RHETORICS AND LITERACIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Faith Kurtyka

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
WITH A MAJOR IN RHETORIC, COMPOSITION, AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2012
As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Faith Kurtyka entitled *Rhetorics and Literacies of Everyday Life of First-Year College Students* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English.

_______________________________________________________________________
Date: 11/9/2011
Anne-Marie Hall

_______________________________________________________________________
Date: 11/9/2011
Amy Kimme-Hea

_______________________________________________________________________
Date: 11/9/2011
Damián Baca

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

_______________________________________________________________________
Date: 11/9/2011
Dissertation Director: Anne-Marie Hall
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at the University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this dissertation are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the head of the major department or the Dean of the Graduate College when in his or her judgment the proposed use of the material is in the interests of scholarship. In all other instances, however, permission must be obtained from the author.

SIGNED: Faith Kurtyka
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Anne Marie Hall, for her diligent support, encouragement, and guidance in this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Amy Kimme Hea and Dr. Damián Baca, for their useful suggestions for revision and thoughtful responses to my work. Jennifer Haley-Brown, Ashley Holmes, and Jenna Vinson, PhD candidates in RCTE, were instrumental in making this dissertation happen, from providing feedback to offering support both theoretical and emotional. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, LaRue Diehl, for his valuable insights on the workings of the undergraduate mind.
DEDICATION

For my dad, Dr. Thomas J. Kurtyka, D.P.M, the first “Dr. K,” who taught me to ask an honest question and get an honest answer.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES........................................................................................................................................... 9

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................................ 10

ABSTRACT.................................................................................................................................................. 11

I. DESCRIBING AND INSCRIBING THE EVERYDAY ................................................................. 13
   Describing Students ................................................................................................................................. 16
   The Rhetorical Power of the Everyday Ethnography ............................................................ 23
   Pedagogical Action Research .......................................................................................................... 29
   Theoretical Framing and Chapter Summaries ............................................................................... 34

II. FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE GOES TO COLLEGE: BUILDING ON STUDENTS’ EVERYDAY LITERACIES ................................................................................................................. 43
   The Context of Funds of Knowledge vs. Rhetorics and Literacies of Everyday Life of First-Year College Students ................................................................. 44
   Reading a High School Situation: An Everyday Literacy Practice ........................................ 52
   Undergraduate Cynical: An Everyday Literacy Practice ............................................................. 56
   Evaluation of Funds of Knowledge ................................................................................................. 64
   Pedagogical Outcomes ....................................................................................................................... 64
   Funds of Knowledge Outcomes ...................................................................................................... 68
   Reflections on Funds of Knowledge in College ............................................................................ 71
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>III. EVERYDAY INJUSTICES: RE-FRAMING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONSUMERIST IDEOLOGIES</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data and Method</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Culture</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Amplification and Bridging</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Transformation: Offering Social Norms in Place of Market Norms</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV. EVERYDAY CLASSROOM LIVES: CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN LECTURE HALLS AND COMPOSITION CLASSES</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity Theory</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction in Lecture Classes</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction in Composition Classes</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Construction of the Good Student in the Lecture Class</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Construction of the Good Student in the Composition Class</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in the Lecture Class</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in the Composition Classroom</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing Contradictions in the Third Space</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF CONTENTS -- Continued

V. EVERYDAY LIFE ON LOCATION: GREEK LIFE, RESIDENCE LIFE, AND STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

  The Activity Systems: Residence Life, Greek Life, and Student Organizations ...... 180
  Overlaps with the Composition Activity System.................................................. 189
  “What’s in it for me?”: Student Apathy and Consumerism.................................. 189
  Playing the Game ...................................................................................................... 196
  The Snowflake Mentality vs. Creating Community................................................. 199
  Contradictions with the Composition Activity System............................................. 201
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 209

VI. THE EVERYDAY TEACHER-RESEARCHER: A MODEL FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH

  Defining the Rhetoric of Everyday Life for College Students................................. 214
  Student Engagement Research................................................................................. 219
  Student Engagement Research in Practice.............................................................. 234
  Future Directions and New Contexts ........................................................................ 237

APPENDIX A. THE LISTENING ESSAY ........................................................................ 241
APPENDIX B. MULTI-GENRE RESEARCH PROJECT ................................................ 242
WORKS CITED ............................................................................................................. 243
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. Differences Between *Funds of Knowledge* and *Rhetorics and Literacies of Everyday Life of First-Year College Students* .................................................................48

TABLE 2. Consumerist and Alternate Frames........................................................................85

TABLE 3. Activity Systems of Lecture Classes and Composition Classes..................132

TABLE 4. Activity Systems of Student Life.................................................................183
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. Funds of Knowledge Process ......................................................... 62
FIGURE 2. Legitimate Peripheral Participation ............................................... 203
ABSTRACT

This project, *Rhetorics and Literacies of Everyday Life of First-Year College Students*, presents results from a year-long teacher-research study of 50 students in two sections of first-year composition. The goal of this project is to create writing pedagogy in touch with first-year students’ everyday worlds and to represent students as people who enter the classroom with literacies, knowledge, and resources. Using funds of knowledge methodology, this project shows how to use students’ existing literacy practices and rhetorical skills to move them to deeper levels of critical literacy. Employing frame analysis, this research shows how contemporary consumerist ideologies inform students’ orientations towards their education and demonstrates how to use these ideologies as a bridge to getting students to both question the meaning of a college degree and take an active role in their education. To show some of the tensions that emerge for students moving between the spaces of student life, this project uses activity theory to compare the everyday practices of lecture-hall classes and composition classes. “Third Space” theory is suggested as a way for students and teachers to leave familiar practices and scripts to question larger assumptions about the creation of knowledge. Activity theory is also used to examine students’ experiences in campus communities, where it is argued that students feel they are engaging in more authentic learning experiences, though they retain some of the attitudes they have towards their academic work in these communities. Combining activity theory, pedagogical action research, and principles of student-centered teaching, conclusions argue for a paradigm for “student engagement
research,” a methodology for teacher-researchers to both study students’ everyday lives and incorporate student culture into the teaching of writing.
I. DESCRIBING AND INSCRIBING THE EVERYDAY

I had the idea to study students’ everyday lives while conducting interviews for my master’s thesis, a study of the use of personal writing in a writing-across-the-curriculum course. A group of five students had volunteered to be interviewed for the study, and so three times during the semester, we met in the coffee shop adjoining the campus library. I asked them questions about their writing for the course, and they gave sufficient, if not enthusiastic, answers. Throughout these interviews, three rhetorical moves emerged in which I saw and heard more passion and energy than when the students were only telling me about school.

First, their complaints about the class were animated and indignant, specifically that the class was boring, or they didn’t see the value of the work they had to do, or they didn’t like how they were being graded. When I asked them follow-up questions to their complaints, however, they often floundered to come up with specific examples or further explain why some aspect of the class was meaningless or unfair. I sensed that complaint had become a rhetorical force, normalized into the way they talked about school, even if they didn’t have evidence to support their complaints. Their complaints were all the more surprising to me because I found the class well-planned and executed. Their professor had won numerous teaching awards, and it was clear to me from her assignments and the way that she talked about the course that she was reflective about what she wanted students to learn. All her assignments were pedagogically grounded, both in the ways of thinking in her field and in composition pedagogy, so I was surprised when students consistently characterized assignments as “busy work” or “pointless.”
The second rhetorical move I identified was the way students “figured out” the instructors and the class. Each student was impassioned in her defense of what she thought the instructor was “really” looking for. One was confident that her grammatical skills would earn her an A, another was sure that she had used enough quotes for an A, and a third, who actually consulted the scoring guide distributed with the assignment sheet, thought her thesis and evidence were strong enough for an A. I coded these stories about manipulating college life as “game-playing” narratives, exemplified by the passion and satisfaction one might have for a game well-played. On the flip side, observing the meetings of the professor and her teaching assistants, I witnessed how instructors were quick to explain students’ motives in ways that attributed their actions to personality traits (“they’re lazy”) rather than their environment or simple misunderstandings. For example, the instructors were frustrated that the students had used Wikipedia as a source for a research project and disappointed that students hadn’t made the effort to find a more legitimate source from a scholarly journal. For their part, the students told me they used Wikipedia because they thought the information was just as good as anything they would find in a scholarly journal and complained that the instructors’ grading was “harsh.”

In addition to complaints and game-playing stories, the third rhetorical move that disrupted my otherwise mundane interviews was the way students’ everyday lives were woven into the coursework.\footnote{My impulse is to say “their everyday lives outside academics,” but as I found, it is difficult to clearly mark the boundaries of what is inside and outside academics.} One student was listing the steps she took in writing a paper, paused, and then began talking about how she took a break from writing the paper to
work on her *Lord of the Rings* fan fiction. Immediately, she sat up straighter and began speaking with more intensity and focus, using hand gestures, adding anecdotes about her online fan fiction community. A similar phenomenon happened when a student told me about her dance workshop, and another who told me what she was watching on TV to procrastinate writing. In these moments, when students were talking about the way school was entwined into their lives, they became animated and passionate in contrast to the plodding narratives they told about writing essays.

I had stumbled upon some uniquely rhetorical characteristics of students’ everyday lives. The moments above strike me as rhetorical because they reveal the cultural logics students use to make arguments about how the university should function. I borrow the term “cultural logics” from Krista Ratcliffe who sees understanding cultural logics as a means of “rhetorical listening” or “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” with the purpose of identifying with the other in a way that allows successful communication (25). In rhetorical listening, one focuses on the other’s “cultural logics” so that “listeners may still disagree with each other’s claims, but they may better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning within a different logic” (33). Many of the students’ cultural logics defied expectations and beliefs I held dear as a student and a teacher. I had always thought that if I clearly explained to students what they would learn from something, they would be happy to go along with it. I assumed that students would make an effort to understand my pedagogical goals and would value them. I assumed that I was being transparent about my grading processes. I assumed, like the instructors I
interviewed, that I had students “figured out.” Finally, I assumed that academic work was the centerpiece of students’ lives and I didn’t realize how much other forces, like family and friend commitments, push and pull them in other directions.

If the cultural logics were the logos for their arguments about how the university should work, their impassioned responses to my interview questions were the pathos that animated their complaints. This pathos surfaced (1) when their logics were violated in some way, such as when a teacher awarded grades they deemed unfair, (2) as they were discovering the appropriate behaviors that would get them sufficient grades at the university, and (3) when they talked about their everyday activities that collided with academics. For my dissertation, I wanted to conduct a series of interviews that would capitalize on the enthusiasm that I found in these rhetorical moves and how they revealed the cultural logic of undergraduate students. For the purposes of this dissertation, the following are my central concerns of the rhetorics of everyday life of first-year college students.

1. How do students rhetorically construct their academic lives? What are the key rhetorical moves they make when talking about what their education means to them?
2. How do students’ constructions of academics conflict or converge with how instructors think about academics?
3. How do students’ academic worlds and social/everyday worlds intertwine?
4. How does any or all of this relate to writing and composition pedagogy?

**Describing Students**

I chose to conduct an ethnographic study of first-year college students to respond to these questions because ethnography can offer nuanced cultural representations of students, rather than defining them by what they lack or eliding their culture completely.
This is especially important considering that historical studies of the emergence of writing programs illustrate that composition studies was founded on an ideology that students can’t write, which was used to justify its existence as a discipline. As Sharon Crowley argues, to establish English studies as a discipline in the 19th century, those in the field had to prove that reading literature wasn’t just for fun. By creating a difficult entrance exam in English, they were able to create the appearance of a deficit in students who needed English instruction. Crowley says that Freshman English was “designed to create docile subjects who would not question the discipline’s continued and repeated demonstration of their insufficient command of their native tongue” (78). James Sledd comments that teachers view their students in a deficit model so that they can “transform” their students with writing instruction, disregarding students’ resistance, failing to question their own authority to transform, or whether students need “transformation” in the first place. According to Sledd, the most successful argument compositionists have made is for their own existence, which is predicated on proving that students can’t write.

Common tropes of teacher-talk also reflect a deficit model. In Writing Students: Composition Testimonials and Representation of Students, Marguerite Helmers points out how this deficit thinking pervades teacher narratives in composition studies, arguing that reducing students to a set of characteristics puts the teacher in the position to “domesticate and govern” students (48).

This “deficit model” has meant not just seeing students in terms of what they lack but a failure to “see” them at all. Crowley argues that composition teachers are so eager to avoid the “student-bashing” that characterized the discipline in its early years that
instead they talk about students as “newly born,” ready to take on whatever ideology the university has to offer. The corporatization of the university, meaning the way that the university has changed to reflect corporate models and structures, has also meant that students’ culture is elided from discussion of pedagogy and classroom practice. As Jeffrey Grabill contends, a corporate model means that those in “management”–both teachers and administrators–make curricular decisions based on what they think their “employees” or students need. More often, these decisions are based on what Kenneth Burke calls “terministic screens” or sets of symbols we use to interpret the world that direct our attention to certain aspects of phenomena (1344). Terministic screens like “first-year student” or “teenager” can lead to assumptions about students and subsequent designs of university life based on these assumptions. For example, the assumption that students are adept with technology might lead to a push for online classes, or an assumption that teenagers like junk food might lead to a student union full of fast food. These terministic screens serve as shorthand for bureaucratic standardizing practices, which represent students as “deracinated, ahistorical, malleable” to justify the sorting process of bureaucracy (Miller 16). Bruce Horner writes that the commodification of academic work–a result of professors trying to compete in a corporate model of the university–means that pedagogy, like the kind published in academic journals, must be able to be applied everywhere; in effect, the salient and unique character of classrooms and students are erased (33).

Critical pedagogy has made efforts to re-inscribe students’ everyday lives into composition pedagogy. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor incorporates
everyday life into the writing classroom by rooting his class in the problems and conflicts faced by his students at an open-enrollment college. Shor argues that doing so demonstrates to students that they can be empowered to solve the problems they face every day, a process he calls “extraordinarily experiencing the ordinary” (93, emphasis in original). By questioning “familiar” routines and power relations, students are encouraged to question other existential questions, alleviating the tensions between students’ academic study and the lives they lead outside of the classroom. Shor writes that this process “locates an empowering theory of knowledge in the re-perception of reality” (93). Inspired by Paulo Freire’s work with Brazilian peasants, Shor creates a model for getting students to question their reality, beginning with a “conceptual paradigm” which he uses to spark students’ curiosity by looking at the societal structures behind it (162). Using a hamburger from the school cafeteria, Shor asks students to describe the hamburger and its immediate social context, then its “global relations,” then the way it changes over time (165). This process encourages students to question their everyday lives and view themselves as agents of change in their circumstances.

James Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* is another example of a means of incorporating everyday life into the classroom. Berlin offers a social-epistemic rhetoric based on material conditions and subject positions. Because Berlin thinks that culture is as much about how people creatively respond to change as it is about how they create the circumstances of their experience, he thinks that teachers must understand their students’ social contexts to instigate dialogue and facilitate “sound planning about the topics, questions, and comments that are most likely to set a meaningful encounter in motion”
By examining students’ use of language in their everyday lives, they can realize the ideological functions of language and literacy practices.

Despite these strides towards incorporating students’ culture into composition, scholars continue to call for more nuanced and reflective ways of accounting for students’ everyday lives to encourage more concrete and realistic discussion, to understand students’ motivations more clearly, and to question the “norm” of undergraduate life. Todd Taylor argues that when compositionists do look at what’s going on in students’ lives, we tend to do so through “the safe, insulated, intellectualized bubble of academic talk” (135). Taylor argues that although students’ composing processes are shaped much more by their material circumstances than by ethos, pathos, and logos, composition studies often denies these material dimensions, meaning that our pedagogy ends up more institutionally-centered than we’d like to admit. In 1989, Kate Ronald and John Volkmer provided ethnographic data that supported this point, concluding that both students and teachers operate under the pretense that students are “writing to communicate” rather than writing to get a good grade or pass a class. They found:

Most of the research on writing processes is aimed, finally, at describing the composing habits of our students so as to change those processes, or at least help them gain more conscious control over them. It seems logical, and honest, therefore, to begin by discovering exactly what our students’ writing processes are, not only in experimental studies, but also in the contexts in which they operate every day. Our study, then, suggests further research in classrooms, dormitories, students’ writing places in general, rather than in controlled environments.

Ronald and Volkmer are arguing that research in composition too often imagines idealized conditions for writing, constructing students as people totally focused on
writing as opposed to people struggling with competing demands. “Writing” is not just the act of committing words to paper, but the place, circumstances, and contexts of that act. Ronald and Volkmer’s ethnographic research demonstrates that the material contexts of students’ writing—time of day, other homework, family life—determine the outcomes of their writing more so than rhetorical choices. In 1988, Mike Rose challenged researchers to put theories to the test based on the richness and diversity of language learning. He asks, “Do our practices work against classification that encourages single, monolithic explanations of cognitive activity? Do they honor the complexity of interpretive efforts even when those efforts fall short of some desired goal?” (297). Rose laments the loss of “the complexity of cognition—its astounding glides and its blunderous missteps as well-is narrowed, and the rich variability that exists in any social setting” (294).

Twenty years later, ethnographic research is still needed to offer composite sketches of undergraduates and the conditions under which they write. In her 2009 study of the reasons that students are silent in the classroom, Mary Reda finds that while composition teachers value speaking so much that they tend to “demonize” silent students, these students have compelling and logical reasons for not talking. She expresses concern that teachers are quick to make assumptions about students’ motives, instead of considering how their contexts are influencing their decisions about how to behave in class. Reda writes:

[W]e need to develop a clearer understanding of the contexts in which our students are working, learning, and speaking. . . [W]e also need to consider our students’ negotiations of the multiple relationships in a classroom—between teacher and student; the categories of “teachers” and “students”; a student’s
educational context and an individual classroom; “knowledge” and authority; the constructions of “self” and community; speaking and silence—that are made more difficult, ironically, because many of the terms of these relationships remain tacit. (153)

Reda argues for making explicit our expectations for behaviors in class, to question and de-privilege the way we construct “good” and “bad” students. Reda thinks that by getting to know students’ contexts, we can better understand why they act the way they do.

In response to these calls to factor in students’ social contexts when learning to write, I am challenged to re-think the idea that an ethnographic dissertation in composition should only be a study of students in the act of writing or students’ writing. So throughout this project, I also study what they think and believe, what they do, and how they theorize what they think and do, because literacy education always involves a larger set of ideological assumptions. As John Duffy contends, “all elements of literacy instruction . . . are ultimately rhetorical and ideological, ultimately intended to promote a vision of the world and the place of the learners in it” (43). To believe in the value of everyday life as a valuable site of study means believing in the context beyond writing—it includes the writing but is not limited by the writing. In calling for researchers to study everyday life, Martin Nystrand and John Duffy argue that “current research in composition [should] increasingly look beyond classroom-based investigations of written language toward the roles and meaning of writing in diverse social, historical, and political settings outside of academia” (xxx). While I certainly agree with this, I also think that a classroom investigation does not preclude “diverse social, historical, and political settings outside of academia.” A primary focus of this dissertation is how those settings come to bear in the classroom. Thus, this dissertation is composition-based in
that it studies composition students in a composition classroom, but it is distinctly rhetorical in that it looks at the rhetorics of these students’ everyday lives, “the ways individuals and groups use language to constitute their social realities, and as a medium for creating, managing, or resisting ideological meanings” (Nystrand and Duffy ix). For me, this means that I study how students imagine the university space and themselves as college students. I look at these rhetorics with the belief that they play an important role in understanding students for the purposes of literacy instruction.

*The Rhetorical Power of the Everyday Ethnography*

Linda Brodkey writes that “ethnography attempts to bring stories not yet heard to the attention of the academy” (48). So while it may seem that “everybody knows” what goes on with first-year college students, their everyday lives are a valuable site for ethnography precisely because they are often taken for granted. Ethnographies of everyday life have been able to show how students’ social contexts influence what they learn and their attitudes about learning. For example, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* reveals that literacies are an integral part of people’s lives, though not in ways that necessarily equal success in school. Challenging the notion that students who do not do well in school fail because of some kind of innate quality, Heath is able to connect the social contexts (including the literacy practices) of working-class students’ home lives to a lack of success in school-sanctioned literacies. When the student-teachers under Heath’s supervision conducted ethnographies of their students’ home lives, they were able to build and adapt their curriculum in ways that valued the knowledge in the
communities of working-class students. The teachers found that bridging home and school literacies led to increased student engagement and gave students authority in the classroom (314). Heath’s work proves that when teachers become ethnographers of students’ lives, they can base their curriculum on their knowledge of students’ home communities in ways that value those communities and mediate the disconnect between home and school. Margaret Finders thinks it is important for teachers to research students’ lives because what teachers think is student-centered often means the teacher’s perception of students and their culture, and is rarely based on systematic or rigorous study of that culture. Finders’ research on a group of 7th grade girls shows that teachers and other adults often rely on myths about adolescent life in making curricular decisions, and that students’ social networks determine what they will learn in the classroom (30). Finders thinks that by researching these social networks, teachers can discover ways of “breaking through” the social networks that delimit literate practice (128).

In *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*, Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti challenge the pedagogical view that learning happens in the de-contextualized space of the classroom, instead arguing that what students will learn is determined by “larger contextual, historical, political, and ideological frameworks that affect students’ lives” (ix). To confront the idea of schooling as place where students are empty receptacles that teachers must fill with knowledge, the authors of this book—educators in Tucson, Arizona—conducted ethnographic work on the home lives of the students in their classes, most of whom were from working-class, Mexican-American communities. The point of their project was not
to replicate this knowledge in the classroom but to validate students’ experiences, and build what they already know from their families and homes into other areas of the curriculum (González 43). The Funds of Knowledge project challenged the common pedagogical practice of seeing students in terms of what they lack and the roles of the teacher-as-expert as the student as “know-nothing.”

This dissertation, then, consists of ethnographic work on the rhetorics and literacies of everyday life of first-year college students with the goal of creating pedagogy that accounts for students’ culture, uses students’ prior learning to support new learning, and challenges and questions assumed terministic screens for first-year college students. I believe that analyzing these rhetorics and literacies of everyday life will lead me to a better understanding of first-year students’ culture. As the ethnographies above demonstrate, learning about students’ culture can provide significant benefit for classroom instruction as well as the ideological orientation of composition studies. The Funds of Knowledge researchers report that they had a greater understanding of the complexity of their students’ lives, and how their home lives affected classroom learning. Teachers were able to individualize their curricula, instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach. Ethnographic work helped teachers earn students’ respect and “students come to feel safe entrusting teachers to guide their learning and development of self” (Buck and Skilton Sylvester 218).

---

2 Funds of Knowledge does not take into account the use of prior knowledge and resources to the exclusion of learning or doing anything new. The authors are clear that the goal “is not to merely reproduce household knowledge in the classroom. . . . [but to build] classroom practice . . . on the familiar knowledge bases that students can manipulate to advance learning in . . . other content areas” (González 43).
The most well-known ethnographies of college student culture are James Moffatt’s *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture*, published in 1989, and Rebekah Nathan’s *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, published in 2005. Both are participant-observation ethnographies of college student culture, where the ethnographer poses as a college student. Both find that the full burden of demands placed on students—like different expectations in different classes, responsibilities to clubs and organizations, and financial problems—need to be taken into account to understand why students behave the way they do. Nathan’s book in particular stresses how much of students’ lives at college is taken up by activities that don’t directly relate to their classes.

Cognizant of this work, I originally decided not to do participant-observation like Moffatt and Nathan both because of time constraints but also because I felt their experience as a participant observing obscured the viewpoints of the undergraduates. In both texts, the reader tends to learn more about the researchers’ views and biases than the students, and students are rarely given an opportunity to theorize their own experiences. I wanted to conduct research that was more collaborative, and I wanted to make sure that students had a voice in interpreting their experiences. Moffatt and Nathan also see students in terms of what they lack, often expressing disappointment in the students. Nathan, for example, holds an unspoken ideal of college life where students show up for class every day with all the homework completed and engage in lively discussion with their fellow students. Because she holds this idea but never foregrounds it, she tends to
see students in ways they deviate from what she thinks they should be. Moffatt often takes pains to illustrate his superiority to students by representing them as shallow.

At the beginning of the write-up phase of this project, I thought I was going to be able to do better than this. I was determined to not fall prey to Keith Rhodes’ caution that oftentimes in ethnographic study, “The inquiry becomes less a question of ‘What is the cultural situation of writing education?’ and more a question of ‘What is lacking in these students?’” (28).

Easier said than done. Though chapter two of this dissertation, I think, does a good job of avoiding a deficit model, many times throughout the rest of the project, one can observe where, like Nathan and Moffatt, I get frustrated or irritated, especially with students’ consumerist ideologies in chapter three. This is not to say that these emotions need to be expunged from my analysis. Ethnographers are encouraged to record “personal” and “emotional” experiences, in both interviews and fieldnotes, because they are important later on for interpreting data (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 104, 113). As ethnographer Ralph Cintron observes, “some of the most important human encounters are those that cause anxiety, even anger. At these moments, we encounter all those limitations that define us” (130-31). Thus, I attempted to delve into moments that frustrated me, believing that the roots of my frustrations represented places where I was seeing something differently or learning something new. While I don’t pretend that my work entirely avoids the pitfalls of seeing students in a deficit model, this project helped me to question my assumptions about students and the assumptions embedded into composition pedagogy. In looking at the larger context of American consumerism in
chapter three and the differing activity systems of lecture classes and student organizations in chapters four and five, I gained a better understanding of how students’ outside contexts influence their behaviors in composition.

Though my interviews for my master’s project had been with juniors and seniors, I chose to focus of first-year students for this project. As an instructor of first-year composition, I thought it would be useful to me to understand this demographic. I hoped that studying first-year students in transition would help me respond to Bruce Horner’s call for a representation of students’ social contexts as “an ongoing, heterogeneous material process” that is “conflicted” and “processual” (37). First-year students seemed to me an ideal group to study because their integration into the university is in-process and constantly being revised, as I will show in the following chapters. First-year students are also interesting to me because they present a kind of “outsider within” standpoint, meaning that they are in a unique position to offer criticisms of the status quo. Patricia Hill Collins traces how Black women who have been “insiders” to White culture without the ability to ever really belong have been able to “tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender” in literature and especially in academia (S15). Collins argues that the benefit of this position is “the ability of the ‘stranger’ to see patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to see” (S15). Outsiders within also have the power to adopt a “critical posture . . . [which] may be essential to the creative development of academic disciplines themselves” (S15). Most first-year students are being offered “insider” status as college students but have not yet fully been immersed in or achieved substantial success in college life. Though many will
eventually end up insiders, their first year of college is a time when they are still making that transition, and so their viewpoints provide powerful insight and critique into the taken-for-granted practices of the university.\(^3\) This is not to say that a uniformity of viewpoint exists for first-year college students. Students address the challenges of college in multiple ways using the resources they have available to them. Trying to understand college life requires using the skills they’ve developed over years of socialization into education, and so I am interested in their viewpoint not for the purposes of generalization but because the various strategies they use creates a diverse and dynamic picture of university life.

*Pedagogical Action Research*

I wanted to do an ethnography of the everyday lives of first-year college students to also understand how social contexts influence learning. I was attracted to the methodology of pedagogical action research, defined broadly as systematic inquiry by teachers on students and classrooms with the purpose of improving learning, involving “using a reflective lens through which to look at some pedagogical issue or problem and methodically working out a series of steps to take action to deal with that issue” (Norton xvi). Pedagogical action research analyzes data along with participants, assumes that learning takes place within a social context, and reflects on the researchers’ stance and investment in the project (Norton 54-56). In addition to enabling me to teach and research

\(^3\) Many will end up insiders, but many won’t. The percentage of students who began their studies in fall of 2009 and returned in fall 2010 is only 77% (National Center “University of Arizona”).
at the same time and immediately incorporate my findings into my teaching, I felt that what I wanted to know about students affected my identity as a teacher, and my curiosities about them reflected conflicts and confusions in the student-teacher relationship.

One way of conducting pedagogical action research is to modify a classroom practice and reflect on how learning improves, which I do in chapter two. An alternate direction, however, analyzes more broadly the functioning of disciplinary knowledge and epistemologies, which I do in chapters three, four, and five. In arguing for this approach, Carolin Kreber writes that “within the discourse on the scholarship of teaching, we read, hear and certainly learn much about how to teach certain concepts better, but relatively little about the kinds of learning experiences we hope students will have during their college and university years, and why we believe certain experiences are more valuable than others” (391, emphasis in original). Kreber believes that pedagogical action research, in addition to improving learning, can lead to a fundamental re-thinking of the goals of higher education. Lin Norton terms this the “enhancement approach” to pedagogical action research, meaning that “the emphasis is not so much on the individual practitioner/s themselves, but on understanding the social and political context in which their practice occurs” (54). This goal most interested me because I felt that those social and political contexts determined how students were understanding their university educations and because these contexts inspired the spirited interviews I had done for my master’s thesis project.
To generate a list of interview topics, I conducted a series of five pilot interviews with students in my first-year composition class in the fall of 2008, asking students about all aspects of their daily lives, and I selected interview topics based on when I heard from students the moments I described at the beginning of this chapter: students de-coding institutional demands, finding ways to work the system, and carving out spaces for their own interests within academic life. I also chose topics that I thought would dovetail with the goals of literacy learning in first-year composition. I came up with a list of eight areas of everyday life that showcased these rhetorical moves: residence halls, fraternities and sororities, time management, student organizations, on- and off-campus jobs, high school vs. college life, text messaging, and writing in other classes. At the start of each semester in my composition classes in the fall of 2009 and spring of 2010, I presented this list to students and asked them to sign up for one interview about one topic. Over the 2009-2010 academic year, I conducted interviews with 17 groups of 2-4 students in my first- and second-year composition courses (English 101 and 102). These courses fulfill the first-year writing requirement for most students at my university. (I have two interviews for every topic except for student organizations, because no student had yet signed up for a student organization at the beginning of the fall semester.) The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. I taught one section of 25 students each semester and so interviewed almost 50 students. I describe the institutional contexts of this class and these students further in chapter two.

A representative from the Institutional Review Board at my university thought it best to do the interviews as part of the course curriculum. Concerned that students not
feel pressured to perform in a certain way, I allowed them to sign up for whatever topic was interesting to them, noting that they did not have to be an “expert” in the topic to discuss it. In the interview itself, I told them that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they received credit just for showing up to the interview. The grade for the interviews amounted to approximately 0.06% of their final grade for the class, so if the students chose not to attend, it would not significantly impact their grade. I did not ask any direct questions about myself or my class. I chose what Andrea Fontana and James Frey refer to as “unstructured” interviewing, where the researcher is trying to “understand the complex behavior of members of a society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (366). The particular emphasis here is on “the desire to understand rather than explain” (366). I had a list of guiding questions, but deviated from them to follow what the students were interested in. And when the students seemed hesitant to answer a question or appeared uncomfortable in their body language, I changed directions.

The biggest ethical dilemma I faced was overcoming my position as an institutional authority. In her work with dropping-out narratives at an alternative high school, Betsy Rymes reasons, “Storytellers carefully craft language to render the events of their lives simultaneously reportable to their peers and to me, the researcher, and whatever institutional agenda they see me representing” (42, emphasis in original). In balancing the roles of teacher and researcher, I am challenged to reflect on the power each of these roles gives me, and how I can negotiate that power differential in ways that resist domination. As Helen Dale writes, the teacher-researcher faces “competing
fidelities” to students, to teaching, and to the research project (92). In interviews, my goal was to downplay my role as teacher, because, as this dissertation proves, students perform in ways that win a teacher’s favor. I cannot say that students forgot my institutional position as their teacher, or that they spoke to me as they would a peer. I do think I was successful in diminishing my role as teacher, at least enough so that students weren’t always fishing for a right answer to please me. The focus group dynamic meant that students often spoke directly to each other, asking each other questions, and telling each other stories, lessening my role. I conducted all the interviews in small conference rooms instead of the classroom to move out of the space where I was seen as the authority. My authority was also lessened by my appearance: I appear young enough to be an undergraduate, and I am female and small in stature. Furthermore, as the interviews went along, I learned the insider terminology students used to talk about their daily lives, and so I used this terminology when interviewing, which contributed to downplaying my teacher role. For example, I learned that students tended to use the word “teacher” for instructors of small classes, and referred to themselves as “freshmen,” so I used these words in interviewing. And of course, I also believe that students came to trust me as the semester went along, as I demonstrated to them that I cared about them and what they had to say.

While my appearance and stance likely contributed to students’ openness with me, I also think they were willing to talk about their educational experiences because they were excited that someone cared what they thought. Ira Shor describes the same honesty occurring when arranges for a group of students to give him feedback on his
class. Shor writes, “[Students] ate my liver twice a week while I lay chained to the rock of experimental democracy. To my amazement, they let me hear more than I was comfortable knowing” (When Students 124). For me, there were definitely moments when having to listen patiently to students’ laundry list of complaints felt like being chained to a rock. Shor suspects that students are so forthcoming because “they had been storing up grievances in a system that schooled and ruled them without asking their opinions, in preparation for a long life in a big country with a small democracy” (When Students 124). I often had this same feeling—that students had spent most of their educational careers complaining to peers or not saying anything at all—and they welcomed an opportunity to talk to someone about what they were going through.

At the same time, however, I was careful not to completely reduce my position as teacher because I wanted students to know that I was conducting this research because I wanted to be a better teacher. So although I conducted the interviews in the role of an interested observer, the classroom research was determined by my teacher role, meaning I assigned essays and in-class writings and led class discussions that would help me understand undergraduate life. Chapters two and three offer significantly more detail about the writing students did about undergraduate life.

**Theoretical Framing and Chapter Summaries**

The chapters of this dissertation start close to the classroom and then move beyond the classroom. I first look how students’ existing literacy practices demonstrate rhetorical skills which can be built upon to move them to deeper levels of critical literacy.
I then expand to understand how contemporary consumerist ideologies inform students’ perceptions of a college degree as a commodity, and how to alleviate tensions this may cause in the composition classroom. Then, I compare the everyday practices of large lecture-hall classes with the practices of smaller composition class to reveal the tensions that emerge for students in moving between these spaces. Finally, I examine students’ experiences in campus communities like Greek life and student organizations, how they understand their identities in these groups, and the kinds of learning that goes on in these spaces. Combining activity theory, pedagogical action research, and principles of student-centered teaching, I create a paradigm for “student engagement research,” a methodology for studying the everyday life of college students, with a particular emphasis on genres of writing.

Considering the purpose of this project was to see student culture in all its complexity, I sought out theories that would help me see a more nuanced picture of students’ social contexts. This dissertation, then, takes a multi-pronged theoretical approach to studying everyday life so that each data set is analyzed with an appropriate theoretical model. Below, I talk about some of the different lenses I use and how they help me see the everyday, and how each frame affected my coding. The individual chapters themselves will be most effective in laying out the details of the theories; in this introduction, I only want to stress how each theory was selected and how I coded the data using the theory.

Chapter two uses funds of knowledge theory, as described earlier, and builds from ethnographies of “social literacies.” I was attracted to the funds of knowledge theory
because it specifically aims to avoid monolithic or simplistic notions of culture. Instead, it advocates using the “processual approach” to culture as defined by Norma González: “what people do, and what people say about what they do” (40). Thus, through a series of focus group interviews and a writing assignments, I examine students’ rhetorics of everyday life and “social literacies,” or the embedded literacy practices students use to “make sense” of their social world at the university (Barton and Hamilton 7). A central assumption of all this scholarship, which I share, is that “People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (González, Moll, and Amanti x). “Social literacies” denotes the way people use literacies to make sense of their social worlds, based on Michel DeCerteau’s approach to the “everyday,” which analyzes how people resist conformity to social structures in daily life. By highlighting social literacies, ethnographers like Shirley Brice Heath, David Barton and Mary Hamilton, and Ralph Cintron have de-privileged a standard of “good” or “correct” literacy and challenge the notion that literacy is the unique territory of educational institutions. Certainly, composition studies is not oblivious to students’ literacy practices, particularly those like text messaging that frequently surface in the classroom. What ethnographers of social literacies do, however, and what this chapter does, is view “deficits” through a different set of terministic screens to see them as strengths or resources. The approaches of both Funds of Knowledge and ethnographers of social literacies were useful to me in changing these terministic screens. When coding my data, I looked for everyday literacy practices, and the social purposes they served for students.
In chapter two, “Funds of Knowledge Goes to College: Building on Students’ Everyday Literacies,” I first explore some of the ethical issues of taking Funds of Knowledge, which was originally designed for working-class elementary and middle school students, who are Mexican-origin, African American, and American Indian, and moving it to an institution of higher education of primarily white, middle-class students. I describe the pedagogical choices I made in researching students’ funds of knowledge, and the process of building the curriculum. I find that students’ knowledge of how power works in informal social peer networks can be used as a bridge to understanding how power works in institutional contexts, and how language can be used as a tool to change those contexts. I conclude with a reflection and evaluation of the use of funds of knowledge at the college level.

In writing up chapter two, I found that funds of knowledge theory sometimes caused me to focus too much on creating a uniformly positive representation of students.\(^4\) I was emphasizing what I liked and appreciated about students and ignoring things that frustrated or confused me. I found myself becoming frustrated in particular at moments where students expressed consumerist ideas about their education, and I wanted to understand the stories they told themselves about their university education that led them to a consumerist mentality. Chapter three, “Everyday Injustices: Re-framing First-Year Students’ Consumerist Ideologies,” interprets students’ consumerist mentalities using sociologist Erving Goffman’s theory of framing. In this theory, a frame is a narrative that

\(^4\) I am not implying that the Funds of Knowledge researchers did this, just that when I attempted a similar project, I found myself doing so.
provides a schema by which individuals come to understand and interpret events as well as decide on future actions. I use Jim A. Kuyper’s methodology for frame analysis, identifying frames by looking for “key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images, and names given to persons, ideas, and actions” and examining how these frames “define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies” (301).

I identify frames by looking at the way students talk about what they think is wrong with their university education and how it could be improved. Frame analysis theory provided a useful way for me to understand how students were approaching their education and caused me to look at how that contrasted with my own approach. In coding for frame analysis, I looked at the logics behind what students thought was unjust at the university.

I seek multiple frames by which to understand students’ complaints that might otherwise be uniformly labeled “consumerist.” Complicating these frames is important because students’ consumerism is typically seen as a deficit in feminist and critical pedagogies. Therefore, I find it necessary to acknowledge the consumerist dimensions of students’ writing, while also complicating the portrait of first-year students as consumerist, seeking ways that they adopt, resist, and struggle with consumerist ideology. Because the consumerist frames and the alternate interpretations of the frames are ultimately about the meaning and value of an education, I believe they present a funds of knowledge opportunity to talk with students about what they want out of their education, how they can become active learners, and alternate models for education. I use a method called “frame alignment” to explore some ways to use consumerist ideologies as a route to class discussions on the meaning and value of education. I suggest having
students re-visit their early expectations of college, offering them ways of becoming active learners, and asking them to articulate the products they should receive from their tuition dollars. To instigate a large-scale questioning of how consumerism infiltrates the university, I propose offering students an alternative model of education based on social norms rather than market norms.

For chapter four, “Everyday Classroom Lives: Contradictions Between Lecture Classes and Composition Classes,” I wanted to understand the lecture classes (general education classes of 100-1000 students) that dominate students’ academic experiences in their first year. I argue that composition needs to factor in the lecture class to understandings of student’s cultures because students’ behavior in composition classes is often a response to the social conditions they face in these lecture classes. One theory that was useful to me in this chapter was the concept of “repertoires of practice,” which are the “linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires” that people use to move between boundaries, encompassing both “vertical” learning that takes place as people move to greater membership in communities of practice, and “horizontal” forms of learning that occurs as people move across institutional and societal boundaries (Gutiérrez and Rogoff 22). I look at the repertoires of practice students bring with them to the composition classroom because I want to understand how their previous and current experiences in lecture classes influence their behavior in composition.

Another way to understand the social spheres students move through is by using the lens of activity theory. Activity theory is based on what people do, and how they do it, unlike analyzing a “place,” which is often tied to a physical location, or a “discourse
community,” which is often perceived as monolithic. In chapters four and five, activity theory helps me to look at the differences between the spaces students move through in their everyday lives by drawing my attention to what students are trying to accomplish in each situation. I could have used frame analysis for chapters four and five but decided not to because students were talking more about communities they were joining and the outcomes they were trying to achieve through certain behaviors, as opposed to imagining a university education. Activity theory also focuses on different activity systems, meaning that it begins with the assumption that students do not approach every class in the same way. In other words, activity theory helped me acknowledge that students were coming from somewhere else that was very different from composition classes.

Chapter four analyzes the lecture class as an activity system and then contrasts it to the sort of activity system I attempt to foster in my composition classroom, using composition theory and reflections on and observations of my own teaching. I found that for students, the boundaries of the lecture class and the composition class were fluid, even though for me they seemed like two very different spaces. The boundary that was most important to students was between academic and social life. I suggest that because they see all kinds of academic life as the same—whether composition class or lecture class—they use the same tools, rules, and behaviors in all their academic pursuits. I suggest the concept of “Third Space” as theorized by Kris Gutiérrez, Betsy Rymes, and Joann Larson as a heuristic for navigating activity systems and provide a detailed narrative about my encounter with Third Space. I think that Third Space offers a way for
both the students and the teacher to rethinking their repertoires of practice and activity systems, calling on both to think differently.

Chapter five, “Everyday Life On Location: Greek Life, Residence Life, and Student Organizations,” uses activity theory to analyze some of the activity systems involving the first-year college students in my study to think about how these systems interplay with the layers of academic life, specifically how these activity systems overlap and contradict each other, and what that means for composition. I find that in both academic activity systems and the activity systems of residence life, Greek life, and student organizations, students display attitudes of apathy and consumerism, tell game-playing narratives to explain how they move through the activity system, and hold individualistic views of themselves and those around them. In the activity systems of residence life, Greek life, and student organizations, however, I noticed that students display an enthusiasm for learning through the process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 93), where students are apprenticed to become members of a community—an enthusiasm I did not find in the way they talked about their academic lives.

My concluding chapter, “The Everyday Teacher-Researcher: A Model for Student Engagement Research,” offers a teacher-research paradigm I call “student engagement research” that offers a means for both students and teachers to become ethnographers of students’ everyday life. This method reflects a commitment to privileging students’ viewpoints and a way of finding and highlighting those viewpoints. After re-defining what the rhetoric of everyday life has come to mean for me in studying undergraduates
over the course of this project, I offer principles of student engagement research for capturing this everyday life.

This project began with my desire to conduct interviews that were passionate and enthusiastic, and so I chose three rhetorical moments that I felt captured this enthusiasm. I had many more moments like those cited at the beginning of the chapter, and I have tried to structure the chapters here around these moments. The rhetorical force of complaint is most present in chapter three, where I aim to understand students’ logics for how the university should work to discern why they get upset when it doesn’t work that way. Students’ “game-playing stories” of how they figured out their classes is the centerpiece of chapter four, and chapter five seeks to understand why they get so excited in these extracurricular contexts and less excited in composition. I hope that the students’ enthusiasm shines through in the data I’ve presented here. Perhaps the most honest representation of first-year students I can offer is one of people who are trying to make sense of their lives, actively engaged in trying on new identities and adjusting to a new space.
II. FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE GOES TO COLLEGE: BUILDING ON STUDENTS’ EVERYDAY LITERACIES

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of taking funds of knowledge pedagogy,\(^5\) originally designed for working-class elementary and middle school students, who are Mexican-origin, African American, and American Indian, and moving it to an institution of higher education of primarily white, middle-class students. When importing a research method across disciplinary boundaries, in this case from educational anthropology to rhetoric and composition, it is important to investigate how the method worked in its original disciplinary context. This chapter begins, then, with a comparison between the social contexts of *Funds of Knowledge* and the social context of the university where I work. Contrasting these two contexts, in effect, functions as a site description for this project. After this comparison, I describe the pedagogical process by which I located students’ funds of knowledge and built a curriculum around them. I identified two literacy practices: (1) students’ rhetorical awareness of the way that people communicate in high school and (2) “undergraduate cynical,” a critique of authority figures and authoritarian structures that typically arise in students’ conversations with peers. I argue that students’ knowledge of how power works in informal social networks can be used as a bridge for them to understand how power works in institutional contexts, and how language can be used to change those contexts. I evaluate the use of funds of

---

\(^5\) I use funds of knowledge (no italics) to refer to the pedagogy and methodology, and *Funds of Knowledge* to refer to the book itself.
knowledge in light of the pedagogical goals I had for the course and offer an overall reflection of the use of funds of knowledge theory at the college level.

The Context of Funds of Knowledge vs. Rhetorics and Literacies of Everyday Life of First-Year College Students

In *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*, a group of elementary and middle school teachers, working under the guidance of educational researchers at the University of Arizona, conducted ethnographic work on the home lives of their working-class students. With the premise that people are “competent, they have knowledge and their life experiences have given them that knowledge,” (González, Moll and Amanti, “Preface” x), the Funds of Knowledge approach uses “students’ knowledge and prior experiences as a scaffold for new learning” (Amanti 135). To re-orient themselves from seeing students in a deficit model, teacher-researchers visited communities and interviewed students’ families to determine the knowledge that circulates in working-class communities. The point of this methodology was not to replicate this knowledge in the classroom but to validate students’ experiences and build what they already know from their families and homes into other areas of the curriculum (González 43). The funds of knowledge project de-privileged the typical, linear student-teacher relationship so that the teacher could understand “the multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed” (González 74). The researchers hoped to alleviate the gap between what students did in their everyday lives and what
they had to do in school, in the belief that alleviating this tension would increase students’ engagement in school.

Funds of Knowledge emerged from anthropological work with Mexican-American communities in Tucson, Arizona and was a collaborative project among Norma González, an anthropologist, Luis Moll, an educational researcher, and Cathy Amanti, a graduate student in anthropology and education and elementary school teacher. Both González and Moll had previously conducted ethnographic work in working-class Tucson communities. Amanti was concerned that her teacher training program had blamed households of low-income and minoritized families for low student achievement in school, under the assumption that such households did not value education. In her actual experience working with these students, Amanti found them to be active and engaged learners (7).

Funds of knowledge theory pulls from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who rejected the “banking concept of education,” a model whereby the student passively learns and the teacher teaches (Freire 58). In the funds of knowledge model, as in Freire’s model of problem-posing education, traditional student and teacher roles are questioned and complicated. Instead of the teacher holding all the knowledge and passing it along to students, knowledge is co-created. The funds of knowledge researchers also used Freire’s notion of “dialogue as emancipatory educational process” when they spoke to students’ parents about the historical roots of their experiences in the United States (González et al.108). As a result of this dialogue, the parents felt more confident about the role they
could take in their child’s education, seeing themselves as “worthy of pedagogical notice” (González et al. 108).

Many of these parents likely did not feel that they were “worthy of pedagogical notice” because of the state of Arizona’s neglect for educating English language learners. At the time *Funds of Knowledge* was conceived and implemented, for example, a lawsuit was brought against the state of Arizona, charging the state with not allocating proper funding to school districts with a majority of low-income, English language learners. The plaintiffs succeeded in proving that the mere $150 allocated per student violated the Equal Education Opportunities Act (EEOA) because it was insufficient to provide adequate resources to students (Wright 667). Various ballot measures and laws have since passed seeking to limit immigrant rights in Arizona, contributing to largely negative public views of Mexican-origin people entering the United States. Perhaps the most well-known of these regarding education, Proposition 203, passed by ballot initiative in 2000, in effect created English-only education and “sparked widespread debate about immigration and immigrant communities as a whole, stirring up strong emotions about illegal immigrants and directed attacks on the Hispanic community in particular” (Wright 690).

Anti-immigrant sentiment in Arizona is still strong today, as evidenced by the passage of Senate Bill 1070 in April of 2010, requiring immigrants to carry documentation of their legal status at all times, creating penalties for those who help illegal immigrants, and prohibiting local law agencies from restricting enforcement of immigration laws (Arizona State Legislature). According to polls, support for this bill
among Arizonans was as high as 70 percent (Holub). Another recent bill, House Bill 2281, imposes fines on schools with “ethnic studies” programs that teach students about Raza culture. Luis Moll argues that such publicly supported measures create “neocolonial ideological conditions” for the schooling of Latino/a children because they remove the students’ culture and language from the school context (276). Angela Valenzuela refers to the schooling process of Latino/a children as “a powerful, state-sanctioned instrument of cultural de-identification, or de-Mexicanization” (161). Funds of Knowledge, then, is an important social justice model of education because it views students in terms of the strengths and resources that result from their home lives, reversing the systematic oppression of their culture.

I learned about *Funds of Knowledge* in a graduate class on multicultural education and social justice I took through the education department at my university. Reading the book for the first time, I was impressed by the teachers who were willing to cross home/school boundaries to really get to know their students and by the creative ways they incorporated students’ home culture into their classrooms. As I mentioned in the opening of chapter one, I was interested in the ways that students’ material conditions and outside-of-school activities come to bear on their learning and wanted to conduct an ethnography of undergraduate life. The challenge presented by *Funds of Knowledge* was not just to “know” students in my class but to actually use what I learned to teach them, adapting funds of knowledge theory to account for different students in a different context.
The demographics of the University of Arizona, a research university in the American Southwest, are quite different from those of the project described in *Funds of Knowledge*. Table 1 articulates the many differences in contexts and methods of funds of knowledge and my project. Perhaps the most salient difference is that the students at my institution are majority Caucasian and have parents who went to college. Though I did not gather racial demographic data on the students who participated in this study, approximately 62% of the incoming first-year class at the fall of 2009 identified as White, non-Hispanic (Office of Institutional Research). In the fall of 2010, only 17% of resident first-year students were first-generation students, meaning that their parents did not attend college (Sears).

| TABLE 1. Differences between *Funds of Knowledge* and *Rhetorics and Literacies of Everyday Life of First-Year College Students*. |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Timeframe** | Early 1990’s | 2009-2010 |
| **Researcher(s)** | Elementary and middle-school teachers in two groups: one of four teachers and one of 10 teachers | Faith Kurtyka, PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition |
| **Research Participants** | “the households of working-class Mexican-origin, African American, or American Indian students” (6) | 49 first-year composition students |
| **Institutional Setting** | Elementary and middle schools in Tucson, AZ | 4-year PhD-granting university in Tucson, AZ |
| **Methods** | Participant observation, life history narratives, reflection on | One year of classroom observation, 17 interviews with focus groups of |

---

6 All but two of the 49 students in my two semesters of first-year composition classes entered the university directly out of high school.
Because of the great differences between these projects, I am hesitant to say that I “did” funds of knowledge because clearly, I did not replicate the study as represented in the book. Despite the differences, I still call this chapter a funds of knowledge project for two primary reasons. First, I share with the funds of knowledge researchers an exigency that monolithic, deficit-driven views of students culture are problematic for teaching. First-year students at the University of Arizona face a much different kind of “deficit model” than the students described in *Funds of Knowledge*. In chapter one, I outlined some of the ways rhetorics of deficit circulate in the field of composition, writing program administration, and anthropological texts on undergraduate culture. These deficit rhetorics circulate in the public sphere as well. For example, every year since 1998, Beloit College has published a “mindset list” which claims to offer “a look at the cultural touchstones that shape the lives of students entering college this fall” (Nief and McBride). Widely publicized and re-published in national newspapers, this list has a paternalistic, nostalgic tone, focusing on what students don’t know or haven’t experienced. For example, the list for the class of 2014 reads, “Few in the class know how to write in cursive” and “Unless they found one in their grandparents’ closet, they have never seen a carousel of Kodachrome slides” (Nief and McBride). Assuming that students have no contact with history whatsoever, the list fixes students in a concrete
historical moment with statements like “They may have assumed that parents’ complaints about Black Monday had to do with punk rockers from L.A., not Wall Street” (Nief and McBride).

The “millennial generation,” a term referring to students born between 1982-2002, are also often seen in a deficit model as students. Teachers complain that millennials have short attention spans, due to their overuse of technology. Millennials are often portrayed as seekers of instant gratification who demand convenience. To be clear, I do not believe that popular views of millennial students are the same as the popular views of students of color or low-income students in *Funds of Knowledge*. I do find a parallel between the way millennials are discussed in higher education and the way that Latino/a students are discussed in K-12 education because a lot of literature on teaching millennials discusses them as though they are some exotic, other culture, like “Millennials in College: How Do we Motivate Them?” (McGlynn) and “Lessons from Teaching Millennials” (Stewart) and “A New Take on What Today's Students Want From College” (Young). A rhetorical practice of making generalizations about a kind of culture makes researchers, teachers, and the general public believe we can “know” them. I share with funds of knowledge theory a desire to complicate deficit-driven and over-generalized models by conducting ethnographic research into students’ cultures.

The second reason I classify this chapter as a funds of knowledge project is that I share an ideological stance with that project: I believe that students’ learning exists within the larger contexts of their lives and that an ethnographic analysis of this culture can offer nuance to stereotypical views. These views, which reflect an “assumed
isomorphism of space, place and culture,” are exactly what Norma González critiques by conducting funds of knowledge work (37). She argues that cultural generalizations about students often assume that they are “passive recipients” or even victims of their culture, and ignores the ways in which students construct their own identities and form ideologies (36). González stresses the significance of not seeing culture as an intractable force. Instead, she advocates a “processual approach,” looking at “what people do and what they say about what they do” in order to build a dialogue between students’ home life and school life (40). I too am interested in breaking down generalizations by looking at what students actually do, because I also agree that representation of culture should be “dynamic, interactional, and emergent” (González 37).

I will evaluate my use of the funds of knowledge methodology based on how well students achieved the first-year composition course goals and the pedagogical outcomes of funds of knowledge. The course goals are drawn from two of the goals of the first-year composition program at the University of Arizona and represent the critical and analytical skills students develop in college writing. I had two further pedagogical outcomes that I hoped would be a result of using funds of knowledge pedagogy. First, students should gain a sense of self-sufficiency at college-level writing, feeling that their previous experiences with reading and writing will help them tackle new challenges. The ideological thrust of funds of knowledge is that students are capable and resourceful, but I find they have internalized a deficit model through years of education. I wanted to challenge this belief by showing students how they were already users of rhetorical analysis in their everyday lives. Furthermore, students should believe their existing
literacy practices are valuable for learning school-sanctioned literacies. Pulling from Shirley Brice Heath’s coinage in *Ways With Words*, Barton and Hamilton define “literacy practices” as the “larger patterns of how people talk and think about literacy” (6). In most ethnographies of everyday literacies, literacy practices are defined in terms of products, for example, “writing grocery lists.” I am more interested, however, in the critical thinking that results in the written product. This critical thinking amounts to literacy practices as well, because it reveals patterns of thinking about literacy. Thus, I’m using “critical thinking” to mean a kind of rhetorical awareness and analysis that students do in their everyday lives that can be used to achieve the course goals stated above (and can also be transferred back into everyday life). I also wanted students to leave their comfort zones, experimenting with new kinds of writing for new audiences, confident that they have the background necessary to try new kinds of writing. To summarize:

**Course Goals**
1. Assess the rhetorical strategies writers use to achieve their purposes with varied audiences, situations and purposes.
2. Develop critical analyses of public, scholarly and personal issues based on research, observations and reflections from their own experiences.

**Funds of Knowledge Outcomes**
1. Students should gain a sense of self-sufficiency at college-level writing, feeling that their previous experiences with reading and writing will help them tackle new challenges.
2. Students should believe their everyday literacies are valuable for learning school-sanctioned literacies. Students should be able to leave their comfort zones of reading and writing, experimenting with new kinds of writing for new audiences.

*Reading a High School Situation: An Everyday Literacy Practice*

At the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester of my first-year composition course, I assigned a paper that asked students to analyze the way language was used in high
school. We watched a documentary called *American Teen*, which followed a group of high school students in Warsaw, Indiana through their senior year, showing the dynamics of their friendships, relationships, and family life as they get ready to graduate and go to college. The essay I assigned following the viewing of this movie asked students to create and support a theory about language use in high school, drawing from examples in *American Teen* and their own high school experience. I wanted them to look specifically for ways that language:

- Creates or shapes interpersonal relationships or community.
- Asserts power, social status, or authority.
- Conveys some kind of attitude or opinion about high school.

I asked them to name specific instances of language use, describe them in sufficient detail, and analyze them to show how they fit into the theory they created.

This assignment embodies the principles of funds of knowledge theory, adapted to the cultural context of high school. Because, as González, Moll, and Amanti argue, the term “culture” often connotes static norms and generalizations, a study of a culture should be focused on practice, which includes “the strategies and adaptation that households have developed over time, and the multiple dimensions of the lived experiences of students” (“Introduction” 10). To suit the culture of high school, I asked students to articulate the rhetorical choices they made and their peers made in high school social situations to build relationships, demonstrate social standing, and critique the institution, all of which are “strategies and adaptations” developed over their years of education. González, Moll, and Amanti also say that funds of knowledge research challenges commonly held views that the culture of working-class Latino/a communities
is a “problem,” instead validating the culture of these communities by researching it and bringing it into the classroom. Similarly, I wanted students to see that the way they had already used language in their daily lives was worthy of theorizing and valuable enough to discuss in a college writing class, rather than seeing common high school language uses (like text messaging, for example) as a barrier to their development as writers. As funds of knowledge theory challenged the domination of school-sanctioned literacies by engaging with multiple ways of knowing, I wanted to challenge hierarchical notions of college-level literacies by asking students to look at multiple literacies of different kinds of social contexts.

Student writing shows that a key everyday literacy practice in high school is interpreting written and spoken messages, which requires amassing and interpreting all kinds of verbal, physical, spatial, and written clues: body language, clothing, lunchtime seating arrangements, friend groups, relationships (past and present), precedents of language use in comparable circumstances, and an awareness of social hierarchies. In their essays, students carefully present background information so as to accurately describe the context of language use. For example, Joseph\textsuperscript{7} writes:

Everyone was envious of Dylan and her wealth. She lived in the biggest house, drove the best car, and wore the nicest clothing. She was always top of the line in every aspect. One year a new student, Shannon, transferred to our school that was like Dylan but exceeded her in almost every way. Soon people began to pay attention to Shannon and people began to stop paying attention to Dylan. Insecure about losing her social status, Dylan started a rumor that Shannon had an STD and soon the entire student body was talking about [it]. Soon after people stopped talking to Shannon and Dylan was in the spotlight again.

\textsuperscript{7} All names are pseudonyms.
To interpret Dylan’s rumor, Joseph analyzes her material possessions, her status in the school, and her motivations to maintain that status. Joseph understands that Dylan starts the rumor with the purpose of increasing her social status and identifies the strategies Dylan uses to make her point, which Joseph is able to evaluate.

In addition to words spoken and written, students are especially attuned to what Ralph Cintron calls the “non-discursive and performative” rhetorical choices that are “stitched” to discourse “so that one cannot be understood without the other” (“Gates Locked” 6). Writing via alphabetic script is often combined with non-linguistic forms of expression which support the message one is trying to send: where one sits at lunch, facial express, posture, disruptive acts and behaviors, and body language support and complicate language uses, and so must be interpreted in conjunction with them. Joshua illustrates how physical acts of disruption accompany language use:

[My school] was vandalized by a group of students . . . [who] spray-painted the walls with verbal abuse, destroyed windows and classrooms, and broke almost every item in the cafeteria. The amount of damage that these students caused was astonishing and it cost a great deal of money to fix these damages. . . . The group of students that did this act was recognized as the students who really mind their own business. They did not disrupt classes . . . . They were simply the group of kids who were not popular. Many people believed that these students suddenly lashed out at the school because they could not handle the pressure of being socially awkward at school, so they did something they knew everyone would talk about.

Like Joseph, Joshua rhetorically analyzes the message of this language use, the audience it intended to reach, and the message it was trying to send. He offers the public interpretation of these acts of vandalism, demonstrating how they were received by their audience.
How students think about literacies of high school is significantly similar to the way that I as a composition teacher want them to think rhetorically about texts in line with my course goals: texts must be interpreted in terms of audience, situation, and purpose, and they must be analyzed for their effectiveness in regard to the speaker’s purposes. After describing another everyday literacy practice as a fund of knowledge, I will describe how I used students’ rhetorical awareness as a fund of knowledge to meet course goals.

_Undergraduate Cynical: An Everyday Literacy Practice_

The second essay I assigned in the fall of 2009 I called the “everyday injustices” essay, and it asked students to describe an injustice they encountered in their everyday lives at the university, argue for why it was unjust, and propose a solution. These essays were characterized by what Michael Moffatt calls “Undergraduate Cynical.” In his ethnography of college students at Rutgers University in the 1970s and 1980s, Moffatt uses the phrase “Undergraduate Cynical” to describe the way students talk about the functioning of the university, summed up by an attitude that is “wise to the ways of the world,” attributing the “earthiest possible motives” to professors, administrators, and the university as a whole (90). As a rhetoric of fatalistic complaint, Undergraduate Cynical advocates that students do the best they can to work a corrupt system and share with others the ways they have done so. Moffatt describes the social dimensions of this kind of talk, its ability to bond students together, and how it initiates first-year students into the world of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. I am more interested, however, in the ways that Undergraduate Cynical reflects legitimate concerns about institutional structures and
authority and a sense of injustice, as well as how it manifests in literacy practices which can be used to propel students to deeper critique.

Most examples of Undergraduate Cynical emerged when students talked about the injustice of tuition and textbook costs, representing the university as money-hungry business aiming to milk students for all they are worth. For example, most students felt that the only reason they were required to take general education classes was so that the university could charge them more money. Sara writes that students should be able to take a variety of classes, arguing that the administration “can keep the freshman . . . motivated by offering the classes they actually want. They will have more students to continue at the university and make the university more money.” Megan makes a similar argument for better teaching at the university level. She says, “If universities were keeping their students motivated with teachers who care about their students as well as teachers who are prepared to teach on a larger scale, they could increase retention rates which would then increase the amount of money collected in tuition every year.” The students cynically assume that the bottom line of the university is making money. Using the example of the high prices of textbooks, Krista writes:

The university generates significant amounts of money by buying books back from the students. It is generally a quick and simple method for the school to generate income at the expense of the students. After all, the University of Arizona acts as a business in some aspects and needs money in order to keep running.

---

8 This is not to say that the students are wrong in attributing profit motives to the university, only that it is significant that profit is the first and most prominent motive they consider.
Undergraduate Cynical is interesting because it reflects what students are learning as adjust to college. In her study of the way pre-teenagers transition from middle school to junior high, Margaret Finders writes, “Literacy can provide a window onto the complex processes at work as individuals move from one context to another” (10). Undergraduate Cynical represents a significant way they are making sense of the university and bonding to each other through the use of complaint. Finders also observes how acts of “literate underlife” offer “opportunities to disrupt the official, to document a refusal to embrace the obligations of the institution” (56). I valued students’ complaints because they acknowledged ways that they were held in subject positions in the university. As first-year students, they felt victimized by university structures and policies they didn’t understand and couldn’t successfully navigate. Students seem to rarely challenge existing authority structures through official channels or direct confrontation, preferring Undergraduate Cynical complaints that circulate among peers. In my teaching, I wanted to transform students’ Undergraduate Cynical complaints into concerns that could be articulated to authority figures at the university. I was curious to see how students would handle these underground rhetorics being brought to institutionally sanctioned spaces of the university. I also wanted them to take greater responsibility for their education, delineating what parts were their individual responsibilities and what was the obligation of the university.9

9 The complaints of Undergraduate Cynical erase or alleviate personal responsibility by focusing on the implicit unfairness of the institution. Using Albert Bandura’s concept of a “locus of control,” meaning the degree to which people feel they can control what happens to them, Stephanie Merz finds that upper-and middle-class students felt that the university had more responsibility for their education, while working-class students took more personal responsibility. It may be, then, that Undergraduate Cynical is an upper-
Opportunities for New Learning: Speaking to Authority Figures and Rhetorical Listening

Because power flows through layers of bureaucracy, particularly at large institutions like the University of Arizona, students were often confused about who was responsible for these injustices. One student, Jeremy, wants lower tuition, and guesses that the people responsible for this were “the Bursar’s office and the Financial Aid office,” confusing the administrative tasks of these offices with the decision-making power of setting tuition. In an interesting conflation of high school and college worlds, Nora writes that “the UA school board” was responsible for the cost of on-campus housing. Because they are not even sure who is responsible for their injustice, it is all the more difficult for them to identify the motives of the perpetrator. So the first thing I wanted to teach students was how to analyze and then speak to audiences in power.

Students also place a premium on speaking and “being heard” but less on listening. Students valued and sought out ways to express their opinions in forums that would let them speak more freely but they tend to make language choices in ways centered on themselves, meaning what made them look good in the eyes of the audience or what is most convenient for them. Stephanie writes:

A certain form of writing that took place at my high school was called slam poetry. . . because students felt that slam poetry allowed them to express their thoughts or opinions, that would be socially unacceptable [otherwise] . . . The opinions [of the slam poet] are not something that are seen as socially acceptable; however, writing a slam provides a safe outlet to release his feelings and gives his and middle-class way of seeing the world. I also suspect that because Undergraduate Cynical functions as a social mechanism that bonds students together, and because Undergraduate Cynical is so common among students, the rhetorics of personal responsibility of working-class students may be silenced in favor of the dominant rhetorics of Undergraduate Cynical.
audience a chance to listen to what he is saying before interjecting with their own ideas or opinions.

The slam poet chooses a medium where he knows he can “be heard” in the way that he thinks his classmates need to hear him. Many of the examples from the high school literacies papers illustrate a desire to “be heard” or “say what you want to say” but there is very little desire to listen. In fact, students often describe the listening side of high school social situations as unpleasant, such as Joshua’s example of vandalism, or numerous papers that described being teased in high school. Students seem to only think about audience to the extent that they are concerned about what the audience thinks of them. This amounts to a self-centered view of language. Students often used self-words to describe the functions of language in high school like self-esteem and self-image.

Why might they have trouble listening? Certainly, adolescence is characterized by a focus on the self and how one is being perceived by others. I also think that Undergraduate Cynical is a rhetorical practice that encourages immediately ascribing the most negative motives to the university, without “listening” for other motives. In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, Krista Ratcliffe explains the “biases against listening” which permeate rhetoric and composition, but which I would argue also permeate wider American culture (19). Ratcliffe cites Deborah Tannen to argue that “speaking is gendered as masculine and valued positively in a public forum while listening is gendered as feminine and valued negatively” (21). This gendering means that listening is subordinated to speaking. Ratcliffe also argues that American culture is highly visual, privileging the visual acts of reading and writing over the auditory act of listening (23).
Whatever the reason, I wanted to teach students a more productive kind of listening, which I believed would be necessary for speaking to authority figures in ways that could effect change. I also want to teach students that being a responsible rhetorician means assuming people have logical reasons for their behavior and seeking out and trying to understand those reasons. Ratcliffe defines “rhetorical listening” as “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relations to any person, text, or culture” with the purpose of “[cultivating] conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally” (25). The aspect of rhetorical listening I found most important for my students was understanding that other’s claims arise out of their “cultural logics,” or cultural belief systems (33). When focusing on cultural logics, Ratcliffe believes that “listeners may still disagree with each other’s claims, but they may better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning within a different logic” (33). I was hoping that students would research their audiences enough to understand some of the cultural logics of the people who run the university.

Figure 1 demonstrates how I used students’ funds of knowledge to move them to the course goals. After identifying the funds of knowledge, I looked for the critical thinking skills present in students’ funds of knowledge and analyzed these skills for how they fit into the course goals. Once I identified the skills students had from the funds of knowledge and the course goals I wanted to achieve, I identified the literacy learning they still needed to develop.
The Listening Essay assignment in Appendix A challenges students in the literacy learning still necessary by asking them to use listening rhetoric with the end goal of constructively confronting authority figures, drawing from concerns students already had in their everyday lives. Students were required to conduct research on their injustice to see it from more than one angle and to listen carefully to a variety of views on the issue.

Students needed to know that the task I was giving them was one at which they had been successful in their social lives. To draw the connection between the rhetorical
analysis the students had conducted in their high school literacies papers and the listening essay, I showed them how they were already capable of reading the audience, purposes, and contexts of language use. After demonstrating their capacity for interpreting familiar social situations—like the rungs of popularity in high school—I explained why it was important to learn to read less familiar social situations. I hoped that by showing them that they already possessed many of the skills necessary for rhetorical analysis and critique, they could see the significance of their opinions. As Norma González argues, validating lived experiences as funds of knowledge effectively disrupts deficit models because it challenges and questions traditional notions of what knowledge is valued and who has that knowledge, crossing “the ultimate border—the border between knowledge and power” (42).

Once students had “listened” to their sources, it was time to speak back. Appendix B demonstrates the multi-genre research project students completed to address their injustice. This project had the added responsibility of finding a university entity—a person, office, or committee—that dealt with this specific injustice. By learning about the appropriate audience, I was hoping that students would be able to understand some of the cultural logics operating behind the decisions of professors, staff, and administrators at the university, and see how these cultural logics might conflict with their own.

By committing to the rhetoric of everyday life, I commit to a rhetoric that must be flexible enough to accommodate mundane tasks like getting a refund from the post office as well as large-scale social change. My immediate hope in the multi-genre research project was that students would learn both the radical project of how to speak to authority
figures in ways that can change that authority and the somewhat more mundane goal of how to work within a system and navigate a bureaucracy to get what you want from an immediate situation. My eventual hope was that students might actually present their projects to their audience, though this step was not yet built into the project, as I wanted to see the kind of work they accomplished.

Instead of just making students more “aware” of their circumstances or the discourses available to them, this pedagogy presents rhetoric and writing as tools of change. Building on what students already know (and are likely upset about) makes it genuinely student-centered. Learning discourses that will be influential with those in power offers students the economic and cultural capital of a powerful discourse, but also teaches them how to use it for change. This pedagogy validates students’ identities and lived experiences as citizens of the university, because it works with them to develop critiques they already have.

Evaluation of Funds of Knowledge

Pedagogical Outcomes

My pedagogical goals for students were for them to assess the rhetorical strategies writers use and develop critical analysis of public, scholarly, and personal issues based on research. They had demonstrated an acumen for doing so in their personal, social lives, and I was hoping to propel that into their academic lives.

Perhaps most noticeable about their response to these assignments was a resistance to choosing an audience. Many students chose an audience of “other students” for their multi-genre projects, while openly admitting that other students would not have
any real power to change the injustice. Two examples from the multi-genre projects below illustrate their justification.

- My audience is the student population. Although students do not have the power to directly change the circumstances of the injustice, they are affected by it as much as I am and I feel it is necessary to include them in my struggle.
- The audience for my public argument will be a group of people that have the ability to change the outcome of this injustice. I think it will be the government, the school board, but most likely I will choose an audience of college students.

In choosing other students as an audience, their goal was less about collective action and more a campaign to “raise awareness” of their injustice. Students deflect speaking to concrete authority figures, I suspect, because as the high school literacies papers showed, they are more comfortable speaking to their peers, and because their previous education may have shown them that speaking to authority figures is ineffective. Even in projects that named an audience who had the power to change the injustice, the genres appeared geared toward peer audiences, such as a flyer with cartoonish clip art or a comic strip.

Justifying an audience of other students required some awkward rhetorical maneuvering but allowed them to remain in the comfort zone of a peer audience, even if that audience couldn’t really affect their injustice. Henry Giroux argues that to be truly resistant, an action must be counterhegemonic, posing a significant challenge to the norms of schooling; otherwise, the behavior is merely oppositional because it only works within the status quo of institutional social relations. Funds of knowledge is a process that moves students from what they know (a comfort zone) to what they don’t know or have not tried (a discomfort zone, so to speak), and students opposed this move by trying to stay in their comfort zone. They retreated from the assignment requirements—concretizing authority figures, trying to understand the cultural logics of those authority
figures–into the domain of what’s more familiar–speaking to peers. As a teacher, I was trying to get students to be what Giroux terms “resistant” because the assignment asks them to challenge the standard power dynamics of the university. And they use what Giroux terms “opposition” to maintain the status quo of power relations.

Because power is so dispersed, especially at a large state university, students struggled with pinpointing the person or people responsible for an injustice. Heidi, who chose to argue that the university’s campus should be smoke-free, writes, “I know that the President has the power to change our campus into a smoke-free zone . . . As for the President, I want her to make a change to enforce my idea of a smoke-free campus.” Other students chose “the President” as their audience for everything from campus dining options to general education requirements. Their statements reflects little of the social know-how students exhibited in their examples in the high school literacies papers. “Speaking” in high school relies on months and years of experience speaking with familiar people; in the brand-new college environment, students were uncomfortable with choosing an audience.

I also see students’ reluctance to choose a legitimate audience as a reluctance to immerse themselves in the issue. They chose to maintain a cool detachment from the assignment, which asks them to become an agent of change in regard to the injustice. Adapting Ira Shor’s term, I would call this a rhetorical Siberian Syndrome. In When Students Have Power, Shor defines the “Siberian Syndrome” as the phenomenon where students sit at the outer edges of the classroom as “a defensive reaction to the unequal power relations of schooling, which include unilateral authority for the teacher and a
curriculum evading critical thought about the history, language, and culture of the students” (13). Shor thinks that students choose Siberian seating locations because they understand the space of the classroom as teacher-centered, and in the corners of the classroom, they can carry out “guerilla resistances” (13). I see students’ performances in these assignments as a rhetorical Siberian Syndrome, where they remove themselves from the concrete conditions of the assignment by not choosing an authentic audience. Shor thinks that this detachment emerges for many reasons: past experiences with uninspiring education, multiple and competing outside commitments, and utilitarian views of the purposes of education (107). I would add to this that the students may be unused to having any real power or having assignments that matter to their lives. In conferences with students about the assignments, I kept having the feeling that I was throwing them into the assignment and they were scrambling to get away. I would push them to find a more specific audience and think more clearly about the genres available to them, and they would express reluctance to do so. Their rhetorical moves of the assignment to justify an audience of other students show their evasive maneuvers (what Shor calls “guerilla tactics”) to sidestep becoming the center of the classroom.

On a more positive note, I interpret their hesitance to engage in the assignment as a sign that I had successfully found the boundary between what they did and did not know because they retreated to a safer mode of communication. Certainly, this is not something that happens without some discomfort, and that’s understandable. In retrospect, I see more opportunities for negotiating this opposition. I could have done more to work with students to better understand their anxiety about speaking to authority
figures. Students could also have had more say in the development of the assignment. I assumed, perhaps wrongly, that students use Undergraduate Cynical because they feel powerless to instigate change and they would like to have access to more powerful discourses. In his anthropological work, however, Moffatt thinks that Undergraduate Cynical is merely a playful discourse that serves to bond students together, rather than the seed of more active resistance. Students fall back to Undergraduate Cynical, meaning that their criticisms of the university are circulated in the peer networks (as evidenced by their multi-genre projects geared toward a peer audience) and they attribute the motives of those in authority to being evil or profit-driven (if they seek out those motives at all). It may have also been effective to add an intermediary step to the assignment where students map the power dynamics of the university, examining how power trickles through layers of bureaucracy. Students could have analyzed their use of Undergraduate Cynical and been more invested in the process of transforming it using Funds of Knowledge. By taking on the funds of knowledge work myself, I was perhaps playing into a Hero Teacher narrative where I am the one to “understand” my students and accordingly create a brilliant pedagogy to save them.

**Funds of Knowledge Outcomes**

In terms of funds of knowledge, I was hoping students would learn that their previous literacy experiences would help them with new challenges, specifically school-sanctioned literacies, at the same time being able to leave the comfort zone of their previous literacy experiences. Students’ ideas about both their injustices and their literacy skills were what I called “self-trivializing.” Although I had hoped students would gain a
sense of self-sufficiency at college-level writing and a feeling that their previous experiences with reading and writing would help them tackle new challenges, it was difficult to convince students that they were already knowledgeable, much less that their knowledge could be used in other contexts. For example, I spent a lot of class time convincing students that their high school literacies papers demonstrated expert rhetorical analysis (as I hope I’ve demonstrated here). But because they still felt that the high school situations from which this analysis emerged were silly, petty, or childish, they tended to also trivialize the rhetorical analysis of those situations. And despite the time I spent stressing that their complaints about the university were legitimate and important, they dismissed them as “just whining,” and scoffed at the idea that any audience would take them seriously.

Joseph’s essay detailing Dylan’s rumor-mongering is a common retrospective on high school: students often wrote with a tone of world-weariness illustrating that they were above and beyond immature language games (though it is difficult to tell the degree to which they had this awareness in high school, and how much it emerged or developed since coming to college). Text messaging is a prime example of a literacy practice students tend to perceive as trivial. In interviews I did with students, they tended to refer to text messaging as “informal” and “casual,” which explains why they mostly text peers and less so parents, bosses, or other authority figures. However, the constant fear of saying the wrong thing means that communication that may seem informal or impulsive may actually be extremely well thought out. In fact, students often spend quite a bit of
time crafting the perfectly informal-sounding message, as evidenced in Robert’s example from his high school literacies paper:

Sitting in math class I could find nothing better to do with my time than to think of the perfect text message to send to a girl that I was trying to flirt with. I sat there for a good thirty minutes typing and deleting, typing and deleting [until] finally I had the perfect message, “hey what’s up.”

Text messaging, in this case, is a strategic deployment of linguistic resources, knowledge of social structures, and choice of medium, and Robert’s situation shows that texting can be very high stakes. As I argued to them, interpreting these language uses as arbitrary or inane misses that high school social situations are high stakes because they are characterized by fears of stigma and being marked as an outsider.

I find student self-trivializing to be a hallmark of teacher-centered education. Throughout their years of education, students have developed deeply rooted ideas about how education is supposed to work, and those ideas mostly involve learning from a teacher. Shor thinks that students don’t value a student-centered classroom because classes where teachers do most of the talking are seen as more rigorous (93). The question of “rigor” is an important one to consider in student-centered teaching because a central ideology of the modern university system is that detachment from material surroundings is necessary for offering critique. As Jasper Neel argues, universities value “theoretical activity” over classroom practice, meaning that “disinterested, unsituated discourse” has the most worth in the institution (32). Neel thinks that such a speaking position produces discourse that “appears in the world as if it had been written by no one, as if it were merely the medium through which pure knowledge resulting from pure speculation presents itself” (33). An academic argument gains credibility because the
Successful academic discourse erases the presence of the self because as Aristotle argues, ethos is built not on the personhood of the speaker, but on the construction and delivery of the speech. Resulting from both the discourse employed and the detachment from material surroundings, “critique” becomes a way of analyzing the world while not looking at one’s own position in that world. David Bartholomae argues that in learning academic discourse, students must learn to “invent the university,” meaning they must learn the “specialized discourse” of a specific discipline (134-135). This amounts to a kind of performance for the teacher where the student tries on an authority and identity he or she doesn’t have to increase the credibility of his or her argument. The right to speak, as Bartholomae argues, is not earned by having something original to say but rather by “being inside an established and powerful discourse” (143). In this sense, the student’s knowledge and experiences are de-valued in favor of an academic persona that offers greater credibility for the student’s argument and restricts access to knowledge and authority. Therefore, assignments that ask students to use their student-persona and lived experiences may be seen as less rigorous than assignments that ask for a de-contextualized stance.

*Reflections on Funds of Knowledge in College*

Funds of Knowledge is a type of critical pedagogy because it broadens ideas about who is a learner and what constitutes knowledge (González 41). As William Thelin argues, problems that arise in critical pedagogy should not be grounds for dismissal of the
whole practice but rather offer insight for other critical pedagogy practitioners. The goal of critical pedagogy is not to be the heroic teacher who saves students but to show the gradual and recursive transformation of teaching that happens along with critical pedagogy (Thelin 127). In this spirit, I offer the following observations and critiques of my adaptation of funds of knowledge.

A large problem with funds of knowledge is that it may be the first time students have encountered such a pedagogy in 13+ years of education. Throughout this chapter I have argued that what students know and think is valuable—an argument I had to consistently make to the students themselves. To make this argument to students more convincing, I built the infrastructure of the course so that it would send the same message. As Shor writes, “To help move student students away from passivity and cynicism, a powerful signal has to be sent from the very start, a signal that learning is participatory, involving hope, humor, and curiosity” (Empowering 26). I sought out pedagogical practices that would reinforce Funds of Knowledge ideology. For example, through my writing program’s service-learning program, students in my class gave campus tours to a group of high school students to show them the university and talk about campus life. The students worked in pairs to design the tour and decide on what they wanted to share about their college experiences so far. The tours gave my students the opportunities to be experts on college life, building their confidence in what they knew. Another way I showed students that I valued their knowledge was by using community-based assessment (CBA) for both the assignments described above. CBA is “recursive framework of writing, assessment, and reflection activities that move students
toward productive praxis” (Inoue 208). In short, the students designed the scoring guides for each assignment, graded each other’s papers individually and normed in groups, and finally met with me to determine a final grade. As Asao Inoue argues for this process, “this pedagogy moves away from teacher-centered assessment and evaluation of student writing, and pushes students to do these things for themselves . . . students take control of all writing assignments, their instructions, assessment criteria, and the practices and reflective activities that go along with their writing” (208). In valuing student self-sufficiency, CBA sends the message that students can competently evaluate college-level work.

I also challenged students’ internalized deficit model by basing the entire curriculum on issues that affect them in their daily lives. Because first-year composition is not the most glamorous teaching assignment, it is easy to forget that first-year students do in fact have a kind of awe and reverence for the college classroom, particularly at the beginning of the school year. As the students said in interviews, they see college as a serious place, much more serious than high school, because it prepares one for the real world. So when students see that the issues they face in their daily lives are worthy of discussion in a college-level class, they begin to believe that what they know about those issues is valuable as well. And though the curriculum begins with what students already know, it spirals outwards to the social context, the institution, and the real world.

In adapting funds of knowledge, I found that it may entail making assumptions about in-group homogeneity. What is readily apparent—like discourses of Undergraduate Cynical—may be readily apparent because it is dominant and may obscure counter-
narratives. Short of creating a unique curriculum for each student, I had to work with some generalizations about what students already knew, which created problems for students who were unfamiliar with certain cultural practices. For example, one of the liveliest discussions we had was near the beginning of the semester when I asked students to tell me about some of the rules of text messaging. Almost everyone in the class participated in this discussion. Near the end of class, one student raised her hand and said, “Am I the only one here who’s never sent a text message?” There was a single audible gasp and then a long silence. This happened to be the day I assigned the high school literacies paper, and so the same student came up to me after class to express concern over whether she would have enough to say about the assignment because she had been homeschooled. I explained to her some strategies for approaching the assignment, but she did not seem convinced. By the next class period, she had dropped the class.

It is ironic that a pedagogy with the clear intent of aligning with students’ everyday lives could be so alienating. This situation points to the problem of taking “culture” as a starting point for any pedagogy, because there is no single culture or typical daily life. “Student-centered pedagogy,” as in, a pedagogy based on a singular conception of a student, is much easier than “students-centered pedagogy” which embraces a multiplicity and diversity of students. Certainly, it is unrealistic to find literacy practices so all-encompassing that every student will have something to say and certainly, part of being an educated person means being able to offer some kind of an opinion about a variety of topics. I also do not think everyone must be comfortable all the
time—as I elaborate in the pedagogy described above, moving students out of their comfort zones is an important step in the learning process. I would have liked to make more space for dissenting or contradictory voices in the text messaging discussion. I could have asked students about other literacy practices that fulfill the same role as text messaging, or require the same sorts of critical thinking, while having the same outcomes, broadening the discussion to include a discussion of different media and writing technologies—comparing note-writing, say, to text messaging. This means that using funds of knowledge requires finding direct routes as well as detours to students’ prior learning and experiences.

Funds of knowledge is a pedagogy about changing the ways that teachers view students, which changes the way that institutions view students, which changes the way that societies and cultures views students. As one teacher observes, funds of knowledge changes the student-teacher dynamic because “it is through active listening and responsiveness that teachers earn students’ respect and that students come to feel safe entrusting teachers to guide their learning and development of self” (Buck and Skilton Sylvester 218). To base a classroom on students requires living with a good degree of chaos and transition, which taught me a lot about being a flexible and responsive teacher. Before this project, I would just pick a theme for my class and design some writing assignments about it. During the semesters I did funds of knowledge, I worked in a constant cycle of research and curriculum development. One reason I have spent so long in this chapter elaborating on the process of funds of knowledge I used is because it was one of the most difficult things I’ve had to do as a teacher. How do I figure out what
students know? How can that be used in an assignment? How do I make transparent to them what I’m doing? How do I show them I care about what they think?

The effort required by funds of knowledge surpasses the superficial ways teachers might try to get to know students (“What’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?”), and students notice. Once they saw that I genuinely cared about what they did in their everyday lives, they seemed to care more about my class. The best example of this was a student who sat in the back of class every day, baseball hat pulled low over his face, occasionally falling asleep. The day after our interview, he sat in the front row and asked three questions. In turn, I found myself explaining why we were doing things more often. As I got to know the students, and especially as I learned what their cultural logics of the university were, I realized I needed to spend more time saying why we were doing what we were doing. As I learned about how differently they saw the university from how I saw it, I knew that I had to make clear that I wasn’t just giving them “busy work” and it became important to me that they know that. I became adept, too, at explaining things in ways that made sense to them. For example, in the past I would tell students that peer review was a chance for them to help out a fellow classmate. In doing this research, however, I realized that students are very individualistic, and do not feel especially qualified to help out their classmates anyway. Now, I explain to students that research shows that reviewing someone else’s paper actually helps you write your own. Students react much more positively to this injunction, and seem to take the activity more seriously.
In honoring students’ knowledge, I faced some ethical dilemmas about what kinds of knowledge to use in the classroom. This ethical dilemma emerged most prominently when students wrote consumer complaints about their injustices. For example, one student wrote, “I feel like if I am paying a ton of money to attend this school, I should have a fair amount of quality professors to choose from.” As much as I wanted to validate students’ concerns, I was uncomfortable validating a consumerist view of education. I dislike the belief that students’ only obligation to get a degree is to write a check, as opposed to being conscientious students, doing the work, participating in class, and so forth. In the next chapter, I explore these troubling rhetorics of consumerism that greatly inform students’ perceptions of the university.
III. EVERYDAY INJUSTICES: RE-FRAMING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’ CONSUMERIST IDEOLOGIES

As I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, students’ consumerist rhetorics were some of the most troubling moments of ethnographic study for me. As a teacher, I don’t like to think about myself as a merchant selling goods, and I don’t like to think of education as a commodity to be bought and sold. I also dislike the belief that students’ only obligation to get a degree is to write a check, as opposed to being conscientious learners, doing the work, participating in class, and so forth. Rather than ignoring these affective responses, in this chapter, I want to use them as an ethnographic lens though which to interpret the data. I follow as a guideline what Ralph Cintron says in his ethnography *Angels’ Town* about frustrating moments in conducting ethnography.

There were times in Angelstown when I did fieldwork with people who seemed difficult and not very likeable. What was I to make of values and beliefs that seemed to run contrary to my own? . . . How do I render the density and subtlety of life lived, if, as the observer I felt that mostly nastiness and short-sightedness were to be found there? Call this my prejudice, but it seems to me that some of the most important human encounters are those that cause anxiety, even anger. At these moments, we encounter all those limitations that define us. . . . An ethnography of emotions would [assume] that emotions have a public dimension, that anger and nastiness, say, do not well up from the interior of a person but are distinctly shaped along systemic lines. (130-31)

Cintron is arguing that the ethnographer’s frustration emerges when the field work touches a nerve, and he advocates delving into these moments to understand the dimensions of this emotional response. Cintron’s approach is to avoid looking at “nasty” individuals, and instead to look at the “ideologies that shaped their conditions, beliefs, and action” (131). On a personal level, students’ consumerist mentality frustrates me as a teacher because I am anxious about the job of the instructor becoming the job of
customer-service provider. I feel pressured to meet students’ demands because, as a graduate instructor, course evaluations have significant bearing on my future. I feel implicated in a consumerist framework because I see the way I act as a student consumer—shopping around for graduate programs, demanding that my class time be used efficiently, complaining about the poor customer service at the financial aid office.

In interpreting students’ consumerist views, then, I want to look at the systemic lines of these consumerist views: how consumerism manifests in American culture, and by extension, the American university. I also need to look at how I am a part of that culture, and how my own frustration emerges from the conflicts between my ideals and the consumer culture.

In this chapter, I examine some of the frames at work in students’ understanding of the university, using Erving Goffman’s theory of “frame analysis.” In Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, Goffman argues that people use frames to give meanings to situations and experiences. A frame consists of a narrative that provides a structure or schema by which individuals come to understand and interpret events as well as decide on future actions. In the way that a picture frame structures and boundaries a picture, frames provide a way of understanding social situations. To connect to Cintron’s point, a moment that’s frustrating for me as an ethnographer may be a result of my own frames of experience conflicting with the frames of experience of students in my research.

Jim A. Kuypers looks at framing in the news media to demonstrate that frames have a rhetorical function. Kuypers defines framing as “the process whereby
communicators act—consciously or not—to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner” and says that frames serve to “define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies” (300). Kuypers thinks frames are rhetorical because they provide “contextual cues” that encourage a particular point of view, highlighting or downplaying certain aspects of a story (298, 300). Brian Ott and Eric Aoki, for example, show how the news media framed the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay teen in Wyoming, as a unique “tragedy” to avoid making the public feel guilty about widespread anti-gay sentiment (483).

The rhetorical function of framing is demonstrated in Linda Adler-Kassner’s The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writers and Writing, in which Adler-Kassner examines the tensions between the frames of dominant narratives about writers and writing, and what those in composition believe to be true about writers and writing. Adler-Kassner demonstrates how this works in a newspaper story about basic writers that uses phrases like “underprepared” and “remedial” to forward the frame that students are coming to college unprepared for college-level work and that time is wasted getting them up to college standards (12-13). A compositionist, however, might interpret this story with a different frame, viewing it as a testament to the way different kinds of writing are valued in different contexts, or that students’ existing literacies should be studied and valued rather than derided for what they lack. Adler-Kassner argues that writing program administrators should analyze what stories they are telling to students, university administration, and the general public about writing and writers, and understand the
juxtaposition between dominant frames about writing and the frames their programs support.

In the same way Adler-Kassner examines the different frames by which a single news story can be interpreted, this chapter seeks multiple frames by which to understand students’ complaints that might otherwise be uniformly labeled “consumerist.” Complicating these frames is important because students’ consumerism is typically seen as antithetical to some feminist and critical pedagogies. Where feminist pedagogy seeks to build a student-teacher relationship based on “nurture, supportiveness, interdependence, and nondominance” (Schell 76), the consumer ethos is mistrust and suspicion, because in a consumer culture one has to be vigilant for how false meanings might be attached to commodities. The feminist pedagogue “envisions the student’s full intellectual growth as its goal and works to facilitate it” (Hays 160). Instead of simply creating a product like a grade or a degree, the instructor works to help students achieve their full potential, which is not easily commodified. Critical pedagogy, likewise, tends to view the vocationalism that results from consumer culture as adversarial to the goals of the pedagogy. For students, vocationalism results from consumerism because, as Ira Shor writes, “consumer messages overstimulate desire to buy things, and they want to earn more money fast to become successful consumers living the good life” (Empowering 218). Shor refers to vocationalism as one of many “obstacles to empowering education and critical thought” because career-driven thinking doesn’t promote reflection about the position of the worker or the status of the work (217-218).
As a feminist and critical pedagogue and teacher-researcher, I am committed to validating student voices; therefore, I find it necessary to acknowledge the consumerist dimensions of students’ thinking, while also complicating the portrait of first-year students as consumerist, seeking ways that they adopt, resist, and struggle with consumerist ideology. Because the consumerist frames are ultimately about the meaning and value of an education, I believe they present a fund of knowledge that can be used to talk with students about what they want out of their education, how they can become active learners, and alternate models for education.

Though to some readers it may seem self-evident, I want to take a moment to explain why the composition classroom is a good place to talk about the meaning of a college education. As I have been arguing in this dissertation, I believe a composition curriculum should be rooted in students’ everyday concerns. As my data illustrates, students’ first year of college is marked by an anxiety about why they are in college. High school feels like a requirement because one was made to go, but college represents a significant, adult life choice. So when students are confronted with classes that don’t seem worthwhile, they question the value of a college degree. Thus, to make first-year composition student-centered means taking up this concern and addressing it. Furthermore, it is important for students to question the meaning of a college education because is difficult to get students on board with the daily practices of learning if they are not on board with the larger picture of education. A discussion about consumerism is also important to the composition classroom because, on a practical level, consumerism causes a lot of tension between students and teachers. In addition to consumerism being
adversative to feminist and critical pedagogies, practices like complaining about grades and expecting immediate gratification from classes result from consumerist thinking and can create problems in student-teacher relationships. So while the types of discussions I advocate for here may not relate directly to writing in terms of thesis statements, they reflect students’ concerns about their place in college and confront common tensions that arise in composition.

Data and Method

My data regarding students’ views for this chapter is drawn from the assignment to write on “everyday injustices” as described in chapter two. These papers asked students to describe an injustice they encountered in their everyday lives at the university, argue for why it was unjust, and propose a solution. I use Kuyper’s methodology for frame analysis, identifying frames by looking for “key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images, and names given to persons, ideas, and actions” and examining how these frames “define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies” (301). I identify frames by looking at the way students talk about what they think is wrong with their university education and how it could be improved.

Since the late 1980s frame has been used extensively as a theoretical model in sociology for understanding how groups mobilize individuals to align with a cause (Benford 410). In his critique of framing analysis, Robert Benford makes two important points about the limitations of frame analysis which are important for my analysis here. First, Benford notes the “static tendencies” of frame analysis, meaning the “focus on frames as ‘things’ rather than on the dynamic processes associated with their social
construction, negotiation, contestation, and transformation” (415). Benford thinks that it is more important to look at “framing” as continual process, rather than a frame as a snapshot in time. My analysis of frames in this chapter seeks to capture some of this dynamism by looking at how frames are developing in students’ first year of college, and the influence I can have on the development of these frames. I also seek to address Benford’s critique of the “monolithic tendencies” of framing, meaning “the tendency to treat frames in a singular fashion as though there is a single reality” (422). In fact, the exigency for this chapter is to catalog the multiple frames students bring to their interactions to avoid “framing” students as singularly consumerist. I acknowledge that I am looking at only a handful of the multiple frames that can be used to read these experiences because as Benford notes, “reality construction entails emergent, dialectical processes” (422).

In this chapter, I first describe the ways consumerism has manifested in the university setting. Then I look at students’ consumerist frames, as well as at alternate frames that can be used as a stepping-stone to getting students to question the significance of the education they are getting (see Table 1). I use Snow, Roshford, Worden, and Benford’s model of “frame alignment” to theorize some ways these consumerist and alternate frames can be used for a productive conversation about the meaning of a college education. I suggest having students re-visit their early expectations of college, offering them ways of becoming active learners, and asking them to articulate the products they should receive from their tuition dollars. To instigate a large-scale
questioning of how consumerism infiltrates the university, I propose offering students an
alternative model of education based on social norms rather than market norms.

**TABLE 2. Consumerist and Alternate Frames.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Consumerist Frame</strong></th>
<th><strong>An Alternate Frame</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The university is a place of business, where the students purchase a degree for a fee.</td>
<td>The university should provide a high-quality education, with good teaching and meaningful learning experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The focus of college should be on getting a good job.</td>
<td>College should have purpose, value, and real-life applicability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers deserve choices among classes, majors, and the various amenities on campus.</td>
<td>All the services of the university should work toward supporting students in learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor is the central provider of education and the merchant who sells the products of the university. “Good student face” is exchanged for high grades.</td>
<td>In <em>teacher-centered education</em>, the instructor is the central provider of education, therefore students must provide a Good Student Face to get what they want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College should be instantly gratifying.</td>
<td>The different parts of college should work together as a recognizable whole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Consumer Culture**

A consumer society is defined by the way people orient themselves toward
decision-making and how they think about their world using a consumer mindset.
Roberta Sassatelli uses Max Weber’s definition of consumer society as a social space
where “daily needs are satisfied in a capitalist way through the acquisition of
commodities” (5). Douglas Goodman and Mirelle Cohen observe that being a consumer
culture means that “our central shared values have to do with consumption” (31). So even
though we may value, say, education, we shop around for the best program or the best
school for our money. What we value, of course, is not an individual or solipsistic
decision. As Pierre Bourdieu has observed, people’s tastes reflect their social and cultural positioning (6).

Since at least the early to mid-1990’s, writing program administrators (WPAs), as part of the university’s bureaucratic mechanism, have been examining the infiltration of consumer culture into the university. WPAs have drawn connections between this permeation and an influx of “frames” that contradict what WPAs believe to be true about writing: the devaluation of writing as a mechanical that which “anyone” can teach, the use of writing as a corporate tool to regulate employees, and writing classrooms as spaces to monitor student subjectivity and prepare students to be good corporate workers. The emergence of writing programs correlates with the rise of writing as a managed, corporate activity, beginning post-Civil War. In Donna Strickland’s argument, writing was increasingly becoming a corporate management tool for control: memos, for example, became a key way for management to disseminate information to employees. Under corporate logic, employers wanted employees who could cheaply and efficiently produce texts that in turn would cheaply and efficiently standardize employee labor and production. Paralleling this to the university, writing became an activity that was put under surveillance and assessed to ensure uniformity. Through the 1920’s, the corporate structure created a stratification in which men in the managerial class were the “heads” of operation in charge of the “intellectual” or “creative” work, and women were the secretaries charged with the labor of “mechanical” tasks of executing or transcribing the thoughts of men. Strickland traces the effect of this to the university even today where in English departments, literature is seen as more “intellectual” than the “mechanical” labor
of teaching composition, which is still considered “women’s work.” This has been one of the most pervasive effects of corporatization in writing programs: the hierarchy between the intellectual work of literature, and the devaluation and feminization of composition as a mechanical skill\(^\text{10}\), as well as the rise of a managerial class of WPAs to regulate the production of writing.

Stanley Aronowitz shows that not only does the university function to standardize the production of students who will fit into its own community, the university’s partnership with corporations and felt need to cater students to the whims of the job market mean that the university socialize students to obey authority instead of challenging institutional power. The knowledge valued in the university is increasingly that which will serve corporate interests, bring in grant money, and strengthen corporate partnerships. Thus, in writing programs specifically, writing becomes a mechanical “skill” that will be instrumental in helping someone get a good job, as opposed to a rhetorical process that requires critical thinking, analysis, and thoughtful decision-making. As Bruce Horner points out, by tailoring its writing programs to “the real world,” the writing program assumes that the world outside the classroom is “real” and the world inside the classroom is not. Seeing the classroom as an unreal, asocial space denigrates the work of the composition teacher and composition scholarship.

\(^{10}\) For the most part, of course, scholars of rhetoric and composition do not still think about writing this way. Many other faculty and administrators in the English department and the university still do, and due to factors like No Child Left Behind and the SAT/ACT, most students do too. Writing as a mechanical skill is frame in society at large as well, like the person next to you on the plane who must “watch their grammar” when they learn they are sitting next to an English teacher.
Underlying the lamentations of the university’s consumer culture is the frame that the university should be outside or even above the consumer culture of the real world. Richard Miller writes that the reason scholars keep writing books and articles about the corporatization of the university is that this fact is continually surprising to the average academic who expects a “life of the mind” and is shocked to discover that rather than ivory-tower serenity, she must deal with budgets and power hierarchies. Tony Scott writes that capitalism is seen as the “norm” in today’s universities, which is problematic because the university needs to be “outside” regular society in order to critique it. As Rebekah Nathan learns as a result of her ethnography of first-year college students, “we would not want a university to become so immersed in the world as it is that it can neither critique that world nor proffer an ideal vision of how else it might be” (152-53).

One result of the increased corporatization of the university, meaning the way the university has come to mimic corporate models, is that consumer culture has become intertwined into university culture. Leah Schweitzer expresses concern that student-centered pedagogies have morphed into customer-service practices. Directed Self-Placement, for example, where students are given information about different courses and are then able to choose their courses, could cause students to “see instructors as something akin to street merchants to be haggled with.” James Zebroski shows how post-Fordist regimes of capital—unique products targeted to individual consumer tastes—determined the course offerings at Syracuse University, meaning that the writing program was in a constant state of flux, always creating and shaping courses based on student demand. The online course registration system at my university uses the phrase
“enrollment shopping cart” in the area of the website where students select their classes, the phrase “shopping cart” reflecting the influence of online retailers that use this term.

Just because the university is influenced by a consumer culture, however, does not mean that students are entirely passive consumers. Consumers consume, but also individually evaluate the meaning of these goods beyond their monetary value, “appropriating and re-appropriating goods” by assigning personal meanings and values to them (Sassatelli 81). While advertisers commodify goods by arguing for their utility in people’s everyday lives, people re-appropriate the meanings of commodities for their own purposes. Michel DeCerteau asserts that consumers are active through “tactics,” which in consumer culture, means that people attach their own meaning to goods and services and make the products a part of themselves (26). Sassatelli finds that through these means, “consumption is a meaningful sphere of action with subversive as well as integrative potential” (105).

Adopting the consumer stance can also be empowering because it gives one a fixed and stable identity in the postmodern capitalist landscape. Fredric Jameson argues that contemporary capitalism creates a global economic infrastructure, which is too overwhelming, too disparate, and too diffuse for the average person to understand. To navigate the cultural and historical milieu, we create “cognitive maps,” such as art, theory, and political activity that help us navigate the postmodern landscape. As Jameson writes:

[T]he phenomenological experience of the individual subject . . . becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world . . . but the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place . . . [because historical] structural
coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable to most people. (278)

Cognitive mapping provides a means of making sense of a postmodern, globalized, heterogeneous, complex world through the lens of personal experience. First-year students create cognitive maps of the complex university terrain through narratives that put them in the role of consumer and the university as the producer of degrees. Creating a cognitive map of the university in this way means that students are able to articulate a powerful, active, and satisfying role for themselves as consumer. In this role they can interpret and explain in a familiar way their experiences in a new setting. The university also offers students ways of personalizing their experience at the university to create a cognitive map. One example is a “thematic minor,” which students create by putting together 18 units of their classes and writing a one-paragraph justification of their choices. Like Directed Self-Placement, the thematic minor follows a consumer model—the student, as informed buyer, shops around for their best value—though the student also attaches his or her own meanings to that product in choosing classes that he or she believes are relevant for the intended course of study. The justification of the thematic minor functions as a way for students to orient themselves and carve out an academic identity in the university’s vast array of course offerings. The thematic minor offers students an empowering stance in making sense out of the university, and gives them an opportunity to attach personal meanings to their career track. In short, students deploy consumerist narratives to carve out a clear and powerful stance in a space in which they may feel powerless or disoriented.
While many scholars of rhetoric and composition have critiqued the capitalist model of the modern university (see for example Strickland, Aronowitz, Miller, and Scott discussed above), students’ narratives of consumerism offer an alternate perspective to hold in suspension. Students’ narratives are what Jean-Francois Lyotard, in The Postmodern Condition, calls “petite narratives” or smaller narratives that critique grand narratives. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard attacks the grand narratives that began in the Enlightenment era in favor of petite narratives that more accurately capture individual experiences in the postmodern age. Lyotard believes the proliferation of petite narratives opens up the possibility of greater heterogeneity, and requires an open stance of listening to others. Ultimately, “mutually responsive understandings emerge, boundaries are often approached, challenged, and crossed, and new frameworks are established” (Capeheart and Milovanovic 128). These petite narratives offer a counterpoint to perspectives on the consumer university offered by scholars of rhetoric and composition.

Student Frames

A primary frame students use to describe the university, as demonstrated in the segment from Amy’s injustice paper below, is of education as a consumer transaction.

Imagine going into a coffee shop on a crowded day. Customers have one goal, and that is to get their drink and go; however, at this very busy coffee shop, customers must buy several other expensive, low-quality, unwanted drinks. It’s easy to picture the frustration that this injustice would cause. Instead of waiting three minutes for one drink, a person would have to wait three minutes for every drink required, and would have to pay for each drink out of their own pocket. At the University of Arizona, students have to take general education requirements before they can start taking courses that apply to their major. Like the coffee shop scenario, this is completely unnecessary and quite ridiculous. Why should students have to pay for overcrowded classes that have nothing to do with their
major? Many students believe these courses are a waste of time and they don’t take them seriously. General education requirements are an injustice to new students due to the large class sizes and poor quality of teaching; instead, gen. eds. should be optional for students that already know what they want to do and required for students who are undecided. . . . Gen. eds. should be treated just as samples at a coffee shop are: if somebody doesn’t want to indulge in a sample, then they should not be forced to.

Amy compares the university to a coffee shop, where one expects a variety of offerings, efficient and professional customer service, and high-quality products worth the money one pays for them. The sample drinks aggravate the customer because the customer is always right, so there is no possibility that the customer may like one of the sample drinks, or that once receiving the drink ordered, may not like it and will want to try something else. The logic of the general education classes, as Amy seems to understand it, is that by “sampling” a variety of classes, students may find new interests. But this would entail the customer being wrong about their original purchasing decisions. Amy’s passage reflects a belief in the commoditization of education. The process of commoditization, usually enacted through advertising, means that a good is “transformed into a commodity exchangeable on the market at a fixed monetary price” (Sassatelli 4). In the way that “raspberry soy latte” becomes a good that can be purchased for a certain amount of money, the “degree” becomes a commodity with an attached exchange value, meaning that going to college becomes a consumer decision.

Reading this as an instructor, I see several places where I think Amy’s metaphor breaks down. I expect my students to prepare for class every day, and to both contribute to class and listen respectfully to their classmates and me. But the customer, being always right, is only expected to pay for his or her coffee—she is not expected to have done any
preparation, to listen to the barista’s suggestions, or to acknowledge other customers. I would hope that students would have patience and perseverance in my classes, looking at the larger arc of the course, believing that the knowledge they ultimately walk away with will be valuable, instead of seeking the instant gratification that accompanies a caffeine hit. I don’t think that writing instruction can be easily commodified into a single product, but that it is a long process of personal transformation.

But though Amy is arguing that the university is a place of business where customers are offered choices among classes and majors, she is also arguing that education should be high-quality, meaning that it should have purpose, value, and applicability. Amy rejects the general education classes, or “sample drinks,” because of “the large class sizes and poor quality of teaching.” The injustice of general education classes was a common theme in students’ writing, and while they certainly used consumerist logics to argue against them, they also demanded better teachers and a higher quality of learning. They wanted authentic learning experiences that contributed to their overall education. In his argument for the injustice of general education classes, Anthony writes:

College should do more for making students have the ability to learn, rather than the actual knowledge itself. The professors at this school are highly capable and highly skilled, but if they cannot present their knowledge to students in an acceptable way, it becomes a waste of time for everyone involved. By fixing class size problems, overcrowded classrooms, and lowering the amount of lecture classes, more students may be inclined to attend a more student-focused school.

The problem identified by Anthony and other students is that college is too focused on the product, and not the process. Students complained frequently about the instructional delivery methods singularly purposed towards simply transmitting information (reading
off the PowerPoint) rather than creating an environment where students had the opportunity to engage. In making this argument, they are actually resisting the consumer value of efficiency, because large lecture classes where information is read off a PowerPoint is, for better or worse, an “efficient” model of conveying information to large groups of people. Anthony wants his education to be structured in a way that he can participate and be engaged. So although one frame for interpreting the student comments above is that students want an efficient consumer model of education, another frame would be that students want a meaningful education where they can take active roles, but are frustrated by large class sizes and passive learning that prevent them from doing so.

Another common student injustice that could be interpreted through a consumer lens is students’ careerism. The most satisfactory product students think they can receive in terms of classes is a class in their major that they are “interested in.” Being “interested in” a class means that it applies to one’s major and will be useful either in getting a job or working in that job. In other words, students believe they should have a wide variety of classes to choose from so that they can receive the best product. In the injustice papers, student comments like these express anxiety over taking the “right” classes for fear of not being fully prepared for their future careers.

- Why do I need to take any classes on Traditions and Culture, to broaden my horizons? I didn’t come to college for that, I came to be prepared for my career.
- A university that runs on my money shouldn’t constrict me and place demands on me. I should be receiving knowledge pertinent to my life.
- What would be the ideal class that you would attend for your very first year of college? Putting aside the obvious answers of a class that had no homework or a class where you could sleep throughout the length of it, the most common answer I believe I would receive would be that of “a class that has to do with my major.”
To the students’ dismay, they must purchase a number of unnecessary products to receive the ultimate product of a degree. For them, having to take general education classes is similar to going to Target and having to buy paper towel, a set of dishes, and toothpaste, just so that you can come back a week later and get the digital camera you actually wanted. They evaluate the classes the university produces by the degree to which they believe they are directly applicable to the “real world.” Anthony writes, “One of the biggest problems [in college] has been selecting classes to further my education and to study things that pertain to real life, things that will be used from the day I graduate college to the day I retire.” They associate college with the “real world,” which actually means “the work world,” and not anything else they may encounter once they graduate (hence Anthony’s sentiment above that things learned in college will cease to be useful once he retires).

That students are career-oriented is a concern for me as an instructor not because I don’t think I can prepare students for “the real world,” but because my idea of what that preparation entails is very different than theirs. In studying first-year students’ expectations for composition, Russell Durst writes that students expect to learn “correctness, clarity, conciseness, and creativity” and “report little interests in engaging in critical analysis, in extending their writing processes, or in entering the sort of intellectual community that the composition class entails” (60). I am more concerned with teaching students the critical thinking that I think is necessary to be thoughtful and engaged citizen of the real world rather than writing in genres or certain basic skill sets that they think will be relevant for the real world.
Another frame for this careerism, however, is that students want their education to have a purpose. Because they struggle with seeing how a general education class on “traditions and cultures” fits into the larger picture of their education, they interpret it as lacking in value. I think that the issue is less about a career specifically and more about having a direction. Faced with myriad options at the consumer university, they focus on a single career track to avoid feeling overwhelmed or directionless. I suspect that students were unwilling to entertain the notions that their choice of major/career could be wrong, or even that it might change, because they feared the vertigo that may result. As one 17-year-old first-year student wrote, “If I know my profession, I have already found it after years of searching, then why must I sample [general education] classes?” Like this student, most assumed they would get a single degree that would prepare them for a single job that they would have for the rest of their lives. I think this single-minded focus seems is a survival strategy to keep them working and on-track, avoiding the existential crises that can result from having too many options. In chapter five, I discuss how students are less likely to question the meaning and purpose of the organizations they get involved in, like Greek life, because these organizations have clear trajectories of involvement, where students can see where their participation leads them and what they will receive from their participation. In college, students are less clear on the trajectory of involvement that will lead them to a successful career.

Another consumerist frame is that students want the university to be a “setting for consumption,” places that “offer complex experiences, part play and part shopping, all brought together through a ‘theming’ of the environment, relations, [and] activity”
(Sassatelli 167). The classic example of a setting for consumption is Disneyland, where the staff and animators of the space “coach” visitors in the way they should be interpreting their environment. Disneyland consistently reminds visitors that they are in “the happiest place on earth,” immersing them in what Steven Watts calls “a fantasy world where unique images and experiences evoke laughter, wonder, curiosity, and emotional warmth” (389). Opportunities for consumption abound—souvenir shopping, a wide variety of places to eat—to contribute to the overall experience. The university also acts as a setting for consumption. Our student union is reminiscent of a mall, offering one-stop shopping for university-branded clothing, a movie theater, and a food court with the same offerings as a mall food court. The university book store has relegated textbooks to the basement, leaving the entry floor for commercial books, university apparel, a makeup counter, and office supplies (sponsored by Staples). We have a recreation center, dorms that are more like private apartments than the shoebox dorms of yesteryear, and endless student activities, including major sporting events. The university as setting for consumption coaches students to have positive associations with their college years. Several students wrote complaints in their injustice papers about these various opportunities for consumption on campus. But when students created an argument about these amenities, the root of their injustice was not so much that they did or did not like the options presented to them; rather, they didn’t like that they didn’t have enough options for where to spend their money. This is because in a consumer culture, solutions to problems are framed as individual choices, regardless of whether or not the freedom of individual choice actually solves the problem. As Goodman and Cohen write, “People do
not agonize over different government and community-based solutions, they agonize over whether they should use paper or plastic bags at the grocery store” (137). Because consumerism operates under the ideology of individualism, solutions to problems are also framed as individual choices.

The students believe that individual consumer choice was the solution for an array of problems. For example, in the passage from Rose’s injustice paper, she uses the words “selection,” “choices,” and “options” as central values of what the food offerings on campus should be:

The dining halls [have] only a selection of fast food, with very little healthy options. . . . As a result of this deficiency, the students are forced to eat off campus and go through their spending money or have no other choice but to eat the unhealthy food offered, having to deal with the consequences. The food at this school creates boredom and forces students to either spend too much money making their own salad at the salad restaurant or [choose] a burger or pizza at one of the less-expensive fast food options. . . . Having to worry about weight gain and money issues resulting from the defects of campus food, on top of handling new classes and a new social aspect, is not an ideal way to spend the first year of college.

Her argument is that having no options adds stress to students’ lives. In a customer-service rhetorical practice, she believes that the various amenities on campus should support the central goal of providing students with an education, similar to the way the rides and entertainment at Disneyland should contribute to its status as “magic kingdom.” She thinks sub-par services can detract from the purpose of providing a full-service setting for consumption. Another student, Ali, writes her essay on the various “fees” added to students’ tuition bills. Again note that her argument is less that students should not have to pay the fees and more that students should have a choice about paying the fees.
Due to budget cuts, college attendees are no longer students, they are personal piggy banks for universities. . . . I have never taken the time to listen to the student radio station though I am still paying for it. . . Those new plasma screen televisions look great in the main library; but I did not ask to have them but I am funding these kind of unnecessary purchases. . . . Students pay a total amount of $115 a year for information technology and library upkeep. . . . While students flock to the library to cram for finals, they are not the only ones with free use of the technology at hand. Homeless persons also use the library as a haven, but do they have to pay to use the new Mac computers or watch those plasma televisions? NO! Why should students have a mandatory fee added to the already sky-high tuition cost when just about anyone can walk into the library and use their resources? Since students are the ones who fund the maintenance of these resources, we should be the one to decide what our money is spent on.

Ali goes on to discuss the fees for using the student recreation center, the high cost of textbooks, and a fee for dropping a class after the first week of school. Note that she locates the injustice of this system in the fact that the fees are “mandatory” and believes the solution is that students should be able to “decide” where their money is spent.

The arguments could be interpreted as consumer complaints about the lack of options in the setting for consumption. Another way to interpret them, however, is that students want the choices available to directly support them in their learning rather than trying to provide a host of other services. Rose’s argument about the lack of healthy food options could also be interpreted in the frame that she wants the university to help her be a good student, which necessitates healthy food and low stress. The various options for consumption at the university mean that the student is re-framed as consumer, which is an identity that can get in the way of their identity as learner. Ali resents that the university sees her and her fellow students as “personal piggy banks” as opposed to learners, job seekers, or any other identity. Ali actually dislikes that she is seen only in terms of her consumer value. Just as the students had trouble seeing how their general
education classes led them on a trajectory towards a career, they question how the opportunities for consumption on campus help them to learn.

A third consumer frame of students’ university experience is that the instructor is the central provider of education and is thus the merchant who sells the products of the university. Much of the public discourse surrounding K-12 public education concerns “teacher accountability,” highlighting the teacher as the most important figure in the educational system, defining the success of the teacher almost entirely by standardized test scores (Jones). In the news media and popular culture, teachers are rhetorically constructed as primarily responsible for the quality of a student’s education, precluding other elements of the educational system: institutions, administrations, communities, and of course, students. Movies like Dangerous Minds or Freedom Writers also focus on how a single teacher makes all the difference. One of the most popular documentaries of 2010, Waiting for “Superman,” concerned the United States’ public education system. The film portrayed teachers as the hinge on which education turns: good teachers mean students learn, bad teachers mean students do not learn, “learning” being defined as doing well on standardized tests. The idea of merit-based pay for teachers also reflects a belief in the direct correlation between the teacher and student performance. While university instructors are not held to quite the same standard at K-12 instructors via standardized testing, the construct of the teacher as the central provider of the service of education remains. In January of 2009, the chancellor of Texas A&M University announced that faculty members could receive bonuses of up to $10,000 based entirely on student evaluations. But unlike merit-based pay, the bonuses had everything to do with “customer
satisfaction” and nothing to do with what students actually learned. The chancellor was quoted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as saying, “This is customer satisfaction. It doesn’t have to do with tenure, promotion, status. It has to do with students’ having the opportunity to recognize good teachers and reward them with some money” (Huckabee).

This frame—the teacher as the primary provider of education—explains why students emphasize wanting a professor to teach their courses rather than teaching assistants (TAs). Students often felt that a “good education” entails direct access to professors, revealing an ideology that professors are keepers of special knowledge. Because teaching assistants are not the professor, they cannot provide a satisfactory product. Students viewed teaching assistants as Professors Lite, incapable of providing the service promised by the university.11 Steven writes:

Sometimes, the TA is not an expert in their field and they are in graduate classes themselves. Students do not get the full experience of a functional classroom from them. The issue of TA’s commanding a classroom is unjust because the students at the University are paying for an education taught by professionals and are actually being taught by unqualified assistants. Most TAs have degrees, however this does not mean they have any experience in teaching. A lot of the times the TA will not know how to connect with students and this can cause students to misinterpret information as well as provide no motivation to try harder in class. This in turn will have a direct (possibly negative) effect on the role of the student in the classroom.

Steven sees it as the responsibility of the professor to provide “the full experience of a functional classroom.” By contrast to TAs, he assumes that all professors are “professionals” who can “connect with students,” and are “experts in their field.”

---

11 There are some definitional issues here. When the topic of bad TAs came up in a class discussion, I reminded the student that technically, I was a TA because I was a graduate student, even though I was the only instructor for the class. They did not think I was a TA because they think TAs are only the leaders of discussion sections or labs.
students don’t receive the product they desire, they “misinterpret information” and lose “motivation.” Steven places the burden for learning squarely on the professor and thinks that were the professors better, the students would be better. It is the responsibility of the professor to initiate the economic transaction. Because students see the teacher as the central provider of education, they believe that getting good grades is a model of consumer exchange where they put on a certain performance to win a teacher’s favor. Their responsibility is to develop a relationship with an instructor to get the instructor to “like” them. They also see individual instructors has having unique “tastes.” David Russell and Arturo Yañez show that when an instructor asks students to complete a writing assignment that is unfamiliar to them, students they are likely to think that the assignment reflects the instructors “personal” tastes, even if the assignment represents a move common to the instructor’s field. So even though the assignment may reflect a common way of thinking, writing, or performing in the instructor’s field, it is new to the students and so they think it is only a preference of that individual instructor.

Erving Goffman’s theory of “face” provides some explanation for these student behaviors. Goffman writes that individuals analyze social situations to determine how they should act in a way that will offer them positive value (Goffman Reader 22). When these performances—the sum of which Goffman calls a “face”—are rewarded, the behavior is reinforced. To maintain a certain face, an individual needs access to structural resources and a knowledge of what behaviors are validated by the present culture. The sum total of the “self” is both the performance one puts on to receive social value but also “the actor behind the mask” who can make decisions about how to perform. The
individual has some, but not total autonomy, in the role being performed. Goffman’s model is implicitly an exchange, where an individual offers behaviors and personality traits that will help him or her acquire social capital. I see the economic exchange angle of Goffman’s theory made more explicit in the way students talk about what they do in their everyday lives as college students. For students, the “face” they are presenting to the teacher is their most important contribution to the class and becomes a kind of currency that they exchange for good grades. Presenting this face requires deciphering exactly what the teacher wants, in terms of classroom demeanor and schoolwork. This explains, to some extent, why students would deem it important to be labeled as an “A student.” They believe that label is what they exchange to actually get an A. As Goffman suggests, 

Instead of allowing an impression of their activity to arise as an incidental by-product of their activity, [people] can . . . devote their efforts to the creation of desired impressions. Instead of attempting to achieve certain ends by acceptable means, they can attempt to achieve the impression that they are achieving certain ends by acceptable means. (Goffman Reader 22)

So in some cases, the performance of the Good Student Face becomes more important than doing the work of the “good student.” I don’t want to imply that students are merely being manipulative. Goffman says that people fall along a spectrum of belief in their performance from the “cynical” actor, who does not believe at all, to the “sincere” actor, who believes entirely. What’s significant is that students collect information from a class and then perform an aggregation of behaviors and practices as a “face,” which becomes a commodity the teacher exchanges for a grade, another commodity. 

It could also be argued that students assign the individual instructor full responsibility for their learning because they have been socialized to teacher-centered
education. If they are used to the teacher as the bearer of all the knowledge in the classroom, it makes sense that they don’t consider other ways that they (or the institution, or the administration, or anyone else) can improve that education. If the entire focus of education is on pleasing the teacher, one would put a good deal of effort into crafting the right face to meet the demands of that teacher. In student-centered education, this face would become less important because the teacher does not bear the sole responsibility for evaluation. The face one shows to the teacher might be only one of many faces used in the classroom.

Students also want a university education that is instantly gratifying. As Daniel Bell observes in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, capitalism originally worked because people would delay gratification to meet rationally defined goals, but consumerism has contradicted this by emphasizing a culture that wants goods and services *now* and advocates impulsivity. Students are used to instant gratification, where they purchase something, receive it immediately, and express dismay when they have to wait. This thinking appeared in students’ complaints about “busy work” in interviews. They defined “busy work” as work they had to do that did not appear to directly affect their grade or serve a learning purpose. I asked students about this in an interview on the differences between high school and college.

Faith: What's busy work?
Nora: It's like work sheets, stuff that people just copy off each other, like in high school. It’s not for your own knowledge it’s just copied off other people, getting extra credit. In high school when we had substitutes . . . For substitutes it’s always like, “Oh finish this worksheet” and you’re like, “Are you kidding me?”
Heidi: This is like the most busiest work ever! And everyone would complain they didn’t want to do it and it was just like some teachers would just look at it and see writing and give you points. I could have written anything down.
I am not arguing that “busy work” doesn’t exist at all. I am arguing, though, that the desire for instant gratification can mean that students have difficulty seeing how all the parts work together in the “big picture” of their education. After all, in a consumer culture, we are constantly bombarded with advertising that tells us in no uncertain terms why products are useful to us, thus “inevitably modifying and expanding our desires and needs” (Sassatelli 4). Students expect the products of the university to work together towards a single goal, and to be immediately and obviously useful toward that goal. They struggle with the value of doing anything at college that doesn’t appear to directly contribute to the final product of a degree.

All of these complaints need to be interpreted in light of the fact that students may be resorting to consumerist arguments because consumerism is a socially acceptable rhetorical practice. In her ethnography of first-year college students, Rebekah Nathan writes that students believe firmly in “equality” which amounts to “anonymity” (91). In other words, getting into a debate with your professor about the cause of third-world poverty may not fit the pose of “too cool for school,” but complaining that you totally got ripped off by your cell phone carrier is a common, acceptable complaint that will win you empathy and agreement. In a consumer culture, the most available means of persuasion is the consumer complaint. Whether or not students actually think that money is the main reason they should be treated a certain way, consumer complaints provide an argument they know will persuade many audiences.

*Frame Amplification and Bridging*
Using funds of knowledge theory, then, I propose some ways students’ frames can be used as a strength in the composition classroom for talking about the meaning or purpose of a college education. For some means that frames can be used or shaped, I use scholarship from sociology that explains how frames can be used to motivate a group of people to take action. In “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden and Robert D. Benford study how religious and community activists motivate people to get on board with their causes by using the frames people already have. Snow et al. identify four main processes of “frame alignment” that these organizations use to tap into people’s existing frames and get them on board with their causes (464). Below, I discuss how three of these processes could work in the classroom. Through “frame amplification,” I demonstrate how students can be re-connected to their early expectations for college as a space of meaningful learning, and how the consumerist frame can be a way of thinking about what students do want from college, rather than what they don’t want. Using “frame bridging,” I show that students need options for how to act as an active learner. Through “frame transformation,” I illustrate how to offer students alternative social models for education besides consumerism.

Snow et al. show that social mobilization organizations use a process of frame alignment called “frame amplification” (469). Because people are distracted by their daily lives, they may not realize they have an existing frame, much less act on it. So social movement organizations capitalize on or “amplify” these frames by taking a frame someone already has and clarifying it for them. In my research, I found that many
students said that they entered college expecting to be active and engaged students, but the structure of the university eventually made them give up on those expectations. Students still believe that a university education should be a meaningful and valuable learning experience. Stephanie, for example, writes:

Upon entering my freshman year at the University of Arizona, I had high expectations. I was finally going to be able to study what I wanted to and was going to have teachers and classmates who were motivated like I was. So one can only imagine my surprise when I walked into my first class and saw five hundred other students all seated in one giant auditorium. It only took one fifty minute period to realize how difficult adjusting to this large class size was going to be. No longer could I raise my hand to ask a question or make commentary on what I was supposed to be learning. Instead, I was expected to sit and listen quietly to the lecture my professor presented and hope it had all sunk in by the time our test over the material came around.

Stephanie had high hopes coming to college, but the way her classes were structured meant that she didn’t know what to do to or how to be an active learner anymore. Other students described higher expectations for college but showed how the structure of their classes and class selection changed their thinking. One student, Sharon, argues that required general education courses create a strict path students must follow; as a result, they aren’t required to think about what they are genuinely interested in. And even if they did consider what they want to learn, class selection is so limited by the time they register, they have to take what they can get. Sharon writes that students signing up for whatever credits they need just to graduate is an “initiating factor that starts the cycle of the ‘I can just slip by’ mindset.”

Many come to college with expectations of college life not far from my own—they want to participate in class, get to know their instructors, and feel like a part of a classroom community. Even though these expectations change as they confront the
realities of the university structures, they still believe that the university should provide meaningful learning experiences, as I showed in the frames above. To amplify these frames and constructively confront consumer culture, students can be re-connected to their original expectations and think about what they can do to change their university experience to meet those expectations. Often, students’ ideas of what college should be like come from portrayals in movies and TV—students falling over each other to raise their hands, challenging or outsmarting the professor, arguing with each other—and in truth, I think many would actually prefer this to sitting checked-out in the back of the class. In my class, we watch clips from TV shows and movies that portray college in this way, discuss why none of their classes are like this, including the different factors that prevent them from being students who actively participate in classes, and how this can be changed.

I also attempted frame amplification by switching around a common frame students used to describe their education. I found that much of students’ consumerist complaints were about receiving an inferior product, meaning they were getting an experience they did not want to pay for—the recreation center, teaching assistants, being the last group to register for classes, etc. They had difficulty, however, articulating what they were paying for, beyond the vague notion of a “degree that will get me a job.” Students have paid some money for something, so they are in a position to argue that they want something in return, using the consumer ethos. Parsing out what they actually do want is an excellent way to talk about what getting an education really entails. The
following are some questions we discussed to think about the disconnects between their expectations for college and the reality they’ve encountered.

1. What does your money get you? You say you want a degree that makes you employable, but how does that play out in the everyday matters of being a student?
2. What kind of a person do you want to be as a result of your college experience? What can you do to make that happen?
3. What is the goal of these general education classes? Do you believe in that goal? What can you do to help achieve that goal?

At this point, consumer metaphors break down. For example, students often boasted that they didn’t have to attend some of their classes; they could just look up the materials online and still do well on the test. They are, of course, paying for these classes, so when they don’t use them in the way they are intended, they are ripping themselves off, so to speak. They have to pay tuition regardless of whether they show up to class, and instructors get the same pay whether or not they show up. I found that in class discussions on this topic, students were willing to admit that it’s not a bad idea to get something out of a general education class besides a passing grade. Though it didn’t show up in their papers, in class discussions they were able to rehearse the common theoretical arguments about liberal arts education and the importance of being a well-rounded person, but they struggled to articulate how this plays out in the everyday practices of classroom behaviors and attitudes.

I have also had students interview juniors and seniors to ask them to talk about the value of their education, because studies show that students tend to end up satisfied with their college educations.  

12 In a 2004 study involving 82 in-depth interviews with college

---

12 For students who don’t know a junior or senior, I offer to connect them to former students in my classes.
juniors and seniors, Peter Kaufman and Kenneth A. Feldman found that “the majority of students . . . felt very strongly that they had the potential to work in an occupation that would provide them with financial success and social prestige” (482). Kaufman and Feldman talk about how students came to feel more intelligent, knowledgeable, cosmopolitan, and prepared for their future careers as a result of their college education. While their results are not wholly generalizable, the study highlights the fact that students do tend to finish college as satisfied customers, but as my data show, they want to be satisfied right away. Having students conduct their own research on the value of a college degree shows them that with some patience, they may find the value they are seeking.

Another approach to frame alignment is “frame bridging” (Snow et al. 467). In this model, the organization takes something about which people are angry and offers them a formal plan or structure for what to do about it. For example, while many people may hold certain political beliefs, they do not act on them until they receive a phone call or direct mailing about an organization they can contribute to that supports those beliefs (Snow et al. 468). Having been passive consumers for so long, students need to know what to do to be an active learner beyond merely showing up for class. I had been dismayed at how much pressure the students placed on their professors for the quality of their education, but students say they do understand that putting in effort is important if they actually want to learn something. The following excerpts are from an interview on high school vs. college.

Beth: [College] is your future, as much as you want to put into it, you can. So it’s up to you now. It’s not your parents waking you up [and saying] you have to go to school! . . . It’s just like if you wanna do well in college, get a good job, it’s up to you.
Lindsey: I think in high school we’re spoon fed a lot more than [in college], because here it takes will to maintain, you have to put effort into helping yourself instead of the teacher giving you a study guide. I . . . think it’s also made me more mature, more independent because I was so dependent.

There is a clear rhetoric of personal responsibility here that I believe can be propelled into helping students learn to be more active learners. I believe, based on my data, that students want to take an active role in their education, but they don’t really know what that might look like. Funds of knowledge pedagogy in particular offers a way for students to think about their role at the university beyond the customer identity, because funds of knowledge is not about what students want in the consumer sense but about what they already know. The goal of funds of knowledge is not to please students, but to make them feel as though they have something to contribute. We brainstorm some ways students can be active learners to remind them that their education is also their responsibility and that they can have the kind of education they expected when arriving at college.

*Frame Transformation: Offering Social Norms in Place of Market Norms*

While the above suggestions provide discussion-based means of approaching the consumer mentality, addressing consumer culture means a larger-scale encounter with a social system. This entails what Snow et al. refer to as “frame transformation,” and it primarily involves reconstituting the way people see a situation (473). For example, an organization might try to convince people that the injustices they take for granted in their everyday lives actually warrant action. My goal was to question the consumerist frame for understanding education, offering students an alternative frame that would give them
an active role in the classroom. Because consumerism is built into the structure of the university classroom, confronting it might entail offering an entirely new social situation.

Anthropologist Alan Fiske’s models of social life provide useful ways of theorizing the composition classroom and the university space. Fiske proposes a “market pricing” social model to explain exchange-based transactions. In the market pricing model, people consider the value of goods and services as commodities and conduct cost-benefit analyses to determine their behaviors and choices. Market pricing social models value efficiency and people’s primary identities are determined by what they do to make money. Operating out of the market-pricing model, students want their classes to efficiently provide them with a college degree which will offer them an identity in a profession. As Fiske observes about the market-pricing model, people “take a calculatingly rational approach to social life, an orientation toward expected utility calculated from profit-expenditure and risk-return ratios” (707-708). Students conduct cost-benefit analyses all the time—deciding which homework to do for which class based on how many points each assignment is worth, deciding if they can afford to skip class or if by doing so they will miss something important, and so forth.

The contrasting social model to market pricing is communal sharing, a model that typically forms among family and close friends. In this model, people do things out of caring and kindness without expecting direct compensation. Material possessions belong to everyone and are shared freely. Using Fiske’s work, sociologists Margaret Clark and Judson Mills discuss exchange relationships, where one gives in exchange for receiving something and can incur debts to others, or communal relationships, where one gives
something because someone else needs it, and people are “concerned about the welfare of the other” (13). Clarke and Mills find that people have a sense of what type of relationship is appropriate for certain contexts and develop social norms around these expectations. In one study, they found that when people want an exchange relationship, they are happier when they get something in return for giving something, but when people want a communal relationship, they’re insulted if an exchange relationship in introduced. As Clark later found, in exchange relationships, people are concerned with getting credit for their individual work, and they keep track of it in order to receive some kind of reward for it later. In communal relationships, they don’t mind other people taking credit for it or receiving no credit at all.

I explain the market and communal models here because I think that introducing communal norms into the classroom space could create a productive tension with the market-model university, spurring students to critical self-reflection. I am not interested in creating a communist utopia—I am interested, however, in adopting some communal norms to cause enough tension with the consumer university to make obvious the taken-for-granted consumer norms. In approaching the problem of students’ consumerist mentality in the classroom, Russell Durst argues that we need to teach “reflective instrumentalism,” which asks student to critically reflect on the purposes of higher education. As Durst argues, this pedagogy “accepts students’ pragmatic goals, offers to help them achieve their goals, but adds a reflective dimension that, while itself useful in the work world, also helps students place their individual aspiration in the larger context necessary for critical analysis” (178). I am concerned, however, that careerism is too
ingrained in our culture for students to seriously consider any other way. In presenting a classroom culture based on communal sharing, students would at least know an alternative, and would engage in the reflection necessary to see the consumer norms.

Is it possible to create social norms in a space as “market priced” as the university? The classroom works against the development of communal sharing relationships in many ways. Fiske writes that communal sharing relationships are based on commonalities (antithetical to the students’ deeply rooted individualism) and significant relationships formed over long periods of time (longer than a semester). Communal relationships mean that people don’t mind if others take credit for their work, but the university is concerned with marking students according to their individual abilities. People in communal sharing relationships often have deep ties related to ethnicity, culture, family, or tradition, as opposed to the random assortment of students who land in the same class. And of course, communal sharing is in contrast to the wider consumer culture, which values individuality, personal achievement, and commodities that can be bought and sold.

I do think it is possible to set up a classroom in a way that supports at least some of the norms of communal relationships because students have communal relationships in their everyday lives. The first step would be to create a classroom community mirrored on the way students form friend groups in real life. My research shows that students want to individually create their own communities. They want the university to provide a setting for community, but not create the community itself. For this reason, students view icebreakers and getting-to-know-you games as artificial and an imposition on the process
of community formation. Instead, students should be allowed to get to know each other in more organic ways, like self-selected small groups. The next step would be to introduce some kind of communal norm. For example, students complete an activity requiring them to work with others, but receiving only one grade for the whole group. Or, students would have to do a peer review of an essay for another student in the class without an explicit offer of points for the task. (This kind of a task has to be entirely framed as a social request, because, as James Heyman and Dan Ariely show, if market norms are introduced and then taken away, people will still act in terms of market norms.) Shifting systems would make more transparent the market-pricing model of education. For example, when students sit down to do their homework, they often prioritize which assignment is worth the most points, in keeping with a risk-return ratio common in market-pricing social models. How might they decide between a lab report worth 10% of their chemistry grade and a peer review for their friend in their English class which isn’t worth anything but they know their friend really needs the help? What kind of effort might they expend if they are in a group where their individual effort is undifferentiated from the rest of the group?

My own attempt at introducing communal norms used Community-Based Assessment (or CBA), which I mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. In 2005, Asao Inoue proposed a CBA model in which students collaboratively develop scoring guides for their writing assignments and then use these scoring guides to grade each other’s work. Constant reflexivity between writing and scoring guide development makes students aware of their multiple positions in the classroom:
(1) as a co-developer of the standards by which all writing will be judged, (2) as a writer who reads a wide variety of assessments of her writing, (3) as an assessor of colleagues’ writing, and (4) as a colleague who compares her assessment and writing efforts to others’. (Inoue 215)

Inoue believes CBA will correct an imbalance of power in grading practices, which value bureaucratic needs for consistency and record-keeping over the needs of students, who hold the highest stakes in the classroom. Community-based assessment introduces a communal norm by dispersing power in the classroom among students, instead of framing the teacher as the single provider of the product of education. In market-based grading, the teacher becomes a nexus of power, and students access that power by going to office hours, learning the teacher’s predilections, and performing the Good Student Face. Community-based assessment disturbs this familiar student-teacher relationship by assuming that students can become competent graders, making grading into a communal act.  

Many of the problems that emerged in this process came about as a result of students’ discomfort with switching from market to communal norms. For one thing, students mistrusted their classmate’s competency to grade essays. Despite the fact that all the students read, tested, and revised the scoring guide, practiced on sample papers, and had to consult with their groups and meet with me, an anonymous survey I gave students at the end of the process showed that many still did not believe that they were getting a fair grade from CBA. One student wrote, “How can a new student grade someone else's

---

13 Jennifer Haley-Brown and I collaborated on a book chapter on community-based assessment, which is under review. The description of community-based assessment and what happened when I tried it is a revision from this collaborative work.
paper on what they think a good paper is, when they themselves are as inexperienced as
their peers?” Students’ mistrust of their grades was based in part on their belief that a
teacher should be the only one assigning grades, presumably because the teacher has
qualifications that ensure that grading will be “fair.” Lacking the trust of communal
relationships, market-pricing values of individualism and competition characterize their
response to communal norms.

On the other hand, CBA was successful in making glaringly obvious many of the
market-pricing norms of the classroom that students and I normally take for granted. The
majority of students took grading so seriously that at times I felt guilty for causing them
excess anxiety. At the same time, however, what they were feeling as they wrestled with
their peers’ essays was responsibility to another person and empathy for that person’s
position. In one group, we spent 20 minutes discussing the emotional impact of assigning
a paper a C- as opposed to a D. Certainly, this agonizing is a result of the market-pricing
model that assigns values to grades as commodities, but it also is a result of imagining
how another student might feel upon receiving a low grade, an empathy that results from
a communal society. On the first day of group norming, I walked around and asked them
how it was going. One young woman threw her hands and the paper she was holding in
the air in exasperation. “Grading is so hard! I never want to do this again!” She
proceeded to read aloud some of the more grammatically problematic sentences in the
paper in shock and disbelief. Another student said, “Being an English teacher is hard!”
When I asked her why she thought so, she responded, “I’m not a professional grader.”
The student next to her added, “It’s someone you know.” Their response proves that not
only were they able to develop empathy for their fellow students, but for me too (and I
hope, their previous English teachers). We had many engaging discussions in the small
grading groups about what grades really mean, how grades impact people, and how our
grading would impact the student receiving the grade. I learned a lot from students about
how they view grades, like the emotional impact of a C versus a D, and they learned a lot
about how stressful grading is for me.

It’s interesting to me that emotion played a large role in the CBA process, from
students frustrated with poorly edited papers, to students anxious about assigning poor
grades, to students imagining the frustration others might feel upon receiving those low
grades. Leaving behind the cool, detached consumer stance of market-priced society, we
entered into a territory where personal relationships mattered more, where what one
person does affects another. At one point, during a full-class norming session, literally
the entire class began arguing loudly with each other about grade a paper deserved, and
then proceeded to re-direct their ire towards me, using their disagreement as proof that
there was no inter-grader reliability in the process. For better or worse, I have rarely seen
such large-scale emotional displays in the classroom. Unfortunately, the emotional
dimensions of community-based assessment ended up obscuring the pedagogical goals.
As I noted earlier, students had difficulty seeing how all the parts of the class worked
together. In the end-of-semester evaluations, many only remembered how stressful the
process had been, and their dissatisfaction with their grades. Only a few commented that
they “liked” the process or got something out of it, though I had explained many, many
times its pedagogical value. So while it may not have been a customer-service success, I
think it successfully put students in touch another potential model of learning, which doesn’t happen without some discomfort. As Cintron argues, emotions make evident “those limitations that define us” and are “distinctly shaped along systemic lines” (130). I use the community-based assessment example here to demonstrate the potential impact of switching norms. Personally, I felt guilty enough about the anxiety I was causing students to the point that I only did community-based assessment once, whereas I had originally planned to do it twice. In adopting communal norms, I realized, we had adopted the norms of a community, which is not an idyllic place where everyone gets along, but a place where people regularly disagree about how to achieve their goals, or what those goals should be.

While students come to composition with norms from consumer culture, they also come with norms developed in other classes. In the next chapter, I continue my exploration of social norms at the university, examining the behaviors and practices that are a part of large lecture classes and carry over into composition. I continue my discussions of students’ attitudes towards their educations and the expectations they bring to the composition classroom.
IV. EVERYDAY CLASSROOM LIVES: CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN LECTURE HALLS AND COMPOSITION CLASSES

When compositionists talk about physical teaching spaces, they often use the word “classroom” to denote a location suited for 20-30 students, who sit at desks, in front of computers, in a circle, or in small groups. At my university, this kind of classroom mostly describes the setting of the English composition, math, and foreign-language classes required in students’ first year. But the first-year students at this four-year university spend a far more significant portion of their academic lives in one or more of ten required lecture classes, most of which hold between 100 and 1,000 students. In these classes, which students call “lecture classes,” they listen to an instructor, take notes on laptops or in notebooks, and follow along with a PowerPoint or outline posted to a course management website. Students participate in the class using “clickers,” electronic devices equipped with buttons that allow them to respond to multiple-choice questions. They normally meet in a large lecture two times a week and attend a smaller discussion section of 20-30 students once a week.

In this chapter, I argue that composition needs to factor in the lecture class to understandings of students’ experiences in first-year composition because their behavior in the composition class is a response to the social conditions they face in lecture classes. As Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz contend, the “social behavior” of the classroom is “conditioned and contextualized by socially constructed beliefs about and images of the classroom,” which often emerge from past experiences of being a student (7). Patrick Dias points out that the composition classroom is part of the larger institution, meaning
that “students and course activities are constantly subject to the demands and pressures that redefine and compromise what it is we intend within the seemingly closed confines of the course” (26). On a larger scale, Nedra Reynolds argues that the field of composition needs to examine the material conditions under which people write because “Place does matter; surroundings do have an effect on learning or attitudes towards learning, and material spaces have a political edge. In short, where writing instruction takes place has everything to do with how” (20). Composition always takes place in a location that structures the kind of activity that can occur there, and the experience students will have in composition is colored by their past and current experiences as a student.

I seek to uncover the “repertoires of practice” students develop in lecture classes to better understand their practices in composition classes. “Repertoires of practice” is a term coined by Kris Gutiérrez and Barbara Rogoff to avoid generalizations about minoritized students in K-12 education. Gutiérrez and Rogoff observe that teachers sometimes oversimplify the causes of behavior of students from certain ethnic groups (for example, “Mexican students learn best by watching”), assuming group uniformity. To explain similarities in the way that groups of people act, Gutiérrez and Rogoff recommend taking a “cultural-historical perspective” by looking at “individuals’ and groups’ histories of engagements in cultural practices” (19). “Repertoires of practice” are the “linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires” that people use to move between boundaries, encompassing what people learn as they move to greater membership in communities and the skills they acquire as they move across institutional and societal
boundaries (22). Instead of saying, for example, that Mexican children learn visually, Gutiérrez and Rogoff try to understand the history of the children’s participation in certain events. Gutiérrez and Rogoff cite findings that show that children who have recently come to the US from rural Mexico are accustomed to watching adults participating in activities and do not immediately ask the adults to explain the activities, as do children of European descent (22). In looking at repertoires of practice, one is able to “talk about patterns of people’s approaches to given situations without reducing the explanation to a claim that they do what they do because they are migrant farm workers or English-language learners” (Gutiérrez and Rogoff 22).

In the same way that a teacher might make an assumption about students from an ethnic group, Bruce Horner’s survey of composition scholarship observes that students are often represented as composites of “identified essential characteristics” which are perceived to account for their behavior (33). At my university, for example, students’ actions are often attributed to privilege because many come from privileged backgrounds. Instead of relying on these generalities, this chapter examine the everyday practices of lecture classes which form some of the repertoires of practice students bring with them to composition because these lecture classes are the primary way they are experiencing college for their first two years. In lecture classes, students learn knowledge in a specific field and also learn to adjust into the college environment.

Using activity theory, I analyze the lecture class as an activity system, and then I contrast it to the sort of activity system I attempt to foster in my composition classroom, using composition theory and reflections on and observations of my own teaching. To
make this analysis relevant for a wide audience, I focus on practices that will likely be familiar to many composition teachers, such as group work, class discussion, and the writing process, though I acknowledge these are not practiced in every classroom. To see how students view the lecture classes, I draw on data collected from eight focus-group interviews of 2-4 students each for a total of 24 students. The interviews focused on the differences between high school and college, writing in classes besides composition, text-messaging, and note-taking. These interviews were triangulated with essays students wrote about their literacy practices in high school and college and classroom observations.

In this chapter, I argue that lecture classes should be analyzed as activity systems to understand the repertoires of practice students bring to the composition class. I analyze three primary points of contradiction between the activity systems of lecture classes and composition: social interaction, the performance of “Good Student,” and writing practices. In lecture classes, students tend to feel alienated and text message or go online to chat with friends to alleviate these feelings, believing that these actions don’t affect those around them. In composition, students are asked to behave socially (e.g., group work) but are used to working and being marked individually, so they often lack the repertoires of practice to accomplish social activities successfully. The “Good Student” in the lecture hall is quiet, passive, and takes pride in his or her independence. By contrast, the “Good Student” in composition is active, works with others, and participates in class by speaking. Because students are most familiar with a teacher-centered classroom, they may struggle to understand their role in the classroom (or if they have any role at all).
Writing in lecture classes is often a form of testing, where there is a right and wrong answer. Students take notes in lecture classes in accordance with game-playing narratives, which they construct to understand the secret logic of how the class works. Lecture classes also focus more on mechanics and the final product of writing. In composition, the process of writing is more strongly emphasized; typically, there is not one right answer a teacher is looking for. Having grown accustomed to teacher-centered learning, students may be unused to critical pedagogy methods and resist democratic classroom practices. In my conclusion, I argue that both students and teachers need to move beyond their comfortable activity systems to find what Kris Gutiérrez, Betsy Rymes, and JoAnne Larson call a “Third Space,” where it is possible to critique the larger norms of schooling and what counts as knowledge.

**Activity Theory**

Activity theory will help me analyze the differences between lecture classes and composition classes because it looks at what students are trying to accomplish in different situations. Unlike analyzing a “place,” which is often tied to a physical location, or a “discourse community,” which is often perceived as monolithic, activity theory is based on what people do, and how they do it. Because activity theory stresses the developing processes of activities, what students say here about lecture classes represents their current conceptualizations of these classes and is constantly being revised as they receive feedback on how they are doing. So although I am representing these students at a specific time in their educational careers, I also believe these data captures their ever-
changing learning process of how to perform in lecture classes because repertoires of practice are dynamic and adaptive as people move between contexts. I try to represent students here in a state of flux as they pull from previous practices and learn new ones, what Horner calls “an ongoing, heterogeneous material process operating within as well as outside student consciousness, the site of teaching, and writing” (37).

Activity theory was originally developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s and 1930s but did not gain academic popularity until the 1980s and 1990s when anthropologists used it in their studying of cultures (Engeström “Expansive” 135). Vygotsky’s original configuration of activity theory took some time to catch on with anthropologists because it was individually rather than collectively focused. Alexei Leontiev’s re-configuration of activity theory in the 1970s and 1980s to include collective action, and Yrjö Engeström’s subsequent revision of activity theory to add the concept of “community” as a unit of analysis made activity theory more useful to anthropologists focusing on how communities, rather than individuals, accomplish activities and share motives (Engeström “Expansive” 135). The utility of activity theory comes from its focus on people and their cultures “in their everyday life circumstances, through an analysis of the genesis, structure, and processes of their activities” (Kaptelinin and Nardi 31).

The activity theoretical approach is similar to funds of knowledge theory for its emphasis on “practice,” meaning “what it is that people do and what they say about what they do” (González 40), and its approach to studying students within their “larger contextual, historical, political, and ideological frameworks” (González et al. ix), or the activity systems they move through in daily life. Engeström writes that an activity theory
analysis focuses on “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (“Expansive” 137), like the contradictions students might find between their home and school culture. Funds of knowledge also aligns with activity theory’s de-privileging of what Engeström calls “vertical learning,” or the accumulation of knowledge or skills that typically happens in schools, in favor of more “expansive learning,” the more nebulous, unstable, unstructured learning that happens in organic learning settings (“Expansive” 137). This expansive learning is what the teachers in *Funds of Knowledge* sought to use as a resource to integrate into the classroom in order to bridge the activity systems of students’ home and school lives.

As David Russell observes, activity theory clarifies the complicated process of learning accepted genres in different communities, making it useful for researchers examining how people learn new disciplines and professional genres. Russell notes that a central theme of research using activity theory has been “that newcomers to a genre/activity bring their cultural history to their writing, and take an active role in learning as they wrestle with new genres” (“Writing and Genre” 229). Activity theory has been a central tool for those studying technical and professional writing, as the demands of such writing can point to contradictions between the activity systems of school and the workplace. For example, Deanna P. Dannels looks at how engineering students approach presentations on design in their academic courses, and then how they do so in engineering workplaces. Finding significant contradictions between the activity systems with respect to “audience, identity, and structure,” Dannels recommends foregrounding some of the problems that arise when the classroom is meant to serve as pseudo-
professional environment to help students rhetorically analyze the context in which they are presenting (164). Clay Spinuzzi examines the problem of “pseudotransactionality” or “writing that is patently designed by a student to meet teacher expectations rather than to perform the ‘real’ function the teacher has suggested” through the lens of genre and activity theory (“Pseudotransactionality” 295). Spinuzzi finds that students are accustomed to writing in the system of the student-teacher relationship, and so carry over that relationship into the workplace; for example, the student might place a great emphasis on correctness because that was the standard held by his or her previous writing teachers. Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle actually suggest that students learn activity theory as a way to analyze different genres of writing to write for different contexts. Ed Nagelhout and Glenn Blalock argue that “writing teachers work within a complex web of contradictions” and they need “strategies to understand and negotiate the contradictions and complexities” where they teach (134). They prescribe having students write out their expectations for a course as contrasted to the teacher’s expectations to provide an opportunity for naming and discussing some of these contradictions.

Patrick Dias and Anthony Paré’s 2000 collection *Transitions: Writing in Academic and Workplace Settings* takes up the responsibility to help students transition their writing skills to the workplace using the tools of activity theory as a way to understand what students will have to learn. Patrick Dias examines university writing classrooms with an eye toward how they do or do not prepare students for writing in workplace settings, suggesting ways to work out some of the tensions that exist between
these two activity systems. Aviva Freedman and Christine Adam clarify the differences between learning that takes place in academic and workplace settings (32).

Activity theory is also used as an analytical tool for understanding complex organizations. Chris Anson uses activity theory to determine the “locus of activity” for assessing writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs, identifying the academic program as a site for making structural change in WAC instruction. Jason Swarts uses activity theory to show how people make texts their own through the process of “textual grounding”—such as annotating, marking, or organizing texts in ways—that makes the texts more useful for communicating within an organization. In *Tracing Genres Through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design*, Spinuzzi pulls from genre theory and activity theory to create a methodology he calls “genre tracing.” This method examines the incarnations of written genres as they pass through organizations to foreground them as “organic and necessary ways that workers adapt information to support their own endeavors” (x).

My use of activity theory acknowledges, as do Dannels, Kain and Wardle, and Nagelhout and Blalock, that students face many contradictions between activity systems when they enter a writing class. Comparisons between academics and the “real world” are obviously important for writing teachers who want their students to write in real-world settings. But instead of focusing on the contradictions students face between the academy and workplaces, this chapter studies the contradictions and overlaps between composition and the large lecture classes in which many students are concurrently enrolled. The next chapter seeks overlaps and contradictions between composition and
communities join as a part of their college experience: fraternities and sororities, residence halls, and student organizations.

In “Activity Theory and its Implications for Writing Instruction,” David Russell says that an “activity system,” the basic unit of analysis in activity theory, must have certain characteristics. An activity system should have history from which participants build their current ways of interacting with tools and develop new ways of using tools. The system should be “dialectical” nature, meaning that it is socially based and that people learn things from interacting with each other. The system should have “shared cultural tools” used by participants to accomplish the activity. “Tools” are broadly defined as “mediational means” and can be actions, emotions, or physical objects. The activity system should also exhibit change and growth as people and their tools change when they learn something new.

Lecture classes and composition classes both meet Russell’s definition of activity systems because students have ways of interacting with them that are built from their previous educational experiences. Students use tools (e.g., cell phones, notebooks, and laptops) to accomplish activities within these systems. They are constantly revising their practices in these classes, mostly with the purposes of figuring out how to be a “good” college student and get a passing grade. The composition class meets the requirement of being “dialectical,” because students are asked to work and learn together. The lecture class, however, is more individualistic in many ways, contrary to the communal nature of most activity systems. Lecture classes tend to promote individualism since students do not often work together, and there is little group or class discussion. In most cases, the
individual student attends class, learns passively and alone, and takes tests and writes papers by herself. Students feel alone in these classes because the classes are so large, students know very few people, and the instructor normally does not know their name. I argue that lecture courses are still communal activity not because of how they are run from the instructor or institutional point of view but because students create a more community-based activity system in the class (often in resistance to the way the class might want them to) by depending on each other and creating smaller communities to achieve their motives in the class. In the interviews I’ll cite later, students talk about how they text each other to find out what happened in class, share game-playing narratives to help each other do well in class, and try to make friends so they have someone to sit by. Elements of social connection, sometimes in an us vs. them solidarity, emerge in the lecture class activity system, even though the lecture class values individualism in many ways. Thus, my analysis of the lecture classes operates more from the students’ perspective rather than the instructor or institutional perspective, as I believe the students’ point of view offers greater insights into the communitarian aspects of the activity system.

In using activity theory, I focus on what activity theorists call “contradictions” between activity systems. Far from being coded as negative, contradictions are a normal part of the functioning of activity systems and offer complex situations that place people in “double binds” that can change the individuals or the activity system itself (Deans 300). Engeström writes that contradictions in and between activity systems cause “critical self-reflection” whereby individuals seek solutions and seek re-designs of the activity
system (“Activity” 34). In reflecting, they often find new ways of doing things and will teach them to others or even create new activity systems (Engeström “Activity”). Other compositionists have also used activity theory to look at disconnections: articulating the contradictions between the activity systems of service-learning partners and classroom teachers, understanding how college students navigate the written genres expected of college classes and real-life scenarios, and sorting out the various contradictions in activity systems encountered by dissertation writers (Deans; Ketter and Hunter; Lundell and Beach). Building from these analyses and interpretations of activity theory, I study the contradictions first-year college students face as they move between composition and lecture classes, reflecting on how the repertoires of practice from lecture hall classes conflict with the everyday practices of composition.

Table 3 defines each point of analysis in activity theory and offers examples for how it manifests in the activity system of each type of class. I contrast the activity system of the lecture class (from the students’ perspective) with the activity system of first-year composition (from my perspective, informed by composition theory) to highlight the contradictions that arise. I label as repertoires of practice the way these contradictions may appear in the classroom. For example, students’ previous engagement with writing assignments may not have focused on writing as a process, meaning that they approach composition with a focus on the product of writing, which constitutes a repertoire of practice. The last column of this chart expands upon these repertoires of practice to think about their implications for writing instruction. The entire chart serves as a condensed version of the points I will make throughout the rest of this chapter
TABLE 3. Activity Systems of Lecture Classes and Composition Classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Activity System</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>How it works in the lecture class (the students’ perspective)</th>
<th>How it works in the FYC class (my perspective/comp theory)</th>
<th>Reflections on Contradictions—Repertoires of practice that may develop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objects/Motives</td>
<td>Larger purpose behind the activity system, what people are trying to accomplish</td>
<td>Pass the class; Obtain degree; Seek social connection to combat isolation; Prove that one belongs in college; Look and feel like a “good student,” self-sufficient, independent</td>
<td>Improve on writing and critical thinking skills; Interact with teacher and classmates; Help students improve their writing and feel agency as writers</td>
<td>Students may text message or go online in class; Students may see writing as “what I have to do to get a grade” or resist real-world scenarios; Students will want to try things on their own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>The collective action taken to meet the object or motive</td>
<td>Create social/friendship connections; Figure out the rules of the system (“what the teacher wants”) and circulate these rules</td>
<td>Rhetorical understandings of writing; Group work—peer review, workshop; Writing as a process</td>
<td>Students may believe that “good writing” entails following a set of rules; Students may be open to forming in-class social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>People or small groups involved in the system</td>
<td>Anonymous, individual students; Individual students connect to other, larger social networks beyond the classroom; Individual subjects do not affect other subjects</td>
<td>A community of writers who learn together; Names and individual personalities are important</td>
<td>Students may resist group work, but work well on their own; Students may do well when presented with the opportunity for self-formed social networks, Identity as student may trump identity as writer; Students will like being treated as individuals—one-on-one conferences, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Directives or norms that determine what people can do</td>
<td>Individual, personal freedoms; Discover and share the rules of the game that lead to passing grades</td>
<td>Work together; Writing is evaluated fairly, transparently; Teacher attempts to be unbiased</td>
<td>Students may not understand the importance of attendance or participation; Students will be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mediating Artifacts/Tools</strong></td>
<td><strong>towards students</strong></td>
<td><strong>open to transparent grading processes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What people use to work toward their motive, can be tangible or intangible</td>
<td>Game-playing narratives; Online materials; Course management website; Cell phones, laptops, clickers; Continuous partial attention; Wikipedia; Writing as an individual and mechanics-focused process used to prove learning</td>
<td>Reading and writing as tools for learning and thinking; Writing as discovery and creation; Writing as a community or group activity</td>
<td>Students may evaluate work they have to do in terms of point values; Students may focus on writing as doing something “correctly;” Students may not buy into the writing process, concerned more about the product and grade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Requesting patience from the reader, I offer a few caveats in interpreting this data. I acknowledge visiting the physical locations of the activity systems described in this chapter and the next would have added richly to my data and analysis, but this was not possible due to time limitations on this study. Furthermore, activities are not limited to physical locations and focusing too much on physical space can limit analysis of the activity system. The metaphor of “space,” Deans argues, can be seen as monolithic or deterministic of people’s views in that entering a physical space can be interpreted as adopting all the beliefs of that space. Deans thinks that moving away from spatial metaphors means that one is more able to conceptualize of the “struggles and contradictions” inside of a community (290). When entering an activity system, people adapt in various ways and not in others, begin new activity systems, and assert individual agency. Activity systems occur outside of physical spaces as well, and so many analyses of activity systems also do not analyze a specific location (see for example, Deans’ analysis of service-learning and composition programs, Freedman and Adam’s portrayal...
of differences between classrooms and workplaces, and Lundell and Beach’s work on
dissertation advisers and graduate colleges).

Another caveat I offer is that since people are always a part of multiple activity
systems, it is not possible to extract all the norms of a specific activity system and
attribute them to that activity system. Elements of the lecture-class activity system
overlap with other activity systems, like K-12 education and wider American culture. I
have attempted to focus on the elements of the activity system that I think characterize
lecture classes, while acknowledging that this is a simplification for clarity. I also read
students’ narratives about what happens in their other classes cautiously for the reason
that students tend to reduce the complexity of the class to “what you have to do to pass.”
So even if higher-order thinking or greater intricacy was involved in the courses, it is
possible that would not be reflected in their narratives. Student narratives often take the
form of cynical complaint, so the data I’m working with here sometimes reflect that tone.
Several times in my analysis, I point to places where students might be exaggerating or
misinterpreting, and I offer explanations for these points. Students’ interpretations of the
class also vary from the instructors’, so just because the students say their classes
function in a certain way does not mean they actually do. I did not conduct interviews
with these instructors, which is also a limitation of this study. My goal here is not to
criticize the lecture class instructors or argue that my methods are better. I appreciate the
difficulties and constraints of teaching large classes, and I respect the work these teachers
do. Finally, in interviewing students, I did not ask them directly about their experiences
in my classes, because I did not want to make them feel uncomfortable as I was also
their teacher. So my description of the system of the composition class draws on my observations using field notes I took immediately following our class sessions. The difference in ethnographic methods for collecting information about composition and lecture classes means I am not exactly comparing apples to apples, but I believe that my observations of students’ behaviors can still reveal how they face the contradictions between activity systems.

Despite these limitations, I think this project is still relevant because my goal is not to recommend changes to the activity systems of the lecture classes but rather examine how that activity system impinges on the work of the composition class activity system to better understand accommodations that might be made to help students in the learning necessary for successfully moving between activity systems.

**Social Interaction in Lecture Classes**

In this section, I compare the meaning of “social” in lecture classes to what it means in composition. By “social interaction,” I mean “social” as it is used in theories of New Literacy Studies, in terms of the socially constituted nature of language but also “social” in terms of its everyday meaning as in friendships and relationships. I look at how students use and create social relationships with peers, how they sustain old relationships, and how they use relationships to achieve goals they have for themselves. I also use “social” to mean the student-teacher relationship and the power dynamics of that relationship.
Students are especially likely to feel lost or out of place in lecture classes because of the size and impersonality of the class. Due to these feelings of anonymity and isolation, one of students’ central motives of the lecture class is seeking connection to a social system where they are more comfortable. In “Location, Location, Location: The Real (Es)Tates of Being and Writing in Composition,” Johnathan Mauk argues that a crisis exists in academia surrounding the “placelessness” of incoming college students (370, emphasis in original). Being a successful college student depends on students becoming a part of the academic space, so students who have significant commitments to other spaces feel distanced from academic life. Not surprisingly, this feeling of placelessness is heightened at the beginning of students’ college careers, when they are first separated from home and family. In her interview, Nora discusses the anonymity she feels in the lecture class and the lack of acknowledgement of students as individuals.

I never had a class with more than thirty kids in high school but when you have a class that’s a lecture class of a few hundred kids obviously the teacher can’t pay attention to everyone so the teacher’s ability to care for each student the way they did in high school isn’t the same. The lecture teachers, there’s a difference... It’s really hard for lecture teachers help each student individually in class.

Habituated to feeling like an individual in high school classes, Nora is struggling with being treated as one of many in lecture classes. To alleviate feelings of loneliness, students try to create relationships with people in the classes, which can both help them develop a social network and serve as mediational tools to help them do well in classes. One student, Ashley, says that she tries to make friends in all her lecture classes. These friends help her with academic life, like saving a seat for her when she’s late, and with social life, providing someone to talk to in class (and thus a motivation to attend class).
Several students said in interviews that having friends in lecture classes can make the class less “intimidating,” making the lecture hall into a place where students can identify with and help each other, creating smaller communities within the larger class.

Students also seek connections to a comfortable social system through text messaging. As Derek Mueller notes, students may prioritize existing social networks (often formed and sustained using text messaging) over the networks of the academic system. Mueller thinks that labeling practices like text messaging as “digital underlife” assumes that students’ academic commitments are primary in their lives and their social lives are somehow “beneath” their academic world. In reality, Mueller argues:

In this age of networks, individual, isolated students may appear to be writing by themselves, “privately” defining their transgression against institutional roles, but just as often, they are . . . entering into highly interactive exchanges prone to drift across multiple institutions, even transcending institutionality. The network trumps the school as the reigning social system, now in ways more tangible than before. (244)

Text messaging serves as a mediational tool that gives students a sense of place and connection to the networks that are central to their lives. Texting helps to preserve relationships that risk falling apart as a result of being away at college and build new relationships to navigate university life. Text messages help students find out what they missed in class, connect them to resources back home, and keep up with old friends, as in the examples below.

- Marcus: For the most part texting is social, but I do text about school if I’m sick for a day, I’ll text a friend. I always like to find out if I have a friend in a class just so I can, and if not, I try to meet a couple of people and get their number just so they’ll be in class if I have to miss for some reason.
- Stacy: I keep up with all my friends [by texting]. I’m from the Bay area so I keep up but if it’s like paragraphs I’ll call them because I don’t want to text, I’ll call you and talk instead of texting, because sometimes it hurts my fingers.
Though the nature of text messaging is social, the activity system of the lecture class, characterized by anonymity and individualism, fosters the thinking that what you do only affects you. Therefore, students feel that if text messaging distracts them, it’s their own fault, and that text messaging does not affect those around them. I asked the students why people might continue to text message if there were strict consequences:

  Daniel: I just think that people don’t think that it’s that bad. It’s not like we’re in high school any more. We’re in college, it’s our decision.
  Marcus: Yeah, you’re not going to detention if you get caught with your cell phone. I just feel like kids feel more independent when they’re in college so they feel they should be able to make their own decisions, then they’re responsible for their own actions, too.

The lecture class is an activity system ruled by individual, personal freedoms—because your education is your responsibility, no one has the right to tell you what to do. This means that in the activity system of the lecture class, the “subjects” are individual students who have the ability to pass or fail on their own volition. Amber makes a similar point:

  At college you get out what you put into it, and if [students] come to class and [texting is] what they’re choosing to do, it doesn’t affect me because I’m there to learn. Yeah, it’s frustrating that we’re all in the same class and they’re texting and then they ask the question that the teacher just answered. I think teachers should be more strict, like, “I just said that. You need to pay attention.”

Amber is clearly conflicted here because she says that what students are “choosing to do” doesn’t affect her, and then she gives an example that it does and suggests that instructors should be more strict. Other students too say that they are unaffected by what their classmates do in lecture classes, but they clearly observe, remember, and critique what other people do. I think that this discrepancy shows that students value individualism and
value their ability to not be affected by others, but in reality they realize they are often affected by others.

I suspect that one reason students continue to text in classes where they know it’s against the rules is an anxiety about missing something. Text messaging makes them feel like they are always connected to whatever is happening in their lives. Ellen Rose calls this phenomenon “Continuous Partial Attention,” or a “state of fragmentary awareness” resulting mostly from the use of computers and the Internet, combined with a “compulsion to connect” (43). In a state of continuous partial attention, a user constantly checks Facebook, email, sports scores, and text messages, unwilling to give full attention to any one activity, in fear of missing something else (Rose 43). I heard a kind of helplessness to the way students talked about cell phones—it was as though their social worlds were created and sustained by text messaging and they had no choice but to text right along if they wanted to participate. In this sense, they see themselves as joiners rather than creators of the activity systems of their social networks. In an essay about the way high school students use text messaging, Michael writes:

When I entered high school, I did not have a cell phone. The majority of my friends had already had cell phones for more than a year and I was beginning to feel left out. Without the joy and convenience of texting or calling whenever I felt like it, it was like I was missing out on a key piece of creating relationships. . . . This built pressure on me, which caused me to constantly ask my parents to purchase a cell phone for me. After much pleading . . . my parents decided to buy me my first cell phone. With the newly acquired cell phone I no longer felt as if I was being left out on anything.

The activity systems of their social lives are constructed around connectedness, typically through media like texting, Facebook chats, Skype chats, etc. The activity systems of their academic lives, however, require them to pay attention in class.
Continuous partial attention is one tool students use to reconcile the conflicts between the activity systems of their social lives and academic lives. For example, students bring laptop computers so they can take notes and go online for social purposes in lecture halls, thereby reconciling the activity systems of their social lives and the lecture hall. Tiffany says that chatting online during a lecture still counts as “kind of” listening and Megan says that watching sports highlights online in lecture is “half paying attention.” Ashley says that the rule for lecture classes is that “When you get into lectures, it’s just common courtesy to know that people who want to learn sit in the front and then people who want to semi-learn sit near the back,” “semi-learning” being a form of partial attention. At the University of Chicago Law School, where Internet access was disabled in some of the classrooms, one student commented while some students were constantly on the Internet and while some never were, most were in a “middle range,” meaning that they “usually [pay] attention to the instructor, but will occasionally check their email or chat online” (Guess). These are all ways that the students can feel part of multiple activity systems simultaneously.

For their part, students openly admit that they struggle with doing more than one task at a time.

Faith: Is that distracting in class? To have your Facebook open?  
Tiffany: Oh yeah, it’s so distracting.  
Stacy: Yeah. It’s terrible.  
Tiffany: It’s horrible.  
Faith: But you do it anyway?  
David: I do it all the time.  
Stacy: I try like not to bring my computer sometimes but—  
Tiffany: Usually I get other work done in my lecture classes that I like don’t really need to pay attention to.
Stacy: It’s hard cause we [her and Tiffany] have a lecture class and he puts everything online. Like everything. So he’s like, “You guys don’t even have to come.” He told us that. And we’re like, “Okay.” He said you guys can come if you want.

This interview segment shows that students struggle with motives from two different activity systems: the compulsion to connect in the social world and being a good college student. Tiffany seems to reconcile these systems by being physically present in the class, but doing homework for other classes, which allows her to feel good about herself that she went to class and got something done, but allows her to use her time productively. It’s interesting that Tiffany chooses to use the lecture class as a study hall instead of going home or to the library to get work done at this time. I would argue this is evidence of the struggle of “placelessness” in the first year of college. While putting class material online creates “anywhere pedagogy,” lauded for its flexibility (students can work at home in their pajamas!), I am concerned that, as Tiffany shows above, students need and want a place to go. Sometimes they retreat to online spaces to feel a sense of place; sometimes they go to lecture classes and use them as study halls. Under this logic, it makes sense that sitting in a lecture class, especially listening to a boring lecture and staring at boring PowerPoint slides, students might feel that they are missing something important happening elsewhere in the world, so they switch to a different activity system to feel connected again.

Research in cognition and multitasking shows that people have difficulty switching between multiple tasks and processing diverse visual stimuli (Rose 44). In a study of undergraduates’ use of laptops in a lecture class at the University of Vermont, researchers put spyware on students’ computers to monitor their activity during the class,
and classified usage as “productive”—applications like Microsoft Office and course management websites, or “distractive”—everything else. The study found students were using “distractive” applications about 42% of the time, and when correlating distractive usage with grades, found that instant messaging in particular had “a significant and substantial negative correlation with academic performance . . . IM seems especially virulent with respect to distracting students” (Kraushaar and Novak 249). I would suggest, based on this research, that part of the reason instant messaging is so distracting is that it pulls students out of the activity system of the lecture class, placing them into another activity system completely, with different rules, communities, motives, etc. Students don’t necessarily underestimate the ability of the laptop to distract them—they underestimate their ability to navigate between competing activity systems. Feeling removed from the activity system of the lecture class decreases students’ participation in it.

*Social Interaction in Composition Classes*

As a composition instructor, I am interested in the social interactions that take place in lecture halls because, like many instructors, I use collaborative work extensively in my teaching practices. One key point of comparison between the lecture classes and composition is the feeling of place and a feeling of community. Creating a classroom “community” has long been a central value of composition studies, both for the pedagogical reason that students can learn from and teach each other and because compositionists believe that writing has an “inherently collaborative foundation” as a
social act (Ede and Lunsford 355). As Reither and Vipond argue, “both writing and knowing . . . are from beginning to end collaborative: they are things we do with others” (856-857). Kenneth Bruffee writes that “collaborative learning” emerged in the 1970s when overworked instructors used it as a means to help underprepared students, and it is still used as a way to de-center teacher authority and create a mentality of “we’re all in this together” (637). The quest to create a classroom community is manifested in the use of icebreakers to help students get to know each other, peer review and workshop, and group and partner collaborative writing projects (see for example Reither and Vipond; Cross; Dale; Gere). More recently, compositionists have questioned how community might be effectively formed on online spaces (Driscoll) and how collaboration influences concepts of authorship (Ede and Lunsford). I use many of the pedagogical techniques that originate from social views of writing: peer review and editing, full-class workshops, partner work, group projects, and small-group and full-class discussions.

In interviews, however, students were often frustrated by group projects because they inevitably led to unequal distributions of work. Their perceptions of working with other people were almost entirely negative.

Faith: Do you like group work?
Claire: I’d rather do it on my own. Cause I hate relying on other people. . . . I had to do a group project in Spanish which was really annoying because I was paired up with these two girls who were not very smart, so it was just so frustrating . . . I don’t want to do the work all by myself, but I don’t want to work when the other people are doing nothing and [I get them] a good grade. Okay then they do it, and then it’s bad. And I don’t want to get a bad grade, so I end up doing it by myself and it just sucks.

One interpretation is that students don’t have the repertoires of practice necessary to make dysfunctional groups work, so they give up and do the work on their own. I would
also argue that based on the two sets of interviews I did where I asked about group work, students who got high grades in my class tended to dislike group work more than students who got lower grades, which to me confirms Claire’s frustration about group members not doing their fair share and relying on more motivated students to get the work done.

It may also be that students most value individual accomplishments, and group work blurs the distinct accomplishments of the group members. One student, Kyle, told me about the group work required for his chemistry class. The class meets as a lecture twice per week, and once per week, students attend a lab that lasts several hours.

Faith: Do you have to do the lab reports with other people?
Kyle: I do it by myself. Sometimes I call other people for help and stuff. It’s really hard. We do the labs in groups though. But we write individually, it just shows your individual ability to write. What you learned. For the chemistry lab midterm, we had to perform the experiment in an hour and then write the lab report in an hour.

Kyle’s example shows that although collaborative activities may be a part of what students do, they are still marked individually. Karen Burke LeFevre says that American culture clings to the idea of the single, unique author who searches individually for “truth,” an idea originating in the Platonic tradition, and continues to be influenced by a capitalist culture which also values individualism. According to LeFevre, the egoism of American society means that people can continue to make unique, Columbus-like “discoveries” of new information and merely use language as a tool to convey those discoveries. Clearly, this ideology trickles down into education where students seek to be rewarded for their individual efforts and come to believe in meritocracy.

Believing, as LeFevre does, in the social nature of thought and language, I use teaching practices in my class that ask students to work with others, which sometimes
conflict with the ways students are used to working. For example, one day I asked a
student to evaluate three pieces of writing with two group members. The group was then
supposed to come to a consensus about their evaluation of the writing. I stressed the
importance every person reading all the pieces of writing (a task manageable in the time
I was giving them) and the importance of them coming to a group decision about their
evaluations, as I wanted them to see how writing can be interpreted by different
audiences. As I walked around observing the groups, however, they all assigned one
piece of writing to each group member and designated that one reader’s evaluation of
the piece of writing as the “group consensus.” Certainly, the students chose the method
that was most time-efficient, but I also believe they selected a method that involved the
least amount of group interaction.

Activities such as this one might seem strange to students because the activity
system of the lecture hall promotes individualism and self-sufficiency. In the lecture
class, students are mostly anonymous to each other and to the instructor. Though they do
form small friend groups on their own, their real social networks exist outside of the
lecture class, which they connect to by texting, using social networking sites, and instant
messaging. One specific element of activity systems, subjects, bears further discussion
here. The “subjects” of the activity system are the people who are involved in
accomplishing the tasks of the system, with a focus on how these people think about
themselves. In the activity system of the lecture hall, students are individuals and their
real social networks are created and maintained on their own, often through the use of
social media. In the composition classroom, when I ask students to engage in
collaborative work, I am asking them to (1) use their classmates as a social network (2) depend on these people to accomplish a task (3) negotiate their differences. This is a new way of working for them, as they are used to self-selecting their social networks and using them as they wish, so they cleverly transform group work into individual work.

As mentioned earlier, in the lecture class, students feel isolated to the extent that they don’t feel that their actions really affect anyone else. In my composition class, I give a speech on the first day of class about why I don’t allow text-messaging; it is distracting to their fellow students and to me, and they risk missing out on important information. Without fail, the very next day after I give the “no texting” speech, a student is texting openly in the front row. In the lecture class, individual, personal freedoms are the rule, so students have difficulty seeing how their behaviors can affect others in composition.

On a more positive note, I think it’s important to provide students with social opportunities in composition. Students have the motive in the lecture class of making friendships and social connections, which can help them pass the class and alleviate feelings of isolation. These connections can be difficult to create in a lecture class that discourages interaction among students, but the composition classroom is a more ideal space for forming these connections. One student I interviewed said that she only had two friends in college: her roommate and a friend she met in my class. Another student told me several times that my class was her “favorite,” but she chatted with the people around her for almost the entirety of every class period, leading me to suspect that she liked my class more for its social dimensions than the content. I suspect as well that students may welcome the opportunity to make friends in first-year composition to resolve the tensions
between social and academic worlds, because they say that having friends in a class increases their motivation to attend class (though they may want to create these connections on their own rather than having the teacher manage them). Students also welcome being treated as individuals, through practices like conferencing, as this is not a feeling they get from large lecture classes.

The Construction of the Good Student in the Lecture Class

Motives of students in the lecture classes include “feeling” like a good student, and presumably, appearing that way to both the instructor and other students. Student use laptop computers as mediational tools to achieve this motive. They report that when they sit in front of a laptop, they feel good about themselves because they appear to be a “good student,” even though they may not be participating in activities that relate to learning or studying. In studying teenage women’s use of cell phones, Rachel Campbell shows that the cell phone becomes what Michel Foucault calls a “technology of the self,” because it is a way that an individual constructs her identity. As Foucault argues, the technology of the self permits “individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18). The laptop becomes a mediational tool in the lecture class, but because it is equally useful for taking lecture notes as it is for browsing the Internet, the laptop has all the power to make you feel like a “good student” while enabling you to be a “bad one.”
Ashley: I know people that go to [a lecture class] and they go there and they sleep. Megan: If you’re gonna go and watch sports, [you’re still] half paying attention. If you’re going to sleep or watch a movie, why did you go there? Ashley: There’s no attendance for that class. There’s just no point. When I go, I go and pay attention. I don’t sleep. It’s not necessarily distracting, I just don’t understand why students do it.

Megan: Where’s your logic in that? I guess it makes them feel morally better that they went to class [laughs]. I do that sometimes with homework like if I’m going somewhere over the weekend, I’ll bring my books to do my homework even though I know I’m not going to do them. But I feel like I’m making an effort—maybe—and I feel better about myself.

Ashley: I have my book in my bag. I’m not doing anything with it, but it’s there!

Megan: Just in case!

Just as Megan’s physical possession of the textbook makes her “feel better” about herself, bringing a laptop to class makes students “feel” like good students. As the laptop serves as a tool to help students feel academic, the physical possession of a cell phone makes students feel socially connected. Two students said that when they were on campus and ran into someone they didn’t know very well, they pulled out their phones and started texting to show that “I have friends, they’re just not here.” For both the cell phone and the laptop, what one is doing with the tool is less important than what one appears to be doing.

Students’ narratives of completing work in a lecture class were animated by a desire to show independence and self-sufficiency. Students expressed pride in their abilities to use lecture classes for their own purposes in ways that worked for them. Ashley says that one of her lecture classes is poorly designed because they watch movies and it is difficult for her to take notes in the dark, so she uses class time for socializing and then teaches herself material at home using Wikipedia. In this way, when the lecture class fails to provide a space to learn the material of the lecture class, students find other
uses for it, like doing work of another class, or socializing. The lecture class serves as mediational tool for Ashley’s social life, and Wikipedia becomes the mediational tool for her academic life:

Ashley: I can honestly say in my [sociology class] I really don’t go to class a lot. I missed probably a good three weeks of this class and then when our test came, I just—I didn’t do an all-nighter, I stayed up until 4. I just like—he gives us a study guide and I just looked up like all the history. I watched the movies [from class]. Those I can’t watch in class because it’s hard to focus and it’s so dark. And I don’t know. I have friends in that class too so it’s hard to focus. So I would watch them on my own and take detailed notes by myself. So I knew what was going on, the main points. It’s like half history class, half on the movies. So I looked up [online] all the history dates and all the leaders and where the countries were. Got an 83 on the test. So I can honestly say that like you can teach yourself a lot.  

Not surprisingly, classes which put “everything” online were the classes students were most likely to skip. Given the choice between going to class (listening to the lecture) or learning it themselves online (reading through the PowerPoints and Googling what they don’t know), students choose the online-at-home option because their vision of a good student is one who can figure things out herself without help. The lecture class activity system doesn’t offer students a lot of individual help, which creates a “do-it-yourself” mentality. Like Ashley, many students took pleasure in their ability to teach themselves material from lecture classes and admired other students who were able to do so.

Emily: First semester I would have lectures with 300 kids and the teacher would just go through the chapter of the book, so after Thanksgiving, I stopped going because she would just go through the chapters of the book and I could do it on

---

14 To me, and to some readers, an 83 may not seem like a good grade, though Ashley is clearly satisfied with it. It is important to keep in mind what I argued in chapter three, that general education classes often engender a “I can just slip by” mindset, as students don’t see their larger purpose. Therefore, a student satisfied with a B in a general education class might not find this grade satisfactory in a class in their major.
my own. I got like an A on the final and a B in the class and I hadn’t been going to it for a while.

The lecture class, in this case, becomes a place where you can be proud of not going, a sign that you are a good student. In not going to class, one demonstrates that one does not have to use institutionally sanctioned routes to learning, but rather creates one’s own path to getting a good grade. Two students in an introductory business lecture said that the class had designated peer tutors to help them learn the technology required for class projects, but the tutors were unhelpful, so they just got help from their friends in the class. Drawing on existing friend networks is one way students resist the individualism of lecture classes. Working “independently” with one’s friends still showed one’s self-sufficiency because it didn’t involve learning the way the instructor expected you to learn. Another student told a story about a friend of hers who didn’t go to class at all but used the time she would be in class to study for the class in the library, which drew great admiration from the other students in the interview.

So pervasive was the thinking that a good college student is independent and self-sufficient that students continually sought independence even when it didn’t work. Many students said in high school, they were “babied” by both teachers and parents constantly reminding them of everything they had to do. Chase, for example, claims he disliked his high school because all the students were required to keep planners that were monitored by the teachers. Chase says that now in college, he is behind in most of his classes, and is struggling to balance school with his social life. Nonetheless, he is glad that keeping a planner is not required in college.
Chase: I like college a lot better [than high school]. High school was just more structured. They walked you step by step. College is, you’re on your own, and I tend to be a more independent person so it just kind of fits my style better, even though I’m not really doing well with it now, currently. High school’s more structured and I never really liked it when they walk you step by step like you're a little kid through everything.

The ambivalence Chase demonstrates here—desiring freedom and independence while facing the fact that you are not handling that freedom and independence well—represented a tension expressed by many first-year students, a tension that emerges in differing rules for high school and college. They firmly believe that, unlike high school, college is the place where you are “on your own” and “an adult.” They claim to like this because they don’t want to be treated like children, and they want a chance to prove themselves as capable without help. At the same time, they struggle with making the adjustment, faced with the reality that, as in Chase’s situation, they are often unsuccessful at managing their time on their own. Chase thinks of himself as an “independent person” and says that “currently” he is not doing well with time management, but he believes that he will get better.

In lecture classes, students seek to construct a “good student” identity, which is a combination of (1) subject, how the student perceives herself, (2) motives, the desire to look like and feel like a good student, and (3) rules, the behavior one finds fitting for being a good student. Good students in lecture classes appear engaged by sitting in front of a laptop taking notes. They are often quiet and pay partial attention to the class, flipping between sports scores, Facebook, and notes for class. Good students in lecture classes are independent and can learn the material on their own, often without even the aid of the class itself.
As Stanley Aronowitz claims, accepting authority, tolerating boredom, and being satisfied in a passive role is part of students’ training to be “good workers” in the real world, where they will need to be able to do so. In many ways, students are rewarded for sitting quietly and appearing to pay attention. In a teacher-centered classroom, being quiet is valued because it means that other students are able to listen to the teacher and that the teacher is not distracted. Students may also not see the benefit of participation because there isn’t a direct reward for it. The subjective nature of grading “class participation” means that it tends to be a minimal part of students’ overall grade, and so students are at best only vaguely rewarded for it in terms of points (though they may certainly find other rewards in participating).

Students also believe that what other students say in any class is somewhat meaningless. In two interviews, students actually complained about other students who spoke in lecture classes, seeing them as “show-offs” or “brown-nosers” and as distracting to the real work of the class. In other instances, students talked about how in high school, students just made up things to say in class to impress the teacher.

Claire: My high school [English class] was – all of our essays and all our class discussions were on like symbolism and themes and stuff like that so none of it was on the plot of the story. So you could get away really easily without reading the book at all. Just be like “I think that this symbolizes happiness because whatever” and [the teacher] would be like “That’s so creative.”

In a class discussion we had about why students don’t speak in lecture classes, the students said that a handful of students always dominate large-group discussions, so it’s not really a discussion anyway. They also felt that teachers sometimes took discussions in
certain directions, and they were anxious about saying something that disagreed with the teacher.

*The Construction of the Good Student in the Composition Class*

In contrast to the high value placed on quiet, passive listening in lecture classes, composition places high value on “student engagement” in class, which tends to mean speaking, writing, and acting in ways that show that the student is listening and contributing to a class understanding. Composition values the “dialogic” classroom, a term derived from Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, which forwards the notion that language is constructed through and in response to other language. Entire sections of texts for new composition instructors, like *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition* are devoted to “facilitating class discussion” and “keeping students engaged” by creating a classroom environment where they feel comfortable enough to participate (Roen et al). I often hear instructors say of students, “They were quiet today,” which implies that it was not a good class day. As Mary Reda argues in her overview of composition’s literature on collaborative learning, “Dialogue has come to represent all that is good and empowering and right in our pedagogies; it is a Burkean god-term” (37). Because composition values the socially constructed nature of knowledge, classroom discussion and other interactive, participatory educational models are important for learning how to write.

The belief that student-talk is a waste of time was evident in the semester I was conducting this research. In one case, I had spent the class period explaining a multi-
genre assignment. The students looked confused and so several times I asked for questions, but no one volunteered any. As soon as class ended, however, five students came up to the front to ask questions about the assignment. Students are anxious about appearing too engaged in front of their classmates, and they are afraid to ask a “stupid question,” so student-talk gets pushed out of class time to allow teacher-talk to take center stage. This points to the highly performative element of class discussion: students must balance the “face” they are putting on for other students with what they think the teacher wants to hear.

Not surprisingly, it is easier to remain silent, and what does get discussed in class may be different from what students actually think. One day, I gave the students a chapter from Rebekah Nathan’s *My Freshman Year* about how college students tended to stick to friend groups of similar race and resist becoming a part of a larger community, like the floor of the residence hall. I asked students to free-write for five minutes at the beginning of class on if they agreed with Nathan’s findings or not, and then we had a class discussion about the chapter. In a lively class discussion, students said they found their fellow university students to be “friendly” and “open” and that college was much better than high school because it didn’t have cliques. One student said, “everybody is friends with everybody.” Their free-writing, however, made the opposite argument: almost every student wrote that it was difficult to make friends. Sharon writes:

> It seems like [students] get those few close friends and that is it. When it comes to diversity too, nobody wants to change. We are comfortable with what we previously know. Not many students are willing to step outside of their comfort zone and make new friends every day. The problem with community and diversity on large college campuses is due to the stubborn students who won't apply themselves to become something they are not used to.
Most other students agreed with Sharon, saying that college wasn’t all that different from high school, where people found a few friends and stuck with them. One writes, “I thought we would come here and make new friends instantly but yeah everyone just keeps to their own groups.” The discrepancy in the free-writing and the class discussion, I think, shows that students feel the need to represent themselves in a certain way to their peers and to the teacher, especially with sensitive topics (which are often the ones most worth discussing). Discussion may actually encourage conformity, because students are unwilling to disagree with a popular opinion.

In many ways, the lecture class reflects the individualism of consumer culture and vocationalism. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor contends that students become independent because they mistrust consumer culture, where they are used to getting ripped off, and in political life, where they don’t feel they have a voice. Shor writes, “The big lesson of everyday experience is that you have to make it on your own. [Students] have trouble believing that people who are not relatives or close friends will be honest with each other or will take risks for someone else” (35). The “good student” behavior of individualism and not asking for help is frustrating for composition teachers who value socially based approaches to learning. Students may not come to office hours, believing that doing so is a sign of weakness or may be less than enthusiastic about helping their peers. As I seek to create a classroom community that reflects the social nature of writing, it is important to me that students trust each other and see each other as resources for learning. Students may not get why I am asking them to work in partners or
groups, or how they can help each other, as the lecture class activity system operates under the logic that independence is best.

Writing in the Lecture Class

When students talk about writing in their lecture classes, they use what I came to call “game-playing” stories. These stories reflect students’ assumptions that courses operate under a consistent logic, which is learned by trial-and-error as the student attempt the class’ different assessment measures. Students represent the logic of the course as a secret knowledge of what the instructor “really wants.” In 1987, Robert Brooke identified similar narratives as part of his research into how students resist their institutionally defined roles. In analyzing student narratives, Brooke writes:

[Students] thought of themselves as contestants in a game of luck, nerves, and skill, in which those who scored the most points survived, and those who didn't went home humiliated. They were aware, in short, that the classroom environment demanded certain actions of them which were as formal and arbitrary as the actions demanded in games-playing. (146)

Drawing from Erving Goffmann’s concept of underlife, Brooke suggests that students tell game-playing narratives because they want to assert their complex identities outside of the role of “good student” as defined by the institution and “to show each other that they all recognized . . . that they as individuals were different from the roles they were being asked to play, and that they were all aware of each other as fellow games-players” (146).¹⁵

¹⁵ It is interesting, of course, that they shared these stories of “underlife” in the presence of me, their teacher and an institutional representative. As I described in chapter one, factors like my age and appearance, as
Game-playing narratives serve several functions in the lecture class activity system. First, by representing themselves as game-players, they are demonstrating that they know they are being asked to perform as students, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the role of the “good student.” Second, game-playing narratives serve as mediational tools to bond students together in a common activity of figuring out how the university works, creating an us versus them solidarity. In activity theory, “tools usually reflect the experience of other people who tried to solve similar problems earlier and invented or modified the tool to make it more effective” (Kaptelinin and Nardi 70). Game-playing narratives function both as the tool itself, where classmates share trade secrets in a course, as well as instruction manuals for other tools, like which readings are really necessary for doing well on the test. Websites like RateMyProfessors.com accomplish a similar goal of students helping other students by sharing what they’ve learned about an instructor or a class. Telling these narratives keeps them in circulation to be passed along to others. Of course, these stories are also imbued with the pride one might have in playing a game well, bolstering the students’ status in the eyes of the listeners. In reviewing my interview transcripts, I found that once students would start telling these stories, I wouldn’t have to ask questions or prompt them for as long as ten minutes as they took turns sharing, which leads me to believe that these stories are a common way that students bond with each other.

______________________________
well as the relationship we built as the semester went along, meant that my presence as a teacher was not always felt.
Playing the game becomes a kind of rule for the lecture class activity system. Like Ashley’s story about teaching herself using Wikipedia, game-playing narratives condense the complexity of the class to the minimal actions one must take to get by. In being reductive about their approach to the class, they show how they are distancing themselves from the institutional role of the student fully engaged in the class. The game-playing narratives often take the form of “the teacher says” followed by “what I actually did” and then a marker of whether or not the strategy worked. Stories of failure were just as common as stories of success. Because the game is mostly meaningless, doing poorly at it doesn’t necessarily reflect on you as a person. For example, Megan happily shared a story about how she “bombed” a test because she “studied the wrong thing.” She exhibited little embarrassment in this telling, probably because she didn’t think the test legitimately measured her knowledge or much else related to her identity.

Note-taking, the primary kind of writing students do in lecture classes, was often part of the game-playing narratives. This writing involves recording what the instructor says, accounting for how one expects to be assessed. Once students discover the secret logic of the course, they revise the design of their note-taking to do better. For example, recognizing that the laptop presents potential for distraction, students write by hand in notebooks. Amber says:

[In one class] I filled out the study guide. It was definitely a good strategy and then if I had questions I also had the page numbers in my notes so I could go and re-read that specific part. In physics . . . I copy down the examples we do. If he says something important about a certain problem I write it in the margin [For] Spanish, . . . each chapter I’ll write down the key notes that I know will be on the test, because all the Spanish classes are structured the same, so I'll take notes on what I know is going to be on the test and major points like that. Then I don't have
to read through the book again, it’s my notes, what I think is the most important parts.

Game-playing narratives like Amber’s showcase students’ independence by demonstrating that they can take shortcuts to studying and still do well. Although students take satisfaction in playing the game well, I suspect they also sense that games are fairly meaningless when moved to different contexts, particularly that ephemeral “real world.” David Russell and Arturo Yañez argue that because students don’t always see the value of literacy practices in lecture classes beyond the immediate needs of the class, they are “acting in terms of the university,” performing only in exchange for a grade (345). So I read game-playing narratives not necessarily as a cynical manifesto of how to cut corners but as a frustration with the way that lecture courses can feel like jumping through hoops. Within that frustration is a desire to actually learn something that will be of use in the real world. Game-playing narratives are also imbued with a carryover of resentment of high school, which most students felt was filled with busywork and wasted time. They expect college to be an experience where they do find some sort of meaning, even if that “meaning” is only job preparation and the attainment of social capital. Thus, when classes feel pointless, they tend to become resentful.

Game-playing narratives are constructed for the purpose of fitting in by showing off one’s ability to decipher university life. The social dynamic of the focus-group interviews sometimes led to students changing or re-constructing narratives for their audience. For example, in one focus-group interview of three students, I began the interview by asking them what kinds of writing they had had to do in college outside of first-year composition. All three immediately told stories that boasted of how little time
they had to spend on writing for lecture classes—from a half hour to, at most, two hours—and how easy writing was for them (“I can write an essay in 20 minutes and get an A on it”). Later in the interview, one of the students mentioned that she turns off the Internet connection on her computer to write, so I asked them what kinds of things they do to focus when they write. At this point, they told stories about writing essays for long periods of time, from five hours to all night long, or writing for a few minutes, then procrastinating, then writing again, and then procrastinating for hours at a time (“takes me forever!” one student exclaimed). They described writing as “horrific,” “really, really difficult” and dealing with “crazy pieces of writer’s block.” One possible explanation is that they were interested in telling game-playing narratives at the beginning of the interview to impress their classmates and me, and later on in the interview, they feel okay with talking about just how difficult writing really is, probably because one student was willing to admit it first. This is not to say the game-playing stories are untrue, only that they are constructed to serve a very specific social function of demonstrating that one has figured out college.¹⁶

Writing essays for lecture classes, like tests and quizzes, is also characterized by game playing because students interpret essays in lecture classes to function as short-answer essay tests, where one fills in answers in response to a prompt. Because students believe that writing functions as test-taking, there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.

¹⁶This happened in the class discussion about community that I mentioned earlier. Students were hesitant to say that they hadn’t made a lot of friends in college as this would be a sign that they weren’t doing college “right.”
Their essay assignments for their lecture courses tended to be specific, short, and received very little feedback.

Faith: What kinds of writing have you done for classes besides English 101?
Nicholas: I’ve written two papers, both took like a half hour to write. [For one class], it had to be one-and-a-half pages and [the instructor] outlined what he wanted in each paragraph so you just had to fill in the blanks. In the paragraphs he wanted introduction, two to three sentences on main theory, second paragraph we had to talk about if they had direct moral standing or not and he basically just outlined the entire thing so you just had to find the answer in the book and type it up. It was kind of like fill in the blank.

Because there is a right way and a wrong way to compose an essay, the students say the most common mistake they make on these essays is not following the prompt. Writing becomes very black-and-white in that you either completed the assignment correctly or you did not, and writing reflects very traditional student-teacher roles in the division of labor of the activity system: the teacher has the answers and the students try to give the correct answers.

Faith: What advice would you give to someone who was starting [at this university] next fall about writing?
Stephanie: Read the prompt, and read it again, and again, and if you’re not sure you have the prompt right go to office hours!

When the long, slow, and laborious process of writing was not emphasized, students ended up writing essays for lecture classes the night before they are due because the greatest emphasis is on the written product. Students said that they did not receive guidance throughout the writing process and rarely received substantive feedback on their writing. They find the lack of feedback frustrating less because they want to improve their writing and more because they don’t know why they got the wrong answer.

Faith: How do your other instructors talk about writing?
Beth: What do you mean?
Faith: Like in my class, I go over the assignment sheet…
Beth: Like before they assign a paper?
Kyle: Not really, they just let you wing it.
Beth: Yeah, especially in lectures. It’s just like, “This is due at this date,” and then they don’t talk about it until it’s like, due next class.
Kyle: Not even that. They just give you the date, “Hey a month from now this paper’s due” and then they don’t talk about it until that day.”You’re like, “Oh this paper is due, I forgot.”

It makes sense, however, that the process of writing is not emphasized in these types of writing assignments because they are assessment tools to see if the student can repeat the information in the class. In the way the students might cram for a test the night before, they write the paper the night before it’s due. So the way students talk about an essay is very similar to the way they would talk about a test in terms of what they did right and what they did wrong correlated to what the instructor actually wanted. Kyle says about an essay for a lecture class, “It’s hard because I don't know what they really want because they don't talk about it in class, so you're just kind of shooting in the dark and hopefully you get what they wanted right.” Needless to say, writing becomes very frustrating when the students feel like they are playing a game of finding out the right answer. Because the writing assignments are so specific in asking students to report certain information, the students also say that such assignments often ask them to “summarize” and do not ask for their “opinion.”

They also claimed their writing assignments separated “form”—grammar, spelling, and mechanics—from “content.” The degree to which essays were graded on either characteristic varied. Most students, like William, said that substance counted over style.
William: I’ve had to write papers in my [gen ed class] and like they’re mostly graded for what you say, not how you say it or your organization or anything. They're looking for if you answered the prompt correctly and used the right dates and if you understood the readings you were supposed to do for class.

In classes where “writing” was emphasized, it meant a focus on mechanics.

Steven: For my history class last semester, my teacher called it our class mantra, and it was “writing counts.” . . . For all of our essays they were really strictly graded on grammar, structure. They still had a content but mostly I got docked for that other stuff.
Faith: What did that instructor mean by “writing”?
Steven: I guess he meant the way you write counts, not so much what you say. Make sure everything you write is done correctly. He wanted all the essays correct or you lost points.
Faith: Would it be marked up if like, you missed a period?
Steven: Yeah. It wasn’t a fun class.

In addition to showing how “writing” is equated with “mechanics” in lecture classes, Steven’s comments also point to the fact that students associate “writing” with a kind of suffering. They struggle with making themselves write essays they don’t care about and talked a lot about “pointless” essay assignments, especially in high school.

Stephanie, for example, had to write an essay in high school arguing for the importance of keeping the penny: “The entire time I’m like, this is pointless, I don’t care about the penny, nobody cares about the penny and the teacher doesn't want to read an essay about the penny. It was a stupid waste of time.” They talk about long hours in the dead of night, the lack of purpose to writing, and the frustration that results from having procrastinated.

Even the physical space of writing, they feel, should be devoid of joy. When I asked one interview group what they did to focus when writing, Stephanie says, “I turn off my wireless internet so I can’t go on Facebook. And I move everything away from my reach, like food and like fun, Play-Doh stuff and I just clear out everything so there’s nothing I
can do but write.” It is not surprising, then, that they have a lot of negative associations with writing, whether because writing can’t co-exist with fun, because draconian rules make writing feel like stepping around landmines, or because it is lonely.

A possible interpretation of the students’ game-playing narratives, specifically the comments about writing assignments, is that they are learning the genres of different activity systems. When a student says in a game-playing narrative that he or she learned what an individual teacher likes, it could be that the student actually learned what is valued in that teacher’s field. Russell and Yañez show that when an instructor asks students to complete a writing assignment that does not meet the students’ existing expectations for writing in that field, students are likely to think that the assignment reflects the instructor’s “personal” tastes, even if the assignment represents a move common to the instructor’s field. Because lecture courses make it difficult for students to become immersed in an entire activity system, students really only end up learning a small part of the rules of that activity system. Therefore, it cannot really be said that students have learned a genre of writing, because they haven’t necessarily learned how that genre fits into the activity system of the discipline.

Writing in the Composition Classroom

Lecture classes acclimate students to traditional student-teacher relationships, where the teacher has all the authority, knowledge, and power to determine the “right” answer. The writing students do in these classes is marked by the teacher’s knowledge: in note-taking, the students copy down what the teacher says, and in writing essays, they
write down the knowledge the teacher has given them. They may be surprised at the amount of authority given to them in the composition classroom because many composition teachers, myself included, “de-center” their authority using student-based pedagogy. In fact, Patricia Bizzell argues that “one might read the history of modern composition studies as a series of attacks on classroom uses of power” (847). In these methods, students have the authority to determine the syllabus, the assignments, the direction of class discussion, and so forth. This empowering model of education does not just mean that the curriculum becomes all about the student but that “the learning process is negotiated, requiring leadership by the teacher and mutual teacher-student authority” (Shor Empowering 16). Compositionists also use critical pedagogy methods to question “oppressive pedagogical power” (Bizzell 848). By disrupting the linear student-teacher relationship, what Paulo Friere calls the “banking concept of education,” composition instructors also hope that students can learn to question other forms of oppressive power. For many reasons, however, students sometimes reject student-centered methods and critical pedagogy. As Shor writes, “students do not come to class expecting a negotiated curriculum, power-sharing, or an invitation to critique the status quo . . . They arrive with little practice in democratic rhetoric” (When Students 20).

As I mentioned in previous chapters, I used a method called “community-based assessment” in my class that offered students authority to grade and give evaluative feedback on the essays of other students in the class, in collaborations with their peers and myself (Inoue 209). On both an anonymous survey I administered at the end of the
unit as well as course evaluations, students critiqued this method, primarily because it disrupted their expectations of teacher authority.

- How can a new student grade someone else’s paper on what they think a good paper is, when they themselves are as inexperienced as their peers?
- I don’t mind doing group grading but I think the instructor should be giving the final grade and not peers.

This is not to say that disrupting students’ expectations is a bad thing, pedagogically speaking. On the contrary, critical pedagogues like Shor take a certain kind of joy in the shock value of these methods and argue that these disruptions are exactly what persuade students to question the norms of their educations. Regardless of the pedagogical value, however, it is important to remember that teacher-centered methods are built into institutional structures, and changing those methods can have real material consequences.

The course evaluations at my university ask students to evaluate the instructor on if the instructor offered “helpful responses to my writing.” While I regularly offered one-on-one conferences with students to give them feedback on drafts, the response most salient in students’ minds was the response that came with their final grades, which for two papers was written by other students in the class. This meant that I received very low scores in this section. My point here is both that students hold firm expectations for a course which they might not let go of regardless of how much they learn, and that the institution validates these expectations. Critical pedagogy and student-centered classrooms present many contradictions with the activity system that characterizes both lecture classes and the larger university.

Students continue to believe, based on their experiences in lecture classes, that the teacher has a hidden agenda of what he or she wants from students’ writing. As a writing
teacher, I encourage students in the notion that there are many ways to write a good paper—many organizational strategies, many kinds of thesis statements, many satisfactory opening lines and concluding paragraphs. Using a rhetorical approach to writing instruction, I encourage students to make these choices for themselves, using the considerations of audience, purpose, and context. Like many first-year composition teachers, I have to sell students on the fact that I don’t think writing amounts to a predetermined set of rules (e.g., “Don’t use I” or “Don’t start a sentence with ‘but.’”). When writing is reduced to a set of rules, there is a wrong way and a right way to do it, and so I am also tasked with proving to students that I will evaluate their work fairly and transparently, according to how well it achieves its rhetorical purpose. Students may not believe me when I say there are many ways to complete an assignment, believing that I am being secretive when I do not reveal specific preferences for their writing.

*Embracing Contradictions in the Third Space*

What hope is there for navigating these contradictions? How can the repertoires of practice with which students have grown comfortable be reconciled to composition classrooms? Certainly, students learn to adapt. I do not mean to argue that students are not able to see that composition is a different activity system than a lecture class (on the contrary, spotting these differences is a sign of a successful game-player), but that they naturally use the behaviors of one activity system for another as they are still learning to navigate both. And because they share motives in both activity systems, like getting a passing grade and making friends, it makes sense that they would try out similar
behaviors in both. I can also adapt, making transparent to students how the expectations of my class might be unique from what they’re used to. I think that highlighting these differences should be a practice of composition pedagogy, and I wrote a chapter for a composition textbook concerning the differences between high school and college-level writing.

I want to introduce the concept of “Third Space” here as a way of conceptualizing the distances between activity systems and the hope for reconciliation. In the process of identifying, clarifying, and extricating certain practices as part of certain activity systems, I have somewhat oversimplified the space of the classroom as dichotomous. The two activity systems I’ve outlined in this chapter so far might be seen as a kind of binary logic in that they each have their own practices, expectations, and purposes, and I have emphasized their differences. To complicate these binaries—student vs. teacher or lecture class vs. composition class—I turn to some possibilities for Third Space in the composition classroom. Third Space space offers a way for both the students and the teacher to rethink their repertoires of practice and activity systems, calling on both to think differently. Kris Gutiérrez, Betsy Rymes, and Joann Larson define “Third Space” for the classroom as a moment of “authentic interaction” that occurs when both teachers and students depart from their expected and scripted roles and in doing so, enter into “the possibility of contesting a larger societal, or transcendent script” and “redefine what counts as knowledge” (453, 467). 

A “teacher script” is “the teacher’s view of

---

17 I found it odd that Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson do not mention the concept of Thirdspace as developed by Edward W. Soja. Gutiérrez writes in a 2008 article, “Developing Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space,” that she was not aware of Soja’s use of the term “Thirdspace” in his 1996 book of the same name.
appropriate participation” (445). The students enact a kind of underlife to “assert forms of local knowledge that are neither recognized nor included within the teacher script,” which becomes their “student script” (Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson 451). Text-messaging would be an example of student script as it is outside the realm of the teacher’s idea of correct participation. I argue that both teacher-scripts and student-scripts emerge from the accepted behaviors and practices of activity systems; thus, a Third Space is also a space between activity systems.

In the example presented by Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson, a teacher is giving a quiz on current events, following a traditional format where he asks questions and solicits answers from the students. The students follow an “underlife” script, shouting out incorrect answers that will make other students laugh, undercutting the teacher’s view of correct class involvement. In the moment that Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson propose as Third Space, the teacher asks a question about the Supreme Court case Brown vs. Board of Education, and one student asks what school students would go to if they were “half Black and half White” (465). The teacher responds that even people who were partially Black had to go to Black schools. As Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson analyze this moment, the student departs from her underlife script to ask a question that is socially important at the time of writing the 1995 article I cite here (despite the fact that they are colleagues at the University of California-Los Angeles). Nonetheless, the description of Third Space will sound familiar to readers of Soja’s work. Soja draws from Henri Lefebvre’s “deep critique . . . of all forms of categorical or binary logic” (Soja 7). In Lefebvre’s spatial analysis, the goal is always to “crack open” binaries by introducing “an-Other term, a third possibility . . . that partakes of the original pairing but is not just a simple combination or an in-between position along some all-inclusive continuum” (Soja 60). As Soja describes it, “In this critical thirding, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives” (5). This is similar to the concept of Third Space in the classroom as the formation of an alternate discourse to teacher-speak and student-speak.
(and personally relevant, as one student in the class is half-Black and half-White), and the teacher departs from his question-and-answer format to give a somewhat controversial answer. In this exchange, a Third Space is possible for following the students’ interests, for students to speak from their personal experience and contribute to classroom knowledge, and for a larger questioning of the United States’ history with segregation.

I think the “Third Space” allows a moment of classroom interaction where the students and I can let go of our activity systems as “the right one” and be more open to where each other is coming from. This moment of Third Space interaction is pedagogically useful because it destabilizes the sometimes-rigid patterns that develop from activity systems. A Third Space can also make clear the contradictions between activity systems, allowing for a questioning of taken-for-granted values. In the rest of this chapter, I offer an example of a Third Space moment that moved towards accomplishing these goals.

In the lecture class, students covertly text message to connect themselves to social networks outside the class. I used to explain to students on the first day of class that texting was inappropriate during class because it was distracting to the texter, his or her classmates, and me. Texting is a part of students’ scripts because, for them, it constitutes appropriate classroom behavior, a repertoire of practice formed from previous activity systems. As a teacher using funds of knowledge pedagogy, I wanted to use students’ enthusiasm for text messaging as a way for students to have class discussion, listening to each other and considering others’ viewpoints. My desire for a dynamic classroom
discussion using multimedia tools becomes part of my teacher-script because appropriate participation in my class consists of lively discussion and incorporates new media.

I planned to set up a Twitter account, post a question to it, and then have students text responses to the question, which I could project in real time for the whole class to see. I thought this would be good idea because numerous times in interviews, students used the word “conversation” to describe text messaging. Therefore, I thought that we could have a class conversation using texting. Before enacting this idea, however, I explained the students how I wanted to use Twitter and why, and asked them to write anonymously about their thoughts on the idea and if it was feasible given their phone and texting plan.

In class, I had described the texting/Twittering idea as a dialogue, a mediational tool for class discussion. But their interpretation of the use of texting in class reverted to the didactic form of learning they were used to in lecture classes. Thirteen out of 24 student said they would use it, but only so that I could text them reminders about quizzes and due dates and they did not want to be expected to text to Twitter outside of class. They wrote “it would be an easy way to stay on top of things” and “it will be easier to communicate things” (presumably, from me to them). In short, they wanted me to use the Twitter account to send them text messages, and not about topics or ideas from class, but about quizzes and due dates, as opposed to them sending messages to the account to contribute to a conversation. Furthermore, others said that they preferred to write things down by hand in class, use their computers, or have oral discussion, equating what I was
trying to do with Twitter with note-taking. Only a few, those that said that they preferred oral discussion to Twitter, seemed to really understand the purpose I had intended.

Students seemed to hold the ideology that texting was appropriate for social settings but not school settings, and they were clear that a boundary existed between the two. In interviews I did with students on time management, for example, they allocated separate times for socializing and for homework. One student says that when his social life takes over, schoolwork gets pushed to the side.

Joseph: I need to start using my planner more because I forget some things. For instance, I had no idea our essay was due today [laughs]. So that’s on my list to do before tonight.
Faith: Why didn’t you write it down?
Joseph: Honestly, one of the things is I went home this weekend and I just completely—it was my birthday this weekend and I was completely involved in nothing to do with school. [laughs]

In effect, the social and academic sides of college life form two distinct activity systems with very different rules and communities, and students end up choosing one or the other. They also defend the boundaries between these activity systems. I suspect they do so first of all because they do not want the stress associated with school to encroach upon the fun of social life. My interviews on high school life show that academic and social worlds flowed together more in high school, because students were in smaller classes with teachers who knew them and students who were in their friend groups. In college, they are in large lecture classes where they know few people, and the instructor typically doesn’t know them at all, disconnecting school from social life. I also think that separating out the social or “fun” aspects of their social life from their academic life allows them to be a more serious students. Many students said that their lackadaisical or
off-task behavior in high school was a result of being in classes with their friends. In college, many are determined to be more serious about their classes, which may mean isolating out the academic segments of their lives. Whatever the reason, I find the preservation of this boundary between activity systems to be important, and it points to a real problem with a funds of knowledge approach that breaks down home-school barriers: students may not want their funds of knowledge used in the classroom.

It would appear that the lecture-class style of learning creates a framework by which students interpret what’s happening in all their classes, lecture or not. In the terms of activity theory, the rules and tools of lecture classes as an activity system filter into the activity system of the composition class. Why don’t students distinguish more clearly between the classes, learning the norms of behavior for each? (They do, after all, see each as a separate game to play.) Students’ perceptions about the appropriateness of texting in peer networks (social activity systems) versus the appropriateness of texting for classroom activities show that they demarcate the activity systems of their “academic” and “social” worlds but not the individual activity systems of academic life. The most important distinction for them is between social and academic worlds—distinctions between academic activity systems that seem obvious and significant to me (like composition vs. a lecture class) are more trivial to them.

Students draw upon their repertoires of practice because they recognize a similar context to what they’ve experienced in the past, which triggers a transfer of knowledge. For example, when students are assigned an essay in first-year composition, they may associate it with the context of writing essays in high school, so they may use many of the
same strategies as in high school—the five-paragraph essay, opening with a quote, avoiding the use of the word “I,” and so forth. Students use existing repertories of practice for tackling academic tasks because they perceive a similarity between those tasks.

The Twitter example shows a Third Space between activity systems of composition and lecture classes because in discussing the adoption of an everyday literacy practice for classroom use, I had to depart from my teacher-script to consider the existing rules students have for text-messaging and how they are accustomed to interacting with the teacher in their lecture classes. The students had to depart from their comfortable separation of academic and social life. In departing from these set ways of acting in the classroom, I think that we approached what Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson term the “Third Space,” which makes it “possible for both teacher and student to redefine what counts as knowledge” (467). Students, for example, became more critical of dominant media ideologies of technology. In the series of interviews I conducted about texting, students were largely uncritical of it, arguing that texting is essential for communication and maintaining relationships. In the Twitter instance, disagreements emerged that questioned these narratives: they questioned how texting could be counterproductive, how simplistic it was, and the what kind of classroom discussion they actually wanted to have. In turn, I departed from my teacher script—a script, by the way, that has informed my entire dissertation—by re-considering if students want their funds of knowledge used in the classroom. I had to consider the degree to which I should honor students’ existing ideologies and social life/school boundary and the ethical boundaries of
asking students to unsettle the way they categorize their lives. By both of us questioning our scripts, whether media ideologies or pedagogies we hold dear, we are able to question a larger script about teacher and student roles.

How to find these moments of Third Space? Many arise organically, as in the example used by Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson, and the responsibility falls on both students and teacher to pursue the opportunities for questioning “transcendent scripts” inherent in these moments (452). For me, it was not until I became more aware of the disparities in activity systems that I realized the importance of a Third Space. Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson think that the “productive social heteroglossia” of Third Space moments comes forward from conversations “structured by tension” and where multiple voices are at play (467). In my classroom situation, I think the tension arose because students were still struggling with determining the appropriate uses of text messaging in different activity systems. Certainly, I was struggling with appropriate media usage in the classroom, which is why I had students write about their opinions on using texting in the first place. More generally, the students are struggling with how to act appropriately in their different classes (am I supposed to participate in discussion or listen quietly?), and I am struggling with how to get them to act in ways I deem conducive to learning (should we text or have oral discussion?). I ended up abandoning the idea of the Twitter account and texting in class, mostly because students displayed such heteroglossia in their ideas about it. In retrospect, this would have been a productive moment of Third Space for us to question our ideas about appropriate class participation.
Departures from teacher and students scripts mean departures from comfortable activity systems, which to me, seems necessary for both students and teachers. As Mike Palmquist, Kate Keifer, and Jill Salahub found in their study of an online writing center as activity system, contradictions can identify necessary changes to an activity system (12). As an instructor, I am not as directly confronted with the “double-binds” students must address in crossing between activity systems. I do have to acknowledge the role that other activity systems play in pedagogy and classroom practice, which comes with a degree of humility about how much influence I really have as a writing instructor. The composition class can certainly provide a place for students to think critically and creatively, and can influence how students look at their everyday lives, but may not necessarily dominate the way students think about university life, or create the framework through which students see the rest of university life.

In conclusion, I think that both students and teachers need to move beyond the rigidity of their comfortable activity systems to find a Third Space where it is possible to critique the larger norms of schooling. In my next chapter, I continue my exploration of activity systems by moving beyond the boundaries of academic learning altogether into student organizations, fraternities and sororities, and residence halls.
V. EVERYDAY LIFE ON LOCATION: GREEK LIFE, RESIDENCE LIFE, AND STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

In ethnographies of everyday literacies, the word “home” is used to describe a place where literacy originates and flourishes. For González, Moll, and Amanti, a “home” is where students live more or less permanently, typically with a set of blood relatives who take care of them. When Dolores Delgado-Bernal talks about “pedagogies of the home,” she means a similar kind of place: an actual, physical location that represents “people, family, community, culture, and language” (125). David Barton and Mary Hamilton categorize one type of writing in their ethnography of one town in England as “writing in the home,” which connotes writing done to manage people who share a common living space, like writing grocery lists. The “home” is constructed as (1) relatively permanent, (2) housing a family, and (3) a source of culture. González, Moll, and Amanti and Barton and Hamilton use the term “family” almost synonymously with “home,” as the home is usually the physical location for families.

In these ethnographies, homes exist as part of larger communities, which also reflect norms and values. A “community” is often represented as a specific neighborhood. In *Funds of Knowledge*, the teacher researchers walk though the neighborhoods where their students live—their “communities”—to understand their students better and to develop with questions to ask in their ethnographic interviews. González, Moll, and Amanti use the terms “home,” “household,” and “communities” to identify sources for funds of knowledge and situate their work as an attempt to bridge the differences between home/community life and school life for students who speak languages besides English,
come from working-class backgrounds, and are Mexican-origin, African American, and American Indian.

On a college campus, however, the terms “home” and “community” take on altered meanings. Could a residence hall be considered a “home”? Are sororities and fraternities “communities”? Could two students living in an apartment together be called a “household”? For commuter students and for non-traditional students, these terms may still apply, but on my campus, a four-year state research university, the life lived by most first-year students is defined by a departure from home, household, and community to live a life almost entirely created in just the short time they spend in college. Most students I interviewed referred to “going home” as going to where their families live, and they would hardly refer to their dorm room as a “household.” These students tended to shy away from the “community-building” activities in their residence halls, preferring instead to form their own small groups of friends.

Observing commuter, part-time, and nontraditional students at a community college, Johnathan Mauk expresses concern that composition focuses too narrowly on “academic spaces” to the exclusion of the nonacademic spaces where students actually spend most of their time (386). Mauk finds that “significant numbers of college students . . . come through colleges without a sense of location, without the cartographic skills necessary for placing themselves in the layers and complexities of academic life” (369). As Mauk contends, and as I expressed in my third chapter on consumer ideologies, students are more focused on where they will be when they leave the university (i.e., a job) than where they currently reside. Similar to *Funds of Knowledge*, Mauk shows
problems that arise from the disconnects between the spaces of academic life and the spaces where students spend most of their time. The instructors at his community college believe:

[S]tudents’ nonacademic lives were in constant tension with academia, intellectually, ideologically, physically, and metaphysically. The consequence of that tension was students’ lack of intellectual investment in the courses. Many instructors described their students as uninvolved, uninterested, and unmotivated, and most blamed their students' domestic, workplace, and recreational commitments—those elements that provided centrifugal force away from the academic institution. (371)

Certainly, differences between academic life and everyday life can cause students to feel distanced from their education. This is a central problem articulated in *Funds of Knowledge*. But as that book demonstrates, it is important not to place blame on everyday life because doing so can amount to the view of “culture as a problem” (González 40).

This chapter is my attempt follow Mauk’s suggestion to “recognize the spatial complexities that define our students’ (and our own) lives . . . [and] to include them in our understanding of how to write” (380). Though Mauk is speaking in spatialized terms, I find it more useful to employ the terms of activity theory, which emphasize “the doing of the activity in a rich social matrix of people and artifacts” (Kaptelinin and Nardi 9), allowing me to see into the contexts students move through in their college lives and what they try to accomplish in those contexts. If students are in fact “placeless,” I need a theoretical method that follows them through social matrices. I use activity theory to analyze some of the activity systems involving the first-year college students in this study—residence life, Greek life, and student organizations—and to think about how these systems interplay with the layers of academic life.
I am curious as to how some of the main themes I’ve identified throughout this project as parts of the composition activity system play out in other activity systems in which students are involved, specifically how these activity systems overlap and contradict each other. I find that in both the composition activity system and the activity systems of residence life, Greek life, and student organizations, students display attitudes of apathy and consumerism, tell game-playing narratives to explain how they move through the activity system, and hold individualistic views of themselves and those around them. In the activity systems of residence life, Greek life, and student organizations, however, students display an enthusiasm for learning through the process of “legitimate peripheral participation,” whereby they are apprenticed to being a members of a community. I did not find this enthusiasm in the way they talked about their academic lives. I conclude by offering suggestions for further research that studies community-building, how students are simultaneously socialized into campus groups and academics, and students’ strategies for negotiating power in these communities.

The Activity Systems: Residence Life, Greek Life, and Student Organizations

The data in this section come from five focus-group interviews with students about living in the residence halls, involvement in student organizations, and Greek life. I interviewed two groups of students about the residence halls and Greek life in the fall 2009 and spring 2010 semester, and interviewed one additional group of students about being involved in organizations in the spring of 2010. My analysis focuses on the sororities and the residence halls, as I have the most thorough data for these activity
systems, but I use the fraternity and student organizations to triangulate my conclusions. Because I am working with a smaller set of data, this analysis is meant to be a preliminary, hypothesis-generating exploration into these sites, suggesting possibilities for a fruitful area of research on everyday life. I find students’ perspectives, however tentative, important because they are on the boundaries of these activity systems, and they are thus highly conscious of what is required to become a member of the community.

Residence life, Greek life, and student organizations are activity systems that share the activity of integrating students into a community, although they do so in very different ways. In residence life, students are invited into the community of the whole hall through participation in free and open events. The residents tend to favor their own, individually formed communities over this larger hall community. In Greek life, new members enter the communities of the sorority and fraternity houses through the “rush” process, where they learn about each house, decide which one they want, and try to get into that house. The student organizations attempt to involve students both in the community of the organization and in the community of people who share the interests of the people in the organization, like a hobby or future profession. All three meet David Russell’s definition of an activity system, which I quoted in the previous chapter: they have historical roots that determine present ways of acting, they are social in nature, people use tools to accomplish their activities, and their tools of participation change as they learn new things (‘Activity Theory’).
Although I am not doing a specifically spatial analysis, I acknowledge that visiting the physical locations of these activity systems may have added richly to my data and analysis. I felt, however, that the locations of these activity systems are also students’ private spaces and I was concerned about invading their privacy. Also, because these activity systems are catered to the needs of first-year students, I wanted to privilege their interpretations over my own. I am relying greatly, then, on the way they construct the space of the activity systems through language. As Kristie Fleckenstein argues, space is not “fixed and monolithic” but instead is continually constructed through “perception and articulation” (154). People use language to articulate the meaning of their space, their identity in a space, and their relationships to others in a space, thus creating the space through language (Fleckenstein 158). So although I believe a visual, spatial analysis of these places would have been an effective methodology, my interview data allows me to interpret the construction of space through language. As I mentioned in chapter four, many analyses of activity systems occur without the analysis of a physical location because activity systems are not tied to specific physical locations.

Table 4 offers descriptions of the activity systems I will describe in this chapter—composition classes, the residence halls, Greek life, and student organizations. Following the chart is a more detailed description of each activity system. My description here encompasses the salient characteristics of these activity systems that was apparent to me as I listened to students talk about them in the interviews and is in no way meant to be exhaustive.
TABLE 4. Activity Systems of Student Life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rules/Norms</th>
<th>Composition Class</th>
<th>Residence Hall</th>
<th>Greek Life</th>
<th>Student Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apathy; Consumerism; Game-playing; Individualism</td>
<td>Apathy; Consumerism; Game-playing; Individualism</td>
<td>Secrecy; Game-playing; Commodifying one’s desirable characteristics</td>
<td>Apathy; Consumerism; Game-playing; Individualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>Students; Teachers</td>
<td>Students; Resident assistants; Hall council; Staff</td>
<td>Rushes; Pledges; Members; Officers</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>Texts; Writing; Class discussion; Classroom space</td>
<td>Hall council; Funding from student fees; Free food</td>
<td>Exclusivity; Promise of Community; Rush process; Initiation</td>
<td>Free food; Topic of club; Promise of career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Students who are required to take the class; Teachers</td>
<td>Everyone in the hall; Small, individualized, friend groups</td>
<td>“The House;” Members and potential members</td>
<td>Students with specific interests or career trajectories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects/Motives</td>
<td>Pass the class; Obtain degree; Seek social connection to combat isolation; Prove that one belongs in college; Look and feel like a “good student,” meaning self-sufficient, independent</td>
<td>Housing; Community; Diversity; Academic success; Potential friendships; Independence; Be near classes</td>
<td>Housing; Community; Continue legacy; Academic success; Prestige for the house</td>
<td>Bond over common interests; Bolster resume; Leadership opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labor</td>
<td>Teacher teaches; Students learn</td>
<td>Hall council and resident assistants plan events; Students have free choice as to whether to participate</td>
<td>Rushes make choices about the houses; Pledges learn the rules of the house; Members represent the house; Officers program events; Pan-Hellenic council oversees all the houses</td>
<td>Officers organize activities; Students pay membership fees and participate in activities; Faculty sponsors support the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “composition activity system” I describe in Table 4 refers to the full set of practices and behaviors students bring with them to composition, not just behaviors that are necessarily valued or encouraged in composition. This somewhat generalized activity
system represents the “repertoires of practice” I observed in my class, and the way students talked about their educations as a whole throughout the previous three chapters. For the purposes of appropriate comparison, I look at this activity system from the students’ perspective. As I’ve argued in previous chapters, the motive of students in this activity system is to receive passing grades and eventually a degree that will help them get a job. Students often perceive the university as a business where they come to purchase a degree, using their consumer ethos to make complaints about university life. Student apathy emerges in this activity system when they are cautious of aligning themselves too closely to the professor, a pose I have called “too cool for school.” Students see their participation in classes as “playing a game,” where they figure out the instructors’ secret rules for getting a good grade.

I selected the residence hall as a site for analysis because my university has 24 residence halls, which house about 5800 students. I interviewed one student who was on her residence hall council and six other students who live in the residence halls. “Rebecca” is a first-year student majoring in public health who serves on the residence hall council in the position of “director of operations,” which she describes as “a cross between secretary and treasurer.” Her residence hall, one of the largest on campus, houses approximately 800 students. She became involved with the hall council because

---

18 There is a tension here between official terminology (“residence hall”) and emic terminology (“dorm”). “Residence hall” has become the new term used to avoid some of the negative associations of “dorm,” and to more accurately describe the apartment-like living of newer residence halls. Only Rebecca, the student on the residence hall council, used the word “residence hall” or “residence life,” which suggests that the residence halls have not been successful in their re-branding.
she has hopes of being a resident adviser or “RA” next year, a job that comes with free housing.

What kind of activity system is a residence hall? One way activity systems can be interpreted is through their “objects” or “motives,” which show the larger meaning behind the actions of the individuals in the activity systems (Engeström “Activity” 31). On a basic level, the official motive of the residence hall as activity system is to provide a place for students to live, including sleeping and hygiene, though these are the least-publicized goals of the residence hall. The website for residence life consistently uses the word “community” to describe the living styles of the residence halls. The university has “themed” halls for honors students, engineering students, Native American students, and so forth so that students can “start out with something in common” (“Theme”). According to the residence hall website, and my interview with Rebecca, the halls also emphasize “diversity” and “social justice,” and have a full-time “Coordinator of Social Justice Education.”

Another way to understand an activity system is through its “mediating artifacts” or “tools” which people use to accomplish the motives of the system (Engeström “Activity” 30). One of the primary tools that the residence halls use to accomplish their goals is another activity system: the residence hall council, made up of elected undergraduates and resident assistants, who live on the floor and are also students. The residence hall council is its own activity system whose purpose aligns with that of the residence hall, though is sometimes at odds with the residents themselves, as I will discuss further later in this chapter. Costs of living in the residence halls vary from
approximately $5360 per academic year (August to May) for a triple occupancy to $10,117 for a single. Most students live in double occupancy rooms at an average cost of about $6,500 per academic year (“2011-2012”).

The students living in the residence halls do not necessarily share the motives of the residence hall council or staff because individuals in activity systems adopt and reject the activity system’s motives to varying degrees (Deans 296). The residence hall demonstrates a split between the “official perspective” on what the hall is supposed to be, determined by institutional needs and enacted through permanent staff as well as resident assistants and the hall council. As I will discuss, the students living in the residence hall view it as a reservoir of potential friendships, and they prefer to create their own groups of friends rather than participate in the “community” of the larger residence hall. They often struggle with sharing a small living space with another person, as they were used to having their own room in their parents’ house, and complain about roommates who are disrespectful of their belongings or space. The students thought of the “dorm” primarily in terms of their immediate living conditions and the people closest to them, whereas Rebecca—the student on the hall council—and the residence life website discuss the hall as a large community of students who share common goals.

A second activity system is “Greek life,” consisting spatially of the sorority and fraternity houses that dot campus. I will have a greater emphasis on sororities because the young women I interviewed were more forthcoming about their process of entering the
sorority than the young men were.\footnote{Secrecy is an important value of both the sorority and fraternity systems. While the sorority members seemed eager to share with me what they learned, my interviews with fraternity members contained cryptic statements like “we did our first ritual, which was, like, kind of fun but not fun at the same time. I can’t really talk about it. You don’t want to know about it.” I did not ask a follow-up question to this.} The costs of being a member of Greek life vary greatly among sororities and fraternities, as members pay different rates based on whether or not they live in the house, and if they choose to eat meals at the house (sometimes the meal plan is required to be a member). Without housing, fraternity membership typically costs $500-$1,100 per year, and sororities are about $400 per year. With housing, costs can run to about $1,300-$2,100 for fraternities and about $3,400 for sororities per year (Fraternity and Sorority Programs). The houses also provide a place to live, but typically only for juniors and seniors, and even then, many students choose to live in apartments for privacy or space reasons. According to the students I interviewed, “the house” is a kind of sacred space for the fraternities and sororities, and it serves as a metonym for the group as a whole.

Central motives of the Greek Life activity system include community, with a closer emphasis on family in terms of “brotherhood” or “sisterhood.” The students refer to their fellow members as “brothers” or “sisters.” This family connection is strengthened because almost all of the students I interviewed had close relatives who were also in a sorority or fraternity and encouraged them to join. If you have family members in the fraternity or sorority you are considering joining, you are called a “legacy,” which reflects favorably on you. The students were also proud of their “philanthropy,” a process by which they choose a charitable organization and raise money for them. Reputation was also important. The students often chose their houses
based on what they learn about them from other people, and the sorority members said they monitored their sisters’ behavior because one woman acting out at a party could ruin the reputation of the whole house. On my campus, sororities (unlike fraternities) cannot have alcohol or hold events at the houses themselves. Like the residence hall council, which serves to further the goals of the activity system of the residence hall, the sororities and fraternities have presidents and “chairs” of their different activities—rush chair, social chair, philanthropy chair, etc.

Both Greek life and the residence halls as activity system seek to support students in their work in the activity system of academics. For example, many sororities and fraternities have mandatory “study hours” for the first-year students pledging the houses. Sororities and fraternities must maintain a certain GPA to avoid being put on probation and eventually losing the house. Certain houses will also have higher GPA standards, and members from both groups talked about feeling pressured and putting pressure on others to maintain the group’s average GPA. Academics is also emphasized as a central value of the residence halls. The halls have “classes in common” lists so students can study together and in-residence tutoring available. Although both systems provide support for students to study, the emphasis is on grades and GPAs as sign of success.

Student organizations were more difficult to classify as an activity system because of the diversity of organizations on campus and because the first-year students I interviewed were really only on the periphery of these organizations. From the students I interviewed, I found that student organizations have a central motive of helping students to bolster their resumes and give them leadership opportunities, while others have the
motive of connecting students with similar interests. Career-oriented student organizations offer students professional development and volunteer opportunities, help students learn more about their chosen career path, and provide networking among students with similar goals. Interest-based organizations offer students the chance to practice activities, like snowboarding, with members who share similar interests. Several students said that student organizations require that one have at least sophomore standing to hold leadership positions, so they said their roles were usually limited to passive participation, which likely affects their level of engagement in the club.

*Overlaps with the Composition Activity System*

*“What’s in it for me?”: Student Apathy and Consumerism*

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the attitude of “too cool for school.” The “too cool for school” attitude emerges in the activity system in what Engeström calls “rules.” “Rules” are the “norms” of the activity system, the laws defining what people are supposed to do in the activity system and how people are supposed to act (“Activity”). Students are supposed to act detached and apathetic, operating out of a consumerist ethos. In this posture, the students boast about doing the minimal amount of work to get by, and they are cautious of looking too engaged or aligning themselves too closely with the professor. This attitude showed up in a kind of overall apathy and a consumerist view towards their education. They were most interested in how they could get something out of the educational system that would directly benefit them. I discussed how the “too cool for school” attitude came out in the rhetoric of Undergraduate Cynical
in chapter two, when students complained about the bureaucracy and other injustices of university life to bond with each other and distance themselves from the institution. In chapter three, I argued that students adopt a consumer mentality to make demands on their education because a consumer ethos is more socially acceptable than wanting to learn. This attitude was also on display in the game-playing narratives I discussed in chapter four, when students shared stories of the way they manipulated course work to do the minimal amount to get by. The previous chapter also showed how students see themselves as players of a game to distance themselves from the role of “good student.”

Rebecca also faced a problem of student apathy in her work with the residence hall council. As an activity system, the council has high objectives. Rebecca says their goals include “building a stronger community,” “social justice,” and “lots of diversity and eye-opening experiences.” Examples of events that helped to achieve these goals were a fashion show sponsored by the council featuring transgendered people (and music and food) and a demonstration by a person from campus health about safe sex practices. The students who live in the residence hall, however, do not share the objective of the residence hall council. As Rebecca describes the residents, they manifest the “too cool for school” posture by finding ways to get the free food from the event with as little participation as possible. Being an engaged and active student herself, Rebecca struggles with student apathy.

Rebecca: We’ve tried to do [activities about social justice] at the dorm but nobody cares. They come for the food and then they leave. They walk in, grab a cookie and walk out the other door.
Faith: Why do they do that?
Rebecca: I think they’re too caught up in their own lives. I understand, but I figure if you’re going to come for the cookie the least you could do is sit down.
We’ve gotten smarter though! [The other student in the interview suggests serving the cookies after the event starts.] We tried that, but then we just end up with a very large amount of cookies. And then they just go to my room and I eat them!

The students and the residence hall council end up trying to out-game each other. The students try to do the minimal participation to get the free food. The council tries to get the students to come with the offer of free food but will only give out the food with a minimal amount of participation.

The residence hall council is motivated by a kind of care for the whole student as resident of the hall: helping the student physically and emotionally and giving the students “eye-opening experiences” to contribute to their experience of college life. Though residence halls offer many opportunities for involvement, entertainment, and academics, the students who live there see the greatest value of the residence hall as a font of potential friendships. Beyond that, as Rebecca’s story shows, students are interested in creating their own space, choosing their own study spots and recreational activities. In an interview with students about living in the residence halls, all the students said they chose to live there to meet people, advice they had gotten from friends and family members who had attended college.

Faith: Would you recommend living in the dorm to an incoming freshman?
All three: Yeah.
Faith: Why is that?
Justin: My friends who don’t live on campus, like it’s harder for them to come down and do stuff, incidentally, like you know what I mean? Like you text, “Hey, do you wanna go here?” and they’re like, “OK,” and if they live off campus you have to wait for them to get here when you like go somewhere. It’s just easier.
Michael: Yeah it seems like the people who live off campus are always sitting in their apartment or something and aren’t going out much and kinda stick to themselves.
Deidra: I have a friend who’s a junior and he doesn’t live in the dorm, he hasn’t made a lot of friends, so I mean I guess you have a better chance of making
friends if you live in the dorm so it’s probably good for incoming freshmen so you try and meet as many people as you can.

Once friends have been provided to them in the residence halls, the students’ objective as part of the residence hall system is to create their own activity system of individualized friend groups. Two students I interviewed never went to any residence life events, one because he was involved in his fraternity and another because he thought the people on his floor were quiet and not very friendly. A third student said she “dropped by” the activities, but, like other students, she was noncommittal:

Deidra: [The residence hall activities are] not like a big like event thing. People come in and go out, in and out. Some [people come] more than others, cause there are some people that always go and some people are like, “Oh that’s cool and drop by.”

Deidra’s comment clearly displays the “too cool for school” rule in that it portrays a resistance to looking too involved. One must not get actively excited for or anticipate an event. If one happens to be walking by and the activity looks “cool,” one goes in but might soon “go out” again.

The hall council activity system encounters many of the problems I’ve encountered in the activity system of my classroom, many of which I’ve discussed in this dissertation. I see a parallel between the way sanctioned residence hall activities are exploited for their free food and the way lecture classes are “played” to get a passing grade. Similar to the way that students avoid the idealistic community-building potential of residence hall activities, they avoid community-building in composition. This is not to

---

20 This “drop by” mentality seems to reflect Rebecca’s complaint that students come to the event, eat the cookies, and leave.
say that students are avoiding any community; they welcome opportunities to form small
groups of self-selected friends. But they want community defined on their own terms and
resist the teacher (or the residence hall) defining that community for them.

Ali, a sophomore involved in the medical student association, the chemistry club
and the pre-pharmacy club, embodies both student apathy and consumerism in her
orientation towards the student organizations with which she is involved. When I
identified some consumerist rhetorics in chapter three, I observed that students see a
college degree as a commodity they can purchase for a fee. This thinking creates a
consumer stance, where they try to get their money’s worth for the best product. As a
consumer of student organizations, Ali is unapologetically involved in these clubs for the
“products” of resume-building and free food. She expresses no guilt about this, perhaps
because her reasons for joining are the same as everyone else’s:

Faith: Why did you decide to get involved?
Ali: I want to go into pharmacy. I think everyone comes to the [pre-pharmacy
club] for the free food. We have speakers come and speak to you about the
professions to go into . . . Pretty much the students that show up are there for the
food. No one really asks questions and when they do I think it’s because the
leaders of the pre-pharmacy club usually instigate the questions, like they’ll ask
the speaker something and someone will elaborate on it. But I don’t really talk to
any of them. It’s almost like an auditorium, there’s six, seven rows of desks back.
I’d say there were 100 people or less. Maybe 70 or 80, a pretty big group. But like
I said, they all show up for the food. Christmas time we had candy, pizzas and
sandwiches are really popular. Like we had Hungry Howie’s and they had plenty
of pizza, like if you wanted to stay after you could take boxes home, after
everyone had as much pizza as they wanted and we still had boxes left over.
Faith: Why do you think people join the club?
Ali: I think they join because it looks good on the application. Yeah, there might
be a few people who come because they like it, but for the most part people join
because they want it to look good on an application somewhere. And if you’re not
involved, pharmacy club won’t care.
“Free food” is one parallel between the activity systems of the residence hall council and the student organizations. David Russell says that what sets activity systems apart from other frames of analyses is that “the unit of analyses in activity theory is not the workings of an individual mind but the relations among the participants and their shared cultural tools” (“Activity” 56). For all of these activity systems, “free food” is an essential tool that determines whether or not students will participate. It is manipulated by those planning the event in strategic ways to get people to come to the events and is a reason given for participation. In the passage above, Ali remembers the specific type of food at the event as well as how much of it was there.

Free food is a “mediational tool” of these activity systems. In activity theory, tools serve to mediate between people and their reality, and “influence the nature of external behavior and also the mental functioning of individuals” (Kaptelinin and Nardi 70). Several things are worth noting about the “free food” as mediational tool for these activity systems. First, the incentive of free food operates out of the trope of the broke, starving college student, assuming that such students will be attracted to events offering food. But the food is not free. In the case of the residence halls, all the money comes from the residents themselves, who pay as much as $800 per month to live in the halls. Ali pays $35 per year for the privilege of sitting through lectures about pharmacy, “free food,” and the line on her resume. Thus, if students are “broke,” it’s because they’ve already paid for their residence hall or their organization membership fees, and giving them food is really just giving them what they’ve already paid for. A more accurate trope might be the “apathetic” student, who needs instant gratification to get motivated.
Economist Nick Szabo contends that even small payments at the point of transaction involve “mental transaction costs,” which is the mental effort involved in making a decision to pay for something (qtd. in Anderson 59). Free, of course, eliminates the effort of this decision-making process. In this way, free food can actually contribute to apathy. Ali doesn’t have to think about what she’s getting out of the pharmacy club—the line on the resume, a community, knowledge about her future profession—because the incentive of free food is always there. The free food eliminates the consumer dilemma of making a choice and the fear of getting ripped off. Second, free food as mediational tool actually *encourages* a lack of engagement in the activity system. As economic psychologist Chris Anderson argues, people don’t care very much about things that are free because there is no investment and no risk, thus encouraging “thoughtless consumption” (67). It seems that the organization itself is also thoughtlessly consumed, as in the way Ali and her fellow pharmacy club members sit idly through lectures about pharmacy, and the hall residents casually drop in and out of events. Because the mediational tools of the activity system determine the rules and motives of the activity system, free food actually encourages (feeds?) student apathy.

The parallel to first-year composition might be students’ choice to attend class. In the same way that consuming the food at a residence hall event feels free because no money is exchanged at the point of transaction, students might feel as though they can come and go from class and use class resources as they feel necessary. Financial aid, scholarships, and funding from family all make tuition feel removed from the actual product of classes and learning. If tuition were charged at the door of the class to remind
students how much they’ve paid to be there, attendance, participation, and the demands on the teacher might change drastically. Textbooks, by contrast, never feel free (even though they are bought at the beginning of the semester and used later on) because they are typically bought all at once (making for a gigantic sum) and because they are a very material, concrete product, unlike the more nebulous products of tuition. I often get complaints on course evaluations that I don’t use my textbooks enough “to make it worth it” but have less frequently received the complaint that class time was not used wisely. While I like to think this is because I am an efficient teacher, I suspect the larger reason is that the textbook is more clearly a product they paid for, whereas students are less clear what paying tuition gets them.

**Playing the Game**

In chapter four, I discussed how students view lecture classes as a “game” they play. Students share game-playing narratives to boast and to teach others how to also successfully play the game. This is demonstrated above in the way that the hall residents and pre-pharmacy club members attempt to get as much free food as possible with the smallest amount of participation. (And the residence hall council tries to give away as little free food away as possible.) Perhaps the best example of game-playing, however, came from the sorority and fraternity rush process. In the “rush process,” new students learn about different sororities and fraternities, and sororities and fraternities learn about them. The goal of the process is to make decisions about who can join. A “rush” is someone engaging in this process. A “pledge” is someone who has chosen and been chosen by a sorority or fraternity and is in the process of becoming a full-fledged
member. The sorority rush process is extremely rule-governed because one objective of the Greek life system is to organize the rush process in a way so that the rushes are not biased toward any one house. The rushes cannot bring anything out of the houses they visit, so they travel between the houses with clear plastic bags instead of purses. They are also required to visit all the major sorority houses. At each house, they have a brief conversation with a member where they are asked the same questions about their family, where they are from, and what they want to study in college. A rule that forms among the rushes is that to get into a sorority, you have to be memorable. To be memorable in a process that encourages treating everyone the same, however, requires some game-playing.

Adriana: And [they ask you] just the same stupid questions that mean absolutely nothing. Like, you don’t care what my major is, I don’t care what your major is. Christina: I didn’t have to listen to the questions, because it was just automatic at one point. Adriana: You’d always try to bring up something that they’d remember you [by]. I’d be like “Oh my twin’s over there.” That’s good. They’d be like “Oh, you have a twin?” and they’d get all excited, and they’d be like “She looks exactly like you!” and “You should both be in the house!” Everyone wanted both of us together. I think you get more points in a house if you get twins together but we split up [laughs].

Christina: I love astrology, that was mine. I would guess their sign! In one house, I guessed this girl’s sign, and she was like “Oh my god!” and she grabs one of the active members, and was like “Oh my god guess her sign!”

Clearly, the new pledges identified a problem with one of the rules of the activity system—that people were not allowed to express their individuality—and so ended up changing the rules by finding opportunities to set themselves apart. In considering how

---

21 The points system is unclear to me, though they seem linked to status. Adriana and Christina were hesitant to explain it, so I didn’t ask further questions, but it may have been that they didn’t quite understand it themselves.
activity systems change, Yrjö Engeström theorizes that most activity systems take on new members through “internalization,” where members learn how to act in the activity system. When a disruption occurs, usually based on an individual’s reflection about how the activity system isn’t working, change begins on an individual level. One person or a sub-group of people does something differently, a process called “externalization.” Engeström thinks that “As the disruptions and contradictions of the activity become more demanding, internalization increasingly takes the form of critical self-reflection—and externalization, a search for solutions, increases. Externalization reaches its peak when a new model for the activity is designed and implemented” (“Activity” 34). We can see this happening in the rush process when the tactics for subverting the superficiality of the process become a rule for the process. In the very next line of the interview, Adriana re-states the point she and Christina are making, and the male interviewee, Robert, chimes in to say he does the same thing.

Adriana: Bring something random [to talk about]. Don’t even worry about telling them your major, spit those questions out but then start bringing up something about you that’s really cool.
Christina: Like interesting things that they’ll definitely remember you by.
Robert: You definitely need to go into the house with an icebreaker. I went in with my friend, we had a tag team thing going on. We literally had the same conversation 500 times. He’d say, “I could have played basketball in college.” And I’m like, “Oh really man that’s so tight.” A lot of fraternities are really competitive and they want good sports teams so they can win so after that it was really easy to get more guys to come over to me.

Similar to the way the students expressed pride in figuring out “what the teacher wants” to get a good grade, they delight in showing that they’ve learned just what the sorority or fraternity house wants in a new pledge, using their individuality to showcase what they have to offer. These students are also forming new activities within the activity
system. It is unclear the extent to which the rule about expressing your individuality in the boilerplate interview was an innovation that all three interviewees came up with on their own, or if someone told it to them. The way Adriana phrases this rule in the passage above makes it sound like she is re-voicing advice she received from someone else. The stories also reflect a consumer mentality because the students commodify what they can bring to the house and stage themselves to look desirable to the members.

**The Snowflake Mentality vs. Creating Community**

When talking about their involvement in these activity systems, students displayed an attitude I came to call the Snowflake Mentality, reflecting the belief that everyone is a unique individual. Some of this mentality emerges from the larger consumer culture, because a post-Fordist economy is defined by “customization,” or the tailoring of unique products to unique, individual consumers (Sassatelli 48). In turn, individuality is displayed through the purchase of consumer goods in a “mass-produced culture” (Goodman and Cohen 69). The Snowflake Mentality conflicts with large lecture classes because these classes send the message that large groups of students have the same needs and learn the same way. Students do not engage with these classes because they don’t fit their sense of who they are as learners: unique people with individual tastes. In the residence halls, the Snowflake Mentality also becomes a barrier in trying to find or create a community because the hall residents resist joining in on the one-size-fits-all, open-to-everybody residence hall events. The Snowflake Mentality also creates a tension in activity systems that are designed around treating people the same way. For example, Rebecca’s residence hall council plans events that they believe students will be interested
in and provides free food because they believe it motivates students. The hall council, however, has to operate under a generalized view of students; there are, after all, 800 residents in their hall. Students reject the programming of the residence halls, preferring to create self-sponsored communities and thus competing activity systems. The rush process described above is also an example of the Snowflake Mentality at work, as the rushes try to make themselves unique. The point of the process is to ensure fair treatment for all the rushes, which means treating them the same.

I would argue, then, that part of what Mauk calls the “placelesness” of college students involves a struggle to find a place to belong. Believing you are a unique individual, you don’t expect that you will have the same tastes and interests as anyone else and so you must seek out a place that’s right for you. To reconcile their need for connection to others with their Snowflake Mentality, students form what I call “individualistic communities,” reflecting their personal tastes. The dorm, sorority, or other institutionalized space where groups of people meet becomes a kind of smorgasbord of potential friendships, where students can select among potential friends. Again, as I demonstrated in my chapter on the consumer mentality, their greatest consumer value is choice, so they want to be provided with options for potential relationships and communities, but they want to actually form the relationships and friendships themselves. In her ethnography of living in a residence hall as first-year college student, Rebekah Nathan describes going to a Super Bowl party put on by residence life with only a few other attendees. Leaving the party and walking back to her room, Nathan observes that many doors are open on the floor and students are watching
the game with their own group of friends. Almost all the students I interviewed about the residence halls said that they were living in apartments next year with other students they met in the halls. They select their friendships from the offerings, and then move out with their individualistic communities.

Contradictions with the Composition Activity System

All three activity systems share the activity of integrating students into a community, so they must find ways of teaching students how to belong to their communities. The primary disconnect I observed between the composition activity system and the activity systems of these student communities is revealed in the process by which students learn how to be community members: a process Etienne Wenger calls “Legitimate Peripheral Participation” or LPP. Wenger thinks that because we are social beings, learning is a social process that happens as people learn “valued enterprises” that help them become part of a real, meaningful group of people that engage in that enterprise (4). Wenger’s theory is that learning is an “encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (4). Individuals learn and adopt these practices, and communities teach and revise these practices. Newcomers to a community participate by engaging in “peripheral” tasks that are meaningful for the community, but not risky or complicated. As their membership increases, as they apprentice expert community members, and as they become more fluent in the tasks, they learn more about the community and become more integrated in its functioning.
Several aspects of LPP are worth mentioning to understand it as a learning theory. First, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger devised the theory based on observations of learning outside of schools—for example, the apprenticeship models of Yucatec midwives and Liberian tailors—in order to get a “fresh look” at the social dynamics of learning (39). Second, LPP rarely has explicit student-teacher roles and though learning is observable in these settings, teaching is rarely as obvious. Finally, the participants have “strong goals for learning because learners, as peripheral participants, can develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about, and what there is to be learned” (93). LPP learning emerges from organic experiences, where people are trying to be a part of a community, and have a genuine desire to learn the practices of that community. Instead of learning being contained in a set curriculum, learning in legitimate peripheral participation “unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice” (93). In considering such learning opportunities, Kris Gutiérrez and Joanne Larson write that in these settings, the knowledge and skills people acquire have a highly positive social value because they are bound to practices and valued relationships with people in teaching roles. And because learning is not the primary reason people participate in their everyday practices, learning is continuous with experiences encountered in everyday life. (70, emphasis in original)

LPP was clearly at work in the way students talked about their involvement in the activity systems (see Figure 2).
When the students talk about their participation in these activity systems, it’s often with an eye towards further and deeper levels of involvement. They understand both *why* they are entering the community and *who* they will be as they enter the community. Rebecca says that she took the hall council position, an unpaid job, so that she could one day be a resident assistant, a paid position. She believes that the hall council position will teach her enough about working in residence life to make her a competitive candidate for the resident assistant job. Adriana and Christina, as I mentioned earlier, delight in learning everything about the sorority system, especially since so much of it is supposed to be a secret. For example, they described to me a system of hand signals the sorority sisters use while they are speaking to a rush to indicate to the other sisters in the room whether or not they like the rush. The secrecy of the activity system makes learning the rules exciting.
Christina: The first day I had no idea [about the signs]. Obviously, my roommate’s in the same sorority as me, we obviously talked about it. She’s in a different group for rush but we talked about it. And she’s like “There are signs” I was like “What? Get out!” They’re not obvious about it, but—

Adriana: They’re really good at it but I just knew because I know girls in sororities with big mouths are gonna tell you what they do. And if one girl stays with you the whole time you know the house isn’t really interested in you, but if you talk to five girls you know that you’re gonna get a call back.

Many aspects of the rush process are supposed to be kept secret, but the students took great pleasure in sharing them with me. In our focus group interviews, they would tell me something they learned and then nearly shout in chorus, “You’re not supposed to know that!” (the “you” not meaning me specifically, but “you” as in “new rushes”). They are incredibly excited to become members of these communities, learn about them, and take on these new identities. They also told me all about the pledging and initiation processes and what they expect when they get more involved with the houses, because these activity systems also present leadership opportunities for students. After becoming a member, there are opportunities for advancement, like being a resident assistant in the halls or a chair of the sorority.

Even the students who lived in the residence halls described it as a kind of learning experience for becoming an apartment dweller or homeowner.

Faith: Do you plan on living in the dorms next year?
Deidra: It’s usually a one time.
Christopher: It’s like after you get sick of it, you kinda want to be in your own place. Like the way I see it is kinda like the dorm is the first step. Like to doing things on your own like vacuuming and [taking] care of your room, like laundry. Then you gotta take the next bigger step, an apartment, and you start moving up eventually like maybe a house.

While apartment life may not seem like an integration into a community the way joining a sorority is, the students also say that part of the experience of learning to live
“on your own” by learning how to take care of a physical location also entails learning to get along with other kinds of people who may be sharing that space. The students living in the residence halls felt it was an essential experience for learning how to co-exist with other people. Deidra says, “It’s definitely a lot different from living at home, but I think it’s a good experience to see how different people are.” Christopher complains about his roommate that “borrows” his clothes because he doesn’t want to do his own laundry, but he describes learning how to get along with the roommate as an overall positive experience.

In each of these instances, students have a genuine desire to learn something to be a part of a community and are eager to take on the identities offered by greater membership in the community. This is not at all how students talked about the academic part of their lives. In that activity system, students focus more on what they can get out of their participation, the “what’s in it for me?” thinking. Lave and Wenger caution that “where there is no cultural identity encompassing the activity in which newcomers participate and no field of mature practice for what is being learned, exchange value replaces the use value of increasing participation” (112). Confusing the use and exchange value of learning results in “conflicts between learning to know and learning to display knowledge for evaluation” (112). By Lave and Wenger’s analysis, students learn for a grade or a degree because they don’t see the contextualized, community-driven purposes of learning or the identities they are supposed to be forming. In places like the pre-pharmacy club, students attend for the exchange value of the line on the resume rather than the experience of learning to be a pharmacist. In the residence hall, they attend
activities for the free food rather than the educational or community-building purposes of the activity. They “play the game” because they don’t see how the rules of the game could apply anywhere else.

In fact, as is apparent in their complaints about general education classes and the other hoops they feel they have to jump through to graduate, they want to be on the clear trajectory of LPP, but they have trouble seeing how what they do in their first year at the university gets them anywhere else. Students’ vocational mindset, then, can be theorized as a kind of desire for a learning model more like legitimate peripheral participation. They think that in college, they will be apprenticed into a community that will teach them a job, so when they can’t trace how what they are doing leads into that job, they see what they are doing only for its exchange value.

The composition activity system has more in common with Ali’s experience in the pre-pharmacy club. In the pre-pharmacy club, Ali is frank that she has no interest in further involvement or being a part of a community; she is most interested in the exchange value of her participation. As far as Ali is concerned, she gets exactly what she wants out of the pre-pharmacy club: the line on the resume and the free food. (I asked her if she wanted to get further involved, but she said she was busy with her coursework and probably wouldn’t have time.) She explains that in applying to pharmacy schools, it is important to show “community involvement.” She says, “It doesn’t matter if you’ve got a 4.0, if you’re not involved in your community [the admissions committee] will go on to the next person who has a 4.0 and volunteers a lot of hours per month.” It is ironic that Ali’s “community involvement” is sitting in a lecture hall listening passively to a lecture
and eating, but it demonstrates how “community involvement” becomes a commodity that Ali can exchange for advancement in her career. It doesn’t even matter if it’s not much of a “community” (“I don’t really talk to any of them”) and if she’s not really “involved” (“the students that show up are there for the food”), it matters that it appears a certain way on her resume to help her achieve her career goals.

I wish that Adriana and Christina approached the task of learning to write in my class with half the enthusiasm with which they approach learning the secret hand symbols of the sorority house. I wish that Rebecca was as passionate about being a leader in my class as she was about creating activities that engage residents of her hall. Instead, I often feel like the leaders of the pre-pharmacy club, incentivizing everything I do, hopefully and animatedly asking questions, trying to get people involved. David Russell argues that in the academic activity system, students have options for how involved in the community they want to be: “whether to involve themselves primarily as consumers of a discipline’s or profession’s commodified tools (knowledge) in distant genres, to place themselves on the periphery of its activity system, or to become involved actively in its life through deeper participation” (“Re-Thinking”). Russell thinks that this creates tension for students and so proposes two solutions. One is to teach students in a writing-across-the-curriculum setting, where they learn the actual genres of writing in certain disciplines. Another is to teach “rhetoric,” helping students to become conscious about their language choices. In this method of instruction, students would learn how to analyze the conventions and genres of different disciplines. Service learning and writing in and for the community also present options for engaging students in legitimate peripheral
participation. As Tom Deans points out, however, writing for a community groups can cause more tensions because the activity system of school contradicts with the activity system of the community. Just because the student is participating in a legitimate community doesn’t mean that he or she will gladly give up his or her identity as student. Students will have to balance being a “good student” vs. an “effective worker,” or “pleasing the teacher” vs. “serving the client” (Deans 301).

I am cautious, of course, of creating a dichotomy between the classroom as unreal and the rest of the world as real (even though this is often how students see it). As Bruce Horner states, seeing the classroom as unreal or asocial denigrates the work of the composition teacher. One of the central moves of critical pedagogy—offering students power to determine the syllabus, assignments, evaluation, or the day-to-day functioning of a course—can be theorized as a kind of legitimate peripheral participation because the students are offered legitimate roles that formerly belonged to the teacher. In this way, the classroom is seen as a legitimate community that students enter into by taking on responsibilities, like leading discussion. Even so, the process of critical pedagogy often immediately immerses in these responsibilities, as early as the first day of class, as opposed to starting out with smaller, less risky tasks and gradually receiving more responsibility as happens in LPP.

The problem with LPP in the composition classroom is that students must feel that their participation is legitimate. Lave and Wenger say that legitimate peripheral participation is characterized by learners who “can develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about and what there is to be learned” (93). I attempted a form of legitimate
peripheral participation in the community-based assessment model I described in the previous chapters. Students work individually to evaluate their classmates’ papers anonymously, and then in groups, and then with me to develop a final grade and offer the writer feedback and constructive criticism. This worked as a kind of legitimate peripheral participation because students got to participate in the typically teacher-centered model of grading. Students were able to see, as apprentices are in legitimate peripheral participation, the “whole enterprise” of the grading process. While I would argue that they understood the importance of grading, they did not seem to fully understand why they were grading, instead of me. I explained many times the philosophy of community-based assessment—how learning to evaluate a piece of writing independent of a teacher was an important skill they needed to have after leaving composition class—but many still complained that the process of grading was too important to be taken on by their classmates. I think the larger problem here is that I was trying to argue to them that the classroom is a legitimate reflection of the “real world,” and that the skills they were learning—like how to develop criteria by which to analyze a piece of writing—would have some bearing on their lives outside of the classroom. This is not a problem faced by legitimate peripheral participation, because participants are already in a world as real as it gets.

Conclusion

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, my data are not quite complete enough to make firm conclusions, so I’m going to make some suggestions for further thinking and
research into the kinds of spaces I have discussed. These spaces offer insights about how students join communities, stay involved or choose to leave them, and take on leadership roles, which is important because of composition’s high value of community. As Hephzibah Roskelly writes, “The terms that dominate our collective conversation in conferences and in our journals—collaboration, peer response, discourse community, shared knowledges—have become symbols for a pedagogical agenda that values talk and activity as learning tools (123). Nonetheless, Roskelly contends that “we haven’t translated [our belief in collaboration] very effectively into our classrooms, to other educators, to administrators” (123). As Paulo Freire found, and as Lave and Wenger’s research on legitimate peripheral participation shows, non-institutional settings can be more conducive to collaborative work because “they provide potential power for those traditionally powerless within institutions” (Roskelly 126). Wenger thinks that “in spite of the curriculum, discipline, and exhortation [in school] the learning that is most personally transformative turns out the be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice” (6). Studying the spaces of student life offers insights into creating writing classes as communities—communities to which students have some allegiance and accountability, and where students feel like they are working towards something larger than a grade on a transcript.

Beginning with the point of involvement, I am interested in students’ trajectories of socialization, using Stanton E. F. Wortham’s definition of “socialization” as “a process that happens across events, as an individual move from more peripheral to or novice participation to fuller participation in a set of practices” (97). Wortham advocates looking
at the trajectories of this socialization process “and complexities of how individuals move across specific trajectories and how events in a trajectory are linked” (97). To what extent does involvement in these organizations parallel students’ involvement in university life? Greek life, for example, often claims to increase retention rates (Westberg), and so it would be interesting to take an ethnographic look at how increased involvement in student communities translates to academic achievement.

These communities of practice seem to fulfill students’ need for identity and community, so further study could explore how students learn about and decide to join communities. In her ethnographic work on the language of youth organizations, Shirley Brice Heath writes that most youth come to youth/adult organizations on their own, seeking them out rather than being persuaded by an advertisement or announcement (“Working Through Language”). Being involved in a student group may mean that students are pulled into the socialization trajectory of academics, but it could also mean they are pulled away. How do students choose between work they have to do in these groups versus work they do for school? To what extent do students regularly have to make these kinds of choices? And when they do choose, what kinds of logics are they operating under? Especially in the context of a consumer university, what “products” are these groups offering and how do they compete with the products of a university education? For instance, how does the pre-pharmacy club stack up against the pre-pharmacy major?

In addition to academic success, communities of practice also provide occasions for studying how students take on leadership roles, particularly those that involve
working with faculty and staff. Looking at how students navigate these power relationships can provide insights to the language practices they use to navigate authority. In chapter two, I demonstrated that students struggle with speaking to authority. Heath writes that “youth organizations that place young people at the center of activities and give them adult-like responsibilities” provide ideal opportunities for studying the movement of language in groups of youth (222). Due to “the parenting and household structural arrangements that predominate in the late twentieth century” young people rarely have the opportunity to engage with adults in “collaborative work” (Heath 218), and Etienne Wenger argues that schools provide limited opportunity for youth to come into contact with “adulthood as a lived identity” (276). Certainly, college students are legally adults, but this does not always mean they feel like adults or act in roles associated with adulthood. Some students had quite a bit of responsibility in these organizations, which could be an interesting comparison to how students take responsibility for their academic work. Rebecca, for example, often discussed the residents in her hall as errant children she had to manage. In adopting these leadership positions, students are showing how they problem solve and collaborate. It may also be interesting to see the stances students take to assert authority (parent? teacher?) and the tactics they use (like only offering the free cookies ten minutes after the program begins).

In my final chapter I describe “student engagement research,” a paradigm that offers some ways of thinking about how to further investigate all aspects of students’ everyday lives, including these communities.
VI. THE EVERYDAY TEACHER-RESEARCHER: A MODEL FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH

Reading texts that critique representations of students in scholarship and texts that describe teacher-research methodology, it is easy to feel like one is walking through a minefield. The researcher should focus the research on the participants, but map his or her own positionality. Participants should be represented in specific contexts, but observations should be useful for a wide audience. Larger social constructs should be accounted for, but everyday practices should also be valued. Throughout this project, I found that the practices of ethnography and pedagogical action research were still useful to me, but I needed a guide on making decisions about what to look for and what to represent. As a matter of necessity in studying students’ everyday activity systems, I developed certain research principles that guided me through decision-making. I conclude by offering a teacher-research paradigm I call “student engagement research” that offers a means for both students and teachers to become ethnographers of students’ everyday life, offering a set of guidelines that might be useful to researchers attempting a similar project. To do so, I first define what the rhetoric of everyday life has come to mean for studying undergraduates over the course of this project, and then I offer principles of student engagement research for capturing this everyday life.

These guidelines are limited because they are based on my own research with mostly 18-21 year-old, white, middle-class students at a four-year research university. Also significant was that they were full-time college students (though this does not mean that they were focused on academics full-time, studied full-time, or thought of themselves
as students full-time). Most lived in on-campus residence halls and were single and without children. They primarily learned by attending physical classrooms on the university campus. This specific social construction of “student,” while common enough in American colleges and universities, elides non-traditional students, distance-learning students, students with families, and commuter students, as well as working-class and first-generation students (though a handful of the students I interviewed fit these profiles too). I acknowledge that an ethnographic study of students who do not fit this demographic might operate under very different principles. For example, the reason students were able to attend interviews with me was that they were on campus all day and had enough free time to take an hour out of their day to talk with me. Despite the limitation of the demographic, I still hope these guidelines are useful to researchers in a variety of contexts because they aim to explore students’ lives outside the classroom, lives that are as important for what goes on in the classroom whether the student is a working single mother returning to school or a 19-year-old full-time student. These guidelines also account for how the students themselves talk about their shifting subjectivity as student, a subjectivity that varies greatly in importance to them.

*Defining the Rhetoric of Everyday Life for College Students*

Everyday life is an important focus for study because it inscribes student culture into the teaching of writing. Student engagement research responds to Bruce Horner’s call for representing students “not as passive bundles of fixed characteristics, varying only in the degree of pliability or resistance they offer to one’s pedagogical techniques,
but as participants, also subject to material contingencies, in the construction of the work conducted in the composition classroom” (35). I believe that looking at taken-for-granted practices of students’ everyday lives can add significantly to the conversation on how material conditions affect the classroom. As Jeffrey Grabill argues, the mundane is “a critical site of activity precisely because it seems so common, so obvious, and because it is often invisible; the transparent procedures of the mundane are the locations of the most significant exercises of power” (133). Power is a central issue in the definition of everyday life for college students: how they feel and respond to institutional power, the power they exert as consumers, students, and learners, and the power students hold in other spaces of student life as contrasted to classroom spaces.

As defined it in the first chapter of this dissertation, the “rhetoric of everyday life” is “the rhetorical character and dynamics of language in mundane contexts especially beyond school, and also rhetorical interpenetration of school discourse and political and cultural forces transcending the academy” (Nystrand and Duffy viii). In my first chapter, I refined this definition for the purposes of this study to focus on the rhetorical moves that reveal the cultural logics students use to make arguments about how the university should function. This definition progressed as I went through this research. For me, studying everyday life meant asking the following three questions.

(1) How are students interpellated by the activity system of academics? How do their language choices show the degree to which they’ve adopted or resisted the paths set for them by institutional forces?
As Louis Althusser argues, educational institutions are the central “ideological state apparatus,” meaning that it is one of the “distinct and specialized institutions” that transmits the ideologies of the dominant culture (103). ISAs “interpellate” people by telling them “this is who you are and this is your place in the world” (120). Althusser thinks that educational institutions reproduce ideology to maintain the status quo, and one of the primary functions of education is to teach students how to be productive workers in a capitalist workforce, meaning good behavior, tolerating boredom, and obeying authority. I contend that the effects of this interpellation is revealed in the rhetoric of everyday life, when students talk about how they view themselves in relation to the university—as first-year student, as consumer, as good student, as future pharmacist, etc. For students, “the university” comes to mean the various authority structures that align themselves with the institution—everything from an academic adviser to a professor to an RA. Furthermore, students recognize that the university provides sanctioned pathways for them to become full-fledged members, and they adopt or resist these pathways to varying degrees. This is not to say that they are free of the university’s ideology, but that they form conceptions of how the university interpellates them and they make choices about how they want to fulfill that role for themselves.

Students are provided these institutionalized pathways everyday: for example, ideally they attend the residence hall event to make friends, take the general education courses at the university to become a well-rounded person, and read the textbook to do well on the test. And they often choose alternate paths: they go to a house party to make friends, they take the general education courses at the community college in their
hometown during the summer to save money, and they Google the terms on the study
guide to do well on the tests. These alternate paths are what Michel DeCerteau might call
“tactics,” ways that people manipulate social space to assert their agency (37). Ellen
Cushman, in a similar vein to DeCerteau, thinks that looking at everyday life reveals how
people take action to change the status quo (13). Students have very smart critiques of the
way that the university reinforces power over them, and they use tactics to resist this
power to claim ownership of space at the university. Looking at mundane activities, like
note-taking, can reveal these resistances.

(2) How do the rhetorics of larger cultural forces come to bear on the way
students talk about their everyday lives?

I have sought various social and cultural forces that might influence students’
thinking about their education and looked at how these forces played out in the way they
imagined university life. In chapter two, I delved briefly into how the educational climate
created by No Child Left Behind, an educational reform passed in 2001 that mandated
standardized testing for K-12 education and linked test results to federal funding,
influences students’ thinking about education. One effect of No Child Left Behind was a
focus on “right answers” and large-scale, one-size-fits-all assessment, which is how
students are accustomed to being assessed. Chapter three focuses on the consumerist
ideologies that have infiltrated the university and the larger culture, and how these
ideologies appear in what students say they want from the university. I’ve also discussed
ideologies that reflect the spirit of American individualism and the Protestant work ethic,
which tell students that they can be anything they want to be if they work hard enough.
So a key aspect of the rhetoric of everyday life for me has been identifying some of the cultural forces that give rise to the way students think about the university. Identifying these cultural forces reminds us that students are part of a larger culture, a culture that includes us as teachers. It can also avoid classifications by generation (e.g., “millennials”) which tend to be reductive and deficit-driven.

(3) How do students move between the spaces of student life—home, residence hall, fraternity, classroom—and how do they talk about these movements?

Students face contradictions between their school lives and everyday lives, so they develop strategies to negotiate these differences in activity systems, a combination of background experiences participating in events, relationships, other interactions that help them navigate these boundaries. The way they navigate their everyday lives—like through game-playing narratives—presents an important instance of the rhetoric of everyday life. In a critique of Vygotsky and Piaget, Engeström writes, “Traditional developmental theories are about progress, about climbing upward on some development ladders [but] exclusive concentration on the vertical dimension of development requires closed boundaries, elimination of horizontal movement across social worlds” (“Development” 129). Vertical learning is the type most emphasized in educational settings, focused on learning new content or a new skill. Horizontal learning, according to Engeström, focuses on how people move through different activity systems and social spaces. Some of the most interesting interviews I had were not students talking about what they were learning vertically—world religions, Spanish, pre-calculus—but what they were learning horizontally—how to fit into the world of college, studying, making
friends, getting along with roommates, and so forth. Engeström does not say that vertical and horizontal learning are unrelated; his point is that educational theorizing tends to focus on the vertical to the exclusion of the horizontal. To most fully comprehend everyday life, student engagement research aims to uncover both these horizontal and vertical forms of learning, often in response to contradictions between activity systems, as I have demonstrated in chapters four and five.

**Student Engagement Research**

To capture these rhetorical moments, I propose a methodology called “student engagement research,” which reflects a commitment to finding and highlighting these viewpoints, as a means of further exploring the activity systems of students’ everyday lives. The term “student engagement research” reflects on the degree to which students are engaged in the activities of their daily lives. The term “student” in “student engagement research” connotes the importance of student subjectivity for how this research method is conducted. For me, “student engagement” means that the classroom is centered on who students are and how they engage with their surroundings. In my theorization, student engagement research adapts the basic principles of student-centered learning to a research method that investigates student perspectives on everyday life.

I view student engagement research as a dialectic between research and teaching, because throughout this project the roles of “teacher” and “researcher” blended together. I include some pedagogical recommendations, with the stipulation that in student engagement research, teaching and researching look very much the same. I hope that
these five guiding principles will be useful in encouraging teachers to do this kind of work.

(1) Student engagement research addresses the development of student subjectivity and the conflicts and contradictions of student subjectivity.

I choose the term “subjectivity” because it implies that students are, as Foucault writes, “subject to and subject of” the university (qtd. in Grant 104). This means that students are tied to an identity of being a student and that that identity emerges from the way the university disciplines their practices and behaviors. As Barbara Grant argues, a cycle exists whereby students perform in ways they deem appropriate for being a “student,” which shapes how the university treats students, which then shapes how students act to be a member of the university. I use the term “student” in “student engagement” rather than “learner” students have difficulty identifying moments when they are learning, but they have lots of ideas about when and how they are performing the role of student. This is not to say that the focus is only on how students are students but to look at how this subjectivity fits or disconnects with other subjectivities.

The term “student” also focuses on the institutional role of the student and implies a student-teacher relationship. So although the term “student” may seem restrictive, I believe it reminds us that being a student is intimately connected to the idea of being a student. Furthermore, looking at different ways of being a student reminds us that students exist in specific context. Marguerite Helmers writes that by appealing to the experiences of all teachers, teacher narratives construct an “essential, transhistorical student” (2). Investigating the postures, performances, and ideologies connected to the
idea of being a student contextualize that subjectivity. As more students head to state universities and community colleges, go back to school with jobs and families, work at jobs, and get involved with student organizations, the student-subjectivity becomes fragmented across activity systems. Student engagement research studies how, why, and when students identify as students and how these subjectivities are built by their everyday life circumstances. What subjectivities do students prioritize? How do they choose between the different subjectivities offered by different activity systems: student, friend, partner, parent, child, adult, employee?

In examining student-subjectivity, student engagement learning also looks at the historical practices of student-ing. What is the students’ history of approaching the tasks they are currently being asked to do? How have they acted as students in other contexts and how might that conflict with how they are currently being asked to act? The data I’ve presented here show how I instigated conversations with students about what it means to be a good student in different classes, which is worth investigating further. As I discussed in chapter three, Goffman writes that the self is both the performance one puts on to receive social value but also “the actor behind the mask” who makes decisions about the performance. To what extent is the subjectivity of a good student performed? Why do students feel the need to put on this performance? In what contexts are they play-acting the role of the good students and in what contexts is it more genuine?

It might be enlightening for students to interview me or their other instructors about what we think being a “good student” entails. For example, many of the students in my interviews said that they think they can text undetected, but I suspect that, like me,
many instructors know all students’ strategies for furtive texting. The same goes for laptop use—likely, many professors think that using a laptop in class means that the student is not paying attention. While students seem to be able to reflect on their own conception of being a “good student,” it would be productive to have them juxtapose this alongside the conceptions of their professors. I also questioned my own notions of a “good student” throughout this project, which is why in chapter four, I suggested that finding a Third Space between activity systems is a better goal than trying to make students fit into the activity system of composition.

*(1) Student engagement research privileges students’ viewpoints, even when and especially if they are contradictory, politically incorrect, confused, elusive, or otherwise problematic for the researcher.*

Ethnographies privilege the viewpoints of the people being studied, but privileging these viewpoints can cause problems for teacher-researchers who can become frustrated with what students have to say. These moments, however, make obvious ways that students critique educational systems and teaching methods, distance themselves from “good student” subjectivities, and fashion their own subjectivities in relation to the institution of schooling. Throughout this project I struggled with student viewpoints that were frustrating to me, particularly in relation to consumerist, utilitarian beliefs about education, but in examining students’ beliefs, I was challenged to confront some of the more romanticized ideals I have about education. Admittedly, this confrontation has made me more cynical about students. For example, a student recently came up to me after class and said that he thought the activity we did in class that day was useful for the
project we were working on. I instantly imagined that student going back to his dorm room and high-fiving his roommates about how he totally played his teacher and how he’s got his A locked-down now. Part of me is distressed that I think that way, because I like to see the best in everyone, but I’m also grateful that as a result of this project, I have an internalized student-voiced counter-narrative to the teacher-based narratives I’ve always told myself about education. Now, when I hear teacher-narratives, I can consider the story from the students’ perspective, imagining the students’ motivations based on the beliefs I’ve encountered in this dissertation. Similarly, I have found that when I plan an activity or design a writing assignment, I am better able to assess how students will approach it because I know how they approach their other schoolwork. The only way I was able to come to this view was through confronting complicated and troubling student beliefs.

Traditionally, giving participants power in ethnographic research has meant analyzing data or writing up data with participants (Helmers 131). This is an excellent strategy, and one that I employed formally, by asking students to analyze their own language uses and practices, and informally, by asking them to discuss and theorize their lives in interviews. But through this project I have learned that another kind of power becomes available to participants when the ethnographer stops trying to resolve every contradiction, problem, or concern. In retrospect, I realize I began this project constructing a kind of public-relations crusader role for myself, saving students from negative portrayals. I used to think that the best way to give them power in my research was to write positive things about them, but I have learned people’s everyday practices
do not fall easily into the categories of “strengths” and “deficits.” Eventually, I felt the best way I felt I could empower the participants in this study was to let them speak and have patience with what they had to say, without instantly trying to categorize it, ignore it because it was “negative,” or uphold it because it was “positive.” This style of research requires patience and perseverance: students tell game-playing narratives, they contradict each other, they mock institutions, teachers, and the whole idea of learning. But I think to give them real power is to relish the complexity of these moments.

By genuinely listening and paying attention to views that contradicted my own, I was able to see how those views were not only a part of classrooms. Students themselves complained about the viewpoints of their fellow students. For example, I often found myself frustrated by student apathy, but when Rebecca expressed the same frustration (as described in chapter five), I realized that this apathy didn’t really have anything to do with me. Student apathy was a repertoire of practice carried over from years of experience in a consumer culture and educational experiences that didn’t value students’ opinions. I used to think that if I just said the right thing or chose the right classroom activity, that apathy would vanish, so I found it refreshing and enlightening to learn that it was an issue in different contexts. I only found this out by allowing troubling viewpoints an active place in my research.

The idea of “repertoires of practice,” or the practices people bring with them to new contexts, was also useful to me in thinking about the circumstances that lead students to act in certain ways (Gutiérrez and Rogoff 19). “Repertoires of practice” challenged me to ask participants about their previous experiences and link those
experiences to what I was observing as a teacher. Looking at students’ circumstances helps me empathize with them by imagining myself in their position. It is easy to look at students text messaging in the front row of your class and believe that they are doing so because they are apathetic, but when you look more closely and see how socially disconnected they feel, and how text messaging is viewed in the other contexts of their lives, you begin to understand their position.

Student engagement research does not privilege students’ viewpoints to the exclusion of other viewpoints, particularly those of the institution, though does use and study the contrasts between students’ language choices and institutional language choices. In pedagogical action research, one seeks to understand what Kathy Charmaz calls “in vivo codes,” which are participants’ special terms that capture meaning or experience, and reflect “assumptions, actions, and imperatives that frame action” (55-56). As a teacher-researcher, I often found myself torn between students’ insider terminology and the terminology that would make the most sense for my audience. For example, students always referred to themselves as “freshmen,” this being an important cultural subjectivity for them. “Freshmen” have to register last for classes, have to live in the dorms, have to take general education classes. They are underclassmen. And yet, students speak about this subjectivity with a kind of pride one might take in being an underdog. It’s also often used as an excuse for why they are lost on campus, why they don’t know what classes to register for, and why they are homesick. Being a freshman also implies the logical progression of college, as in “I’m a freshman now, but I’m going to be a sophomore, then a junior, then a senior.” A “freshman” is the lowest in status now, but
surviving it is a rite of passage that allows the student to move somewhere else. So while I understand and appreciate that “first-year student” is both gender-neutral and inclusive of all students beginning their university careers, students don’t seem aware of the gendered language, and actually want a kind of exclusivity associated with being a “freshmen.” These *in vivo* codes reflect how students view their world.

Students’ language choices are also interesting because they reflect students’ degree of institutional literacy. One example is their use of the word “teacher.” They tended to use the word “teacher” for smaller classes—my class, foreign language, or math, “TA” for the discussion-section leaders, and “professor” for the lead instructor of general education classes. It would be interesting to correlate these to the actual institutional positions to see how their language choices reflect their knowledge about these relationships. From my observations, it appears they think a “teacher” is someone with whom they have frequent contact and who knows them, while a professor stands in front of a class and lectures. These examples point to an important split between teacher-speak and student-speak, and it’s worth investigating why we might use terms that are unfamiliar to our students (and in turn, why they might use terms that are unfamiliar to us). I am interested to learn more about the circumstances under which students’ terms and compositionists’ terms diverge. One of the most important rhetorical skills I acquired in this project was a greater fluency in student-speak, which makes obvious the difference between student’s everyday language and the language I use in my institutional position.

(2) *Student engagement research values students’ analysis, which forms at least one stratum of the final analysis.*
Throughout this project, I have asked students themselves to analyze their learning situations and institutional positions. In the everyday injustice project, for example, I asked students to analyze an injustice they faced as first-year college students. This requires an ethnographer’s eye for the way people are embedded in institutional cultures and how they act on those cultures. I asked students to analyze their everyday literacy practices, also with an ethnographic eye, looking at how their literacy practices made them part of their high school culture. In interviews, I regularly asked students to theorize their own behaviors. I have found that because they are trying to figure out how to do well in college, students are incredibly observant of the people around them. Further analysis alongside students would have been ideal but was less feasible for me under the conditions of writing a dissertation. Nonetheless, by asking students to write analytical papers about student culture, and asking them why other students acted in certain ways, their own analysis becomes at least the first step of the recursive process of writing up ethnographic data.

Also of note is that students’ analysis does not necessarily look like researchers’ analysis. Ethnographers of the social must also “interpret data along with people” and “generate data which reflect vernacular interpretations” (Barton and Hamilton 64). This doesn’t necessarily mean sitting down and coding ethnographic data (though, of course, it could). Students don’t analyze their daily lives by coding and writing memos—that’s what I do. The challenge to the student engagement researcher is to discover how students are already making sense of what happens to them and incorporate that into the analysis. In chapter two, I showed how Undergraduate Cynical analyzed the power
structures of the university. In chapter three, I showed how students analyzed injustices that happened to them as first-year students using the rhetoric of consumerism as a tool of persuasion. In chapter four, I explained their analyses of how to behave in lecture classes via game-playing stories, and in chapter five, I showed their analysis of social groups through their explanations of how to become members and how to get the most out of the group. All of these analyses—the critiques students have in their everyday lives—form the centerpiece of the analysis I do as a researcher.

(3) Student engagement research finds horizontal as well as vertical learning.

It is the imperative of student engagement research to follow students out of the classroom, being curious about multiple learning occasions because students have adaptive cartographic skills they use to move horizontally through college life. How people negotiate the difference between activity systems can be seen as a strength, or a fund of knowledge, which is why it is important to analyze. For example, Dolores Delgado-Bernal studies how Chicana college students adapt to college by “negotiating, struggling, or embracing their bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities” (115). For Delgado-Bernal, the students’ abilities to move between the cultures of school and home is one of their greatest resources and should be a focal point for educators.

To study horizontal learning, student engagement research tries to understand the daily, strategic choices students make to get by at the university. In her ethnography of “quiet” students, Mary Reda questions the value composition places on dialogue and shows that students’ “decision to be silent is a legitimate, reasoned one” (154). Similarly,
student engagement research aims to understand the reasoning behind students’ decisions and behaviors. Certainly, students can behave irrationally or impulsively, but as I found, they are trying desperately to “figure out” how to act in college, and they are self-conscious as to if they are “doing it right,” meaning that their choices are more often than not deliberate and calculated.

Though finding these locations of everyday learning presents an important area for researchers, I also believe students need to recognize their own horizontal learning to develop an subjectivity as one who can and will change in college. In my opinion, one of the most troubling aspects of the vocationalism of first-year college students is that they have a single career track. They believe that they will have one job that they will work in until they retire. Many factors contribute to this single-career thinking. The university pressures them to choose a major as early as first-year orientation. Faced with the overwhelming amount of choice at the consumer university, students use their major as a guideline for choosing activities they will be involved in. It also seems that having a single career in mind helps with the feeling of “placelessness” in the first year of college. (At my university, students who are undecided on their majors are assigned to the optimistically named “Center for Exploratory Students” which helps them select a major as quickly and efficiently as possible. Being an “undecided” major is perceived less as a process of mindful discernment and more as a lack of direction.)

Single-minded vocational thinking troubles me because it doesn’t allow students to think of themselves as people who change: change their major, change who they want to be, make mistakes, experiment, branch out, or try new things. This is especially
pertinent for writing teachers because an ability to adapt and change is a central quality of being a good writer. Nancy Sommers writes that when commenting on students’ essays, our goal should be to compel them “back onto the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning” (154). Students may be unused to the experimental nature of writing a first draft, trying new kinds of writing, taking risks in writing, accepting constructive criticism, or making changes to a piece of writing. I would hope that a greater focus on horizontal learning, like the learning students do to form and join communities in college, will show researchers their adaptive nature, and will help students acknowledge the same.

One way to reveal vertical and horizontal learning is by analyzing written genres of students’ everyday communities, because these genres reveal both vertical learning of the ability to use the genre and the horizontal learning of how to fit into the activity system. Because writing is a tool used to mediate communities, written genres can be analyzed to learn more about a community. As David Russell defines it, “a genre is the ongoing use of certain material tools (marks, in the case of written genres) in certain ways that worked once and might work again, a typified, tool-mediated response to conditions recognized by participants as recurring” (“Uses” 43). When we talk about “real-world writing” in composition, we usually mean genres of writing within the domain of a professional organization, like a service-learning project where students write for or with a community partner (see for example Deans). I encountered many examples of both written and spoken genres in students’ everyday lives, which I think
can also provide an interesting site of study to talk about how writing functions in a community.

Two examples from the sorority of a written and oral genres were “dirty talk” and the “Greek book.” Dirty talk is a genre of speech and writing whereby participants gossip to each other about which houses are interested in which rushes. The adjective “dirty” emerges from the fact that the process is supposed to be one of integrity. Through dirty talk, rushes find out (in advance of their official notification) which houses did and did not call them back to meet them again before deciding which rushes to formally choose for the house. Sometimes dirty talk results when members get excited about rushes joining the sorority and send them enigmatic text messages, hinting that the rush has made it into the house. Dirty talk as an oral and written genre functions to relieve some of the anxiety of the rushes and can also explain decisions made by the houses that may seem unfair to the rush. I would imagine that dirty talk also gives the speaker a sense of satisfaction of telling a big secret in a process that values confidentiality. When rushes learn “dirty talk,” they are learning a way of speaking (vertical learning) but also a way of speaking that they can use when they are full members of the house (horizontal learning).

The Greek book is a genre of writing that helps the rushes keep straight all the houses they visit.

Christina: We had a Greek book and you’re supposed to write down what you liked about each house, and their philanthropy.
Faith: What is a Greek book?
Christina: During rush you have a little book and you write down notes about the houses, like why you liked the house, why you didn’t. I starred the pages of the
houses I liked, and there were stars on every page and I’m like “Okay.” [She rolls her eyes at this to express disappointment in her lack of discrimination.]

Adriana: I would be like, “I didn’t like their shirts.” I’d be like, “No style.” And I’d be like, “No.” And one I liked, it was “Pretty.” “Yes.” “Girls I got along with.” “Funny.” “Good vibe.” You’re very honest in your little book because it’s just for you.

Faith: So that’s to keep them straight in your mind?

Adriana: It’s hard to remember all the houses because you see 11 the first day, then 8 the next day, then 5 the next day.

What’s important about both dirty talk and the Greek book is that the women clearly see the function of the genre of writing and speaking within the activity system. In chapter four, I argued that students have trouble seeing the architecture of the class in relation to class goals; thus, they think that their classes contain a lot of busy work. These students don’t complain that writing in the Greek book is “busy work” because they understand how doing so helps them in the process of deciding on a house and becoming a member of the community. Russell argues that being a newcomer to an activity systems means learning the genres already in use and figuring out why people use them (“Uses” 44). The functions of both dirty talk and the Greek books were clear to Adriana and Christina, because they could see how these genres served the activity system.

I think that everyday genres like dirty talk and the Greek book deserve attention from researchers and students because, like other genres, they “reveal loci of dis coordinations, breakdowns, power asymmetries, and sharing, and so on, within and among activity systems” (Russell “Uses” 48). The Greek book reveals loci of dis coordinations in the activity system of the rush process: Why do the women have to visit so many houses that they can’t keep them straight? How do the women decide on the criteria by which they will evaluate the houses? How do they make a fair judgment of
a house if they are only there for a brief time and have what they admit are “superficial”
conversations? Russell argues:

[A]n analysis of intertextual genre systems can help students, teachers, and
curriculum reformers trace students’ involvements with various activity systems
related to the discipline and in the process see options for introducing and
changing genres in a course or curriculum, for tracing the strings that must be
pulled, in textual or other ways, to mobilize people and gain power (“Activity”
64)

Genres from everyday life could be used as models for helping students see how
genres of writing function elsewhere. Understanding what these genres mean shows the
vertical learning of how to write and read them, as well as the horizontal learning of how
they enable the writer or speaker to become a member of a community.

(5) Student engagement begins with humility—the assumptions that teachers need
to learn about their students and that students are different from teachers.

Over the course of this research, I have engaged in many, many conversations
with people about how students “really are.” Though I offer data I have collected and
interpreted using valid and rigorous research methodologies, I still encounter
interlocutors who insist that their anecdotes and casual observations trump what I have to
say. Perhaps this is because, as Marguerite Helmers writes, teachers’ views of students
are shaped by teachers’ experience of being a student (129). Whatever the reason, I argue
for a more anthropological view, working under the assumption that a teacher-researcher
is, in many ways, observing strangers. I think teacher-research needs to be approached
with fewer assumptions about who students are and what they do. I am certainly guilty of
this problem, especially since being a student is an identity that has always come easy for
me. Still, approaching research with a healthy lack of judgment and dose of curiosity
sometimes leads to frustration with students’ beliefs or choices. As Johnathan Mauk contends, “In composition studies, we need to recognize the spatial complexities that define our students’ (and our own) lives, but not in order to vanquish those complexities, to wish them away, but to include them in our understanding of how to write.” (380). By reasonably assuming that teachers and students are different, this research makes more transparent both roles and does not take either for granted.

*Student Engagement Research in Practice*

I want to give a specific example of how student engagement research might work. Below, I offer a piece of data and look at it from the perspective of student engagement research to show what such a perspective might add to the existing perspective of a teacher and/or researcher. One student, Anthony, discusses his experience using laptops in high school. His high school had been in the news because it bought Macbook computers for all the students to use for the four years they were in school. I asked him how he felt about having the laptops in class.

Anthony: It makes high school a lot more interesting. I could write essays in class. I could research things in real time if I wanted to find something out. If I’m in a math class and I don’t understand what the teacher’s talking about I could look it up online really quick to get a better idea of what’s going on if he was going too fast or something. Especially like in like English classes, we did a lot of discussions and we could do that online, there’s discussion features on there. We would do that during class in real time. It was nice doing that.

Faith: Was the computer distracting?

Anthony: The thing is the computer tech people at that school prevented you from like doing anything on that computer besides schoolwork. Like every game website’s blocked. All pictures were blocked out. It was really only school use. You couldn’t do much on it . . . You could blame a lot of crap on your computer not working. You [could say], “No, I didn’t do that essay because my computer crashed last night.” And you could . . . make those computers crash purposely.
put a Halo\textsuperscript{22} disc into this thing and it didn’t handle it at all. And it froze up the computer and like fried the hard drive and I lost everything. But I didn’t have to do anything for like a week because of it. It was kind of interesting. It was probably a bad idea.

As a teacher listening to this story, I might question stories I’ve heard from students in the past about technology failures, or think about the importance of teaching students to be critical about technology. From an ethnographic perspective, I might classify Anthony’s story as a common narrative of students’ technology use or question the ambivalent construction of his reaction (both “It was kind of interesting” and “It was probably a bad idea”). As a student engagement researcher, I might still pursue many of the same strands of inquiry, but I also use the guiding principles above to structure my thinking. To begin, the interview passage presents a viewpoint that is both troubling and contradictory, meaning that I privilege it in my interpretation. The latter half of Anthony’s narrative is troubling because Anthony is being destructive to school property and lying to his teachers. At the same time, however, his narrative is significant to consider alongside what Keri Facer and Ruth Furlong call “the myth of the cyberkid” to describe how young people are associated with the future and advancements in technology. This myth can mean that researchers overlook how and why young people may dismiss or be hesitant in their technology use (454). Not all young people love technology or are capable of using it successfully and to its fullest potential all of the time. Significantly, Anthony demonstrates that he knows how the high school wants him to use his computer, and that he did use it in this way, but he also demonstrates an

\textsuperscript{22}“Halo” is a video game for the X-box 360 system.
alternative use of the computer to get out of doing work. Student engagement research
values students’ analysis, which forms at least one strata of the final analysis. Anthony is
demonstrating a critique here of the way that technology is supposed to solve educational
problems. As Amy Kimme Hea writes in an analysis of the laptop program at Anthony’s
high school, “Wireless laptops alone cannot guarantee critical literacy, student and
teacher agency, or even education reform” (208). Instead, Kimme Hea posits that “we
must strive for complex, dynamic praxes of teaching and research with, through, and
about wireless and mobile technologies, and we must come to view those technologies as
both enabling and constraining certain aspects of our lives” (206). Certainly, Anthony’s
technology practices speak to this point, demonstrating one way to form these “complex,
dynamic practices” might be to understand how students’ literacy practices related to
technology reflect their critiques of that technology.

Anthony’s narrative also exhibits horizontal and vertical learning. Anthony
certainly sings the praises of laptop usage in terms of vertical learning when he says he
can look up things he doesn’t understand, write papers, and chat with his classmates. The
part of his story about crashing the computer, however, reflects a kind of horizontal
learning because he learns how to get by in class with very little work. The vertical and
horizontal learning aspects of this transcript correlate with two different view of
Anthony’s student subjectivity. In vertical learning, he represents himself as a fairly eager
and engaged student, but his horizontal learning is characterized by learning how to game
the system and get out of doing work.
In terms of looking for how students shape their student-subjectivities, Anthony’s narrative points to a problem Anthony has likely encountered in fitting in at college (and one mentioned in several interviews). In high school the Internet connection was set up in a way so as to keep students focused on schoolwork; in college, students are allowed unfettered Internet access, which likely means that they have to self-regulate their web surfing, a difficult aspect of the horizontal learning necessary to succeed in college. Student engagement research might pursue ways that students use laptop computers that are in line with what their teachers ask them to do, and how they use them for their own purposes. Finally, student engagement research assumes that I need to learn more about Anthony’s position. This might mean that I need to look more deeply at Anthony’s motivations for crashing the laptop, or the circumstances under which he is a focused student and when he gets distracted.

Future Directions and New Contexts

Student engagement research will vary based on the institutional setting. At a smaller university, students may have a greater sense of community, meaning that they will feel more of the individualization and personalization that many millennial students desire. At the same time, however, students are paying a much higher price for their education, which could lead to an even greater focus on “getting your money’s worth.” Particularly in a difficult economic climate, smaller and more expensive universities must justify their higher cost to attract students who may find it financially easier just to attend their local state university or community college.
Students may be more engaged in their education and extracurricular activities at smaller colleges and universities but may choose to be partially involved in a large number of activities rather than deeply involved in a few. This mentality may exist, in part, as a manifestation of the continuous partial attention students use in their daily lives. In the same way they flip between browser tabs on their Internet browser, they try out a variety of activities on campus. This kind of engagement may be a repertoire of practice carried over from high school, where students tried to be involved in as many activities as possible to impress college admissions officers. Student engagement research might question the extent to which students are involved in extracurricular activities as commodities to put on a resume to be exchanged for a scholarship or admission to a prestigious university. In the same way that Ali commodified her involvement in the pre-pharmacy club to get into the pharmacy school, students’ involvement in high school activities becomes a commodity to be exchanged for college admissions.

Student engagement research might also contrast the experiences of academically successful students entering more selective universities to students in public, larger colleges and universities. Students who were academically successful in high school will likely cling more firmly to the repertoires of practice that have worked for them in the past, especially since high school offers students glimpses of college life through advanced placement courses and other “college preparatory” work. Students who have been successful in these activities might develop intractable repertoires of practice. In an interview, one student enthusiastically told me that he felt his Advanced Placement English Language course prepared him for my first-semester composition course, even
though what the test measures is, in my opinion, markedly different from what happens in first-year composition courses. But because Advanced Placement courses are marketed to schools and students so aggressively as “college-level” work, students may continue to believe they are, even when presented with evidence to the contrary.

At a community college or university with larger enrollments of part-time students, student engagement research might have a more diverse set of activity systems to contrast with the academic activity system. Students pulled in multiple directions will have more competing (and possibly more appealing) activity systems. Many community colleges and online programs market themselves to students based on the ease with which one can be a part of multiple activity systems. The University of Phoenix website, for example, offers “Your Degree. On Your Terms” with the specific goal of “champion[ing] the needs of working adults” (“Committed to Your Success”), making the argument that one can successfully participate in the competing activity systems of university and the working world. However, for the University of Phoenix online, only 6% of students who began their degree in the 2004-2005 academic year had completed their degree within six years (National Center “University of Phoenix”). A potential future research project using student engagement research could examine how these activity systems compete, how students interpret the marketing promise of a degree that fits into a busy lifestyle, and how students actually manage to negotiate conflicts in activity systems.

I hope that student engagement research provides a means to continue to examine critically the myriad and innovative ways first-year college students navigate everyday life. I am continually struck by how, as a teacher, I greatly overestimate the role I play in
students’ lives, caught up as they are in friendships, relationships, activities, family life, and other classes. Rather than lamenting how little influence I have, it has been key for me to analyze some of these other influences, to get a clearer picture of what student actually do. I believe a methodology for everyday life does not erase the influence of the teacher but contextualizes what the teacher does within the spaces of everyday life.
APPENDIX A. THE LISTENING ESSAY

Part I: Describing the Injustice

- Identify an injustice that directly affects your life at the U of A, as related to your position as a first- or second-year student.
- Explain why you believe this instance or situation is unjust.
- Identify what you believe to be the cause of this injustice.
- Identify the “other side” of this injustice. If, for example, the injustice is being brought about by professors, attempt to see the situation through their eyes. What are their motivations? If this policy is unfair to you, to whom might it be fair?
- Explain what you’re doing in this paper through a “research narrative” that explains why you selected your sources.

Part II: Listening

Your essay must demonstrate that you have listened to 5 viewpoints on your issue. Your sources must represent at least three scholars (“scholarly” or “academic” sources). The remaining two viewpoints are up to you (e.g. newspaper articles, organization’s websites, interviews, etc).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To listen to a source means that you:</th>
<th>Listening is not:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Engage with what a speaker is saying and how he or she is saying it</td>
<td>- Interjecting your own opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fairly and accurately explain the speaker’s argument, how the speaker’s situation or context might lead him/her to take such a position, and how the speaker defends his/her stance</td>
<td>- Only listening to outsmart someone else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Grant that others have important and valid reasons for their beliefs</td>
<td>- Assuming that someone believes something because they are evil or stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Disingenuous or fake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Unfairly or inaccurately representing what someone has said</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B. MULTI-GENRE RESEARCH PROJECT

Using the information you gathered and examined for Essay 2 (Listening Essay), you will create a multi-genre project in which you convey an argument to a specific, public audience. Your argument will represent your stance and opinion on the issue you researched for Essay 2. You will compose and combine a set of diverse genre documents which should make a persuasive argument to your chosen audience. Your final product will not look like a traditional essay. You will combine visuals with text, paying attention to document design.

Select a Specific Audience (that best fits your purpose) The first step in working on this project is to select a specific audience—likely, a person, department, committee, or office at the university. Research the university’s website to select the one that best fits with the argument you want to make. Be as specific as possible.

Required Parts of the Multi-Genre Project
A cover letter in which you
Convey your thesis (your stance)
Describe your chosen audience, how you chose that audience, and how each of your pieces appeals to that audience
A table of contents identifying the type and/or title of each genre entry
Three carefully selected genre entries that use at least two ideographs
A list of endnotes (with corresponding superscript numbers throughout your project) that explain how you are using researched source material throughout your multi-genre argument
A bibliography, using MLA citation, with at least eight sources (four of which must be scholarly)

23 I give credit to my colleague Ashley J. Holmes for the idea of having students create a multi-genre project, and some of the language of the Multi-Genre Research Project assignment sheet.
WORKS CITED


---. “‘Gates Locked’ and the Violence of Fixation.” Nystrand and Duffy 5-37.


---. “Preface.” González, Moll, and Amanti ix-xii.


Ketter, Jean and Judy Hunter. “Creating a Writer’s Identity on the Boundaries of Two Communities of Practice.” Bazerman and Russell 307-29.

Kimme Hea, Amy C. “Perpetual Contact: Re-articulating the Anywhere, Anytime Pedagogical Model of Mobile and Wireless Composing.” *Going Wireless: A Critical Exploration of Wireless and Mobile Technologies for Composition*


