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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Annie J. O'Dowd entitled "Composition Classroom Narratives of Teaching and Learning." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

John M. Peters, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Trena Paulus, Mary Ziegler, Michael Keene

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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COMPOSITION CLASSROOM NARRATIVES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Annie J. O'Dowd Gray
December 2008

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Dedication

*This dissertation is dedicated to my children,
Elyse, Audrey, and John, and to my grandchild, Neela, for their love and
grounding influence while I pursued my goals.*

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank those who helped me complete my Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Psychology and Research, Collaborative Learning. The completion of this project depended upon the support and participation of many important people in my life, especially those mentioned here.

First, I would like to thank my Fall 2007 English 1010-P43 Freshman Composition students who willingly (and anonymously) agreed to participate in this study. Their presence extended far beyond one Fall semester by finding its way in words onto the pages of this project.

Secondly, I would like to thank Dean Lois Reynolds, my former department head, for her support while I completed my graduate classes and for helping me carry out the process for student participation in this action research project, the first of its kind in our department.

I want to express my deep gratitude to Dr. John Peters for his practical guidance, flashes of creative insight, and his loyal friendship during this part of my academic journey. His mentorship was invaluable.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Trena Paulus, Dr. Mary Ziegler, and Dr. Michael Keene. All three have challenged me to see more clearly my responsibilities as researcher to the academic road before me. Dr. Keene, in particular, encouraged me to examine more deeply than I ever had before into how I want to teach freshman composition to college students.

Members of my interpretive research group, especially, Cheri Torres, provided important feedback and advice regarding the thematic and metaphorical analysis stage of this project.

I would also like to thank Amanda Zieger for her outstanding professional support as transcriptionist. Her work was the golden key to this project becoming more manageable.

Lastly, mere words cannot express my gratitude to my family and close friends as they have inspired me to bring this project to completion in a timely manner. I am humbled by their unconditional love and unwavering belief in me as a scholar and human being. Now that I am through with this project, I hope to be seeing more of them--and my garden.

Abstract

This was an action research study examining 1) narratives community college writing students had about themselves as writers in a college-level writing course and 2) the connection between those narratives and student experience of collaborative learning activities. The study of narrative is particularly useful in determining how people make meaning of experiences in their lives.

The class utilized three types of teaching and learning to explore the writing process, including lecture, discussion groups and collaborative learning activities. Students and teacher used a social-constructionist approach to conversation that implemented a process of reflective dialogue about writing and writers' strategies.

At the end of the course, which began with thirty students, nineteen students out of twenty anonymously volunteered to participate in the study. A neutral third party randomly selected twelve names for final participation. The researcher conducted a phenomenological analysis of audio taped entrance and exit interviews of the twelve students. The study also utilized relevant examples from student journals and researcher field notes. Data analysis yielded themes that the researcher subjected to metaphorical analysis.

Findings revealed what narratives students had about themselves as writers upon entering and exiting the course. Results showed that using collaborative learning activities in the writing classroom influenced student narratives of themselves as writers. Students experienced interpersonal and technical gains from participation in social-constructionist-oriented classroom

dialogue about writing and from certain, specific aspects of a learning environment that incorporated collaborative learning activities.

Conclusions linked the use of collaborative learning in the college writing classroom to the creation of a “novelesque” and process-oriented class experience that lent itself to the meaning-making of college writing. There were additional implications from this study concerning composition studies and student retention of college freshmen.

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Abbreviations

CL = Collaborative Learning

TI = Type One Teaching and Learning

TII = Type Two Teaching and Learning

TIII = Type Three Teaching and Learning

Comp = Freshman Composition

R & D = Remedial and Developmental

PSTCC = Pellissippi State Technical Community College

UTK = University of Tennessee Knoxville

TBR = Tennessee Board of Regents

Gen. Ed. = General Education

Preface

Approach to the Study

*“Story is metaphor for life. It takes us
beyond the factual to the essential.”* (McKee, *Story*, p. 25)

This dissertation, although written, remains a work in progress. I have identified some implications this project might have for composition studies and for freshman student retention efforts but will likely arrive at more insights with time and distance on my discoveries. At this point, I can now say that I see my teaching practice from an entirely different angle, one that reveals how dynamically our shared classroom interactions influence freshman writers’ experiences of college writing.

Two aspects of teaching college freshman composition (comp) captured my curiosity and became the focal points for this study. The first was my writing students’ unexpressed narratives about themselves as writers navigating a first-year writing course. The second was a need for evidence about if and how a certain teaching/learning methodology I had recently added--Peters and Armstrong’s (1998) version of collaborative learning (CL)-- impacted these narratives. Thus, the purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to grasp a sense of student narratives, and 2) to reflect on how the students experienced CL as part of those unfolding stories.

Several factors defined the need for this research. The most pressing was a lack of corroborating evidence in key areas related to how freshmen writers make that crucial transition into college writing—evidence from their own, subjective point of view and not necessarily through a multicultural lens. Recent literature on this subject focuses almost exclusively on the literacy narratives of minority students who overcome cultural obstacles to become members of

new academic discourse communities. Studies like Soliday's (1994) and especially Corkery's (2005) are useful for those working with concerns in multicultural education. One particularly helpful voice from this literature was Nelson's (1995), who noted that writing professors should not disregard freshmen writers as automatic outsiders to the college academic discourse community. On the contrary, these writers already have arrived at "a set of assumptions, or interpretive practices that shape their approaches as readers and writers" (p. 412).

I agree. But I also recognize that these "interpretive practices" are only temporary identifications freshmen writers make. The larger, overarching rationale I had for mining student narratives and examining their experience of the CL pedagogy was my conviction that students' individual stories of themselves as writers necessarily change and influence one another, constituting a broader, more elusive story of an entire classroom meta-narrative--the group's story of teaching/learning. Exploration of this idea through thematic and metaphorical analysis led to the most satisfying part of working on this project.

The closest I could get to student stories was to ask the students how they experienced themselves as writers. Underlying my thought process was a perennial trust in narrative theory. Polkinghorne (1988) defined *narrative* as "a kind of organization scheme expressed in story form" (p. 13). Narrative theory involves the worldview that human beings are naturally storytellers and that people act in the world on the basis of their narrative frameworks. According to Fisher (1984; 1987), we structure our lives and create meaning out of them from the stories or narratives we create around the things we do or are involved in. As opposed to what Fisher described as *a rational world paradigm* (1987), which posits that we negotiate our way through life in terms of logical response to the rhetorical exigencies we face, we really have *a narrative*

paradigm at work, an ongoing story of our lives that we make up and imbue with meaning as we go along.

This study involved a combination of phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis. I asked students about their experiences, so I began with the phenomenological analysis. I then extended the Thomas and Pollio (2002) model with Steger's (2007) method of metaphorical analysis in order to arrive at context-rich metaphors that could serve as characters in the students' own stories. Further interpretive work, a narrative analysis, transformed these metaphors into individual, and later, a group narrative. One surprise on this journey was the vital importance of my own story, something I account for in the Discussion chapter.

I chose a qualitative model of research called insider action research, which allowed me to study my practice in order to improve it. Peters' (2002) model of action research, DATA-DATA, guided this project and its structure. I used DATA-DATA for two main reasons. First, it provided a logical, accessible way to organize my informal reflections and formal research. Second, it accommodated well a phenomenological analysis of what happened to students' stories about themselves as writers, (and my own role related to what happened) and CL's influence on those stories

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter I is an overview of my practice as a community college professor of freshman composition. This is followed by Chapter II, an analysis exploring the assumptions behind why I conduct my practice the way I do. Chapter III follows, where I account for my practical theory and the plan of action that drives my research project. In Chapter IV, I lay out my research design and procedures. Chapter V is a presentation of findings. In Chapter VI, I discuss research findings in depth, offer tentative conclusions, and

re-theorize about my original practical theory in light of research findings. Chapter VII provides the wrap-up for my study with a final discussion of the implications of my findings for my practice, composition studies, teaching/learning in higher education, and action research.

CHAPTER I:

A Snapshot of My Practice

The DATA-DATA model requires that at the outset of their research, action researchers provide a rich, comprehensive description of their practice in order to situate themselves *first as practitioners* and *secondly as researchers* of that practice. Such a stance, rooted firmly in actual, day-to-day life, acknowledges that the researcher is never really in a position to objectively stand outside her practice. In fact, to be an authentically reflective practitioner, she maintains a foothold both inside and outside her practice. In keeping with this first task of action research, my positioning as researcher, I now describe the institution where I teach and then my role and responsibilities as a comp professor.

My Institution and Freshman Composition

Pellissippi State Technical Community College (PSTCC) has four campuses in and around Knoxville, Tennessee, serving approximately 8,000 students through both online and on ground (e.g. traditional in-class) courses. With an average student age of 28 years old, PSTCC offers basic and developmental writing classes to those who score below 19 on the ACT, or not well enough to be placed in college level writing their first semester. Freshman composition, called by insiders “comp,” is described as the following: “(A)n entry-level college writing course devoted to the study and practice of expository and persuasive writing. Assignments include essays and reports with emphasis on research, writing processes, and effective formatting” (English 1010 Master Syllabus, 2007, p. 1).

PSTCC comp classrooms host a wide variety of students. In addition to serving the eighteen year-old fresh from high school, comp classrooms can include the mom in her thirties

returning to school now that her kids are in daycare, the deaf student whose training does not qualify her for entrance to the four-year university, the out-of-work laborer who wants a new start, or the juvenile offender who has struck a deal with his parole officer to shorten his time. All are likely candidates for my particular writing classroom. All possess hidden, rich stories about themselves as human beings and as developing writers in the college setting.

Teaching Comp

There are several main approaches to teaching comp that leaders in comp studies have attempted to classify, including Berlin (1982) and Fulkerson (2005). As far as PSTCC students are concerned, it is no secret that different professors teach comp differently according to their pedagogical affiliation, despite a cookie-cutter master syllabus and Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) General Education (Gen. Ed.) requirements for what comp professors should offer their writing students. Most PSTCC English professors emphasize rhetorical prowess in their comp courses. I am one of them.

However, despite my commitment to fulfilling Gen. Ed. Requirements, I am not a purist in my approach to teaching comp; that is, I draw from a variety of suggested pedagogies. In particular, my strategy is a hybrid of the Fulkerson (2005) and Berlin (1982) typologies involving expressivist, rhetorical, and socio-cultural approaches to teaching comp. Thus, what we do in the classroom more closely resembles Faigley's (1986) position that the teaching of writing requires an outlook broader than any one pedagogical view can provide.

Some explanation is needed. In the first few weeks of a semester, I am something of an expressivist in that the students and I move their writing from the known to the unknown. Students write essays based more on their personal experience rather than on some objective,

outside truth or strategy for arguing well. This pedagogy puts me in the camp of Macrorie (1985; 1988), Elbow (1973; 1981; 2002), and Murray (1982; 2003), all proponents of the expressivist stance on teaching composition.

As the students and I move closer to midterm, we focus more on classical argumentation and what Berlin (1982) has called Positivist practices. We study the classical rhetorical appeals in different kinds of essays. Thus, we play with affecting our audiences through various modes of discourse and deft use of logos, ethos, and pathos. As professor, I might find myself here in league with Bitzer's (1968) notions on appropriately addressing different rhetorical situations.

Furthermore, my work as a New Rhetorician has me teaching students to think about their thinking processes as they talk and write. From this viewpoint, we pay attention to writing as a recursive process, and I sometimes find myself trying to help students make logical sense of a certain writing task by breaking it down into components, but without the computer culture terminology of Flower and Hayes (1981).

Finally, once students are fairly comfortable with themselves, rhetorical concepts, the writing process, and each other, I introduce a socio-cultural lens that asks us all to look twice at assumptions behind long established societal practices in which we all seem to partake. Thus, from right after midterm on, we are somewhere between what Fulkerson (2005) derided as Critical Cultural Studies and what Faigley (1986) called the Social View—or a worldview that assumes that anything we determine about language, writing, and even the issues we write about must be understood from a societal--in addition to an individual--perspective. Writing, I show the students, arises from the culture, not inside individual heads, exclusive of the culture's influence. Faigley acknowledged that a worldview like this could encompass "poststructuralist

theories of language, the sociology of science, ethnography, and Marxism” (p. 535). Thus, on any given day, our classroom pedagogy could shift depending on the text we are studying or writing task before us.

Conversations with my colleagues and my own experiences using different pedagogical approaches for certain assignments have convinced me that few writing professors work exclusively in one approach with today’s students. It might be argued, like one of my UT professors did, that a theoretically pure comp course—one that is exclusively rhetorical or expressivist, for instance—is more consistent and therefore possibly more effective for improving student writing. I have reflected on this suggestion, but for me, there are simply too many useful aspects in each approach to stick to just one.

My Comp Class Up Close

Typically, I meet with a comp class for fifty-five minutes three days a week in a room with a whiteboard, about thirty student desks, and a lectern. Audio-visual equipment is ample. There are an overhead projector and a large media station with VCR, document camera, computer, and a DVD. After I take roll, the students and I hold informal discussion for several minutes. These brief exchanges begin with a general greeting and banter on the top news items of the day. I scan the room and comment in a friendly way on who is there and who is not, and the students interact informally with me around the question, “What’s going on with you today?” Then, we usually split our lesson time into journaling, dialogue about writing processes and/or text, and closing instructions about assignments or upcoming events. I typically give a mini-lecture followed by discussion, small group activity, or individual work. Our text is a global reader, offering readings from different international/cultural/historical perspectives on issues

that affect people worldwide. Our overall task is to write essays on aspects of these readings by combining a variety of rhetorical modes.

The role of dialogue. Most days, I encourage lively dialogue around the global issues on which we write as well as about the writing process itself. I define dialogue along the lines of Senge's (1990) description of a group of people who "enter into a genuine 'thinking together'" through their conversation (p. 10). This definition also involves "a free-flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually" (Senge, p. 10). I encourage this interactive atmosphere because students seem to respond positively to having a voice and also seem to think more deeply about the writing process as they explore aloud each other's and the text authors' viewpoints, which are often much different than their own. When we dialogue together, I get the sense that we are experiencing a very different type of teaching/learning about English—something much more provocative than the standard lecture format through which I, as professor, "control" the give and take of subject matter by being the only speaker. Especially from the third week on, there is a great deal of dialogue as we explore authors' texts and the students' own writing.

Most students participate with enthusiasm in these dialogues. While I utilize and value the more traditional methods of teaching/learning like lecture and small group activity, I think that these methods are best balanced with these large group dialogical experiences--especially cumulatively over the course of a semester. My sense of this classroom approach "working" is almost wholly intuitive.

As we make our way through the semester with these blended methods of teaching/learning, an unfolding sense of "our class" emerges. I sense that we create a sort of

story of our being together to practice and study writing. We become familiar with one another and use that familiarity to explore ideas further in a safe way. In addition, through the open dialogues we weave amidst more traditional methods of teaching/learning, reading and writing become participatory experiences; authors' ideas and how we can write about them call on each of us to draw on, offer up, and test aloud the experiences we as individuals bring to the classroom community. I believe that these opportunities for active, rather than passive, kinds of learning sustain, deepen, and sometimes transform students' own stories about themselves as developing writers.

Although I like to provide ample opportunity for dialogue in my classes, my own reflections on methodology that endorses dialogical activity--in particular, collaborative learning (CL) techniques--have been seldom, private, and certainly not systematic. Because I define CL as "people laboring together to construct knowledge" (Peters & Armstrong, 1998, p. 75), I get the sense that, indeed, we as professor and students meet together in dialogue to deepen our understanding and create something new together. In our daily way, we share and create knowledge about how writers write and how to write better ourselves. When we engage in CL, we don't set out to know a certain set of facts; we just dialogue around a major reading or piece of student writing and see what happens. CL is never a forced activity. Yet, I have never pondered deeply on how CL affects our overall class experience. Neither have I asked the students how they experience CL from their point of view.

In Pursuit of Narratives

As Schram (2006) has put it, narrative "is a natural, obvious, and authentic window into how people structure experience and construct meaning in their lives"

(p. 105). Each semester, the students and I participate in a continuum of activity that drives their writing efforts. As they individually draft and collectively review papers, engage in facilitated conversation about global issues, and write the occasional collaborative piece, I get the sense that the students forge their own unique identities as college writers. At the end of the semester, most students--like literary characters--exhibit change over time. They forge relationships with each other and with me; their writing generally improves. Sometimes students who were fatalistically convinced upon entering the course that they would fail or that they were poor writers actually find their writing “voice” by the course’s end and produce excellent academic work by college-level standards. Other students are shocked that what they learned in high school about writing is insufficient in this new academic setting.

One of the more concrete ways I know that students’ views of themselves as writers exist and shift is that during the first week of the course I ask them to write about what they see as their writing strengths and weaknesses. I also ask for an end-of-the-course reflection that invites them to account for what they think they have learned. Most often, they describe a change in skill or an improvement between when they started the course and when they ended it. When I examine their final portfolio of papers, these reflections are usually verified. But I have never asked them—in their own words-- *how* they think they got there—what stood out for them, what made the difference.

In addition to the thirty or so individual, writerly stories playing themselves out, I think that there likely is one overall group story of college writing also being created each semester. This story may define our class and contain the essence of our experience together.

CHAPTER II:

Analysis of My Practice

Having described my practice and pedagogical rationale, I want to take some care to expose and challenge the assumptions I had going into each semester as a comp professor. Doing so is an important part of seeing how I've influenced my practice over the years.

I begin this brief analysis with some reflections on what I usually used as my comp students' first assignment, which asks them to account for what they perceive as their writing strengths and weaknesses. Historically, I tended to look more deeply at *how* students wrote this assignment, rather than *what* they wrote. After all, despite the self-referential topic choice, the first assignment was a skills diagnostic. I learned over the years using that first exercise that it was quite efficient to focus closely on how students communicated on paper rather than what they thought they could or couldn't do as writers. However, I can see now that I was surely missing an opportunity to understand in a deeper way what students thought about themselves as writers as they entered the course and how they made meaning of their roles and duties as academic writers.

At the end of the course, even though I sometimes asked students to write a reflection piece on what they thought they had learned about writing, there was nothing in the actual prompt that encouraged them to reflect freely on how, why, or even if they thought their writing had changed. It certainly didn't attempt to capture if they thought they had changed their perception of themselves as academic writers. Thus, the reflection piece lacked something essential drawing on students' experiences. In addition, when I analyzed a student's final portfolio of papers, I almost always saw improvement in grammar, mechanics, form, style, and

rhetorical skill, but there was no narrative evidence of how that student thought she improved as a writer. I simply never asked for it.

Even though I have been fairly convinced most students become stronger college writers, I have also considered that they were merely hoop jumping--making suggested corrections on the papers they were allowed to revise in order to earn to a passing grade (or better) by semester's end. This strategy, if they were following it, would have been a matter of "classroom literacy," or a coping strategy some students might use to learn how to pass the course instead of mastering the subject matter. But upon further reflection, I realized that the non-revisable, timed, in-class writing assignments—especially the final exam—attested that students really did pick up new ways of understanding how to write in college situations. They gained skills from comp that they could draw on in other pressured writing situations like, let's say, history class. From midterm on especially, students seemed to have learned much more than how to fix a comma splice. Most have put the writing process into a meaningful enough context to accomplish course goals and to turn in a decent portfolio. Thus, despite my initial doubts, I had to admit that comp students, for the most part, did actually learn how to write better by the end of the semester.

But what were the actual stories of how they learned about college writing? Even as I analyzed what it was we did in those first and last assignments, my mind wandered back to how their actual experiences might paint a narrative that could bring order and life to student experiences while providing context for future experiences in writing classrooms. Schram (2006) wrote, "Narrative inquirers are concerned not only with events and ideas in the here and

now but also with how those events and ideas are given meaning on a continuum of experiences. Meaning will change as time passes” (p. 105).

In addition to being curious about student narratives, I needed to think about my interest in CL and its possible influence on those narratives. There was no question that we spent a lot of time doing collaborative, dialogical work in my comp classes. In fact, I spent very little time formally lecturing to students on how to write and much more time unpacking together with them what different writers—and they themselves-- did in their writing. Thus, in our fifty-five minute class, I came to see that the teaching of writing involved far more dialogical, collaborative activity and much less monological, traditional teaching. The bottom line, however, was that I had never systematically reflected on what particular aspect(s) of CL, if any, influenced student writerly identities and writing. Did it make a difference in their experience? Did it shape their narratives? If so, how?

On the basis of the preceding informal analysis, I developed two practical questions: 1) How may I bring to the forefront student narratives about themselves as developing writers? 2) How may I find out how (and if) CL influences these narratives? The latter question, in particular, was a precursor to finding out more about possible connections between CL and student narratives.

CHAPTER III:

My Own Practical Theory and a Plan of Action

In this chapter, I share my own practical theory of what I planned to do to explore the supposed connection between student narratives of themselves and CL. I also highlight my own theory with the theories of others that have influenced my thinking as an educator who works with CL.

The Power of CL Dialogue and What it Does

First, I have noticed that there is something powerful about engaging in CL dialogue that ignites student interest in exploring the ideas they write about. Engaging in CL dialogue offers a creative, viable space for the students and I to express ourselves as people, not just professor and students, in a safe place to voice and test opinions before writing about them. Once students warm to the CL process, which I will explain later, our conversations take twists and turns we never counted on. The dialogical activity energizes our imaginations.

Our dialogues allow us to work together democratically to create a new, shared understanding of whatever we talk about--for instance, how an author argues her point from A to B. Our impromptu CL “sessions,” peppered with my facilitated comments that help us experience connections between ideas, allow us to experience our topic and ourselves a bit differently at the end of each conversation; we create a new understanding about that author’s writing and our ability to write about that reading—something we didn’t bargain on at the beginning of the dialogue.

Our class dialogues seem very much like a work of fiction. As professor and students, our mutual understanding is comprised of our spoken words and interwoven silent reflections

that function like thirty narrator expositions between our spoken words. I can even imagine the omniscient narrator's voice telling our tale of teaching/learning; it's the one that has a sense of all our stories. The most important story of teaching and learning in that class has no narrator; it is that of how all of us make meaning of the writing process.

Moreover, our CL dialogues mimic aspects of the writing process. Student voices and their silent, deliberations between the times they experience their own voice interacting with others', demonstrate two different but necessary aspects that comprise the actual practice of writing. Voicing and silent deliberation re-enact what writers do when they argue a position and still provide consideration for alternative viewpoints. Actual, real-time dialogue, in indirect but powerful ways, informs writers' sensitivities to the writing process. At times, I point out this perspective to students in simple terms as we converse about the things they write about. In learning to hear themselves and hear others through CL, students learn how to develop a writer's sensitivity to self and other.

CL, therefore, gives students real-time practice with both active discourse and deep reflection on their roles, thoughts, and feelings as parts of that discourse. Because we pay attention to *the process* of our unfolding conversations, students might gradually, but vaguely, become aware of their vital dual role as speaker and writer. Most striking for me, however, is how our CL dialogue sessions expose multiple viewpoints against which students may test their own and others' ideas. Again, appreciating these different points of view is extremely valuable to understanding the writing process itself; students can try on different ways of thinking and responding. Thus, the dialogues we engage in—especially their focus on multiple ways of knowing something—offer students a veritable field of possibilities for how they will develop their next writing project.

Some Other Links Between CL and Student Narratives

To further my notion that there is a connection between aspects of CL and students' ongoing, emerging stories about themselves as writers, I turn to several important perspectives: social constructionism, the importance of cultivating an inside/outside sensibility, multiple ways of knowing (as an element in Peters & Armstrong's [1998] collaborative learning theory), and an important theory on the concept of the processual.

All the perspectives mentioned above encourage self-reflection. It can be argued that reflection is the starting point for students to transform static concepts of themselves as writers into a notion of themselves as *a story in motion*, as *improving* writers in the college-level setting. Secondly, these perspectives are process-oriented and encourage looking at "what is" from several vantage points over a period of time. Finally, these perspectives encourage a participatory stance towards one's development as a writer. One might say, in sum, that CL encourages a participatory way of knowing (Reason & Torbert, 2001) about texts and writing processes, a way of being in the classroom that can augment the physical act of writing traditionally emphasized in the college writing classroom.

Social constructionism. The worldview of social constructionism is helpful for understanding how students can use dialogue to negotiate meaning through reflective thinking about texts and writing processes. I agree with Gergen (1999) and Bruffee (1993) that we create meaning together through socially constructing our shared understandings in collaborative activities. I also believe that when I provide opportunities for us to share openly what we think and feel about global issues and how writers write, we begin earnest work toward constructing meaning around these things so that we may later write about them. Through dialogue that

honors a social constructionist framework, we strengthen our own ability to navigate our way from textbook knowledge about writing to tacit knowing of how to do it (Polanyi, 1983).

Levelising. It might be helpful at this point if I share how we engage in CL dialogue. Without explicitly teaching students the academic “steps,” I facilitate a reflexive process with my students called *levelising* (Peters, 1999; Peters & Ragland, 2005), a process that allows people to examine dialogue in action. Levelising adds depth and dimensionality to how we view texts and the writing process. Its process-oriented approach to conversation lets us see our dialogue unfolding as a story--as it happens. Levelising allows us, while we converse, to step back from our own words, to slow down the progress of our thoughts so that we can see what we are saying to one another from several simultaneously valid perspectives (Peters, 1999; Peters & Ragland, 2005). As an important part of engaging in CL, levelising encourages reflective thinking about different ways to understand writing processes, texts--and one other in relation to them.

Levelising has class participants stepping back in a series of verbal removes in order to see themselves engaging in the teaching/learning context. Everyone in the classroom, including me as professor, participates consciously and simultaneously in levelising; it is a systematic and shared process.

There are four levels to levelising as described by Peters & Ragland (2005). In the first level, *Pre-Reflective Being in the World*, professor and student participants interact in a manner sensitive to their environment and one another. Rather than focusing on her own thoughts, a participant directs her awareness toward others; thus, there is an emphasis on listening and looking in order to experience another’s words and gestures.

Level II is *Reflective Being*, which may spark, for example, from a startling remark or

surprise response to a question. At this level, a participant considers her actions in reference to others. That is, she lends some distance to words said or actions made by imagining those words and actions from her own and others' concurrent perspectives. Thus, she experiences herself simultaneously inside and outside her own point of view. She continues to reflect on the different levels of awareness she experiences, distancing herself from herself and identifying herself with the other in a recursive manner as she speaks/reflects. "From each of these perspectives," wrote Peters & Ragland (2005), "she is able to reflect *on* her actions *in* the moment of acting *and* afterward" (p. 2).

Next is Level III, *Framing the Experience*, wherein participants (through facilitator prompting) experience themselves reflecting on their shared utterances and perhaps see that they are responding from behind a conceptual framework influencing their perspectives. Participants examine shared contributions to utterances in the act of their being spoken. While at this level, students and professor may experiment with different frameworks for different results, almost like trying on different hats.

In *Theorizing*, Level IV, students and professor reflect on their frameworks. Thus, meanings are reflected upon in the context of how they arose. Here, a participant can, as Peters and Ragland (2005) have put it, "think about thinking, critically examine what others think, consider how her own and others' theories shape her experience of the world, and perhaps construct her own new theories" ("Levelising" p. 2). Subject matter when students and professor are levelising takes on a more qualitative, felt dimension. Instead of just learning *about* the subject matter, students and professor engage in an emerging narrative of their own that enlivens understanding.

I think the levelising process helps students experience themselves as vital participants in an ongoing, unfolding class story about learning college writing. However, it is not a story with a neat beginning, middle, and end. Like the writing process itself, levelising is oddly revelatory as it unfolds and turns back on itself. Each aspect of levelising is not necessarily meant to progress in a linear fashion; while in the act of dialoguing about subject matter, participants slip in and out of various levels as they examine how they are saying what they are saying while they are saying it. It is open to many possible outcomes.

And herein is the importance of the inside/outside perspective generated through levelising. Attending to how the conversation unfolds *in the act of unfolding* it means that participants learn to occupy positions simultaneously inside and outside their usual perspectives about the subject matter and themselves as speakers/thinkers. What is “built” among participants is the Bakhtinian “middle” of the utterance, or the place where meanings are generated *between* people. Peters & Armstrong (1998) have called this middle area “X,” the content and process in which we engage through reflective dialogue. This “X” “speaks” to individual group members, the group itself, and they to it within a dynamic web of dialogical activity.

An example might be helpful to illustrate the above. For instance, Jim asks the class an open-ended question about how the author, Wendell Berry, constructed his argument against President George W. Bush’s national security strategy. He asks something like, “What are we supposed to make of how Berry uses his essay against Bush’s policy as a bully pulpit for his agrarian views?” Mark, on the other side of the room, responds with an ambiguous, somewhat snide comment about how Berry’s agrarian bias overshadows his main point that Bush acted irresponsibly in bombing Iraq. Mark adds fire with a flippant statement questioning Berry’s

loyalty as an American. Mark's offhand remark prompts Tracey to ask Mark why he feels that way and to say more about where he is coming from. This invitation reveals Mark's rationale for how he, raised on a farm himself, would have argued differently due to his deep, abiding patriotism, and so on. I then ask Mark how he would outline his response to Wendell Berry and invite him to do so. Mark, at first hesitant, goes to the board to chalk out how his response would look.

This brief exchange teaches all of us, through the "X" it creates, how to negotiate various meanings and responses to the text and perhaps even lends class members' alternative viewpoints on how they may write about Berry's essay from a unique point of view. If no one had been sensitive to what was behind Mark's remark and had failed to inquire about his point of view, Mark's perspective may not have arisen at all. As professor/facilitator guiding all of the preceding, I might have interjected various comments highlighting a speaker's frame of reference, inquired what would happen if we looked at a speaker's perspective in another manner, gently drawn out defensive-looking or quiet students, or encouraged students to ask back when a new opportunity for understanding began to show itself. Thus to facilitate CL, the facilitator can be sensitive to every nuance and potential in the room, spoken or not.

I think this unfolding, conversational "X," through the very process that creates and maintains it over time, is what contains the seeds of students' emerging sense of themselves as owners of good ideas, ones they can write about with interest and focus. CL conversation opens avenues for the writing processes of others to influence how students think and create. Levelising seems to work as a catalyst--a philosopher's stone--in creating new understandings about texts and the writing process.

Peters & Armstrong's CL theory and multiple ways of knowing. Both the social constructionist standpoint and the cultivation of inside/outside perspectives through levelising can be found in the *actual practice* of CL as described by Peters & Armstrong (1998). What differentiated their CL theory from many other CL theorists', such as Bruffee (1993), is their insight that for an experience to be truly collaborative, all group members--including the instructor--*participate as co-learners*. In addition, the Peters & Armstrong theory differed from other descriptions of CL because it focused on the construction of new individual *and group* knowledge about subject matter.

Peters & Armstrong's theory of CL allows for four particular elements to emerge within the dialogical experience: dialogical space, cycles of action and reflection, a focus on construction of new knowledge, and multiple ways of knowing. I work under the assumption that all four elements of this theory, but especially multiple ways of knowing, contribute to student narrative formation. Before I explain how, I will mention the other three.

First, this model's *dialogical space* encourages the free, considerate expression of one's individuality in relation to others. I have already mentioned that I try to provide this sort of space in my writing classroom. A large part of encouraging this space is setting the tone for a safe classroom environment--a container--(Isaacs, 1999) where being oneself is okay. Students can then venture out orally--before trying to do so in their writing--beyond the boxlike conditioning of their own perceived limitations about who they can and can't be as classroom speakers and eventually, writers. Practical measures to enhance this space include encouraging students to ask more probing questions of one another, asking answerers to ask back of

questioners for further information, and having students share relevant narrative incidents of critical importance to their lives.

Co-creating this space for dialogue involves another element of CL--*cycles of action and reflection*--that encourages us through levelising to create new knowledge. Students participating in CL start thinking about the impact of what they say before they say it much like a writer has to think about what she wants to say before--and while--she writes. Furthermore, it is sometimes necessary for me as facilitator to ask further questions of students in order for them to uncover their own assumptions or frames of reference about what they are saying. Writers, too, need to consider carefully where they stand in relation to their audience as well as the subject matter about which they are writing. Finally, participating in these cycles of action and reflection mimics what writers must do when writing and revising texts.

Another element of CL is its *focus on the construction of new knowledge*. In broad terms, this element concerns how we work together to create and sustain the “X” mentioned earlier. We are always working toward what we are building together as an understanding of writers and writing processes.

The last element of the Peters & Armstrong theory, *multiple ways of knowing*, requires most of my attention as CL facilitator. The students experience me attending to group processes, being inclusive of divergent viewpoints, and openly reflecting on significant, striking moments that occur among us in our dialogues. They also learn how to encourage these things themselves, so I am not doing all the work. They learn to mirror what I do because I position myself as co-learner. Through experiencing my shifted role as co-learner in the conversation, students begin to play with the importance of trying on multiple simultaneous perspectives--something they need to learn as

developing thinkers and writers. Because I spend so much time working with this particular element, I would like to know how it manifests in students' emerging narratives about themselves as writers.

A processual approach. Finally, I like to encourage a different kind of teaching/learning aesthetic in my classroom, one more concerned with process than solely on product. This approach has been hard to describe and name. I have lately grown fond of seeing my classroom as a text, a notion with a Bakhtinian influence.

Although Mikhail Bakhtin was, among other things, a literary critic, his notion of *text* allows for the term's expansion from a literary to a broadly cultural context. Thus, it is feasible that any classroom may also be negotiated as a text. Bakhtin regarded the novel as the narrative form most closely resembling the forces affecting our daily life interactions. It can be argued that a classroom, with its competing, multiple viewpoints-- its dialogism immersed in a social context, or *polyphony*--can "read" very much like a novel under certain circumstances, especially those classrooms that allow for contingencies, the unexpected, to affect the process of what is taught and learned.

One advantage of encouraging this view of a writing classroom is that participants can freely influence what is covered during the typical class period; as professor, I have not hermetically sealed the possibilities of the lesson plan. Dialogue, in particular, can allow for the emergence of the *novel-esque* because one can't necessarily control its outcome. Its constituent parts comprise an astonishing, unpredictable whole. Dialogical classrooms honor a more open-ended process and attend to how individual teaching/learning "moments" create *a unique story* that is both the class' group understanding of the material and part of each individual's story about teaching/learning in that class.

Moreover, creating, revealing, and examining student stories about teaching/learning requires a different pedagogical aesthetic than that provided by transmitting subject matter to students by traditional means. Narratologist Gary Morson (1999) has described *tempics* as an aesthetic device that allows one to appreciate contingencies present in *processual narratives*, or works that unfold without an intended authorial blueprint for what happens. *Tempic* works possess open-ended time sequences in which multiple possible futures exist for narrative events. Morson, for instance, described works like Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Dostoyevsky's novels as tempic. In a sense, the things that happen in processual narratives unfold similarly to how real life events occur, seemingly randomly. But by story's end, all events are completely necessary and interconnected.

Furthermore, Morson (1998) described tempics as a way reading of text that allows for the *presentness* of each event to unfold (p. 2). Seen *tempically*, things that happen in texts are unique and meaningful in and of themselves, not because they fit some overall design. Tempics honors certain texts' *open temporality* and hospitality to a field of possible future events. Morson contrasted tempics to traditional poetics, which attempts to organize narrative events into patterns fulfilling an overall structure. For instance, if I am too focused on the mechanics of shoveling content into my students--fulfilling the solitary, stated goals of departmental objectives and a state-sanctioned curriculum--I might miss an opportunity for all of us to "talk a paper" into existence via a CL dialogue thanks to what opened up in classroom dialogue that day.

There is a link from Morson's notion of processual narrative to educational theory, particularly alternative teaching/learning methodologies such CL. CL offers a pedagogical avenue for examining dialogical relationships that emerge *in the act of* teaching/learning. As CL

draws attention to process, it requires a tempic aesthetic to appreciate how it works differently than other, more traditional, methodologies.

But let's look at tempics in context. Although entirely necessary and useful, I see lecture and even small group cooperative teaching/learning activities as tending toward *certain* defined pedagogical goals. Traditional modes of teaching/learning allow for one possible future: the transmission of certain facts about the subject matter without much room for contingencies, or different possible futures. CL broadens what is possible in the writing classroom. I see short distance between Morson's tempics to the Bakhtinian-influenced version of CL described by Peters & Armstrong (1998).

Morson (2003) wrote, "A process must have more than one step because it involves tracing possible futures" (p. 5). Classroom pedagogy can commence processually like any literary narrative, but if we are to focus on its availability to contingency--in Morson's (1999) words, "the presence of something that does not fit the overall design" (p. 280) in a teaching/learning setting-- we might concern ourselves with *how* we allow for classroom dialogue that generates meaning from individual moments. Taking stock of how dialogue in teaching/learning settings allows for contingency spotlights how synapses occur in conversation, something Bakhtin might call *once-occurrent utterances* of how participants explore subject matter and each other (Shotter, 2005).

To intentionally cultivate and appreciate such teaching/learning moments calls for a tempic response to the craft, one that both subjectively immerses itself in activity and objectively observes process. My hunch is that through engaging in CL, we encourage student narratives of themselves as writers to unfold and transform rather than stagnate or cease altogether. The

cultivation of the tempic aesthetic allows for writing identities to blossom in an organic manner. To work with that aesthetic authentically, I have to back off as a teacher concerned with maintaining total control of what happens in the classroom.

Thus, underscored by my beliefs in the value of social constructionism, classroom instruction that includes CL and its emphasis on multiple ways of knowing, and the cultivation of a tempic, processual approach to teaching/learning, I theorized that, indeed, freshman composition student possess narratives of themselves as writers and that there was a connection between CL and these narratives.

A Plan of Action

Now that I have acknowledged and explored some of my theory about how I approach my practice, I will describe the plan I used to put into action my practical theory about student narratives and how CL participation influences those narratives. This next section serves as the “ACT” portion of the DATA-DATA model of action research.

Social Constructionism

About the second day of class, I explained the worldview of social constructionism to my students. I lectured how we would be experimenting with this worldview by engaging in whole group dialogues. I even mentioned the names and ideas of Gergen (1999) and Bruffee (1993) on how collaborative activities help groups create meaning of their experiences together.

Engagement in CL: Levelising

Although I did not explicitly lecture to my students about the four elements of Peters & Armstrong’s (1998) theory of CL, I informed them that we would be engaging in several forms of teaching/learning that included CL. Our actual CL experiences took several forms. From

time to time, and especially because we customarily used content-rich global issues as our springboard for writing assignments, the students and I gathered into a circle with our chairs to dialogue about a topic they eventually wrote about, like the African “Blood Diamond” industry, for instance. Such activity typically generated lively conversation through which we experienced our own opinions in contrast to one another. I facilitated these dialogues and, as necessary, joined in as a peer would with my own viewpoint--something the students encouraged and enjoyed. Other times, I simply interjected guiding comments as previously described.

We also collaborated on the writing process itself. I sometimes put an anonymous student paper or an author’s article under the document camera and projected it for all to see while we dissected how the author/student argued her point. As a variation, I facilitated student comments as we together talked a paper into existence, creating and outlining an argument from scratch (on the whiteboard) based on previously covered rhetorical strategies. The focus was always on generating the whole group’s understanding of how writers make decisions about what they put on the page.

Finally, an online enhancement to the course was our class blog, “Shades of Gray,” a venue where students could “sound off” about the issues they wrote about and about authors’ writing strategies. I moderated this blog just like a CL session, encouraging students to “ask back,” etc. as necessary.

Each time we engaged in CL, we practiced the art of levelising. However, I took care to facilitate these CL sessions without overemphasizing the actual, named steps of levelising so that students would not become too fixated on labels. I instead emphasized our dialogue *experiences*

as a shared *process* of becoming more aware of what we said and how we said it in the moments of our utterances.

Multiple Ways of Knowing

Our classroom experiences with CL's multiple ways of knowing were enhanced in two specific ways. First, the students and I were able to experiment verbally and aurally with multiple ways of knowing through the facilitated dialogue we shared about the articles we read as well as their own papers. It was not uncommon to hear students say, "I never thought of this that way before" in the middle of such facilitated sessions. Second, students were free to add ongoing, open commentary throughout the semester on the class blog. This commentary put in to practice an honoring of CL's multiple ways of knowing.

A Processual, Tempic Classroom

Finally, our classroom tended in three ways toward a tempic, processual approach to teaching/learning: 1) through dialogical classroom sessions and online enhancements that honored a social constructionist worldview, 2) through the use of CL as a teaching/learning methodology, and 3) through specific attention to encouraging multiple ways of knowing. Online or in person, I took time to highlight individual striking moments we all had about writers' strategies and authors' stances. Furthermore, we did not slavishly stick to the lesson plan each class day and often found ourselves immersed in surprising contingencies. In one particular early class, for instance, we were "supposed to" cover only the writing process in its traditional, textbook stages, such as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing/proofreading. However, the lecture transformed that day into a CL session highlighting another, often-overlooked step of the writing process, publishing, and its vital link to producing professionally rendered academic papers. Students

shared different notions on what might be considered academically “correct” formatting and presentation for their college papers. We actually wound up covering elements of both MLA and APA style, something that put the MLA rules in context of different academic traditions. In sum, we became comfortable enough with each other that the students and I could engage in conversation that often took the lesson plan in unusual directions.

Thus, in these several ways, I was able to put into action my theory about student narratives and CL’s influence upon them.

At this point in following the first DATA in DATA-DATA, I have described my practice (**D**escribe), analyzed my practice through several different lenses (**A**nalyze), put forth my practical theory (**T**heorize), and described the plan (**A**ct) that put my theory into practice. In short, I have undergone a systematic form of reflective practice. The next part of the journey involved a formal inquiry into what students experienced, a step that initiated the second DATA with my research design (**D**esign).

CHAPTER IV:

Research Design and Procedures

I was interested in two things: 1) understanding how my students saw themselves as writers and 2) understanding how and if CL influenced their stories. Thus, for my research design, I turned to the tradition of phenomenology identified with Husserl (1931) and expanded upon as a descriptive method by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) and Thomas and Pollio (2002). As part of my phenomenological analysis, I looked deeply at metaphors (Steger 2007) and concluded with an interpretive narrative analysis.

Phenomenological methods provide a systematic way to explore people's lived experiences. While all approaches to phenomenology concern themselves with the understanding of lived experiences, *meaning making* was the main thrust of my research. As such, its design for collecting and interpreting data involved a deeply reflective interpretation *toward* meaning (Moustakis, 1994), made particularly accessible through the Thomas and Pollio (2002) design. I will never know completely how my students made meaning of college-level writing, but phenomenological methodology provided me useful ways to bring to life their attempts at meaning making.

Research Questions

I explored two research questions. The first was 1) *What narratives, or stories, do freshman composition students have about themselves as developing writers upon entering and exiting a college-level writing course?* This question focused on finding narratives that were actually there but hidden from plain view. Knowledge of these narratives as the overall "lived experience" (van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 1998) of my writing students was intended to help me

understand how comp students made sense of the writing process through what we did in the classroom. My second research question was 2) *How do freshman composition students experience collaborative learning as part of these ongoing narratives?* This question addressed a second aspect of my theory. It focused on how CL, as combined with other methods of teaching and learning, was experienced in context of these unfolding classroom stories. Even as I conjectured that there was a connection between CL and student narratives, I was also curious to know how/if individual narratives unfolded a larger narrative that could hold for the entire class.

This primary purpose of this action research study was to generate useful, practical knowledge (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) intended for me to understand better what we do in the writing classroom and therefore to improve my teaching practice. Herr and Anderson (2002) have described this kind of research as “insider action research” (p. 31). Insider action research allows me to inquire into what goes on in my practice in real time. The information it reveals is immediately relevant to improving my own practice and perhaps even to others who are interested in exploring how they may improve their own practices.

The research process required a first-person stepping back from my practice to see myself in the act of influencing it. In keeping with the spirit of action research, I gathered relevant information as it arose, analyzed it, theorized about what it might mean, and made some decisions about how I may best improve my practice—all without having to pretend that I do not actually influence it. In contrast to action research, traditional, positivist methodology that seeks to separate the researcher from her practice does not yield results that capture the same sense of immediacy or participant intimacy. On the basis of my re-theorizing after analysis of my findings, I chose a course of action directly informed by this research.

Participant Selection

My own students in PSTCC's Hardin Valley Campus, English 1010 Freshman Composition, section P43, were the participants in this study. During the first two weeks of September, 2007, I informed all students in this class section that I planned to study some aspects of my teaching practice that term. I told them that they would have the option at semester's end to voluntarily and anonymously permit their journal entries and entrance and exit interview transcripts to be included as data for the study. I also told them that my use of volunteer students' data for research purposes would not commence until after grades were posted, so that their decision to participate or not in no way influenced their grade for the class. I reassured them that no special class-related requirements would be imposed on anyone enrolled in the course, whether or not they eventually agreed to have their data included in the study. I responded at that time to questions that students asked about the study, and I made sure to tell students I did not want them to identify themselves to me as volunteers or non-volunteers at any point during the semester. I reiterated that I would not know who agreed to participate until after grades were turned in.

During the last week of classes in December, 2007, my department head and I met with my students during a regular class period. I re-apprised the students of the study in more detail and briefly explained its purpose and methodology. I then said that the department head would now ask for volunteers to participate in the study and that I would not know the names of the volunteers until after grades had been submitted. I left the room. In my absence, the department head assured the students that their grades would not be affected by whether or not they volunteered for the study. She distributed consent forms to all students, not just those who were

going to participate, and described the contents of the form. She fielded any questions the students had. After she was confident that students understood the consent form, she asked those who agreed to permit their course materials to be used in the study to sign their form; others who did not want to be in the study did not have to sign it. She collected all forms from all students and returned to her office to make copies of the signed forms. She returned the copies to the students. The department head stored the original consent forms in her office and did not reveal the names of the volunteer participants to me until after I turned in final grades.

Based on recommendations from Thomas and Pollio (2002), I had previously determined that I should gather data from six to twelve participants. Citing Morse (1994) and Ray (1994), Thomas and Pollio (2002) have noted “an appropriate sample size for phenomenological research can range from six to twelve persons” because saturation tends to occur after that point (p. 31). I decided beforehand that my department head would randomly choose the names of twelve of those who agreed to participate because fewer would not have provided enough data for a meaningful collection and more would have made for unwieldy data analysis. After grades were turned in for the semester, the department head randomly selected twelve names out of the total pool of volunteers as follows: Names of all volunteers in the pool were entered on slips of paper. The slips of paper were folded and placed in an open box. The department head then conducted a blind draw of twelve names from the box.

Data Collection

I employed the collection of qualitative data from audio taped entrance and exit phenomenological interviews conducted in the manner suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002). As necessary, I also pulled relevant examples from student journal entries that highlighted what

emerged in the interviews. I rounded out my data collection by examining my typed researcher field notes (kept in the manner suggested by Bogden and Biklen, 2007). My overall goal in data collection was to gather a deep and rich amount of information to be subjected to thematic analysis once the final participants were chosen for analysis. Prior to any data collection, I sought IRB approval from both UTK and PSTCC for this study.

Bracketing Interview

Before conducting any of the phenomenological interviews, I explored my own assumptions as researcher through participating in a bracketing interview conducted by a UTK Educational Psychology professor in the manner suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002), following the tradition of Husserl (1931). Listening to the playback of this interview before meeting with students was very useful in that I was reminded that I carried with me certain biases and fears about engaging in the research process. I re-examined the text from this interview later in the research process when I re-theorized on my findings.

Student Interviews

After I had participated in and initially examined my own bracketing interview, I felt ready to engage in student entrance and exit interviews. Entrance and exit interviews are typical ways of conferencing with comp students about their writing. It is always the instructor's prerogative to tape these for professional, reflective purposes. The interviews took place in my office on the Hardin Valley campus of Pellissippi State Technical Community College at an agreed-upon time. Interviews followed Thomas and Pollio's (2002, pp. 26-30) suggested guidelines for conducting a phenomenological interview.

During the first two weeks of September, 2007, I met with each student for a brief, up to

fifteen-minute audio-taped interview with a key open-ended phenomenological question and phenomenological prompts. Before the interview taping began, I told the student that the tape would be used for instructor reflection and also possibly for research purposes, depending upon whether or not that student gave his/her anonymous permission at the end of the course after grades were turned in. Either way, the tapes would be destroyed after use.

I opened each entrance interview with icebreaker, phatic speech (e.g. “Tell me a little about yourself”) and continued naturally to a key phenomenological question--“How would you describe yourself as a writer entering this course?” which addressed my first research question. I chose this focused question instead of a traditional, open-ended phenomenological question like “What was your experience in class this semester?” because the nature of my first research question focused squarely on a certain aspect of their experience—their view of themselves as writers. As necessary, I used additional probing questions to deepen the conversation on topics related to the key question. After each student answered the key question and related prompts, I turned off the tape recorder. When the student left, I made notations in my field notes about the interview process.

I conducted the exit interviews in my office during the last week of classes in December, 2007. I met with each remaining student for an approximately fifteen to twenty minute audio taped, exit interview. The second interview proceeded in the manner of the first interview. It initially focused on a similar key phenomenological question to that asked in the entrance interview: “How would you describe yourself as a writer exiting this course?” In order to gather data for my second research question, I then asked another key phenomenological question: “What stood out for you this semester about this course?” followed by a third: “What was your

experience with collaborative learning this semester in this course?” The second key question was a broad one that I felt was necessary to capture their entire experience. The last question insured that I could gather specific data related to my second research question about student experience of CL. After a student answered these three questions, I would turn off the tape recorder, say goodbye, and record my impressions of the interview in my field notes.

Only interview data of twelve volunteering students was examined and used for the project. All audio tapes of volunteer and non-volunteers have been destroyed as of the writing of this dissertation.

Student Writing Journals

Course requirements stated that all students keep a typed writer’s journal in order to brainstorm ideas and muse about their understanding of class readings. In this, they also responded to weekly open-ended, phenomenological questions about what and how they were learning about the writing process. A typical question was, “What stood out for you this week in this writing class?” For additional data, I used participant journal entries as examples illuminating and adding depth to themes that arose in entrance/exit interview data. Only sections of journals of those students who consented to participate in the study were used as supplementary data.

Field Notes

Based on my classroom experiences with my students, I kept typed, reflexive field notes throughout the semester in the manner suggested by Bogden and Biklen (2007). These included an account of what happened during each session, my own subjective, personal reflections on what I saw as emerging student narratives, and reflections on our classroom CL sessions—

information addressing both research questions.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

To analyze interview data, I implemented an eight-step thematic analysis technique used in similar studies (e.g. Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997) using phenomenological data of lived experience. People who study phenomena, phenomenologists, seek “to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” and “believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available to each of us through interacting with others, and that it is the meaning of our experiences that constitutes reality” (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 23).

Interviews were transcribed and subjected to analysis that, on a continuous basis, related parts of the data text to the whole of the text. The process followed eight steps as recommended by Thomas and Pollio (2002). I did the following:

- 1) read/reread transcripts for what stood out as significant
- 2) generated meaning units related to significant data
- 3) looked for recurring response patterns
- 4) reread transcripts for initial themes (relating parts of the transcript to the whole)
- 5) read journals for highlighting examples
- 6) developed and validated global themes by rechecking if they were indeed in transcripts and supported by journal entries
- 7) developed thematic metaphors out of recurring language patterns
- 8) presented the initial structure of findings to interpretive research group members

I took Thomas & Pollio’s (2002) analysis method a bit further with an in-depth look at

metaphors. I did this because arriving at only themes did not seem to point sufficiently to the essence of student narratives and what they could mean. Specifically, I worked with Steger's (2007) method, a systematic plan for drawing out individual metaphors from group settings.

The first step in Steger's method is "Metaphor Identification and Selection," which involves careful reading and rereading of the text. Step 2 is "General Metaphor Analysis," which involves applying up to six ways of testing the reliability of a metaphor: applying it to comparison words, associations, dimensions, categories, concepts, and idioms. The final step in Steger's method is "Text-Immanent Metaphor Analysis," which involves returning to the original interview transcript to reconnect the metaphor to its spoken context. Finally, Steger emphasized the wisdom of the researcher taking up to five additional, analytical measures: referring to her own interview notes, prioritizing emerging metaphorical interpretations in light of the interviewee's logic rather than only the researcher's, using a back-and-forth consideration of the text vs. the researcher's metaphorical interpretation, trusting the creative process oneself to be both "a skilled manual worker and an artist" while interpreting metaphors (p. 10), and subjecting the final metaphorical analysis to the critical eye of colleagues in order to validate findings. Following this method to augment Thomas & Pollio (2002) enriched my overall data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Positioning

Through following the suggestions for doing a first-person phenomenological action research study on my own practice, I entered this project by unearthing and examining my assumptions in a bracketing interview. I positioned myself as researcher both inside and outside my practice--subject to outside review and evaluation-- in order to obtain a description of events

as they truly happened. The findings of this research, through my adherence to the rigor of phenomenological analysis, became a factor in my decision making about my practice.

As the researcher, my contribution to the research setting does not have to be a negative factor affecting its validity (Creswell, 1994). But I also realized that I needed to account for some other ethical necessities in my overall design. According to Reason, “Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing” (1994, p. 327). In short, largely through my attitude toward and experience teaching comp, I influenced what I researched. For instance, I should note that I have been teaching freshman composition since 1999, and it is a class that I enjoy teaching because the students and I usually form a cohesive learning community around writing papers and reading texts. This perspective is a bias that I brought into this research experience. I also tended to believe before data gathering that the students whose narratives would reveal the most transformation at the end of the course about how they perceived themselves as writers would be the ones who were also highly contributory members of our CL conversations. I was additionally biased in my classroom pedagogy toward privileging conversation over silence. I tended to encourage a lively, talkative classroom and may have over-facilitated the comments of talkative students rather than focused expertly on drawing out the quiet ones. Accounting for biases like these and my positioning as researcher is a very important part of taking responsibility for the validity of the research process.

Other Considerations

As previously mentioned, I requested human subject research (IRB) approval from both UTK and PSTCC to conduct research on my practice within this student population as well as sought informed consent from the students themselves for their individual participation. With

that said, I would like to re-emphasize that agreement to participate in the study was anonymous and optional. Although participants were my students, this research was not *on* my students. It was *on my practice*. I took great care to assure all students that their assessment would not be influenced in any way by their participation or lack of participation in the study. I did not offer any incentives or payments for participation in the research. All students in the class, regardless of their choice to take part of the study, experienced entrance and exit interviews and submitted a writer's journal. I utilized data from consenting participants only. When interpreting data, I did not use any identifying information about the students in my reporting. I assigned pseudonyms of S1, S2, S3, etc. to taped interviews and my analysis to protect participant anonymity.

To provide even further protection, I observed several other measures. The transcriptionist hired to transcribe the audio taped recordings as well as members of the interpretive research group used for feedback on analysis were required to sign an agreement to keep data confidential. I kept data and consent forms securely stored in a locked cabinet in my office in McWherter 341, Hardin Valley Campus of Pellissippi State. I kept electronic data in a password-protected file in my computer at Pellissippi State. The data sources, including transcripts, tapes, and other forms of data used in the analysis will be destroyed upon the completion of the study. Consent forms will be stored for three years following the study.

To further establish quality after reconstructive analysis, I asked an outside party to review the strengths and weaknesses of my study (Creswell, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Some of the questions addressed by the audit included the following:

- 1) Were the findings grounded in the data?
- 2) Were inferences logical?

- 3) Were the themes/metaphors appropriate?
- 4) Can inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified?
- 5) What is the degree of researcher bias?
- 6) What strategies are used for increasing credibility? (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988)

Feedback from this audit helped me discover several places where I needed to provide further clarification for my readers. For instance, one major clarification was to relate in more detail in the Findings section on how Steger's (2007) analysis method fit into the Thomas & Pollio (2002) step-wise approach to thematic analysis. Another led to my adding further details about how I came to choose certain themes and metaphors, emphasizing how I always went back to the actual words of the students themselves so that I could be sure they were arising from their lived experiences in the appropriate context. In sum, the review encouraged me to take into greater consideration how clearly I was relating my ideas. I am confident that making these changes bolstered the overall rigor of my action research study.

CHAPTER V:

Findings

Here, I present my findings for each research question in turn. The first research question was 1) *What narratives, or stories, do freshman composition students have about themselves as developing writers upon entering and exiting a college-level writing course?* The second research question was 2) *How do freshman composition students experience collaborative learning as part of these ongoing narratives?*

Research Question #1: Entrance Themes

Five narrative themes emerged from the key phenomenological entrance interview question, “How would you describe yourself as a writer entering this course?” These themes were the following: 1) unmotivated, 2) frustrated, 3) inexperienced/fearful, 4) formerly confused/presently hopeful, and 5) confident/creative. Upon further examination of these themes, I classified them into one of two different organizing narratives of how entering students described themselves as writers. These were a 1) Narrative of Difficulty and a 2) Narrative of Possibility.

Narrative of Difficulty

Three of the five themes from entering students could be grouped into a Narrative of Difficulty. They arose from entering students who described themselves as writers rather negatively in that they were 1) unmotivated 2) frustrated or 3) inexperienced/fearful.

Unmotivated. Students expressing lack of motivation as writers admitted to having taken “the easy way out” in high school and having endured non-engaging English classes. They also saw English classes as a sort of necessary evil:

(S2): *I see myself as not very motivated to write well. I mean, it was very easy in high school to just get by with minimal effort. I make a lot mistakes with grammar, which makes me behind the good writers, I guess. Generally, I find English classes pretty boring, but I have to take them.*

These same students saw themselves as average performers:

(S8) *I have always done pretty average work. My grades were decent on writing assignments. I think my writing is kinda boring and straight to the point.*

Frustrated. The previous theme was closely related to a second theme some entering students had about themselves as writers: frustration. This theme was tinged with disappointment and dread about the prospect of taking yet another writing course. Students expressing this theme shared specific obstacles as the source of their frustration:

(S10): *English, to me, is that subject that didn't appeal to me or come easy at all. I have experienced many different teachers, but I feel the one teacher has damaged my ability to write by not allowing me to have an opinion. I became very frustrated and (from) then on tried to change myself to fit her. Since then I have yet to find my ability to write again.*

(S11): *I am over having to write for school; it's a dead-end thing for me. In fact, I used to like to write, but as I got older my writing changed. It was no longer something I did just when I was bored or as a fun alternative to homework. It had BECOME my homework, and I began to despise having to do it. (student's emphasis)*

Interestingly, frustrated writers tended to blame others or institutional practices in general for their difficulty with or dislike of writing.

Inexperienced/fearful. The last theme that arose for entering writers as a Narrative of

Difficulty involved two strong, intertwining sentiments: awareness of how limited some students felt their exposure had been to academic writing and fear of the unknown in light of that self-perceived limitation. These fears were fueled by the self-perception they were outsiders to higher education:

(S1): *I would say that I am a bit timid about writing. After all, it's been 25 years since I had any real writing assignments in a school environment. I suppose I need to deal with the panic reaction I have when first faced with an assignment.*

(S3) *Prior to [this class] my actual writing was minimal. I have not attended school in many years so, the only type of "writing" I completed was simple accounting entries in the workplace. I am not sure I am ready for this.*

(S4) *I would call myself an infant when it comes to writing. I haven't done much of it, and that might be a problem in this class.*

(S9): *I don't consider myself a writer at all. The one word that describes me as a writer is "inexperienced." Yes, I know I have been writing over twelve years, but I was never really good at it. Writing has never been my strong suit. I am concerned about that.*

Narrative of Possibility

Other students who entered the course described themselves as writers in more positive terms. I classified these more positive themes as part of a Narrative of Possibility. Two major themes arose from these entrance interviews: 1) formerly confused/presently hopeful and 2) confident/creative.

Formerly confused/presently hopeful. Some students admitted previous confusion over their academic writing performance but emphasized how ready they now were to learn to write

better in the college setting:

(S5): *I am a very inexperienced, awkward writer, but I am eager to learn. I have many, usually outlandish, ideas. I have wonderful thoughts that get jumbled and disoriented when I put them on paper. I see myself growing in a positive environment with input from multiple sources.*

(S6): *Blank. Blank would be a perfect word to describe my life as a writer. As far as writing it out on paper, well, that is where I have a little problem. Hopefully, I will figure all that out.*

Thus, students expressing this theme shared narratives expressing hopefulness that they could start anew and finally understand this enigma called academic writing.

Confident/ creative. The other, rather positive theme in this narrative category was the expression of confidence with writing, especially creative writing. Some students simply loved to write and identified with themselves as writers although not necessarily in an academic context. An added feature of this final theme was the expression of the pleasure certain entering students derived from the act of writing:

(S7): *I enjoy writing whenever I can. I write short stories that tend to reflect on some point in my life. My persuading skills are very good, too.*

(S12): *I consider myself an actual poet. I love writing. It is one of the ways I express myself best.*

Research Question #1: Exit Themes

Having gained some idea of entering students' narratives as writers, I then turned my attention to themes arising from how students described themselves as writers exiting the course.

This information further addressed my first research question. Six themes emerged from the key phenomenological exit interview question: “How would you describe yourself as a writer exiting this course?” These themes were the following: 1) competent/experienced, 2) less fearful, 3) self-aware, 4) self/other aware, 5) stuck, and 6) integrated. I grouped these six themes into three organizing narratives. These narratives were the following: 1) Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth 2) Narrative of Awareness and 3) Narrative of Inertia or Change.

Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth

Upon exiting the course, some students shared that as writers they were now felt 1) competent/experienced and 2) less fearful. These themes revealed that these students had grown in competency through their exposure to academic writing or matured emotionally as less fearful writers. I classified these as Narratives of Technical/Emotional Growth to depict two kinds of growth derived from exposure to new writing experiences.

Competent/experienced. Certain students indicated how many new and valuable writing experiences they had had that semester. For them, these cumulative experiences translated into a self-perception that they had achieved greater competency as academic writers. Students expressing this theme seemed genuinely enthusiastic about their increased ability and gained experiences:

(S6): *I think I am improving as a writer and have learned a whole lot about exploring different angles and approaches to writing a paper.*

(S9): *I see myself as a better writer than at the beginning of the semester. At first I believed that I was inexperienced, but I really do think that my writing ability has improved from everything we have done.*

Less fearful. This was a second, related theme that conveyed a similar enthusiasm, but one geared more toward an emotional perception shift in relation to the task of academic writing. Students expressing this second theme previously experienced trepidation about the task of academic writing. When the class was over, their fears had been allayed and their writing identities validated:

(S1): *I feel prepared. I'm not afraid anymore.*

(S3): *At the beginning of this class, I was really concerned as to how I was going to write because I feel that I bring something different to the table since I have been outside of school for many years and had been more hands on in the work field for so long. No, I feel. . . less intimidated now. You don't have to use words twenty letters long and quote everything including the dictionary to make a paper. I guess I have learned that maybe some of my expressions or "way of words" are logical and powerful in their own way.*

Narrative of Awareness

Other exiting students emphasized that they felt more 1) self aware or 2) self/other aware as writers. Their words indicated that they had undergone a sort of discovery process about themselves as writers. Thus, I classified both types of discoveries under Narrative of Awareness.

Self-aware. The self-awareness theme arose from exit interview comments that specifically mentioned newly perceived writing strengths and weaknesses. These students were much more aware of their habits as writers:

(S1): *I've learned that hitting the wall with a project is not necessarily a bad thing. I have also learned to stop and reflect on what I've already written and to spend a little bit of time getting in touch with my feelings about it, as well as my thoughts about what I've*

written. *I stop and look at a project I am doing. . .and just feel it!*

(S4): *I am still not very good at academic writing. Writing is not something that just flows for me, and I think after this semester I have found out why. When I am writing a paper and someone gives me a topic, I usually don't know very much about it. So here I am faced with learning about this thing I don't know about and writing a paper. Technically, it shouldn't be too hard because you just find some sources and put them together to formulate it in to a paper, but it is not that easy for me. Now, I would say, however, that I got . . . better as the semester rolled by.*

Self/other aware. Some exiting students took their awareness comments one step further. They emphasized that they were not only better aware of writing strengths and weaknesses, but also of others in general, due to influential interpersonal experiences in the class. Sometimes this “other awareness” aspect expressed genuine astonishment:

(S7): *I found myself wanting to hear others' opinions on the things we dialogued about. I think I became a better listener as well as a better writer.*

(S9): *[I learned] that you can pretty much say whatever you want to say on paper or in person, however you want to say it, if you are sensitive to others. I loved this class, and I learned a lot about writing and people in general.*

(S11): *[The class] made me feel like I was in a room full of Christmas bulbs—everyone was so bright—they were excited about what they were doing—and they were into it!*

Narrative of Inertia or Change

Finally, some exiting student writers' comments yielded themes of being 1) stuck or 2) integrated. Students expressing these themes felt either that they simply could not overcome their

own writing demons no matter how hard they tried or that something had “clicked” for them about the writing process, elevating academic writing to an extremely gratifying act. Either way, both themes reflected extremes: great positive change or stagnation. Thus, I grouped these in an organizing Narrative of Inertia or Change.

Stuck. The stuck theme expressed no change in self-perceived writing ability due to continued, abundant grammatical/mechanical issues. This theme conveyed that these students had more or less given up on success as writers in the course:

(S10): *It sounds bad, but I am doing about the same. I mean, yeah, I can write, but all the grammar and that stuff is kind of overlooking everything so it really doesn't matter if I can write good; it's all the little, technical stuff.*

Integrated. In contrast, the integration theme communicated that some students had made profound personal breakthroughs as writers. This theme, peppered with much metaphor, revealed a felt appreciation of the art of writing:

(S1): *I am learning a lot about how to pay attention to my inner voice. . . I now see writing very much as an art form. It can be dull, mundane, and forgettable, or it can be unsettling and attention grabbing, even to the point of evoking emotion. Rich, descriptive words serve as the author's color palette, and sometimes the author can use curse words, shocking situations, or even disgusting subject matters to apply texture. I learned what my tools are; I learned how to use them and how to apply them.*

Thus, I found that six themes arose from student descriptions of themselves as writers exiting the course. I grouped these themes into three organizing exit narratives that stood in contrast to the two organizing entrance narratives.

Research Question #1: Metaphorical Analysis

Entrance Metaphors

As I re-read narrative patterns derived from student entrance interviews, I found that entering students were split in their expectations of success or failure. Intrigued, I re-analyzed each participant interview using Steger's (2007) method. I applied his three suggested steps of analysis ("Metaphor Selection and Identification," "General Metaphor Analysis," and "Text-imminent Metaphor Analysis"), including as many of his "tests" for the metaphor as seemed relevant. Four character metaphors arose from recurring language patterns that entering students used to describe themselves as writers. These were the following: 1) "Cool Hand Luke" 2) Wounded 3) Wanderer and 4) Artist. I now provide a thumbnail sketch of each metaphor, referring in detail to how I applied Steger's method.

"Cool Hand Luke". I patterned this character metaphor after the Paul Newman film character, who played a good-natured, complacent, yet aloof prisoner when he had to, but who, in reality, was a beleaguered individual awaiting the next opportunity to escape. Evidencing these characteristics, several students described themselves as writers in a very detached manner. They communicated a lack of care about academic writing or a history of cheating the system as writers:

(S2): *I didn't really pay attention in English class. They didn't flow for me, and I made C's and stuff by cheating. So I got by somehow.*

The hallmark of these writers was apparent heedlessness. During interviews, they exhibited an aloof air and did not make very much eye contact with me as interviewer. I was intrigued by how the metaphor of "just coasting along" seemed to repeat itself in several ways. Bumps in the road for these students were tantamount to really having to work for a good grade. They were also

rather unabashed about their previous lackluster performance. Since the metaphor of needing to “flow” emerged, I got the impression that they desired, above all, to continue taking an easy ride. Simultaneously, their surprising level of self-disclosure about having done just that in high school writing classes impressed me with its sense of impunity. At first, I classified these students as *Coasters*. But I wasn’t sure if I had arrived at the right word; it just wasn’t descriptive enough.

When I put their interview transcripts aside, additional comparative metaphors that came to mind seemed too pejorative. Archetypal character designations like the Fool or Harlequin did not carry the right level of indifference about slack work habits. Plus, these terms implied that the student writers were either jokesters or imbeciles, which they were neither. It was important to pick a character metaphor that captured their self-perception as writers and nothing more. I determined that some more attention to student background and biography would help me arrive at the correct metaphor.

I returned to the transcripts themselves for further clarification. For instance, in his entrance interview, S2 revealed that he always felt behind in writing class due to feeling somewhat out of step with others when it came to grammatical/mechanical skill: *I make a lot mistakes with grammar, which makes me behind the good writers, I guess*. It was interesting that he, plus other students expressing a similar lack of motivation, reported his situation as if it had occurred outside of his control. Phrases below like, “The teachers were saying” showed that the student did not accept full responsibility for his performance. The detachment belied more than what was said. I wrote in my field notes that S2 did not make any eye contact with me the entire time he spoke about himself; he was in his own world. Moreover, S2 used dismissive hand gestures in the following segment; he waved off the phrases “took the heat off,” “doesn’t work for me,” and “off on something else”:

(S2): *Around my sophomore and junior year, my teachers were saying I was really behind and that I needed to catch up as hard as I could. It was better, I guess, my last year or so because we were reading instead of writing so much. Took the heat off. So I am a little behind in writing. . . . See, it's the flow that trips me up. Like making my paragraphs kind of come together, like having a middle point. That really doesn't work for me because all of a sudden I find I'm off on something else. There's too much to think about.*

On the one hand, this student was rather disassociated from his performance as a writer. After the acknowledgement that he was a little behind, he tried to explain why. S2 seemed to want to feel like he was capable, like he could be an adept writer. On the other hand, it did not seem like he wanted to fully try to make this happen. He wrote off the prospect of making further effort with a statement of why writing doesn't "work" for him. In examining the transcripts that evinced this behavior, one thing became clear: an interest in freedom. Their detached accounts of themselves as writers, combined with their almost flippant level of self disclosure, made me see these entering writers as students who valued, above all else, their independence. Thus, I assigned students like S2 as a "Cool Hand Luke."

Wounded. There were also students whose pride and confidence had been wounded by frustrations in previous writing classes. As mentioned in the thematic analysis, S10 wore her feelings about how damaged she was from her previous English class. I noticed words like "hit" and "jumped" as well as phrases like "nothing I did was up to standards" and "nothing was good enough." These words revealed someone who was in some pain about the topic of writing. The level of antagonism S10 expressed about previous teachers stood in stark contrast to the general question about how she experienced herself as a writer. The interview question called forth a

resentful, emotionally charged response. It was evident that the dignity of students like S10 had been injured by these previous experiences, so I considered metaphors that captured a state of writerly dis-ease:

(S10): *My sophomore year, I was hit with a teacher with a different perspective on things and then nothing I did was up to standards and nothing was good enough to be “right”. . . I have a lot of ideas and opinions but[am] less likely to express them because I feel as if I will be jumped on or extremely argued with that my opinion is wrong.*

I first arrived at *The Patient* to indicate those whose sense of themselves as writers was in a delicate, rehabilitating state. But here I kept bumping up against how S10’s grasp of grammar and mechanics was not up to academic standards and how angry she seemed that this was the case. I did not get any indication that students sharing this resentment were desperate to change their situation by finding out more about their academic deficiencies. Instead of hoping for rehabilitation, their position was defensive, defiant.

I then became resistant to using a metaphor that signified a state of sickness, so I started to think about alternative metaphors that might work. After all, *Patient* belongs to the idiom of healthcare, so perhaps there was another, more appropriate metaphor. *Challenged* came to mind, but it really didn’t capture the situation. I finally arrived at *Wounded*, because this metaphor offered connotations of having soldiered forth in writing classes (without sufficient ammunition in grammar and mechanics), having been injured in battle, and having entered into a defensive posture. The injury, however, was freshly beneath the surface and would possibly stain everything the student did in the course.

I reviewed this new metaphor in terms of the data. I saw then that *Wounded* was a much

better overall choice, especially because students used words charged with violence to describe how they were injured. “Hit,” “struck,” “stunned” all attested to having received wounds. To make sure, I went back to the “getting-to-know-you” parts of our interviews and reviewed how students shared lingering distress over their high school English experiences. These experiences were already part of their academic biography, and they seemed deeply embedded in the student’s writerly self-concept rather than just an interview anomaly for dramatic effect.

Wanderer. There were also entering students who expressed anxiety over their previous writing experiences without anger or resentment. These students emphasized either their lack of writing experience or former confusion illuminated by hope to do better. Therefore these students were represented in both kinds of entrance narratives based on which sentiment was stronger: their inexperience or their hopefulness. These students genuinely wanted to understand academic writing, and their words reflected their earnestness.

(S4): *Writing for me is like the quest for the Holy Grail. Writing sometimes is scary because sometimes teachers are more concerned about page numbers than the writing itself. I hate going back and rereading and editing and all that—it drives me crazy. But you have to. This is a quest like others—it has its own obstacles to tackle. You always have to push yourself.*

My initial reaction to these writers was to pick up on the obvious quest metaphor and to dub them with as a *Knight*. But as I further examined these students’ comments about how they planned to go about questing in the writing classroom, I saw that they really did not have sufficient knowledge to attain their grail. Their quest was not that of an already-initiated, well-bred knight like Lancelot or Gawain from the Arthurian legends. Instead, their notion of the quest

was more like Percival's (in Wolfram von Eschenbach's version of the grail legends), who, because he suffered from a sketchy education, self-absorption and youthful ignorance, spent many years meandering aimlessly in search of the grail before he eventually attained it. I think of Percival's journey as less of a knight's and more of a wanderer's. His heart was pure, however, so achieving the grail was a possibility. These students seemed like academic wanderers with good intentions.

When I returned to the students' actual words, additional language from journal entries reinforced my association writers as searching to satisfy a deep desire:

(S4): I am still growing, trying to feed by hunger and desire to become a better writer. It is hard. I have to say it is always a challenge, but at the same time, it is rewarding when you can sit back and say, 'I wrote this,' and it actually makes sense and other read it and approve it. I feel I have a long way to go before saying I am a good writer, though.

There was a certain yearning here. Entries like these also contained an impressive determination. I also noticed that these *Wanderer* writers either slightly overemphasized their inexperience or their hopefulness. This later became an important distinction. Either way, these entering students were eager to find what they were searching for, but for the time being, they were lost. Thus, I arrived at the designation *Wanderer* to capture their situation.

Artist. There were also those student writers who were already comfortable with the act of writing through previous successes with creative writing and/or journaling. These students did not impress me with their current writing ability; instead, they struck me with their unqualified identification with themselves as people who derive satisfaction from writing. In fact, their choice of imagery was sometimes amusing because they took certain risks with their writing that revealed

inexperience with words despite confidence as self-perceived artists:

(S12): *I am a will-be poet. I am a lot more comfortable with creative writing than I am academic writing. Sometimes I can't stop. I'd say that writing is like vomit of the mind into the hand. My stomach-mind is one sick puppy. It never stops throwing up.*

I reflected further. The *Artist* metaphor was a self-perception and not a fact. Although these students identified with the fantasy of themselves as artist-writers, they also acknowledged that their strength was in non-academic forms of writing. I toyed around briefly with the metaphor, *Diva*, because these students tended to describe their writing in rather grandiose terms, but this metaphor became too gender specific and carried connotations of someone who took criticism poorly. I needed to return to the transcripts to make a final decision.

When I did, I was reassured that the biographical information these students shared revealed a long-held identification with themselves as talented writers:

(S12): *My first grade teacher noticed that I had an appetite for literature. She took the liberty to put me into an accelerated reading program. I suppose that's where my imagination started coming to me from.*

I decided to bank on this self-perception. Thus, based on their biographical statements as they entered the course, I resettled on *Artist* as it captured entering writers who were already confident with their raw talent, whether it was there or not.

Exit Metaphors

I conducted a similar metaphorical analysis with exit interview data. After arriving at pre-course character metaphors for how students saw themselves as writers, I was prepared for their designations to remain static. However, upon reevaluation of their exit interviews, I saw that

change occurred in almost all cases. Again, using Steger's method, I found that five character metaphors emerged from figurative language exiting students used about themselves as writers. These were the following: 1) Apprentice 2) Companion 3) Prisoner 4) Veteran and 5) Alchemist.

Apprentice. At course's end, several students expressed feeling more in control of their writing ability. They had learned enough about writing and the writing process to perceive some of their writing strengths and weaknesses. I saw these students as having achieved some level of self-discovery that positioned them as now being able to recognize what passed for academic writing, even when they themselves still missed the mark at times. These students seemed more self-possessed, more at peace, about what they could accomplish as college writers:

(S2): *I see my mistakes. I've got to start revising and proofreading and reading aloud consistently because I'll catch most of my errors before I turn in a paper.*

I began to think of these exiting students in terms of the metaphor, *Judge*, because they had learned enough about themselves as writers to make better decisions about what good writing could be. In order to test the *Judge* metaphor, I made comparisons with other words that carried a similar combination of skill improvement and newfound self-awareness. My eventual problem with *Judge* was that judges, thanks to their earned ability to submit critical opinions, wind up affecting others through their decisions. These students experienced themselves as better masters of their own domain as writers, not others'. In fact, they really did not even mention the reality of others at all in their reflections. Furthermore, their command of language was adequate but not exceptional, as a judge's should be. The big difference for these students was that they seemed to have shaken off their previous laziness, lack of experience, confusion, etc. and to have entered into a more serious relationship with academic writing. Their freshman comp experiences had tested

them. So, at this level of the analysis, I leaned more toward *Initiate* than *Judge*.

Reflecting even further, I was struck with how often these students indicated specific examples of what they could and could not do in their writing now they had finished the course. These examples were nowhere to be seen in their entrance interviews. They seemed to know their habits better. But something was still missing because their sense of competency really didn't qualify them for a powerful metaphor like *Initiate*.

Their overall emphasis on what they had started learning about themselves as writers led me toward a third metaphorical possibility—*Apprentice*. I decided that this metaphor better captured students' initial success at self-discovery as writers. They were now indentured to the craft of writing, and they clearly had a long way to go:

(S5): *The most beneficial thing I have learned is how to research and research correctly.*

Do not put the entire paper off to the last night—it usually does not work out too well, and you end up doing more work than if you had done it correctly.

Indeed, they were tenderfoots in the process of writing self-discovery. There was not an emphasized awareness of how others contributed to their budding knowledge, but more of an early perception of their own abilities. Until they expanded this awareness to include others, I saw them as *Apprentice* student writers. For now, these students were learning and newly self-aware writers.

Companion. In contrast, there were also students who expressed the type of self-awareness stated above in *Apprentice* but who also emphasized how important others were in their journey toward that awareness. These students struck me as having derived more from the course than mere technical enhancement. They had grown appreciative of others' views and commented positively on class opportunities to interact with others. They saw others' input as invaluable to

their own development as writers.

(S5) *I loved being able to talk aloud in this class about what I was feeling, debating, and getting others' opinions—it was a new experience for me that really helped me put more support in my papers. I actually think that the other students in the class helped make all this “stick” more. I have never been able to express in class what I feel without being censored.*

I began thinking of these students as awakened writers, ready to help others, so I initially chose the metaphor *Counselor*. I considered the *Counselor* metaphor appropriate for students who had gained sufficient technical and interpersonal skills. But I soon realized that this was my imposition of a role beyond student writer. In addition, this metaphor pulled a great deal on the field of psychology, and it followed that its greatest meaning derived from that idiom. I then considered that *Mentor* would be a better choice, but reconsidered since that metaphor carried with a certain kind of hierarchical connotation. Mentors are role models who have journeyed far and lived to tell. These students weren't that far along the writing path. More and more, *Guide* seemed a better metaphor, less “initiated” than *Mentor*, and more on the level of students who had grown from their class experiences enough to also be aware of how others figure into the teaching and learning process.

A return to the transcripts showed that exiting students who exhibited *Guide* traits had emphasized revelatory awareness of others as vital to their learning. They also acknowledged their gained writing competency by contrasting their experiences in this class to previous class experiences. Since their appreciation for others set them apart from the *Apprentice*, who seemed to be working alone, an appropriate metaphor began to emerge that emphasized student peer

awareness. It became *Companion*, which captured the story of a student who gained writing competency from positive contact with other student writers. These exiting students perceived themselves as more competent writers who were self/other aware.

Prisoner. There were exiting students who expressed that their writing ability had not improved from when they had entered the course. These were students whose writerly self-perception had been injured from previous class experiences; they had entered this course with reservation and suspicion. In one exit interview, a student admitted that although she appreciated certain aspects of the present course, she felt that she had not improved as a writer. Her journal echoed this sentiment:

(S10): *It sounds bad, but I am doing about the same. I mean, yeah, I can write, but all the grammar and all that stuff is kind of overlooking everything to it really doesn't matter if I can write good, it's all the little technical stuff. I'm just stuck in a situation I can't get out of.*

She, and students like her, seemed a prisoner of lingering negative self-perceptions. As I reflected on the rather strong metaphor of *Prisoner*, I challenged myself to see this character metaphor in other ways. I tried out *Captive*, but this term did not carry with it the mental “bars” behind which these writers seemed to be looking at their situation. *Hostage* was also a metaphor I considered since students seemed to be kidnapped by their negative memories, but it implied that someone else, in particular, was responsible for their not feeling like anything had shifted by the end of the course. There was no evidence of blaming someone in exit interviews or journal entries, despite what these students may have shared in their entrance interviews.

I returned, in particular, to S10's account and reviewed some of her final statements in the

exit interview. In contrast to her more positive peers, she did not like activities that put her into contact with others. I noticed that others in this category expressed a similar preference for isolationism:

(S10): I'm just not a good writer, like I read something and then when I try to say it like real wordy or I don't say it good like I mean to say. I'm not good with grammar. . . and I do much better on my own. I do better knowing I am responsible for everything and not have to depend on anyone to understand anything or to get anything done. I feel when I'm by myself I learn more because I do know what is going on and take it upon myself to get it done without worrying about anyone else.

Thus, *Prisoner* seemed most consistent with exiting writers who had been indicted for insufficient writing skills and locked in the cell of a consistent, negative self-perception.

Veteran. In addition, there were exiting students who emphasized, above all, how much experience they had gained in academic writing during the course. Their consistent mentioning of gained experiences made me visualize them as having passed through a series of tests and come out on the other side unscathed. I saw them as initiated through their experiences into a new perception of their writing ability:

(S4): In the beginning of this course, I was majorly concerned with not having much experience with this type of writing. But now, I think I really have learned so many different ways I can get a point across. I've got more ammunition. If you had told me at the beginning of the course that I would feel this way at the end of it, I wouldn't have believed you because, well, I never felt that way before after an English course. I got through this okay even though I didn't know much going in.

After reconsidering the metaphor, *Initiate*, I chose *Knight* to capture their successful running of the writing gauntlet. The term *Initiate* carried with it a lot of literary heaviness having to do with risking death. It seemed too serious. The *Knight* is an archetypal character who is on a quest fueled by a higher ideal; his image captures the questing nature of how these students conquered their inexperience. One student had even stated previously that he was on a quest for the Holy Grail of writing well. He and others had more or less pledged themselves toward this goal. However, further reflection on *Knight* as an exit interview metaphor forced me to look deeper into how important *experience* was to the *Knight*. The Knight was not necessarily in search of experience. Something was missing.

I returned to the students' transcripts. Right away, the word "ammunition" from S4's interview caught my eye. I reconsidered his stance and others, like him, who emphasized experience. These students were, technically, farther along the writing path than *Apprentice* students. They were not only more competent academic writers now, but they also saw the value of their *experiences* as the very thing that gained them that competency. Thus, in the end, I opted for a metaphor that did not carry with it so much literary baggage, something that communicated in a clear way that these writers had survived their mission and were competent and seasoned by their experiences: *Veteran*.

Alchemist. One of the most surprising results of the exit interviews was that there were students who blossomed in their self-perception as writers and demonstrated significant technical gains by course's end. Their closing narratives delivered a combination of competency, self-awareness, other-awareness, and artistry. These student writers spoke and wrote about their experiences in a way revealing that they had found some sort of philosopher's stone to academic

writing. They turned words into gold:

(S1): I've learned how to enter into a writing assignment, write a bit, then back off and do some other things to let my mind renew. I let the page simmer awhile. During this period, I primarily "feel", or meditate on what I've written, if you will. Then I return to my experiment, and I throw those feelings on paper. I "think" about them as I work with them, see them there on the page. Something surprising always emerges. It's definitely a creative process. I actually enjoy it!

It was tempting to call these students *Artist*, but I chose the metaphor *Alchemist* instead because they emphasized following a writing process that transformed words into a satisfying creation. References to alchemy are laden with connotations of magic and the occult. Looking at the metaphor from the standpoint of what alchemists "do" was most important. They possess knowledge enabling them to turn base elements into finer material. I could not think of a better word for students who were able to, at the end of the course, integrate all they had learned that semester about academic writing and demonstrate both technical gain and personal growth.

Returning to the text for the last part of the analysis, I saw how consistently these students used artistic metaphors to explain the science of writing:

(S10): I learned what my tools are. I learned how to use them, how to apply them. I learned how to approach the canvas with creativity. I learned how to throw ideas on paper, organize them and see where the patterns are. I just start throwing paint on the canvas now.

Alchemists are at once scientists and artists who possess the secret to creation. In this course, their philosopher's stone could have been many things: a sheer willingness to learn in a

group with others, open-mindedness, or maybe an ability to overcome previous fears. What was most evident for me was that these students' final success involved an integration of self-awareness, other awareness, and knowledge and experience of an academic writing process that worked for them.

Research Question #1: Further Considerations

The last thing I did in my analysis of themes, organizing narratives, and metaphors related to my first research question was to trace what happened to student writers' stories from the beginning of the course to the end. I will discuss the significance of these findings in the next chapter—especially since they caused me to revise my original theory--, but for now, a recap is in order for how themes, narratives, and metaphors shifted.

Student writers entering the course were playing out either a Narrative of Difficulty or a Narrative of Possibility. Those with a Narrative of Difficulty were either a “*Cool Hand Luke*” or *Wounded* character working out the themes of lack of motivation, frustration, and inexperience/fear. Those playing out a Narrative of Possibility were either a *Wanderer* or *Artist* character working out the themes of former confusion/present hopefulness or confidence/creativity.

Students' themes, narratives, and character metaphors changed in surprising ways.

At the end of the course, the “*Cool Hand Luke*” writers were enjoying a state of learning and self-awareness; now *Apprentice* writers, they had transformed their Narrative of Difficulty into a Narrative of Awareness.

Furthermore, formerly *Wounded* student writers became one of three characters. Some *Wounded* writers transformed their Narratives of Difficulty into Narratives of Awareness by

gaining self-awareness or self/other awareness; they became *Apprentice* or *Companion* writers. Other *Wounded* writers played out a Narrative of Inertia or Change by describing themselves as stuck; they became *Prisoners*.

The *Wanderer* student writers also played out one of three possible narratives. First, several *Wanderers* became competent and self/other aware, *Companion* writers working a Narrative of Possibility into a Narrative of Awareness. Next, there were *Wanderers* who gained enough writing experiences to become competent, seasoned *Veterans* playing out a Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth. Other *Wanderers* transformed into *Alchemists*, integrated writers who ended the course in a Narrative of Inertia or Change.

Finally, the self-perceived *Artist* writers in a Narrative of Possibility gained enough self-awareness to settle into a more realistic notion of how to succeed in academic writing. They became *Apprentice* writers ending in a Narrative of Awareness.

Research Question #2: Thematic Analysis of What Stood Out

I then identified themes addressing my second research question, which was the following: *How do freshman composition students experience collaborative learning as part of these ongoing narratives?* To gather data for this second research question, I asked students two related exit interview questions. Analysis of responses to the exit interview question, “What stood out for you about the course?” yielded eight themes: 1) clarification, 2) idea generation, 3) reflection, 4) openness, 5) comfort, 6) diversity, 7) stimulation, and 8) unusualness. I grouped these eight themes into two meta-themes signifying what students thought stood out about the

course. These two meta-themes were 1) Dialogue and 2) Learning Environment. Since I was not dealing with characters in this particular analysis, I decided that a further, metaphorical analysis for this second research question was not appropriate.

Dialogue

Students emphasized that the class dialogues they engaged in led to 1) clarification, 2) idea generation, and 3) reflection.

Clarification. This theme about how dialogue stood out for students included rich descriptions of how our particular kind of classroom dialogue clarified student understanding:

(S2): *I definitely have progressed with putting my thoughts to paper. What made the difference was the verbal, honestly, just like talking and getting all kinds of thoughts out really cleared things up for me.*

(S1): *What stood out is that there really is a process to all this! Talking about issues and the act of writing itself made that clear.*

Idea generation. Another characteristic that stood out about class dialogues is that the free-flow of conversation made it easier to come up with good ideas to write about:

(S2): *It's kind of like you are in this set way of thinking and then someone says something outside the box you're in and you start taking on that thinking—in a different kind of concept—so you're just kind of going in all directions instead of staying in that one, old path.*

(S3): *We learned how to draw good ideas out of each other by simply asking questions. That was neat.*

(S9): *I tend to learn better when the students get to talk instead of hearing the teacher talk*

for an hour and half. In this class, it was like a conversation and it really helped put ideas in your head for writing.

(S11): *[The class] helped me see others' points of views and incorporate them into my writing.*

Reflection. A final characteristic of class dialogue that stood out for students is that hearing others' ideas allowed them to reflect deeper on the topics they wrote about. In doing so, they could mentally bounce their ideas off others'. Students reported that this shared reflection was a positive, valuable experience in that it helped them build writing confidence from knowing more clearly what to write about:

(S3): *Just to hear others' views and points of interest has allowed me to explore deeper in my brain how I really feel about the issues that we have discussed and written about.*

Sometimes students were philosophical about this aspect and its larger implications:

(S5): *To be able to talk and have the thoughts and ideas flow freely, to be able to evaluate my own opinions and others' helps me find out what I truly believe, to find out what I want and don't want. Who I am. Is that not the purpose of college? To figure out yourself and grow yourself into something that others want to be around, want to employ, want to be part of.*

(S9): *I love the dialogue in the class. I love listening to and, especially, reflecting on what other people have to say and what they think of a certain issue or of the readings. I don't always agree with what they say but I think that they say it in a respecting way, especially since you taught us some tips on how to do this.*

Learning Environment

A second meta-theme about what stood out about the class was the Learning Environment. It evinced five thematic aspects: 1) openness, 2) comfort, 3) diversity, 4) stimulation, and 5) unusualness.

Openness. Students appreciated that they had the freedom to explore controversial topics and field their questions about writing in an open forum:

(S3) Normally, classes don't have open dialogue for certain topics so you just kind of write what you think should be written. But if you are encouraged to be open and honest to matter what it is and nobody's sitting there pointing fingers or whatever, then the mentality you have when you write that paper is that you are more honest.

Comfort. Students reported that this learning environment helped them achieve a level of ease with one another and with the subject matter:

(S3): [In our class] you are able to project what you think so that you feel more comfortable with really digging deeper on your own feelings to put in your paper.

Diversity. Student comments also revealed that different points of view were key to that learning environment:

(S9): We have a diverse group of people with very different opinions. I enjoy hearing other people's outlooks on different subjects and everyone seems to respect each other.

Stimulation. Student comments emphasized that the learning environment helped them stay interested in what they were doing at the time in the classroom:

(S11): The more time we spent around each other in the circle that you would make with our desks—that helped because it was face to face and it was, you know, do something

about what you are saying, back it up. It made you think—you could feel the electricity in your brain just all over the place, you know?

Unusualness. Finally, students admitted that the learning environment was a new experience for them and that this figured positively into their experience:

(S9): Well, [the class] is a lot different than I thought an English class in college would be. This class is unlike any English class I have ever attended. I actually looked forward to this class. It was so different than high school. Here, we're allowed to talk out loud and give each other ideas. You taught us how to speak with one another in a non-argumentative way—one that is simply creative. That was really cool.

In sum, two meta-themes--Dialogue and Learning Environment--captured student experiences about what stood out for them about the course. Dialogue yielded three themes of 1) clarification, 2) idea generation, and 4) reflection. There were five Learning Environment themes including 1) openness, 2) comfort, 3) diversity, 4) stimulation, and 5) unusualness.

Research Question #2: Thematic Analysis of CL Experiences

To complete my thematic analysis for Research Question #2, I then analyzed responses to the exit interview question: “What was your experience with collaborative learning this semester in this course?” Four themes emerged from responses to this question. Students reported that CL provided 1) freedom of speech/voiced-ness 2) confidence 3) equality and 4) diverse perspectives. Again, because I was not dealing with characters in this particular thematic analysis, I determined that an additional metaphorical analysis was not necessary.

Freedom of Speech/Voiced-ness

Many students reported that participating in CL helped them gain a sense of freedom about what they could contribute verbally in a writing classroom. They appreciated the freedom to speak to one another and have their voice “count” as they exchanged ideas. Interestingly, student comments hinted at a connection between this acquired voice and greater ease with writing:

(S8): *When I entered the class, I mean, I felt kinda like I really didn't know what was going on out there—you know, I'm just another kid in the crowd—and then when you come in here, and you experience the freedom of [CL] you know, there's a kind of voice that rises up. It shows in the whole class. The class all kind of spoke out. The voice gives you, you know, a different view on our own writing, too. I can't explain it.*

(S10): *The thing that stands out to me the most [about CL] is the possibility of finding my inner voice in writing. I am sure that is possible with CL. I feel that when you actually find your voice your best writing comes from it.*

Confidence

The theme of increased confidence also arose from student comments on the CL experience.

(S3): *You were allowed to project what you think in class and then you could feel more confident with really digging deeper in your own feelings to put in your paper.*

(S11): *There is no doubt about it that dialoguing with everyone the way we did helped me believe more in the value of what I wanted to say on paper.*

Equality

Students emphasized that participating in CL helped *break down* the traditional barrier between teacher and students:

(S11): *What stood out about collaborative learning was when we would get in circles and discuss with each other rather than just having the teacher be above all. This helped me be more open 'cause I'm really shy. In a traditional classroom manner, the professor/teacher is lord of all things school-related and everything must be directed toward this Supreme Being. Today, a friend from work made the observation that the true changing from childhood to adulthood is when a student no longer imagines the teacher as being this perfect being incapable of error, and I think that this type of classroom structure truly helps pupils reach that state.*

Diverse Perspectives

Finally, student comments indicated that CL helped them with their writing because it gave them practice exploring diverse perspectives on the things they were going to write about. Students reported that CL participation encouraged them to consider a topic from multiple angles. This exploration helped them appreciate what each other had to say and find novel ways to write about those issues:

(S11): *These collaborative things are absolutely wonderful. I would never have learned so much on my own! By letting us talk together, we pick up thoughts and ideas for our writing that would never have occurred to us if we worked only alone. I enjoy when we sit in a circle and talk aloud, even though I did not often enough participate by talking myself, I thought in my head about what they said and compared it to what I think personally.*

(S11): *This class has affected my life in more ways than just my writing. It has worked my brain into a new, more effective form. That means I can look at something now and decide that there are at least three different ways of seeing and writing about that same thing. Instead of being stuck in a rut, brought up the way I have been and staying that way no matter what.*

In sum, student responses to the last exit interview question about their experience with CL yielded themes of 1) freedom of speech/voiced-ness, 2) confidence, 3) equality, and 4) diverse perspectives. In the next chapter, I discuss what these and other findings mean in relation to my practical theory.

CHAPTER VI:

Discussion and (Re) Theorization

In Chapter III, I theorized that comp students had narratives of themselves as writers entering and exiting the course. I also theorized that there was a connection between CL participation and how those narratives played out, especially in the context of a social constructionist classroom that tended toward a tempic, processual approach to teaching/learning. In this chapter, I comment on findings related to each research question and also discuss how those findings related to my original practical theory. Such a task necessitated that I engage in two intertwining discussions culminating in a synthesis of both research questions. I first revisit my findings in relation to Research Question #1 and eventually draw out one major conclusion. At this point, I reconsider my original practical theory in light of this conclusion. Then, I revisit findings for Research Question #2 and enter into a discussion that draws three major conclusions; the third of which leads to additional reflections. Toward the end of this chapter, I offer an extension of my original practical theory and discuss an integrated perspective on these findings.

Research Question #1: Discussion of Findings & a Conclusion

Research Question #1 was the following: *What narratives, or stories, do freshman composition students have about themselves as developing writers upon entering and exiting a college-level writing course?* My findings showed that students entering the course began with either a Narrative of Difficulty or a Narrative of Possibility. Students with the former saw themselves as unmotivated, frustrated, or inexperienced writers. Likewise, their character metaphors were either a “Cool Hand Luke,” Wounded, or Wanderer (who emphasized inexperience). Students entering the course with a Narrative of Possibility saw themselves as

either formerly confused/presently hopeful or confident/creative writers. This narrative also included the Wanderer (who, this time, emphasized hopefulness) as well as the Artist student writers.

At the end of the course, exiting students had shifted their stories to one of three narratives: a Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth, a Narrative of Awareness, or a Narrative of Inertia or Change. Student writers playing out a Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth saw themselves as competent/experienced and less fearful writers at course's end. Their character metaphor was the Veteran. Students ending with a Narrative of Awareness evinced being self-aware or self/other aware writers. Their characters were the Apprentice or the Companion student writers. Finally, students in a Narrative of Inertia or Change expressed being either stuck or integrated writers. Stuck writers were the Prisoners, and integrated writers were the Alchemists.

What happened here? I analyzed students' words about themselves to reveal students' writerly predispositions entering my course and those influencing how they might approach their next writing course. But my interpretations were just a glimpse at their self-perceptions. That I could only glimpse is a limitation of this study.

Taking thematic elements into a metaphorical analysis helped me see more clearly what was going on in this class for students. As figures of speech people use everyday, metaphors provide qualitative researchers an open window into thought processes. This study concerned itself with, among other things, how my students experienced themselves as writers; thus, it followed that exploring their self perceptions in pictorial language could lend itself to my understanding the students as characters in their own unfolding stories about teaching/learning.

Examining metaphors has much precedent. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Putnam,

Phillips, and Chapman (1996) acknowledged that metaphors reveal underpinnings of how people experience themselves, especially in organizational settings. According to Steger (2007), a metaphor is a “ ‘lens’ (Spiggle, 1994, p. 498) or a ‘container’ (Dexter and LaMagdaleine, 2002, p. 365) providing us with particular insights and data about its author and his or her emotions, beliefs, and self-concepts that are often tacit and unconsciously produced” (p. 5). Steger posited that analyzing metaphors that arise in individual narratives “may provide scholars with insights into the speaker’s otherwise unexpressed values, beliefs, and assumptions” (2007, p. 4).

Steger (2007) offered his methodological rationale in an organizational analysis context, something that I found very appealing as professional trying to improve the overall effectiveness of her practice. Steger’s three-part method of metaphorical analysis (2007) was particularly useful for my research study in that it did not ultimately separate students’ metaphors from the contexts from which they were uttered. His methodology provided a systematic way to critically examine metaphors occurring within *individual* interview narratives--within the context of the particular texts from which they derive--something not many researchers have addressed. Steger wrote about an inherent bias that he aimed to remedy, “Organizational-level analyses clearly dominate individual-level analyses” (2007, p. 5).

The findings related to Research Question #1 showed that comp students, in addition to their assumed goal of learning how to write by college-level standards, also simultaneously grappled with their pre-college writerly identities. The image of Janus, the double-faced god of doors and gates, came to mind while doing this research. One of Janus’ faces points in the direction of the past and the other, the future. Over the semester, students reshaped their identifications as writers; they potentially assumed two faces, passed through two gates. Despite

how they entered the course, students spent the entire semester approaching the opposite gate, the forward-facing countenance that came to symbolize their predisposition for their next writing course.

As I deliberated further on my findings, two things became clear. First, freshman writers at the beginning of the course described themselves thematically and metaphorically in terms of a past orientation toward success for failure as writers. Their narrative possibilities were simplistic black-or-white predispositions. However, at the end of the course, freshman writers described themselves in much more diverse ways and mostly in far more positive language. Most exiting student narratives revealed in thematic and metaphorical terms that in the intervening months, something transformational had occurred in their self-perception as writers. Thus, most freshman writers, when asked to describe themselves as writers at the end of the course, described themselves in terms of how their previous predisposition toward writing had changed.

Finally, I took note of the Wounded student writers whose narratives began as a Narrative of Difficulty. A very few remained in similar identifications at the end as stuck, Prisoner writers. These students neither cared for collaborative activities nor found a path through their cumbersome grammatical/mechanical problems. They were also initially resentful about their previous experiences in writing classrooms. They neither embraced their roles as comp class members nor accepted gracefully their status as novice writers in a new writing class. Reflection on all of these things led to the following conclusion regarding Research Question #1: *Freshman writers who accepted roles as novice academic writers--and who immersed themselves in opportunities for collaboration with other classmates--were the ones whose self-perception reflected increased levels of writing competency and confidence at the end of the course. This*

conclusion corroborates one of Sommers and Saltz's (2004) Harvard study findings that student writers who succeed in college writing "initially accept their status as novices" (p. 1).

So far, my practical theory was supported by the findings that students possessed narratives of themselves as writers. At this point, based on these findings, I saw no need to revise it.

Yet, despite this early validation, this initial conclusion seemed premature, for it soon became clear to me that I had not acknowledged one very important aspect of students' narratives, especially their exit narratives. Since I positioned myself as co-participant with my students during our CL sessions, my own narrative as professor/researcher needed be unearthed as well as those of student writers. Their stories were influenced by my story and vice-versa in relation to our roles as CL co-participants.

An Addendum: My Own Narrative

I was able to draw on both my bracketing interview and my field notes in order to make this informal analysis of my own narrative. Two statements in my bracketing interview stood out as significant. The first was related to my fears that the students would not be able to describe themselves well as writers. The second was a deep concern about being able to emerge from data collection with some usable data.

I garnered from these statements and their contexts that I began this research with worry, fear, and a full set of assumptions about what the students and I would be capable of doing together (and therefore of what I could accomplish as researcher). I felt highly inexperienced in my researcher role and dubious of my luck in what kind of data I would be able to gather.

I also re-examined my field note comments from the entrance interviews. Some of my

comments revealed that certain students struck me as under-prepared for the course and utterly disconnected from their role and responsibilities as a freshman writers. These statements yielded revealing things about my past-facing visage as researcher. First, I was quick to assume a lot of things about my students. Due to my own initial doubts and fears, my entrance narrative colored my initial reactions to the project and the students themselves. I was seeing them through a glass darkly, so to speak. Although I was following all the correct, scholarly procedures as a researcher, I was surprised as I reread my notes how my own fears, worries, and assumptions mirrored my students'. We were much more alike than I realized.

Then there was my role as co-participant and professor to consider. One field notes excerpt indicated, at the very least, that I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility for helping students “wake up to” academic writing, like it was all up to me, but that (based on evidence in bracketing interview excerpts) the outcome of my professorial task seemed almost entirely out of my control. Most revealing were my comments belying that I was not at all comfortable with letting the semester unfold as it needed to.

But my comfort level changed. Later field notes excerpts included lengthy passages appreciative of certain, specific positive traits students demonstrated in the writing classroom, like a tendency to help others. Another passage expressed my astonishment that a certain student who seemed not to “get” college writing at the beginning of the course was now making significant strides. Many comments were simply write-ups of positive CL episodes that stood out as significant breakthrough days. Thus, I had stopped making assumptions and was simply immersed in reflections of what actually happened in our class.

From reexamining two things--the assumptions I had as researcher entering the data-

gathering phase and my later professorial reflections—I gained a much clearer sense of myself as having changed just as much as my students seemed to: both as a researcher and professor.

Specifically, by the time of the exit interviews, I was responding to students from the professor's role and not at all from my own, uninformed, anxious, researcher-oriented standpoint. I grew more relaxed as a researcher as I began to recognize how important we all were in that class to each other in the entire teaching/learning process. Metaphors started to emerge. Instead of assuming the role of course puppet master, I became a sort of behind-the-scenes tour guide for our experiences together. To clarify, our trip was a sort of eco-tourism in that, by the end, I was also willing to get mud on me too by showing the students through the jungle of academic writing--all without disturbing the natural flora and fauna of our interactions together.

Most significant was that the field notes revealed that my professorial orientation to facilitating CL had changed similarly. For instance, during the third week of the course, I wrote about my expectations being too high and described a CL session that almost turned into a melee because one student had stepped on another's political toe. This particular reflection reminded me that, as professor and co-participant in our dialogues, I took just as many risks as my students did in the uncharted territory of class dialogue—and that it wasn't comfortable at times. Yet, later entries showed that I eventually learned to sit back and let things happen. One of my last entries told the tale of how appreciative I was by the outcome of one particular CL session. The previous class period, a student had shared a pathos-filled persuasive presentation accompanying her formal paper. Unsolicited, a formerly silent student shared in great detail how the other student's presentation had made “all the difference” in his “finally understanding how to write a persuasive paper.” He had revised his paper based on what he learned in class that day from another student.

Although I did not set out to conduct a formal thematic analysis of my self-perception as a writer, through re-reading my bracketing interview and field notes, I saw a Janus-like pair of character metaphors arise as a researcher/professor. My entrance metaphor, more focused on my role as researcher, was a Narrative of Difficulty because my notes expressed dominant themes of doubt, concern, and fear/inexperience over the research task. To cope, I sought to be objective, distant, and almost clinical in my impression of where students were “coming from” as writers. In other words, my distance potentially affected my role as professor! I was sufficiently prepared as professor but not yet cognizant of how the students (and the semester) would affect my role and responsibilities in my dual role as researcher. I classified my beginning role as a controlling one, meting out grades based on how student writing satisfied established rubrics, not really investing myself in the students’ as persons. I thought that an appropriate character metaphor was *Judge*.

By the end of the semester, however, I saw that my story had changed to a Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth and a stronger focus on my role as professor. My behavior shifted to that of someone who had relaxed into the ebb and flow of our classroom dynamics. I had gained facilitation skill from my encounters with CL and valuable new insights into students as persons and writers. My exit character understood that, within the class structure, letting go to whatever happened at the moment was key to learning something as co-creator of that shared environment. Although I initially identified with the *Veteran* exit metaphor due to its emphasis on having completed a tour of duty, I ultimately chose *Guide* to signify that I, as professor, had accompanied the students the whole time, whacking away at the underbrush and swatting off mosquitoes with them. I emerged at the forward-facing gate a little older, a bit more unkempt, and far humbler about my dual role as professor/researcher.

Did my own narratives influence my findings in this dissertation? To answer that question, I have to reflect on the course itself. There is no doubt I taught that course like I typically have since I added CL methodology a few years ago. The cast was different, of course; every professor can attest that each class has its own unique chemistry that allows for ease or difficulty with interaction. This class was typical: we started out timidly and warmed to each other. My early worries about the course, at least the ones I recorded, were more prevalent as related to my role as researcher, not professor. But there was nothing I could do about those worries except let the interviews and our class interactions play out as they had to. The beauty of a phenomenological study is that it always is about “what happens,” so it was inevitable that any researcher jitters I experienced would give way to my natural role as professor.

I do not think my dual role influenced these findings in a way that rendered them invalid. The findings of this study need to be understood from the contexts out of which they came: students’ experiences, not mine. Even though I acknowledge that all our narratives changed and shifted, mine included, I more or less forgot my role as researcher for the semester until we conducted exit interviews. A review of my own narratives helped me see that although at the outset I felt self-conscious in my dual role as researcher/professor, at the end, my focus was in the place it always is—on my role and duties as professor. These findings drew on the students’ own experiences; thus, they showed, in their view, what really happened in that class.

Indeed, all of our narratives emerged and shifted, mine included. However, even after further reflections on this point, I realized that teasing out an overall interpretation of our combined stories was not yet possible. My theory about the existence and dynamics of student narratives not only needed to be augmented with the fact that I, too, possessed a story that shifted

but also needed to take into consideration that the shift was involved with how CL influenced and joined each narrative in our class. I now address my second research question to get closer to a way I can readdress my original theory.

Research Question #2: Discussion of Findings & Three Conclusions

The second research question in this study was the following: *How do freshman composition students experience collaborative learning as part of these ongoing narratives?*

Findings showed that two important meta-themes stood out for students about the course: its Dialogue and Learning Environment. Dialogue yielded opportunities for 1) clarification, 2) idea generation, and 3) reflection. The Learning Environment struck students with its 1) openness, 2) comfort, 3) diversity, 4) stimulation, and 5) unusualness. Furthermore, students reported that their CL experiences encouraged 1) freedom of speech/voiced-ness, 2) confidence, 3) equality, and 4) diverse perspectives. Based on these findings, I was able to make three conclusions of how students experienced CL as part of their narratives. What follows is a discussion of my how I arrived at each conclusion.

CL and Student Narratives

At the end of the course, students reported feeling more confident about writing and what to write about—based on their interactions with others, and especially, their discovery of diverse perspectives on something they were going to write about. As I earlier theorized, such evidence points to Bakhtin (1990), who endorsed the entirely necessary, life-enhancing, and dialogical relationship between self and other. For Bakhtin, viewpoints of people other than oneself were the key to identity-making; another's "otherness" is essential to a sense of the self's selfness. Others are mirrors. He wrote, "Let him remain outside of me, for in that position he can see and know

what I myself do not see and do not know from my own place, and he can essentially enrich the event of my own life” (p. 87). For Bakhtin, the utterance was the all-important unit of discourse between persons, one that he saw as an open-ended, joint construction between self and other.

A peculiar quality of a Bahktinian utterance, due to its dependence on previous utterances, is that it always includes the voices of other people, not just what one thinks of as her own contribution to communication. All utterances between persons are open to many possible futures in that utterances, in the very act of their being created and exchanged, are perpetually influenced myriad elements involved in their joint construction. Bakhtin (1986) said, “From the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created” (p. 95). I mention all this to say that the narratives that students reinvented for themselves were not wholly individual projects. Students’ interactions, and especially as influenced by participation in CL in the context of other types of teaching and learning, co-constructed and brought to the fore their new, writerly identities. Their interactions took four initial metaphors defined by predispositions for success or failure—“*Cool Hand Luke*,” Wanderer, Wounded, and Artist student writers—into new roles better defined in terms of *how they had been changed by the comp experience and each other*: Apprentice, Companion, Veteran, Prisoner, and Alchemist. Thus, my first conclusion about how CL influenced student narratives is that *participation in CL, in the context of traditional types of teaching and learning such as lecture and paired activities, better defined student narratives of themselves as writers.*

A Shift in Narratives

The findings led to even further reflection on my original practical theory. Based on students’ exit interviews, all but one of their re-formed writerly character metaphors could be

classified as a comp success story. By “success,” I mean overall, self-perceived improved writing competency at the end of the course. I believe that actual success in college writing courses depends on many inner qualities that entering students may or may not possess or be able to develop—not the least of which being humility, earnestness, persistence, enthusiasm, and a good, old-fashioned thick skin. Like characters in a novel, these freshman writers evinced certain qualities or traits that caused them to grow or remain unchanged. As by-products of their interactions with others, episodes of interpersonal and technical disorientation pushed them out of their comfort zones and served as potential catalysts for their growth as writers. Students shared experiences where, at least for a moment, they either voluntarily explored or (through participation in CL dialogue) involuntarily strayed from the safety of what they thought they already knew about writing (and the issues they wrote about). This challenge refined their grasp of academic writing like the forging of metal in fire. Finally, the fact that students praised certain, particular and shared environmental factors originating from their CL participation leads me to think that success in comp is not necessarily an individual enterprise, something I have never before considered.

Moreover, the fact that some students revealed they liked to work alone belied CL’s challenge, its sheer difficulty. I admit that CL has its disorienting aspects, especially in the beginning when students are learning its ropes. Bruffee (1993) commented on these aspects extensively. Reflections on the disorienting power of CL dialogue led me to consider Mezirow’s (1991) ideas on transformative learning theory, and especially his notion of the disorienting dilemma as kindling for transformative learning experiences. Mezirow described transformative learning experiences as:

. . . learning through the transformation of learning schemes. This is learning that involves reflections on assumptions. We find that our specific points of view or beliefs have become dysfunctional, and we experience a growing sense of the inadequacy of our old ways of seeing and understanding meaning. (1991, p. 94)

Integral to Mezirow's theory is the "disorienting dilemma" itself, or an experience that does not fit one's current expectations and, in order to be assimilated into one's life, forces one to accommodate it within one's existing problem-solving capacity or learn an entirely new way of coping. Either way, the person may undergo a "perspective transformation."

In reflecting on transformative learning theory I am not suggesting that our entire comp class experience amounted to one big disorienting dilemma for writing students, but I am suggesting that our participation in CL amidst other types of teaching and learning may have at least been partially responsible for reshaping writerly identities, especially when students encountered viewpoints that challenged their previous assumptions about issues and the nuts and bolts of academic writing. This possibility intrigues me because, if true, it underscores the de-centering and potentially re-centering qualities of CL dialogue in a writing class. Dialogue with peers can force one to reconsider or at least reflect on one's original stance, especially when the self feels threatened by opposing viewpoints.

Quite a few Mezirow followers have effectively addressed pieces of what I am talking about here. For example, D'Andrea (1986) discussed the act of reflection on difficult experiences in one's life and the vital roles of relationship and dialogue in helping one learn from these challenges. Other studies related to this topic are Gehrels' (1984), Saavedra's (1994), and Gallagher's (1997).

Not only dialogue, but also narrative plays into research in transformative learning theory. For instance, Edwards (1997) examined how people may experience transformation as a result of “re-storying” their identities in relation to identity-challenging experiences in their lives. A study on transformative learning linked somewhat topically to my own is Vogelsang’s (1993), who researched transformative learning experiences in transitioning college students. This research revealed that dialogue with others who shared alternative viewpoints proved vital to the transformative learning process students experienced. In consideration of all the preceding discussion, I realized that CL’s challenge could be one of the most important aspects of its influence. Primarily, CL participation challenged students (through interactions with different others) to form and draw on inner resources that pushed the limits of what they previously knew about writing and the issues they wrote about. My second conclusion about CL’s influence on student narratives is that *participation in CL in the context of other types of teaching and learning challenged most students to succeed in comp and therefore shifted their original narrative.*

A Community of Practice and Meta-Narrative

Finally, further reflections on the findings led to one more major conclusion about the link between CL and narratives. The exit interview themes revealed that students were struck with having experienced comfort and openness with class Dialogue and Learning Environment. The class provided students a safe, systematic, non-judgmental way to explore dialogically what others thought and what they themselves thought about issues and writing. As part of that overall experience, CL participation imparted, among other things, freedom of speech/voiced-ness and a sense of equality. CL participation seemed to level the playing field between disparate individual stories and to usher the class into *a community of practice* around the act of teaching/learning, one

that not only affected *individual* writerly identities but also the *group's* understanding of itself as a writing class. In short, a group story emerged, one more felt that stated. My third conclusion about the influence of CL on student narratives was that *CL participation in the context of other types of teaching and learning helped generate a community of practice and a resulting meta-narrative of teaching/learning.*

Some clarification is needed on this third conclusion. Wenger (1998) described a community of practice as any place or situation where people regularly meet to learn and create meaning together (pp. 45-47). Communities of practice have a special role in educational settings as related to identity building. Wenger wrote, "Students must be enabled to explore who they are, who they are not, who they could be" (p. 272). Dialogue is a vital part of this process. So much of what happens within communities of practice is the building of identity. Wenger indicated that experiencing and navigating one's identity within a group is not a matter of holding onto a certain, individual self-image. It is more a matter of one's self-informing the group and the group informing the self. Wenger added:

The experience of identity in practice is a way of being in the world. Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities. . . . An identity, then, is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other. . . Bringing the two together through the negotiation of meaning, we construct who we are. (p. 151)

From the perspective of our larger story—our group meta-narrative—class members renegotiated, expanded, and assimilated individual writer identities in order to accommodate a way of being together experienced solely by that particular group. In social theory, Strauss (1997) and Giddens (1991) wrote about the negotiation of individual identities within groups toward the creation of a group way of being together. Perhaps more closely aligned with my interests here, Linde (1993) addressed individual identities as ongoing, interactive narratives that shift and reconstruct themselves in relation to the groups they belong to while in the process of achieving coherence. Linde's perspective, in particular, led me to consider more fully that CL participation drew out our class meta-narrative in a way that linked our different stories to a larger, felt perspective on what was going on in the class.

After reaching these conclusions, there were still no revisions to my original practical theory because findings supported that CL amidst other types of teaching and learning affected student narratives of themselves as writers. In sum, CL participation influenced student narratives in three ways when used alongside traditional methods such as lecture and paired activities: 1) it helped define students' individual narratives of themselves as writers, 2) it challenged most students to succeed in comp and therefore shifted their original narrative, and 3) it helped generate a community of practice and a resulting meta-narrative of teaching/learning.

Toward Clarity on Our Meta-Narrative

As indicated in the introduction to this section, I saw that CL's third influence deserved deeper exploration, for it necessarily tied in findings for Research Question #1. The prospect of a meta-narrative, something about which I previously theorized, prompted me to examine the idea of a "story" from a couple of different vantage points, especially because I wanted to figure out

what that larger story was all about. Thus, I next consider the notion of a meta-narrative and its relation to story structure, character, type, and plot.

To reflect on what that meta-narrative might be, I started with the personal. Within our larger, shared story, I wore two hats. By the end of the course as professor, I had gained a sense of who the students and I were to each other and how we had all come to know college writing. As a researcher, I had a different but related sense of our meta-narrative. I focused on only one particular aspect of that story in relation to those characters—how they experienced CL—but even examining that one aspect of class methodology helped me experience my practice—and my narrative identity—from an entirely fresh perspective, one revealing how narrative can function within persons and classes through a complex interplay of structure and character. To understand the meta-narrative more fully, I stepped back as researcher/professor even further to examine the concept of our stories (and story) from a purely technical standpoint.

Structure and character. The container for what happened in the class was how it was taught; methodology provided structure for our experiences together. The individual narratives that the data revealed also had a sort of structure. The students and I provided the characters for our little classroom production. Structure and character have very specific functions that might be easily overlooked when immersed in teaching a course, but they are important to consider if one desires a sense of an overall story of teaching/learning. Writer Robert McKee (1998) has commented on the function of structure and character in screenwriting terms:

The function of structure is to provide progressively building pressures that force characters into more and more difficult dilemmas where they must make more and more difficult risk-taking choices and actions, gradually revealing their true

natures, even down to the unconscious self. The function of character is to bring to the story the qualities of characterization necessary to convincingly act out choices. . . . The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure and the actions they choose to take, while characters are the creatures who are revealed and changed by how they choose to act under pressure. If you change one, you change the other. If you change event design, you have also changed character; if you change deep character, you must reinvent the structure to express the character's changed nature. (pp. 101-102)

McKee's words gave me pause in that, as related to what we as writing professors try to accomplish in college writing classrooms, we tend to focus almost exclusively on *the structure of course events* rather than on *the development of the characters* in that story of teaching/learning. To acknowledge the presence of an overall story is also to acknowledge the essential interplay of both events and character in the teaching/learning process.

Narrative type and plot. Something happened among us, that much is clear. Narratologist Seymour Chatman wrote, "A narrative without a plot is an impossibility" (p. 47). One might consider the general form of all narratives to ascertain what actually occurred. To do this, one must first accept the premise that the class can, indeed, read like a text with a plot containing twists and turns that eventually, more or less, resolves—at least until the next semester's batch of students. I think I have established this much.

Narrative texts of any kind include two essentials: the story of what happened and the actual discourse that comprised those happenings. Within that story, there are two essential elements: the *events*, or the actions themselves; and *existents*, which amount to the characters and

setting. Since I was not necessarily interested in the actual structure of the discourse that created the class story or stories, I did not perform a formal discourse analysis. But because I was interested in story itself, the content of our teaching/learning experience as revealed through its characters, it followed that I used a phenomenological analysis to capture characters' experiences and to offer an interpretation of what happened. I paid particular attention to the characters in our classroom drama through a thematic and metaphorical analysis perhaps somewhat related to—in the literary tradition—A.C. Bradley's (1904) open trait analysis model made famous in *Shakespearean Tragedy*. I examined what the characters said and how they said it.

I thought it interesting how our individual stories pulled together prevailing ideas on literary narrative and narrative theory as applied to the social sciences. Looking at narrative this way completely realigned my classical training in what narrative could be. For instance, Polkinghorne (1988) discussed how Northrup Frye arrived at a taxonomy of different narrative types—myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic—based on traits of the protagonist as compared to others in the story. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998)—drawing on Gergen and Gergen (1997)—classified narratives a bit differently as one of four types: romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire, depending upon the goals of each type (p. 88). They and others have indicated that the point of a romance is the journey itself since it embodies the archetypal image of the hero who experiences a series of tests or challenges on the way to his goal. Using this definition of romance, I saw how it reflected the outcome of most of our individual narratives and, quite possibly, our group classroom story. In fact, individual romances abounded within our classroom. The few students whose stories did not change for the better found themselves in a different type of narrative, likely a tragedy.

In addition to type, narratives also have particular ways their plots develop over a period of time. Aristotle wrote much about this in *Poetics*, and from this work most critical literary theory on the subject derives. However, in a little different spin from the perspective of the social sciences, Gergen (1998) referred to three customary ways narratives tend to proceed:

The first may be described as a stability narrative, that is, a narrative that links events in such a way that the trajectory remains essentially unchanged with respect to a goal or outcome. . . The stability narrative may be contrasted with two others. One may link together events in such a way that either increments or decrements characterize movement along the evaluative dimension over time. In the former case we may speak of a progressive, and in the latter, regressive narratives.. . As should be clear, these three narrative forms, stability, progressive, and regressive, exhaust the fundamental options for the direction of movement in evaluative space (p. 4).

Gergen claimed that there should be “a virtual infinity” of narrative possibilities available within combinations of these above-stated narrative forms, since all plots “may be converted to a linear form with respect to their evaluative shifts of time” (p. 4). For instance, characters could play out a progressive narrative of life events where things get better and better all the time until their situation eventually evens out to a happily-ever-after scenario, and thus, a stability narrative. Gergen’s final point was that we must not forget that all narratives are necessarily grounded in social interchange and identity-making—things that ultimately establish cultural values. He closed by arguing the following:

Narratives of the self are used within daily life as a means of creating or sustaining

value—the value of both oneself and all other protagonists. . . the incidents woven into one’s narrative are seldom the actions of the protagonist alone; others are included as well. In most instances others’ action contribute vitally to the events linked in narrative sequence”(p. 10).

I agree with Gergen’s claim that individual identities can come together and be influenced by one other enough to create a narrative sequence that affects the individual and also the sustainability of the group. However, Gergen fell short in his use of three basic narrative structures as containers for a larger, encompassing story that busies itself with “creating and sustaining value.” With that in mind, I particularly disagree with his contention that all narratives can be “converted to linear form” or can be reduced to a precise causal chain of events. As I indicated in my original theory, I suggest that our overall class story followed a very different kind of narrative structure, a tempic, processual one, unrecognized in traditionalist literary terms from the classic model, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, because it did not necessarily follow the customary interplay of linear time, structure, and character.

Both Research Questions: Bringing it all Together

At the risk of sounding like I am repeating myself in places, some recap is necessary before I close this last reflection point and state my overall impression on this research project and its findings. I first bring together all of these elements discussed previously into a discussion of what our meta-narrative really was. I highlight, in particular, its type in order to make a final point about how CL brought about its key features.

As I recap, I should point out that we engaged in CL methodology in a blended context, along with lecture and small group activities. Thus, our course’s setting included three types of

teaching/learning (Peters & Armstrong, 1998) that brought together many characters in various ways. Students revealed through their interview texts what kind of writers they thought they were at the beginning and ending of that course experience. These reflections constituted bookend self-perceptions that I was able to work into narratives and use to draw on a major conclusion about them that hinged upon their self-perception as novice writers. Students were also asked what stood out for them about the course, the responses to which I was able to group into two meta-themes: Dialogue and Learning Environment. I examined whether or not and how their character metaphors and narratives changed in relation to what they said stood out for them about the course. Additionally, I asked them about their experiences with CL and found that students indicated CL participation yielded thematic aspects, which I then used to draw out three major conclusions about CL's influence on student narratives. I questioned my original theory on the existence of narratives and CL's influence on them with further discussion, especially since I concluded that a group meta-narrative existed as well, one that even incorporated my own character metaphors and narratives. I now present an overall extension of my original theory and a bridge of the findings to my two research questions. I present these things to provide synthesis for the two different but very related aspects of this study—narratives and CL's influence on them.

After consideration of these last discussion points and few more, which I will discuss below, I decided to make a couple of additions to my original practical theory. Specifically, *freshman composition students who experience CL as part of a social constructionist, tempic classroom aesthetic play out individual narratives of themselves as writers as well as a group meta-narrative of teaching/learning. Both narratives are basically processual bildungsromans that arise out of the contingencies that CL participation encourages.*

I will start with an overview and will proceed to discussion highlighting additions to the last sentence.

All student participants and I began as characters playing out either a Narrative of Possibility or a Narrative of Difficulty, depending upon our predisposition toward success in our respective roles. In Gergen's terms, one might call these initial inclinations toward a progressive or regressive narrative. By the end of the course, however, our closing narratives transformed into either a Narrative of Awareness, a Narrative of Technical/Emotional Growth, or a Narrative of Change or Inertia. No matter what they emphasized in their interviews, most student participants knew they had made improvements in their writing and demonstrated a concurrent shift in their character metaphor. All except one of their metaphors revealed a story of success. In addition, I released the reins enough as professor to shift into another character metaphor myself. Again, in Gergen's terms, most stories ended as progressive narratives except one, which amounted to a stability narrative. But, interestingly enough, and contrary to the Aristotelian model, there was no traceable, linear path to how we all made those changes in self-perception. Even in hindsight, no one could have predicted our individual or group outcome, a fact that will prove important to my final point.

What stood out for students about the course (Dialogue and Learning Environment) and CL itself (eight thematic aspects)--pointed to CL's huge role in defining the course's structure, narratives, and also its characters. My original theory was reinforced, for I saw evidence that our group's meta-narrative deviated from the familiar, poetic narrative model. But it possessed more defining characteristics. In one way--the traditional, literary sense--our overall story is a romance, the hero's journey. It could also, in Gergen's estimation, be seen as a progressive narrative since

most students gained competency and reflected on their experiences together in a positive light. Our group story or meta-narrative actually can be seen as a romance, in particular, a *bildungsroman*.

A *bildungsroman* is a literary genre derived from the German Expressionists that captures the story of a youthful protagonist who braves difficult trials that form his mental, psychological, and moral fiber. Key to his story is his eventual adaptation of certain grown-up norms that insure his entry into adulthood. One might also see the *bildungsroman* as a “coming of age” story. This kind of story is also a form of *monomyth*, a genre popularized Campbell (1993), that describes a cultural hero who overcomes personal desires and comfort in order to become initiated into a deep understanding of the human condition. By facing and conquering almost insurmountable odds, he learns the truth about himself and clears the obstacles to his goal. On a far more modest scale, of course, freshman writers can be likened to this kind of hero. All the students were given a similar task—to face themselves as academic writers and do the inner and outer work necessary to become initiated into a new academic discourse community. I, too, faced inner and outer work of a similar type. It is not too much of a stretch to see many individual *bildungsromans* worked themselves out in our class—mine included. These were individual struggles that revealed a larger, more binding sort of *bildungsroman*.

As I pondered this realization, I returned to the peculiar nature of our class meta-narrative. Classifying our overall class story as a romance, a progressive narrative, or even a *bildungsroman*, made me think about what happens to comp classrooms when CL is included to augment more traditional ways of teaching and learning like lecture and small group activities. The findings for this study were drawn out of a course that implemented all three. The nature of the other two

types seemed important to consider. Lecture and paired activities have students either wrestling with subject matter alone or with a partner without the freedom to generate alternative meanings outside the “right” answer expected of them by the teacher. CL, because it is necessarily a participatory, open-ended way of exploring ideas, encourages student and teacher identities and ideas to bump up against one another through exploratory dialogue. It is a characteristically social methodology with unpredictable results. Whatever our dialogue produced around the topic of writing was an open-ended proposition. In the process, multiple possibilities for the “right” answer emerged, especially because an individual person rather than the professor—or so-called “expert”—had the ultimate say-so about how to interpret what that “right” answer might be. But, through CL, each of these answers had the chance to be voiced, considered, remolded, and assimilated by all participants. *As such, it is methodology conducive to writer identity shifts.*

Furthermore, participation in CL welcomed the unknown into our classroom. Through verbal and aural exploration with the various facets of CL—a focus on construction, dialogical space, cycles of action and reflection, and multiple ways of knowing—we experienced a shared meaning-making, a quality that lent our classroom story what Morson (2005) called *narrativity*, something referred to in my original theory. Through our moments of deep engagement with others, our dialogues allowed us to temporarily suspend and reinvent our entrance narratives right before our senses—for the process itself was enmeshed in our individual and group interactions. As a result, *anything was possible* in the outcome of our individual stories; *anything was possible* for the outcome of our group story. Morson (1999) wrote that openness to such potentials, such multiple outcomes, is a hallmark of *processual narratives*, or stories that cannot be predicted. Such classrooms, like such novels, demand an appreciation for contingencies less attractive to the formalist classroom tradition.

As introduced in Chapter III and my original theory, the existence of contingencies is key to processual narratives. Morson clarified that there are ten contingency-producing factors in processual narratives. These are 1) a *“processual intentionality*, 2) *a lack of closure*, 3) *the changing position of the author*, 4) *a forward-looking temporality*, 5) *loose ends* 6) *a serial outcome*, 7) *attention to the present moment*, 8) *the utter significance of “reading” a moment*, 9) *attention to potentials*, and 10) *a nurturing of the sense of time it takes to honor all of these elements* (pp. 306-309.) In short, these ten factors contributed to the cultivation of a tempic aesthetic to teaching/learning writing.

Final Thoughts

One concern, having presented this research, is that this study’s intentions will be misconstrued. Awareness of student self-perceptions as writers should not be confused with an intention toward examining the process of self-esteem building within freshman writers. Despite the presence of stated or unstated writing course designs promoting this very thing, I think intentional efforts at freshman writer self-esteem-building are transparent and insulting to college-level students. They entirely miss the point of comp. The emphasis in college-level writing courses should be on learning to write better in different rhetorical contexts; our eyes should be—among other stated goals-- on initiating the freshman writer in the ways of higher education discourse. My hope is that the discoveries shared here are seen in terms more concerned with how college students become better writers.

As I completed this study, another concern became clear. I focused on just twelve stories, but there were actually many of our stories that I did not study. Attrition is inevitable. In fact, about ten students dropped the course for various reasons. But what were these students’ stories?

And how did the physical absence of these students at the end of the course impact the individual narratives I was able to study? The group story? One of the limitations of this study is that I was not able to examine the stories of the ones that got away. I will never know if and how CL impacted their stories of teaching/learning.

A final concern is that of over-endorsing CL as a methodology for professors to use in their freshman comp classes. Using CL is not easy; nor is it entirely effective with all writing classes. Bruffee (1993) has described its challenges well, including its displacement of academic authority; its negation of the “guarantee of accountability” provided by other methods like lecture and cooperative activities (p. 92); its occasional chaos; and its roulette wheel of uncomfortable, tense moments. Clearly, the one student in this study who preferred to work alone was at a disadvantage having to suffer the terrain CL ushered us into. Despite my focus on CL in this study, I see it as necessary to balance it equitably as a methodology with other, more familiar ways of teaching writing so that students can experience its merits within the boundaries of the known.

CHAPTER VII:

Further Actions

The final, necessary step of any good action research project is to take some sort of meaningful action in one's practice based on his or her current practical theory. Such a step sometimes starts an entirely new cycle of action and reflection. With this chapter, I have completed the last part of the DATA-DATA action research model. After a synopsis of my general theory as revised, I will then consider some implications of this research for my own practice, for the field of composition studies, for teaching/learning in higher education, and for action research.

My original practical theory included my belief that freshman composition students possessed narratives of themselves as writers and that participation in CL amidst traditional types of teaching and learning influenced these narratives, especially as part of a writing course friendly to social constructionist principles and a tempic approach to teaching and learning. I theorized that an individual and a group story of teaching/learning were possible. Recent additions to this theory are that both kinds of stories are processual bildungsomans that arise out of the contingencies that CL participation encourages.

Implications For My Practice

I have taken the opportunity to research my own practice with an eye on understanding it and possibly improving it. That the project was on the practice itself, not on the students, has been paramount in my mind both from a research and a teaching standpoint. There are not many opportunities in higher education for one to engage in a sort of research that not only potentially

benefits one's practice, but also quite possibly one's field and related fields by drawing out meaningful implications from research findings.

I see now that it is often our own, subjective immersion in our own teaching dramas that keeps us from seeing the broader, more perspective-enhancing implications of what we do as English professors. Experiencing my own teaching practice in this new way, I am reminded that our class story is one of many thousands that play themselves out individually and communally every day. Looking at the class as a story of teaching and learning objectifies our experiences, puts them in context. Whatever I, as professor, take too seriously today might be better put in perspective tomorrow by standing back a bit, by perceiving my own professorial concerns in a more universal context that values the voices of others as much as my own.

Intentional Reflection

First, this project has caused me to reconsider the power of reflection in my daily practice. Previous to commencing research, my attempts at reflective journaling had been sporadic and brief. I now see the value of accounting in a regular way for how I experience my practice. My reflection needs to be a more intentional experience, one that I commit to on at least a weekly basis, in order to be reminded of the assumptions I carry with me into the classroom. Likewise, I see the value of providing my students with opportunities to reflect openly on how they experience themselves as writers, if only for the purpose of shining a light on what we are all trying to accomplish in a course like comp: the journey and process of becoming more competent writers. I also think that the students and I could all benefit from some shared reflection on what our class story of teaching/learning might be each semester. Thus, I plan to 1) keep a weekly reflective journal on my comp class experiences, 2) continue to ask students at the beginning and

ending of the course how they experience themselves as writers, and 3) add a shared, reflective activity that encourages the students and I to articulate what we think is the story of teaching/learning writing going on our class. Such measures will aid the writerly identity-building aspect of comp, perhaps trigger meaningful transformative learning experiences about college writing, and insure that I as professor continue to remain accountable for my assumptions.

Studying Narrative, Structure, and Character in Other Classes

Furthermore, this research has taught me much about examining all my courses from the standpoint of interplay between structure and character. One might say that contemplation on such an abstract perspective of teaching/learning provides an opportunity for meaning making around the daily drudgery inherent in grading papers and assigning grades. The notion of our creating a processual narrative out of class structure and character intrigues me in that it seems to account for an alternative way to think about “storying” our lived lives. I would like to initiate another round of action and reflection on one of my literature courses, where we can simultaneously make a foray into the function of narrative and the usefulness of narrative analysis in revealing deeper dimensions of authors’ works and our own lives.

Student Identity Renegotiation/Sharing Conclusions

Finally, part of my revised theory was that to the degree freshmen writers come to embrace their role as novices, their chances increase for success in the comp. Perhaps I should discuss this very notion with my comp students at various times during the semester, thereby making it a conscious, reflected upon consideration. What would happen to students’ stories of themselves as writers if we openly addressed this possible outcome in my comp classes? I would like to experiment with sharing these research findings with my future comp students.

Implications for the Field of Composition Studies

CL lives at the crossroads of dialogue and narrative meaning making. Personal meaning making and narrative identity are vastly important potential focus areas in comp studies, especially since they underscore how students navigate, transition through, and create value of an increasingly complicated world (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McAdams, 1993; Singer, 2004).

This world, as we are well aware, is increasingly digitized and depersonalized. Paulus, Woodside, and Ziegler (2007) wrote about the process of meaning making as studied through collaborative, online dialogue. They were particularly interested in how online forums aided meaning making, especially through subject-matter oriented dialogue (Gorski & Caspi, 2005). In an era of technology-savvy comp students, more studies need to be done that focus on how individuals and groups of comp students make meaning in collaborative online forums.

But my study concerned itself with a face-to-face comp course. Comp classes like mine involve the daily, in-the-moment decisions writing professors make about how much dialogue and interaction to allow in their courses despite pressure to fulfill state-sanctioned course requirements. My study shows that using CL methodology in addition to traditional modes of lecture and small-group activities can have meaningful results for student self-perception about college writing ability—an area directly related to meaning-making and narrative identity of first year writers. Thus, there are significant pedagogical implications here for first year studies as related to writing students. Students indicated that CL participation led to four things: freedom of speech/voicedness, confidence, equality, and diverse perspectives. The first three are more affective, interpersonal outcomes of CL participation while the last is a technical outcome, directly related to what students said helped their writing in that they could understand more

ways to write about something and additional perspectives on why writers write the way they do. More research needs to be done on what CL actually does in the writing classroom as related to student self-perception of writing ability, especially if an unstated but obvious goal of comp studies is to train students to be better, more confident writers. In particular, perhaps we as comp professors might rethink how social interaction in the comp classroom assists in students' successful assimilation of comp skills. We might even break out of our comfort zone once in awhile to see what it is like to experiment with and formally study alternative methodologies that might at first seem scary (because of the contingencies they might produce) but might in fact take the teaching and learning of writing to an entirely different level.

Furthermore, this study underscored the importance of accepting one's role as a novice writer. This finding attests that we might be more intentional in our writing classrooms about making it "okay" to be a novice. Then, we should follow up on our efforts with research. CL participation, at least in my study, seemed to create a place where students felt comfortable trying on new writing approaches for size via a non-committal format—dialogue rather than print, something I think crucial for beginners as a shared learning experience. The writing that followed was far more informed, far more erudite than if we had not engaged in pre-writing dialogical activity. As comp professors, we might do well to help our students have more exploratory dialogical experiences before they sit down to write an essay. As far as research implications are concerned, a prevailing interest in the first year experience for comp students makes this a prime time for comp professors to make formal inquiries into their own practices about how students experience comp.

My study also suggests that students make meaning of writing not only to themselves as

individuals but as a group, a relatively new notion to comp studies literature. Other studies in collaborative learning (e.g. Merrill, 2003; Armstrong, 1999) indicate that the relationships that students form while engaged in teaching and learning experiences influence 1) how they see their themselves as participants in those experiences and 2) their construction of meaning around those experiences. Engaging in a systematic process of dialogue appeared to be the catalyst.

When I reflect on my own study in context of these and similar studies about collaborative learning, it is easy to see that higher education needs to re-conceptualize college writing as an ongoing dialogue between persons and texts. Certainly, the notion that everything is text is not a new one for writing professors, but it is very much a new concept for freshman writers. One of the first things I teach my comp students is that everything they read should be approached from a dialogical standpoint; no piece of writing—even if it is printed in a bound book-- is a settled matter. It is always open for negotiation and the influence of competing interpretive frameworks. I tell them that reading an author's argumentative stance is an open proposition because at core, that writer is trying to convince the reader to adopt her point of view. In the process of becoming savvy to all the rhetorical play that author uses to communicate her point, we can also dare to imbue that point on the page with our own lively interpretation, which, of course, comes from our own, unique frame of reference based on our own unique life experiences). And, we can verbally share that interpretation--even augment our newly minted point of view with others' feedback--before writing about it.

The ultimate question for me is this: how may we continue to enliven the field of comp studies with the students' own experiences? It is so tempting to teach comp as a "This is the way you do it" kind of course. Of course, that very stance *kills the course* for it brings nothing new to

the world of comp studies. We start anew in comp every time we teach ourselves as professors (and our own students) to critically examine a piece of writing in a way different than one's own prevailing "frame" might automatically allow. Further research in comp studies would do well to steer in the direction of systematic forms of reflective practice designed to get professors thinking about the far-reaching implications of what they actually do in the writing classroom.

Higher Education and The First Year Experience:

Student Retention and Identity-Renegotiation

When I started reading student comments on what stood out for them about the course, my mind began racing to the implications of this study for student retention studies. There is so much concern these days over keeping college students enrolled in courses during that critical first year. Tinto (1998) has written extensively about how collaborative learning strategies, in particular, aid student learning and help freshmen persist during that the first year. But so much of "making it" through that first year depends upon students' successful renegotiation of their academic identities. Kill (2006) hints at higher education's love affair with stability. She highlights our "reliance on relational stability" in the classroom and how our pining for this sometimes keeps students and teachers from pushing the limits of what is possible (p. 234). Students falling prey to the lure of stability fail to challenge former self-perceptions and to work past outworn academic coping strategies. They never finish that first year. Kill wrote:

. . .as much as we in academia would like to believe in our capacity to make the genres our professional communities more fluid and open to new experiences, the reality of institutions is that they resist change and growth. Thus, the process of (re) defining the discursive subject of community is ongoing, but one characterized

by a kind of formal resistance built into the nature and function of genre. . . . It is because of our reliance on relational stability that challenges to traditional relationships and divisions of power in the classroom provoke resistance in defense of the stability of all identities involved. For this reason, we as teachers need to be especially attentive to the motivations informing our motivations. . . . (p. 234)

My study suggests that participating in CL in any first-year course puts on the table the topic of identity renegotiation during that critical first year. It suggests ways we can think about student retention. First year students need to feel connected, competent, confident, and voiced during that first year; my findings show that initially, many of them don't. This study shows that CL participation can provide those kinds of positive outcomes when used as a methodology alongside more traditional modes of instruction. More research needs to be done in this area.

With that said, although my writing students gained overall from CL's inclusion as a methodology, I have much to learn about how ten students did not see its inclusion in a college course a reason for sticking around until the end of the semester. Those of us interested in working with CL in the first-year courses should see if we can find ways to understand more about the connection between CL and student retention. Perhaps this starts with a greater focus on accountability for student retention efforts, especially in our yearly self-evaluations.

Implications for Action Research

My own experience of the project. As a researcher, I learned a tremendous amount about formal research from doing this dissertation, especially in relation to developing a carefully-considered methodology. The DATA-DATA approach was an excellent container and guide for my efforts; for the most part it kept me organized and confident that I was headed in a direction

that would eventually prove readable. Accounting for and refining my practical theory Chapter III and referring to it as needed throughout the Chapter VI discussion were something of a challenge, however. I learned firsthand that action research requires a constant, back-and-forth glance at what was theorized and how an original theory might be revised in light of research findings. Particularly satisfying was how this research generated interests inside my actual practice, and not solely out of someone else's theoretical rationale for how I should be conducting my practice. In other words, I did not have to divorce my real life as professor from my professional life as an action researcher. Finally, I learned a lot about myself as a writer. My tendency is to be wordy, so the tremendous amount of data and the task of winnowing it down into manageable sentences proved a humbling experience, to say the least.

If I could make any changes to what I experienced, I would be more vocal with my teaching institution before data gathering about my intentions of doing a project like this. I think I took my community college by surprise, something I describe below.

The Uphill Battle

I experienced a challenge inherent to conducting an action research project at an institution largely unfamiliar with nontraditional forms of research. At the institution where I was pursuing my Ph.D., getting my dissertation proposal approved by officials at the institutional research level was no difficult matter. However, at the institution where I teach, my initial proposal to do human subject research on my practice was flatly rejected. I endured a nerve-rattling appeal justifying that I, indeed, was doing research on my practice and not on my students. In retrospect, it seems that unfounded fears about liability and misunderstandings about the right of faculty members to be reflective practitioners initially clouded the perspective of those charged with approving this

action research project at my institution. This is no condemnation. In fact, I think my appeal necessarily highlighted the fact that I knew my rights as a faculty member and caused the administration at my institution to reconsider long-held but unquestioned views on what constitutes academic research. English professors can benefit a great deal from doing action research on their practices because the process necessarily has them seeing what they do from another, fresh perspective while acknowledging that they do, in fact, *influence their own practices*. I look forward to another opportunity to do this kind of research. My initial struggle for research approval makes me more aware of how novel the field of action research is to institutions unfamiliar with its rich history. This built-in bias against approving non-traditional forms of research will fade to the degree that practitioners embark upon additional, fruitful studies of their practice. I see this study as one more voice added to those reflective practitioners who have gone before me.

In closing, this research was intended to help me improve my practice as an English professor through revealing how students experienced themselves as developing writers and if and how one aspect of my pedagogy informed their narratives. It is still my contention that freshman students' personal stories are relevant and useful for writing teachers to examine in that they provide insight into how students in higher education internalize and make meaning of the writing practice and process during a very crucial transition in their lives. But students are not their stories. In the writing classroom, or in any part of a human being's life narrative, a deeper recognition is always occurring concurrent to any particular, glimpsed aspect of their overall story. Yes, awareness of narrative gives educators a way to temporarily arrive at an understanding, an insight into hidden processes affecting our students, but narrative knowledge is

an elusive, transient discovery; it is always in motion even in the moments of the story becoming clear to us. What we think is ourselves, what gives us our sense of self, is largely mental content, a patterned collection of memories and reactive thoughts. What is most important is to recognize how others are co-creators of what we think of as our own narratives, individual or group. Writer Eckhart Tolle (2006) likes to remind us that although what actually happens in life changes continually, beneath all the drama is a strong undercurrent, a consistency. It is the fact that there is always one moment and one moment only. In any given moment we will never not be ourselves as we meet those challenges, so we might take care not to over-identify with one definition of the self in relation to a skill, another person, or the trajectory of our lives. I tend to agree.

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Vita

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