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Teaching Discomfort: Students' and Teachers' Descriptions of Discomfort in First-year Writing Classes

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TEACHING DISCOMFORT: STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' DESCRIPTIONS OF
DISCOMFORT IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSES

by

Andrew G. Anastasia

A Dissertation Submitted in
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ABSTRACT

TEACHING DISCOMFORT: STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' DESCRIPTIONS OF DISCOMFORT IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSES

by

Andrew G. Anastasia

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015

Under the Supervision of Professor Alice Gillam and Professor Rachel Spilka

“Teaching Discomfort: Students’ and Teachers’ Descriptions of Discomfort in First-Year Writing Classes” uses qualitative research in first-year composition classes to argue that the experiences of first-year writing students and teachers complicate composition’s paradoxical reliance upon and avoidance of psychological discomfort in composition classrooms. Students’ and teachers’ values regarding critical inquiry evince a complex link between the potential for discomfort to generate knowledge and unintended emotional consequences that are further complicated by long histories of the value of reason over emotion. Students’ perspectives, in particular, and the challenges they pose, can help the field rethink the role and value of discomfort in our established modes of teaching.

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For Evelyn and Isadora. May we find love, comfort, and support in the lives we create with one another.

And in memory of my mother, Susan J. Boardman (1952-2011). May wherever you are dress you in rags and feathers from Salvation Army counters, and may the sun pour down like honey on you, our lady of the harbor.

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When cleaning out a file cabinet several months ago, I found the first seminar paper I wrote as a master’s student: “Emotion in the Composition Classroom: Is there Space in a Bartholomean Pedagogy for a Psychoanalytic Approach to Composition?” I wrote this paper for Dr. Alice Gillam’s English 701 (Teaching College Composition) course. Dr. Gilliam, who is now one of my advisors, has supported my thinking and writing for the past nine years—she helped this project come full circle, and I am thankful for her commitment, patience, and thoughtful advice. My co-advisor, Dr. Rachel Spilka, joined my committee during a time when I needed kindness and momentum. Her double dose of tough questions and genuine encouragement propelled this project forward when it threatened (as it often did) to stall out. To Dr. Jane Gallop, who taught me how to write, how to think, and how to get over myself—thank you for supporting me throughout my graduate career. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. James “Dimitri” Topitzes, whose mentorship and brilliant thinking changed the course of this project (many times). To Dr. Bill Keith—thank you for your time and thoughtful conversations. I hope there are more to come in the future.

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INTRODUCTION: THE VALUE OF DISCOMFORT

Students complain that they find certain material assigned in these courses triggering and have requested various accommodations as a result...I am wondering what others on this list think about this issue and how you may have dealt with it in the classroom?

Question posted on the QSTUDY-L, 2/24/14 by an
Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts-
Boston

If by “trigger” someone means, “made uncomfortable” or “feeling offended,” then they should not be excused. On the other hand, if by “trigger” someone means, “causes me to re-experience (sexual abuse, etc.) corporeally or psychologically, then I think the person should be excused

Reply posted on QSTUDY-L, 3/9/14 by an Associate
Professor, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

In spite of the fact that writers experience all sorts of turmoil, uncertainty, and discomfort when they—we—write, attempts to make composing less aggravating and more programmatic, merely a matter of acquiring useful, marketable skills, serves mainly to industrialize composing by teaching students to assemble meaning...rather than to challenge the politics and economics of the markets in which these skills are suppose to be useful....Teaching for critical consciousness...causes, perhaps requires, an uncomfortable state of mind.

Hurlbert and Blitz, “Resisting Composure”

The opening epigraphs represent several assumptions about discomfort in education. In the e-mail exchange between two associate professors in the University of Massachusetts System on the QSTUDY-L, one professor asks colleagues how they might approach an increasingly common student complaint—that their course material is “triggering,” and therefore they are in need of “accommodations.” One of the first replies to this query states that if by “triggering” the student means, “made uncomfortable” or “feeling offended,” then they should be denied accommodations. On the other hand, if by “trigger” the student means that they have re-experienced trauma, then they should be excused.

Public conversations about the question of “trigger warnings” in college syllabuses increased significantly between December and August of 2014. In an article published by “7 Humanities Professors” in *Inside Higher Ed* online in May (“Trigger Warnings are Flawed”), the faculty members voice concerns about a spate of resolutions on college campuses (Oberlin College, UC Santa Barbara) mandating or encouraging “trigger warnings” on class syllabuses. These warnings are flawed, they claim, for several reasons: these warnings might encourage students to file complaints against teachers, an outcome that, “serves as a guarantee that students will not experience unexpected discomfort,” and that, “most faculty are not trained to handle traumatic reactions.” Institutions that really care about trauma, they note, should do more for students who need the appropriate resources. As someone named “Alex” commented at the end of the article, “using the suffering of people with a real illness to describe various discomforts of people who *don't* have that illness is annoying at best.” Colleen Flaherty reports in

“Law School Trigger Warnings?” that opponents argue mandatory “trigger warnings” would “deny students one of the hallmarks of a college education: being made to feel intellectually uncomfortable at times.”

The second epigraph makes distinctions between a “real trigger” and “discomfort,” which Flaherty describes as a “hallmark” of college education. In these instances, discomfort is not “excuse-worthy” or a “real illness.” Educators worry that mandatory trigger warnings might threaten their ability to make students “intellectually uncomfortable,” and that those students who would use discomfort as an excuse to avoid exposure to a teacher’s potentially uncomfortable lesson are frauds who exploit the suffering of those who have “real” illnesses. The third epigraph, an excerpt from C. Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz’s essay “Resisting Composure,” makes another distinction—this time between the discomfort “we all feel” when we write and that which is pedagogically useful. Perhaps beyond being pedagogically useful, which is also behind some teacher’s fears of mandatory trigger warnings, Hurlbert and Blitz warn that removing discomfort could threaten composition’s exigency in the academy. In this instance, echoing the spirit of the conversation about trigger warnings, discomfort is a mundane, “hallmark” experience that *makes composition matter*.

These epigraphs evince that discomfort is valuable to education, but only under certain conditions and when employed by teachers. According to some current debaters, students who claim to be triggered by discomfort should not be taken seriously—in fact, they are making things worse for those with legitimate problems. We might all experience discomfort when we write, but without it we run the risk of industrializing composition. These conversations raise several questions: What if our attempts at

awakening students' critical consciousness about the politics and economics of the markets make them so uncomfortable that they stop listening to our messages? Worse yet, what if the discomfort a student feels when writing triggers a traumatic memory? These questions are also informed by my teaching experiences, one in particular where a student had a violent reaction in my classroom. I want to share this story here as a way of situating this study within a real-time problem—one that, while extraordinary, highlights the exigency of my inquiry.

A gay veteran who had completed several tours in the Persian Gulf War, Ryan¹ lamented one day after class that he never understood what I wanted from him. His was no new complaint; most of my students tell me my pedagogy—the one I learned in my graduate composition pedagogy seminar—makes them feel disoriented and confused. This “materialist” curriculum, one descended from David Bartholomae and the University of Pittsburgh, was intended to dislodge students from their comfort zones in myriad ways: by offering challenging reading materials, posing questions to wean students off a “banking model” of education, and by enacting the curriculum through silence and teacher de-centering. I pushed this pedagogical model further by choosing texts about social inequity that I anticipated would make them uncomfortable. My goal in combining decentering teaching practices with provocative course materials was to push students to rethink their deeply held beliefs and assumptions about the world—a practice Megan Boler has called a “pedagogy of discomfort.” While at the time I was unaware of this pedagogy, my personal dedication to social justice was a comfortable fit with the

¹ All names and references to places have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

² Judith Goleman (1995) defines “critical composition” as pedagogy that emphasizes “the *double* activities of ‘learning about’ and ‘making something of’ social determinations” (100). This is a

writing program's belief that the critical reading and writing practices create a more informed citizenry.

In part because I felt authorized by the writing program to push students past their comfort zones, I didn't think much of his complaint until a few days later when I opened group discussion as usual; Ryan started yelling obscenities at me—screaming about my unreasonable expectations, neglect, selfishness, and irresponsibility. His rage went on for about two minutes before stopping abruptly. Twenty-four startled students stared at me while I watched this crying, red-faced man shake in his desk. I struggled to re-route my defensive anger, and worked quickly to diffuse the situation, using (without really thinking), language gleaned from years of therapy. Something worked—Ryan calmed down and after a few minutes, I invited him to lead a discussion about his feelings, which opened space for other students to express their fears about failing the class. Soon after this incident, Ryan's engagement with the course materials and his writing shifted dramatically. He stayed on to produce an exceptional portfolio, later telling me he thought he had broken through a significant emotional barrier by “sticking with it” rather than dropping the course. I felt strange when he told me that—as if there were some hidden emotional curriculum behind my pedagogy. Perhaps he was right.

While Ryan was ultimately successful, I feel responsible for using discomfort in a way I believe triggered such an extreme emotional reaction. I question now whether his success could have come without severe discomfort and angst. Could there have been a way for Ryan to expand his thinking and develop into a more critically thinking writer without pushing him past his emotional limits? Admittedly, one of the limitations of this example is that it is extreme—most students have and will continue to successfully

complete my classes without incident. And, to be honest, I believe most students' thinking requires a significant "shock" to help cast in relief the beliefs and practices we are trying to change. Ryan's case frames the opening to my project because it was so extreme, because he shocked *me* out of my habitual teaching practices and raised my awareness of discomfort in composition studies.

We often take for granted the value of didactic discomfort as transformative, but Ryan's experience presents a compelling challenge to these assumptions. Like Hurlbert and Blitz, I dislike the thought of a scholarly world where we have to warn students if we are going to rattle their cages and curtail our efforts to, if not make them critically conscious of their own material conditions (a concept that has been heavily critiqued by feminist scholars anyway), use discomfort to open up new opportunities for critical thought. Yet, in reflecting on Ryan's experience, I think we tend to assume that discomfort is harmless—that its didactic benefits far outweigh any risks. While many have argued that discomfort is not only unavoidable but necessary to learning (Berlak 2004), and that teaching that does not "hit upon some crisis...is perhaps *not truly taught*" (Felman 1992), I have wondered, from listening carefully to students and teachers who experience discomfort in myriad ways in first-year composition classrooms, whether we need to call into question some of our taken for granted valuations of discomfort in education.

Despite discomfort's extensive presence in composition classrooms, the term itself is noticeably absent from disciplinary discourse. My research addresses two problems. First, critical composition² practices tend to value discomfort for its

² Judith Goleman (1995) defines "critical composition" as pedagogy that emphasizes "the *double* activities of 'learning about' and 'making something of' social determinations" (100). This is a

transformative effects without understanding how discomfort works. Scholarship about critical composition pedagogy, especially practices that stem from “conflict pedagogies,” emphasize the educational benefits that derive from employing discomfort as a tool for transformative thinking. Teachers, often without being aware of it, assign readings about social injustice for their students and then assume that after enough exposure, students will be persuaded by what is just. For instance, in one of the interviews I conducted for this study, a teacher described her attempts to get students to change their thinking about America as a post-racial society. To change their thinking, she described assigning several *additional* texts about systemic racism after they resisted the first readings. Teachers know the transformative potential of discomfort caused by dissonant ideas, but a lack of understanding of discomfort limits the way they are able to achieve their curricular (or personal) goals and might have unintended emotional consequences for students who are especially vulnerable.

The second problem is that didactic discomfort is all but unilaterally treated as an acceptable, positive pedagogical practice. Teacher-scholars in our field have espoused approaches to teaching writing that have, in effect, split discomfort into two distinct parts: emotional and cognitive. This split has occurred over time and through scholarly conversations that extol the virtues of discomfort-causing pedagogies, while ignoring the emotional effects of discomfort in “contact zone” classrooms. Emotional discomfort might be what we all feel when we write, but discomfort as cognitive dissonance is an extreme phenomenon that catalyzes attitudinal change. Discomfort in critical composition

form of critical pedagogy that pushes beyond radical and liberatory theory to emphasize the importance of raising students’ critical consciousness through praxis. I find Goleman’s definition useful for this project because discomfort is a pedagogical praxis, not merely an extension of theory on emotion and affect.

is simultaneously treated as an inactive, inconvenient, and harmless feeling *and* tacitly relied upon as a powerful tool for social transformation. Put another way, teacher-scholars in the field have conscious and unconscious attitudes about emotion in writing classrooms that compel many to disavow the emotional aspects of discomfort while at the same time employ discomfort as a means to destabilize students' thinking. When we split emotion from discomfort, we fail to consider the ways in which "boring, mundane" discomfort is also transformative, and not always in positive ways. Further, from talking with students about their experiences with discomfort in first-year writing classrooms, I can see that treating discomfort as a positive, transformative experience presumes an able-minded, reason-oriented subject. Students in this study frequently draw from their own experiences with post-traumatic stress disorders and anxiety to speak back to our presumptions about their emotional capacities for *extra* discomfort, thus raising important questions about the ethics and efficacy of didactic discomfort.

My project enters the conversation at the intersections of critical composition studies and interdisciplinary theories of emotion and cognitive dissonance because despite our recent "affective turn," the perspectives of teachers and students who experience discomfort in real-time have yet to be addressed. In my qualitative case study, I investigate implications of *teaching discomfort* in first-year composition classes as a way to explore whether teachers and programmatic curricula value teaching discomfort while not recognizing its unintended effects on students and teachers. With students increasingly entering our classrooms with diverse literacy backgrounds, combat experiences³, and exposure to adverse life events⁴, we need to think about the unintended

³ In the fall of 2010 alone, 210,000 veterans across the U.S. used post-911 benefits to return to college on the GI Bill (Grossman 2009), a significant number of whom (31%) have been

consequences of teaching discomfort. Margaret Price observes that while there is a tendency to believe students with a mental or emotional disability comprise a vast *minority* in our classes, “the abundance of stories [told about mental disability in U.S. higher education] indicates that mental disability is not now—if it ever was—a rare occurrence (“Introduction”). My own teaching experience confirms this. Since I started teaching first-year composition courses, I have had multiple students with diverse life experiences tell me how my teaching (discomfort) evoked dissonance or turmoil in their fundamental beliefs, which in turn complicated their sense of self, vexed a relationship with a loved one, or prompted them to seek counseling. I typically exited from tense office hours feeling justified for causing these reactions—thinking that my students would eventually see the benefit of “conscious” thinking. Since then, I have come to appreciate how students’ experiences with discomfort deserve careful attention. We need to achieve a more complex and empirically based understanding about learning outcomes—and concurrently, more about the potential emotional and cognitive impact on students—of our approaches to discomfort in writing pedagogy.

Admittedly, studying discomfort in writing classrooms is difficult because it is overdetermined. The *OED* states that “overdetermined” has two primary definitions. The first accounts for “the existence of more than one cause or contributory factor, or of more conditions than are necessary to determine or account for something.” I agree with Hurlbert and Blitz when they say that writing makes us all uncomfortable. Trying to

diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or a traumatic brain injury (19%), thus increasing the risk of a difficult transition into the classroom (Elliott, Gonzalez & Larsen 2011; Grossman 2009).

⁴ In a large-scale, multi-method 2008 study of the prevalence, nature, severity, and disclosure of adverse events, Smyth et al. reported prevalence rates of adverse events ranged from 55.8% to 84.5%. The study concluded that, “these findings provide compelling evidence that typically more than half of all college students report negative life events” (74).

parse the causes of discomfort in an already uncomfortable space would be a difficult, if not impossible task. This might be the primary reason that no one has done an in-depth investigation of teaching discomfort in composition; it seems to me that with such a complex phenomenon, it would be impossible to come to any unified or valid conclusion about the causes and outcomes of discomfort. Even so, this type of study has potential value to provide the field with an early attempt to reconcile the multiple, conflicting realities we inevitably encounter as a community of teacher-scholars. We need to begin studying discomfort in writing pedagogy from the perspectives of those who initiate or experience it—otherwise we will continue simultaneously to value and disavow discomfort in the writing classroom.

The second definition of “overdetermined” derives from psychoanalytic contexts: “the expression in a single dream, symptom, etc., of two or more needs or desires” (“Overdetermined”). While the *OED* attributes this usage to Oskar Pfister (1917), the first to articulate the term in a psychoanalytic context was Freud (1895) when working with Josef Breuer on his *Studies on Hysteria*. Freud’s early articulation of the term helped advance his argument that hysteria results from an accumulation of causes, “the principle feature in the aetiology of...neuroses [is] that their genesis is as a rule overdetermined, that several factors must come together to produce this result” (263). Freud revisits this concept in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* by adding that more than just an accumulation of meanings, overdetermination operates “in accordance with the principle of the complication of causes” (60-61). If we think of discomfort only as being overdetermined in the first sense, we can easily see that discomfort has *multiple* causes, but we miss the tensions evident in a “*complication* of causes.” Returning to the debate

about trigger warnings, those debaters who dismiss these warnings allude to discomfort's overdetermination by discrediting it as a legitimate cause of retraumatization. Trauma, on the other hand, is not overdetermined; it has a narrow etiology that allows practitioners to create best practices for treatment.

I claim that discomfort is tacitly understood to be overdetermined in the first sense—as a something with too many causes to account for or fully understand. This claim is central to my argument that the field values discomfort while not recognizing its unintended effects on teachers and students. Ironically, many composition scholars employ discomfort pedagogically for a specific purpose: to unsettle students' deeply held beliefs about the world; perhaps even to bring about a critical consciousness. Discomfort is, at once, viewed by most as so diffuse and universally experienced as to be relatively harmless, yet valued by many for its specific psychological effects. Feminist philosopher Emily Zakin explains that numerous, conflicting forces are at work in producing an overdetermined instance (like discomfort). These instances are sites “of stability but also of instability, contention and crisis; they are ambiguous, representing both conscious and unconscious desires...the product of overdetermination is an ambiguity whose meanings might well be in complete contradiction” (407). This project understands discomfort to be a site of stability (everyone feels it, no one thing or person causes it) and instability (it causes students to become destabilized) that represents conscious and unconscious desires. The definition of overdetermined that accounts for these multiple, conflicting desires can help us make sense of the seemingly paradoxical themes that recur around didactic discomfort in this project.

The paradoxical condition of discomfort in composition illustrates the twin problems of dismissing discomfort as a “real” emotion and promoting its use as transformative. Like the teachers debating “trigger warnings,” or those concerned about the tendency to industrialize composition, I have witnessed the powerful effects of student thinking due to exposure to uncomfortable topics. As a compositionist committed to social justice, I have fallen in line with what I have experienced as a tacit cultural permission to use discomfort with students for the sake of a greater good. My research remains critical of the unequal power dynamics in education, particularly when it comes to deciding what is and isn’t “triggering” for students enrolled in a compulsory composition course. Yet, thinking back to the half-dozen e-mails I have received from students thanking me for “opening their eyes” to injustice or “validating their experiences with racial oppression,” I cannot dismiss the transformative power of discomfort in composition classrooms. While recognizing that the value of discomfort is connected to broader cultural assumptions about emotion, labor, and the perennial threats to liberal arts education, I have also witnessed unintended consequences of teaching discomfort that have prompted me to question dominant approaches to (and avoidances of) discomfort in the writing classroom.

Megan Boler’s “Pedagogy of Discomfort”

While it would seem that teacher-scholars in composition who advocate or practice “bitch pedagogies,” or who intentionally create an agonistic classroom environment consciously attend to students’ emotional states, these critical pedagogical practices are more often than not antagonistic towards them (Alcorn, Gorzelsky,

Micciche). Simply put, coming into contact with ideas that challenge one’s thinking evokes emotion. Many have identified connections between emotions, power, and pedagogy (Worsham 1998) and between emotions and the formation of social norms (Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990), but as K. Hyoejin Yoon has argued, the scholarship critiquing critical pedagogy for its lack of attention to affect has yet to “name critical pedagogy as an affective discourse” (718). Because challenging social norms means challenging emotions associated with these norms (Ahmed 2004), those educators who seek to “rattle complacent cages” (Boler 175) ought to be prepared to face the emotional consequences of doing so. Consequently, the writing classroom—particularly classrooms designed to work with critical inquiry, consciousness raising, struggle, or attention to social injustice—is regarded as a site of transformation without an acknowledgement of critical inquiry as an affective discourse.

Megan Boler (1999) articulates connections between critical education and emotions in her book *Feeling Power*, where she calls for an examination of how the “politics of emotions” shape teachers’ and students’ lives (“Feeling Power: Emotions and Education”). Boler argues that a “pedagogy of discomfort” is an invitation to educators and students to “engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine...how one has learned to perceive others” (176). Boler situates her articulation of “critical inquiry” as a tradition of liberal education—one that values “dialogue, democracy, and rationality” (177). By situating a “pedagogy of discomfort” as critical inquiry, Boler brings the collective processes of feeling emotions to bear on the historically individualized processes of rational thought and critique. This intervention is crucial because it acknowledges that emotions are experienced collectively and that they

are deeply embedded (though typically disavowed) in the critical processes liberal education values. While Boler does not engage the specific mechanisms of discomfort that help students and teachers question their own beliefs and assumptions, her work scaffolds a scholarly agenda for those interested in the intersections of pedagogical explorations of social justice and emotional connections to beliefs and values (Berlak 2004; Boler & Zembylas 2003; Zembylas 2010; Zembylas and McGlynn 2012). Boler and others who have produced scholarship on “pedagogies of discomfort” help us identify gaps in composition studies between practices that consciously or tacitly involve discomfort and conversations about affect and emotion involved in teaching writing.

I think many writing teachers would understand a call for a “pedagogy of discomfort” in composition studies, but I believe naming the emotional consequences of our extant “conflict pedagogies” counters universal expectations that teachers must also create comfortable environments for students—especially freshman. While Boler’s call sounds similar to those composition has for writing and critical thinking in the academy, unlike in composition studies this pedagogy is grounded in a feminist politics of emotion. I believe that for discomfort to work as a pedagogical tool, teachers and programs must also be willing to create and implement a concomitant emotional curriculum, but I do not think that composition studies is presently committed to that task.

Boler’s work can help us identify gaps in our own interactions with discomfort, but there are several places where my project moves within and against hers. First, I am weary of fashionable calls for “pedagogies of,” and do not intend this project to advocate any additional struggle, discomfort, or conflict in composition studies. I agree with feminist sociologist Maria do Mar Pereira that teacher-scholars would be well served to

attend to the discomfort that already exists in most classrooms before intentionally creating more (“Uncomfortable Classrooms”). Given that rhetoric and composition scholarship has neglected conversations about emotions in the classroom for so long, I believe paying attention to discomfort *already* in a writing classroom is a good start. Further, I see the word “pedagogy” as static; it evokes a hierarchical structure, a linear process, and a one-way direction. This project shifts the language of “pedagogy of discomfort” to “teaching discomfort” because I see that latter as the tacit, disavowed reality of many critical composition practices.

This project understands the meaning of discomfort as always doubled, often unconsciously practiced (unlike Boler’s intentional pedagogy), and as a reciprocal phenomenon that can bind and rend relationships simultaneously. This study names *teaching discomfort* as a pedagogical reality of most critical composition classrooms that requires a sustained investigation. The phrase “teaching discomfort” is a double-entendre that gets at the reciprocal dynamics involved with discomfort in the classroom. The phrase “teaching discomfort” speaks to the multi-directionality and difficulty inherent in actually using and controlling discomfort as a pedagogical “tool.” Discomfort can be the subject of teaching, or the teaching subject can be the object of discomfort. In this way, we can see that teaching discomfort moves in accord with recent “affective turn” theories that posit emotion as a “complex braid” (Worsham), a “performative that produces effects” (Micciche), and “a relation of ‘doing’ in which there is not a distinction between passive or active” (Ahmed).

Second, Boler’s articulation of “pedagogy of discomfort” does not conceptualize the term or explore the unintended consequences of discomfort for teachers and students

in real-time situations. In outlining a pedagogy of discomfort, Boler asks, “What do we—educators and students—stand to gain by engaging in the discomforting processes of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions?” (175). In naming “teaching discomfort” as the pedagogical reality of many critical composition classrooms, I am more interested in querying the processes already in place that are uncomfortable and asking, “what do we stand to lose?” Boler does not address two key components my project takes up: conceptualizing discomfort using interdisciplinary scholarship on emotion and cognitive dissonance and interviewing teachers and students to see where discomfort may fall apart as a pedagogical tool. Boler asks us to examine how “our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment” (178), yet leaves the door open to question whether (and how) we “see” students and teachers who are emotionally vulnerable. If Price is correct, then the “dominant culture” has taught us that those with emotional “disabilities” or vulnerabilities are in the minority and thus we often fail to see how enacting a pedagogy of discomfort might cause unintended consequences.

As the rhetoric of discomfort in debates about “trigger warnings” shows, students are not always trusted to distinguish between “useful” discomfort and “triggering” trauma (or some other legitimate affective experience). One of the unintended consequences of our assumptions about teaching discomfort is that we “presume an able-minded subject” (Price “The Emotional Turn in Academic Discourse”). The prevailing approach to and simultaneous avoidance of discomfort persists because it is an overdetermined site of conflicting conscious and unconscious desires. Teacher-scholars need an ethics for working with multiple manifestations of discomfort in first-year writing classrooms—one that derives from students’ and teachers’ own experiences. The field would benefit from

knowing more about discomfort, not only because we could improve our everyday teaching practices by knowing more about how discomfort affects our classrooms, but also because of the potential for unintended negative side effects. Scholarship in rhetoric and composition has taken an “affective turn” (Clough) or a turn towards “nonrational rhetorics” (Davis and Hawhee), which asks us to question how emotions and embodiment⁵ operate in pedagogy (Albrect-Crane “Theories of Affect”). We need an ethics of discomfort based on a fuller understanding of the emotional *and* the cognitive effects of didactic discomfort—one that bridges divides between social-turn and affective-turn praxes in composition. In the next section, I review scholarship about “conflict pedagogy” in composition studies to highlight the ways in which critical composition studies thinks about and acts upon educational practices that could be considered “pedagogies of discomfort.” The purpose of reviewing this literature is to contextualize my study of “teaching discomfort” within the field’s extant practices.

Conflict and Struggle in Critical Composition Studies

Teacher-scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have debated the role of struggle and conflict in the writing classroom for decades. In the 1980s, as the field was gaining traction as a legitimate discipline, dominant scholarship that focused on the expressive and cognitive composition processes of individual students gave way to conversations about the impact of the social on writing processes. Scholarship in the late 1980s turned toward discussing the material realities of writing teachers’ increasingly diverse composition classrooms. A number of teacher-scholars argued persuasively for

⁵ Including non-normative emotion and embodiment, as Price asks us to consider.

the inextricability of students' social, economic, and cultural experiences from their writing contexts. As the field took a "social turn," as it was later described, the tone of these conversations grew urgent because they took on, as Patricia Bizzell points out, cultural crises underneath the problem of literacy. In the opening epigraph to this Introduction, Hurlbert and Blitz capture that tone, claiming simply that without a little discomfort when we write, teachers risk the industrialization of composition. If we are to avoid that, they claim, then our task becomes a matter of "teaching discomfort."

Many teacher-scholars during this time referenced the "politics" of writing instruction in the face of social inequity, which consequently drew attention to the liberatory pedagogical practices of Henry Giroux, Ira Schor, and Paulo Freire as models for composition (see Bizzell, *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, Cooper and Holzman, *Writing as Social Action* and Bullock, Trimbur, and Schuster *The Politics of Writing Instruction*). One of the most powerful cases for the place of politics in the writing classroom between the late 1980s and early 1990s came from James Berlin's "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." Berlin argues here for a "social-epistemic" rhetoric that "is self consciously aware of its ideological stand, making the question of ideology the center of classroom activities" (478). The idea of becoming "self consciously aware" figures centrally in his social-epistemic pedagogy; Berlin's thinking was influenced heavily by Freire and Schor, which prompts him to argue that the goal of his pedagogy is to "externalize false consciousness" (491). As Byron Hawk recently argued, however, Berlin's goals were predicated upon the idea that merely exposing students to the "right" ideas would create personal change:

Basing social-epistemic rhetoric on a socialist ideology, Berlin wants to replace current-traditional and expressive pedagogies with a heuristics that focus on enlightening students and bringing them out of a false consciousness...Berlin has to state his position up front and he has to put faith in the power of rationality and the free individual: if teachers display rational readings of injustice for their students...surely they will be persuaded by the just (79-80).

Berlin's influential argument in the late 1980s infuses conversations about seeing writing in social and cultural contexts with a particular sense of (rationalistic) urgency, which some have argued helped elevate composition studies above its reputation as the handmaiden to literary studies.

Many teacher-scholars in the field took up Berlin's call for teaching writing as a political act that awakens our students' false consciousnesses by focusing on conflict and struggle. Mary Louise Pratt invites us to think of our classrooms as "contact zones," which she describes as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). In her article "Contact Zones and English Studies," Bizzell argues that we should use Pratt's model of "teaching the contact zone" to normalize this way of teaching in English studies. "This way of teaching" includes Pratt's suggestion, Bizzell notes, of having "all the students in the class...[hear] their culture discussed and objectified in ways that horrif[y] them" (cf. Bizzell 167, Pratt 39). Richard Miller offers the field a vivid example of the horrors of violent cultural objectification in "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." In this article, Miller describes his colleagues' reactions to a public reading of a student paper titled "Queers,

Bums, and Magic,” wherein a student describes violently assaulting a homeless person in a trip to “San Fagcisco.” Miller concludes that the tendency in the classroom with this kind of writing is to suppress or discipline it—responses, he argues, leaves in tact the cultural assumptions that create it. Instead, Miller establishes his classroom as a “contact zone” that solicits “unsolicited oppositional discourse” (400) and faces the discomforting writing head on rather than avoid it.

Writing primarily about assumptions we make about basic writers and socially disadvantaged students, Min-Zhan Lu argues for a classroom space where a students’ multiple, competing discourse sites become “friction points” that then motivate them to become more critical learners. If we force students to resolve their dissonances, then this resolution, she argues, would “lead effectively to the silencing of that dissonance and to the diffusion of the potential for resistance it represents” (21). Similarly, in his essay “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” John Trimbur (1989) suggests that classroom collaboration tends to line things up too neatly because students are quick to accommodate others’ opinions to avoid conflict. Instead, he argues, teachers should think of collaborative spaces within an “agonistic framework of conflict and difference” where tension, dissonance, and difference are addressed without the goal of resolution (610). Thomas West (1996) pushes Trimbur’s idea of “dissensus” farther, arguing for using “conflict as a heuristic” that helps students reflect on the social tensions of living, writing, and reading in ways that are not “bounded by antagonistic dualisms” (153).

Calls for thinking of the classroom as a site for conflict, struggle, and dissensus also produced questions about the role of teaching argument in composition classes. In “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” Susan Jarratt argues against some

feminists' opposition to argument, and advocates "a rhetoric...revived today in overtly confrontational feminist pedagogies as a progressive mode of discourse in the composition classroom" (264). Dennis Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn Cooper address Jarratt's concern in "Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation," and look for argument to be both "confrontational and cooperative" in ways that, "includ[e] moments of conflict and agonistic positioning as well as moments of understanding and communication" (63). Ultimately, they argue, students are often encouraged to argue from stable positions. Teaching argument from a paradoxical position, such as "confrontational cooperation," offers students a less stable, more dynamic approach to argument. Andrea Greenbaum acknowledges that Jarratt, Lynch, George, and Cooper's argument contributes to seeing writing teachers as agents of social change, but pushes the idea of agonistic modes of address even farther. Greenbaum calls on feminist instructors to adopt a "bitch pedagogy," one that leverages the "muscularity of argumentative discourse" to model for female students, in particular, the ability to assert positions and engage in "rhetorical combat" (154).

While this scholarship belongs to a particular moment in rhetoric and composition history, conversations about struggle and conflict made an indelible mark on what it means to teach composition in the university. By the mid 1990s, John Trimbur (1994) indexes these powerful conversations as composition's "social turn" ("Taking the Social Turn"). A social turn in composition asks us to see literacy as ideological, composing as a sociocultural activity, and subjectivity as open to being repositioned in relation to other peoples' subjectivities, cultures, discourses, and practices (109). The assumed value of transformation and raising students' awareness through struggle and

discomfort is folded into this paradigm shift, named, and subsequently normalized through its repeated use in composition history, theory and current-day practice.

As someone who uses pedagogies of conflict and struggle to teach critical literacy practices and develop critical writing skills, I feel a growing need to attend to the emotional temperature in my classroom, but I admit I do not always know how. This concern is amplified by conversations that question the ethics of this approach. Karen Kopelson, for example, has emphasized fostering classroom environments and pedagogical strategies that “facilitate the comfort, safety, and optimal learning conditions for lesbian and gay students so that they may ‘come to voice’ as writers” (18). The idea of “coming to voice” is also connected to particular kinds of expressivism that address the inevitable discomfort of a writing classroom, and advocate pedagogical approaches that play, as Peter Elbow has noted, for example, the “believing game” instead of the “doubting game.”

My sense is that in the clashes between the radical individualism of comfort-focused, student-centered approaches like expressivism and the radically political, socially situated, critical conscious-focused, conflict centered approaches of social-epistemic rhetoric, important middle ground between comfort and discomfort has been lost. I explicate this point more thoroughly in Chapter One. For now, my experiences with students and colleagues who teach writing suggest to me that it is time to interrogate some of the assumptions composition pedagogy has inherited from “social turn” thinking. Central to this inquiry must be the voices of students and teachers who have much to say about their own emotional experiences in the classroom. Far too often our scholarly conversations theorize the benefits of creating the classroom as a contact zone without

considering the lived experiences of students and teachers who must negotiate (multiple) clashes and conflicts.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter One: “Towards a Conceptualization of Discomfort”

The purpose of this chapter is to work towards a conceptualization of discomfort. While defining discomfort is difficult, I articulate a starting point that shifts throughout the chapter, and eventually settles down enough to carry forward into my study. After a brief discussion of “discomfort,” I establish historical context for this study by reviewing discomfort’s “absent-presence” in composition scholarship.

Following this discussion, I review scholarship in composition studies that addresses emerging understandings of emotion and affect in writing classrooms. Discomfort has not been taken up in composition studies, but recent scholarship on emotion and affect in the field provides a useful framework to conceptualize the term. I draw from scholarship on emotion in composition to ground my conceptualization of discomfort for this project, while also pointing to scholarship about discomfort and cognitive dissonance the field has yet to consider. As it is discussed in scholarly conversations about “pedagogies of discomfort,” and as it is instrumentalized in composition pedagogies, discomfort has not been fully conceptualized using research about discomfort as cognitive dissonance. Emotion scholars since the “affective turn” theorize emotion as a social experience. The emphasis on the social aspects of emotion tends to elide individual experiences, which in turn glosses over the complex psychosocial and cognitive processes that can create blocks, resistances, or teaching

failures. I organize this chapter by unpacking the ways in which scholarship since the “affective turn” can deepen our understanding of discomfort, and merge this amplified understanding with conversations in social psychology about cognitive dissonance that have not yet used “affective turn” thinking to reconsider emotions as social, rather than individual experiences. Approaching the phenomenon of discomfort through these frameworks creates a robust, interdisciplinary conceptualization.

Chapter Two: “‘A Praxis of Stuck Places’: Research Methodologies and Methods”

Chapter Two outlines the methodologies and methods used to conduct this study. In the first section, I discuss how feminist rhetorical methodologies influenced the design and execution of this study. In the second section, I discuss empirical methods I used to collect and analyze several sets of data: classroom observations, face-to-face interviews, and course materials. While it is often expected that research methodologies and methods work in unison, this chapter exploits tensions between feminist, post-critical critiques of modernist understandings of the subject, truth, and validity that inform empirical research methods. In navigating these tensions, I keep in mind Patti Lather’s concept of “a praxis of stuck places,” which encourages a methodological approach that finds a way of moving forward through stuck places in research that seem impossible to resolve. Instead of merging disparate ideological approaches to research or preserving their conceptual oppositions, I establish “the impossible” as a site that enables working through irresolvable contradictions. As I analyze the interviews with teachers and students in Chapter Three, I pay close attention to the “stuck places” where paradoxical narratives have disrupted my expectations, challenged my preconceived ideas, and in their refusal to

line up neatly or synthesize into themes, point to the possibility that discomfort, like an elephant in the classroom, both is and isn't "there." At the same time, however, talking with students reveals that discomfort has material consequences that I address in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three: "Elephants in the Classroom: Students' and Teachers' Descriptions of Discomfort"

Drawing from interviews, course documents, and classroom observations I conducted in three first-year writing classrooms, Chapter Three examines teachers' and students' descriptions of "teaching discomfort" in their first-year writing classroom. When interviewing teachers, I found that they expressed great value in discomfort as cognitive dissonance in getting students to think critically, but were less aware of the ways in which discomfort as emotion interrupted some of their teaching goals and values. In two cases, conversations with teachers revealed different layers of discomfort; of particular note were instances where clashes between teachers' and the writing program's goals and values generated discomfort.

Students' descriptions complicated the teachers' perception of the effectiveness of discomfort as a motivational tool, which in turn raised questions about the ethics of discomfort when used without teachers receiving specialized training. I see the paradoxical moments in teachers' narratives about discomfort as symptomatic of a broader, but less conscious valuation of discomfort as cognitive dissonance *and* fear of emotion in conversations about teaching. The students I interviewed displayed a greater awareness of both these components of discomfort and spoke back to the efficacy of generating discomfort to "push" students towards critical thinking. Students

communicated a critical awareness of their teachers' motivations, and named certain uncomfortable topics as "the elephant in the classroom" that the teacher seemed to want to talk about, yet simultaneously failed to "push students" hard enough to get to a deeper conversations. At the same time, teachers voiced desires for using discomfort to push students, yet were also afraid they would "cross the line" and face disciplinary consequences from their supervisors. The third case in this study is different than the first two in that "teaching discomfort" was generated not by exposing students to uncomfortable topics, but through collisions between the teacher's and students' identity needs and desires. This case raises broader questions about discomfort for the field beyond critical composition.

Chapter Four: "The Ethics of Teaching Discomfort and Implications for Teaching Composition"

Students and teachers expressed complex and paradoxical experiences with discomfort, including calling into question the ethics of teaching discomfort, the lack of teacher training in working productively with discomfort, and the conflicts between teachers' and students' desires in writing classrooms. This study has shown me that teaching discomfort without attending to the emotional consequences of discomfort has the potential to derail our pedagogical goals and cause unintended emotional consequences for both students and teachers. In this chapter, I reassess the value of discomfort as critical inquiry and the paradigm of composition scholarship that avoids the emotional environment of the classroom according to the insights of the teachers and students who co-create uncomfortable dynamics together. I suggest ways that individual teachers and programs can work towards a greater awareness of their own teaching

values, and assess the degree to which these *examined* values interact with, complicate, or interfere with discomfort as critical inquiry *and* discomfort that is always already present in the classroom.

In an effort to identify the complex ways that make discomfort a valuable and problematic part of first-year writing classrooms, I have focused on the relationships between teachers, students, and course materials. As my research shows, the dynamics between teachers and students are often already uncomfortable—using discomfort to “push” or “dig into” things that make them uncomfortable without understanding the psychodynamic and cognitive mechanisms at work limits our ability to manage the emotional environment of our classrooms as effectively and ethically as is possible. My project offers composition teachers a more effective means of identifying their own values related to discomfort as well as an ethical means to become aware of and work more productively with discomfort in writing classrooms, where increasing numbers of culturally, emotionally, or economically vulnerable students need a more consciously mediated approach to teaching discomfort.

CHAPTER ONE: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DISCOMFORT

Introduction: A Baseline Definition of Discomfort

I begin this chapter with a baseline description of discomfort because this chapter conceptualizes discomfort using theoretical frameworks from within and outside composition studies. As I mentioned in the Introduction, discomfort is overdetermined, meaning there are too many contributory factors to say precisely that one particular thing causes discomfort. Related to this definition, but with roots in psychoanalytic psychology, these myriad contributing factors represent conscious and unconscious desires that produce meanings that are often in conflict. Framing discomfort as overdetermined makes it a slippery and unstable concept, but doing so allows multiple meanings to emerge from the data I collect for this study. This initial definition gets the conversation started, but by the end of the chapter, discomfort will have shifted, grown, and perhaps contradicted itself, which I believe offers a rich, multidimensional conceptualization for this project.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two sets of definitions of discomfort that are germane to this project: First, that discomfort is the “absence or deprivation of happiness” (1a) and “that which causes distress; a trouble, a sorrow” (1b). Second, that discomfort is “something that makes a person feel (mentally and physically) uncomfortable; a hardship” (4a) and “the state, condition, or fact of being (mentally or physically) uncomfortable; uneasiness” (4b) (“Discomfort”). In these instances, discomfort is defined as having the potential to be both the experience *and* the cause of being uncomfortable. These definitions help explain why I am interested in the concept of “teaching discomfort” rather than a “pedagogy of discomfort.” The former gets at the

doubled nature of discomfort—that it can cause someone to feel a certain way and also be the cause of feeling a certain way. The phrase “teaching discomfort” amplifies the doubled definitions of discomfort: one can “teach discomfort” (that is, to cause someone distress, trouble, or sorrow) or feel uncomfortable teaching (teaching makes the person feel uncomfortable). In this chapter, I refrain from defining discomfort as emotion, rather; I take a cue from Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche in pointing out that the Latin root of emotion, *motere*, means “to move” (3). Discomfort moves people to feel a certain way; in the definition above, this way is described as “uncomfortable,” and “uneasy.” The scholarship I review on emotion in composition studies and cognitive dissonance in social psychology posit different frameworks for understanding discomfort. At times these frameworks are in tension, but the unifying understanding of discomfort is similar: that it animates feelings, behaviors, and emotions; it *does* rather than *is*. This chapter is organized into three sections: I consider the ways discomfort has been ignored in rhetoric and composition studies, then examine theoretical frameworks in rhetoric and composition that help to understand discomfort, and move towards interdisciplinary theories relevant to thinking about discomfort from new perspectives.

Discomfort’s Absent-Presence in Composition

In *Feeling Power*, Megan Boler describes emotion as an “absent-presence” in education, meaning emotion seems to turn up everywhere until one attempts to catch a glimpse of it and then it is gone. This “absenting” of emotion, she notes, is a deliberate attempt to keep separate the mind and the body, subordinating the latter to the former. In this section, I describe similar movements in rhetoric and composition studies in order to

track the discursive shifts that make it difficult to name and discuss discomfort in the field.

Following the Dartmouth Conference in 1966, the young field of rhetoric and composition studies experienced a paradigmatic shift from product to process-oriented writing instruction. Scholars characterized as “growth theorists” (James Britton and Donald Moffett) argued for teaching language in expressive ways—starting first with intimate and expressive “inner speech,” and moving outwards towards more public writing. This model countered dominant “top-down” (i.e. current-traditional⁶) approaches, and offered teachers a way to take students’ writing processes seriously. These teacher-scholars argued that learning to write anything other than stuffy, voiceless academic prose (what Ken Macrorie calls “Engfish”) requires a messy, complicated multi-stage process that by the 1970s the field called “process writing.” Associated teaching practices included peer response groups, journaling, teaching students to listen to and find their authentic “voice,” and encouraging students to “write what they know” (see Peter Elbow, Toby Fulwiler, Don Murray, and Sondra Perl for examples).

Expressivism has been sensitive to the ways in which students can quickly become fearful of writing. Modes of writing instruction that teach students to distrust their writing, Sheri Rysdam argues, are “not conducive to perpetuating student comfort with writing or the ability to turn writing as a safe place to work through thoughts” (287). Based on “growth model” theories that young writers need time and space to learn

⁶ The phrase “current-traditional” references a pedagogy that emphasizes the written product over writing process. In short, current-traditional approaches believe in mechanical form, grammar, syntax, and correctness. For an extended conversation, see Berlin and Inkster (1980), “Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice.”

through writing, these early expressivist and process teacher-scholars offered student-centered models for making writing processes more comfortable.

In “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” Susan Jarratt describes this time as “composition without conflict,” noting that these models encourage avoiding conflict, particularly over social differences (267). Citing Murray and Elbow’s models as particularly egregious, Jarratt notes that these two teacher-scholars valued sharing common experiences in writing groups, and urged teachers to play what Elbow calls “the believing game,” that one does not argue with a writer, but rather takes everything in and listens (*Writing Without Teachers*). She argues that feminist adaptations of expressivist models posit that teaching should be nurturing and nonconflictual (269). Arguing against these models, Jarratt writes that nonconfrontational models of rhetoric and composition ignore the realities of the social world, and encourage an elision of difference that benefits men in particular. Likewise, Joe Harris concedes that, “metaphors of growth gloss over conflicts and differences” (643). When students come to college, he notes, they often are confronted with values and beliefs that conflict with their own. To succeed in college, he notes, students must be taught how to deal with conflicting sets of beliefs, values, and discourses.

Around 1980, as rhetoric and composition was establishing itself as a legitimate field, teacher-scholars critiqued expressivist and process pedagogies for a failure to attend to either the social conditions of writing or teaching as inherently ideological. As the field gained legitimacy and distance from literary studies, many rhetoric and composition scholars looked to critical pedagogy as a way to make sense of basic writers’ struggles, in particular, as well as their own treatment within departments that saw writing instruction

as “service” work. The increased attention to scholarship by Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and Henry Giroux gave the field an exigency and theoretical rigor; James Berlin’s argument for placing ideology at the center of what he termed “social-epistemic rhetoric” was particularly influential. Many cite Berlin as creating a new foundation built on “composition’s apparent immanent progressivist history” (Murphy 97). While there are myriad approaches to teaching composition today, the “social turn” in composition significantly transformed how many of us understand the work we do as more than a mere service to the university.

The three decade-long paradigm shift from expressivist and process pedagogies to social-epistemic rhetoric and critical composition studies can also be read as a transition from pedagogies of comfort to pedagogies of conflict. Critical compositionists have been hesitant, however, to name discomfort as a desired product of pedagogical conflict. To borrow a phrase from Gwen Gorzelsky, much scholarship has relied on a “metaphorics of conflict” to describe the work that generates discomfort in writing classrooms. While discomfort seems to be the ultimate goal of pedagogies of struggle, no one in rhetoric and composition studies has named these practices as colleagues in other fields have: a pedagogy of discomfort. As Laura Micciche argues, because the field tends to privilege reason over emotion, “compositionists tend to either neglect or underestimate emotion’s presence in the process of meaning-making” (1). Returning to the idea of the use of “metaphorics of conflict,” rather than naming discomfort as a pedagogical method, I question why few have outright named the desired result of pedagogies of conflict. One way to make sense of this avoidance is to think about the consequences for teachers and the field if we were to push for, as Hurlbert and Blitz do, making students uncomfortable.

There is a tension here: common sense tells us that writing is uncomfortable, and that teachers should make students feel more, not less, comfortable. Related to this tension are gendered expectations of “teacher’s work,” which in composition studies in particular, is often seen as “women’s work.” The backlash against “comforting pedagogies” has much to do with women being expected to nurture their students through difficult writing processes (see Theresa Enos, *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives*, and Elizabeth Flynn “Composing as a Woman” for an extended conversation). In the following section, I make sense of this “ignorance” through the field’s long-standing aversion to emotion that recent “affective turn” scholarship seeks to remediate.

Emotion in Composition Studies

In spite of this turn, emotion scholars take discomfort for granted. Few have investigated this phenomenon. While the affective turn in the social sciences and humanities has recently reinvigorated conversations about affect and emotion in composition studies, little attention has been paid to discomfort as a key emotional experience in first-year writing classrooms. Prior to this “turn,” initial efforts to address emotion in composition studies were quieted by deep anxieties about emotions in theory and practice, while simultaneously critical compositionists invested discursive time and pedagogical energy advocating pedagogies of conflict. But the field cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, there is heavy critique from social-epistemic rhetoricians that pedagogies that attend to an individual’s psychological experience are, at best, shortsighted. On the other, critical compositionists and social-epistemic rhetoricians

argue that our role as writing teachers is to destabilize students and raise their critical consciousness.

Despite working within this culture of distrust, several early emotion scholars made connections between composing processes and emotion. For example, as early as 1964 Janet Emig wrote of “the uses of the unconscious in composing,” and described writing as an unavoidably messy, unconscious process (7). In the 1980s, Alice Brand discussed relationships between cognitive, psychoanalytic, and affective aspects of writing. Brand’s early writing explore connections between writing and therapy (*Therapy in Writing: Psychoeducational Enterprise*), and by the mid-1980s focused more on bridging gaps between socio-cognitive and emotional discourses (“The Why”). In these initial conversations, scholars’ understanding of emotion reflected dominant understandings of emotion as being individually experienced. Most authors during this time approached affect and emotion as psychological “feeling states” that are felt subjectively and influence the writing process (Fleckenstein 1991; McLeod 1987; Rose *When a Writer Can’t Write*). The most significant limitation of early theories of emotion in composition was considered the focus on individual experiences—a perspective that cut too close to social-epistemic critiques of expressivism.

Writing about emotion after the “social turn,” Lynn Worsham helped shift the perception of emotion as a private, psychological experience, to thinking of emotion as being socially constructed. Worsham’s “Going Postal” articulates one of the cornerstone definitions of emotion for composition studies: “The tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order

and its structure of meanings” (216). Worsham’s knot defines emotion in a language the post-social turn field could hear, and parallels a similar shift in the social sciences and humanities—one Patricia Clough later termed the “affective turn.” Clough defines this turn as one that “expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter instigating a shift in thought in critical theory,” and that moves away from psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity towards “an engagement with information and affect,” including exploring non-organic life, and systems within overarching understandings of biopolitical control (2). The extent to which the parameters of this turn have reached composition studies is questionable; we are starting to see these kinds of conversations in emergent calls in composition for Critical Affect Studies (Edbauer Rice) and “non-rational rhetorics” (Davis and Hawhee). My project recognizes the importance of the “affective turn” in revitalizing theoretical discussions of emotion and affect, but does not (at this time) engage these particular conversations. The work in composition I find most useful for a conceptualization of discomfort, “uncover[s] and elaborate[s] intersections between rhetorics of emotion and Composition Studies in order to reflect critically on how emotion concepts are embedded in the social and institutional fabric of our work” (Jacobs and Micciche 3). I see discomfort as one of those “emotions” embedded in the work critical compositionists do in the classroom that needs to be “uncovered.”

This scholarship rejects the notion that emotion is a reaction, a tool, a gendered attribute, or an individual experience. In *Doing Emotion*, for example, Laura Micciche notes that emotions are performative—they are things we *do*, not things that happen to us (2). In saying emotion is something we do, Micciche argues that emotion “emerges relationally, in encounters between people, so that emotion take for *between* bodies rather

than residing *in* them” (13, original emphasis). As part of establishing emotion as a category for composition studies, Micciche draws on Butler’s concept of performativity to offer an alternative framework for the ways in which we *do* emotions: a counter to popular understandings of emotions as happening to us, as things we possess. The theory of performativity helps substantiate her term *emotioned*—a word she uses throughout her book to signify “the active role writers in the field take in crafting practices and theories” (3). Thinking of emotion in terms of performativity asks the field to reconsider classical notions of emotion, which tend to see emotion as supernumerary to discourse (1).

Thinking of emotion as performative is a useful lens to consider discomfort’s doubled meaning. What I mean by this is that the definition of discomfort already includes a nod to performativity—that is, to “doing” and being “done.” If we were to keep discomfort’s definitions separate, we would fail to see the potential for discomfort to do, undo, and redo social relations in unexpected ways. Discomfort is not merely about feeling X or doing Y, but also about the “betweenness” of that mutual experience. This is not to say that individuals don’t feel uncomfortable, or that things don’t *cause* discomfort. Thinking of discomfort as something that generates what it names, draws things together (experiences, bodies, energies), and shapes them with every new interaction is particularly important for critical pedagogues to consider. This is because the dominant assumption is that pedagogical conflict and struggle will produce an effect that teachers can anticipate in advance. Understanding discomfort as a complex affective experience generated between objects and able to configure and reconfigure the contours of the classroom itself complicates pedagogies of discomfort or struggle. Because social

interactions are shaped and reshaped in unexpected ways, one can never be certain of the outcome.

Micciche's understanding of emotion as performative is influenced by Sara Ahmed's thinking in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, where Butler's concept of performativity informs Ahmed's articulation of emotions as "sticky." The ways in which we respond to objects and to people over time, and in relation to social norms and values, shape the very surfaces as an "effect of the impressions left by others" (10). "Stickiness" is a rejection of the idea of "insides" and "outsides." Ahmed argues that emotions do not originate "in here" or "out there," but that they "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (10). Stickiness, she notes, is an effect of histories of contact between things that have already left an impression on a surface, and indexes an "accumulation of affective value," which involves a "transference of affect" that does not signify that an object has the property of stickiness nor does the transference of affect mean there exists an "active" or "passive" dynamic in becoming sticky (91-92). To offer an example of the performative nature of "stickiness," signs become sticky through repetition, and in relation to social norms and values. Thus, if a term like "faggot" is used pejoratively time and again, then it becomes a "way of signing;" it becomes difficult to understand that word as anything other than insulting and threatening (91). The repetition of the word "faggot" has a binding effect that attracts those who are hailed by the term, while at the same time can block things from moving. The sticky word, "faggot" might stick to other words that are often associated with it: unnatural, diseased, feminine. Ahmed notes that "*it is the concealment of such associations that allows such signs to accumulate value*" as a form of stickiness

(italics in original 92). She warns, however, that given past histories of contact, as with the word “faggot,” some signs will become stickier than others; it’s important not to neutralize the differences between objects (92).

Repression has much to do with what makes objects ‘sticky’ (11). Thinking about discomfort as “sticky” in relation to “metaphorics of struggle” helps me think about why discomfort seems so present and so absent in discourses about and practices of critical composition pedagogy. As I noted in the Introduction, critical composition practices value discomfort for its transformative effects, but its absence in our conversations is suspicious. Discomfort might stick to related terms (struggle, conflict, ‘bitch pedagogy’), but must be repressed (or the chain of associations must be concealed) for it to accumulate value. Discomfort is valuable, but claiming its value publicly counters perceptions of teachers as helpful, which in turn drives discomfort “underground,” as it were, and intensifies discomfort’s stickiness. Thinking of discomfort as “sticky” helps explain why it seems to cling to composition’s “pedagogies of struggle” without actually “sticking” at all. Instead, discomfort circulates between bodies, texts, and objects; it binds things together and rends them. Discomfort creates the (classroom) effects that take shape as a result of its circulation.

Conceptualizing discomfort also requires examining scholarship that theorizes the affective environment of the classroom. If discomfort creates the emotioned effects that contour the shape of the classroom, bodies, texts, and surfaces, then one must also question whether those spaces are outfitted, as it were, to be conscious of the emotional work going on in class. My gut reaction is, “no.” Most teachers are not encouraged to pay attention to the emotional atmosphere of their classrooms. At the same time, however,

many teachers (critical compositionists or otherwise) are required to use writing to get students to think critically about texts, politics, themselves, and the world. Emotion scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have issued a call for working with affect-based pedagogies in contrast to dominant reason-based approaches. Julie Lindquist calls for a sustained inquiry into the real-time affective engagements in the classroom: engagements that “allow students to locate their own affectively structured experiences...within more integrated understandings of social structures and identity formation” (188). Lindquist argues that teachers cannot expect students to understand social inequity through critical inquiry alone, because students’ visceral reactions exist in the domain of the emotional.

Similarly, Sally Chandler argues that it is not possible to teach students academic discourse without providing “emotional scaffolds” for making sense of experiences that involve the “double-bind” of cognitive and emotional composition processes (65-66). Building on Jennifer Trainor’s and Lynn Worsham’s earlier calls for compositionists to engage various sites of emotional schooling, Amy Winans, for instance, proposes a controversial approach to rethink the affective space of the writing classroom: faculty must “consciously see[k] to change the emotional rules that operate within our classrooms” by developing a critical vocabulary of emotioned, embodied experiences that arise when asking students to think rationally about social inequity and injustice (488). My project on teaching discomfort moves in accord with Chandler’s, Lindquist’s, and Winans’ suggestions, and in Chapter Four I focus specifically on creating what I call “shelters of exposure” to create a more emotionally hospitable environment for the inevitable affective and cognitive effects of discomfort in the writing classroom.

While I agree that discomfort is generated dynamically between objects, and that it structures the surfaces of objects in ways that create the effect of an “inside” and an “outside,” I cannot accept the wholesale rejection of individual experiences in favor of social explanations of emotion. I think Lindquist and Winans acknowledge the pedagogical challenge of applying exciting (and useful) theories of affect and emotion to classroom realities. What I mean by this is that while “in theory” discomfort might whip and whirl around the classroom—evading conscious attention while simultaneously being a prominent affective value in the room—in practice, a conceptualization of discomfort needs more attention to theories of the effects of discomfort’s affective contours on the students and teachers who experience it. Although some readers may object to my claim that we must also attend to how individuals experience discomfort, I would answer that in reality, individuals experience discomfort in ways that should not be elided by theories of emotion as socially constituted. The solution is to find a balance between these theories where one does not override the other.

Having said this, however, when scholarship focuses on “the individual student” in composition studies, red flags are often raised about the boundaries between teaching and therapy (Bishop 503, Richmond 73). For example, Margaret Price has recently argued that we must note the anxiety that compels us in our scholarship to always qualify any work on emotion, thereby reifying the teaching/therapy divide. “Who has told us it is so dangerous?” she asks, “What ideologies are supported by maintaining that divide so fiercely?” (Chapter One, Loc.1172, par. 1). In addressing these divides, Jeffrey Berman (2004) discusses being mindful of the emotional work we require students to do. Berman’s approach remediates what he see as an abject fear in education of addressing

the reality of students' suffering in the classroom. That we teachers often bring up these contentious topics—ones that resonate deeply with many students' adverse life experiences—our inflexible boundaries between therapy and writing instruction too often leave students triggered, unhappy, and alone. Berman argues that, “without playing the role of a therapist, I have often received comments from students stating that they found my class therapeutic...teachers can have an important therapeutic role without being therapists” (26). Students, he notes, are often not well. Berman takes seriously one observation a former student made in a letter to him writing that, “educators ‘have major public health issues to confront’” (29).

Likewise, in “Healing Trauma,” Mark Bracher claims that our efforts to promote social change in writing classrooms are ineffective because we fail to see connections between disrupting students' deeply held beliefs and identity vulnerabilities. Bracher argues that the first step in reducing violence is to understand the cyclical relationships between violence, trauma, and identity vulnerability (516). His two most striking claims are that teachers do not see these relationships, and inadvertently perpetuate cycles of violence and trauma by denigrating students whose world views do not conform to our own, and that our desires as “cultural workers” to engage criticism stems from our own unrecognized identity needs that are shaped within cultures of trauma (503). Bracher's project argues that teachers must reduce students' identity vulnerabilities by avoiding re-triggering past traumatic or adverse life experiences, identify one's own identity desires as they relate to teaching, and create the conditions for healing in our composition and literature classrooms.

One of the ways literature and composition teachers inadvertently perpetuate systems of violence in the classroom, Bracher claims, is when we open up class discussions about difference and various “isms,” which can often turn the classroom contact zone into a hostile environment for socioculturally vulnerable students. Students who have never been challenged to think about their own privilege or participation in systems of inequity frequently commit various microaggressions⁷ during class discussion (face-to-face and/or during online conversations) in response to class readings or their peers’ comments. These microaggressions can escalate, and turn into a re-wounding caused by the structural-level traumas of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism (see also Ellsworth 1989, Orner 1992, Yoon 2005). When our own defenses are triggered by these offensive comments, it’s difficult to handle the situation with compassion and clarity. Bracher observes that teachers often reach for shame to remediate the repugnant comments—this strategy, he advises, is ineffective.

Berman calls for empathy in the classroom as a way of promoting deeper care and listening, opening up opportunities for forgiveness, and offering the kind of identity recognition Mark Bracher (2006, 45) claims is necessary for students to engage with difficult material in the classroom. Berman defines empathy as “trying to understand another person’s feelings and thoughts without losing sight of the differences between self and other” (32). Teaching empathically helps us better understand trauma, which, he claims, is “a subject that now has become part of our everyday life. We live in an increasingly traumatized age, and an awareness of trauma reminds us of the value of

⁷ The theory of microaggression posits that most interactions between people who identify or are identified as belonging to a socioculturally underrepresented group (e.g. people of color, trans-identified people, LGB-identified people, people with disabilities) are characterized by put-downs that are done in “automatic, pre-conscious, or unconscious fashion,” which accumulate and affects personal and structural “peace” in the world (Pierce 1970, cf. Solórzano 1998: 121).

forgiveness” (34). His pedagogical emphasis is on “how classroom self-disclosure can lead to students’ heightened awareness of themselves and their classmates” (32). We can see how Berman’s work threatens to garner charges of being solipsistic or expressivist. Price points out that critical pedagogy makes short work of “eschewing emotion” as ‘expressivist,’ or ‘personal’ (Kindle 1084), but Berman’s focus for over thirty years in the classroom has been squarely on tuning in to students who are often abused by a “disabling” educational system that treats non-normative emotional and cognitive states as “Other” to those that are the target of our teaching practices.

I spend time with these theories because I have witnessed some of the emotional consequences of discomfort in writing classrooms, and believe that conceptualizing discomfort requires that we also think about the environments we create, unconsciously and consciously, with students. My thinking on reconfiguring classroom spaces so that discomfort is more productive (cognitively and emotionally) is heavily influenced by Bracher’s psychoanalytic perspectives of violence and trauma and Berman’s insistence on empathy in the classroom. In thinking about what kind of classroom discomfort structures (or surfaces), it becomes clear that teachers, programs, and students must be made aware of and participate in creating something new—a kind of classroom that can contain the overdetermined, sticky, and relational effects of teaching discomfort. I will turn my attention to teacher reflection and affectively mindful classroom environments in Chapter Four.

Discomfort as Cognitive Dissonance

Emotion scholars in rhetoric and composition studies might perceive looking at research from social psychology about discomfort as cognitive dissonance as a step backwards in time. This is because in the fifty years of research on cognitive dissonance, discomfort has been conceptualized as a psychological state. Thinking of discomfort as a psychological state contradicts much of the theory on emotion since the social and affective turns, but I am uncomfortable thinking about discomfort as something that only exists as a social phenomenon. Cognitive dissonance theory provides thinking that balances both the social and individual experiences of discomfort. In blending these different ways of theorizing discomfort, I hope to provide a fuller conceptualization for the field of rhetoric and composition studies.

Social psychologists have produced prolific research on cognitive dissonance over the past fifty years. Leon Festinger posited the original theory of cognitive dissonance in the late 1950s. He surmised that when an individual experiences an inconsistency among cognitions, discomfort is generated. Dissonant cognitions are unpleasant, thus individuals seek strategies to alleviate the aversive state. In his 1957 monograph *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Festinger was the first to identify psychological discomfort as dissonance—the experience that motivates an individual to reduce the conflicted state (267). Festinger’s original theory emphasizes the temporal and reciprocal nature of discomfort and attitude change, noting that within this timeline, many interceding events occur between dissonance arousal and resolution—events that may increase reminders of the inconsistency or decrease the dissonance. For example, to reduce the feeling of discomfort, individuals could increase consonant cognitions or

minimize the importance of dissonant cognitions. Psychological discomfort, being intolerable for a sustained period of time, is theorized to motivate an individual to change his or her attitude (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959).

In 1984, Cooper and Fazio distinguish between dissonance arousal and dissonance motivation. This distinction challenges Festinger's original claim that dissonance is a purely negative experience. They conclude that dissonance arousal can be misattributed (to an external source, for example), thus pointing to the possibility that this arousal can be considered either positively or negatively ("New Look" 260). If the arousal is perceived negatively *and* internally generated, then dissonance arousal becomes motivation (261). When dissonance arousal becomes dissonance motivation, then discomfort becomes the drive that motivates a change in attitude. Elliot and Devine claim that with the exception of the "New Look" model, few studies have paid attention to the psychological discomfort component of dissonance motivation (383). In a study where participants were randomly assigned to write essays assessing the relationships between choice, attitudinal change, and discomfort, Elliot and Devine conclude that "attitude change is in the service of reducing the psychological discomfort" generated by dissonant cognitions—not necessarily because their attitudes on the matter changed (391). This distinction raises a key question for teaching discomfort: when critical compositionists introduce students to ideas that arouse dissonant cognitions with the thought that "discomfort" will transform their thinking, is it possible that this discomfort merely motivates students to alleviate the unpleasant feeling rather than change their attitudes?

One of the reasons discomfort may fail to actualize deeper changes in students' attitudes or beliefs, is that the motivational system underlining dissonance phenomena acts to defend and preserve self-consistency. Working from the premise that dissonance and self-confirmation are concomitant, several scholars have posited that the motivation that drives dissonance is primarily one of self-affirmation. Steele suggests that when attitude change occurs, it is because individuals strive to present a positive self-image. Steele, Spencer & Lynch note that drawing upon positive aspects of self both prior to and after a dissonant event defends against the disconfirming implications of the dissonant act. Galinsky et al. find, however, that self-affirmations only reduce psychological discomfort without actually "curing" the discrepancy. They theorize that "threats to the [self] affirmation should re-expose the original dissonance," thus leading an individual back to the original source of her discomfort (126). Their study raises questions about failed attempts at dissonance reduction. Galinsky et al. conclude that following a failed attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance, participants re-experienced psychological discomfort for two reasons: first, because dissonance is activated by the meanings in the dissonant experience (142). Second, because self-affirmations that actually draw individuals closer to the dissonant act (or idea, or cognition) amplifies dissonance. Individuals are motivated to present themselves congruously, thus conforming dissonant cognitions to the attitudes they perceive in those around them can reduce discomfort by hiding, or "masking" their discrepant attitudes (142).

In sum, social psychological theories of dissonance and discomfort posit several empirically substantiated claims about discomfort that are useful for rhetoric and composition studies. First, discomfort drives an individual to alleviate perceived

cognitive dissonance, which in turn may create attitude change *in the service of reducing discomfort*. Second, because dissonance works to preserve self-congruity, positive self-affirmation (external or internal) may provide “ample defense” against threats to self (i.e. preserve or maintain cognitions *or* attitudes that are congruent with self), but can also fail because affirmations often appear to reduce discomfort while leaving the original discrepancy in tact. These studies, while certainly not the definitive “truth” about discomfort, offer scholars interested in emotions (discomfort, in particular) another perspective. This research complicates several prevailing assumptions about discomfort in educational settings (including composition): 1) that using writing that provokes uncomfortable feelings is enough to change students’ minds about the subject at hand, 2) that discomfort is an effective means to inaugurate reflective, critical change of deeply held beliefs and assumptions about the world, and 3) that discomfort is a phenomenon that can be wielded as a pedagogical tool, much as one would use a hammer to sink a nail.

For the purpose of this project, discomfort is conceptualized as a complex, overdetermined affective phenomenon that is generated in spaces between objects and that circulates between bodies, texts, and objects, binding things together and rending them. Discomfort creates the (classroom) effects that take shape as a result of its circulation, but is also generated by psychological experiences called “cognitive dissonance,” which in turn motivates people to resolve the unpleasant feelings of competing cognitions. That individuals desire recognition and to maintain self-consistency, discomfort from competing cognitions can catalyze or compel a person to resolve that discrepancy by changing their attitudes or by “masking” their feelings to

remain consistent with others' beliefs, thus preserving self-consistency and increasing the chances for recognition—especially from peers and teachers.

Though it may mean that discomfort is hard to “pin down,” the fact that it is overdetermined should not deter teacher-scholars from investigating its presence in composition classrooms. I find the interdisciplinary frameworks for understanding discomfort useful in making sense of my participants' own complex, paradoxical relationships to discomfort in the writing classroom. The two frameworks presented in this chapter: emotion scholars' approach to emotion as a socially constructed, multidimensional phenomenon that circulates between and shapes the surfaces of things, and social scientific perspectives that discomfort is a psychological state that motivates the resolution of competing cognitions, provide lenses for exploring discomfort as both a social and a psychological phenomenon. Rather than trying to reduce discomfort to a single experience, or view discomfort as having too many causes to manage, understanding that discomfort *does* more than we presently understand is useful in calling attention to reasons why teachers and programs should know more about its potential consequences. If teachers and writing programs believe that discomfort is a necessary experience of education, then these interdisciplinary frameworks should point us towards more complex meanings, which in turn should be central to critical composition pedagogy and curriculum.

CHAPTER TWO: 'A PRAXIS OF STUCK PLACES': RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

It is what seems impossible from the vantage point of our present regimes of meaning that is the between space of any knowing that will make a difference...that is precisely the task: to situate the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working through aporias.

—Patti Lather, *Getting Lost*

Introduction: Feminist Methodologies and Empirical Methods

In Chapter Two, I discuss the methodologies and methods used to conduct this study. In the first section, I discuss how feminist rhetorical methodologies shape my approach to academic research and influence the design and execution of this empirical study. In the second section, I discuss the methods used to collect several sets of data: classroom observations, face-to-face interviews, and textual materials from each case. While it is typical for methodologies and methods to work in unison—the former typically providing an epistemological approach to the latter—these two sections productively exploit tensions between post-critical and postmodern feminist approaches to understanding modernist demands for structure and validity. In this way, Chapter Two takes a more experimental approach in merging conventions that belong to two different traditions. My chapter combines these ways of making knowledge from different disciplines, thus crafting a hybrid approach that discomfits disciplinary boundaries.

Qualitative methodology is often conflated with method, but this study treats the two as distinct and in tension. Sandra Harding distinguishes between the two thus: a method references ways to gather empirical evidence; a methodology is a theory and framework for conducting research (2). Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland (2002)

add that methodologies connect a “particular *ontology*...and a particular *epistemology*...in providing *rules* that specify how to produce *valid knowledge* of *social reality*” (11, original emphasis). The epistemological assumptions of case study method and feminist composition methodology are different. My research design follows Robert K. Yin’s case study method. Yin is relatively quiet about methodology because case study research is adopted by many different disciplines, which in turn provide the “rules” for how to produce and interpret knowledge. This does not mean, however, that case study methods are value-free heuristics.

In a short paragraph in the opening chapter to *Case Study Research*, Yin writes, “this all-encompassing method can embrace different epistemological orientations,” such as “relativist,” “interpretivist,” and “realist.” The dominant orientation of the method I adopted for this study is “realist,” which Yin notes “assumes the existence of a single reality that is independent of any observer” (17). Exactly what kind of *realism* Yin adopts for this method is unclear, but his definition evinces a modernist relationship to truth, power, and the role of the researcher as “independent from” an external reality. Feminist rhetorical methodology stands in diametric opposition to these assumptions, and has articulated itself as “enmeshed in the web of postcolonial, postmodern...paradigms and frameworks” (Kirsch and Royster, Ch.8, location 1490, par. 1). As rhetoric and composition studies is my primary field, I look to the discipline for methodological guidance. This guidance, however, differs from other fields in that there is no consensus about how to do writing studies research. Rhetoric and composition studies as a field might agree that what makes it unique is the study of *writing*, but how the field goes about it is a matter of debate. Feminist rhetorician Gesa Kirsch, for example, advocates

for “methodological pluralism,” noting that employing a variety of methodologies will enable the productive exploration of tensions and fissures, create “polyvocal dialogues,” and provide opportunities for researchers to question the epistemological assumptions that underpin their individual choices. Following Kirsch’s earlier work establishing feminist principles as composition’s methodological practices, many others have joined the conversation. This project has been shaped by feminist research that values open conversations, researcher self-reflexivity, and allowing the voices of research participants to be the primary authority on the subject under consideration. This chapter has two sections. I begin by reviewing the feminist rhetorical methodologies that provide the framework for this study, and then transition to a discussion of how these methodologies translate into research practices. The two sections represent what Patti Lather calls a “praxis of stuck places,” an in-between site where one comes up again and again against the impossible and in doing so, finds a way forward.

Methodology

When I was 26 years old, a senior sociology major, I made the decision to undergo a gender change from female-to-male. In my last semester, I started hormone therapy treatment with exogenous testosterone, the effects of which impacted the sound of my voice before any other changes manifested. In other words, my voice quickly dropped registers and my classmates took notice. One class period the professor was explaining how to aggregate demographic survey data. I raised my hand and asked, “What happens if the respondent doesn’t identify as male or female?” My peers turned and stared at me. The professor paused for a moment before answering awkwardly, “Well

that data wouldn't count." Aside from everyone feeling quite uncomfortable, I remember this situation exposing the ways in which my professor's method (survey) was influenced heavily by an unquestioned understanding of gender as an outward manifestation of sex differentiation. Her study's findings, about the romantic relationships between college men and women, didn't merely exclude the experiences of an entire class of people; its inflexible method participated in defining the epistemological frame through which a transgendered life is rendered illegible, and thus "does not count."

In *Troubling the Angels. Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, Patti Lather and Chris Smithies discuss their relationship to research participants in this way: "this work has made a claim on us to not drown the poem of the other with the sound of our own voices, as the ones who know, the 'experts' about how people make sense of their lives" (xvi). I find Lather and Smithies' perspective helpful in thinking about the power relations inherent in figuring out who and what matters to our research endeavors. Likewise, feminist methodologists Sandra Burt and Lorraine Code observe that scientific methods that "govern conceptions of what counts as knowledge in the academic mainstream," have excluded women and other socially vulnerable minorities from the data with which researchers draw conclusions (20). Worse, these researchers are often unable to make this "local knowledge," that which is situated in the real lives of underrepresented "others," count as informed (20-21). These absences matter, and as such, have prompted me to adapt some of the "given" methodological assumptions that inform empirical research.

Since my project interrogates discomfort in the academic lives of students—students at the same university I teach and research—I must attend to ways I have participated in the pedagogical practices I critique. Taylor and Rupp note, "what is

distinctive about feminist methodology is not the use of particular techniques but rather an epistemological understanding of how knowledge is generated, how it is reported, and how it is used” (2116). A central feature of feminist methodology is self-reflexivity—feminist scholars have called upon researchers to question their own assumptions, keep open lines of communication, and to be explicit about the ways in which their own positionality affects every aspect of the research project from conception to execution. As someone who teaches discomfort in first-year writing classes, I want to find ways to account for the ways my assumptions about teaching, discomfort, and the program itself might drown out students’ voices as well as to own the tendency to use discomfort with students to encourage deeper responses.

Being accountable for the ways in which my experiences saturate every aspect of this project is not in itself an answer to the ethical concerns raised here. Part of the ethical quandary for this project is that there is no getting around the fact that I benefit professionally from hearing about students’ discomfiting experiences. Bruce Horner, for example, notes that self-reflexivity in composition methodologies has become so mundane that it has been commodified, turned into a matter of an individual researcher’s “ethos—not praxis” (578). Researchers may feel they are being “good,” he notes, by performing self-reflexivity rather than actually reflecting. Also commenting on the *work* of reflection, feminist rhetoricians Powell and Takayoshi observe that the problem with self-reflection is largely semantic: “We consciously use the term *self-reflexive* as opposed to *self-reflective*...whereas *reflective* is associated with deep or careful thought generally, *reflexive* carries with it a more systematic and methodological significance... We are concerned not with deep or careful thought generally but with a particular kind of

method” (3). Understanding the motives and pressures involved in knitting our own lives and subjectivities into our work helps feminist researchers, in particular, avoid making themselves the focus in ways that have become a bit conventional. As these researchers claim, self-reflexivity, while arguably the crux of feminist methodologies, should be used methodically and as a means to identify one’s desire to produce knowledge through the use of someone else’s feelings, words, and experiences.

In an effort to identify my desire to produce knowledge using students’ and teachers’ descriptions of discomfort in a way that is more than a conventional performance, I kept a research journal where I interrogated my motivations according to Takayoshi, Tomlinson & Castillo’s heuristic for understanding “how subjectivity flows through the research process” (112). This heuristic, in combination with Mark Bracher’s (2006) suggestions for teacher reflexivity, informed my suggestions for working productively with discomfort that I outline in Chapter Four. The authors suggest that keeping track of reflections to guided questions can make researchers aware of “shaping influences” on their research. Examples of questions I asked myself included:

- What are your motivations or purposes for researching? What is it you want to know?
- What do you already believe about the research project?
- What epistemological or cultural beliefs do you have related to your research problem?
- What is your ideological commitment to the subject?

Engaging these questions alongside my study enabled me to find ways, grounded in my own experience and ways of knowing, for my field's feminist rhetorical methodologies to shape the contours of the case study methods I have chosen for my project without my own experiences becoming the focus of the study.

Donna Haraway urges feminist researchers to “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (584), which in turn forms a more ethical relationship between researcher and participant—a central concern for feminist methodologists. But even as we enact our values through self-reflexive practices, it is not always easy to see what we must become answerable for. Krista Ratcliffe's thinking in *Rhetorical Listening* is useful here: “our (un)conscious assumptions about identification inform not just who we are but what we expect from ourselves, from others, and from language. And all of these assumptions affect the data and conclusions of a scholarly study” (51). In a study about discomfort—a phenomenon that is already overdetermined, unstable, and suffused with unconscious desires—one I have described as being a dynamic, reciprocal, affective force that exists between objects—making oneself accountable to the unconscious assumptions about (not only identification) but the phenomenon itself *is* challenging. There were times in interviews, for example, where I could not tell where my discomfort and my participants' began and ended.

As an example, my research participants often described discomfort as a host of experiences and practices that weren't directly accessible through the use of research questions alone. Participants said seemingly paradoxical things about discomfort, or simultaneously discussed its presence and absence in the classroom. To help me navigate these seemingly “stuck places,” I looked to feminist organizational frameworks suggested

by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch that urge researchers to focus on “the adequacy of our own actions and judgments,” rather than judging the quality of our research participants’ performances (Ch. 2, location 263, par. 2). In listening to participants’ seemingly conflicted descriptions about “teaching discomfort,” I attempted to question why I thought their statements seemed paradoxical. Often it was because their descriptions contradicted what I thought they would say, or that their experiences did not conform to my presuppositions based on the scholarship I reviewed in Chapter One. In the moment, when I was sitting across from my participants and my questions seemed to go nowhere, I was challenged to listen to what they were actually saying, rather than what I thought they should say. Jane Gallop calls this “the ethics of reading,” which, she notes, is actually about listening. “What do I mean by ethical?” she asks. “I believe it is ethical to respect other people, by which I mean: listen to them, try to understand what they are actually saying, rather than just confirming preconceptions about them, our prejudices” (12). Understanding how discomfort is experienced in first-year writing contexts challenged me to listen to what was said and unsaid in ethical ways.

When talking about discomfort, I tried to keep in mind that some researcher projection is not all bad; rather, it is a matter of balancing listening to what my participants actually said, and probing for ways to deepen our conversations. Royster and Kirsch call this “tacking in,” a strategy they describe as a commitment to “engage dialectically and dialogically, to actually use tension, conflicts, balances, and counterbalances more overtly as critical opportunities for inquiry in order to enable a conversation” (Ch. 5, location 970, par. 1). I found that some of my research questions tended to get at discomfort too directly, when instead the tendency is for “discomfort” to

elude capture. I relied on “tacking in” with participants to exploit some of the tensions present in what sounded to me like contradictory statements about the role of discomfort (or not) in their classrooms.

“Tacking in” and the ethics of listening carefully to another person are two feminist-informed methodologies that actually complement case study approaches to interviewing. For example, Yin remarks, “Interviews...will resemble guided conversations...Although you will be pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, your actual stream of questions in a case study is likely to be fluid” (110). But Yin warns that the researcher must be careful to follow the line of inquiry established by research questions while guarding against asking them in an unbiased way (110). While complimentary, the concept of being “unbiased” assumes this is possible, and though feminist methodologies also warn against bias in qualitative research, the topic is addressed by advocating being transparent and reflexive about the inevitability of those biases.

Royster and Kirsch’s concept of “tacking in” is also part of a larger strategy they call “critical imagination,” which is a tool for using the imagination to “notice the unnoticed, re-thinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be” (Ch. 2, location 317, par. 1). I attempted to use this tool in asking less formal, more conversational “probing questions,” because the object of my study (discomfort) called for this approach. What I mean by this is that while in the moment with participants, I made conscious and unconscious moves to “go with the stream,” as it were, by exploiting tensions in what I perceived as “the unnoticed.” For example, with student participants in particular I would ask one of the central research questions and receive flat answers that did not seem to address the question. In paying attention to subtle things I sensed were

both there and not there in their language, I often rephrased the question by offering a metaphor or simile. Often I found myself “going underneath” discomfort to get at it through rhetorical devices that provided a bit of emotional and linguistic distance. I was a bit hesitant to “use my imagination” in this way because I feared I would project things that were not actually there, but in the end, some of the most compelling information came from moments when I used speculation, metaphors, and a critical imagination to mediate the discomfort of talking about discomfort in interviews.

Royster and Kirsch open their chapter on “strategic contemplation” with an epigraph from Krista Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening* where she writes, “[U]nderstanding means listening to discourses not *for* intent but *with* intent... [R]hetorical listeners might best invert the term *understanding* and define it as *standing under*, that is, consciously standing under discourses [and] letting [them] wash through, and around us” (Ch. 6, location 1131). In analyzing participants’ descriptions of teaching discomfort, I was least successful in “standing under” their words to listen closely and ethically to what emerged. During live interviews, it was difficult to balance listening closely to the obvious and not so obvious, though I strived to be mindful (though not always) and subtle in going back and forth between formal questions and flexible conversations (Royster and Kirsch, Chapter 6, location 1137, par. 1). Following a feminist-rhetorical methodology to analyze data from interviews, however, was even harder. My goal in analyzing these data was to slow down, gain some critical distance from the interviews (a strategy Royster and Kirsch name “tacking out”), and “linger deliberately inside of the research” (location 1131, par. 1). Related to “critical interpretation” in their feminist-informed organizational framework, “strategic contemplation” is a meditative practice designed to open space in

the research project for things to emerge, and to allow the embodied nature of the research project room to inform analytical strategies.

I mention these challenges because talking about struggle and failure openly as part of the research process is a practice that has gained discursive traction in the discipline.⁸ My struggle to listen carefully and ethically to my participants' written transcripts was a result of my failure to see what I was about to become answerable for. I immersed myself in the interviews and created codes for patterns I saw emerge from the data. I stopped "listening" to these data, however, when I saw several patterns point to a strong relationship between the social-psychological theories of cognitive dissonance and Boler's conceptualization of "pedagogies of discomfort." Instead of presenting my participants' voices as I argue in my Introduction is one of the gaps the study seeks to remediate, I made them conform to and confirm the presuppositions I explicate in the next section. The first draft of Chapter Three was filled with unexplained assumptions, projections, "distorted views," and a general "closing down" of meanings. These were not overtly conscious acts; I was only able to see and hear my participants once I was held accountable for them—that is, once I received the same feedback from several readers. Ironically, my experience "not counting" as data in my undergraduate sociology professor's studies doubled back on itself as I discounted rich and interesting descriptions that did not conform to my method of data analysis. In getting stuck between two traditions—one that offers the comforts of structure, validity, and truth and another that rends these concepts to build a new framework based on meditation, fluidity, and

⁸ A search of the 2015 CCCC schedule indicated the number of panels on "failure" quadrupled from the previous year. See also Alison D. Carr (2013) "In Support of Failure."

polyvocality—my research process attempted (though not always successfully) to make what feels impossible, a space of praxis.

Methods: Overview

In this section, I discuss case study methods that structure my research process, and offer a brief overview of my research site. I will introduce my research participants in greater detail in Chapter Three. I begin by offering my rationale for choosing an empirical case study approach. When I decided to write my dissertation about discomfort in first year writing classes, my initial literature review revealed there were few conversations about discomfort in composition studies, and none that included teachers' and students' voices about discomfort as it is experienced in the classroom. Feminism has shown me the value of making space for peoples' voices in research; combined with my previous experiences conducting case study research, I decided against a "purely theoretical" account of teaching discomfort, opting instead for a qualitative approach. The aim of this study was to investigate students' and teachers' descriptions of discomfort in first-year writing classrooms. Janice Lauer and J. William Asher note that most empirical studies begin with a "motivating dissatisfaction" that irritates the researcher (4). As I explain in my Introduction, I was irritated by the presence of discomfort in my first-year classroom, in "absent presence" in conversations about pedagogies of struggle or other critical teaching practices, and its notable absence from our field's conversations. This motivated me to ask: what is the most effective way to formulate a richer understanding of the ways in which discomfort operates within a first-

year writing classroom setting? How can I situate this study in the lives of those who experience it instead of just theorizing discomfort?

I chose a case study approach because my aim was to ground a discussion of teaching discomfort in teachers' and students' own experiences. Merriam notes, case studies are often "employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation...the interest is in the process rather than the outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (19). Berg and Lune observe that case study research can be defined in many ways, but the common understanding of the case study is that it provides "an approach capable of examining simple or complex phenomenon, with units of analysis varying from single individuals to large corporations...to world-changing events; it entails using a variety of lines of action in its data-gathering segments and can meaningfully make use of and contribute to the application of theory" (325). Further, case studies are a preferred strategy for projects like mine that ask "how," "why," and "what" questions; where the researcher has little control over the events; when the focus is on real-time issues of consequence; when a researcher seeks to illuminate a decision or set of decisions; and when the context is inseparable from the phenomenon under study (Lancy 1993, Yin 2003).

Case study research, as with all qualitative research, is praxis: like the work teachers and students do in the composition classroom, qualitative research seeks to transform the world by making the unseen visible so that a quiet phenomenon like discomfort may be brought into the light of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 3). Case study is an appropriate approach for studying discomfort in first-year composition classrooms because this method allows for me to analyze discomfort on multiple levels. For example,

as Chapter Three highlights, many of the research participants' descriptions of discomfort pointed to the ways in which discomfort manifests on a macro-level, which in turn influences what happens pedagogically on a micro-level. A study of discomfort requires flexibility, depth, and multi-level analyses because discomfort is elusive and often difficult to capture. Case study method, which still an approach predicated upon empirical and methodological assumptions that are in tension with my study's feminist methodologies, offers my project more flexibility than other empirical methods.

Typically, there are three types of case study research: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. I see this project as a hybrid descriptive-exploratory study. Descriptive case studies have a narrative dimension I find compatible with rhetoric and composition methodology. L. Lynda Harling-Stalker notes in the *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* that, "descriptive case studies tell a story (what happened and how), but they do not pinpoint causality (why it happened)" (137). While I am ultimately responsible for making sense of the stories these participants tell, my intention for these stories is that in combining best practices of descriptive case study method and feminist rhetorical methodologies I will use this hybrid approach to do justice to my participants' experiences, while also pointing to new directions for doing empirical, feminist case study research in the humanities.

Research Questions

Propositions

Descriptive case study research designs typically include study propositions.

Propositions direct the researcher's attention to things that require acute analysis *within*

the scope of the study, and reflect important theoretical issues related to the phenomena under examination. The objectives in articulating propositions at the outset are to begin developing a theory so that one can 1) “match” this theory against extant theories and 2) enable “pattern matching,” that is, matching pieces of information from cases with or against the study’s theoretical propositions during the data analysis phase of the research study (Yin 2014). Before developing my research questions, I stated the study’s propositions in my research journal in narrative, free-writing form. The core propositions from that writing are as follows:

- “Teaching discomfort” is a system of complex, affective experiences, circular requests, and classroom dynamics.
- Much of what I know about teaching discomfort is experiential, and comes from learning how to teach writing at Great Lakes University.
- In teaching observations I conducted over the years, I observed a paradox of comfort/discomfort that leads me to believe that discomfort in the writing classroom is always there, and is also encouraged by teachers to get students to “think harder.”
- Teachers who adopt a critical pedagogical curriculum and related mode of address are more likely to cause students discomfort because that is a value that informs their work.
- Most writing classes value critical thinking, and most critical thinking requires cognitive dissonance, which in turn involves discomfort (Festinger 1957, NCTE “Habits of Mind”).

- “Pedagogies of discomfort” like the kind Megan Boler defines and advocates, resonate with the “pedagogies of struggle” that became popular during the social turn (Boler 1999, Trimbur 1994).

Yin writes that propositions are important because “how” and “why” questions “do not sufficiently point to what you should study.” Propositions help reflect important theoretical issues, and point the researcher towards the relevant evidence in the data (30).

My research propositions offer an example of tensions between my methodological approach and research design. Feminist rhetorical methodology values transparency and accountability in discussing ways a researcher’s epistemological experiences impact their research. In articulating these propositions, I saw an opportunity to account for experiences and knowledges that I had about discomfort prior to conducting the study. That way, I would have something written to keep my perspectives in check if my experiences influenced my interviews or data analysis in ways that became projective. The purpose of propositions in case study research, however, is to help the researcher articulate theoretical issues ahead of collecting data, so that when it comes time to analyze the data, one has something that points to the “relevant evidence” in the study. To my mind, I see that propositions used in the way Yin (and others) suggest ask researchers to develop a theory of what is being studied before the data is collected. The diverse methodological approaches this study enacts, however, advocate developing theory *a posteriori*. This practice dovetails with my principles because I believe *a priori* practices reify a hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant. If I have already established, based on my observations and extant scholarship, an anticipated

“pattern,” then I am already projecting that expectation onto our conversation and thus reducing the chance that I am listening closely.

Ultimately, articulating a hybrid form of propositions (investments, experiences, and feelings that I sensed might influence my data analysis *and* theoretical positions that might help focus my interpretations) helped when my first attempt at analyzing these data was distorted. Once I was made aware of these distortions, I went back and listened more carefully to my participants’ descriptions; I reanalyzed each interview and revised Chapter Three, and in returning to my original propositions (in addition to reading my readers’ comments), I could see that these statements not only pointed me where to look for “evidence” of what I already knew, but also helped me see the things in the data I truly didn’t expect. I would be remiss to deny that my experiences and knowledge of existing theory about “teaching discomfort” hadn’t already focused my attention to and away from certain patterns while crafting interview questions, during the interviews, and certainly after when transcribing them.

While Yin suggests posing research questions before propositions, I took the opposite approach. After articulating my propositions, I drafted several overarching “how,” “why,” and “what” questions based on: the study’s purpose, my experiences in the classroom, and a review of the literature on the topic.⁹ I originally established three overarching questions: (1) How does each instructor describe comfort and discomfort in

⁹ Yin notes that in general, “what” questions are exploratory in nature, though there are many overlaps between a question’s substance (e.g. What is my study about?) and its form (“who,” “what,” “where,” “why,” or “how” questions). Areas of overlap exist to the extent that it is common to pursue a particular strategy regardless of the question. The form, however, should match the research strategy. I have written one question in “what” form, though the substance of the question seeks description: “What factors contribute to an uncomfortable classroom environment?” (7). I identify my research design as primarily descriptive, but acknowledge the tendency for this study to blur boundaries between “exploration,” and “description,” primarily because there is a lack of detailed research about the phenomena of “discomfort” in the writing classroom.

the writing classroom? (2) How does each student describe comfort and discomfort in the writing classroom? (3) What are the relationships between scholarly conversations about discomfort and teachers' and students' descriptions of discomfort? I expanded the study's questions into data collection questions to guide my interviews. After the first round of interviews, I added several more (see Appendix C for complete list).

Study Design

This study uses a multiple-case design. There are three first-year writing courses at Great Lakes University: English 095 (basic writing), English 101 (college composition), and English 102 (research writing). Each course is a case. In a multiple-case design, each case is embedded within its own context. I chose a multiple-case design for several reasons. First, my study investigates teachers' and students' descriptions of discomfort in first-year composition classes. Because there are several different types of first-year writing classes at GLU, each with its own unique set of circumstances within the broader context of the First Year Writing Program, a multiple-case design was the most appropriate choice. Second, designing a multiple-case study affords several benefits over a single-case design. For example, because there are several distinct variables for each case (teacher, class size, curriculum, student population), a multiple-case design offers the opportunity to compare similarities and differences across each case. In this study, two cases shared several important themes whereas the third offered different perspectives. The third case presented what Yin describes as a "feedback loop," where a discovery is made in one case that prompts the researcher to revise the study's original propositions (59). This case challenged several of my propositions (namely my focus on

pedagogical discomfort, meaning discomfort that results from a teacher's course design), which in turn pointed to the possibility that the results of this study have broader implications for the field than originally considered. I discuss the differences between the first two and third cases in detail in Chapter Three.

Data Collection

Participant Selection

I collected data from first-year writing classes at GLU, a large urban research university located in the Midwest. For the past eight years, I have taught and researched at GLU; I chose this site for exploring descriptions of discomfort because my “motivating dissatisfaction” with teaching discomfort originated here. This choice has benefits and consequences. On the one hand, because I am familiar with the curriculum and its changes over time, I was able to draw on my experiences teaching in the program to use “tensions, conflicts, and balances” to “enable conversations,” as Royster and Kirsch advise. I am also familiar with most of the teaching staff, so teacher participants and I came to interviews with a level of shared knowledge and respect that more quickly enabled deeper conversations. My level of familiarity with the program, the context of the cases, the cases themselves, and some of the participants helped generate data that provide a greater depth of coverage of the cases. On the other, this level of familiarity might have caused teacher participants to withhold information from me if they feared I would judge them or use sensitive information against them. It is hard to know if our collegiality compromised the interviews in any way, but I feel it is important to account for the possibility. Also, because I teach at GLU (and the student participants were made

aware of this), on top of existing unequal power dynamics between researcher and participant there was the added power dynamic between teacher and student. I must also account for the possibility (likelihood?) that students' answers to research questions were impacted by these twin dynamics.

Using a purposive sampling method, a “nonprobabilistic” form “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to...select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam 1998), I first solicited teacher participants (teaching assistants and adjunct instructors) from a list of eligible first-year composition teachers during the 2012-2013 school year at GLU. After receiving multiple replies, I used two variations of purposive sampling methods, criterion and maximum variation (Patton 1990), to select the individual teachers for my study. I used the following criteria to narrow the pool from 86 eligible FYC instructors to 10:

- Participants had pedagogical philosophies similar to the researcher.
- Participants had pedagogical philosophies radically different from the researcher.
- Teaching assistants had over seven years teaching experience.¹⁰
- Participants were scheduled to teach an FYC during the Fall 2012 semester.

From this pool I selected three instructors, one from each level of first-year composition (English 095, English 101, English 102), whose experiences most closely matched these criterion. Purposeful sampling allowed me to solicit participants from a broad range of lecturers, instructors, and teaching assistants, by which I mean years of experience, demographic identifications, and teaching philosophies.

¹⁰ I wanted teachers with over seven years experience because that would include a pool that had taught at GLU during a significant leadership and curriculum change.

During the second week of classes, I solicited student participants from each teacher-participant's class using a questionnaire (Appendix C) designed for maximum variation and criterion sampling. I designed this questionnaire with feminist rhetorical methodologies in mind. I wanted to obtain a diverse sample, which meant I had to ask students to report their demographic information on the form. Empirical survey methods offer little guidance for those who wish to expand the demographic categories typically available on questionnaires. I employed a feminist rhetorical approach to self-identification in an attempt not to "drown out the poem," as Lather and Smithies write, of someone else's life. On the questionnaire I gave a description of the study, and then asked students to write in how they identify. For example, instead of offering two boxes for gender, race, or sex, I phrased the question as "Gender Identity" or "Racial Identity" and offered examples. Several students in each class asked for clarification, which turned into longer discussions with their teachers about why a researcher might want a potential participant's own description of their identities rather than making those choices for them. In one class, this conversation took up most of the class period. This made me worry about boundaries between researcher and student-participant on the one hand, but on the other I realized that these kinds of conversations with participants is a form of praxis that makes feminist research meaningful.

To address ethical concerns and questions of validity for the student sample, the questionnaires contained exclusion criteria that asked students to self-exclude from the study if they currently experience or have been diagnosed with a psychological condition, disorder, or delay (with the exception of the diagnosis "gender identity disorder" or other

gender-related diagnoses listed in the DSM IV¹¹). From the eligible pool, I then selected a total of nine undergraduate students, including three students in each of the three classes with the most diverse demographic identifications (race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability identity, and class identity), and five remained in the study long enough to collect significant data.

Interviews

Over the course of the Fall 2012 semester, I scheduled four rounds of 60-minute focused, audio-recorded interviews, and two to three rounds of hand-notated classroom observations. I designed the case to include multiple sources of evidence to (1) strengthen the construct validity and reliability of the case study evidence and (2) address a broader range of historical, attitudinal, and curricular issues for triangulation purposes (Patton 1990). Triangulating these data helped to corroborate and complicate instances of teaching discomfort in my participants' recorded reflections, curricular materials, and in classroom interactions.

All interviews were conducted in my office and lasted between 45-90 minutes. I conducted pre-interviews to get a baseline conceptualization of teachers' and students' experiences with discomfort in a writing class. I asked participants to take 30-35 minutes to respond in writing to two prompts: (1) describe a situation in which you experienced comfort¹² in a writing classroom, and (2) describe a situation in which you experienced

¹¹ The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the APA, provides the standard criteria by which a range of medical, psychiatric, and pharmaceutical professionals and agencies classify mental disorders. I feel conflicted about this decision to exclude students with mental health concerns from the study, and in future research on teaching discomfort in writing classes I would recreate this study with participants who experience or have been diagnosed with mental health issues.

¹² I included "comfort" in these baseline descriptions because I wanted a description of experience to cast against those participants described as "uncomfortable," but as the study progressed it became clear that the emphasis of this project was discomfort.

discomfort in writing classroom. The purpose of this writing was to enable me to ground subsequent open-ended questions about comfort and discomfort in each participants' unique experiences. I read each statement multiple times for emergent experiential expressions, which Kidd and Kidd describe as writing that jumps out as signifying, "what is important to the person who wrote it and how it has been lived and expressed" (9). Several themes began to emerge about how participants described "comfort" and "discomfort," and I organized the expressions into themes with the intention of sharing the themes with each participant at our next meeting.

For the interviews, I planned first to discuss participants' baseline themes, then (over the course of several interviews) ask each participant four core data collection questions¹³ in order to establish grounds for intra- and cross-case comparisons:

- How do you describe "teaching discomfort?"
- Do particular pedagogies contribute to discomfort?
- What factors, if any, contribute to an uncomfortable classroom environment?
A comfortable one?
- How do curricular materials, if at all, communicate discomfort?

My first interview was with Summer, the instructor for English 095. Before I was able to ask her questions from my list or discuss her pre-interview writing, she started talking about her irritations with aspects of the writing program that conflicted with her teaching values. I changed strategies and listened to tensions I perceived between her values and the program's. This was an important moment in the study, because I realized I had not accounted for teaching discomfort to include discomfort between teachers and programs.

¹³ See Appendix C for the full list of data collection questions.

Summer and I never got through what I had planned to discuss; instead, I quickly transcribed this first interview and added several questions about teaching goals and values. I began the subsequent teacher interviews with these new questions. During the second round of interviews, I asked students and teachers to examine their pre-interview writings and then continued with the original data collection questions. During the third and fourth rounds of interviews, in addition to asking the remaining questions, I drew from my interview notes and classroom observations as guides for subsequent semi- and unstructured interviews. I wanted the participants to speak openly about their own experiences without too much guidance from me, but also for the interview to have structure and purpose. I balanced the two by asking, “Can you give me an example?” or “How would you develop a writing program?” Challenging for me during the more conversational moments of the interviews was being mindful of sharing silence, and giving enough time for a respondent to ruminate on their response.

Data Analysis

A key goal of this descriptive and exploratory case study was to translate peoples’ descriptive experiences, empirical observations, and textual analyses into a narrative that ethically merged my own interpretive processes with my participants’ experiences. I transcribed verbatim all the interviews and imported each transcript, plus the syllabus and assignment sequence from each instructor, and my notes from classroom observations, into a cloud-based qualitative data analysis program called Dedoose. This program helped me code and categorize the large quantity of narrative text, and then create “hyperlinks” between categories, codes, and excerpts of text. This “matching” technique

allowed me to observe subtle and prominent themes from the data. Another helpful feature was the “word cloud” that was automatically generated by the computer program. As new texts were uploaded, the cloud would grow and rotate, offering a three dimensional view of the most frequently used words in the study.

There are no cookie cutter formulas for case study data analysis—most interpretive work depends on a researcher’s own style of thinking, a convincing presentation of evidence, and thoughtful and self-reflective set of interpretations and limitations (Yin 110). I used a mixture of approaches, starting by reading each transcript holistically to glean which statements and phrases stood out as particularly important, and then reading selectively for specific concepts related to the study’s propositions. Using Dedoose to address these questions, I noted when concepts recurred within and across the three cases. Once these patterns were identified, I addressed the study’s third question: What are the relationships between scholarly discussions of “pedagogies of discomfort” and teachers’ and students’ descriptions of their experiences of comfort and discomfort in the writing classroom? For this question I returned to the study’s propositions, which were derived in part from experience, but primarily from the literature on “teaching discomfort” to compare the empirically-based patterns/categories with predicted ones. I identify this question as more “exploratory,” and thus employed a modified version of what Yin describes as “explanation building”: a procedure that analyzes each case vertically and then horizontally in order to build a general explanation of similarities and/or discrepancies between patterns in the empirical categories and predicted propositions (149).

Ethical Considerations

I turn to Cheri L. Williams' article "Dealing With the Data: Ethical Issues in Case Study Research" for guidance in dealing with several ethical dilemmas that arose before, during, and after this study was conducted. Her article identifies several core areas in her own qualitative studies within which ethical conflicts arose: maintaining anonymity and acknowledging accomplishments, creating rapport with subjects, and dealing with issues of representation. I find that these are also the three areas I encountered the most trouble and will take time to discuss each separately.¹⁴

First, the Institutional Review Board's mandatory ethics training program emphasizes the importance of protecting study participants' privacy and anonymity. Each participant received and signed a consent form that stated the voluntary, confidential nature of the study. I asked participants to choose their own pseudonyms and safeguarded both electronic and paper data, but the reality is that some of the stories my participants tell about discomfort make them vulnerable not only to identification (even in a larger department, political squabbles are infrequently confidential), but also could (though is unlikely to) jeopardize their success in the department. In one of Meena's interviews, for example, her description of discomfort in the first-year writing classroom was framed by a history of student complaints about her political affiliations. During her interview, we talked about how these complaints also seemed racially motivated (Meena identifies as South-Asian and American). I told her the story she shared was rich and useful, and that it was likely I would want to excerpt it verbatim, but was concerned that the specificity of the instance she shared would likely "out" her to potential readers

¹⁴ With my study, however, participants signed a consent form that assured their confidentiality, not anonymity.

affiliated with the university. We talked about this together at length and agreed that I would send her that particular section for approval before submitting it for review.¹⁵

Second, my position as a graduate student, teacher, and student-researcher creates concerns about rapport. I was able to employ a “purposive” method to solicit teacher participants because I was familiar, if not friendly with my participant pool. I know all 86 teachers fairly well, and many have come to be my close friends. Establishing a friendly rapport with the three who I selected and who agreed to participate was not difficult because they happened to be teachers with whom I was well acquainted. This meant I had to take special care to keep my projections about their identities, their pedagogical philosophies and practices, and their teaching styles in check. To help with this tendency I kept a research journal where I reflected on each interview and identified places where I felt an imbalance of critical distance between my research questions and questions formed *in situ* based on a more intimate knowledge of their lives. Also, while the students I interviewed were not my own, I was still conscious of the power dynamics in play. As I mentioned earlier, student participants knew I was an FYC teacher and, at times, angled the conversations towards their own concerns about passing or failing their respective course. At times I also crossed boundaries by offering advice about their work, which I noted in my research journal.

Third, all reflective qualitative research must grapple with issues of representation, especially when unequal access to power coalesces around issues of race and gender. There are always uneven dynamics between the researcher, who is imbued

¹⁵ This never happened, in part because when I contacted this participant she indicated she did not care if I used that part of the interview; I think we failed to connect because of our busy schedules. I did not feel comfortable including the depth of our conversation about her experiences in the writing program, so I cut the majority of that portion of the interview.

(culturally and institutionally) with the authority to analyze another person's life world, and research participants. This dynamic is amplified in my work, too, by the fact that more than half my participants are students. My questions are inherently intrusive, and thus, given the impossibility of presenting through language another person's descriptions or experiences as pure, unmediated "truth," must be acknowledged as one of the positive failings of all qualitative research. I will never "get it right," as it were because my participant's words, the political, social, and economic context of the university, the literature on "teaching discomfort" must churn through my interpretative filter, which is contaminated by my own experiences.

Finally, to reiterate problems I mentioned earlier in this chapter about propositions and "reading selectively" for concepts related to them, this study has shortcomings in its design and analysis related to my tendency to ask leading questions during interviews and make projective analyses of the data collected. These shortcomings certainly influenced the first draft of my analyses and findings, but because I was made aware of them, I revised my method of analysis. I reanalyzed all the interviews, and created new themes by reading closely the words that were actually in the transcripts. I ignored some of the theoretical concepts I first attempted to "match" to my participants coded themes and worked to stay open and attentive to their voices, as feminist methodologists suggest. In revising my initial understanding of descriptions of discomfort, I found more tensions than I had before—instead of lining these tensions up, I use them to ask further questions about the scope of teaching discomfort beyond "pedagogies of discomfort" or "conflict pedagogies" in composition studies. Throughout the research process, researchers risk projecting their own desire for things to line up and

confirm their own “motivating dissatisfactions.” Making these failings visible—addressing stuck spaces and knitting failure into the research process—transforms impossible sites into praxis.

CHAPTER THREE: ‘ELEPHANTS IN THE CLASSROOM’: TEACHERS’ AND STUDENTS’ DESCRIPTIONS OF ‘TEACHING DISCOMFORT’

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I discussed the rationale for choosing case study methods to explore teaching discomfort in composition classrooms. Case study research affords an opportunity to engage an in-depth exploration of an under-researched social phenomenon by offering real-world perspectives. So too, case study research emphasizes the interconnected nature of context and social phenomenon, as participants’ descriptions of “teaching discomfort” in their first-year classrooms are inextricable from their contexts. Many scholars have critiqued case study research for its inability to generalize to broader populations, but I do not find this to be a limitation. In the Introduction to this chapter, I offer a brief contextualization of my research site, the first-year writing program, and my research participants.

My research site, the first-year writing program at GLU, has a long history of resisting formalistic or “current-traditional” style curricula. I am unable detail all the aspects of GLU’s writing program here, but it is important to understand that for at least the past four decades, faculty, graduate students, and instructional staff have implemented curricula, pedagogies, and assessment methods that many would consider “progressive.” Around 1998, the First-Year Writing Program created new goals to coincide with the “Four Outcomes for First-Year Writing” adopted by the CWPA. These goals included: 1) rhetorical knowledge and awareness; 2) writing, reading, critical thinking connections; 3) writing processes and strategies; 4) academic writing practices. In addition, the program published its first *Student Guide to First-Year Writing* in order to communicate the

program's goals to students ("A Brief Introduction to the First-Year Writing Program"). I started teaching at GLU in 2006. The philosophy of the program at the time espoused an "apprenticeship model" that emphasized recursive writing about difficult academic texts. The writing program administration (WPA) articulated to students that the program believed critical reading, thinking, and writing activities students engaged in first-year composition courses at GLU would be useful in creating informed citizens, able to make wise choices about public policy ("Supplement" to *A Student's Guide* 2006-2007). Several years later, under the direction of a new coordinator, the program maintained its dedication to critical thinking, reading, and writing, and currently frames its approach to writing as "a social, even ethical activity" because writing creates relationships with other people ("English 095/101/102"). Helping students become more responsible citizens and establishing more ethical relationships with audiences through critical writing practices are primary goals of GLU's writing program.

Over the past thirteen years, the program has used two kinds of readers for English 101: *Ways of Reading*, an anthology comprised of complex texts on diverse topics: feminism (Anzaldúa, Bordo, Walker), race and autobiography (Baldwin, Rodriguez, Walker), and language diversity (Anzaldúa, Rodriguez), and the *First-Year Composition Reader* (FYCR), which is an anthology of texts chosen by the WPA with input from the general teaching staff, and customized for the GLU first-year composition program. The readings in the FYCR are multimodal, change every two years, and cover a range of registers and topics. Examples from the 2011-2013 FYCR include Ruth Behar's "Juban América," Maira Kalman's *New York Times* photo editorial "Back to the Land," Josh Neufeld's comic "A.D. After the Deluge," and Sara Stein's "The '1984' Macintosh

Ad.” The texts GLU’s writing program asks students to read and engage critically challenge students on multiple levels.

Combined with a program-wide pedagogical emphasis on class conversations, reflexivity, and teacher de-centering, these curricular and pedagogical practices inevitably produce student discomfort, but at GLU (and in the field in general), the tendency in rhetoric and composition studies is to devalue the emotional labor involved in teaching writing. While I believe that writing is inherently uncomfortable, I also believe that GLU’s program, in particular, engenders teaching discomfort as critical inquiry. Sharing that this program is rooted in curricular and pedagogical practices that value going beyond the mere instrumentality of writing instruction situates this study on discomfort within a program that, in general, values discomfort as a transformational tool. Writing programs across the U.S. are incredibly diverse, and it is very difficult to generalize from one to another. While my discussion of teaching discomfort arises from these local contexts, this project also addresses larger matters of considering the unintended consequences of discomfort in critical composition pedagogies. I will address the broader questions this study raises for composition studies in Chapter Four.

This chapter incorporates the voices of my research participants, the students and teachers I interviewed. I hope to gain a fuller understanding of the conscious and unconscious ways discomfort intersects with teaching critical reading, writing, and thinking practices in first-year writing, and I do so with the understanding that macro-level values inform micro-level practices and vice versa. My findings are organized thematically and by case. The first two cases presented in this chapter—English 095 and English 101—represent approaches to teaching writing that can be categorized as

“discomfort as critical inquiry.” The dominant theme from the teachers’ perspectives I call, “the paradox of teaching discomfort” and from the students’ perspectives, “the elephant in the classroom” and “a change of mind, not of heart.”

The third case, English 102, is different in that the teacher consciously avoided “discomfort as critical inquiry.” Dominant themes presented in this center on “awareness of identity conflicts” and from the students’ perspectives, on the “kairotic” nature of teaching discomfort. This case speaks to “teaching discomfort” as a reciprocal, affective phenomenon that informs and disrupts classroom dynamics between men, in particular. While the first two cases speak to my project’s primary concern: discomfort as critical inquiry, the third case presents useful information that suggests “teaching discomfort” is a widespread concern for the field at large, not just for programs or teachers that (consciously or unconsciously) employ discomfort to shift students’ thinking about the world. Case Three points to the need for greater awareness of ways discomfort impacts interpersonal and group dynamics in negative ways. In all three cases, no teacher seemed conscious of the emotional aspects of discomfort, even though discomfort significantly impacted all three of the classroom’s dynamics. These cases suggest that discomfort is the elephant in the room—or perhaps in the system. I want to emphasize that there is considerable “bleed” between the participants’ narratives within and between cases that made categorizing themes difficult. Ultimately, I see each case as useful in helping us pull discomfort from the shadows and recognize and address its ubiquitous influence in the classroom.

Case One: English 095

Participant Overview: Summer

English 095 (Fundamentals of Composition) is a three-credit, basic writing course. Students who test into English 095 are asked to build on their previous experiences reading and writing and develop new skills by completing a sequence of critical reading and writing assignments in relation to a set of goals and outcomes developed by the English 095 Coordinator and WPA. The basic writing instructor I interviewed for this study, Summer, is also the English 095 Coordinator—she developed the common reading and writing sequence that new instructors use. Veteran instructors are asked to use one course text in common with the standard sequence, and are then encouraged to develop a sequence that moves students towards common goals in ways the veteran teachers sees fit. Summer experienced conflict with the WPA when they, in her opinion, unilaterally made changes to the sequence that were not in line with her teaching values. This conflict frames the first interview exclusively.

Summer and I met four times over the course of the Fall 2012 semester: early October, late October, mid-November, and early December. Prior to the first interview, each participant was asked to come to my office and respond in writing to questions asking them to describe an experience with discomfort and an experience with comfort in a writing classroom. The purpose of asking participants these questions before our interviews began was so I had baseline descriptions of discomfort and comfort written in the participants' own words. My intention with Summer's first interview was to have her reflect on her statements and respond to the first interview question: "Please describe what "teaching discomfort" means to you." However, the first interview didn't go as

planned. When I started chatting casually with her to break the ice, she immediately shared some of her frustrations with the WPA. What seemed to emerge was a manifestation of discomfort I had not anticipated in advance: dissonance between the common programmatic curricula and modes of assessment and Summer's own goals and values for her students. This first interview made me realize I had taken for granted that, in a large first-year composition program such as the one at GLU, clashes between the program's goals and values for students might discomfit individual instructors. Summer's reaction to the program prompted me to adjust my research questions so that I could assess each teacher's own goals and values for their students at the beginning of subsequent interviews.

Between the first and second interviews I observed Summer's class. During this class, Summer told her students that they're going to do an activity called "the fishbowl." The exercise is designed to help students work through a task with a small group, while a larger group observes and notes the small group's process. Summer asked a small group of students to sit in a close circle in the middle of a larger group of students and discuss the course text ("Student's Right to Their Own Language"). This exercise is uncomfortable for students at first because it is new; it puts the "inside group" in the spotlight, and creates a feeling of vulnerability. Eventually, though, the "inside group" gets involved with collaboratively making meaning of the text and becomes less aware that the "outside group" is taking notes on their process. About halfway through the class, Summer asked the two groups to switch roles. In my notes I observe that one or two students of color attempted to bring up the racial aspects of language diversity, but that the white students (one male and one female) ignored questions of race and attempted to

equalize the group experience by discussing “textspeak,” or argue for English-only education in the U.S. I use notes from my observations to compliment my research question probing teachers’ and students’ descriptions of discomfort in their writing classroom relative to the curriculum.

The first and second interviews with Summer yielded rich and contradictory information about her own teaching goals and values and her definition of “teaching discomfort.” During subsequent interviews, I found we circled some of the same themes in the first interview (namely her frustration with the WPA), and spent much time discussing the details of her students’ interpersonal conflicts and resistances to staying on task and coming prepared. The details of these interviews were less rich, though they did indicate that part of Summer’s experience with discomfort is related to gaps between her expectations for her students and her students’ behavior in class. Notes from my second and third classroom observations focus on the tensions that form and resolve related to her students’ willingness to participate in classroom discussions. While I found that these tensions were “uncomfortable” dynamics that were co-created between teacher, student, and curriculum, these instances were less noteworthy—to my mind they were the “normal” kinds of uncomfortable dynamics that attend most teaching scenes.

Theme: The Paradox of Discomfort as Critical Inquiry (Teacher’s Perspective)

Summer’s first interview prompted me to seek a new framework for understanding my participants’ narratives as interconnected to mid-level and larger systems around teaching composition. I began our interview by asking how things were going. She replied:

Summer: I think it's going pretty well. It's...I think teaching 095 is sometimes kind of difficult because, whoops....should I have said that?

Andrew: *You can...*

Summer: Because people either within the administration or within maybe rhetoric and composition studies...somehow there is this discussion about students in this class that's like, well, this population of students...it's a kind of like, traditionally in basic writing it's a lot of poor kids, Black, Hispanic, other people of color. Um, but this semester there was an explosion of students enrollment in 095, but not across the university. So there's like 160ish students...so with these higher numbers, there's also maybe some changing demographics...their families aren't even poor or even working-class. So I guess one of the things I've been kind of fighting against is the kind of traditional positioning of students

Summer explained that in the past, people have made assumptions about basic writing students based on race, class, and level of preparation. Summer saw that in the semester previous to Fall 2012, the coordinator chose texts by Malcolm X and texts about Native American code talkers. In the standard assignment sequence, these assignments asked students how they might relate to these texts on a personal level. Summer believes this makes assumptions that students can relate to Malcolm X or Native American code talkers, and evinces that administration is "entrenched" in a point of view she describes as "open admissions from the 80s" style theory. Her teaching goals are different than what she perceives as the program's goals for students who place into basic writing.

Summer tells me:

I guess my goal especially in this class is really more, it's like old school traditional in a kind of way. I just want students to become better readers, writers, and thinkers. And if they take, ok wait. So, I have students focus on things like instead of just a surface level comprehension, like digging in more deeply, like we all do, so really helping encourage students to craft their own interpretations and that sort of thing. I guess if students take this kind of act of questioning the texts they read and write, if they take that and apply it to their own lives and positions

and this kind of crazy country, then I think that's great. But that's not my ultimate goal...it's kind of like, gravy.

Summer believes the program values having “certain kinds of students” read texts they can relate to (historically, these have been students of color reading texts about racism, power, and difference), but is unsatisfied by what she feels is an inattention to shifting demographics in English 095. By saying her goal is “like old school traditional” because she just wants students to become better readers, writers, and thinkers, she is positioning a more “traditional” approach against one where students are encouraged to apply complex themes of difference and diversity to their own lives. Her ultimate goal is to have students “di[g] in more deeply,” but not necessarily to “apply [acts of questioning] to their own lives.” The latter is just gravy.

When I ask Summer to clarify what “better” means to her (in terms of wanting students to be better readers, writers, and thinkers) she explains:

I guess like audience awareness and focusing on clarity—that's really big for me. I know it's not, like, clarity and coherence. I know these can be contentious terms, and organization and I guess I mean more in a way that a student is able to communicate their ideas...I mean, they are already doing this, so how are the ways I am asking them to write different from other experiences they've had or in different classes? And the curriculum which I wasn't able to do on my own, like the first section [the Composition Director] wrote and shows the text and it doesn't fit in with everything else, which is really very frustrating, and students can see that disconnect, so that's tough. I mean, but everything else is about language difference and writing. So what I am asking students to do in their writing is...I guess, in some ways, kind of like a critical pedagogy stance, like how are students being positioned by the policies at the university, or by, you know, other kinds of things in their lives...So I think what I am asking students to do, regardless of their level, is to take kind of a basic, well not basic, but an initial understanding of a text and think about it in a deeper way.

On the one hand, it seems as if Summer's personal goals for students are more "traditional," or "old school," at least in contrast to assigning racialized texts and asking students to apply those themes to their own lives. On the other, Summer also asks students to "think about, in some ways, kind of like a critical pedagogy stance, like how are students being positioned by the policies at the university or by other things in their lives." This goal appears to contradict her earlier statement that getting students to apply "the questioning of texts" to their own lives as just "gravy."

Here is an instance where considering relationships between a teachers' values and their social and ideological surroundings help make sense of Summer's conflicted statements. A new question arises for me during our interview: What are the consequences when a programs' and a teacher's values conflict? During our final interview, Summer returns to her conflict with the WPA and explains more plainly that the standard English 095 sequence she wrote the summer prior to the Fall 2012 semester was not approved by the Director and Assistant Director, and thus unilaterally rewritten without her consent. This information, in retrospect, helps me understand that this passage: "the curriculum I wasn't able to do on my own," conflicts with the one put in place by the Director. The first part of this sequence was rewritten to include Lynda Barry's comic text, "Common Scents," which addresses issues of ethnic difference by discussing how different houses have different smells. Summer followed the rewritten sequence for the first four weeks before switching back to her original sequence—one where, as she says above, "everything is about language difference."

After having students engage the Barry text for four weeks, Summer assigned a series of texts that focused on macro-level approaches to language difference and

diversity—that is to say, questions of what American colleges should do about “language habits” students from diverse sociocultural background bring with them to the college writing classroom: the 1974 NCTE statement “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language” (SRTOL); a 2010 blog article response to the 1974 statement by Suresh Canagarajah calling for an updated SRTOL; and a 2011 article titled “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.” The combination of Summer’s disagreement with the department’s approach to “difference,” her casting of her own values as “old school traditional,” and the statement that “everything is about language difference” in relation to her complicated “critical pedagogy stance,” made me wonder how she would treat themes of power, identity, and privilege that underpin the texts she assigned. Would it be possible to focus solely on “language difference and writing” without students feeling drawn into conversations about race and “standard English?”

During the next interview with Summer, I asked her to describe what “teaching discomfort” means to her. Her description of “teaching discomfort” is an example of one of the two meanings of the phrase. In her words, the instructor is the one “encouraging” students to dig in to their own discomfort—to “pull out” their disagreements with the text and understand why they’re having that response:

I think part of it could be...as an instructor really encouraging or, let’s say like encouraging students to maybe dig in to whatever does make them uncomfortable, or that they’re a little bit uneasy about somehow. I think maybe they disagree with something that we’re reading, so really to kind of encourage that in some ways—to pull it out, to understand why they’re having that response. And confronting things not just like, ‘okay, everyone is entitled to their own ideas or whatever,’ but really trying to...so in my class we’re talking about language differences, and students who are multilingual, and a couple of students who are African-American and speak in black vernacular and write in it, so we talk about it. We don’t pretend that they are white, so I guess that kind of thing. Like maybe bringing up acknowledging differences and maybe not.

Summer mentions in the first part of her description of teaching discomfort several things teachers “might do.” A teacher could encourage students to “dig in to whatever makes [students] uncomfortable or uneasy.” To “pull it out...to confront things.” The first part of her description of discomfort lines up with her personal goals for students to “dig in” more deeply to form their own interpretations. So far, however, these descriptions are hypothetical. The second part of her description is grounded in her own practices. She interrupts herself to offer an example from her class. She mentions again that the texts she assigned ask students to engage a conversation about Black Vernacular English, multilingual Englishes, and language differences. “We don’t pretend that they are white,” she says, “Like maybe bringing up acknowledging differences and maybe not.” The sudden ambivalence of “maybe not” clashes with more insistent words like “digging in,” “pushing,” and “pulling out.” The sense I get from Summer’s description is that in theory, “teaching discomfort” is useful at getting under the surface of things, but in practice maybe we do it, and maybe not. As I will discuss further in the chapter, Summer’s students’ descriptions of discomfort expose a gap between “teaching discomfort” in theory and in practice.

What Summer’s description of “teaching discomfort” also highlights is the emotional work we tacitly require students to perform under the pretense of wanting them to “become better writers, readers, and thinkers.” If we must “pull” out or on students’ disagreements with the texts we assign in order to achieve our teaching goals, then we have to prepare teachers and students for the possibility of encountering sophisticated defense systems. We don’t, however, teach teachers how to work with students’ complex emotional lives when we stir the pot, as it were, which perhaps without being aware of it

can make teachers hesitant to actually “dig deeper” with students to investigate the themes that matter in these texts.

Summer tells me she values teaching discomfort more because it “really encourages students to start with the places that are confusing or unsettling and pushing that and trying to understand why, and I think that’s because it’s something more visible...more difficult.” In our third interview I asked Summer why she chose the texts she did, and whether she believed those materials communicated discomfort. She told me she was aware that they addressed uncomfortable topics and that this design was somewhat intentional:

Andrew: Do your texts about language difference communicate discomfort?

Summer: Yes

Andrew: Was that intentional?

Summer: Yes

Andrew: Do you think that these texts will cause students discomfort?

Summer: Probably

Andrew: Can you describe the role of discomfort in your sequence compared to the sequence you described earlier—the one where the coordinator assigned Malcolm X and such?

Summer: One thing I can say off the bat is that with my sequence, it was somewhat intentional, especially because I knew from teaching this class before that I would have black, Hispanic, Hmong, and multilingual speakers, other speakers, and talking about language difference and academic positioning in this basic writing class, like, I was very aware of all of those things. But in the previous sequence, I kind of hinted at it, but I don’t think it was necessarily intentional, it was more like an entry into the text, like ‘how can you relate to this?’ and ‘What are your experiences like?’ and in this weird, more controlled way or more purposeful way than what I saw in the spring sequence.

While I understand Summer’s suspicion of well-intentioned teachers and programs working toward critical inquiry by assuming one knows what a student can or cannot

relate to, I see Summer's rationale behind choosing texts about language diversity doing similar things. She claims she knew she would have a diverse class, and thus chose texts about linguistic diversity she assumed would be more appropriate for a class comprised of diverse language users. I don't understand, however, how Summer could engage these texts without encouraging students to personalize at least some of the identity issues that attend questions of language diversity.

Summer's descriptions of "teaching discomfort" in combination with her selection of course texts create a paradox. By using the term "paradox," I mean to highlight several tensions: between making students comfortable enough to engage in the class while simultaneously "pushing" and "pulling" them out of their comfort zones, choosing texts that address "linguistic diversity" and hedging the extent to which one engages the racialized power dynamics inherent in these conversations, and having a bit of power and control over one's teaching situation and having that taken away by a higher authority. When Summer's descriptions seem a bit unclear or conflicted, I believe they are so because there are tensions and dissonances at play—dissonances that limit the extent to which Summer *really* pushes her students' comfort levels. I will put this observation in relation to another teacher's descriptions and return to these thoughts in a bit. For now, I want to note that at the conclusion of Summer's interviews questions remain: it is clear she sees teaching discomfort as "pushing," "digging," "uncovering uncomfortable places," and "confronting" stock answers to difficult questions, but how, exactly, does she "push" her students to achieve the uncomfortable depths she values in getting students to think, read, and write more critically? In the descriptions that follow,

we see that her students' descriptions of discomfort highlight the "paradox of teaching discomfort" in their first-year basic writing class.

Theme: Touchy Subjects and 'The Elephant in the Classroom' (Students' Perspectives)

Interviews with two of Summer's students, Avi and Sebastian, reveal new dimensions to the paradox of teaching discomfort. Both Avi and Sebastian in their descriptions of discomfort in their writing class indicated a lack of "pushing" or "pulling" on Summer's part when it came to difficult topics like race. At the same time, however, the students described being sick of always talking about race, and attributed the lack of depth in class conversations about "language difference" to people being tired of talking about the same thing over and over again. One student described the topic of race in their class discussions as "the elephant in the classroom," which seems very much related to Summer's ambivalent statement that "maybe we acknowledge [racial] difference and maybe not." The metaphor "elephant in the classroom" is a powerful way to think about discomfort; it's very much present in the room, yet much energy is spent not seeing it. In Deborah Britzman's words, I could describe this educational phenomenon as "a passion for ignorance," which she describes as tensions between wanting to learn (or in Summer's case, unlearn) and wanting not to know (57).

My second interview protocol question asked students to describe how their curricular materials communicated discomfort. At first, both Sebastian and Avi painted the course materials as producing rosy, fun-filled conversations. During my first classroom observation, however, I noticed (and sensed) a bit of tension roiling just beneath the surface of their conversation about the 1974 Resolution on "Students' Right

to Their Own Language” (SRTOL).¹⁶ Given the centrality of this observation to the theme, I will spend considerable time explicating the exercise. To help facilitate the day’s discussion about SRTOL, Summer introduced her students to “the fishbowl” exercise. When students are in “the fishbowl,” they ask questions and offer interpretations and opinions related to the topic (in this instance, students were tasked with asking questions about SRTOL). Students outside the fishbowl know not to participate, but rather to listen carefully to the conversation and take notes on process. This exercise is one example of how Summer helps students create a classroom community where they listen to each other and take more of an active role in their own learning. In a later interview, Summer tells me she chose “the fishbowl” because her students complained that not everyone was participating equally.

Before the process begins, Summer asks if all the students have read the text. One student, a female student of color, says she hasn’t; Summer assigns her the role of fishbowl-facilitator so that she may still participate. I noted in my journal that, “I might have told this student to go home, but now she has a role and can be a part of the class even though she did not do the assignment. Summer’s relaxed attitude is not shaming—it opened space for this student to succeed in her own way” (Oct. 3, 2012). The first fishbowl group is comprised of two white men and four women of color; I take note of the demographic make-up of the group because I am worried that the two white men, though outnumbered, might dominate the conversation.

¹⁶ The 1974 SRTOL offers a resolution on language affirming students’ rights to use the dialects that help retain connections to culture, and maintain identity and style. The statement was formed during a period where teachers struggled to respond to the varieties of English that did not conform to the standards upheld by most educational institutions.

One white, male student asks: “Do you think there should be a standard English?”

The group wrestles with the question; one of the women of color asks if a “standard English” even exists. Another woman of color notes that race can be involved, and that you can tell who has been here longer based on their writing. One of the white males starts to dominate the conversation, stating “I’ll ask the questions,” and the facilitator takes a secondary role. The remainder of the conversation is focused on a dialogue between the two white men. I write in my journal, “one woman of color is participating, but she is being talked over.” The white men angle the questions towards “textspeak,”¹⁷ asking whether this new language might become a viable one to help them get a job in the future. The questions about race and “proper” or “standard” English were a bit derailed.

Summer rotates the group during the conversation about the future of “textspeak.”

The new group consists of one man of color, two white men, two white women, and the original facilitator. The group picks up the old thread, but one white woman mentions that she believes a unified language is good because we do need a standard language—I note that the conversation has shifted from one based on the text, to a meta-conversation about “standard English.” The facilitator then asks, “How does the translingual approach challenge writing programs?” The same white woman who commented previously notes that there should be a “common ground” language because it helps people sound “educated.” A white man agrees and notes that there should be a definition of “standard

¹⁷ My use of the term in this chapter originates in students’ usage in their class discussion. I Googled the term and found that “Textspeak,” as it is defined by “urban” online dictionaries, Wikipedia, and Dictionary.com, is “a form of written language used in text messages and other digital communications, characterized by many abbreviations and typically not following standard grammar, spelling, and style” (“Textspeak”).

English” that everyone should learn. At this point, everyone has agreed there should be a “standard English.” The conversation shifts back to business and “texting language,” and the facilitator asks: what are the differences between working class or people who are not as educated in English, or who don’t have a college degree, and people who are “educated”? I noted in my journal that this question seems to stump the group. The white woman who originally made a connection between being educated and having a common ground language notes that “people who aren’t educated need to find that common ground—it’s their responsibility.” My perception of the fishbowl exercise informed the questions I asked Avi and Sebastian in the next interview. I was no longer so sure that the class was as cozy as they had made it out to be. Issues of race and socioeconomic status were raised twice, but each time the conversation somehow reverted to “textspeak” or business language.

Participant Overview: Avi

Avi is an 18-year old, white, Jewish, middle-class identified freshman. While Avi and I scheduled four interviews, he only attended two (once in early October, and the other in late October—after my first class observation). During the first interview, we spent considerable time going over his baseline descriptions of discomfort—most of which included articulations of anger, vulnerability, and resistance to being told what to do. He was surprised when I pointed out these themes, but he agreed that, “writing made him so mad sometimes that he just wanted to punch something.” During this first interview, I asked Avi to define “teaching discomfort,” to which he responded “Like when you feel like you don’t want to do something and you just sit there and waste your time in class.” During our second interview I went through my research questions very

quickly and he gave fairly perfunctory answers. The following section describes our second interview, which took place after the “fishbowl” exercise. During this interview, I decided to push Avi using some of my observations from the class observation.

In our second interview, I pressed Avi a bit more about the fishbowl exercise. Up until then, when asked whether any of the texts or classroom conversations were uncomfortable, he didn’t have much to say. I asked him what he thought about the exercise, and he said that at first he felt uncomfortable—like all eyes were on him, but once people got talking everyone felt more open and more comfortable with each other. Avi recalled his memory of the conversation, noting, “we talked about the language...different translingual language. We were just asking each other questions...we were all agreeing or disagreeing with each other.”

Andrew: Okay. Do you remember addressing issues of race at all in your small group?

Avi: I do remember...But I don’t want to...(mumbling). I don’t really know. Really, I just remember us talking about race...

Andrew: Do you feel like it was brought up and fully engaged?

Avi: I don’t...I want to say it wasn’t fully engaged, because we could go into more depth, but I think it was engaged, like a certain amount.

Having been present during the conversation, I knew the class had barely discussed the questions brought up by the two female students of color. Every time the issue was raised, the group took the discussion to a more comfortable place—discussing “textspeak” as a translingual approach that might somehow be lucrative for the business world.

Andrew: Why do you think that you didn’t go into the full...

Avi: (Interrupting) Because we talk about racism a lot in the class lately, and maybe it's time for a new subject?

Andrew: And when you talked about racism, how have you talked about it?

Avi: We've talked about like through the stories and like how people...like how people view one another and stuff like writing wise, color wise, because like Lou Barry [sic] comments on you know, smell and stuff, and ethnicity.

Andrew: Right, because you are talking about...I think...I'm trying to remember...I have it in my notes but...the facilitator, I don't know what her name is...

Avi: Yeah

Andrew: She mentioned something about standard English and people who haven't had the opportunity to learn it, and she mentioned lower class, and she might have said African-American people, but I don't remember...

Avi: I don't recall.

His comment about how the class had talked a lot about racism in the class lately, but couldn't exactly remember the details seems in line with ways discomfort has been discussed so far in this study—like a shadow you catch out of the corner of your eye, but evades your direct glance.

Wanting to know more about his perception of the course texts relative to his comment that the class had talked a lot about racism, I asked for his opinion on why his teacher chose the texts she did. He replied, “there is a reason, but I don't know it.” I pushed him a bit to speculate. Avi was hesitant to offer an answer when he didn't know the reason, but identified that Linda Barry wanted to communicate that racism was a central message in her text. Probing further, I asked Avi what would happen if there were students in his class with strong opinions about racism. I asked him what would happen

to a student who grew up in a family whose values included racism and anti-Semitism, and then had to read these texts as part of a required course:

Avi: Maybe they would refuse to read it? Or they would refuse to discuss about it?

Andrew: *Do you think that would hurt their grade?*

Avi: It would? But then again they have a right to say no, and they can talk to the teacher, and you know, don't feel comfortable reading the story because of what I grew up and believe, I am sure the teacher would assign something else.

Andrew: *But what if they didn't... What if they said...*

Avi: (Interrupting) then either they would have to do the assignment or drop the class, take an F.

Andrew: *Do you think there is a kind of unspoken request for students to think about their deeply held beliefs and assumptions about the world and question them?*

Avi: Um...yeah. I mean, sometimes people are scared to question themselves, you know, like what if I feel this when I get made fun of a lot.

In reviewing this particular passage later, I wondered why I had asked Avi these questions. I felt I had been too leading, which prompted me to ask myself: "Where is the line between interviewer and teacher?" To be quite honest, during our interviews I felt Avi was giving "unproductive" answers to my questions. I believe I wanted to "push" Avi to give me "better" responses, and thus chose an example (anti-Semitism) I suspected would draw out more complexity in the interview. I valued his insights about "people being scared to question themselves," and found his personalization (conscious or not) to be striking. What this passage represents, though, is my particular form of "teaching discomfort;" I leveraged his values and cast them against something I knew would

prompt cognitive dissonance—having one’s values evaluated by your teacher—which was *my* projection of ethical problems with teaching discomfort in writing classrooms.

But as Avi also points out, “people are scared to question themselves” precisely because there is so much at stake. I followed up with his observation, asking him, “*Do you think students who are racist or anti-Semitic should change their minds about those beliefs?*” He replied that they shouldn’t be taking a class if it’s going to be like that because it’s their choice, and it’s what they think and feel. I pointed out to him that a course like this one (English 095) is required to continue on in one’s degree.

Avi: Yeah, so maybe that’s something they should just stick with. I mean, it’s not going to last forever. They can go back to their beliefs after class, or they can still have their opinions and stuff like that.

Andrew: *What do you think motivates students to change their mind about something like that?*

My question was met with a long pause. I had pushed too much and knew it. Avi became agitated, looking around and avoiding the rest of my questions. My (problematic) pushing to think more critically about the questions I was asking “crossed the line” between, in Summer’s words, “encouraging students to dig in to what makes them uncomfortable” and triggering some form of defensive reaction that shut him down. Avi asked me if the interview was over yet. We still had twenty minutes to go, but I clicked off the recorder and thanked him for his time. Although we had two more scheduled interviews, I never saw him again.

Participant Overview: Sebastian

Sebastian is a 23 year-old middle-class, Black, male, heterosexual-identified sophomore. We met four times during the Fall 2012 semester (mid-October, early November, late November, early December). In the first interview, I asked Sebastian to define “teaching discomfort,” which he described as “doing or feeling weird about a certain aspect of what you are doing, just you don’t feel real secure that you know how to do it right properly.” We talked a bit about some of the themes that I saw in his baseline descriptions of discomfort: vulnerability and anxiety about peer perception of his writing skill level. Throughout the interview he situated his understanding of discomfort as a fear that his peers would judge him “harshly” based on “that my writing is bad and grammar and my bad spelling is bad.” I felt his worries were important, but became concerned during our second interview when his responses to my questions about more global experiences with discomfort were mostly about his individual anxieties. Sebastian offered quick, ambivalent answers to questions I asked about how (if at all) he experienced discomfort from experiences in the classroom, course materials, or his teacher. Towards the end of the second interview, however, his answers opened up when I asked if anything he had heard or read in his writing class this semester had changed his mind about anything. He answered that he and a classmate disagreed about one of the main themes in Lynda Barry’s “Common Scents.” Sebastian said he thought the piece was more about bullying and his peer thought it was more about race, but noted that they ultimately agreed it was probably about both. I recalled this “disagreement,” as it had occurred during the fishbowl exercise, but was unable to follow up in the moment due to lack of time.

During our third interview, Sebastian actually brought up the fishbowl exercise as an example of class exercises that motivated him to want to learn more about a topic. As with Avi, I mentioned to Sebastian that I had witnessed the facilitator trying to bring up race during the fishbowl, but that people seemed to want to talk more about “textspeak.” I wanted to know what he had observed:

Sebastian: Right, it was Brittany

Andrew: *Okay. She asked some interesting questions, but what I observed was that when you were talking about...I think you were talking about [SRTOL] and translingual approaches to writing or whatever and she brought up on several occasions issue of race.*

Sebastian: Um, we talked about it a little in the group meeting, but I think it was just a touchy subject that nobody that nobody really wanted to get into.

Andrew: *Seems like the focus...it's a big part of it, if you have two or three readings...and I also understand you guys watched a video clip, too, right?*

Sebastian: Yeah, I think it was John Stewart, yeah, about Obama and race, and I was like, “wow,” I knew it was funny, but I just can't remember it.

Andrew: *So it seems like a big focus of your class in about race, but why don't people want to talk about it?*

Sebastian: I don't know, it was weird because at first we read the comic book “Common Scents,” and it actually deal with race a little bit, so I don't know why some people just didn't want to talk about it, maybe it's just too touchy of a subject to ask, people don't really want to get involved.

Sebastian twice mentioned that he thought maybe the subject of race was too “touchy.” During this point in our interview in particular, I tried to keep close tabs on the ways in which I discussed race with him; I wanted to give him the impression that I was a trustworthy white man—someone who was sensitive to the power dynamics between us as teacher/student, researcher/research participant, and as white/black men. I felt very

conscious of the fact that I intended to use probing questions with Sebastian as I had with Avi, to get at the “touchiness” Sebastian had named in his class dynamics.

Andrew: Do you think it's important for people to talk about these things in your texts, like for example, African-American Vernacular English?

Sebastian: We talked about it for a little bit.

Andrew: Did you sense any discomfort in the room when you talked about that?

Sebastian: Um, some people didn't want to mention it; we only talked about it for like a second about why that's the type of way. Like that and Spanish and German and Russian, and it was just like a different way of saying words; it's another way of talking.

I am very conscious of the fact that I am pushing the issue of African-American Vernacular English as a primary part of SRTOL with Sebastian because he is a Black-identified man. One of the primary reasons SRTOL is often assigned to students in basic writing classes is because African-American students are disproportionately represented; the African-American students who live in Middletown proper, are believed to speak various dialects of AAVE, and so, well-meaning, white, liberal teachers assign SRTOL as an attempt to offer Black students a text that argues for linguistic equality, acknowledges the pervasive white supremacy in academic discourse.

In the moment, I semi-consciously angled my questions to get at what I wanted desperately to hear: that Sebastian would open up and talk about his own experiences with AAVE and how frustrating and uncomfortable the classroom was because no one would talk openly about racism. When I was analyzing his transcripts, I realized my desires produced a part of the questions themselves. But as Summer had mentioned in an early interview, the texts that have been assigned in basic writing for years have assumed

a certain kind of audience that would feel included in ways that just might counter the array of interlocking forces that discourage success for African-Americans at GLU. I was afraid to ask pointed questions about AAVE that assumed Sebastian was at least familiar with, if not himself a speaker/writer of AAVE, thus contributing to the projective assumption that all Black-identified (men in particular) speak AAVE as a primary dialect.

I mention this here because during this third interview with Sebastian, I felt he was holding back his experiences. I was confused by his somewhat disconnected, desubjectified answers. When Sebastian mentioned that the class glossed over discussions of AAVE and focused on equalizing/normalizing “language equity” issues (i.e. AAVE is just like speaking Spanish, or German, or Russian), combined with my observation that students in the “fishbowl” avoided questions about race and class, I assumed that if he trusted me then he would give me a more intimate critique of his peers’ refusal to engage with the uncomfortable stuff. I continued to probe:

Andrew: So was there any other time in the classroom that you can remember where you felt other people’s discomfort around issues of race and language?

Sebastian: Not really....but people don’t want to talk about it, but I didn’t really feel any discomfort because we have students in the room where English isn’t their first language. There are two who weren’t even born in America, so I don’t really feel discomfort when we start talking about different languages, but they—just, it was really a discomfort because they didn’t want to talk about it.

Andrew: I am curious: if it wasn’t discomfort, then what was it that made them not want to talk about it?¹⁸

¹⁸ I do not know whether I misunderstood Sebastian, or failed to “hear” what he said because of my own desires for what I wanted him to say, but during my analysis of these passages, I realized he had been pretty clear that perhaps for those whose second language is English, they feel uncomfortable talking about “race and language,” which was the original question.

Sebastian: For me, we start talking about different languages...I think I said it and I don't think you were there when we had the second fishbowl that we're talking about different languages, and I said I can't really comment on this because the only language I speak is English. There are actually three people that speak different languages and our group...I was like they more can talk more about it because they speak more than one language...so I can't really comment. I have nothing to say about it, so I think that's probably why the biggest comment on (unclear)...because maybe they personally don't know nothing about the background, so they don't really want to say nothing because they don't have nothing to put into it because I don't really know.

Andrew: *People who don't speak a second language?*

Sebastian: Yeah, people who don't speak a second language, or like the African American Black...I can't say it...

Andrew: *Vernacular?*

Sebastian: Vernacular. Maybe they don't know what that is and all that so they don't really want to say it because they don't have prior knowledge about what it is.

At this point, I was unsure how to proceed. My original question for the “fishbowl” conversation centered on querying whether these racialized/racially-avoidant conversations made anyone uncomfortable. Sebastian’s observation was that people avoided talking much about race because it was too “touchy” of a subject. Sebastian conceded that his peers didn’t want to talk about race, even though they had touched on it with both Barry’s “Common Scents” and the SRTOL, but he then slid from race into language use—the topic of a second fishbowl conversation for which I was not present. This second conversation, at least from his description sounded similar to the first—students angled the conversation back towards something more familiar, less uncomfortable. We, too, had gone from talking about race as an uncomfortable

conversation as brought about by the curricular materials, but then Sebastian directed our conversation back towards “different languages,” including AAVE, about which he had little experience, and thus not much to say.

When Sebastian included AAVE with his comment about “second languages,” I felt a pang of discomfort, realizing that I had inaccurately assumed Sebastian was, if not a full user of AAVE, then at least familiar with its conventions. Though some of my assumptions were based on ways I heard Summer describe her students during our second interview where she had mentioned she chose texts about language difference because she has “a couple of students who are African-American and speak [and write] in Black Vernacular.” It was during this comment that Summer also told me, “We don’t pretend that they are white...like maybe bringing up acknowledging differences and maybe not.” Sebastian, however, does not appear to include AAVE as distinct from “standard English,” nor does he claim any language use other than “English.” Simultaneously, however, he responds to my query about “people who don’t speak a second language” by offering “the African-American Black Vernacular” as an example. In describing why he wasn’t that uncomfortable with discussing language differences, including AAVE, in class discussions, he claimed it was because he had nothing to say—his primary language usage is English.

My assumptions here evince problematic modes of address white teachers often take towards students of color, especially Black or African-American identified students, when wanting to expose their students at a PWI (primarily white institution) to more complex thinking about race. In an English class, these conversations tend to focus on language-use and literacy. It is hard for me to generalize my tendencies as a white, male

teacher and extend these tendencies to patterns I observed in Summer's class; while I cannot lump Summer's individual tendencies as a white, female teacher in with my own, especially given that the logics behind assigning such texts in 095 are to, in part, offer readings that connect with issues more commonly faced by the people of color (POC) and English language learners (ELL) that more dominantly fill basic writing classes. The point I am trying to make here is that my questions about ways curricular materials communicate/do not communicate discomfort is influenced by a racist logic that tacitly assumes all Black, urban students use AAVE, and thus, Sebastian would be able to give me an account of his unique experience against the micro-aggressive comments his students made about race and language use—one that would evince discomfort.

I cannot divorce my assumptions from broader practices within primarily white institutions (PWI) like GLU that may prompt POC on campus to develop coping strategies for dealing with the myriad discomforts on a PWI campus, including the 095 classroom at GLU. In Fries-Britt & Griffin's 2007 article "The Black Box: How High-Achieving Blacks Resist Stereotypes About Black Americans," the authors sampled 9 high-achieving Black students at a large "State University" with a 65%-24% ratio of White to Black students on campus (not too dissimilar from GLU's demographics).¹⁹ Fries-Britt and Griffin concluded that high-achieving Black students reported significant interactions with teachers, faculty, staff, and students where their academic capabilities were questioned. The students in this study reported spending significant time in class

¹⁹ One limitation of this study is that the authors provide a conceptually thin definition of "high achieving," as limited to those enrolled in the Honors Program. While it may be difficult to generalize to those students in my study who are not, by these standards, "high-achieving," many barriers and stereotypes persist for students who are, in my opinion, high achievers—including Sebastian.

“teaching” others about “the Black experience.” Fries-Britt and Griffin note that, “the extent to which Black students manage conversations about race in the classroom can be costly...they become more vulnerable to the judgments and views of others as they freely share their own experiences” (521). Efforts to resist stereotypes from teachers and peers (also called stereotype-threat, see Steele & Aronson), comes at an emotional cost not spent by their white counterparts. In retrospect, I see my interview with Sebastian as existing within the overarching academic environment where Black students must manage stereotype-threat with whites—especially those in power. This lengthy aside is necessary to account for why Sebastian might have been hesitant to identify himself as someone who is part of a community addressed by SRTOL.

I backed off questions about race and language, and switched to asking whether he thought discomfort could be useful in the classroom. He mentioned that sometimes you have to listen to ideas that you’re uncomfortable listening to, but that these uncomfortable ideas shed new light on what you thought before, and then “what you think otherwise.” He offered an example of a student in class—the white, female student I mentioned in the fishbowl exercise who opined the values of having a common language—“Like Kimberly said, people should learn English once they get here.” I asked him if he thought her opinion might cause “useful discomfort” for the students he knew spoke second and third languages in the class, and again Sebastian said he couldn’t speak to that because his family speaks English.

Our conversation segued into times when we might be asked to change our deeply held beliefs and assumptions about things, even if uncomfortable; I asked if he had ever experienced something like that. He mentioned that his political opinions and his

mother's often clash: "we don't talk about it, like, I know what she believes and I think she has good opinions, but what I believe of all this stuff...it's just like the elephant in the room that doesn't get mentioned. We try to ignore it."

Andrew: *What big of a role does discomfort play in that elephant in the room?*

Sebastian: Um, like, it's there and you may want to say it and you might see something on TV, and you might want to comment on it, but you really don't want to comment on it because you don't want to start a whole discussion and debate about it and all.

Recognizing that "the elephant in the room" might be a useful metaphor for discomfort, I ask, "do you feel like there are any elephants in the room in your writing class?"

Sebastian: Not really. I think going to the point where you're talking about religion, I mean, not religion, race...it's maybe an elephant in the room right there that nobody really want to tiptoe around and really mention.

Andrew: *What if, and I don't know if this is the case or not, what if your teacher required you to deal with the elephant in the room together as a class?*

Sebastian: I actually think that it would be a good thing to do.

Andrew: *Yeah?*

Sebastian: Yeah, just to get everything out on the table and will probably be a more better debate than we what normally would have in our classroom than anything else.

Andrew: *Do you think your teacher [Summer] pushes you to engage with that difficult conversation as a class?*

Sebastian: Not really. But it would be interesting if she did do that.

During different interviews, I asked both Avi and Sebastian if they felt Summer ever offered her opinions, or pushed one topic over another. They both said no on several occasions. Their comments seem to contradict Summer's "hypothetical" description of

“teaching discomfort,” but not necessarily her personal example, where she gives a more ambivalent account of dealing with difference in the classroom. While Summer says part of “teaching discomfort” is that instructors confront relativistic answers to really encourage students to engage what makes them uncomfortable, her students indicate that she is less forceful in engaging “the elephant in the room.” I don’t mean to criticize Summer or her teaching, but I want to suggest that if we think of discomfort as an “elephant in the room,” then it makes sense that no one, including the teacher, wants to or is able to confront these issues head on.

If given a choice, as evinced by the “fishbowl” conversations and Sebastian’s observations, students will avoid these uncomfortable topics because they are, “too touchy.” As a program that commonly adopts politically charged texts, however, we must consider the extent to which discomfort blocks many students’ abilities to think more deeply about contentious material. These “blocks” are, in my opinion, exacerbated by teachers’ commitments to “neutrality,” as many students are unable or unwilling to reach these depths alone. This “paradox” is a central theme I will discuss at length later in this chapter.

I wanted to make sure Sebastian and I were on the same page about when discussions of race were appropriate for teachers to discuss openly with their students, so I asked him, “What is most appropriate to discuss in a writing class?”:

Sebastian: Styles of writing. Maybe you can talk about race whether you go into different vocabulary, because I lived in sort of a more urban area, then we moved into a more suburban area and like, different vocabularies back and forth, like, was different growing up as a kid and I think stuff like that would be more easy to

talk about. The fact that we have bilingual people in the classrooms and different languages like that could segue into it and stuff like that.

Andrew: *So you have an interesting perspective—that you’ve noticed that there are different vernaculars that are used in more urban areas versus the suburbs, right?*

Sebastian: Yeah

Andrew: *So if you have witnessed that shifting, right, like, do you feel you yourself would use a certain vernacular in one place and then in another...*

Sebastian: (interrupting) Oh yeah

Andrew: *And do you feel like that is what [SRTOL] is talking about?*

Sebastian: I think so. It’s like though I heard it with different accents you go from one place and talk the way they talk there and then you go to another new talk they way they talk there because it’s like different dialects of types of things you can say.

Andrew: *Do you think that’s a “hotter” topic than what you’ve been talking about in class so far?*

Sebastian: I think that would be a better topic to discuss because I know I’m probably not the only one that does that, who talks a different sort of way when they’re around certain people because it’s not just the setting—sometimes the people that are around you have to talk differently.

Sebastian and I are dancing around the subject—a move I suspect Summer is familiar with as well. When I tried to get at it right away by discussing AAVE, Sebastian distanced himself from that identification. One of the striking features of discomfort is that it requires a gentle touch—a metaphorical approach—a psychic distance that doesn’t trigger a defensive reaction that scares away its more productive aspects.

A close inspection of our conversation reveals to me that: 1) Summer allows students to openly discuss texts about race; these discussions, in spite of students’ of

color's attempts to get at the racialized and classed nuances, are overridden by white students' voices that insist upon a conversation angled more towards a safer, white liberalist notion of "equality" that deviates from the kinds of linguistic equality SRTOL is after and 2) Without more direct intervention from Summer, these "deeper" conversations remain "elephants in the classrooms" that never go addressed. My classroom observations, coupled with Avi, Sebastian and Summer's interviews lead me to believe that there is a difficult paradox in Summer's class that is quite common in FYC courses that use provocative topics for writing prompts: often, teachers want students to become better readers, writers, and thinkers—as Summer does—and thus assigns students complex texts that address provocative topics. Many teachers, Summer included, value "pushing and pulling," but are unsure how much is too much, thus students are asked to raise questions and discuss these difficult themes without the teacher pushing enough. Discomfort as cognitive dissonance is the affective mechanism that teachers rely upon—sometimes tacitly, other times intentionally—to motivate students to question the beliefs and assumptions that block them from "going deeper" into the text. As I witnessed in Summer's "fishbowl" exercises, students' individual discomfort interacts with the collective classroom discomfort. In spite of the fact that Summer put much effort into creating a comfortable classroom environment for students to engage uncomfortable topics, talking about race, as Sebastian noted, was just "too touchy."

That students seemed to avoid "digging in" with topics that were uncomfortable, yet simultaneously acknowledged race, for example, as "an elephant in the room," prompts me to wonder if discomfort actually helps make that elephant appear as something to be reckoned with. This question draws on my understanding of discomfort

as an affective phenomenon that is sticky. As Ahmed notes, repression contributes to an object's "stickiness," which is to say that all kinds of other things might accumulate or "stick" to discomfort (elephants, for example), while simultaneously repressing the emotion that motivates attitudinal change (discomfort as cognitive dissonance). When confronted with worldviews that challenged some students' ideas about language equity, difference, and power, students' experience of dissonance prompted them to alleviate the discomfort by resorting to safer and more relatable talking points: text-speak and establishing a common language for everyone in the U.S. If Summer were to push her students as far as she claims she values, then challenging their easy, deracialized interpretations means it is likely they would resist, which would require a significant increase of time and energy on Summer's part to manage a potentially defensive and resistant conversation. It is my opinion, however, that if we truly wish for students to "go deeper" into the texts, then we must learn how to manage the discomfort that blocks and enables richer conversations about race and difference.

Case Two: English 101²⁰

Participant Overview: Meena

Meena is a female, Indian, South Asian and American-identified veteran teacher specializing in literary studies. She and I met three times (one interview was cancelled and unable to be rescheduled) during the Fall 2012 semester: mid-October, mid-November, and mid-December. I observed her class twice: once about a week after our

²⁰ Originally there were two female student participants for this case, but one excused herself from the study after the first interview after finding her semester was too full to participate fully. Her interview is excluded from this study because it yielded little relevant information.

first interview and another time a week before our third interview. My initial interview plan was to start with my core interview questions, but because our first interview occurred after my first two with Summer, I decided to start by asking Meena about her personal goals for students in her writing classroom. During that same interview, I also asked for her definition of “teaching discomfort.” After taking another look at the first interview, themes began to emerge between Meena and Summer’s cases. I believe these themes are similar because both teachers used texts that were provocative, and both articulated value conflicts between their own teaching goals and the program’s.

Meena’s conflicts were heightened, however, by very personal investments in the text’s topics: racism and sexism, in particular. In her baseline descriptions of discomfort, Meena noted that when her students refused to acknowledge racism as a problem (for example) that she felt personally attacked. Because she did not want her emotions to interfere with staying “politically neutral,” as she described, she added extra readings about race and racism in an unconscious attempt to persuade students that discrimination and social injustice were real and valuable topics to engage. In all three interviews with Meena, I observed many parallels to Summer’s case and thus felt that “the paradox of discomfort as critical inquiry” was a fitting theme to characterize her descriptions of teaching discomfort as well. I have noted in this next section, however, key places that are unique to Meena’s experiences with program-assigned texts about people of color, in particular.

Theme: The Paradox of Discomfort as Critical Inquiry (Teacher's Perspective)

Meena is a veteran graduate assistant at GLU. Meena had not taught English 101 for several semesters, and for this reason she decided to follow the standard writing assignment sequence, but chose her own readings from the FYCR. Due to a scheduling conflict, my first interview with Meena occurred almost a month after my first and second interviews with Summer. Early in our first interview, I asked Meena about her personal goals: *What are your personal goals for students in your writing classroom?* She replied,

I think without this even being intentional my main goal for students to leave my class with is stronger critical thinking skills, so not to necessarily just accept what they're hearing, but to question everything and to look beyond what they're hearing. Because especially this semester they are so resistant to a lot of the ideas. They refuse to acknowledge race as a problem or as an issue to discuss, and so I think my personal goal is to destabilize their so firm beliefs that they have, you know? You don't have to just have one position on everything. That, for me, a way to get at that skills is through writing, is through reading and writing and talking about the questions they have about what they're reading.

When Meena talks about her personal goals for students, she does so with a distancing move: "without this even being intentional," she says, her chief goal is for students to improve their critical thinking skills. This statement is curious, because the English 101 curriculum is designed precisely with the intention of strengthening students' critical thinking skills. One of the primary goals students' work is assessed by is "critical interpretation," which is the one goal (of several) that carries considerable weight in the program. I see her "lack of intention" as not so much related to the program's mandated goal of critical thinking, but more about the ways in which she addresses her students' resistance to the curriculum. I am keenly interested in the rationalization for her main goal: that her students this semester are "so resistant to a lot of the ideas," particularly

that “race is a problem.” Meena’s “personal goal” is to “destabilize” their “so firm beliefs” so that they realize there is more than one position to take on these issues.

Meena started the semester using the standard assignment sequence, which worked with three texts from the English 101 course reader: Ruth Behar’s “Juban América,” Maira Kalman’s *New York Times* photo essay “Back to the Land,” and Josh Neufeld’s “September 1” from *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*. “Juban América” is an autobiographical exploration of Behar’s Jewish and Cuban (Juban) heritage through a reflective analysis of an old family photograph, and “September 1” (referenced further in this chapter as “After the Deluge”) is an excerpt from a non-fiction graphic novel that tells real-life stories from those who experienced Hurricane Katrina. Kalman’s photo essay questions “the American pursuit of happiness” by analyzing unhealthy food culture in the States. Behar and Neufeld’s texts implicitly asked students to think about their own identities relative to systems of power (racial categorization, abject racism), and Kalman challenges students to think about connections between our food systems and rhetorics of happiness and freedom.

Summer and Meena both started out using parts of their respective course’s standard sequence. Summer modified her sequence and chose her course texts after the first four weeks of class because she disagreed with the ways in which the administration rewrote her original sequence. Meena also followed the standard sequence until approximately halfway through the semester, where she broke from it by assigning two texts not in the course reader and started writing her own assignments. Meena tells me she assigned Barack Obama’s speech, “A More Perfect Union” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” because she felt her students resisted and denied some of

the course reader text's themes about difference and racism. When I asked her, "*How do your course materials communicate discomfort?*" She replied:

You know, essays like "Juban America" and "After the Deluge" are hinting at things, you know, they are in the course book so I brought in Obama and Gloria Anzaldúa, I mean, I was feeding off what was already in the book, you know? I think in a way these ideas are suppose to come up, I mean, you can't talk about something like "Juban America" without talking about race and heritage and ethnicity and culture. These things are meant to be talked about.

I asked Meena if she felt there were multiple goals communicated by the course texts—both "critical" and ones "rooted in social justice." She replied "yes," but that "*it's not the case every semester, you know, it's not something I go in with.*" As with "not being intentional," her statement that social justice goals are "not something I go in with" put distance between values and what she does to achieve her personal goals. Meena continues:

I don't go in thinking I need to push upon them this idea to accept diversity because I don't make assumptions that they don't, you know, but when I hear phrases like, 'I think our generation just doesn't have an issue with race, which comes up this semester in the class you're observing, or 'I don't understand why we're reading this, this isn't our problem anymore,' that is when I want to bring that to the surface, you know, there might be more you're not thinking about, and I want to push on that. I mean, I think that is important to be destabilized as much as possible, so I think implicit in my goals there's probably a political aspect, you know, in that I want them to think about some of these bigger social issues that the readings are bringing to the surface. But it's not as though I'm doing it without the basis of the readings, but somehow it seems to come up quite a bit, this idea of race and equality.

The majority of Meena's assigned texts were chosen by the administration—the Composition Director and First-Year Composition Coordinator, but when I asked if she thinks there are multiple goals communicated by these texts, she does two things: she

personalizes her response in a contradictory way. First, she notes that she doesn't always go into the semester with "social justice" goals, but if she does it's because students disavow racism as a problem, and then "implicit" in her goals is "probably a political aspect." Second, she backs off again, creating a bit of distance between her personal goals and "political" aspects of teaching by noting, "but it's not as though I'm doing it without the basis of the readings," which is another hedge.

This dissonance amplifies when I follow up about her students' resistance to some of the racialized themes in the course texts that are part of the standard sequence. Meena's somewhat conflicted desire to "destabilize their so firm beliefs" really ratchets up when her students deny the importance of racism in society. I asked her how that resistance affects her personally and she replied, "I think it makes me feel as though they are not valuing the things I value or that they're not understanding where I'm coming from." Meena explains that for her capstone presentation in her first-year composition theory and pedagogy class, her paper addressed race in the composition classroom. "I was trying to think about these things," she continued, "and what my position is as a person who cares about race and thinks about it."

Meena: And so I don't expect everyone to love these texts, but I think my earliest semesters of teaching I had these things that stood out to me, that one, somebody saying, 'when did you come here?' You know, when did you come here to teach?' and I said, 'Well, from where?' 'Where did when did you migrate?' and stuff like this, and I was like, 'I was born at [Middletown Memorial Hospital] [right up the street from the university], you guys, come on. And so it puts me in a very awkward situation because I don't really like to be 'Oh I'm American or I'm an Indian...That's not how I identify.

For Meena, there's an intensely personal relationship to the racialized themes addressed in the course texts. When students deny and minimize racism as a current sociopolitical

problem, they are not merely making irritating comments; they are saying things that clash deeply with Meena's values and her identity. That becomes more apparent when she dovetails her conversations with students who have made assumptions about her identity (based on her name and skin color) with talking about her personal reactions to students' resistance to racialized themes. Her students' resistance affects her most when she feels they do not value the things she values or don't understand "where I'm coming from," quite literally so, in that her students question her nationality as a US-born citizen.

Meena continued,

I am constantly wondering what the rules of engagement are in a classroom and especially a composition classroom, you know? Where am I? I don't want to break the rules because I have historically gotten in so much trouble by the English Department. And so, not for things like that, but I feel like I'm always called into the Composition Director's office for something. So I am especially now trying really hard to be careful about how I am approaching teaching so that I can just finish this program and be done, you know, and not have any problems. Aside from that I don't want to overstep and go into that personal zone when I'm suppose to be their teacher and teaching them how to write, you know, I don't want it to be about me. But that's hard to separate especially when I'm feeling attacked.

What Meena describes here sounds like a double-bind paradox. Wondering about what the rules of engagement are in a composition class is, to my mind, connected to her experience "getting in trouble" with the program.²¹ The phrase "rules of engagement" calls to mind a combat situation where directives are issued from an authority that describes the scope and limitations of fighting with an enemy. Her subsequent question,

²¹ Meena did not go into detail in this interview about "getting in trouble," but during our second interview she explained that a few years ago she was targeted by some of her students for being "too political," and that she had to answer for some of her choices to the composition program administrators. I did not record the portion of our interview where she went into detail about the instance(s) and secured her authorization only to allude to these events if was necessary to narrate more coherently the results from our interviews.

“Where am I?” is particularly poignant. Meena is “battling” students’ narrow understandings of systemic racism, but she did not necessarily set the terms of engagement (she wants them to think about broader social issues, but does not do so “without the basis of the readings”). On the one hand, Meena fears overstepping into “the personal zone” because these topics enter her class into personal territories, but on the other they’re compulsory—they signify the values of the program. These “battles” are very personal, especially when her values feel under attack, yet she blurs that line between the personal and political because she herself has come under attack from students for being too political

One of the differences between Summer and Meena’s descriptions of “teaching discomfort” is that Summer gave a definition consistent with one meaning of the phrase—a teacher “teaching” discomfort to achieve a particular effect. Meena, on the other hand, gave a definition consistent with the other meaning—a teacher being discomfited by teaching:

Meena: For me I would say teaching discomfort is when I have a plan or certain objectives in mind before going into class and I go about trying to do that in class and something throws me off. I think that while I can accommodate some level of destabilization, there are many instances where I’m just thrown off so much that I lose my train of thought and it becomes very visible. I think for me that is teaching discomfort, when it starts to show that I don’t know what to do.

Andrew: *Ok*

Meena: I think in my definition of teaching discomfort, I think the main or the times I can remember that I’ve been most uncomfortable revolved around me feeling personally affected, like attacked or a comment that kind of stung me outside my teacher mode, you know, words like about race or gender or something political I feel strongly about, and then I have to think quickly how to

respond from a teacher's perspective and not from the way I would respond to somebody else. But the discomfort has always come from when it is coming right at me and I have to respond.

Andrew: You're describing your relation to discomfort in a way that comes into relation with the discomfort of having to separate yourself 'outside your teacher mode.' Can you say more about that?

Meena: Yeah, I mean, as a teacher I think we have to be careful to remain neutral in regard to things like politics, religion...we have to understand that these students are fresh, green, new to the university, especially in a composition class. I think that is what I mean—you have to remember you're the instructor and not this person having a conversation about this topic; it's not like a debate or something you're arguing.

Meena articulates a couple of strong tensions: between being personally affected by students' comments about race and gender, between her personal goal to destabilize her students' beliefs about race, and her desire to remain neutral while introducing students to contentious topics. These statements resonate with her earlier comment that “implicit in [her] goals there's...a political aspect,” yet she does not work to get her students to think about bigger social issues “without the basis of the readings.”

Meena is vulnerable in many ways. When it shows that “she doesn't know what she's doing,” this is not merely uncomfortable for her; it also decreases her authority in the classroom—something, she tells me, she struggles to establish as a woman of color. It is almost as if when confronted with injurious comments about race, Meena splits her real self—one who has the social flexibility to converse with students about personal feelings from her “instructor” self, who realizes she must stay neutral. I believe the statement that truly encapsulates “teaching discomfort” for Meena is when she says, “But the

discomfort has always come from when it is coming right at me and I have to respond.”

Meena admits that she doesn't always know how to respond. I asked her: What factors, if any, contribute to an uncomfortable classroom? She replies:

You know, when moments come up of discomfort in the classroom when they're saying something, not necessarily like that directly affects me but those moments where they're making comments about race that I feel need to be explored more, I still don't push it, you know? I say something to the effect of, "Is everybody on board with that? Does everybody agree? [...]. The problem is we have a lot of people with very firm beliefs that are not swaying and then people who disagree but can't speak up, and I don't know how to mediate

While Meena is more explicit with her admission that she “doesn't push it” with students, I see a similarity between the ways in which Summer and Meena value “pushing” students past their comfort zones and how they don't seem to actualize the pushing in practice. Meena tells me that she maintains a more neutral position not just because she values it, but also because she does not know how to mediate the discomfort that arises in class discussion about contentious issues.

There is no doubt Meena's classroom is uncomfortable; I sensed that immediately when I conducted my observations. What strikes me in Meena's case are the paradoxes and binds that become clearer by comparing my observation notes to her descriptions of discomfort. Meena values destabilizing students' firm beliefs and is discomfited when students do not value or recognize “racism as a problem” as she does. She expresses vulnerability when she discusses being called into the Composition Director's office for her “political views,” and also when students project assumptions about her identity based on her name and skin color. Yet because the program assigns texts that, in her words, “are meant to talk about race and racism,” she feels she can actualize her values under the aegis of the program's approved course materials—in essence, she is shielded

from being called “politically biased,” yet can alleviate some of the dissonance she feels (acutely and personally) when exposed to students’ hurtful comments about racism.

Participant Overview: Lilly

Lilly is a white, female, middle-class identified freshman. She and I met three times during the Fall 2012 semester: late October, early November, and early December. Like other first interviews, the first one began by reviewing Lilly’s baseline descriptions of discomfort. These centered on times in high school where she felt embarrassed in front of her peers by an English teacher who would publicly discuss students’ essays in front of other students. Notably, Lilly mentioned that one essay this teacher picked on was special to her because she wrote about how important her family system is to her. This theme would recur in a later interview when she describes what is the strongest instance of discomfort as cognitive dissonance—a moment that captures what pedagogical discomfort is “meant” to do, that is, unsettle a students’ previously held belief or assumption about social injustice. Also during our first interview I asked for Lilly’s definition of “teaching discomfort,” to which she replied “I think that means sometime when teachers try to make students think out of the box a little bit and try and push themselves. Sometimes it could be taken negatively depending on how your experiences with like writing and stuff and how you feel comfortable.” We spent a lot of time talking about the high school teacher she wrote about in her initial description, and then I purposefully digressed and asked Lilly to “describe her classroom climate.” The conversations that follow are the most provocative responses to questions about

discomfort and classroom climate in the first interview, and discomfort and course materials in the third interview.

Theme: A Change of Mind, but Not of Heart (Student's Perspective)

Meena and Lilly's first interviews were conducted during the same week, which was helpful because both focused on the tensions that were bubbling under the surface of the uncomfortable class discussions about "Jubán America," "After the Deluge," and "A More Perfect Union." When I asked Lilly: *Describe ways the course texts, conversations, or writing assignments communicate discomfort*, she said:

Lilly: Well, we've just read "Back to the Land," "After the Deluge," the "Jubán America," Obama's "A Perfect Union," and we just finished reading "To Tame a Wild Tongue."

Andrew: *Okay*

Lilly: And I just feel like...I don't know. She is like, 'Oh, it will make discussion better if you say things,' but I mean (sighs), I feel like we keep reading stories about like different ethnicities and like stuff like that, which I don't have a problem with at all, but I feel like she's...like...the theme of it is "why don't white people understand what we're going through?" Do you know what I mean? I just feel like it is a story that we've heard over and over again, and I understand it's like, you know, a different lifestyle, and it is harder and I grew up with racial family members, like my mother grew up in a very biracial home. I understand that and I hate... I just feel like the stories we're reading—the message that is trying to get across is that white people don't understand. I don't know. That's just what I feel like, but I don't want to say that because...(whispering) that's a very diverse class and I don't want people to be like, 'Oh, she's a racist.'

Lilly describes that the course materials communicate discomfort through what she perceives as a theme: 'why don't white people understand what we're going through?'

Meena chose the first few texts about race and difference from the course reader. When her students' values about race and racism clashed with hers, she assigned two more texts about race and racism, explaining to me that she felt because the program chose the texts it did, that teachers were supposed to engage difficult themes. Lilly's description of discomfort here, however, made me wonder if Meena had pushed too far, but as she had noted previously, the "rules of engagement" in a composition class can be difficult to determine. This is why listening to students' stories about their experiences in compulsory classrooms where critical inquiry is an assessable goal is so important.

I also think Lilly's response is a bit nervous—as if she worried I would judge her for saying she believed the message conveyed by the course materials was one of "white people don't understand." She qualifies her comments by telling me that her mother "grew up in a very biracial home," before admitting she doesn't want to say what she feels about the class because people might think she's "a racist." This admission is key because it offers an example *in situ* of one of the ways discomfort as cognitive dissonance operates in practice. In theory, discomfort "destabilizes" students—we use it to "push them," or "pull things out of them," but Lilly's description shows us that dissonance is much more complex. When I ask Lilly why she believes the theme of the class is "white people don't understand," she offers this:

Lilly: I do think that racial issues are, um, still present today...I was just, like, why are we reading these over and over again about the same message that the texts are trying to get across, you know? I just felt like they were...oh yeah, it's easier to read something where you could relate to it and I was, I can't relate to these, I'm sorry, but I didn't have these experiences. Like, I don't speak two languages...I was just kind of annoyed by it.

Andrew: *Stay with that feeling of being annoyed. Try and go back to the moment in class where these feelings come up for you. You were confused why it just kept coming up over and over...*

Lilly: uh huh. I feel like they...in our writings...they want you to write about something else than what you do want to write about.

Andrew: *When you say "in our writings," can you clarify?*

Lilly: Yeah, like, in "Back to the Deluse"²² is about the Hurricane Katrina and about the people who were left there couldn't afford to get out, or didn't have family or whatever, and they had to stay there and (laughs) my initial thought, when I read it, was making notes and stuff like that seems, like, unrealistic to me, that they would be having army tanks and guns in the streets where these people didn't do anything wrong, and they're being prisoners in this, you know, this destroyed land, and then another picture would show water trucks driving by with not giving our water and to me, I was like that doesn't make any sense to me; it doesn't seem realistic. I wrote down, "that seems far-fetched, it seems like they are exaggerating," and then when I got to class, it is like they're like 'oh, what are they doing to these people,' like...

Andrew: *Your peer said that?*

Lilly: Yeah, like when we had discussion, you know, "how could this happen?" You know, sympathy towards the people? And I don't know if it's just that maybe I interpreted it wrong, and maybe I did have a very like, you know, that's what you want to think, like, they want you to think that the government would never do that, but I...just felt like in my rough draft I wrote about, this paper seems, or this text seems far-fetched and I don't really believe it and I feel it's very exaggerated, and, you know, and everybody else was like, 'these people, they were like, 'the government is unfair,' and stuff like that, so I was just like, I felt like I did it wrong, like I interpreted it wrong....so I just sort of changed for when everybody else is going, like I...the next paper, I'm like...I wrote the second draft of the paper, I was like "the government is so wrong."

Andrew: *Interesting*

Lilly: I wrote about what they said in class.

Andrew: *But do you feel like you really had a change of mind or heart?*

Lilly: I feel like they personally did me too [sic].

Andrew: *Genuinely?*

²² The text she is referencing is "After the Deluge," but conflated "Back to the Land" and "After the Deluge." She also would say "deluse," instead of "deluge," which I kept verbatim.

Lilly: Yeah

Andrew: *What caused that shift?*

Lilly: I felt like if I did it my way, she was going to say that it was wrong.

Andrew: *Okay, but did you have a change of heart?*

Lilly: Um. I don't know if it was a change of heart, I just felt like I was being close-minded and I thought they opened my mind

Andrew: *Are you convinced still?*

Lilly: No. I don't know why, I just...I just can't. It's hard for me to believe that there would be tanks and guns and in peoples' faces who didn't do anything wrong, but I mean it can happen. It's a possibility.

I hear several important things in Lilly's responses. First, she repeats several times that she is "annoyed" by having to read the same thing over and over again about "white people not understanding." To her mind, this is the class theme and she struggles to relate to the experiences she reads in the course texts. There is resonance here with Avi and Sebastian's comments about their class—Avi mentioning that the class "talks about racism a lot and maybe it's time to change the subject," and Sebastian's observation that "people didn't want to talk about [race]" because it's "too touchy" and that students feel like they can't relate. I want to suggest that these forms of "resistance," as many teachers would call them, has much more to do with protecting self than willfully resisting these difficult themes. Lilly's case, in particular, gives us a sense that there is much more at stake for students than simply "questioning their so firm beliefs," as Meena described as valuable.

That Lilly questions the reality of what happened to people of color in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina because she cannot imagine (or relate) to this kind of world evinces a struggle to learn what Deborah Britzman calls "difficult knowledge."

Britzman observes that this kind of knowledge means learning from a traumatic event (such as a graphic novel-style narration of post-Katrina events), which in turn requires “fragile moves” between the learner and what is to be learned from a traumatic event: “Precisely because insight concerns the acknowledgement of discontinuity from the persistence of the status quo,” she writes, “and hence asks something intimate from the learner, learning from requires the learner’s attachment to, and implication in knowledge” (117). When Lilly (and, I would argue, Avi and Sebastian) cannot attach to these experiences—cannot empathize with the people of Katrina—then, as Britzman claims, “empathy actually may provoke defenses and resistance to insight” (118).

We see that when Lilly is confronted with information that activates her defensive reactions, this information clashes with her previous cognitions about the depth and severity of systemic racism. To her mind—one that she has known to be open to “difference”—it isn’t possible that government officials would abuse and abandon people of color as happened leading up to and after Hurricane Katrina. She is quick to mention that she comes from a bi-racial family, and I read that as an “inoculation” against the kinds of dissonant cognitions she experiences as uncomfortable. That she went along with what she believed was being sympathetic to the teachers’ values because she feared getting in trouble is not unique—her statements resonate with the findings of Galinsky’s study: “because affirmations appear to reduce psychological discomfort without ‘curing’ the cognitive discrepancy, their disconfirmation...reinstates psychological discomfort and dissonance motivation” (126). Lilly keenly picked up on the fact that her teacher’s ideological values are thinly veiled—when she questions whether her paper has to be written a certain way, she is naming the paradoxical “neutrality” that Meena struggles to

maintain. These values, and her peers' opinions, advocate positions counter to her own. Given the dual pressures of attaining a high grade and the need to maintain internal coherence and harmony when faced with the threat of social rejection, Lilly conforms her inconsistent attitudes to her teacher's and her peers'. According to Meena's criteria, I suppose, Lilly has fulfilled her hope: that students will question things instead of just conforming to what they see and hear. I am uncertain, however, if that questioning will persist past the context of this class, especially if questioning certain ideologies challenges her social role within her family system.

Having noted Lilly's earlier comment about her mom growing up in a biracial household, I used that information to probe further into what I suspected was at the core of Lilly's "change of mind" but not of "heart":

Andrew: In your 101 class, have you ever experienced the sensation of where you had a thought or feeling or belief that was one thing, and then you found it came as a result of what you were talking about with your peers, or what you were reading, or what you are writing about. A feeling or believe that kind of came into tension with a new one?

Lilly: Came into tension...let me think [long pause]. I don't know. I...let me just tell you this experience. So I went home, back to where I live, and both my brothers were there. My brother also goes to GLU, one of them. One of them just graduated college, so in talking about this English class that I have and that I have to...we're reading all of these sort of identity, racial stuff like that, and my one brother who graduate college said that, 'well, that sounds like white-bashing,' and I was like, 'well, sometimes I feel like that. Sometimes I feel like the things that I'm read are about how white people don't respect or whatever, these other races and identities, and of course my brother...he gets, he is very opinionated, so he was like, 'blah, blah, blah,' and whatever. And my mom, being a very racially

conscious person, and growing up in a very racially diverse home, was like ‘don’t...you can’t think of it that way,’ and my brother who goes to GLU said, ‘see, that’s the problem with you guys. You think that you know one time that someone says something about a white person and the world is over when they’ve been, you know, white people have been taking advantage of everybody else for forever.’

Andrew: *So that’s your one brother...*

Lilly: Yeah, the one who goes to GLU?

Andrew: *and your other brother?*

Lilly: Who graduated college was like agreeing with me, finally, saying that they were like, quote unquote, ‘white bashing.’

Andrew: *Where did he go?*

Lilly: He went to Cornhusker University. And so my brother who goes to GLU was like, ‘you know, that’s just the problem. One time they do it, it’s okay to have a little balance.’ He was like, ‘I’m not saying that it’s okay for them to be saying that, but you have to realize that they have been mistreated for however many years, and if they want to say that they are feeling this way by the people, then that should be okay.’ I kind of thought about that, and I was like ‘I guess this is kind of right.’

Lilly’s attachments to her “disbeliefs” are fed, in part, by feeling personally interpellated by the messages in the texts. She tells me:

On the one hand I have from my mother, like, you know, ‘everybody should be treated equally and see what you get from other peoples’ sides of stories,’ but on the other hand, I’m like, I don’t even know the word, but it’s like ‘What about me? What about me?’ Like, this isn’t fair to me, or this is what I am thinking, so it’s just kind of a balance between the feelings of, you know, your self and the feelings of like, accepting that it’s okay to let other people have their opinions.

Lilly's repetition of "what about me?" is striking. To my mind, it points to the fact that while our field emphasizes the social nature of emotion, individuals experience intense defensive reactions to cognitive dissonance. Writing about pedagogies of resistance and identity, Bracher (2004) notes that significant identity damage comes at the hands of "protest pedagogy," where teachers desire to expose and reject the "master signifiers" they find oppressive actually "fans the flames of violence" by threatening students' whose identities conform to the groups teachers find oppressive (98). When Lilly asks "what about me?" the tendency might be to downplay the deeper messages embedded in that remark.

For example, in our final interview, Meena reflected on why "After the Deluge" made her students so defensive and mad, noting that the majority of comments her students made about the text blamed people of color for not getting out: "The text immediately made people react strongly—they said things like 'It's not my fault, I could have left'. I didn't mean for the class to take it personally." These excerpts highlight the tendency for teachers to overlook students' affective connections to the material they teach—especially if this material interpellates peoples' core identities in negative ways. Regarding discomfort in these two cases, it appears that there is an expectation that enough discomfort will be generated so that students will be able to see the better, more just choices and change their minds. We must be mindful that there is more at stake in changing one's heart, especially if these changes challenge those held by members of a family system.

In the closing moments of our last interview I asked Lilly what a teacher would have to do with students who are quietly resisting the course material to change their minds. She replied,

I think that she, or a teacher has to bring to light both feelings—the feelings of victimization. I think that we sort of make it okay for us to put the blame on the white people, but I think that’s the issue—that they don’t say, ‘well, how does it make this group of people feel?’ I think that would just make a little more, I don’t know, a better discussion about it.

This suggestion might turn a lot of people off; in fact, I raised this point in a group of friends/colleagues who do anti-racist trainings in Middletown—they pointed out that we already spend enough time catering to white peoples’ feelings. I agree with them, but held Lilly’s suggestions close—talking with her one-on-one helped me see first-hand how discomfort can block students’ abilities to see the value in anti-racist messages her teacher so dearly wants to impart.

In theory, if teachers were to pay attention to the personal shame, sadness, and anger white students feel when reading about systemic racism, for example, then we might defuse much of the defensive discomfort that blocks learning. As Jessica Ringrose argues in “Rethinking White Resistance,” there is an undertheorization of white resistance in pedagogical literatures that impedes our potential for understanding subjective and social change through anti-racist education. While Ringrose focuses specifically on feminist and anti-racist classrooms, her claim is useful here as well. While outside the immediate scope of this project, Lilly’s hesitance to acknowledging the validity of structural racism and altering her paper to work in accord with her teacher’s

values essays suggests further research on the role of discomfort in white students' resistance is needed.

Lilly's remark raises another important question about the role of discomfort in writing classrooms: What is the emotional cost for students and teachers of color to be subjected to other students' racist comments? What is at stake, emotionally, for people of color in classrooms with a tacitly or explicitly anti-racist, anti-bias agenda such as Meena's? I think that it is essential to acknowledge that not every teacher can use discomfort as a pedagogical tool in the same way. As a white, male teacher, I am able to (if I so choose) invite students to question their deeply held beliefs and assumptions without the automatic questioning of my political motives. Students expect me to come in with a certain kind of authority, and when I initiate that dissonance, I do so with all the authority of white supremacy behind me. When I contribute to class conversations about the texts I choose for us to read, I can be pretty direct in articulating the messages I see the texts communicating. I often highlight the uncomfortable words and use them in class discussions. This directness is something I advocate for all teachers, but recognize that the resistance this practice generates is buffered by my privileges, and easier for me to disarm because arguing against my own privilege is often perceived as admirable.

In our final interview, Meena calls this section of 101 "toxic," a "failure," and "dysfunctional." My interpretation of her class dynamics as far as discomfort is concerned centers on the perfect storm, as it were, of individual resistant dynamics, uncomfortable classroom dynamics, and Meena's fears about being reprimanded. In English 101, Meena offered difficult texts for her students to read and write about, but then because of her pedagogical values and also her fears of getting in trouble, she chose

to remain neutral and refrained from rendering her interpretative opinions. Lilly reported that the intensity of the course texts created a snowball effect in terms of silence and resistance: Meena would open a class discussion with a few questions and “nobody wanted to say anything, which then made it uncomfortable because you don’t want to say too much—you don’t want to be the one person that says too much, but then again you don’t want her to be mad at you for not saying something...I definitely think it has to do with that the discomfort is contagious—if someone...if the majority doesn’t want to say something to influence everybody else.”

I asked Lilly if class discussion would “spark” if the teacher got more involved in facilitating the discussion. She replied,

I don’t think she was trying to push an idea or anything, but I can see where some teachers would feel...I mean, I can understand the emotion, but if you’re really confident in your teaching ability, then you’re not going to be teaching...I don’t know what the word is, like education, I guess, or you’re going to be teaching skills and tactics, not opinions.

Andrew: What if a teacher kind of overtly...or, I guess, pushed his or her political opinion more, or at least their understanding of the texts more...openly?

Lilly: Yeah. I feel like when a teacher feels, I am just going to say that I...Meena is a really good teacher in the sense that she teaches us the tactics of how to write really well, and taught us about bias and she doesn’t really push that, but I feel like when the teacher is more engaged, say standing up at the front of the class, whether that be writing on the board or having a bit more of their opinion, as you would say...I think that sort of sparks in students either agreeing with you and supporting your ideas, or sort of disagreeing with you. Here’s why I think that like it’s always better because I feel like that scenario creates a very active classroom; it’s like, I see what you’re saying about power dynamics, but at the same time, as long as you make it clear that it’s your opinion, you know, because everyone can

have different opinions, and you're not like a newscaster who just reads what they're suppose to read...you should have emotions, too. If there isn't that spark in the class discussions, then the teacher should probably initiate it.

My observations of Meena's class correlate with Lilly's statement—I watched Meena sit behind the large, front desk and quietly ask a few questions here and there during group discussion. The feeling in the room was uncomfortable and tense; many students were looking down at the floor, or texting, or sitting with their heads on their desks. There was no spark, no life to the class—just a lot of discomfort in the air. I believe this “toxic,” “failed” class could have gone differently around if Meena had more training to work with discomfort productively. Although I grant that it might take more than “appropriate training” to help this vexed class, I maintain that this case is not uncommon: when discomfort is generated by multiple, conflicting desires without having space to come out into the open, classes like this can devolve quickly. While not every class goes down like this, understanding discomfort in theory and working with neutralizing discomfort in practice can go a long way in creating the kinds of affective classroom environments I discuss in Chapter One. In Chapter Four, I offer context-specific suggestions for classes like Meena's that go downhill fast as a result of students' defensive resistances being triggered by course texts.

Case Three: English 102

Participant Overview: Alan

Alan is a male, Caucasian, heterosexual-identified veteran teacher and doctoral candidate specializing in critical cultural studies. He and I met four times during the Fall

2012 semester: early October, late October, mid-November, and early December. I observed his class twice, and draw heavily from my observation notes in making sense of this case. During our first interview we reviewed what he had written for his baseline descriptions of discomfort. Alan's baseline descriptions focused on instances where his students resisted his teaching. For example, Alan notes that he experiences discomfort in writing classrooms when there is an "awkward, teeth-pulling silence when I am trying to elicit a class discussion," and when "students stubbornly refuse, digging in their heels and grinding proceedings to a halt." In one particularly notable instance, he wrote about a time when he felt that, "the majority of my students seemed to stonewall me." Laughing, he dismissed the writing he had done, noting, "I chose to write about what might be considered a kind of banal teacher discomfort and it was recent in my mind so..." and trailed off.

I found Alan to be guarded throughout our interviews, and had to tread lightly with my questions. Instead of digging more deeply into what I considered very rich phrases about teaching discomfort, our first interview focused on his dislike of the common course sequence for 102, particularly what he considered "long-winded assignments and too many assignments in the sequence." He argued that these factors made students most "discontent" and confused, which he theorized also made them a bit lazy. Striking to me was Alan's defensiveness about his teaching. As with his baseline descriptions of discomfort, his replies to my questions asking him to define "teaching discomfort" in our interviews centered on how his students made him feel. This perspective was different from Summer's and Meena's, where there was a clear focus on pedagogical choices they made to get students to think differently about class texts and

conversations. The following sections describe themes that emerged from our conversations in all four interviews--themes I witnessed in classroom conversations that also emerged in his students' perceptions of discomfort in his class.

Theme: Teaching Discomfort as "Ambush" (Teacher's Perspective)

This case is different than the previous two, because unlike Summer and Meena, Alan is critical of using "social justice" themed readings in first-year composition classes. In previous semesters, Alan would assign the class a series of social justice themed readings to help frame students' research projects. This semester, however, he changed the format of the class so that at the beginning of the semester, students read texts about reading and research methods. Thus far, this chapter has mainly focused on instances of discomfort where teachers assign students texts that address themes of race, racism, power, and difference. This focus represents the particular ethos of the program, and also, as I argued earlier in the chapter, the ethos of critical composition pedagogy. Case Three provides a different perspective on "teaching discomfort." Alan states up front that he grew tired of students resisting texts about social issues *and* he started questioning the ethics of these practices in compulsory composition classes. Alan and his students did not talk about discomfort in ways similar to the participants in the first two cases, and the discomfort I heard through the interviews and felt in his classroom did not arise from not knowing how to mediate students' resistance to difficult course texts. This does not mean, however, that Alan's class was devoid of discomfort. Even though he did not "teach discomfort" in the sense of assigning social justice-themed readings, his teacherly "mode of address" conflicted with his students' needs, which in turn impacted the learning environment in uncomfortable ways. His case raises important questions

about the emotional life of the composition classroom in general—not just for those classrooms that seek to challenge students’ previously held beliefs about the world.

This semester is the first time Alan has not used what he calls “social justice” themed readings in his research writing class (English 102). He tells me:

This is the first time I’ve done that, and the reason that I’ve changed it...well, in the past I’ve had the sort of thematic, like we’re going to read two or three articles about local food production versus industrial food production, or education, or something like that, and then I found that frequently, you know, a fair percentage of the class would resist common, “Oh, I’m sick of reading about food, or I’m sick of reading about education.” So, I’d generally given them a fair amount of latitude in terms of research projects, but I’d say there was resistance about that, so I decided this semester I would just start by helping them, or at least ideally, help them to read better—to read texts better.

Alan’s pedagogical philosophies have shifted over the past several years; in the past he had assigned texts (in his first-year composition courses) by Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Jonathan Kozol, but recently has begun to question the labor required to manage student resistance to these texts, and the ethics of using provocative texts in first-year writing classrooms:

I have certain ethical questions about [using these kinds of texts], you know. While I value the social work that I see them doing, and while I think that it’s important, I also think that sometimes, you know, 18-year olds get ambushed by them and aren’t really ready for it. I so also have some questions about whether that should be the role of the writing classroom, so as much as I might want to affect social change, you know, I want to make my students aware of the ideological and hegemonic structures they’re working in. That’s one thing, but then the next step is questionable, yeah, just from the standpoint of what our role in the university is.

Andrew: *Right*

Alan: If you believe the liberal arts model, and I think we all sort of long for and respect, well, at least in our discipline, to make good citizens who are self-aware,

and who are able to learn on their own and be the self-education populace that are critical of the world around them. If you believe that, then I think certainly the goal should be the other way around [rather than merely train students to get jobs], though maybe it shouldn't be in a writing classroom, maybe there should be another classroom specifically... I mean, though, what are the odds of that? But you know, writing classes tend to the very practical matters of the university; it's a campus-wide class that has to be accounted for, so it becomes sort of a natural seat for these liberal arts goals. Writing teachers in English departments tend to be, you know, more liberal and radicalized, so there's that. Even if you teach writing in a very formulaic way, it is still the most democratic discipline in some senses, because you know, the students are engaging with the ideas of the world and they're able to put themselves into the writing that they do. Maybe democratic isn't the right word, but certainly it's the most empowering.

Alan offers astute comments about the status of composition in the university. He notes that composition is often a campus-wide class that both tends to the very practical matters of the university and is more "liberal and radicalized" within the department. Alan's thinking on the role of the writing classroom within the broader context of the university and its practical and "democratic" goals for students captures tensions the field of rhetoric and composition studies has wrestled with for decades: do writing teachers use the classroom as a venue for helping students come to a more critical awareness of the social and political issues in the world, or should writing teachers focus on helping students become better writers? Alan questions whether "ambush" should be "the role of the writing classroom," which is a telling statement about how teachers outside the immediate field (Alan's doctoral work is not in rhetoric and composition) perceive what we do in composition.

His own pedagogical goals for his English 102 students center on making sure students gain a self-awareness that helps them make choices that reflect their own beliefs

and understandings of the world so that our teaching isn't just "brainwashing." While he might "want to affect social change," he questions whether young students are ready for that in a first year composition class. He sees his teaching as working towards "shedding light on understanding, and having a critical consciousness rather than just a different form of indoctrination through ideological means."

Alan's use of the term "ambush" is striking; it is a very particular way to describe one way discomfort is generated. The word is used to describe an attack by someone or something that is concealed—much like, in my opinion, a curriculum that is hidden from plain view. Students are required to take this course, but they never truly know what they're going to get. They might have an instructor who, like Alan, has come to avoid assigning provocative texts, or, they could have someone like Meena (who up until this point taught English 102), who uses provocative texts to get students thinking more critically about themselves and the world. In talking about discomfort, his use of the term "ambush" seems a particularly aggressive way to describe the unexpected attack of ideas foreign to students—thoughts that will make them uncomfortable, yes, but in a way that seems to go beyond the ordinary discomfort of being required to seek out on one's own an idea to write about, or fend for oneself in a library full of books and articles.

Alan sees teaching writing as an opportunity to give students the tools needed to think for themselves—to go beyond the instrumentality of writing and question the world around them. In fact, all three teachers see themselves as somewhat impartial arbiters of reading and writing methodologies; at least, Summer and Meena struggle with balancing their own values with staying out of the way so that students can wrestle with the socially and politically provocative issues raised by the course texts. The result, I argue, is that

their relative absence in moderating the emotional strain of teaching discomfort makes their critical goals for students less effective. Alan seems to realize the power of unproductive student resistance and has shifted his teaching to avoid it—noting that in the past, he’s found that teaching provocative texts leads to too much student resistance in ways that make it harder for students to enact the critical questioning our first-year curriculum values.

Theme: “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers Anymore” (Students’ and Teacher’s Perspectives)

The most significant theme about “teaching discomfort” that emerged from interviews and class observations has to do with students’ perception that Alan does not give them enough positive feedback. These perceptions clash with Alan’s descriptions of himself and the dynamics in his writing class. During our second interview I asked him, “How would you describe “teaching discomfort?” He replied:

I would say [teaching discomfort] is showing up unprepared, which can often lead to discomfort. And the other one is, you know, student feedback, student energy in the classroom. It’s usually when I feel, you know, my most uncomfortable moments usually stem from, and this is not to say that it’s not because of my inadequacy of drawing them into a conversation, but when I’m trying to have a class discussion and they just sit there and they don’t want to participate for whatever reason.

Alan’s description is not too dissimilar from ways Summer and Meena talk about student resistance to ideas they read in their course texts. Student resistance to the values about difference and equity is a primary activator of the “pushing” and “pulling” both teachers describe as ways to get students more engaged. Alan’s description of discomfort in a class that does not employ “social justice” texts as a way to achieve course goals,

prompts me to shift my thinking away from “discomfort as critical inquiry” towards thinking about discomfort that “just is.” Alan continues:

Even though students talk about ‘flow’ in their writing, there is a certain amount of flow in your teaching, so it seems like when students start resisting you, it’s sort of, it seems to escalate...there’s a lot of momentum issues and presumably they see me getting frustrated because they’re not talking, and then that reinforces them not wanting to talk because they see me getting frustrated; they see my body language.

In the previous two cases, Summer and Meena talked about student resistance in terms of resistance to the ideas (or values, in Meena’s case) communicated in class discussion and course texts. Alan, on the other hand, personalizes his students’ resistance. He notes that teaching discomfort is when students “start resisting you,” and that discomfort escalates when students see him getting upset. While Meena’s frame of reference for “teaching discomfort” was also personal (“the discomfort I feel from teaching”), Alan does not describe being discomfited by students’ hurtful responses or interpretations of course texts. He admits here, in a way, that he is the cause of their resistance.

I asked Alan to talk more about these “uncomfortable moments.” He laughed and told me that a few weeks ago students were doing peer review in groups, and a few students started talking loud enough for him to hear (“they were talking loud enough, so it wasn’t suppose to be under my radar”), and they were complaining about how Alan never has anything positive to say about their work. Alan recounts one student saying, “I don’t know what I would do if there was a positive comments on here—I might fall over.”

Alan: That sort of little chain or discussion went a little wild in this one group, so I finally interjected and was like, ‘Well, Craig, I understand your point and it’s true I probably could make more positive comments, but the fact of the matter is that I have 70 some odd papers to get through, and I’m trying to make comments that are the best so that you can improve your writing. If sometimes I don’t think about the positive stuff, it’s because I try to focus on the more constructive things. And while we’re at it, let’s consider that you say you want more positive things—that implies I’m putting negative things on your paper. Can you give me an example of a negative comment?’ And he was like, ‘They’re all negative.’ And I’m like, ‘No, they’re all inquisitive—they’re all questions and you’re reading them as being negative and maybe that’s part of the problem.’ That sort of generated the group conversation about that topic, and I was uncomfortable. It was more uncomfortable for me than it was for them. So I started putting stickers on their papers, and that made them happy. You get a star. You get a smiley face, like bribing them, or something.

Also during our second interview, I asked Alan how the curricular materials communicate (or do not communicate) discomfort. We talked about his efforts to make the classroom a comfortable space for students; because Alan believes that the more comfortable students are the more engaged they will be with the readings and during class conversations. I will discuss his perception of his efforts to make the classroom a comfortable space in a bit, but it’s during this conversation that he admits he has been accused in the past of being overly critical. He tells me that, “because of my size and because of my voice, I am perceived as being sort of cruel and gruff when I am not trying to be. Well, and in fact, sometimes I’m trying to be the opposite of that; I’m trying to be sensitive and understanding, but I’m being perceived as the opposite.” Alan finds he has to work hard so that students aren’t discomfited by his physical appearance and “gruff demeanor,” but throughout my interviews with Alan and class observations I was struck

by what I perceived as a significant disconnect between how Alan wanted to come across to students and the things he did (or did not do) to achieve those desires.

A bit later in that interview, Alan returned to our conversation about stickers and smiley faces to talk more about why his students accused him of being overly critical. I got the sense that this accusation really bothered him, likely because, in my opinion, he was already self-conscious of the ways in which his physical appearance and demeanor tended to communicate gruffness and negativity to his students. Alan talked about an instance earlier in the semester when he was discussing his grading policies and the first-year composition program's portfolio assessment guidelines. One of his students, Deandre, a "non-traditional" African-American student, self-identified as having failed the course the previous semester and questioned Alan's grading policies. Alan explained to me that Deandre's question sparked a conversation about failure, which prompted Snifter²³ to ask Alan how many people, approximately, fail English 102.

Alan: So without thinking about it, I said it right away: about 35% or so of portfolios, which is true, roughly, as far as I know.

Andrew: *Overall?*

Alan: Overall the ones that go to assessment, but I didn't contextualize that, and then I said another 10 or 15 or 20% fail because of attendance policies. So then Snifter did the math and he said, 'So you are telling me that 50% of people fail this class?' and I said, 'Oh no no no, that's not what I meant!' so I had to backtrack and that was really kind of uncomfortable for me, and probably for them as well. So those are the moments of discomfort that stand out to me... this and, well, 'you don't say anything nice anymore.... you don't bring me flowers anymore' kinds of comments.

²³ Snifter is a student participant in this study.

It becomes clear to me that these two significant, uncomfortable moments are clearly related. During his explanation of Deandre and Snifter's request for clarification about Alan's (and the first-year composition program's) grading system, Alan notes:

Before I got to know them, and [Deandre and Snifter] they were both, you know, that sort of nontraditional men in the room who, you know, they were not intimidating, but why...felt like...okay, if these guys want to be trouble, they can be trouble because, you know, they're not just 18-year old kids who I could just push aside and be like, yeah, so (laughs), but then, you know, Snifter kind of called me out on this issue and said that I was talking a lot about failure because a lot of the course policies are just like, 'these are the ways...there are creative ways to fail a class, you know, like attendance policies, homework policies, if you don't hand stuff in,' you know, whatever. And he called me out and was like, 'well, you're talking about failing.'

To my mind, this conversation about "you don't bring me flowers" has everything to do with Alan's struggle to soften his intimidating appearance and maintain it when other men his age challenge him in front of other students. At the beginning of this section, I described this vignette as "symptomatic." Alan's focus on his male students' comments about being negative while at the same time talking about his efforts to impart a more sensitive demeanor is symptomatic of a need to ask bigger, even more uncomfortable questions about "teaching and learning as a man." Robert Connors writes that he's come to believe male teachers disserve male students because "we are reactive...teaching men can be a confusing task and one filled with cognitive dissonance" (144). Alan's behaviors evince this dissonance: on the one hand he perceives himself a sensitive guy with a "casual demeanor," while on the other, he jumps at his students desire for

recognition and, in an infantilizing way, puts little stickers on their papers as a kindergarten teacher might.

Alan seemed threatened by other men in class, and articulated two main concerns: that he is often frustrated by little “male solidarity blocks” in the back of the room, and that his students will view him as a gruff, insensitive man. When I observed Alan’s class, I noted his students were in haphazard rows that faced him as he sat at the front of the class. His mode of address was one of distance and distancing—he engaged the men in class by joking about sports and football, but it seemed the women and people of color remained quiet and disinterested. I would say that based on my classroom observations alone, it is very important to Alan that his students understand he is the authority figure in the classroom. My observations seem to be in accord with his baseline descriptions of discomfort where he offered an example of a conflict with a male student who was testing his authority in front of other male students in the class. Alan recounts that many students did not do the assignment, and thus his class activity was compromised. This one student from the “little solidarity block” in the back of the class, he noted, asked if he would let them go early and he notes, “My response to this was that under no circumstances was I going to allow their silence to cut short the class, particularly after being implored to do so.” In our conversations about discomfort, however, Alan discussed his struggles with being authoritative in class because he did not want to come across as a mean, intimidating teacher:

Alan: One of my personal bits of baggage, I mean I was bullied a lot as a kid because I was sort of a fat kid with a speech problem and so by the time I was in sixth grade and I was a foot taller and 80 pounds heavier than everybody else even by then as a seventh grader it sort of occurred to me well I could really do some damage to some people and it’s something I’ve been very aware of for a lot

of my life and not just in terms of you know obviously the physical presence but yeah I'm pretty sensitive to it I try to be sensitive to read and sometimes there are moments when I'm perceived as being and this happens a lot, too, because of my size because of my voice I am perceived as being sort of cruel and mean and gruff when I am not trying to be, well and in fact sometimes I'm trying to be the opposite of that I'm trying to be sensitive and understanding and him being perceived as being the opposite because of that factor but I think there's no question about that, it is also afford me and I've had this conversation with many of our you know over the years several of our female colleagues and I walk into the classroom on the first day and I'm wearing Birkenstocks and cargo shorts and a T-shirt. I'm not worried about getting their attention and getting them to respect me because I have all of those weapons of privilege.

I think that if teachers were encouraged to reflect on the kinds of validation we desire but sometimes does not receive, for example, or asked to unpack a teaching event where we are pursuing certain identity needs, then maybe our classroom practices would align with our understanding of self in relation to teaching. In Chapter Four, I suggest specific practices for the field that would encourage these deeper forms of self-reflection.

Participant Overview: Dominic

Dominic Haines is an 18-year old, Caucasian, male, pansexual/bisexual-identified freshman student in Alan's English 102 class. He and I were scheduled for four interviews, but he excused himself after the first two (citing lack of time). We met in close succession—once in mid-October and then again a week later. The majority of our interviews focused on reviewing his baseline descriptions of discomfort. Because I saw a strong connection between his baseline descriptions and what I had witnessed in his classroom, I decided to spend considerable time going slower with Dominic and teasing out themes he discussed in his writing. This strategy was, on the one hand, useful because

he talked a great deal about his feelings about Alan and the classroom environment. On the other hand, this strategy prevented me from asking any questions on my protocol. Because his description of discomfort was embedded in his reactions to praise, feedback, and discomfort as potentially demotivating, I included his interview in the data I analyzed for this case.

In his baseline narrative of discomfort, Dominic shares a story about the first time he wrote an essay for his Advanced Placement history teacher. He writes that because he is a “passionate writer,” that the act of writing itself rarely makes him uncomfortable, but because he sees writing as inextricable from the “deepest parts” of himself, waiting for, or receiving negative feedback is particularly uncomfortable. Dominic writes,

Though strictly not a writing classroom, this class was by far the most demoralizing to me. It crushed my beliefs in my writing skills, and it only every placed emphasis on factual writing from memory, not creative writing. On the first “paper-exam,” I had a mental breakdown. I shifted nervously, and I felt sick and couldn’t focus... Toward the middle of the exam, I was close to tears, and as I clutched my head nervously in a breaking down moment, I realized that this was just one of many more to come. By the time the teacher collected my paper at the fifty-minute mark, it was the most poorly written piece of text I had ever produced in my life. I literally broke down and sobbed when I saw the grade on it when he handed them back, much to my embarrassment.

Dominic expresses in his baseline writings that he is able to write productively when his teachers allow him to be himself in his writing. He writes that his junior-year creative writing class was the best writing class he ever had because his teacher allowed him to express himself creatively, rather than merely memorize facts or answer prompts to a

reading. In one assignment, his teacher asked the students to develop ten characters from their imaginations. Dominic was thrilled, and “poured more into these characters than most probably would have, and each held a part of my own personality; a part I didn’t like to share or express.” As he eagerly awaited his teacher’s feedback, he became anxious and insecure. “I couldn’t focus on anything but the fact that she would be reading them,” he wrote, “and that she would be looking into me deeper than anyone ever had before.” When she gave students back their papers, he felt relieved when she “winked at me in knowledge of what was written on those sheets, much to my red-faced embarrassment.” Admittedly, it was hard for me to read his descriptions straight-faced, as it were, given the affectively ratcheted up feel of this writing, but I had to take at face value his experiences and use them to contextualize his discomfort with Alan’s tendency to withhold the recognition and praise Dominic clearly values.

During our first interview I asked Dominic about the “tone” of his classroom when it came to working on anonymous student work. I asked him this question because during the first classroom observation, I noted that his peers openly resisted (with groans and side comments) when Alan announced they would be working on peer review and analyzing student samples. Dominic offers this perspective on “the anonymous samples” Alan asks students to critique in class:

Andrew: What is the tone of the room when you all are working together to critique or analyze or review an anonymous work?

Dominic: I would say it’s kind of, you know, I guess a little bit of discomfort in the room because you know it’s somebody else’s paper and you’re afraid to say something because what if the person is someone you know, or it’s one of your friends in the class...you don’t want to hurt the person’s feelings.

Andrew: *Have you ever been in one of those peer review sessions when an anonymous paper has been trashed?*

Dominic: Yes. Usually when that issue comes up first, the one who starts crushing the paper raises his hand and says, ‘is this person in the room?’ If the teacher says, ‘no,’ which we don’t know if the teacher is lying or telling the truth, immediately it starts. You know, the writing was wrong, you couldn’t find the direction, you know, and it just goes and then the entire class is shooting down the paper. I’m trying to keep quiet and look around the room to see if anyone has a crushed expression on their face before I raise my hand.

Andrew: *Have you ever witnessed somebody looking a bit defeated?*

Dominic: That’s kind of hard to say because I feel a lot of people in my class look like that regularly. I think it’s mostly that people don’t want to share their work, you know? People don’t want to read their writing and then have others, you know, pretty much politely destroy it in front of them, or not so politely, sometimes, and then people don’t want to read other peoples’ writing that don’t want to be the person getting destroyed, or don’t want to be the person destroying.

These accounts have me feeling a bit turned around. On the one hand, Alan tells me he believes he jokes with students in order to create a more casual environment, one that helps create an atmosphere where students will feel comfortable sharing work with one another. On the other, however, I have to question the emotional tenor of a room where students, according to Dominic, fear sharing with one another because there is a tendency for “work to be destroyed.”

I also felt a bit tangled up in what I felt were very dissonant realities about Alan’s perception of his classroom atmosphere and teaching style, especially after I had observed his class. Alan sat behind a large desk, the chairs were in loose rows, and Alan clearly controlled the conversation from the front of the room. The men (at least those

who were engaged) seemed to enjoy the more agonistic, debate-like aspects of Alan's questions: he would ask students a question, they would answer, and he would counter their answers—often times with a tone I wrote in my journal as “defensive.”

Additionally, in one of my classroom observations, I looked around the room and saw the students of color in a corner as far away from Alan as they could physically be. I noticed the female students staring off as the men debated with each other. There were other white men, too, tucked in a corner opposite the students of color. These men were also staring off, or texting, or doodling on their notepads. I thought to myself, surely Alan must be aware that his choice to debate and defend his positions with such a small, male portion of the class counters his awareness of feminist principles of, at least, power differences in public arenas of discourse? These principles, or his self-awareness of his size and power, never (during my observations) came through in his teaching. Engaging in agonistic debate about the writing itself, or the subject of the writing, which happened several times during my observations, Alan and the few students engaged in class conversation started debating the merits of the content itself instead of the writing. This seemed to create an uncomfortable environment for many students.

From my observations and interviews with Alan and his students, I got the strong sense that there was a significant gap between Alan's flip, “you don't bring me flowers anymore” comment, and the impact of that sentiment on his students' comfort participating in class. His stories bespoke someone who had come to recognize his vulnerabilities, and also the importance of being recognized as a student who has something important to say. Paradoxically, during our interviews, Alan interspersed these stories of personal vulnerability and reflection with defensive remarks about students

need for positive feedback, and with his lack of worry about his students' perceptions of him as a person. Yet, Alan cared what they thought of him—he used self-deprecating humor to create, in his words, a comfortable class environment. While he said he did not care, Alan worried that his commanding physical appearance and gruff voice gave students the wrong impression of him, yet at the same time sat at the front of the room and openly challenged the other four male participants when they argued against his points. I believe these conflicted positions say much about the difficulty for teachers, especially men, to reconcile and manage the desires they have for how students *should* act, and ways they *might* become self-sufficient enough to not need the flowers, as it were.

When we think of discomfort in the composition classroom, we usually picture scenarios where teachers introduce students to uncomfortable ideas in order to change their thinking. This case, however, highlights the uncomfortable dynamics that arise without using provocative texts in the first-year writing classroom. When Alan remarks that his students want flowers when he wants his students to write better, this clash of desires creates an uncomfortable classroom dynamic. This case provides new dimensions of “teaching discomfort” that are not currently addressed: that unrecognized and at times conflicting identity needs create widely felt discomfort that makes classroom participation feel high-risk for many students and that discomfort can cause a teacher to “act out” in ways that may satisfy those identity needs, but alienate or discomfit students in the process. To offer a personal example, I once had one of those “male solidarity blocks” in the corner of my writing class. They challenged me at every turn, which conflicted with my need to appear as a male-identified person in control. In response, I

became aggressive towards them and acted in ways that otherwise made the rest of the class feel uncomfortable; I know this, because several students called me an “asshole” in my evaluations.

The force of these conflicts between teachers’ and students’ needs for recognition often goes unacknowledged. Alan, for instance, indicated that he felt most comfortable, “when I am talking and my students are silently nodding in approval,” and “when my students are joking and laughing at (or at least responding to) my jokes.” As Bracher (2006) reminds us, “each form of recognition can either support or interfere with learning. When students seek recognition as being ‘a good student,’ or ‘intelligent’ and such recognition is not received, they may feel depressed, anxious, or angry” (9). Experiencing our students’ engagement or positive responses to our jokes helps support our identities as “good teachers.” As for Dominic—he was one of the four or five who participated regularly; he was one of those male students who replied most often to Alan’s questions and is also one who observed that Alan regularly “destroyed” his papers. I think one of the ways Dominic received the positive feedback he indicated in his baseline descriptions made him more comfortable and motivated in writing classes was by engaging Alan frequently in class conversations—even if Alan disagreed with or dismissed his ideas. Striking to me, however, is the need for some kind of recognition from the teacher: what happens when too many students need that acknowledgment that things are going to be okay that their writing (or selves) aren’t terrible, yet the teacher withholds that praise? I believe in Alan’s class, he too often denied students that recognition and positive praise, which in turn was articulated as a generalized discomfort with his teaching style.

Snifter and Dominic, as well as other students (according to Alan) felt that Alan was too critical—had too few positive things to say. Many students needs for validation were thus unrequited, and as such, they felt vulnerable and uncomfortable participating in class. I asked Dominic if he thought discomfort could be a “pedagogically useful teaching tool.” He answered,

Dominic: In some ways, yes. It can motivate you to kind of correct your work or make it better, but other times it can also be used as a form to dismay a student, so it should be used wisely and in the correct setting.

Andrew: *Can you describe that wise-ness and that correct setting?*

Dominic: I guess maybe with a teacher in an individual conference, or with other students in a small group conference. In ours, he pointed out the errors in our papers and then in our small group we could look into it and discuss it individually with the teacher. Yeah, it’s discomfoting to know that other people are reading it and they’re going to be judging it. This is better than in a large group setting, like with the anonymous papers.

My follow-up question was a bit off topic, but I had in my mind a prior interview with Snifter where he pointed out a similar aspect of discomfort: that it can be a useful tool if 1) handled with care and 2) with the knowledge that not everyone can tolerate discomfort equally. His words resonated so strongly with Dominic’s observation about didactic discomfort in “the correct setting” that I asked: *Do you think that discomfort affects people differently? Like different people differently?*

Dominic: I would have to say yes. One of my old high school friends, when he was young, you know, he found discomfort... in one of our classes, he would use it to better himself, to work on and improve it, whereas myself—when I’m uncomfortable writing something, I usually end up going through a little breakdown stage where I start to panic because I’m not used to that discomfort really on a personal level. If I’m being judged in front of everyone, then the discomfort is too much—I feel like I’m just not adequate in doing what I’m doing.

I'll never know if too much discomfort truly causes Dominic to “break down,” though his comments about “panicking” and “breaking down” indicate to me that future research on the psychological consequences of “teaching discomfort” on students and teachers is needed. But his comment that there is a right place, a right time, and a right measure of discomfort is useful because it suggests that there is a kairotic aspect to discomfort.

As a way to transitioning to Chapter Four where I offer several suggestions for working with discomfort based on the findings from this study, I conclude these cases with several overarching descriptions and three recommendations from Snifter about discomfort: 1) That a significant cause of teaching discomfort in his section of English 102 is a lack of transparency in what he calls a “hidden curriculum of personal growth,” 2) That discomfort needs careful moderation, and 3) Teaching discomfort requires time; a slowing down of the curriculum. Like Dominic, Snifter pointed out that discomfort *could* be a useful motivational tool *if* teachers receive training on how to negotiate lines between motivation and demotivation, and that teachers must consider that not all students react to discomfort productively.

Participant Overview: Snifter

Snifter is a 39-year old Caucasian, male, heterosexual-identified sophomore student. Snifter served several tours in the Gulf War—he had been away from college for several years and is working towards a degree in social work. He and I met four times during the Fall 2012 semester: mid-October, late October, early November, and late November. Snifter’s insights were powerful, and most likely could comprise an entire chapter. I plan to return to his case in the future because Snifter openly discusses

discomfort and students who experience “adverse life events” (my language). I am interested in pursuing this connection, but for the purpose of this project, I limited Snifter’s “voice” to times when his descriptions contributed to or amplified themes about discomfort and teacher affect, masculinity, discomfort and student recognition, and the potential negative side effects of unattended discomfort in the writing classroom. His baseline descriptions of discomfort focus on three things: feeling uncomfortable and anxious if he does not have enough physical space around him, the age difference between him and his peers, and that often times, given his age and demeanor, people perceive him as being aggressive. During my class observations, I noticed Snifter often challenged Alan openly, which made the overall class dynamic fairly uncomfortable, and that during small group work, Snifter’s peers seemed intimidated by him, but also depended greatly on his keen insights and candid critiques. My conversations with Snifter tended to focus mainly on meta-level descriptions of discomfort. These insights are invaluable, and provide a fitting conclusion to the three case studies involved in this study of discomfort.

My first conversations with Snifter started off slowly. I burned through my protocol questions quickly and received few substantial replies. Unlike the previous research participants, it seemed Snifter was impervious to discomfort: “It’s difficult to make me uncomfortable,” he said, rather, “just irritated.” I had asked Snifter if he could describe a moment or moments about the class that made him uncomfortable. “Alan’s style doesn’t make me uncomfortable—it’s just, I think it’s more internal irritation because of what I’m used to, quite frankly. I’m not a huge proponent of change.” Snifter waited patiently for me to recalibrate my interview plan as I had run out of questions in

the first half-hour of our interview. With everyone else, it took at least three interviews to get warmed up and through all the questions. One of the benefits of using a semi-open interview structure is that I knew I had some flexibility. Given that he used the term “irritated” in response to my question about discomfort, I decided to ask a few follow up questions about his irritations. Turns out there were many.

Andrew: Given that you said Alan’s style makes you...irritated...if you were to design the ideal circumstances for this class, what would it look like?

Snifter: That’s a tough, though question, because quite frankly, I don’t like writing, so I’ve never really thought of how I would craft a class about writing. Without being familiar with writing theory or writing dynamics, I don’t think that I could reasonably rather dissect elements of the existing class, and suggest ways I think they could be improved.

Andrew: Sure, feel free

First on Snifter’s list: change the physical location—it was cramped and hot.

Snifter: There’s a fine line there, though. You don’t want to lose the intimacy because, well, writing is an intimate thing, but the more cramped an environment is, the more cramped people will feel emotionally, and I think that there’s certainly a bio...bio reaction that happens, so I think it would be more comfortable if the area were larger.

Snifter also felt irritated with what he perceived as a lack of overall structure to the course. Instead of a textbook, he told me, Alan assigned four texts about reading. “There’s not as much explanatory materials as I would like, and there was no in-depth analysis, just sort of a cursory thing. And then we go over research essays from prior classes.” His irritations with the structure of the class sounded familiar to me. Many of my own students over time have complained that the lack of a kind of classroom structure that they’re used to makes them uncomfortable.

Snifter's descriptions of his irritations reminded me of my student Ryan, whose experiences I recounted in the Introduction. Both men were non-traditional students returning to college on the G.I. Bill. Ryan and I had several e-mail exchanges about his mounting anxiety with the (lack of) structure. He told me after class one day that he never understood what I wanted from him—that my class left him feeling disoriented and confused. As Snifter was telling me about his irritations, I thought about Ryan and how I had blown him off. I kept telling him I knew what I was doing; that there was a logic to my pedagogy and this feeling of disorientation was both good and would pass once he became acclimated to the method. As I described in the Introduction, Ryan eventually “snapped,” and one day during class conversation he started screaming at me about my unethical, irresponsible pedagogy. Snifter didn't come across to me as agitated or upset, but I heard words like “anxious” and “irritated” and definitely heard a resonance.

Andrew: Do you think that in your English 102 class, there has been an intentional design or an attention to creating a class community feel or environment?

Snifter: Boy, that's a hard question

Andrew: Well, do you feel your teacher is a member of a class community, or a figure at the head of it?

Snifter: (long pause)

Andrew: And maybe just thinking instinctively would be better...kind of a quick, gut feeling.

Snifter: If I were to go through a quick gut feeling, I would go with “no,” I don't think he's part of that classroom community and the addendum to that is I don't think that there is a classroom community.

By this point, I knew Snifter (and Dominic, to an extent) perceived the class as one where students' papers were “destroyed” and believed that there wasn't much—if any—

classroom community. I see clearly now, however, that my question about whether there had been an attention to building a classroom community was, admittedly, my own assumptions about the kinds of environment most conducive to requiring students to grow, personally, through writing. As the interviews with Alan, Dominic, and Snifter progressed, for better or worse, I was having a difficult time not forming opinions of the classroom “community.”

Still, I wanted to know the importance of “classroom community” relative to students’ comfort or discomfort and how he believed this could be achieved. It seemed he had strong opinions that teachers should make classrooms as comfortable as possible, and that discomfort did some kind of work regarding personal growth and interaction, but his details were vague. During our final interview, I asked him whether any particular assignment caused him discomfort. He replied that there was one assignment that asked students to write about “how and why we find it difficult to write.” This assignment, Snifter remarked, really challenged the younger members of the class to connect with the “personal goals” that he felt were understated in the goals and outcomes for the course. He recounted that during a peer review session of this assignment, he was struck by how shallow his peers’ answers were. It was at this point that Snifter identified a central “uncomfortable” aspect in trying to encourage young students to write “personally” as it were, instead of merely “writing critically.” In his mind, there were several “inadequacies” in how the course (and Alan) attempted to achieve an integration of the two.

First, Snifter told me he believes that young people don’t necessarily have a strongly developed sense of self. Because of this, he said, it was sometimes hard for them

to write as personally as he believed research writing required. Second, the expectation of personal growth and development was unclear. Snifter was convinced that as part of the goals and outcomes, students were expected to “put yourself into your writing.” “What I’m about to say,” he hedged, “I don’t know if Alan covered it. I don’t know if he stressed it. I don’t know if he is suppose to or if he should, all I know is that his goal wasn’t a large part of his instruction. That students often have an underdeveloped sense of self at 18, 19, and 20 (Snifter’s words), and that there are tacit expectations to share personally invested writing with “24 relative strangers,” without this goal being explicitly stated, discussed, or integrated fully into the course was, in his terms, “paramount.” “I just think telling people what is expected of them and in whatever case, presenting how that could be achieved lessens discomfort and lessens anxiety and seems to me,” he said, “a better way to go.” Many students, he observed, cannot tolerate being pushed. Ambiguity and discomfort, he noted, are two common learning experiences that teachers have to monitor with care:

You know, this conversation reminds me of the end of our first interview when you asked if I thought there is value to discomfort and learning. And my answer is yes. I do. But it has to be moderated and it has to be the right kind of discomfort. There’s all sorts, you know? There’s physical, mental, social and on and on. So I think you have to allow students to become uncomfortable and confrontational, but at that age, were that the case, and I still have some lingering PTSD from the Gulf...it’s just that I’ve had 20 years to moderate it. So there’s a whole bunch of stuff going on that forgoes any discussion of other psycho...social abuse that you know people may have suffered, so you have to be careful with introducing discomfort because it’s a required course, you know? I mean, discomfort. The idea if we’re just going to keep using the word discomfort, the idea of discomfort that it triggers in your body chemical and physiological responses like adrenaline.

Pupils get dilated, heart rate increases. I mean, all sorts of things, so if you are already discomforted by life, you're already, at, you know, on a scale of 1 to 10...let's say your life is really relaxed. Your attitude is at a three... By the time you get to class, and this isn't your only class, you know, you're fighting with your girlfriend, your car broke down, your dog ate your fucking shoe, whatever the triggering event is. Now, by the time you get to class, your discomfort level is at a five. Now an instructor says, "I'm going to turn up the discomfort level two points." Well, that's not a big deal, but the guy who is at a 7 or 9...so now what happens is we humans don't deal well with discomfort first of all. Secondly, when we deal with discomfort interpersonally, we don't say 'listen, I'm a little uncomfortable right now, would it be okay if we moderated the environment so my discomfort level will go down?' We don't say that. You know, discomfort usually manifests itself through two ways: extroversion or introversion. If it manifests through extroversion you have a problem and the teacher has to be aware of that.

Andrew: So what are teachers suppose to do? I mean, we are not really trained to handle these kinds of reactions to discomfort. Many of my colleagues would say this "awareness" crosses the line between teacher and therapist.

Snifter: Then that is a tremendous failing. A tremendous failing. That is the grossest form of copout that I think could be applied to the situation. Teaching is an emotional business... So I don't see how it could not be part of your, part of your job to be made aware and be trained in this for I don't know 15 years in the automotive industry. It's not rocket science—it's basic human relations training. Aren't teachers given that kind of training? Teach teachers how to deal with the emotional situations they themselves cause, for Christ sake. Hell, salespeople are taught how to do that. Seems to me that the people at Best Buy know how to control interpersonal situations than most teachers who are in charge of 25 students. Jesus.

Snifter's comments here, much like those given by Dominic about his anxiety, exceed the boundaries of this project, but point to the need for research on intersections of mental health and teaching discomfort in freshman composition. I believe these intersections are crucial to knowing more about how to train teachers to identify macro and micro level values, analyze the impact these values have on their teaching, and establish boundaries that allow them to more ethically "push" and "pull" on students' previous understandings of the world in order to accomplish their and their institution's teaching goals. Snifter and Dominic, in offering descriptions of their experiences with discomfort in Alan's class, point my project towards a conclusion that speaks across the cases in spite of the differences between them: that the emotional life of the classroom, regardless of its ideological or pedagogical inclinations, must be taken seriously. Alan's descriptions of discomfort relative to his students' descriptions reveal a disconnect between his perception of himself and his classroom dynamics and what his students pointed to as a lack of attention to these dynamics. In this project I examine the emotional and social psychological forces of discomfort through the links made between field-wide, institutional, and individual values and practices. I do not think the emotional aspects of discomfort should be overlooked, nor do I wish to present "teaching discomfort" as an overdetermined and inflexible reality of every writing classroom. Taking a cue from the student voices in this study, I conclude this section by exploring what thinking of "teaching discomfort" as a kairotic phenomenon might mean for first-year composition instruction.

Conclusion: Towards a Kairotic Understanding of Discomfort

As composition teacher-scholars who works closely with students who have little choice but to take our writing classes to complete their degrees, we can develop more responsible ethics for working with student writers by becoming more mindful of the ways in which teaching discomfort impacts upon our classrooms in conscious and unconscious ways. In the cases of teachers' descriptions of discomfort, we see the impact of macro-level values on micro-level teaching practices. Teachers perceive their given curricula as valuing social justice and critical thinking. These values, in different ways, intersect with their own and prompt them to want to "push" students to uncover their discomfort in ways that fall short in practice. Students report that certain topics are "too touchy" or that "uncovering" certain "truths" could threaten their family relationships. In cases where "teaching discomfort" does not necessarily involve assigning texts about social justice, discomfort unfolds between teacher and students; it accelerates anxieties and derails the creation of a classroom community students describe as important to doing some of the difficult work of writing on a college level. As Snifter asked, "Aren't teachers given [basic human relations] training? Hell, salespeople are taught to do that."

I am hopeful that highlighting "teaching discomfort" will help the field rethink entrenched patterns of devaluing the role of emotion in first-year classes. Discomfort as cognitive dissonance helps motivate, push, and pull students towards a deeper understanding of themes in course texts, their own writing, and even their place in the world. When we introduce students to ideas that conflict with their previous perceptions of the world, they are, in theory motivated by the emotional unpleasantness of that discrepancy. Students' discomfort, however, can thwart the degree to which we "push"

our students. Often, we are afraid we might “cross the line” into the “personal zone” or become too ideologically invested to be ethical teachers. The complexity of students’ personal relationships to the material we believe will “destabilize” them is often unacknowledged. We assume that by proxy of the texts we assign, the discomfort generated will be enough for them to “dislodge their so firm beliefs.” But the biggest paradox here is that discomfort is also the elephant in the classroom; it is the movement towards and away from learning “difficult knowledge.” It seems as if we want students to go “deeper” and to think “more critically” about things that they cannot always see, even if it is standing in the middle of the room. At the same time, as the students noted, the teachers in this study simultaneously pushed these topics and avoided mediating them.

The students in this project reflect back the ways in which descriptions of discomfort clash with the reality of discomfort in the classroom. While I have perhaps been mostly critical of “teaching discomfort” as a means of critical inquiry, every student in the study acknowledged that discomfort, when used “wisely and in the correct setting,” could motivate them to do better, think more deeply. The challenge with this suggestion, even though I agree, is that if discomfort is an elephant in the classroom that creates and challenges “teaching” it, then how do we go about “using” it wisely? The suggestion to use discomfort wisely and correctly calls to mind the classical rhetorical concept *kairos*, which is often translated as “saying or doing the right thing(s) at the appropriate time.” As Margaret Price points out, *kairos* also involves factors such as context, time, physical space, and attitudes (Kindle 1348). Thinking of “teaching discomfort” *kairotically* prompts us to question whether we (as a field, a program, or a teacher) are emotionally savvy enough to know the right time and place for teaching discomfort? Chapter Four

takes up this question and proposes several suggestions for working more mindfully (and kairotically) with discomfort.

Even when it is something as benign as offering a critical remark on a students' paper, or assigning a text about queer sexuality that the writing program has approved, the assumptions and values we bring to these occasions can greatly affect teachers and students experiences in first-year classrooms. Our field can practice a more ethical approach to "teaching discomfort," committing to addressing the elephant in the classroom and listening more carefully to students' experiences as they "talk back" to some of our most entrenched practices.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ETHICS AND PRAXIS OF TEACHING DISCOMFORT: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPOSITION STUDIES

This chapter describes the implications of my research for composition pedagogy and the professional development of writing teachers. The revealing descriptions of discomfort given by teachers and students make me see how first-year composition teachers need better resources to help them work more intentionally with discomfort in freshman writing classes. The stories students and teachers tell about teaching discomfort can help teachers, programs, and the field at large interrogate the values that consciously and unconsciously inform our field's statements, teaching materials, teacher trainings, and pedagogies. Teaching writing is uncomfortable. Whether one values teaching writing as critical inquiry or strives to avoid political or ideological topics, discomfort can facilitate *and* block learning. Close attention to these "emotioned" dynamics, particularly those catalyzed by discomfort, can help teachers develop a mindful awareness of the right time and place for teaching discomfort in the first-year writing classroom.

My study found that teaching discomfort happens in classrooms that consciously or unconsciously engage discomfort as critical inquiry, as well as those that avoid "ambushing" students with course texts or topics that destabilize them. In each case, the teacher participants articulated descriptions of "teaching discomfort" that did not always match up with their students' experiences in the classroom. This revealed that there is a disconnect between what one values (or is wary of) about discomfort, the degree to which one puts discomfort into practice (or the extent to which one tries to avoid it), and the impact of discomfort on pedagogical outcomes. This disconnect appears to be unconscious, which in turn creates paradoxical situations where teachers both create and

are unable to fully address “elephant(s) in the classroom.” These paradoxical situations interact with students’ own complex emotions, and, I argue, when left unaddressed have the potential to deteriorate classroom dynamics, counteract pedagogical goals, or worse—trigger adverse mental/emotional responses in teachers and students.

My research demonstrates how the cognitive and psychological effects of discomfort as cognitive dissonance are amplified by the overarching fear of emotion in rhetoric and composition studies, which limits the tools by which teacher and students might work more mindfully with discomfort in first-year composition classrooms. I suggest teacher-scholars in the field bring to light the emotional labor embedded in the practices it values. Programs and teachers must reflect on the needs and values that compel their curricula and pedagogies. As a discipline, we must listen to the lived experiences of teachers and students when theorizing about discomfort, affect, and emotion. Too often these conversations take place in abstraction from practice, which impoverishes the reality of teachers’ and students’ experiences in the classroom. Reflection on discomfort must be more considerate of context. That is to say, we must interrogate the material, lived conditions that impact our abilities to work with discomfort in generative ways.

This chapter is divided into two sections: *the ethics of teaching discomfort*, where I raise questions about teaching discomfort and its impact on socially vulnerable teachers and students—those of us from socially marginalized groups, and/or those of us who have emotional delays or vulnerabilities, and *the praxis of teaching discomfort*, where I discuss methods for teachers and programs working with discomfort as critical inquiry and for developing an awareness of discomfort and its effects on class dynamics in

general. In the second section, I approach these recommendations by offering strategies for individual teachers, writing programs, and the field at large.

In the first section, I refer to the ethics of teaching discomfort to suggest ways we can develop a mindful awareness of teaching practices that impact socially and emotionally vulnerable students and teachers in ways we tend to overlook. My experience as a teacher who claims membership in socially marginalized communities, as well as listening to Meena's experiences, has shown me how important it is to understand the intense emotional consequences teaching discomfort has for marginalized students and teachers. I have heard people say, "But writing classrooms are uncomfortable for everyone!" While this may be true, not everyone experiences discomfort in the same way. I draw from my experiences as a trans* identified student and teacher who has worked with LGBT students, international students, and students of color, to help explain how important it is to be mindful of the ways we talk *about* and *to* various "others."

Teachers (white, cisgender, heterosexual teachers in particular) who use a Gloria Anzaldúa or a Leslie Feinberg to help students develop critical thinking might take the role of "ally" by proxy, but it is important not to assume that just because one assigns texts about various "others," that they have reflected on their own participation in intersecting structures of power. Given the unavoidable power difference between students and teachers—even in classrooms that attempt to neutralize or democratize these differences—teachers are seen by students as masters of the texts they ask them to read. Racism, sexism, trans and homophobia in classroom conversations manifest through pedagogical authority. As Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) has argued, these "contact zone" conversations are not always empowering. When teachers remain "neutral" about or fail

to push hard enough on the themes of oppression the texts bring to light, these silences can erase the presence of whiteness, cisgenderness, and/or masculinity, which in turn reify these categories as the norms against which all “otherness” is measured.

In the second section, I discuss how devaluing emotion as a field limits our ability to understand discomfort as powerful co-constitutive, affective phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of cognitive dissonance. What I mean by this is that writing programs and teachers are informed by and reproduce Cartesian logics of reason that limit the extent of teachers’ awareness of their participation in emotional discomfort that is not generative. Writing courses are spaces where students are meant to be pushed, challenged, and brought to their limits of knowing. Without instituting dissonance reduction strategies, as Galinsky et al. have argued, there is a distinct possibility that the ideas we would like students to learn—especially if these ideas challenge their world view or sense of self—will be reinstated. My research shows that first-year composition classes are breeding grounds for discomfort by design—discomfort that is part and parcel of writing itself, and discomfort that is accelerated by a teacher’s choice of ideological or political course materials. As such, discomfort can both facilitate learning, and impair the affective and educational quality of teachers’ and students’ classroom experiences. In contrast to working to “destabilize” or “push” students to their limits, my approach to discomfort is to amplify our awareness of the emotional side of cognitive dissonance, using close listening and close reading strategies, self-evaluations, and using writing to build a vocabulary for talking about the emotional temperature in the classroom.

I draw from scholars like Ellsworth and Kruse, who theorize the kinds of structures needed to withstand exposure to uncomfortable ideas, and Bracher, who offers

self-reflexive exercises for teachers to identify their own needs and values. I believe these strategies, if knit into teacher training, may offer new strategies for working productively and ethically with discomfort in writing classrooms. By focusing on teachers training and curriculum development, we can become more aware of, and learn to work more productively with the discomfort that 1) already exists in the writing classroom and 2) is used to compel students to think more critically about the world around them, thus improving the chances that discomfort-related resistance will ease when dissonance reduction strategies are put in place by mindful teachers. In this section, I focus on training teachers to be more attentive to the complexities of discomfort, and offer realistic exercises for teachers and programs to create “shelters of exposure,” a more ethical and effective paradigm for teaching discomfort in first-year composition.

These recommendations, based on findings from this study, participate in several calls from the field and beyond for emotional or affect-based education (Boler, Trainor, Winans), “ethics of care” in education (Noddings), calls for “empathic education,” (Berman, Bracher), and more recent explorations at the intersection of mindfulness studies and writing education (Inuoe, Strickland). These calls have in common an understanding that “caring-about,” in Nodding’s terms, must be instrumental in developing an environment where uncomfortable learning can be confronted. Noddings argues that caring should be a central part of our educational curriculum—that the goal of our education, as much as creating competent, rational thinkers—should be to foster not only the recommended “habits of mind,” but also the “habits of emotion” that make critical thinking, reflection, and responsible citizenship possible.

While I see this section as most useful for teachers who use discomfort as critical inquiry, Snifter and Dominic help me see the ethical consequences of clashes between teachers' and students' unrecognized values, identity needs, and desires in the classroom. Scholars who challenge the narrow definition of critical pedagogy explore ways attending to emotional and identity needs is radical. Mark Bracher (2006) argues that well-worn pedagogies aimed at social change are ineffective because they fail to consider teachers' and students' identity vulnerabilities. He poses a challenge to traditional critical pedagogies that do not account for the importance of recognition in learning contexts, thus expanding the category to include attention to emotions as radical pedagogy. If we are to admit that writing teachers wish to prepare students for meaningful participation in public life, then it is important to remember that our jobs include creating social capital. The central notion of social capital, similar to an "ethics of care," is that relationships matter, especially in the midst of what many understand as a decline in civic engagement, an erosion of social ties, and the impact of electronic entertainment and social media on social relationships.

The Ethics of Teaching Discomfort

Megan Boler calls on those who "engage a pedagogy of discomfort" to "clarify for themselves and for the students their own ethical responsibilities" (197). I agree with Boler that there are ethical responsibilities that come with teaching discomfort.²⁴ Based

²⁴ Recently, a line of scholarship following Boler's original articulation of "pedagogy of discomfort" has theorized didactic discomfort in relation to Foucault's (1994) "ethic of discomfort" (Zembylas 2010; Sandretto 2010). These conversations interpret Foucault's "ethic of discomfort" as one that "emphasizes the proactive and transformative potential of discomfort" (Zembylas 707). My project has raised questions about the tendency to justify using discomfort

on the findings of my study, I suggest that there are two ways that teaching discomfort in first year composition can become unethical: when teaching discomfort is about addressing difference, and when teachers are not given the kind of “human relations” training (in Snifter’s words) that addresses emotion in first-year composition instruction. In the second section of this chapter, I draw on some of Boler’s suggestions to address the praxis of teaching discomfort, but find that the cases in my study complicate her recommendations in several ways. First, Boler speaks directly to teachers who are aware that they’re “engaging a pedagogy of discomfort.” The teachers in this study were, while not necessarily doing so “intentionally,” teaching discomfort, but did not see themselves as the kind of teacher that is hailed by Boler’s call for ethical responsibility. Second, her call is for *individual teachers* to take ethical responsibility. This study found that while individual teachers made choices according to their values, these choices were informed by institutional values and practices. Here I find Boler’s conception of ethics to be limited, and seek to broaden the scope of “ethical responsibility” to include programs and the field at large.

In broadening Boler’s articulation of ethical responsibility, I borrow from feminist philosopher Sarah Lucia Hoagland’s definition of ethics. In *Lesbian Ethics*, Hoagland critiques “traditional ethics” for its narrow focus on individuals as abstracted from society, and proposes an alternative she calls *autokoenoony*, or “self in community who is among many” (12). Hoagland writes, “Ethics starts with our interactions and with the values we spin and weave through our choices” (13). Central to her notion of

pedagogically, even if it is authorized as an ethical practice within a broader self-reflexive, emotional education program. In short, I distinguish my “ethical call” from those situating didactic discomfort from within Foucault’s definition.

autokoemony is that individual choices are made within overarching structures of power and oppression that limit and create opportunities to act. I find this definition of ethics a good fit with the findings of this study—that teaching discomfort is not merely about an individual teacher’s choice, but that “choice” in relation to values and within a community where choices are made from within powerful structures that are not always of one’s own making.

Based on two cases from my study, the first ethical concern I raise has to do with “teaching discomfort” as critical inquiry. This concern is closely related to Boler’s articulation of a pedagogy of discomfort as a practice aimed to invite teachers and students to question their deeply held beliefs and assumptions about the world. I see these practices as they were described in Summer and Meena’s cases as potentially unethical for three reasons:

- 1) The teachers were not intentionally employing a “pedagogy of discomfort,” but rather they were teaching discomfort because they value the work of destabilization and because these practices are in line with the writing program’s values.
- 2) Unlike Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort, neither teacher engaged the emotional consequences of these practices.
- 3) Neither teacher pushed the conversation far enough to actually achieve the “social justice” or “critical pedagogical” values they articulated in our interviews, which is damaging to various “Others” in the classroom whose lived realities are the subject of conversation and critique.

I do not intend to critique these teachers, but rather to see these practices as Hoagland suggests: value-based choices from within complex communities that enable and limit our options as teachers. The purpose of querying the ethics of some of the practices that manifested in this study is to call to light some of the unconscious things we do and become more mindful of them.

While none gave voice to this explicitly, all three teachers acknowledged in their own ways the connections between critical pedagogy and composition studies. Alan and Meena's comments about the role of writing or the rules of engagement are representative of debates the field has engaged for the past sixty years, yet no one has raised the question of whether what we do in composition studies can be characterized as "teaching discomfort." Alan's case, in particular, challenges the narrow perception of discomfort resulting from critical pedagogy in the classroom and opens up the possibility that discomfort is a field-wide concern. If so, we must ask several questions: "Are there any students who might be disadvantaged by the use of discomfort in writing classrooms?" "Are there lasting, negative effects of didactic discomfort?" "What training do teachers need to use discomfort in writing classrooms?" "Who is discomfited by what?" The first step in calling for an "ethics of teaching discomfort" is to invite to the conversation practices, teachers, and programs that otherwise would not feel included in the call.

I want to take a step back and think about Summer and Meena's classes in terms of values, practices, and implications. Summer describes "teaching discomfort" as something an instructor encourages students to "dig in to whatever makes them uncomfortable...to really pull out why they're having that response." The primary way

Summer generates the discomfort that she can then “dig into” is by assigning texts that intentionally cause students discomfort. The texts she assigns are primarily about language, she notes, but they’re also political commentaries about power, race, and difference. Meena values “destabilizing [students’] so firm beliefs” and accomplishes this by assigning some texts that are endorsed by the writing program, and others that amplify themes of racism, inequity, and difference. When it comes to “teaching discomfort,” Meena describes this in terms of her own destabilization—caused, primarily, by her students’ disavowal of values she holds dear. When her students initially resisted the racialized themes in the original texts she assigned, Meena gave them more readings about race and difference, but worked to remain neutral when moderating class conversations.

In establishing the grounds for a pedagogy of discomfort, Boler asks: “what do we stand to gain from this process of scrutiny?” Neither Summer nor Meena self-identified as critical pedagogues. They were, in fact, critical of some of the liberatory assumptions critical pedagogy tends to make. What do Summer and Meena stand to gain by “digging in” to their students’ discomfort? While they were unaware of their students’ reactions to their pedagogical decisions, Sebastian and Lilly, in particular, had more than just “so firm beliefs” to lose—there were matters of identity maintenance and family attachments on the line. For example, Sebastian was very aware of himself as being constructed as a “basic writer.” Several times he told me he was nervous to share his writing because he didn’t want his peers to think he was stupid. He also eventually identified himself as a user of African-American Vernacular English, but did not do so publicly in class conversations because he did not identify with the conversation around language that

took place during class. Lilly articulated that she felt the pressure to (and did) conform her writing to what she perceived as the teacher's viewpoints, but ultimately did not have a change of heart about systemic racism, racial profiling, and government neglect of people of color because her of her complex family values about race.

Alan's question of "ought we be doing this?" in composition classes is not new. Teacher-scholars have been debating the ethics of imposing one's "ideological agenda" on students for decades. I see these instances not as matters of ideological indoctrination, though conversations in the field have tended to focus on this argument (Berlin, Hairston, Phelps), but as emotional matters. Boler writes, "The educator who endeavors to rattle complacent cages, who attempts to 'wrest us anew' from the threat of conformism, undoubtedly faces the treacherous ghosts of the other's fears and terrors, which in turn evoke one's own demons" (175). I don't think that Meena or Summer set out with an "ideological agenda," as it were, to "wrest us anew," but that is precisely what they wanted to happen. And, I think Meena in particular was met with some "treacherous ghosts," which in turn evoked some of her own demons. Meena admitted that she could barely tolerate the pain of some of her students' racist comments, so she added extra readings about race and diversity that in turn amplified the discomfort felt by everyone. What do we stand to gain from this? More important, perhaps, is to ask: what can we afford to lose?

In *Teaching Community*, bell hooks writes how talking about race, white supremacy, and racism can lead a person of color to feel like this talk is pointless and powerless because of the ways in which white people control public speech,

No wonder then that while discussions of white supremacy and racism have become rather commonplace in individual scholarly writing and journalistic work, most people are wary, if not downright fearful, of discussing these issues in group settings, especially when among strangers. People often tell me that they do not share openly and candidly their thoughts about white-supremacist thought and racism for fear that they will say the wrong thing. And yet when this reason is interrogated it usually is shown to cover up the fear of conflict, the belief that saying the wrong thing will generate conflict, bad feeling, or lead to counterattack. Groups where white folks are in the majority often insist that race and racism does not really have much meaning in today's world because we are all so beyond caring about it. I ask them why then have so much fear about speaking their minds. (27-8)

In Meena's classroom, for instance, members of the "dominant" group, in her own words, tended to control the conversation, while her "ball-less" students of color (her description) remained quiet. No one felt safe to speak up against those who denied the importance of race, or who claimed to be living in a post-racial society. The onus must not fall upon our students of color to fight against the tide of white supremacy. As hooks notes, fear of conflict often covers up why people (especially people of color and other marginalized people) are hesitant to speak up about their thoughts on oppression. Fear of conflict and judgment, I would argue, has everything to do with discomfort. In a classroom context, many students are afraid to offend or confront their peers for fear that they will get made fun of or become alienated from the group. In my own classrooms, white students have accused students of color of "playing the race card," the saying of

which became a useful conversation in itself. I believe that if we are to get down to the heart of what many of these texts communicate, teachers need to model careful listening, kind disagreements, and offer students the recognition needed to reduce the discomfort students feel when exposed to dissonant cognitions.

Yet, it is also with good reason Meena felt unsure about how to mediate her students' dissonant ideas. During our second interview, I stopped recording so that Meena could tell me about documented instances when she received official reprimands from the writing program about student complaints against what they perceived was a political agenda to her teaching. Meena feared if she intervened too much in class conversations that her evaluations would prompt another reprimand, which in turn limited the extent to which she felt she could intervene in conversations. Meena's case tells me that addressing ethical responsibility in the teaching of first-year writing requires we rethink about her "choice" to teach socially provocative texts as one that honors her individual values, desires, and the communities within which these choices are made, constrained, and resisted.

Having talked with teachers who claim they simply wish for students to become better critical thinkers and writers and do so by employing texts that address race, power, and inequity, my thinking about teaching discomfort has changed. These are not teachers who identify as "critical pedagogues," and thus they fall outside the audience of Boler's "pedagogy of discomfort." Subtending her project on discomfort as critical inquiry is an emotional curriculum that attends to the inevitable feelings that emerge when addressing material that hurts. I can't help but see that Meena and Summer were not merely teaching *about* writing, but teaching *about* race, racism, power, and difference. These topics are

not only in line with their personal values, but endorsed by the program within which these teachers engage students with a pedagogy of discomfort as critical inquiry. Without having been trained to manage the emotions that make the pedagogy as productive as possible, however, these teachers lack the resources necessary to 1) push as “deeply” as they desire on students’ resistances or uncomfortable spots and 2) gauge or moderate the ways in which discomfort might be pushing too much and creating the opposite pedagogical effect, or worse—triggering adverse feelings or behaviors in students.

Through these interviews, I understand that key questions related to teaching discomfort are “what do we value?” and “what do we desire?” Are we teaching critical thinking, or are we teaching students to be anti-racist and anti-biased? If the answer is the latter, then I am curious how we think we will achieve our goals if we have not made navigating the emotional resistances that inevitably come from this kind of curriculum the core of teacher training. Further, I am concerned about two related problems I observed during this study: the first is a paradox of remaining neutral while desiring students to think more critically about power, oppression, and difference. Related to this concern is a worry that in staying quiet or neutral while members of dominant groups deny the very realities of students’ lives, that we are not doing our students justice.

Like Alan, I have recently begun to question the ethics of teaching discomfort—the kind of discomfort that compounds the already uncomfortable milieu of the composition classroom. I believe, however, that teaching writing must be connected to the sociopolitical world, else composition studies runs the risk of being seen as merely a service to the university, not as a space for students to create live and engaged writing. This is a selfish belief, in part, because I do not like the idea of committing myself to a

career of simply teaching college writing as a boring, depoliticized task. I also know that because first-year writing courses reach the broad majority of college students, we teachers have an opportunity to introduce students to ideas that can slowly unravel them—if they are willing and able to come undone. This is to say, what Summer and Meena (and I) think we are doing by assigning texts that deal with difference and inequity, and what the program we teach for believes, is that the role of writing instruction in the university is to dislodge students ways of thinking so that they may learn new things.

But many students are already made to feel uncomfortable in their daily lives. Socially vulnerable and/or marginalized students often know much about discomfort already, and as such, teachers should be mindful of various “Others” in the class that might be exposed to toxic and microaggressive conversations about matters with which they are intimately familiar. This is not to say we should never make students feel uncomfortable, or never work to create classrooms that are discomfort-free (which is impossible). Summer and Meena are right to try and monitor their “biases” by staying somewhat politically neutral in their writing classrooms. However, I learned from the students in this study that not pushing the conversation far enough does not do justice to the messages about power and inequity in the texts they’ve chosen for their students to read. It became clear to me that both Summer and Meena tacitly believed having their students read these texts would generate enough dissonance and discomfort to, if not get them to wrestle with some of their previous assumptions, at least plant seeds for the future. In raising questions of the ethics of teaching discomfort, I have come to wonder

why we assign these texts if we cannot seem to get to the heart of these matters—racism, injustice, and oppression.

Something we must consider when working with discomfort in first-year composition classrooms is that many of our students are already well versed in structures of difference and inequity. While often in the minority, students who identify or are identified as belonging to a culturally marginalized group are likely to have experienced the conditions about which we want our culturally dominant students to become aware. Students often describe feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable sharing writing until they get to know each other. When we employ texts that discuss power, racism, homophobia, and/or inequity, students are asked to write critically about these ideas, and then share them with their peers. Teachers often take for granted the level of trust required to become open to critique from their peers, especially if these critical writings deal with, even if on a theoretical or philosophical level, the material conditions of their lived realities. What is more, programs that endorse or require students to read, write about, and discuss certain uncomfortable topics should consider the ethical implications of that requirement. How do programmatic choices compel teachers with opposite (or more radical) values to make pedagogical choices in the writing classroom? What are the ways in which these values might put teachers at odds with students, perhaps amplifying the discomfort that is likely to arise in the writing classroom anyway?

The second ethical concern I raise comes from a powerful provocation issued by Snifter during our final interview:

Teaching is an emotional business...I don't see how it could not be part of your job to be made aware and be trained in this. It's not rocket science—

it's basic human relations training. Aren't teachers given that kind of training?

Alan's case complicated my preconceived notions of "teaching discomfort," because I did not anticipate his own ethical objections to what he describes as the tendency in first-year composition to "ambush" young students before they're ready. While he stated he favors that kind of destabilization, he questions whether the composition classroom is the right time and place for teaching discomfort. Ironically, while Alan took care to avoid the kind of discomfort he described as an ambush, his classroom management style generated discomfort that impacted upon class dynamics in unproductive ways. His case highlights the need to detach a close affiliation of didactic discomfort with critical pedagogy or critical inquiry. Teaching is an emotional business, but rarely are writing teachers encouraged to think about the ways in which their needs and values inform their pedagogy and curriculum.

Both Snifter and Dominic described a teacher who was not part of a classroom community, who offered little positive feedback, and whose affect and demeanor seemed to alienate other students in the classroom. Alan's own perception of self and his teaching, however, are at odds with these descriptions. One conflict, his "you don't bring me flowers anymore" comment, evinces a clash of needs between student and teacher. While Alan clearly dismissed his students' needs for more positive feedback in a patronizing way, these needs remain valid for the students. This disconnect might seem insignificant on the surface, but the discomfort generated as a result of their *perceptions* was real and unproductive. My observation of this discomfort in combination with his students' descriptions leads me to believe that many (including Alan) had a need to be

recognized as a “good student,” but received messages (weather conscious or not) that their work wasn’t good enough or their contributions did not matter. The interviews I had with Alan, however, suggested he is a very sensitive, vulnerable person who was aware that his “gruff demeanor” might be taken the wrong way. When he got in front of his students, in particular the two adult male learners he singled out in his interviews (Deandre and Snifter), that sensitivity took a back seat to a more defensive, aggressive style of teaching.

I frame the kind of teaching discomfort that was generated in Alan’s case as an ethical concern because Snifter and Dominic raised my awareness to the possible impact of discomfort on “sensitive” students. For most students, I think, this kind of interaction with a teacher and with a class dynamic that feels inert because of the discomfort circulating in the room merely creates an ambivalent or detached relationship to the class as a whole. Snifter not only raised the question of why teachers are not given human relations-style training, but he described this lack of training as “a tremendous failing,” and “the grossest form of copout.” In failing to take seriously the “emotional nature of teaching,” by not training teachers how to manage the emotional life of the classroom, we fail to consider the possibility that discomfort generated by a clash of needs and desires impacts students in negative ways that often go unrecognized.

Snifter points out that like he, many students returning from war have (diagnosed and undiagnosed) PTSD. In her work on the “manifestation of madness” in U.S. higher education, Price reminds us that “people with mental disabilities do move in an aura of constant violence within institutions, but...most of the violence comes not from these individuals but is instead directed at them” (216). My project cannot answer whether this

particular kind of unchecked “teaching discomfort” participates in that “violence,” but I suspect the answer is “yes.” More research on discomfort and “triggering” is needed to address that possibility. While individual teachers can become more reflective and self-aware of their needs and desires, and more conscious of discomfort that “tanks” class dynamics, the onus ultimately is on teacher training programs and the field at large to take seriously the impact of discomfort on teaching writing—particularly for those who are more vulnerable to these dynamics.

The Praxis of Teaching Discomfort: Suggestions for Professional Development

Given the complex, overdetermined nature of discomfort in first-year writing classrooms, and the ethical concerns this research raises about teaching discomfort, I believe that a curriculum that focuses on working ethically and productively with discomfort should be a central component of teacher professional development. Teaching discomfort requires time, patience, and compassion; it requires the right conditions where trust can develop, and teachers demonstrate they have done the work necessary to ally with various “Others” in the room whose lived realities are often the stuff of class conversation and critique. This may mean we have to scale back the amount of work we try to do in a semester to make room for building “shelters of exposure,” a concept I explicate in the next few sections. On a macro-level, teaching discomfort may also require rethinking the ways in which teachers are evaluated. When students are made to feel uncomfortable, or when they feel discomfited by a teacher’s obvious “difference,” these fears and insecurities often manifest through teacher evaluations and thus limit a teacher’s feeling of trust and safety to push students towards more critical reading or

writing practices. My suggestions here, as inspired by Maria do Mar Pereira's work on didactic discomfort, are both realistic and demand the impossible.

Self-analysis for Teachers

In "Feminism and Composition: Case For Conflict," Susan Jarratt calls for teacher training that is more attuned to "the social complexities of our classrooms and the political exigencies of our country" (269). The following sections attempt to answer that call, by expanding, in part, her advocacy of having teachers' own presentation of themselves as raced, gendered identities as part of classroom discussions of difference and inequity as addressed in course texts (275). Similar to Jarratt's observations, Mark Bracher (2006) points out that teachers' identity needs often clash with students,' and these conflicts can lead to pedagogical failures (135). Taking cues from Jarratt and Bracher, I address both kinds of "teaching discomfort" raised in this study: that which manifests from discomfort as critical inquiry (Summer and Meena), and that which is created by identity needs that go unexamined (Alan). Bracher suggests that many (if not most) teachers are very possessive of their pedagogical strategies, consciously or not, and become defensive when these strategies are questioned precisely because we see them as part of our identit(ies). To get at these unconscious attachments, he recommends that teachers engage in the process of self-analysis, preferably as part of institutionalized professional development. While Bracher's recommendations are based on psychoanalytic processes outlined by Lacan, I believe they can be adapted for a less-psychoanalytic, more widely implementable practice for FYC teachers and programs.

In my opinion, self-analysis is an important precursor to teaching discomfort. The following are examples drawn from the case studies reported in Chapter Three: 1) As

Meena's case suggests, several of her descriptions of discomfort were intimately connected to her sense of self—both her “teacherly” self, and her “real” self. When her students' racist comments wounded and challenged her sense of self, she “fought back” by assigning more complex texts that pushed her own ideological values, and clashed with the her students' identity needs. This “clash” was made clear to me by Lilly's articulation of her struggle with “changing her mind” because of her own need to integrate family members' values into her own identity. If Meena had been encouraged, in a professional development context, to analyze her pedagogical strategies as they relate to self and identity, I believe her class would have been more successful. If prompted to outline her teaching desires, she could turn those desires into intentional plans. 2) All three teachers in this study said they were most comfortable when their students liked them and took what they said seriously. Bracher points out that most teachers have an unconscious desire—one that drives their teaching behavior—to elicit recognition from one's students (140). Taking stock of and analyzing our favorite pedagogical strategies can provide insight into which behaviors drive our desire for recognition. 3) When we ask/require students to question their deeply held beliefs, we too should do the same. By remaining “neutral,” we keep students and their affective experiences at arm's length. 4) Finally, many of the uncomfortable dynamics that arise between male teachers and their students can be managed with greater ease by encouraging male teachers to get in touch with what they want from their students.

In outlining a “pedagogy of discomfort,” Megan Boler stresses the importance of the mutuality needed to invite students to question their deeply held beliefs and assumptions, “The educator's own beliefs and assumptions,” she writes, “are by no

means immune to the process of questioning and ‘shattering.’” Similarly, it is important that the educator explore what it means to ‘share’ the students’ vulnerability and suffering” (187). While these points are true, most teachers are not given models to help make themselves vulnerable to students; on the contrary, many if not most programs encourage teachers, by virtue of the ways in which curriculum and/or assessments are designed and by modes of address and tone, to maintain a hierarchical relationship with students. We are neither encouraged, nor shown the way to turn our own emotions, needs, and desires into reflective material that can enhance our teaching strategies.

While teachers are not often encouraged to look inward, part of the problem is that many of us do not see the value of this practice. Julia Brooks muses, “I wonder if some instructors’ apprehensions to even acknowledge that emotion is a legitimate and powerful component of the learning process may be a result of the same ‘defensive fear’ that Boler proposes, of losing control, being ridiculed...[but] if we have no training in or experience with anticipating, acknowledging and utilizing emotional upheaval in the classroom, then it is understandable that we might be afraid and anxious” (55). Brooks’ observations are very similar to the paradoxical condition of teaching discomfort—we ask students to look deeply into their own lives to question their previous experiences relative to their peers’ and the texts we require them to read, yet at the same time (because we fear losing control), we keep conversations on the surface (or, in Alan’s case, we *think* we purge the class of uncomfortable topics) because often, the consequences of our requests takes us far outside our areas of expertise. My research and experiences have led me to believe that ignoring such a central aspect of teaching first-

year writing leaves teachers unprepared to deal with the uncomfortable realities of the writing classroom.

Training teachers to work effectively and ethically with discomfort in writing classrooms starts by looking inward. Bracher notes there are four “moments”²⁵ that comprise an effective self-reflection for teachers: identifying and exposing counterproductive pedagogical practices, looking inward to identify how and why we organize our classes and interact with students as we do; interpreting identity contents and maintenance patterns as related to our teaching, and “working through” these reflections to ask: what are the relationships between my identity needs as a teacher and my students’ identity development? In working ethically with discomfort in first-year writing classes, I suggest that teachers work through a series of writing prompts (that I will discuss in a moment) in order to explore these self-reflective moments, and then share these reflections with their colleagues. Much of the scholarship on affect, emotion, discomfort, and teaching stops short of offering suggestions on how teachers might become more vulnerable, or ways to make the classroom a more emotionally conscious space. The following are suggestions crafted from personal practice, peer observations, and student suggestions (including those given in this study).

Integrating self-analysis would require a radical shift in ways departments and/or writing programs are administered. Paying attention to the affective dimensions of teacher education requires administrators to take seriously the impact of emotions on the teaching of first-year writing. At present, I do not know of any conversations about this kind of training, and doubt that many programs actually require this kind of self-analysis,

²⁵ I am retaining the spirit of these suggestions, while modifying the language so they’re more relevant to our needs as writing teachers.

but I believe these suggestions would be easy to implement. Using GLU's FYC program as an example, new teachers (teaching assistants, lecturers, and adjunct faculty) are required to attend a week long, hands-on orientation a week before school begins. Once this orientation is complete, new teachers must take a course on foundations of pedagogy. While trends change from year to year, in my experience the focus of the orientation, subsequent semester-long course, mentoring groups, and professional development presentations leans towards histories and theories of rhetoric and composition, though there are many opportunities to apply these theories to practice (though many students, especially those outside rhetoric and composition studies, often complain that there are too few opportunities for practice). To better connect theory to practice, I see these venues as opportunities to connect theories of writing to theories of human growth and development, social psychological perspectives of dissonance and resistance, a short section on disability studies, theories of trauma, PTSD, and other emotional barriers/challenges; in Snifter's words, spend some time on the "human relations" aspect of teaching writing.

Over the course of the semester, as teachers are learning theories of composition, theories of human development and growth, *and* gaining practice in the field, I suggest they be required to keep a journal in which they wrestle with the following questions²⁶:

- What does being a teacher mean to me?
- What does it mean in terms of my social, economic, and material sense of self?
- Why did I decide to become a teacher?

²⁶ I have borrowed from and adapted these questions from Mark Bracher's book *Radical Pedagogy*, pages 138, 139, 143-147.

- What identity needs of mine at that time were involved in my decision to become a teacher?
- What other identity needs do I have now that intersect with being asked or required to teach first-year composition?

In responding to these prompts, teachers should be encouraged to engage in a kind of free association, or focused free writing. Once teachers have been giving time to write and reflect upon these questions, time must be made to share their thoughts with colleagues. What I wish to stress here is that we're often encouraged to keep journals, but find that these musings remain our own private thoughts and opinions—not as material to be turned into real teaching practices. At first, new teachers may feel they lack experiences to reflect upon, but eventually they will get used to the practice of reflecting over time and in relation to the real work they and their peers are doing in the classroom.

Teachers should also be encouraged to bridge their fundamental pedagogical aims and objectives and their identity needs. The following journal questions should be posed to new teachers around the midterm of the first semester:

- What kind of impact do I want my teaching to have for particular students or for a particular class?
- Do I want to impart a certain kind of knowledge to my students—one that's based on my own academic interests or specialties?
- In what ways do my identities communicate with my students? Do my identities cause students to think, feel, or act in ways that might threaten my sense of integrity? How might these threats change the ways (materials, assessments) I interact with students?

Bracher notes, “listing and interrogating our favorite pedagogical strategies, tactics, and classroom practices, assignments, and reflexes can also provide significant insight into the identity components and modes of maintenance that drive our teaching” (139). I agree with Bracher; his point here makes think of the teachers in my study whose teaching was driven, in part, by their identity needs. As I noted in Chapter Three, Alan felt threatened by other men in class and articulated two main concerns: that he is often frustrated by little “male solidarity blocks” in the back of the room, and that his students will view him as a gruff, insensitive man. I think that if Alan were asked directly to reflect on the kinds of validation he desired but sometimes does not receive, for example, or asked to unpack a teaching event where he was pursuing certain identity needs, then maybe his classroom practices would align with his understanding of self in relation to teaching.

We should also work to identify instances where we may be consciously or unconsciously seeking our students’ recognition, and interrogate moments when they refuse us this recognition, or threaten our sense of self. Additional journal questions might include:

- In what ways do I desire/need recognition from my students?
- How do I feel when my students do not respect my authority? How do I respond? Do these feelings unconscious influence my teaching?
- What part(s) of my identity need recognition?
- Name the different forms (conscious and unconscious) of recognition one might receive from students. For example, flattery is one form. Name others.

To offer a personal example, when I first started teaching freshman composition I had just started transitioning from female to male. I looked very much like an adolescent boy

in a woman's body. My students seemed to pick up on my queerness, but were unable to put a finger on what it was about me that wasn't quite right. From them, I dearly desired recognition of my male identity, which included: calling me "sir," and "Mr.;" giving me the respect I was unable to earn as a female; and buying into, without question, my gender identity. In order to achieve these desires, I ratcheted up my aggressive masculine affectations; for example, yelling, raising my voice, changing body postures, taking up more space, calling people out in front of peers for bad behavior, mocking other male students when they started resisting. I am not proud of these behaviors, and I was not conscious of them at the time. To be honest, I thought about my male teaching mentors and tried to model some of their behaviors. My more aggressive teaching came from hierarchical models where teachers reinforced their authority over students. Looking back, however, I can see just how much my identity needs, and need for recognition influenced the ways I taught.

These reflections are important for all teachers, not just we "Others" whose identities might provoke heightened resistances or attitudes from students. When working with discomfort, it is especially important to get in touch with the questions above, while also asking these kinds of questions: Why do I want my students to feel discomfort? What kind of work do I imagine/hope/expect will happen? Because so much of teaching happens through underground, unconscious processes, keeping a journal and discussing one's replies to these questions as part of teacher orientation and training is crucial. I mentioned at the beginning of this section that I wished to demand the impossible—these practices would be challenging to get teachers to buy into actively and voluntarily because this kind of community writing would be uncomfortable to share. Therefore,

creating a program-wide culture of care, respect, and seriousness around these practices is crucial for their success.

Finally, at the end of the semester, new teachers could be asked to journal about, then discuss in large group format, their descriptions of experiences that come to mind in response to these adjectives²⁷:

- Most pleasant
- Most frustrating
- Most exciting
- Most humiliating
- Most uncomfortable
- Proudest
- Most anxious
- Most enraging
- Most inspiring
- Most disappointing
- Most engaging/engaged

Using these responses, teachers might then be asked to pick the most significant positive and negative experience from this list, and provide more details:

- Who was involved?
- Which issues mattered most?
- What was/were the setting(s)?
- Which activities were involved?
- What was the state of mind immediately before and after the event?

²⁷ Bracher, *Radical Pedagogy*, p. 143

- What were our thoughts?
- Fantasies?
- Feelings?
- Bodily responses?
- Behavior(s)?

Then, for the positive experience, teachers might answer the following prompts:

- What specific recognition or validation did I experience?
- What did I do to elicit this recognition or validation?

And for the negative experience:

- What specific recognition or validation did I desire but not receive?
- What damage or threat to my identity did I experience, and to what elements of my identity?
- Could the event have been avoided, made less negative, if I had not been pursuing certain identity needs or other gratifications (such as being in control, or fearing to assert myself to take control)?

The logic behind asking oneself these questions is that desire, identity, and recognition can produce pedagogical practices that undermine our efforts to teach students material they resist. If we are out of touch with the things that drive our teaching—things, in a loose sense, that have to do with aspects of self and identity—then we might hesitate to see alternative ways of teaching students the things we feel are valuable. These desires and needs for recognition exist underground, and we are very often unaware of the subtle (or not so subtle) ways in which they clash with our students' needs and desires. When we teach with or in the midst of discomfort (and we writing teachers inevitably do) we may do so because of unconscious wishes or needs for our students. Therefore, I recommend identifying our identity investments as teachers and in our teaching practices

before we consider introducing students to texts that trouble their own identity investments.

Teaching Discomfort and “Shelters of Exposure”

We humans, as learners, are capable of deep passion and drive for exposure, newness, and change. To be in the midst of learning is to be exposed to strange things that aren't ourselves, that fall outside of what we already know and that unsettle who we think we are. It can be thrilling; but, at the same time, continuous, full-on exposure to unmediated intensity of massive change and compounding complexity can shut down learning and spring denial or other retreats to shelters of self-protection.

—Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, “Sheltered Exposure”

The final suggestion I have for working ethically and productively with discomfort, is to think of the writing classroom as a site where teachers and students can manage, together, the inevitable and manufactured instances of discomfort that attend, facilitate, and block learning. As Ahmed and Micciche have noted, emotions are not contained within individuals—they circulate between objects and people, making certain experiences possible, while blocking others. Discomfort is certainly no exception. From this study, I have found that discomfort was not often on peoples' minds even though in my observations, the classroom air was certainly thick with it.

Ellsworth and Kruse's epigraph reminds me of a composition class. Writing teachers want to push students outside the boundaries of what they know because newness and change can be thrilling. Due to our fear of emotion, however, we forget that the spaces we create or neglect have everything to do with students' ability to tarry with the inevitable discomfort of change. As Nedra Reynolds has argued, the “*where* of writing” has everything to do with “how our experience in the spaces of the everyday

impact upon our identities, our confidence, our senses of self” (176). We have few models, however, for linking theories of affect, the materiality of the composition classroom, and the praxis of teaching writing. In this section, I approach the subject of the “*where* of writing” by drawing on Ellsworth and Kruse’s concept of “shelters of exposure.” My primary concern in this section is to suggest ways teachers can create classrooms as mindful spaces for both the inevitable and manufactured experiences of discomfort in first-year writing courses.

Teachers and students who participated in this study evinced, in a localized context, the ways in which discomfort can facilitate the dissonance needed for learning to take place. Their narratives, however, combined with my classroom observations and analyses, show that discomfort, if left unaddressed, can become a significant block that we often misattribute to students’ own resistances, misbehaviors, or even “bad chemistry.” When we expose students to ideas that trouble their understanding of self, or that unsettle who they think they are, these exposures can block learning. Sometimes this exposure has more intense consequences for those whose lived experiences are the subject(s) of the texts we assign to create the intensified effects of learning. For others, conflicts raised by this exposure may trigger unintended consequences. As Snifter rightly noted, many students come to class “already at a level 10” and cannot withstand more emotional stress. As such, we need to rethink the classroom as a “contact zone” and create spaces where emotions are part of the conditions whereby learning can occur.

I call these spaces *shelters of exposure*, borrowing from Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse’s (2010) theorization of their role in offering respite from the intensities of exposing students to ideas that “unsettle who we think we are” (69). Ellsworth and Kruse

define “shelter of exposure” as a space that helps facilitate experiences that derive from being exposed to ideas that unsettle our understanding of self. These experiences can sometimes be too intense, though, which in turn causes blocks, denials or “other retreats to shelters of self-protection” (69). “A shelter of exposure,” they write,

[H]ouses the tensions between big and small, open and close, cocoons and mountains....shelter and exposure. At these points of tension, abstract concepts and invisible forces—such as interrelationality and interconnection—may be felt as real, may be lived, and may become sharable. From a shelter of exposure, a response can be made to a reality that might not have been sensed: the fact of one’s relationship to the world. (70)

While Ellsworth and Kruse imagine these shelters as digital spaces and virtual online environments, I use the term in face-to-face, first-year composition contexts. I also see connections with studies in feminism, queer theory, sociology, and critical race theory, where teachers rely on discomfort to catalyze the dissonance necessary for learning.

Shelters of exposure in composition studies, then, are intentionally crafted sites where emotion, cognition, and critical thought are not seen as mutually exclusive, but as equal processes necessary to learning. These sites are useful for fostering an emotional climate that helps students work through the inevitable discomfort of writing and sharing writing as well as the discomfort of having one’s sense of self disrupted by readings and class conversations. I imagine these ‘shelters’ as responding to the classroom as “kairotic space,” a concept recently defined by Margaret Price as a space characterized by five criteria: 1) real-time unfolding of events, 2) impromptu conversation that is required or encouraged, 3) in-person contact, 4) a strong social element, and 5) high stakes. I have in

mind that these shelters provide a more hospitable²⁸ environment for discomfort in a “kairotic space” in the following ways:

- Helping non-minority students identify defensive emotional reactions to intense readings that interpellate their identities in structures of inequity
- Offering minority students psychic refuge from the pain of being exposed to distorted projections of their identities
- Re-centering the teacher in terms of making his/her identities and/or experiences subject to the same “disorientation” and inspection as students’
- Making students feel recognized, heard, and validated—especially minority students, who are often talked over or ignored in classroom conversations
- Building trust, humor, fun, and purpose among class participants

By now I hope I have made it clear that discomfort is not something teachers can “use” per se; rather, discomfort exists in a space, is part of that space, and operates in ways far beyond our control. Discomfort triggers students’ defenses, facilitates learning, compels teachers to react in undesirable ways, and stalls class conversations. Building our writing classrooms as spaces that counteract some of the less productive aspects of discomfort, or at least is more mindful of its effects of minority students will help us contend with the discomfort that will always be part and parcel of a (compulsory) writing class.

²⁸ By “hospitable,” I mean that this environment is one where discomfort is managed with open eyes, with a sense of ethics and responsibility, and where unproductive discomfort is reduced. I recognize that in the moment it is not always possible to distinguish between “productive” and “unproductive” discomfort, but I believe that many of the suggestions I offer in this chapter can help teachers become more attuned to differences between the two.

I want to be careful not to suggest that there is a prescriptive way to create these shelters. There is no telling whether our structures will hold up to storms that form beyond our control, and, I suppose, there is no guarantee that our students will help us build these structures along the way. In what follows, I offer a rough blueprint that I have found useful in working with discomfort in my first-year writing classrooms. My hope is that something about building shelters feels right, or seems helpful to other teachers. We have so few models for developing intentional spaces that take seriously the impact of physical space and affective experiences on learning; I consider this a rough attempt at fleshing something out. Before offering examples, though, I want to reiterate the importance of having done some focused introspection ahead of time. I believe doing this work helps teachers get clear on the kinds of work one wants to do in the classroom, which in turn will help teachers craft the best shelter possible for their own personal and institutional contexts.

After my experience with Ryan, the gay veteran who had an extreme emotional reaction to my pedagogy and curriculum, I decided that my ways of teaching disadvantaged certain students. I became very unsure of my teaching; I lost a lot of confidence, and stumbled through the following semester with a lot of unease and guilt. That summer, I came across Bracher's suggestion for self-analysis, and asked myself the questions I suggested earlier in this chapter. I got in touch with feeling threatened by other men in the room, partly because I had been challenged by them so many times in the past, and also because I am transgender. I worried constantly that other men would find out that I am trans*, and somehow use that to disrupt the dynamics in class. Answering these questions honestly helped me see that my first several years learning

how to teach coincided with learning how to be a man. Because I did not yet do either particularly well, I more often than not took a defensive posture with other men, and used threats when I felt my authority was being questioned. These postures hurt my ability to listen to suggestions from students—whether outright or through their resistances—about my modes of address, curriculum, and/or assignments.

Having identified the kinds of recognition I needed from my students (validation and acceptance of my masculinity, and interest and participation in classroom activities), I was able to respond less defensively when white men challenged my authority in the classroom. Instead of arguing with them at every turn just to reinforce who was in charge, I conceded and acknowledged the validity of their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Again, these concessions were likely easier for me to do as a white male because the overarching power dynamics between white men in the world are less uneven (class and sexual, and gender identification withstanding). When I started caring less about the small things with resisting students, I started openly contesting students' racist, sexist, and homophobic responses to course texts. These contestations often provoked anger and resistance from non-minority students, so I introduced an essay by Jane Gallop called "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters." Gallop argues that too often we are taught to read a text broadly for its main ideas. In doing so, we miss the odd, quirky details about the texts we read (including our own), which makes it difficult for us to see what is actually on the page—not what we think ought be there. This is not so terrible, she claims, when we merely misread our own texts; it is worse when we misread the texts of others, thus "projecting" our own thoughts and ideas onto other peoples' ideas. "Ultimately," she writes, "close reading is not just a way of reading but a way of

listening. It can help us not just to read what is on the page, but to hear what a person really said. Close reading can train us to hear other people. In fact, I would argue that that is the most important benefit of close reading” (12).

When my students and I read Gallop’s essay the first time through, more often than not my male students point out that Gallop tends to associate positive things in her essay with feminine pronouns, and negative things with masculine pronouns. While this is not necessarily true (Gallop uses both pronouns equally), their perceptions of her “feminist” inclinations typically become the focus of at least one class discussion. Instead of arguing with them, pointing out that nowhere in the essay does Gallop discuss “feminism,” I ask them how their observations make them feel; I push on these feelings, asking “does this make you mad?” “Why do you feel upset?”. This usually takes them aback, but every time the men in class who raise these points answer my questions openly. After the class and I have listened to these feelings, I work to validate them, but then ask: “Are you projecting because you’re upset, or do you know for a fact that Gallop is a feminist? Have you counted the instances yourself?” The language of projection is infinitely helpful—students grab onto it and are able to use it to monitor their reading practices. The key here, though, is recognition and validation. The male students are discomfited by Gallop, and thus form defensive reactions to the article. If some part of that defensive reaction is not reduced, then the discomfort we assume will do the trick in changing their minds will be ineffective; instead, their defensive reactions might reinforce their original thinking.

Reducing defensive reactions through validation is key, but far too often we get drawn into students’ emotionated reactions to the texts we offer. Neither Alan nor Meena,

for instance, had been trained to validate or recognize students' voices, which only increased the discomfort in the room when, in my opinion, the more effective solution is to decrease it. I observed this with Meena and Alan, though their investments in students' defensive reactions varied. With Meena, her students' needs and desires for protecting their identities conflicted with her needs and desires for students to understand and sympathize with systemic racism. The result: Meena internalized the pain of rejection and shut down, admitting that, "I just gave up. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't say anything when they said awful things." Alan, on the other hand, argued constantly with his male students. While he didn't assign the kinds of provocative texts Meena did, his male students gave him a hard time about mundane things. I observed one class where Alan assigned students to conduct large group, anonymous peer reviews of a rough draft of the research paper. The classroom conversation largely consisted of him sitting at the front of the room with the students in rows and arguing with all the small points other male students raised about the sample paper. The rest of the class—all the female students and a few male students who looked, frankly, completely checked out—stayed quiet and looked bored. Alan's reaction, in this instance at least, was externalized.

Creating a classroom environment where positivity is valued, modeled, and fostered helps mitigate negative aspects of discomfort because positivity (more so than negativity) is motivational.²⁹ Summer modeled this behavior on a consistent basis, and her students took note. Both Avi and Sebastian told me they felt cared for, which in turn increased their motivation to work harder on their writing. I do not mean to say that Alan wasn't at all positive; his perception of his teaching personality ran counter to that which

²⁹ Rhetoric and composition scholars have explored the effects of positive feedback in conversations about process pedagogy, in particular, for decades. See Hays (1982); Hyland and Hyland (2001); Lamberg (1977) for extended conversations.

his students described (and to be painfully honest, what I observed as well). In his own words (and my observations) Alan used casual banter and humor to connect with his students, but what I believe they truly needed to feel more comfortable becoming vulnerable with one another was more encouragement, as Snifter rightly noted, to strengthen a sense of self. According to Summer and her students, she modeled positive thinking and encouraged the same in her students. She offered only positive feedback on student writing, and discouraged students from being aggressive or mean when discussing student writing in class.

There is, of course, a gendered aspect to this comparison. My perception of Alan's class is that he was overly negative, critical, and encouraged agonistic debate in class; it was mostly the men who participated, and those men, at that, who postured and talked over one another to be heard. Summer's class, on the other hand, seemed more cooperative. Students sat in a circle and listened to each other's ideas. When they critiqued a peer's work, they did so by asking thoughtful questions. These outward observations and subsequent descriptions, I fear, can too easily be categorized into dualistic, Cartesian categories: hard/critical=male, cooperative/listen=female. Alan's case is far more complex than this. In our conversations, he shared with me the uncomfortable didactic experiences that instilled in him certain feminist understandings of the world. He is very self-aware in that he knows his large, masculine appearance, gruff voice, and training as a critically minded graduate student impact on his teaching. From my own experiences, however, I know intimately what *feels* at stake for men who come across as "soft" or "touchy-feely," and I believe the threat of being effeminized in front of other

men is enough to unconsciously snap our teaching back into a less sensitive, more domineering mode of address.

One of the greatest challenges in creating the writing classroom as a shelter of exposure is the easy tendency with which to “gender” a shelter in the first place. What I mean by this is that because part of the purpose of this shelter is to equalize the importance given to emotion, I anticipate it being tempting to categorize this suggestion as “expressivist,” or “soft,” or “touchy-feely”—all terms that have feminine connotations. So maybe I should say that for men, creating these shelters for students are particularly important because on average, we tend to devalue emotion in the writing classroom. Perhaps I should take the tack that because these shelters are also *pragmatic* in that they serve as dissonance reduction strategies, all teachers should adopt them because they simply diffuse the mundane discomfort that inevitably subtends all writing classrooms.

Discomfort is an inevitable emotional reality of writing classrooms. Writing is an inherently uncomfortable task that most students do not enjoy. Many of the classroom activities common in composition classrooms—sharing writing, group work, writing what one knows best, and discussing course readings and student writing in large groups—ask a lot of students, emotionally and cognitively. Most students I have taught view writing as a personal endeavor, and as such, feel vulnerable sharing writing—especially if they feel this writing is particularly subpar. We currently do very little to train teachers to deal with the ways in which students consciously and unconsciously resist the mere tasks of writing, let alone writing we require in response to socially relevant texts about inequity—a common task in post-social turn composition classes. The following suggestions are simple ways we can teach our teachers how to create a

space that allows us to “unsettle” students’ perceptions of self and expose them to exciting ideas without settling on either creating a “safe” space,³⁰ or one where we pay little attention to the emotional temperature in the room. These ideas are a combination of practices I have developed and implemented over time, practices I witnessed during this study, and responses from the students in this study, who gave me a good idea of what working ethically and productively with discomfort might look like.

As I mentioned previously, building shelters of exposure starts with guiding teachers through sets of self-reflexive practices. Teachers should have a good handle on their desires, relative to their identities, prior to beginning the semester. Because many teachers—particularly those whose identities fall outside minority statuses—will choose texts (either because of a common curriculum or due to personal choice) that address social inequity as it relates to minorities, I believe it is paramount to have reflected on ways in which one’s own identity might be interpellated by class discussions.

Additionally, many teachers encounter difficulties once uncomfortable conversations arise in class discussion. Having been given opportunities to rehearse using the contentious language needed to “go deeper” into class discussions, teachers are likely to feel more confident in taking a stand relative to their own identities, and using the language that will make a difference. This confident, self-reflexive “taking a stand,” is likely to show the various “Others” in the room that you are somewhat aware of the ways in which class discussion may be painful or difficult for them to engage.

³⁰ I want to briefly acknowledge Suresh Canagarajah’s work on the politics of what he calls “safe houses,” in Pratt’s “contact zones.” Canagarajah claims that ELL and African-American students, in particular, need spaces within which to form alternative identities against the colonizing forces of English language acquisition. These “safe houses,” he notes, are: “relatively free from surveillance, especially from authority figures” and include “extrapedagogical” practices like passing notes, gossiping, and doing off-task work (121). This study does not examine discomfort in ESL contexts, and I identify this as a limitation of this research, as well as a future direction for my work. That future work will more thoroughly consider the relationships, if any, between “safe houses” and “shelters of exposure.”

There are several key materials that work well for building a shelter of exposure, but these suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive—each shelter must match the individual builder’s context. Thus, I recommend as second step in building a shelter, to know and share as much contextual data about the place and people involved in the writing course. For example, I was unaware that many students listed English 101 as their most difficult class.³¹ I found this out because someone casually mentioned it at an instructional staff meeting. After the meeting, I asked this person for the name of the study she cited, and then called the study’s administrator—she gave me access to three year’s worth of data, which also included rich information about student’s self reported struggles and barriers, as well as campus climate issues. From there I called the head of counseling at our counseling center, who told me (on the condition that I would specify that this information is anecdotal), that first-year writing classes are reported as a significant cause of anxiety for students at my institution.³² I then looked up enrollment data, failure rates by race, ethnicity, and gender, graduation rates, and campus climate studies. All of this information was accessible to me very quickly and easily, and the programs I reached out to were very happy to connect with someone from an academic department.

I shared this information with several teaching assistants; I gave them the links to the information so they could see for themselves a broader picture of students’ lives at their institution. My colleagues were surprised to learn that so few of their students, statistically, will graduate. They wanted to know this information—that English vexed so

³¹ MAP-Works, Great Lakes University (2012-2013).

³² Personal correspondence with Dr. Ron Keiser, Great Lakes University Health Center lead counselor, May 16, 2013. When asked which class gave students the most trouble, Dr. Keiser indicated (anecdotally—there are no hard data to substantiate this) that first-year composition courses were most often reported as the course that gives students the most anxiety.

many students—and were saddened to learn so many people of color and LGBT people on campus felt threatened or unsafe on campus. This data seemed to matter; each responded that they would be more empathic towards their students and more mindful of how they design their course. Gathering and sharing contextual data is, to my mind, a good second step in building an environment where students can simultaneously be discomfited and take shelter from that discomfort. What if we gathered this data and used it to paint a picture of our institutional context, then used that picture to decide what kind of curriculum might work best for our students? Many places may already do this—many may not. Given that shelters are completely contingent on context, I feel it is important to mention it here.

We might ask at this juncture, “How does contextual data figure into the benefits of creating a ‘shelter of exposure’?” My first answer to this is that knowing a student’s context, more often than not, generates empathy. Jeffery Berman (2004) emphasizes the pedagogical importance of both empathic teaching and empathic listening, though many teachers, he notes, “remain surprisingly mistrustful of empathy, believing that it might be appropriate in a therapist’s office, but not in a classroom” (34). Most people confuse the concepts “sympathy” and “empathy,” and there are ongoing debates on the differences between them. In developing his theories of empathic teaching, Berman cites Lauren Wispé’s distinction as useful, “in empathy, the ‘self is the vehicle for understanding, and it never loses its identity. Sympathy, on the other hand, is concerned with communion rather than accuracy, and self-awareness is reduced rather than enhanced. In empathy one person reaches out for the other person, whereas in sympathy the sympathizer is moved by the other person” (cf. Bracher 102). When we take a look at trends over time with

regard to retention, struggle, and discrimination, we are able to corroborate the anecdotal experiences we might have as individual teachers. Given the culture of fear and suspicion surrounding our (teachers' and students') emotional experiences, backing out a bit and seeing the forest from the trees, as it were, might permit us time to "reach out for the other person" and modify our writing curriculum to amplify chances for success.

Where institutionalizing self-reflection and using institutional data about students to paint a better, more empathic picture of writing students in general are broader, institutional aspects of the kinds of shelters I am suggesting, the next few are suggestions that individual teachers will hopefully find useful in building their own shelters. I have organized these suggestions chronologically, as these stages of building a shelter are most effective when begun prior to the start of the semester.

Two months before class

The first stages of constructing a shelter of exposure begin, for me, two or three months before the new semester. While the summer is never an easy-breezy time, I typically have a bit more time and space than I do during the semester to plan my fall courses. I begin by reflecting on the previous semester, and re-ask myself the assessment questions listed in the previous section. I am looking for, in particular, significant gaps in my knowledge, feelings or thoughts that have shifted, or encounters that were remarkable in ways that impacted upon my teaching. I then plan my "ideal course," which is a mock-syllabus made up of any desires I might have: goals for students' learning, texts to explore, media, websites, films, learning objectives, disciplinary actions, etc. I get all of my wishes, hopes, and fantasies out onto one document, and then I put it away until the

department or program releases the new course reader, common course text(s), grading rubrics, or other standard parameters that might limit my wildest desires. Some may have the option of planning his or her first-year composition course at will. Others, mostly contingent faculty and graduate teaching assistants, typically must conform their syllabi, at least to an extent, to program specifications.

Once I know the extent to which I am able to choose the course texts I desire (from a list, book, or my own choosing), I read and notate them, asking myself: How do these readings make me feel? and Is there any research I need to do? Going through these processes ahead of time help me feel prepared to create a shelter for some of the things I can control—choice of texts, objectives for writing assignments, reflecting I need to do, and goals I have for my students and myself. Once I get my roster sheets, I go over them and make note of students' majors. While this might not necessarily prepare me for what kind of a student a freshman liberal arts major or junior business major might be, at least I know assumed gender composition, and, sometimes, the racial/ethnic makeup of the class. This does not mean I can assume to know anything about these students as individuals, but knowing a little bit about their basic roles helps me visualize the classroom space before I set it up.

I value striving to achieve many tenets of *universal design* (UD) when creating these “shelters.” According to the Center for Universal Design, UD is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Mace <http://www.ncsu.edu/nc3su/design/cud/>). I work to ensure my syllabi (both hard copies and electronic), handouts, notes, web pages, and D2L (or Blackboard) sites are made

according to UD principles.³³ Once we enter the “kairotic space” of the classroom—the “real-time” work, impromptu conversations, face-to-face interactions and so forth—I know it will be difficult to give structure to the kairotic events that will unfold. When I visualize what this space would look like if drawn, I imagine its borders being made of canvas that ties down to eyehole stakes in the floor. If it gets too hot under the canvas, we let loose a knot and the material flaps open to let in some air. When we are in the midst of a full-on exposure, these flaps can batten down.

Within our classroom, I ask students on the first day to arrange the desks in a circle. After years of doing classroom observations, I am still surprised how many teachers stand at the front of the class while their students, in rows, stare at the backs of heads. The “infrastructure” of the writing classroom—its materiality: walls, desks, books, laptops, and tablets—all matter a great deal during these first four weeks. Most class days are spent in the round. I have students make the alterations. I ask them to (depending on the room) move desks and chairs into a circle or square, depending on the space. While this may not always be possible, when I have been assigned a classroom without movable desks or adequate space to move desks around, I request a classroom change. A shelter of exposure, as I imagine it, cannot function if students cannot see each other’s faces. Sometimes, depending on the course caps, the circle is very large. This can be difficult to work with, but I try and get students as close together as possible.

Getting people as close to one another as possible can cause some students a great deal of discomfort. This is one of the paradoxical instances of teaching discomfort, one that I recognize I am consciously choosing. When I interviewed Snifter, he reiterated

³³ The seven commonly adopted principles of UD are: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use (<http://www.washington.edu/doi/Brochures/Programs/ud.html>)

several times that physical proximity to other students makes him very uncomfortable, and I have no doubt that my “class in the round” would, too. The thing about teaching discomfort is that there are ethical dilemmas around every corner—my hope is that this work encourages teachers to work with discomfort with open eyes and hearts. Discomfort is inevitable, thus these shelters are all about teachers identifying the discomfiting practices they feel are paramount to their teaching, and making that an open point of conversation. As I feel sitting close and in the round is paramount, and recognize that this proximity may make some feel uncomfortable, the classroom geography, as it were, is open for conversation, comment, and debate.

Weeks One-Two

During the first one to two weeks, I do nothing other than work on building a classroom community. I understand the idea of a “community,” especially in a compulsory class, may seem a bit idealistic, but my experiences tell me that they work. Students need some time to form bonds with one another to decrease the instances of vulnerability highlighted in this study. Otherwise, the risk of “sounding stupid” or having their peers look over unfinished writing is just too great—students need to co-create the kinds of environment with the teacher and each other that allows them to feel less vulnerable sharing their thoughts and ideas. In finding models for this aspect of shelter building, I draw on group relations models that offer useful perspectives about “community.” Group relations references an interdisciplinary field that integrates systems theory, theories of power and authority, and psychoanalytic theory (Wallach 2013). While my research in group relations theory exceeds the scope of this project, it bears

mentioning here that a group relations lens allows me to look at student group work behavior (with special attention to discomfort) at multiple levels:

- Psychological (issues of identity, emotions, unconscious processes)
- Social (inter-group relations)
- Political (role of leadership, power, authority)

In creating shelters of exposure, understanding basic premises of group work theory helps me understand that groups possess a mentality and other aspects of unconscious functioning that very much impacts upon ways in which discomfort circulates, makes intense, and blocks dynamics in the composition classroom. These groups need special attention as this is a time when relative strangers are forming trust alliances, companionships, enemies, and support networks that will impact upon their work the entire semester. As such, during these first few weeks I focus keenly on watching how these groups form, and encouraging students to do the same.

There is a name for this practice: “here and now.” I treat the first two weeks of class as a “here and now” event, which means that during this time I teach students how to study their own experiences and behaviors as they occur in real-time. So for example, during the first day of class I ask for a volunteer to take notes on what we’re doing (a quick note: these processes are not unlike “fishbowl” exercises Summer has her students do). I give them a task (if students are able, move the desks into a circle) and ask the note taker to notice everything: the movement of the desks, if anyone takes a lead, who follows orders, how do individuals go about the task? The student note taker is typically overwhelmed by the newness of this task, so I also take notes alongside her. Once we are all in a circle, we sit down and do introductions. I ask students to briefly turn to the

person to their left or right and interview them—gathering as much information as possible. We then go around the large group structure and discuss our interviews. I spend a bit of time every day going over names; students are required to learn them within the first two weeks. Once we've gone around the circle, we debrief our first task: moving the chairs. We start by asking the note taker for her interpretation. I share some of my observations, and we open the floor for additional discussions. If the conversation stalls, I usually say nothing. My desire is to have students feel that discomfort of silence, while at the same time seeing me smiling and looking at them and nodding occasionally. My choice to keep positive eye contact often works as permission for someone to speak up.

Silence figures heavily in my classes. As Pat Belanoff has asked, “What happens in silence? How can we conceive of emptiness? We're a culture fearful of silence. We tell jokes about city folks not being able to sleep in the country because it is too quiet [yet] silence has positive outcomes” (401). During the first two weeks constructing the writing classroom as “shelter of exposure,” I model the kinds of practices we will engage in this space. As we often experience with our students (and as Lilly testified), they will do just about anything to figure out what we really want. Silence frustrates that desire and turns it into resistance, which we hope with time, will compel students to give up and complete a task based on their own thoughts and feelings.

In my observations, teachers become overwhelmed by their and their students' silences, and are most likely to break silence. I suggest we become mindful of silences instead—work to reduce the anxious, doomed feeling that can compel us to say something (perhaps snarky or nasty). Silence helps us practice *mindfulness*, which Rick Ries explains is “being aware in the present moment, not judging but accepting things as

they are—everything that arises: the sound of voices outside the window, the text that seemed so dense when you first read it, the blank page waiting your paintbrush” (“Classroom Implications of Mindfulness”).

Weeks Three-Four

The next three to four weeks are spent learning about each other (likes, dislikes, fears, previous experiences writing, birthdays, holidays, ethnicities, family, etc.). I share my own experiences alongside my students. Whenever we talk as a large group, I always assign a note taker (or ask for a volunteer). The note taker is then responsible for facilitating the large-group conversation about group process, and then making those notes available on our electronic class management site. I like to think of what we do in these four weeks as *rituals*, repeated processes that are unique to our group. The four key rituals I do in every class, all semester long are: learning/using names, sharing with each other “joys and concerns,” listening exercises, and class recap. I assign one student per week to facilitate these “rituals,” as our volunteer or elected note taker takes notes. We then discuss the “here and now” of our ritualized practices and move onto the day’s plans.

What I am doing here is recruiting students to build the walls of this shelter with me. Eventually we’ll have made them up thick enough to withstand a bit of wind and thunder. Students are not good at knowing how to listen carefully to each other—to take ownership of one another’s well being. In the first four weeks, I emphasize student-centered ways for them to build the shelter as they see fit, but with guided suggestions from me. In psychological terms, what I am doing is providing an affective “shelter” that

acts as one big “dissonance reduction strategy.” As Elliot and Devine wonder, psychological discomfort may have more to do with exploring dissonance-reduction processes. If we create an “infrastructure” in the “kairotic space” of the classroom that acts as one big dissonance reduction strategy, then the likelihood that there will be a reduction of the arousal component of dissonance (discomfort) will be reduced. Reduced, that is, but not eliminated. Educators need discomfort to motivate cognitive change, but without a reduction strategy (intentionally created classroom community, trust, validation, affirmation), discomfort cannot do its job, as it were.

During these weeks, I assign students two tasks: the first is to read Jane Gallop’s “The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters.” Once students have read the article, we discuss and address any questions or concerns. During large group conversations, I ask students to self appoint a note taker, a conversation facilitator, and a timekeeper—we develop the details of these roles on the fly. The second task takes the entire fourth week, and includes listening skills exercises I have compiled from the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont and Dr. Mariuse Pickering’s steps to develop empathic listening. The students learn and practice close-listening skills in conjunction with Gallop’s theories of close reading/listening. I encourage students to identify moments when they or their peers are projecting his or her thoughts and ideas onto a text in lieu of what is actually written.

One of Alan’s complaints—a significant source of his discomfort—was with a perceived inability of students to actually listen to each other. In our third interview we were talking about what kinds of uncomfortable situations arise during class

conversations. I asked him to describe what he wants most out of students when they're discussing class texts. He replied:

I mean, the thing that I would like most for my students that they most frequently do not do is listen to each other and respond to each other rather than to have me mediate all the time. So that would be like my first sort of ideal thing—that students would actually listen to each other and respond to each other without having me have to go 'does anybody have a response to that?' That kind of thing, I mean, paying attention, you know, being critical and being willing to ask questions. I find that is an ongoing struggle that I have with my students. So many of them are struggling—are very, very unwilling to ask questions because they feel...they might be embarrassed, like 'everybody is going to think I'm stupid' sort of thing. So I'd like to see some more genuine inquisitiveness. Some engagement with the material. I think that's kind of a dream at this point in time. Maybe you hit the lottery once or twice.

Andrew: *What kind of labor is required on your part for that to happen?*

Alan: Well, you have to think that getting students comfortable with each other is at least as much as you can do, but you know, you're never going to get a classroom of 24 people to love each other...but if you create an environment where they're reasonably comfortable and therefore willing to interact with each other, you know. But this is where I probably fall short on this—really cultivating that, you know, putting them in the position where...I don't want to use force, but I can't think of a better alternative, but forced to listen to each other. I can conceive of any number of class assignment designs that I, you know, never used or implemented that could help get to that.

Alan knows that students need a comfortable environment if they are to have a genuine conversation where each listens to the other—he knows there are things one could do to cultivate this kind of environment, yet he does not implement them. Building shelters of exposure requires teaching instructors how to get in touch with their desires, and then

working to create a program or department culture where exercises like close listening and reading are a part of what teachers do to get the results they desire. Students are not likely to have been taught ways of listening that are genuine and caring because school environments focus on, directly and indirectly, checking out, competition, and dependence on the teacher (because, mainly, students fear punitive grading).

To conclude this chapter, I want to convey that these strategies—these shelters—have been very successful when piloted. Around week five, I give students their first difficult text—typically a socially relevant text from our program reader, or one I have chosen that asks them to start questioning deeply held beliefs and assumptions about the world. I have found that doing the work ahead of time—building care and trust, getting students to take responsibility for facilitating their own conversations, listening and learning not to project their fears and feelings onto a text—pay dividends in the end. Within the writing classroom as shelter of exposure, teachers use the difficult words that really provoke deeper debates, and we make our own identities part of the critique. Staying neutral and leaving students to wrestle with emotionally contentious material is not a part of shelters of exposure. We, as teachers, are as knit into the structure as we hope our students will be. These shelters can neutralize defensive discomfort, and allow us to “confront the different truths our students bring to our classes—not only through self-discovery but in the heat of the argument” (Jarratt 278). In these shelters we are mindful of the present—we do not judge, but become more aware of our surroundings. We teach students to listen—really listen, and care for one another and for us. Teachers listen, validate, and support dissonant ideas, and speak out kindly against racist, sexist, or homophobic ideas. If we are to take an “invitation” to be discomfited seriously, we make

our own thoughts and ideas susceptible to the inevitable vulnerability of a learning environment designed to challenge sedimented thinking.

Teaching discomfort may be an inevitable part of writing instruction, but we need not minimize its effects as such. Writing, in itself, requires students to tarry with the unknown, with wrestling with themselves, with the unconscious things that come to the surface, and, as Janet Emig noted, with the unconscious daemons that fly up out of the page. Unsettling these daemons requires time, patience, and the skilled hand of a teacher who knows how to quell them, when to provoke them, and where to direct them when they come. Self-reflection, getting in touch with teacherly desires relative to one's identity, learning more about one's own biases, knowing and practicing the difficult language needed to delve into oppression and inequity are all necessary components for building shelters where students can be simultaneously exposed to and sheltered from the thrilling, identity-challenging experiences of first-year composition. Teaching discomfort demands we create spaces where this difficult work can be productive, managed ethically, and where students feel that their diverse identities and perspectives are validated and recognized.

AFTERWORD

Last April, I was hired as a basic writing and ESL specialist at a regional university in Western Maryland. My first semester of teaching went poorly. Determined to put into practice the recommendations I listed in the previous chapter, I went to work selling the value of “shelters of exposure” to students who were already acclimated to a radically different educational environment. I was disappointed to find that suggestions made in this project I thought might be somewhat universal did not work in this new place. While I thought my project adequately accounted for the localness of my graduate training and first-year writing program, I now realize that implementing “shelters of exposure” and working openly and honestly with discomfort in first-year writing classrooms is relatively contingent upon the ideological, pedagogical, and curricular culture within which these shelters are to be erected. While I am not certain what went so wrong, exactly, students noted on my evaluations that I was “creepy,” that I made them feel “uncomfortable,” and four students wrote that I was “always angry.” My attention to the emotional climate of my classrooms backfired in a big way.

This semester I am much more reserved—less “in touch” with the discomfort in my classes. That is, with one exception: there is a young, white male student who comes to class with a military-issue pack and sits in the corner of the room. He stares at me intently and, frankly, bears the signs of some kind of emotional fragility. The first essay he wrote (about Jane Gallop’s “Ethics of Reading”) was startlingly angry. I used it as an anonymous writing sample and thought he was going to come out of his skin. Jake reminds me of Ryan and Snifter. At first I tread lightly, but ultimately couldn’t help myself. In class I used his essay as an opportunity to talk (carefully, generically) about

emotional responses to texts and how emotions can help us get in touch with why we feel so strongly about something. After class he stuck around and mumbled, “These desks don’t give you a lot of space. I mean, like, personal space, do they?” It was true that the class I’d been assigned was fairly cramped. Like Snifter, Jake needed a lot of personal space. I nodded and said, “Feel free to sit wherever you’re most comfortable.” His eyes avoided mine and he walked slowly out of the room.

Snifter’s parting comments about “teaching discomfort” still ring in my ears: “If you want to sit at the top of the tower and pore through dusty tomes for the rest of your career, then you’re right—teachers don’t have to be therapists—but the minute you step in front of a classroom full of often times emotionally underdeveloped young adults, well you’re going to take that responsibility and you better have some information about it.” I see a great need to inquire into conversations beyond the reach of this project: triggering and didactic discomfort, discomfort and program design and assessment, discomfort and students who are “disabled” by systems that fear emotionally or psychologically “unstable” people. In a way that might be “creepy,” I see Jake as an opportunity for my interest in discomfort to come full circle. Whereas with Ryan I pushed him past his emotional limits, I know from talking with teachers and students that more work is needed in figuring out confusing lines between pushing too much and not enough, between crossing lines between teacher and therapist, and between teaching discomfort and doing justice to students who are already “disabled” by institutions set up to benefit those who we hope have everything together. As I see it, that is the future work of “teaching discomfort.”

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTERS



Melissa Spadanuda
 IRB Manager
 Institutional Review Board
 Engelmann 270
 P. O. Box 413
 Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413
 (414) 229-3173 phone
 (414) 229-6729 fax

<http://www.irb.uwm.edu>
spadanud@uwm.edu

New Study - Notice of IRB Expedited Approval

Date: August 23, 2012
To: Rachel Spilka, PhD
Dept: English
Cc: Andrew Anastasia
IRB#: 13.041
Title: Teaching Discomfort in First-Year Composition Classrooms

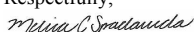
After review of your research protocol by the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Institutional Review Board, your protocol has been approved as minimal risk Expedited under **Category 6 and 7** as governed by 45 CFR 46.110.

This protocol has been approved on **August 23, 2012** for one year. IRB approval will expire on **August 22, 2013**. If you plan to continue any research related activities (e.g., enrollment of subjects, study interventions, data analysis, etc.) past the date of IRB expiration, a continuation for IRB approval must be filed by the submission deadline. If the study is closed or completed before the IRB expiration date, please notify the IRB by completing and submitting the Continuing Review form found on the IRB website.

Unless specifically where the change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects, any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation. It is the principal investigator's responsibility to adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the UWM IRB and maintain proper documentation of its records and promptly report to the IRB any adverse events which require reporting.

It is the principal investigator's responsibility to adhere to UWM and UW System Policies, and any applicable state and federal laws governing activities the principal investigator may seek to employ (e.g., [FERPA](#), [Radiation Safety](#), [UWM Data Security](#), [UW System policy on Prizes, Awards and Gifts](#), state gambling laws, etc.) which are independent of IRB review/approval.

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project

Respectfully,

 Melissa C. Spadanuda
 IRB Manager



Melissa Spadanuda
 IRB Manager
 Institutional Review Board
 Engelmann 270
 P. O. Box 413
 Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413
 (414) 229-3173 phone
 (414) 229-6729 fax

Continuing Review - Notice of IRB Expedited Approval

<http://www.irb.uwm.edu>
spadanud@uwm.edu

Date: August 22, 2013

To: Rachel Spilka, PhD

Dept: English

Cc: Andrew Anastasia

IRB#: 13.041

Title: Teaching Discomfort in First-Year Composition Classrooms

After review of your research protocol by the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Institutional Review Board, your protocol has received continuing approval as minimal risk Expedited under **category 6 and 7** as governed by 45 CFR 46.110.

This protocol has been approved on **August 22, 2013** for one year. IRB approval will expire on **August 21, 2014**. If you plan to continue any research related activities (e.g., enrollment of subjects, study interventions, data analysis, etc.) past the date of IRB expiration, a Continuation for IRB Approval must be filed by the submission deadline. If the study is closed or completed before the IRB expiration date, please notify the IRB by completing and submitting the Continuing Review form found in IRBManager.

Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. The principal investigator is responsible for adhering to the policies and guidelines set forth by the UWM IRB, maintaining proper documentation of study records, and promptly reporting to the IRB any adverse events which require reporting. The Principal Investigator is also responsible for ensuring that all study staff receive appropriate training in the ethical guidelines of conducting human subjects research.

As Principal Investigator, it is also your responsibility to adhere to UWM and UW System Policies, and any applicable state and federal laws governing activities which are independent of IRB review/approval (e.g., [FERPA](#), [Radiation Safety](#), [UWM Data Security](#), [UW System policy on Prizes, Awards and Gifts](#), state gambling laws, etc.). When conducting research at institutions outside of UWM, be sure to obtain permission and/or approval as required by their policies.

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project

Respectfully,

Melissa C. Spadanuda

Melissa C. Spadanuda

IRB Manager

APPENDIX B

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Project Questions

1. How does each instructor describe comfort and discomfort in the writing classroom?
2. How does each student describe comfort and discomfort in the writing classroom?
3. What are the relationships between scholarly conversations about discomfort and teachers' and students' descriptions of discomfort?

Research Questions and Interview Protocol

1. How do participants describe "teaching discomfort?"
2. What are the educational goals teachers have for students in their first-year writing program? (TEACHER)
 - a. Describe the goals, values, and/or outcomes of the first-year writing program.
 - b. Describe your personal goals for your writing students.
4. What kinds of pedagogical practices do participants believe contribute to feelings of discomfort in the classroom?
 - c. Describe a time, if any, that you experienced discomfort in your classroom (TEACHER AND STUDENT)
 - d. How did you become aware of this discomfort? (TEACHER AND STUDENT)
 - e. Describe the emotional temperature of the classroom when your class discusses X text (TEACHER AND STUDENT)
 - f. Have you ever experienced discomfort during a class conversation? (TEACHER AND STUDENT)
3. How do curricular materials, if at all, communicate discomfort?
 - a. Please explain why you chose the course texts you did. (TEACHER)
 - b. What are ways, if any, that your assignments make students uncomfortable? (TEACHER)
 - c. Why do you think your teacher chose the course texts they did? (STUDENT)

APPENDIX C

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

A Study of Emotions in First-Year College Composition Classrooms

1. General Information

Study title: A Study of Emotion in First-Year College Composition Classrooms

Person in Charge of Study (Principal Investigator): My name is Andrew Anastasia. I am a doctoral candidate and graduate teaching instructor in the Department of English at GLU.

By completing and returning this survey, you are consenting to participate.

2. Study Description

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to.

Study description:

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how emotions are experienced, perceived, and described in first-year college (FYC) composition classrooms.

This research is being done because conscious and unconscious emotions have a great impact on teaching and learning how to write in a college writing classroom, but without an in-depth, sustained study teachers of writing will be less able to develop best practices for working with, controlling, and productively working with emotions in the writing classroom. This study will help us to understand the conscious and unconscious ways in which emotions manifest productively and unproductively in the writing classroom. This study will also be helpful in understanding connections between emotions, resistance, poor performance and classroom outcomes, teacher burnout, and motivation, which in turn will be helpful in making the policies, teacher training programs, and course design more effective by bringing first-hand experiences, perceptions, and descriptions into administrative decision-making and design processes.

This study will be conducted in first-year college composition courses at Great Lakes University. Approximately three teachers and three students from each teacher's FYC course (a total of nine students) will participate in the study in addition to approximately 72 students who will participate as part of classroom observations. Your participation in the study will take about 360 hours in total, over the course of four interviews (90 minutes per interview, four interviews over the course of one semester).

3. Questionnaire

1. Demographic Information

Age	
Year in School (i.e. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, other)	
Gender Identity (i.e. male, female, transgender)	
Sexual Orientation Identity (i.e. queer, straight, lesbian)	
Racial Identity	
Ethnic Identity	
Ability Identity	
Class Identity (i.e. poor, middle-class, wealthy)	

2. Exclusions

With the exception of the diagnosis “gender identity disorder” or other gender-related diagnoses listed in the DSM IV, this study excludes participants who are currently experiencing symptoms of and/or have been diagnosed with a psychological condition, disorder, or delay by a medical or mental health care provider.

Please indicate whether you are able to participate in this study (circle one):

Yes No

3. Interest in Participation (please circle one)

I am eligible and interested in participating in this study. I understand there are no material benefits or incentives, and I understand that my ability, willingness, or refusal to take part in the study will not affect my grade or class standing.

Yes, the SPI may contact me to follow up about this study.

*Please provide your initials and e-mail: _____

No

Thank you for taking this survey. All information contained herein is confidential and will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my office for one year, then destroyed. Questions about this study may be directed to the SPI:

Andrew Anastasia
Department of English

CURRICULUM VITAE

Andrew G. Anastasia

Place of birth: Hammond, IN

Education

B.A., Illinois State University, May 2006
Major: Sociology

M.A., University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, May 2008
Major: English, Modern Studies

Dissertation Title: Teaching Discomfort: Students' and Teachers' Descriptions of Discomfort in First-Year Writing Classes

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Awards, Grants, and Fellowships:

Chancellor's Graduate Student Fellowship	2012-2014
First-Year Student Success Award, UW-Milwaukee	2012, 2013
Teaching Excellence Award, UW-Milwaukee	2009-2010
Graduate Student Travel Grant, UW-Milwaukee	2008, 2009
Sappenheim Fellowship, UW-Milwaukee	2006

University Service:

LGBT Studies Advisory Committee	2011-2013
Co-Coordinator, Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference	2006-2011
Milwaukee Graduate Assistants Association	2008-2011
Writing Program Administration	2009-2011
Composition Advisory Committee	2009-2011
English 102 Mentor Coordinator	2009-2011