A growing body of research has opened new possibilities for understanding how emotions affect the composing process. In the past, researchers across the disciplines have been discouraged by the fact that "emotion has simply seemed fraught with too many difficulties to be considered as a tractable topic of study" (Niedenthal 1003). In Composition Studies, many researchers assumed that emotions connected to students' life situations and individual psychology, and could not be integrated into pedagogical practice (Richmond; McLeod "Some Thoughts"). Recent work in both the biological and social sciences has produced theories of embodied cognition (Damasio; Niedenthal), explorations of writing and healing (Pennebaker and Seagal; Pennebaker and Beall; Pennebaker et al.), and characterization of discourses associated with emotion (Jacobs and Micciche; Lutz and Abu-Lughod; Thorne and McLean). Composition researchers have established a corresponding body of work connecting emotion and writing (Brand; Brand and Graves; Jacobs and Micciche; McLeod, "Some"; McLeod, Notes; Perl; Murphy; Richmond; Welch; Worsham). These studies have become possible, in part, because of a shift in the perception of emotion. Within this new perspective, emotion, like other social interactions, is assumed to be "not only individually experienced, but also socially experienced and constructed" (Jacobs and Micciche 4); that is, emotion is understood as cultural rather than individual and biological, and instances of perceiving, responding to, expressing, and containing emotions are (unconsciously) enacted in terms of discursive forms evoked by specific contexts and conditions. This new approach provides a basis for studying emotions not as internal, idiosyncratic events, but as patterns that can be characterized and understood contextually.

As noted in Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche's essay collection, assuming that emotions are discursive opens up a new "way to move" for composition studies. The study of emotion as discourse not only eliminates objections about the individual psychology of students, it also connects researchers to methods that go beyond reflection and self-reporting. In the following analysis, I pursue these ideas within the context of a college composition course where students experienced a particularly high level of anxiety. I correlate formal characteristics of students'
final, reflective essays with findings from psychological studies of writing and healing, as well as with life-course development studies on subject positioning and discourse. This analysis suggests that writing assignments that press young adults toward critical thinking and identity shifts can evoke stressful emotions that, in turn, evoke discursive patterns inappropriate for the demands of critical, analytic writing. I focus on emotional as opposed to cognitive factors in students’ composing processes, and I pose a theory for how and why anxiety surrounding the writing process might lead to the clichés, generalizations, and pat conclusions so typical of beginning writers. I conclude by considering how re-thinking connections between emotional and written discourses can help instructors support students as they strive to meet expectations for college writing.

Analysis of Student Writing

Imagine this: it’s the first day of class your sophomore year in college and you’ve already sat through three other teachers going over their course syllabus and all you want to do is go home... so you sit quietly and wait for the teacher to start talking. When she does, one of the first things that comes out of her mouth is, “You will be tutoring other Wayne State students in the University’s Writing Center as a requirement for this class.” Now just think for a minute, what would be going through your head?

—From “Fear of Tutoring” by Emma, Fall 2002

Student writing in this essay comes from a writing practicum taught at Wayne State University in Detroit. As Director of the Writing Center, I taught one section of intermediate composition each term as a service-learning course connected to the Center. In theory, these sections were for students who wanted experience coaching student writers; in practice, students signed up randomly or because the course fit their schedule. Most students came to the first class meeting unaware of the tutoring requirement listed in the course description. In the fall of 2002, only a handful of the twenty or so students knew they would work as tutors; when I announced the requirement, they were visibly distressed. “Fear of tutoring” was an everyday presence in the classroom, and as I read and re-read student writing for this course I became increasingly convinced that fear influenced their writing in very concrete ways.

For their final assignment, students wrote a reflective analysis on what they learned about their own writing process while they worked at the Center. Emma’s paper, “The Fear of Tutoring,” is excerpted at the beginning of this section. Although her paper contained many elements of analysis, in general it unfolded as a story about how she overcame fears connected to her tutoring experiences. Most of Emma’s classmates wrote essays that were very similar in focus and form: conversion narratives describing what they learned about who
they were and how to interact with others. These lessons have a great deal to do with writing, but they did not reflect the requirements I thought I wrote into the assignment. Though the assignment sheet prompted students to analyze specific features of their writing and their writing process, the papers consisted of broad generalizations sprinkled with sharp (but very general) observations and the occasional section of analysis; they used few if any examples from their work to support their claims. Essays generally concluded with statements like these: "fear can cause you to change and learn" and "writing, like tutoring, is a process" and "it is OK to work with others." As I read, I found myself thinking very hard indeed about what was going through students' heads. I was especially curious why it was that when college composition courses focus on critical thinking, students continue to articulate their ideas in terms of clichés and conversion stories. I found myself wondering what these essays might suggest about writing and emotion, and whether we might need to re-think the teaching of writing in light of what recent research suggests about emotion and discourse.

Dawn Skorczewski's analysis of clichés in student writing offers one answer to this line of thinking. She observes that even students who are able to engage in critical analysis are not able to "sustain a critical voice for very long in an essay and [end] up with a final paragraph that asserts the truth of such statements as 'everybody can do it if they try,' or 'if we ask too many questions, society as we know it will fall apart'" (221). Skorczewski points out that essays that move from critical analysis to cliché bear "important similarities to the hybrid discourse Brian Street describes in his discussion of literacy acquisition . . . [where] students ‘frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes’" (qtd. in Skorczewski 222). In the following analysis, I consider student essays not in terms of cognitive patterns associated with learning, but rather in terms of the social and emotional contexts surrounding their composition. I look at their writing as a "hybrid discourse" where emotional discourses influence and sometimes overwrite the academic patterns students seek to produce.

To prepare for work at the Center, students read selections from several tutoring handbooks, practiced peer tutoring with one another, conducted preliminary reading and writing for a research project, and observed experienced tutors as they worked with tutees. As I mentioned earlier, the final assignment for the course required students to write a reflective essay where they analyzed how their writing changed as a result of work at the Center. Students were prompted to consider how tutoring experiences influenced their processes for brainstorming, drafting, revising, proofreading, and so on. The structure of the assignment encouraged first person analysis, and most students structured their analysis as a conversion narrative. In the following discussion, I use an essay written by Ben, a student in his late teens, to illustrate the salient features of essays for this assignment. Throughout the discussion, I offer excerpts from other student essays to illustrate variations on Ben's general patterns.
Essays generally opened with scenes similar to the arrival stories in ethnographic writing. As in ethnographic arrival stories, students used the introduction to characterize both a new setting and the self who would be changed within that setting. In the following paragraph, Ben describes what he was thinking and feeling as he waited for his first student.

When I got to the Writing Center I sat down and relaxed. I noticed everyone scattered about in no particular order. People were chattering about their papers and their on-going assignments. My heart rate was on the rise as I prepared for my appointment. My palms were a little wet and my mouth was starting to dry. What if I don’t know what to say or don’t know where to go with the session? I could easily lose track of my thoughts and get lost. I tried to shut these negative thoughts out of my mind as the appointment time grew closer.

Ben’s essay is representative in that it describes both an external and an internal setting. He describes an external physical place which is both slightly chaotic and seems to be operating within a predictable routine. He also describes his internal physical and emotional anxiety as he contemplates his responsibilities in the upcoming session. Even though different students noted different details of the physical context, the feelings remained very much the same: fear, anxiety, and suspenseful anticipation. Tiara, who wrote her research paper on the importance of making students feel comfortable during tutoring sessions, began her essay by stating, “The first day that I tutored was not a good day. . . .” Similarly, Rob, a student who also focused his research project on setting students at ease, wrote, “My stomach started to turn as if my lunch had been poisoned.” And Laura, who was studying to be a physical therapist, wrote, “At first I was worried that I wouldn’t know what to say. After seeing other seasoned tutors in action I didn’t think I was up to par. . . .” These introductions present an emotional landscape suffused with uncertainty and pervaded by feelings that the authors are unprepared for the responsibilities they are about to take on.

When Ben describes the session with his first student, he portrays himself as extremely uncomfortable, aware of his discomfort, and worrying that his discomfort will make the student feel uncomfortable as well. He writes, “As I read the paper, I took a quick glance up to feel out the student. He looked uncomfortable as most do. I couldn’t help but to be conscious of other people in the Center. The room is small enough so that anyone sitting anywhere can hear everything. This added to my anxiety and I’m sure it didn’t comfort the student.” Ben’s description remains focused on emotional interactions. His observations move back and forth between his feelings and his perception of the student’s feelings. In this paragraph we do not know what Ben reads in the student paper, only how he feels and how he thinks the student feels. His description of the setting reminds us that for students
and new tutors, writing centers are public spaces, and the fact that their talk will be public makes them feel even more anxious.

Documentation of the hyperawareness and anxiety associated with being in a new setting is a feature of more than two-thirds of the essays for this course. Ben and his classmates refer to the noisy, crowded, public nature of writing center sessions, and the discomfort of this setting. Tiara writes, “I was so nervous and there [were] so many things going on in the Center. . . . Not to mention that other students along with my teacher were watching me.” Tiara, like Ben, reasons that her discomfort will contribute to the discomfort of the students she works with. In these descriptions, students use a logic of empathy to explore the kind of learning that is taking place, both in themselves and in the student tutees. Focus and process are both strongly influenced by emotion, and students use observations about their feelings to create a kind of inductive analysis where emotional similarities suggest general cases. For example, both Ben and Tiara reason that their discomfort influences the feelings and performance of their student tutees, and while both tutors are committed to doing their best, they describe themselves as concerned that they will not be “up to par.”

In the same paragraph where Ben describes his discomfort with tutoring, he explains how tutoring led him to see his own writing differently. He states that while reading his student’s paper, Ben realized he has many writing issues in common with the student he is coaching. Ben writes, “In one particular paragraph I noticed a lot of redundancy of general ideas. It then hit me: I do this in my writing as well. I remembered that you should always start with a general statement and then use detailed examples to develop it. From reading his paper, I came to learn that I have a problem with this also.” Ben identifies this moment as a point where he realizes something important about his writing and about himself. The superficial realization is that he also ought to work on using detailed examples. The deep realization—which Ben develops in the rest of his paper—is that he has writing issues similar to the issues of students who come to the Center, and that he can learn through reflecting on their composing practices and on his own.

Ben’s classmates came to different realizations, but they generally articulated the point of conversion in similar language. Laura writes, “I learned a lot from this session . . . I found out. . . . by sitting down with another writer we can get feedback. This feedback tells us whether or not we are connecting with our audience.” Rob, the student-tutor whose lunch turned in his stomach, writes, “[that day] taught me some important things that have helped me grow as a writer . . . you cannot help those who do not want help. . . .” These points of conversion are similar in that the pivotal realization concerns the author’s willingness to re-imagine his or her relationship to writing and to become more open to trying new approaches. Just as Laura learns she has much to gain from feedback, Rob observes that to progress as writers, students must adopt new attitudes—and until they are willing to try new ideas, there will be no progress.
In these conversions, students characterize themselves as entering new perspectives by connecting to their student tutees. Both Rob and Ben indicate that their identity as a tutor framed this shift. That is, through efforts to help or direct their student tutees, they discovered a new perspective that then helped them to become better tutors and better writers. Their discoveries were realized through the emotional logic of the earlier sections; within this logic, realizations begin with empathetic identification where authors conclude, “these students are like me” (i.e., they are anxious, too), and then transform into closer identification where the author concludes, “I am like them.” As the essays draw to their conclusions, student-tutors move away from this empathetic connection by extending and generalizing what they learned in terms of abstract, reasoned language. For example, Laura writes, “I found out... by sitting down with another writer we can get feedback....” In this declaration she moves from being inside her uncertainty about her abilities as a tutor to a position which allows her to rationalize the discomfort of her tutoring experience in terms of benefits to writers in general.

Ben’s essay concludes with a similar move toward rationalized generalization. He writes, “I have realized that sometimes discomfort will force you to change the situation you are in and turn it around. ... Through discussing things out loud I can better understand my thoughts and then apply [them] to my writing.” In this section, Ben implies a new, deeper understanding of how conversations that give voice to and unpack inarticulate thoughts can strengthen writing processes. In keeping with his focus on discomfort, he emphasizes the role of discomfort in instigating change. Though clearly derived from the detailed emotional scenes in the essay, the conclusion is very general, and the cause for his change in perspective remains embedded in his story. The emotions that made his hands sweat in the introduction are now rationalized as a surprisingly benign gear in the clockwork of emotional dynamics: fear helps you change, leading you to realizations that help you turn things around. At the same time, the essay offers little analysis as to how this transformation came about or how particular changes in his perspective affected his writing.

In concluding their essays, students generally offered simple resolutions to the fears they described. Laura’s realization that collaboration connects writers to an audience yielded the following conclusion: “Even though I might think things seem OK with my writing it can never hurt to have another person look it over and give feedback.” Christine, the student who connected her tutoring experience to a change in identity, wrote, “It took a while to figure out who I wanted to become as a tutor and a writer. But I have learned that tutoring is much like writing; it is a process that takes time to learn and for you to become successful you have to be willing to incorporate what you learn from other sessions and from people around you.” These overly general conclusions often contained surprisingly astute analysis of the author’s writing issues. For example, at the beginning of the term Ben had difficulty writing drafts; he planned his work in his head and subjected his ideas to intense editing and revising before putting them on paper. For the first several
assignments, freewriting seemed more frustrating than helpful and he was generally distressed during the planning stages. His reflective essay begins by stating the fear that he will not know what to say and that he will go off track during tutoring, an observation that connects to his acknowledged anxieties about drafting. At the point of conversion Ben states that he is similar to students who come to the Center, and that through working with tutees he can take part in practices that will strengthen his own writing process. These realizations played out as practical changes in his writing process. As he wrote his research project, he engaged in the brainstorming practices he worked on with tutees; he experimented with freewriting, made numerous lists and outlines, and wrote and rewrote sections of his work (though he did so primarily by finishing earlier sections before going on to the next). In light of these observations, Ben’s essay seems to reveal an implicit analysis of his development as a writer.

So while my initial appraisal that the essays focused on students’ emotional experiences remains true, upon more careful reading I found that their writing revealed a narrative analysis of their development as writers, which if it had been analytic and overt would have been much closer to what the assignment required. The following discussion considers why it might be so hard for students to engage the language of academic analysis, particularly when they are anxious or fearful as they develop their writing.

FEAR, IDENTITY, AND BECOMING A WRITER

Although the Writing Center practicum was an intermediate writing course, most students began the term with characteristics of beginning college writers. When asked to describe their composing process, most noted that they “sat down at the computer and wrote.” They also reported relying on formulaic patterns (paragraphs should be four to five sentences; short essays should have an introduction with the thesis stated in the last sentence, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion) rather than engaging in rhetorical analysis of purpose, audience, and form. At the same time, when asked to characterize themselves as writers, they indicated that they generally saw themselves as “fairly decent writers” and stated that they wanted to work primarily on grammar and proofreading.

These self-characterizations suggest that practicum students had not yet made an identity shift to novice writers, a shift which Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz describe as a crucial step in becoming successful college students. Sommers and Saltz describe novice writers as embracing an identity with “an open attitude to instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment . . . and a faith that, with practice and guidance, the new expectations of college can be met”; they emphasize that becoming a novice writer is a fundamental reconceptualization of self, and point out that individuals who “cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing” (134). Course readings, writing assignments, and
experiences at the Center all pressed students to make this shift. Conflicts between students' self-perceptions and their struggles to master college writing certainly contributed to fears articulated in their reflective essays: fears associated with the implicit demand that they become novice writers.

Student fear and loss of confidence are perennial issues in composition classrooms. Because writing is bound to conceptions of self, pressure to change the way students write challenges the self engendered by the discourse marked for correction. As a result, students required to change the way they write often encounter intense internal conflict (DiPardo; Delpit and Dowdy; Smitherman; Tatum). In her work on feminisms' implications for critical practice, Patti Lather quotes graduate student Kathy Fea's definition of resistance: "a word for the fear, dislike, hesitation most people have about turning their entire lives upside down and watching everything they have ever learned disintegrate into lies" (76). Instructors who teach critical, social activist composition courses have expended much thought and writing on how to respond to fear that manifests as resistance. In classrooms where instructors practice critical pedagogy, fear and resistance have been documented as important factors in what and how students learn (Delpit and Dowdy; Chandler, "Reflective"; Chandler, "Some"; Hays). Although the practicum students in this analysis represent their fear in terms of work at the Writing Center, studies of identity and writing, critical pedagogies, and student resistance suggest that part of their fear may also derive from pressure to shift identity, a pressure common to most college composition courses.

While identity conflicts are highly personal and remain enmeshed in individual psychology and identity development (Herrington and Curtis, Tatum), this uniqueness does not preclude the possibility that anxiety might influence students to express those conflicts in predictable ways. In the next two sections, I describe findings on discursive patterns and emotions from research in writing and healing, life-course development, and narrative analysis studies. I then theorize how these discourses connect to essays from the writing practicum.

**Writing and Healing**

Since the 1980s, researchers in psychology have documented how writing narratives about traumatic experiences has resulted in positive health effects. In a review of research on the psychological and physical health benefits of communication about emotions, J. W. Pennebaker et al report that improvements in health resulting from discussing experiences connected to trauma appear "to generalize across settings and several Western cultures" (Pennebaker, Zech, and Rimé 530). Such studies have been conducted within a wide range of circumstances and for diverse purposes. In most cases, experimental subjects wrote or talked about life traumas such as the death of a loved one, a life threatening experience, or severe illness. In studies involving writing, subjects who effectively coped with stress generally produced writing with specific characteristics: narratives were marked
by particular patterns for movement between emotion and reason, and authors positioned themselves in particular ways with respect to upsetting material.

The research emphasizes that not all forms of disclosure or sharing helped individuals resolve traumatic experiences. In particular, writing about factual aspects of an emotional episode did not affect health variables, while writing about emotional aspects did (see Pennebaker and Beall). More recent studies demonstrated that writing which resolved stress most effectively began by narrating emotional aspects of an experience but then moved toward a more reasoned or rational—reflective—perspective (Pennebaker and Seagal). Overall, writing which allowed participants to experience the most benefit had a narrative structure that moved from an emotional to a more reasoned stance, came to closure, and allowed the author to gain increased distance from upsetting events.

Because these studies were designed to explore the health effects of writing, they cannot be expected to provide direct answers to questions about why student essays tend toward clichés and conversion narratives. At the same time, writing practicum essays consistently began with emotion-laden descriptions, concluded with reasoned generalizations, and shared striking similarities with forms identified by psychological researchers as producing effective relief from stress. Because practicum essays were produced through a series of drafts where the reasoned conclusions often were produced more than a week after the emotion-based descriptions, student composing processes were in many ways similar to processes under the experimental conditions, where subjects were required to write about the same experience for a certain amount of time over a period of days. These parallels between practicum essays and stress-relieving patterns for communication suggest that writing courses where students write about stressful situations or issues related to the course may unintentionally set up students to compose essays in forms for relieving stress.

This analysis does not equate “fear of tutoring” with trauma; student fears are not the same as near-death experiences, illness, and loss of loved ones. The feelings evoked by these very different events are not the same as feelings surrounding student writing. What makes studies of writing and healing relevant to college composition is that they suggest that communicating in a particular form can provide individuals with quantifiable relief from stressful feelings. The research further reports that both writing and talk—where subjects make a cognitive shift from preliminary emotional exploration to more distanced, rational conclusions—can provide psychological and physical relief from symptoms of stress. This suggests that individuals who have experienced relief from stress, either through talk or writing in the described patterns, may (unconsciously) resort to those patterns in future situations where they encounter stress. If this is so, then some number of students in any stress-inducing writing course may feel an unconscious tug to write in forms that previously helped them to feel better.

The research emphasizes that to relieve stress effectively, communication is needed to explore the emotions that produced the upsetting feelings before moving
toward a more distanced, rational perspective. Writing from a distanced perspective from the outset and/or leaving emotions unresolved (e.g., not reaching a conclusion or closure) did not provide effective relief from stress. With respect to students in composition courses, particularly courses which challenge previously unexamined beliefs, these findings suggest that students may experience conflict between the unconscious drive to relieve stressful feelings and the demands of critical, analytic writing assignments that ask them to step outside emotionally driven assumptions, defer resolution, consider perspectives different from their own, or to allow that some questions cannot be answered. Logically, the intensity of stress in a given composition classroom would seem to be a factor in whether or to what degree students will be capable of resisting the comfort and relief of clichéd, generalized narratives. If anxiety can induce an impulse to contain unresolved feelings, and research indicates that it can, then courses which challenge student identities and beliefs may create a need for students to compose personal, emotional essays with coherent, rationalized conclusions, regardless of the assignment.

**LIFE-COURSE DEVELOPMENT, THE IMPULSE TO CREATE COHERENCE, AND POSITIONING**

Studies from life-course development also predict that when students in late adolescence and young adulthood are pressed toward critical reflection and analysis, they will be drawn to reply in terms of conversion stories and clichés. According to Dan McAdams, studies beginning in the mid-1980s identified late adolescence and young adulthood as the point in life when humans begin to craft autobiographical stories to define who they are; the ages from 15 to 25 mark a particularly rich period for memories of particular events used in the construction of identity stories. Prior to adolescence, individuals have not acquired the multiple and varied cognitive tools necessary to construct the kinds of integrative life stories that can explain the self both “synchronously and diachronically, explaining why it is that I am sullen with my father and euphoric with my friends and how it happened—step by step, scene by scene—that I went from being a born-again Christian who loved baseball to an agnostic socialist” (McAdams 190). Traditional college students are at a point in their lives where part of their age-related, developmental work is to develop internal narratives to explain who they are and who they are becoming. Conversion stories are one pervasive, cultural form well suited to exactly the kind of identity construction particular to late adolescence.

In addition, work by McAdams and others suggests this developmental point is also the place where individuals begin to reckon the revisions, contradictions, and idiosyncratic twists life stories inevitably embody. Generally, the college years are a time when students begin a cognitive shift away from the “dichotomous, rigid, or conventional stances toward knowledge and learning” that they bring from high school (Hays 154). In her discussion of developmental features of student writing, Janice Hays points out that “left to their own devises, [dualistic thinkers] tend... to make flat, unqualified, and unsupported statements; they do little elaborating either
of their assertions or on the [supporting] evidence. . . . Their uncoached writing contains an abundance of absolutes . . . general word choices, and heavy reliance on slogans, clichés, and commonplaces” (168). So, it seems college writers are posed to make two interrelated shifts in identity—the shift to novice writer described by Sommers and Saltz, and a shift to a more complex level of cognitive functioning. Conversion stories describe a shift in perspective, but because they are narratives (as opposed to analysis), they do not necessarily require that the narrator identify and describe dynamics that drive the shift. In other words, conversion narratives allow students to engage in a level of analysis suited to their present cognitive patterns for analysis that can position them in a new perspective—one that recognizes the validity of more critical, reflective analysis. Perhaps more importantly, and as shown in the following discussion, conversion narratives meet students’ emotional needs for negotiating identity shifts more effectively than do critical analyses.

Practicum essays generally describe conversion to a position where learning is about the collaborative, interactive creation of knowledge; at the same time, events are set forward from “masterful” subject positions. That is, while students document shifts to new identities where they value interactions among multiple perspectives, they tend to represent this shift in terms of a script that preserves a single perspective that reaches closure with respect to correctness. Use of this familiar script allows students engaged in the risky business of identity work to preserve a sense of coherence and certainty within a new cognitive terrain.

Avril Thorne and Kate McLean’s work on narrators’ positioning within cultural stories can further deepen our understanding of students’ preference for conversion stories. Thorne and McLean found evidence that narratives with clear, unreflective conclusions are culturally-supported master narratives for late adolescents in European-American culture. They also found that authors who couched stories within forms identified as dominant narratives received the validation and support generally accorded to master narratives. Thorne and McLean gathered data by inviting adolescents to recall self-defining stories. The majority of stories concerned “either relationship events (often conflicts with parents or peers) or life-threatening events” (173). The study focused on life-threatening events because evidence from other research indicated that “reactions to traumatic events showed an urgency to explain the cause of the event” (174). Thorne and McLean’s focus makes a good match for understanding the Writing Center essays, since both sets of stories press narrators to explain or rationalize feelings associated with an upsetting event.

Thorne and McLean collected written accounts of traumatic events along with “telling-narratives,” stories in which subjects described contexts for the stories’ narration, including how the stories were told and how they were received. Researchers identified three positions within the telling contexts: [1] the John Wayne [JW], where the teller presents a self that is tough and well able to handle the situation; [2] the Florence Nightingale [FN], where the teller describes a self that is aware and responsive to the needs of others; and [3] the Vulnerable,
where the teller focuses on his or her own “fear, sadness, and/or helplessness” (175). Findings indicated that

audiences were more willing to accept traumatic positions of toughness or concern for the feelings of others than positions of raw vulnerability—unmitigated fear or sadness. Based on their greater likelihood of being accepted by audiences, we speculate that for this sample of European-American college students, John Wayne and Florence Nightingale positions constituted culturally dominant narratives and Vulnerable positions did not. . . . A number of informants commented that listeners do not know how to respond to feelings of fear and sadness, suggesting that there is no general script for managing vulnerability in this sample of late adolescents. (181-82)

In other words, some late adolescents bring to their composing process an internalized expectation that stepping outside dominant cultural scripts for relating distressing events will result in a lack of audience response or even in audience withdrawal.

Thorne and McLean’s research further suggests that students' real-world discursive experience can condition them to expect that communications which do not provide resolution of upsetting feelings will position them for rejection and disconnection. Vulnerability positions report events without providing the resolution and coherence offered by the JW and FN positions. Thus while vulnerability narratives may be more suited to critical analysis, adolescent authors will not perceive them as eliciting the validation and support they may be in need of. When students feel uncertain in their identities, resorting to dominant discursive forms may be an unconscious strategy to ensure that their stories will elicit the supportive reception they need to participate in the risky work of shifting identities and beliefs.

WAYS TO MOVE: RE-THINKING EMOTION AND COLLEGE STUDENT WRITING

Accepting emotion as “not only individually experienced, but also socially experienced and constructed” suggests that we must read student compositions as the product of multiple discourses: home discourses students bring to their writing, the particular version of academic discourse demanded by the assignment, and the emotional discourse evoked by the context(s) for composing, to name a few. These multiple discourses may, as observed by Street, result in a “hybrid discourse” such that characterizations of discursive patterns associated with particular emotions can help instructors identify subsets of particular emotional contributions to form and content. Analysis of the practicum essays provided one instance of how discursive patterns surrounding fear might inform our understanding of student writing. In this last section I take a more in-depth look at how understanding emotion as discourse casts both writing and teaching in a new light

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The pervasive influence of psychoanalysis has long since convinced most composition instructors, as well as the public at large, that writing has an unconscious component, and that an author’s meanings are both intentional and beyond the author’s conscious design. Once emotion is defined as culturally determined and socially constructed, choices about discursive form—similar to choices about content—will have an unconscious component. Discourses are enacted and therefore available for observation and analysis, but they are also characterized as internalized and therefore contextually rather than consciously evoked. As a result, choices about discursive forms for writing will be both artful and intentional, as well as unplanned, unconscious, and connected to contextual cues writers may be unaware of. Within this paradigm, instructors must reconceptualize exactly what kind of learning tasks students face as they enter emotion-laden contexts where they explore new identities, experiment with new ideologies, and patch together new forms for representation.

When engaged in writing associated with intense emotion, students may find themselves in a double bind. Assignments that press students to re-think long-held identities or beliefs induce discomfort, fear, and sometimes anger. Research on writing and healing, and on adolescent subject positioning, characterizes discursive forms that enable students to survey and contain these frightening feelings as grounded in an emotionally-mediated logic and patterns for overly general resolution. In other words, assignments that simultaneously press for critical thinking and identity shifts can evoke emotions that in turn evoke discursive patterns that will not satisfy the demands of the assignment. In such situations students may find themselves drawn toward two conflicting discursive forms. At a conscious level they will know that they need to write objective, analytic academic prose that poses open questions and takes a balanced approach to exploring resolution; but at the unconscious level, they may feel the need for emotional exploration not only of the subject matter but of the self, for rationalized closure of the issues at hand, and for a sense of mastery over the material.

The fact that college students often claim to understand or to have mastered concepts or skills that their writing does not demonstrate is one predictable outcome of this tension between what students know with their minds and what their emotions may cause them to write. As Sommers and Saltz observe, “significant changes in students’ attitudes toward writing do not necessarily correspond to changes in the writing itself” (144). They point out that such gaps between “what a student knows about writing and what the student can actually do” occur during all four years at college (144). Because assuming a new personae or discursive position is significantly more threatening than stating a new idea, even when students understand new ideas and patterns for writing, they may not be able to step into the discursive patterns they cognitively embrace.

Double binds arising from conflict between emotional and cognitive discourses may affect composing in many more ways than we have yet imagined. For example, my earlier work studying discourse and conflict indicates that when
individuals perceive themselves as marginalized or out of power, they tend to become more deeply invested in home discourse rather than adopting the discourse of power (Chandler, "Some"). Even though this move can isolate and further disempower marginalized individuals, the confidence and emotional security experienced within home discourse presumably overwrites the more reasoned choice of adopting dominant forms to engage powerful opponents on their own terms.

This discussion suggests that we cannot teach students academic discourse, at least not in the conventional sense of giving examples or providing directions for what to do. Rather, this discussion suggests that we need to orchestrate emotional contexts that evoke and scaffold the discourses we seek to teach. Then and only then, after students are in an emotional place where unconscious discursive needs do not sabotage their efforts, instructors might orchestrate interactive reflection to help students examine changes in their writing patterns in light of relationships between discourse and emotion. While facilitated reflection will not necessarily assure new discursive patterns, it can set up a process for students to begin to theorize their composing process in ways that can help them bring those theories to new contexts for writing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many if not most student research papers for the writing practicum focused on how composition instructors might support students in moving beyond fear and its consequences for composing. Rob wrote about how creating trust and connection with student tutees was crucial to effective tutoring; Emma wrote about the importance of addressing concerns and anxieties students bring to sessions, even when those concerns seem to have little to do with writing issues; Tiara wrote that tutors who really want their students to learn “have to take a risk and/or responsibility and help that student feel more comfortable.” Student researchers’ notes from tutoring observations documented that successful sessions resulted when tutors made a personal connection that enabled them to provide both reassurance and direction for their students. These same notes described effective reassurance as deriving from moves to draw attention to writers’ strengths or to acknowledge that many writers (including the tutors themselves) have difficulties similar to the tutees’. These moves were most effective when presented in the form of interactive discussion that encouraged students to take the initiative.

Many composition researchers have reached similar conclusions about how best to support student writers. Hays’s work on developmental feminist pedagogies, DiPardo’s study of Writing Center work and a cultural outsider, and Delpit and Dowdy’s work on nonstandard English speakers all make clear that effective pedagogies teach to students’ affective as well as their cognitive positions. Such research suggests that a *sine qua non* for effective teaching is for students to feel comfortable enough to let go of discursive patterns that function as psychological defense. Once students feel comfortable, instructors can help them reflect on connections between emotional positioning and writing in ways that can set up less traumatic transitions between discourses. By creating learning contexts to address
learners’ emotions and thereby lessening defense, instructors can help students make more conscious and therefore more powerful composing choices.

This essay provides one example of how instructors might gather, analyze, and theorize information on emotion and composing. In the analytic method set forward here, formal characteristics of student writing were checked against emerging characterizations of affective discourses reported in studies of emotion, identity, discourse, and communication. To understand student writing in terms of research findings, essays were then read as hybrids of emotional and cognitive discourses and analyzed in terms of the classroom contexts that shaped them. The usefulness of findings from this approach suggest a corresponding usefulness in re-thinking writing not as a product, or even as a process, but rather as a complex intersection of discourses—including emotional discourses—that orchestrate what and how we will compose within a given context. To realize the full theoretical possibilities of what we might discover within this perspective, we will need more nuanced study of emotional contexts for composing, fuller characterizations of emotional discourses, and detailed explorations of how emotional discourses shape written products and processes.

As pointed out in detail by composition researchers who study emotion and writing, there is a wealth of relevant research from other disciplines (see particularly Richmond). In addition to research from “psychology, cultural anthropology, feminism, political theory, critical pedagogy, and theories of social change” (Jacobs and Micciche 4), the analysis in this essay suggests that attention to work from interdisciplinary studies in life-course development, writing and healing, narrative and identity, and autobiographical memory will be particularly relevant to understanding emotion and discourse. Current work in neurology and psychology is also opening up new ways to think about how emotion and social conventions affect patterns for communication. Re-thinking previously discredited theories of emotion that have been re-invented through psychology’s “affective revolution” or applying new information from recent work on neurology and embodied emotion to patterns we observe in our classrooms are two of many possible opportunities presented by a body of work that increasingly points to the importance of emotion in thinking, learning, and communicating (Niedenthal; Haidt).

No matter how much information other disciplines might contribute to composition studies, we need more work to characterize affective contexts for teaching and composing and the associated patterns for writing and learning. We need more book-length, in-depth work similar to Anne Herrington and Martha Curtis’ Persons in Progress and Susan McLeod’s Notes on the Heart, as well as studies that include increased, more tightly focused analysis of correlations between writing and emotional contexts for composition. Studies with particular attention to classroom dynamics and composing processes would be especially valuable. Also, as initiated in A Way to Move, we need more work to theorize emotional politics: in English departments and in the many, diverse institutions which house them, in the texts that structure our teaching of writing, and in the discourses we
encourage and discourage in our classrooms (see for example Bean; Gillam; Kerr; Moon; Ryden). Finally, in order to make effective use of what research may tell us about emotions and discourse, we will need to explore and reflect on our own implication in the discourses we seek to teach.

WORKS CITED


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