that “[t]he self is not so much a substance as a process” that arises during reflective thought or the process of internalizing a “conversation of gestures” (Mind 178). The process of reflective thinking yields both “mind” and “self,” which he describes as “social emergents”—they emerge from the internalization of the social activity of conversation. Within Mead’s system, then, the writer who undertakes personal self-exploration generates a new self in the process of writing.

A pragmatist like Mead would suggest that the benefit of developing a new awareness of some element of one’s makeup—such as a persistent fear or anxiety—is that doing so allows one the opportunity to change one’s behavior, to act differently, in the face of situations that might ordinarily provoke those fears or anxieties. And since, for the pragmatists, the self originates in social interactions, engaging in the social act of writing (which constitutes a break from habitual ways of acting with respect to the object of one’s attention) is a step in the process of creating a new self. Emphasizing the process of thinking-through-writing also provides the opportunity to reinforce Mead’s notion that the self is “primarily a cognitive rather than an emotional phenomenon” (Mind 173). Even if one’s thinking is directed towards an extremely emotional experience in one’s past, it is the cognitive process of “taking the attitude of the other,” of reflecting on that experience and writing about it in a way that another can understand its impact, that ultimately results in self-creation.

Thomas Newkirk argues a comparable thesis about personal writing assignments in The Performance of Self in Student Writing, a work in which he sets out “to justify forms of personal writing in terms of their consequences for student development” (85). He insists that certain types of personal writing fulfill real pragmatic needs in students’ lives by allowing them to “perform” idealized acts of self-presentation (3). Among the types of “self performances” (a concept borrowed from Erving Goffman)
Newkirk explains are those that result from one’s taking an “essayistic stance” toward experience. As Newkirk puts it, “The personal essay dramatizes thought by showing the writer as someone open to the potentially transforming effects of a life sensitively encountered” (13). And he answers the criticism, leveled by James Berlin, Lester Faigley, and others, that the personal essay presumes a writer with a coherent self by noting that the “reflexive turn” of the personal essay actually presumes a self in the process of development. This development “is incremental,” Newkirk insists, and “it consists of a series of before-and-after experiences that result in qualitative change” (22). Consider, for example, George Orwell before and after shooting the elephant or E.B. White before and after visiting the lake with his son (12-13). Essayists who take this reflexive turn do so in order to make sense out of a past experience—and in the case of the essays students write in my class, to see the way past experiences have shaped their present attitudes and beliefs.

Lad Tobin draws similar conclusions about the often-deeply personal writing he sees from students. In his essay, “Reading and Writing about Death, Disease, and Dysfunction; or, How I Spent My Summer Vacations,” Tobin tries to figure out why students so often choose to write about personal pain and suffering. In the course of his essay, Tobin muses on some key moments from his own adolescence; doing so helps him realize that lots of first-year college students are leaving their familiar lives behind for the “unfamiliarity and loneliness and homesickness” of college. Because of these circumstances, he explains, it is unrealistic for us to expect students “to move seamlessly from past to present” (75). Like Newkirk, then, Tobin sees such essays as fulfilling a pragmatic function in students’ lives: they need to tell these stories as a way of holding on to something familiar. Theorists like Newkirk and Tobin provide a convincing explanation for why students take so enthusiastically to personal essays. I offer Mead’s ideas as a way of explaining what happens when students write these sorts of essays. That is, Mead’s ideas about human cognition explain how the process of reflective thought is actually a process of growth and change that, to Mead’s way of thinking, is a distinctly human quality. This act of thinking—of self-reflection—is in essence the process of self-creation.

**Essaying as a Search for Equilibrium**

Although the pragmatists, under the influence of Darwinism and the culture of science, conceive of human reflection as a form of adaptation via problem-solving, I do not wish to define the purpose of the essay genre as merely a way of solving problems. Since the French word *essai*, I tell my students, means “a trial” or “an attempt,” they should think of “essaying” as grappling with ideas that they are attempting to make better sense of, ideas
that agitate them or that somehow cause them some anxiety, whether they are conflicting feelings about a long-held belief or a friendship, or whether they are unexplored feelings about an event or a person from one’s past. In suggesting such purposes for essaying, I am adhering to Paul Heilker’s “rehabilitated sense” of the essay, which he defines as follows:

a textual attempt to come to some understanding of a problem, however partial, provisional, and ephemeral; a weighing out of alternatives; an experiment in thinking whose outcome is unknown at the outset; [or] a Montaignean exploration of a self and world in flux, that leaves the known behind. (161)

Each element of Heilker’s definition seems to fit nicely with Mead’s idea that our lives are characterized by a series of (physical and psychological) adjustments and readjustments to our ever-changing environment. We must certainly see all essays as springing from some sort of impulse, whether a clearly-conceived question to be answered or something more vague, like an exploration of a word or phrase that captures one’s attention. And we must see that whether an essay, is a fervent exploration of a real-world problem or something more playful, the act of writing ought ideally serve to scratch some itch in the writer. So while essay writing ought not be seen merely as an attempt to solve a specific, clearly-defined problem, it can safely be defined as an attempt to create some future state for oneself, as Mead would say. And we need not even have a clear sense of how that future state will feel before we begin writing.

When students delve into personal issues through their essay writing in WPI, the “future” they are seeking is one that will provide a sense of composure about some problem or incident in their lives. This composure, this sense of equilibrium, we seek is sometimes relatively easy to realize, but sometimes it is never fully realized. For example, when my student Mike decided to write about his mixed feelings about applying to the College of Education and studying to become a secondary school teacher, he used the writing task as an opportunity to think about this problem in his life in a way he had never done before—by writing about it and, through that writing, providing a detailed account of his thinking in a way that was new to him. Writing this essay helped him make a decision (he didn’t apply) and helped him clarify his thinking about his own identity as it related to career aspirations. On the other hand, another student, Jill, didn’t set out to make any specific decisions in an essay reflecting on her life as the single mom of a two year-old son. But in writing the essay she articulated certain ideas about happiness and her family that helped her see more clearly the benefits of her decision to quit her full-time job and return to school.

Admittedly, one could imagine all school-related writing tasks as efforts to achieve “equilibrium” (“Having written this paper, I finally
understand Poe's 'The Black Cat'!), but not all writing tasks provide the same personal payoff. As Tobin suggests, personal essays often provide an immediate and even visceral payoff, especially when compared to a lot of the other writing students do in college that will (supposedly) help them someday (i.e., later in other college classes, later on the job). This more immediate payoff makes personal essay writing especially conducive to being discussed in terms of Pragmatism, a philosophy which sees truth and knowledge in "instrumental" terms, which is to say that (as William James puts it), "truth in our ideas means their power to 'work'" (148). And by coming to see personal writing in instrumental terms, student writers are empowered with the ability to think more clearly about important issues in their lives and, potentially, to act differently with regard to those issues.

In Mead's philosophical system, "whenever one thinks, [he or she] is trying . . . to construct a new kind of act required for the solution of a problem not solvable by resorting to habits, whether traditional or personal" (Miller George 56). This is a key point: Because many of the students in my class have done relatively little of this writing-as-self-exploration (compared to the thesis-support writing required in most other classes), engaging in a writing task such as a personal essay can be seen as precisely this sort of Meadean "act": it is a break from habitual uses of writing, yes, but it is a use of writing as a break from habitual ways of dealing with a problem. And since this reason for essaying is often new to them—especially in an academic setting—it is a skill, a way of thinking, that they must practice. Heilker is clear on this point:

Far from being an internalized "default drive" for writing, an automatic and unthinkingly invoked routine for composing, the essay is foreign, unnerving, and challenging. It invites students to work with alien notions of textuality, to deal with what appears to them to be a slippery and amorphous form, and thus to consciously concentrate on their composing, rather than rely on yet another faithful but mindless slotting-in of information in a rigid, formulaic, and too familiar vessel. (162)

If we want our students to grow as writers, to expand their range of abilities, Heilker suggests, we shouldn't shy away from the essay. In WPI, I want students to add self-reflection to their repertoires.

In a particularly well-done essay, a student named Sandy exhibited this knack for self-reflection. In an essay that chronicled her "wild child" junior high and high school years, Sandy set out to try to understand what made her act so recklessly during that time of her life. In her essay, she details fairly typical sorts of teenage experimentation such as drinking and smoking pot, but she also talks about sneaking out of the house and staying out all night and about getting involved (at 14 years old) with an older crowd.

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of friends and experimenting with sex and hard drugs. Newkirk would see a classic "essayistic stance" in her essay: she's writing from the perspective of someone who can see her past more clearly and make better sense of it because of her distance from it.

One of the more powerful scenes in Sandy's essay is a description of an incident in which, after having been brought home by the police in the middle of the night, her father—angry and red-faced and shaking—yells at her. Her father's yelling, she says,

wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that I understood what he was saying. I knew that lying and sneaking out of the house was no way to live my life, but at the time a voice (no, more of a force inside of me) was pushing me to do more. It was almost like the person I was raised to be, the person I was, was put on hold while this darker force took over. When I was doing crazy things there was always a part of me saying, "No, you shouldn't be doing this"; but that voice of reason was always so easy to ignore.

At the end of her essay, after acknowledging that she has caused her parents a great deal of worry and heartache, Sandy also acknowledges that the past is the past: "I refuse to live the rest of my life in regret of things I did when I was too young to even understand what I was doing. The way I see it is I have to make it all mean something or it was all for nothing." Sandy's attempt to "make it all mean something" comes in the process of writing her essay. In returning to these past experiences—these memories which she continues to feel guilty and uncomfortable about—she is "manipulating" them, in Mead's parlance, holding them up to her own gaze and looking at them from a new, more mature perspective. And this more mature perspective, Newkirk would add, is in keeping with a desirable cultural narrative that our students want to pursue.

As a result of Sandy's extended thinking about her former self, Mead would say that a new self emerges. It is important to note that this new self wouldn't exist but for the opportunity she is provided to explore and "manipulate" her former self through personal writing. By insisting on a "reflexive turn" in students' personal writing, and by getting them to see their past selves as potential objects of analysis, we can get students to think in terms of "former selves" and "present selves" rather than an essential self. And in reinforcing this habit of mind, we can get them to see that this form of thoughtful self-reflection is a worthwhile activity, a form of thinking that can help them deal with the big and small stresses of their lives. Sandy's essay is a good example of the power that Thomas Recchio attributes to the personal essay: "[I]t bestows on us the authority to write and rewrite in an effort to understand, and through understanding, to remake ourselves, our work, and our lives" (234). If we offer students the opportunity to reflect on
their lives in writing, we go a long way toward helping them see themselves as persons in process and toward helping them see writing as a life skill worth embracing.

**Statement of Locale**

Like most English degree programs, the one at UNC-Wilmington has traditionally been dominated by required literature classes. When I arrived here in 1994, though, I was surprised and delighted to see that one of the core requirements for all majors was a course titled Essay Writing, which was typically (though not always) taught as a class in reading and writing the personal essay. The only other similar course on the books was a creative non-fiction course taught by the department's creative writing faculty, but it was what might be called a “magazine writing” class (i.e., reading and imitating the sort of writing found in contemporary magazines), so I decided to focus sections of Essay Writing on the personal essay, having students read examples of the essay genre and write essays of their own. Essay Writing has been conceived and taught this way almost exclusively for the last eight years.

I provide this information as a way of explaining that while Essay Writing was a requirement, it was one of only a couple of writing courses most of our majors would be likely to take and one of only a couple courses in which they'd likely write anything other than literary analysis. It was only when an elective like WPI was offered that students could take another class that allowed them to gain practice writing in the genre of the personal essay. (Before we revised our curriculum in 2001, roughly one-fourth of our 300 or so majors chose the Professional and Creative Writing option, so they were required to take more writing classes than other majors, but fiction and poetry writing classes dominated the offerings.) Given the opportunity to write about their lives and their specific interests, students in Essay Writing and, when offered, WPI, enthusiastically took to the task. As of the fall of 2001, though, we have a newly designed major and have eliminated the core requirements taken by all majors. The options for study within the new major are now Literature, Teacher Licensure, Professional Writing, and the Individualized Option (essentially a contract option in which the student and his or her advisor agree upon an individualized course of study).

Several factors played a role in the makeup of our newly designed major, and all of these factors 1) help account for the demise of Essay Writing as a requirement and 2) help to further marginalize courses like WPI. Perhaps the biggest influence was the departure, in 1999, of the creative writing faculty who now make up their own department here. In an effort to forge a new identity without creative writing, the English Department made a commitment to promote professional writing. Since that
time we have hired two technical writing faculty, the only such specialists to occupy tenure lines in our department’s history.

Losing the popular creative writing classes meant losing a fair number of our majors as well. The second influence on our new curriculum was the perceived need to attract as many new majors as possible. One good way to do so, many of my colleagues argued, would be to eliminate the core requirements, which, aside from Essay Writing, included an additional, unspecified writing class, two British literature surveys, two American literature surveys, and a linguistics class. The argument that these required classes—which accounted for 21 of the 42 total hours—were a hindrance to the recruitment of majors won out, and the core requirements have since been eliminated.

This desire to attract majors is also tied into the third influence, which is the increased specialization and professionalization of the field of composition studies. The development of our new Professional Writing option is a direct result of these forces. Despite a liberal presence in this option of courses in argument, style, and rhetorical theory, the proposed name for this option—“Professional Writing and Rhetoric”—was trimmed to “Professional Writing.” Our then-department chair, for one, insisted that the term “rhetoric” would scare away students who might otherwise want to pursue professional writing as a course of study. Including the term “rhetoric,” we rhetoricians argued, would help to both demystify the term and avoid giving the impression that the option was a sort of vocational track. While it certainly isn’t, the course offerings so far have been heavy on workplace writing and on technology/computers and writing. And while most of these courses are rhetorically sophisticated, some are not. Additionally, we have developed a 21-hour, cross-disciplinary professional writing “certificate program,” which is like a minor and which requires students to complete a workplace writing internship.

Thus, a new climate has emerged with this new curriculum in which a course like WPI seems increasingly out of place, maybe more so than in the old curriculum dominated by literature requirements. Another result of our newly designed major is that students in our Literature track, the most popular course of study (slightly over half our majors), are now unlikely to take more than a single class in which they write anything but literary analysis. And, because of the types of writing offerings I’ve just described, there is an increasingly smaller chance that any students will take a course in the personal essay.

In my mind, the importance of a class like WPI lies in its ability to offer English majors at UNCW a chance to practice a type of writing that has a purpose other than “school writing” or “job writing”: the personal essay offers practice in a sort of “life writing” that can be particularly helpful to all
of us at times. A place is needed in every English curriculum, I would argue, for writing that attends to the humanistic goal of helping us better know ourselves. Although I’m all for offering students “marketable” writing skills, I also want to expose students to other less marketable but equally important uses for writing. I want to provide a counter to their desire to see writing in vocational terms, as a set of skills they can acquire to get a job.

**Looking Back**

In this section, aside from looking back to the sections of WPI that I’ve taught, I will also look forward, imagining how the course might be revised to find a more comfortable place within the professional writing curriculum I describe in the previous section.

In many ways, the course in its present manifestation works well. Students generally take seriously the notion that writing about a memorable event in their lives can unearth a deeper significance than they had previously ascribed to that event, and so as a rule their essays exemplify the idea that writing allows us to articulate and make explicit thoughts we only knew implicitly. Even if their self-reflections aren’t always as illuminating as they could be, students are able to point to past experiences that help to provide explanations for why they are, say, overly competitive or for why they have always been the class clown. Occasionally, students take these opportunities for self-rumination to write about truly life-shaping experiences they’ve never written or even talked about before—rapes, abusive relationships, deaths of loved ones, effects of parental divorce, adolescent bullying, and so on. The act of writing these essays—of manipulating these ideas—has provided students with valuable lessons in the power of personal writing both to provide catharsis and to enlarge one’s understanding of the importance of certain events in one’s life.

**Problematic Essays**

Essays that were poorly written but intellectually engaged with the act of introspection caused me the most cognitive dissonance in WPI. These essays have a huge upside: it’s remarkably rewarding when students gain personal satisfaction from the writing they do, as well as when they see the act of writing as an avenue towards changing both their thinking and their actions. For example, one student, Dina, characterized the act of writing about her struggle (when she was fifteen) with an eating disorder as a sort of exorcism: “I never wrote about my eating disorder or talked to anyone except therapists about it. . . . It was such a wonderful feeling to tell that story. I’m not afraid to talk about it anymore. It’s such a relief because my ability to talk about it means it’s really all over.” Dina’s essays happened to be stylistically sophisticated and free of any surface-level errors, too.
However, another student, Pat, was illustrative of those students who wrote powerful, heart-felt essays but who paid little attention to grammar and mechanics. Pat referred to his essay about his best friend’s suicide (his friend brought a gun to high school, shot and wounded their principal, and then shot and killed himself) as “the hardest thing I have ever written, which is exactly why I wanted to write it.” So Pat personally benefited from the writing he did. And he did a great job explaining how this incident resulted in a “loss of innocence” and how it made him much more passionate about his friendships—and vocal about them, constantly telling his friends and family he loves them (even if his friends sometimes think he says it too often).

The downside to essays like Pat’s was their lack of polish. (Also, that these powerful essays usually explored tremendously sad and painful experiences was something I had to brace myself for.) Pat’s work was typical of that of many students whose ability to juggle all the necessary grammatical and mechanical elements of good writing seemed hindered by the sheer weight of the issue he was writing about. It’s frustrating to see students making the same surface-level errors on their final essays that they made at the start of the semester, and I think the reason this problem occurred at a higher than normal rate in WPI sections was because of the tough personal topics students were tackling. These writing tasks seemed to disrupt students’ routines, seemed to prompt more late drafts and drafts that appeared to be rushed. Many students in the WPI sections I’ve taught seemed to be flying by the seat of their pants all semester.

But since, to my way of thinking, WPI was a “less academic” course than others I have taught (or that students have taken), since I saw it as a course emphasizing introspection and self-understanding above all else, I tried to force myself to weigh certain characteristics of students’ writing more than others. While I couldn’t simply ignore altogether the grammatical and mechanical elements of their essays, I could confer less importance on them. Less grade-conscious students (among them Pat) understood that these parts of their writing still had to hold some weight, but they valued more highly the fulfillment they gained than their grade in the course. Other students—those who (rightly) took pride in their technically correct writing but whose essays were less introspective and engaged—sometimes found my desire to see more engagement as evidence of “subjective grading practices.”

And then there were those students who, however well-intentioned, thought that just being “honest and true” about their experiences was the desired end of a successful personal essay. Such lapses into solipsism seemed especially common in sections of WPI, where students’ senses of personal commitment to their written drafts typically ran very high. Despite
many discussions about sharing our drafts with peers and discussions about writing for an audience other than the self, some of my students found it difficult to gain the necessary distance from their very personal essays in order to (as Mead would say) "take the attitude of the other" toward their own writing.

**Conveying Course Material**

Conveying some of the material of the course was another difficulty I encountered. The notion of a constructed or emergent self, for example, is one that I have found undergraduate students often have a difficult time fully comprehending. In discussions with them about this concept, the tendency of many undergraduates is to reject the idea of a socially-constructed self because such an idea conflicts with a strong sense of individuality. Their initial response to the idea of social-construction is that it means people are akin to robots programmed by cultural forces and void of any agency. While the most reluctant students may grudgingly see themselves as being influenced (but only slightly!) by such forces as the media and by their friends and family, they tend to cling to the definition of "self" as something they're born with, something permanent and unchanging. Or if students affirm the shaping power of past experiences, they see the tendency to be shaped as an adolescent phenomenon, as a student named Dawn here illustrates in the introductory essay to her portfolio:

In high school I would follow the fads and trends as they came. I was always into some musical group or television show. My appearance would change, my attitude, my dialect, my interests, and so forth. I changed my self many times to "be cool" and to "fit in."... Now that I am an adult, though, my identity is stable. My identity does not continue to change like it did frequently during my adolescence. I may change my opinions about things once I learn more about them; however, I am sure about my beliefs and what I want to become in the future.

Dawn is like many students who want to equate "social construction" with "peer pressure" and who seem to believe that the shaping forces of culture hold no power over her once she has reached a certain age. One explanation for why the idea of a constructed or emergent self causes difficulty for students is that it runs counter to the deep religious beliefs held by many students from this Southern Bible Belt region. The view that we are born with eternal souls and that we are born as sinners and, since the flesh is weak, will always be sinners is heavily ingrained in many students. Readings that explore the idea of selfhood from a religious standpoint—the notion of being “born again," for example—would be worth adding to my syllabus.
The Future of WPI (and Courses Like It)

Whether or not to re-design WPI, in light of all the changes that have taken place in my department, is something I’ve thought about a lot. Part of me thinks that any student who undertakes an English degree—especially a Professional Writing concentration—ought to have lessons in ways to use language and writing that don’t have anything to do with school or with marketable skills. In other courses, they’ll have lessons in using computers and software as tools for writing and thinking. In WPI, I want students to see writing and thinking as a tool—or an “instrument,” as the pragmatists would say. Writing personal essays that demonstrate how writing can aid one’s thinking and can serve as a tool for self-understanding adds another valuable dimension to students’ educations (and gives them practice writing in another genre). The fact that WPI serves as a dramatic break from courses in my department such as Writing and Technology, Document Design, and Editing shouldn’t be a concern. After all, in my mind, though not officially, the concentration is called Professional Writing and Rhetoric, and lessons in writing-to-learn and in the power of careful word choice are central to WPI.

Another part of me, though, would like to envision WPI as being a bit more complementary to courses like Document Design. This part of me thinks that if, perhaps, the course were about something more academic—if it were about something more than the lives of the students—then I would see students take both their ideas and the presentation of their ideas more seriously. In other words, maybe Pat’s essays would have been more polished. Or maybe I’m kidding myself. Regardless, I can imagine maintaining the spirit of WPI in a course that revolves around the concept of ethics. Such a course could ask students to consider their own senses of ethics and have them write personal essays that explain beliefs they hold dear, how they came by those beliefs, and how they act (or ought to act) in order to be in keeping with these beliefs. A focus on ethics could address issues central to rhetoric, such as: What ethical responsibilities should guide the rhetoric of an individual? Or of an institution? One could analyze rhetorically the arguments people or institutions make for or against a particular issue. Doing so would provide lessons in the way discourse communities shape the language and the thinking (and hence the identities) of its members. We could also focus on topics such as business ethics or “corporate culture” in the wake of recent corporate accounting scandals.

Another possible redesign of the course might be imagined in an attempt to appeal to students in my department’s Literature option (more than half our total majors, after all). The course could explore the idea of authorial introspection, paying special attention to the literary offerings in the text I use and supplementing it with literary memoirs and autobiographies. Regardless of how (or if) the course takes a different shape.
in the future, the one understanding that will continue to drive the course is that personal writing can serve a humanistic and instrumental purpose in one’s life, helping one to grasp hold of one’s world—happy or sad memories, big or small anxieties, or whatever—and make sense of it. Every student should know that writing holds such power.

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WORKS CITED


