

## Chapter 4. Learning About and With Learners

While students have been mentioned consistently throughout the first three chapters of this book, you have so far largely focused your analysis on the contexts, purposes, and audiences for whom you've asked students to write. Chapter 1 asked you to identify ways of thinking in your field or discipline that are often tacit, then start connecting those foundational ways of thinking to expectations for writing. This emphasis on ways of thinking and connections to writing is the starting place for creating *access* to your field; that is, making the ways that the field “works” and how people participate in it more transparent. Chapter 1 explained that *access* is a key part of inclusive teaching. Chapters 2 and 3 helped you to delve into connections between epistemologies, ideas of “rightness” (and what's less “right”) and genres and conventions of writing. Then, Chapters 2 and 3 asked you to complete activities that continue to create disciplinary access.

The chapters thus far have also emphasized that inclusive teaching involves creating *opportunity*—ways for students to bring their knowledge and commitments to your courses and even use those to push the boundaries of courses and fields in ways that represent different ideas and values. This happens as people make knowledge through writing; it also happens as people use writing to represent what they know. Creating *opportunity* for learners/writers, then, involves working from what students know: building on “funds of knowledge,” the knowledge that learners bring from their everyday experiences (González et al., 2005; also see Yosso, 2005). These are *asset-based* approaches to teaching that focus on what students bring (e.g., Davis & Museus, 2019a, 2019b). Many other teacher-researcher-advocates—Paulo Friere (1970), bell hooks (1994), Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021), Mike Rose (1989), to name a few—have enumerated the importance of recognizing what people bring and *can* do (vs. *can't* do). This chapter provides a way to learn about learners and build on their strengths as part of an asset-based practice. We recognize that for some instructors this might seem familiar (“I do that all the time!”); for others—especially those teaching large, lecture-based courses—it might seem more challenging. That's why, in this chapter, you will gain practical strategies that use writing (both your own and your students') to learn about learners and build our asset-based approaches.

### Empathetic Knowledge

The approach outlined here is rooted in taking action based on *empathetic knowledge*—knowledge that is formed *with*, not *about*, learners (Campelia, 2017). The

activities in previous chapters should have illustrated this in your own experience; for example, that your ideas about what makes writing “good” come from your experiences as a person and a professional. The same is true, of course, for students, who bring considerable experience with writing and as writers to your courses. Their experiences are *different* from yours and might be *different* than what you expect—but they are as important to your students as your own experiences are to you. Enacting empathetic knowledge can help you reflect on your experiences again, learn more about what students bring to writing, and cultivate an asset-based practice that will provide access and opportunity for those students.

Goals for this chapter include:

- developing a practice of empathetic knowledge by
  - studying your own learning experiences and assumptions
  - creating concrete strategies to get to know about students’ interests, commitments, and identities
- identifying elements of asset-based approaches to teaching (of writing)
- analyzing course materials/foci to find places to create opportunity (through writing and thinking), enabling them to bring their ideas (through writing) to our courses and possibly fields.

## Forming, Confirming, and Identities: Why?

Earlier chapters have demonstrated that your experiences both contribute to and are informed by your disciplinary or professional identities. They also suggested that ideas about “good writing” reflect values and ideologies that are connected to those identities. As instructors across disciplines seek to make fields, professions, and institutions more inclusive, it is important to invite in those whose experiences have been marginalized or dismissed previously, such as students who are part of historically excluded groups, low-income students, first-generation students, LGBTQIA+ students, and others. Research shows that people in these populations regularly experience:

- *Stereotype threat*: Initially defined by Claude Steele, stereotype threat “refers to the tension that arises in members of a stereotyped group when they fear being judged according to stereotypes” (Ambrose et al., 174).
- *Implicit bias*: Unconscious but socially-reinforced generalizations that are often accompanied by assumptions about beliefs, perspective, ability, and other attributes.
- *Microaggressions*: Repeated actions (including words) that reflect discriminatory beliefs and undermine a person’s agency

Each of these practices reflect and perpetuate systemic injustices—racism, sexism, homophobia, religious bias, classism, raciolinguicism (Rosa & Flores,

2017). These injustices deny students the ability to contribute to the discipline.

Creating *opportunity* in courses, making room for others' identities and commitments in order to form and confirm knowledge with them before, during, and after writing, can help to counteract these injustices. This means providing students with opportunities to create new knowledge that you (as a community of practice expert) might not be able to create—because what you see and know is also shaped by your own identities and biases. By creating opportunity, you ensure that there is room within disciplinary practices and knowledge for the identities students bring, broadening the bases for what is considered “good.” As an example, consider what happens when an engineering student from an Indigenous group contends that the narratives of people who live near a proposed dam are important pieces of data and evidence. Engineers typically do not consider narrative as data. Yet in this case, the Indigenous student brings a powerful perspective and demonstrates why narrative might sometimes be important data to consider when solving an engineering problem. Doing so expands the purview of what is included in the planning, and engineers may begin paying greater attention to the narratives of those affected by their work, something that has typically fallen outside of engineering practice (and has, instead, been seen as being the work of anthropology, public health, or sociology).

Taking class time to learn more about students might feel daunting, given everything else you need to accomplish. But as David Asai (2019), Senior Director for Science Education at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute notes, teaching is a human profession. If you don't take time to get to know the people in your classes, you miss out on new contributions from previously excluded learners. Additionally, peoples' feelings of belonging are closely linked to academic engagement, persistence, and achievement. (For a review of this literature, see Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Students come to instructors with the rightful expectation that courses (and contacts) will help them to continue their intellectual, civic, professional, and personal development through a process of learning—so in many ways, instructors have a responsibility to respond to learners as people.

## Enacting Empathetic Knowledge

As noted earlier, enacting empathetic knowledge entails “forming and confirming” knowledge with others. Adapting ideas from researchers who study and engage others in enacting empathetic knowledge provides faculty with a framework for action.

Synthesizing ideas from Georgina Campelia (2017) and Sara Ahmed (2018), it's possible to identify six steps to build empathetic knowledge:

- Element 1: Knowing Yourself: understanding your own expertise and experiences as a learner

- Element 2: Naming Contexts: situating experiences, expertise, and identities in communities of practice (e.g., disciplinary contexts)—your own and others’
- Element 3: Learning About Others’ Perspectives
- Element 4: Reflecting on Your Perspectives
- Element 5: Creating Opportunities: “forming and confirming knowledge” (Campelia, 2017) with others
- Element 6: Building Structures: creating workable boundaries (for you and for students) to enact empathetic knowledge

The activities in this chapter will enable you to practice applying each of these elements to your own classrooms.

### Element 1: Knowing Yourself

You have already spent some time in earlier activities identifying your experiences with *writing* in your disciplinary context. In Activity 4.1, you’ll reflect on your experience *as a learner*. This kind of reflection serves as a reminder of particular moments of struggle you may have forgotten, and helps you identify who hindered and helped in those moments, how, and why.

Reflecting on a moment of difficulty around a hard idea can help you identify the idea and how you worked with it. It might also help you identify others involved and the roles they played. As an expert, you have worked through a number of learning challenges, and your identities and situatedness have played a role in how you were able to handle these challenges. The first step of the practice of empathetic knowledge is recognizing that as experts and teachers, most instructors have encountered moments of difficulty and both instructors and students benefit when everyone understands how they were able to maneuver within and around those challenges.

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#### Activity 4.1: Knowing and Naming Your Learning Experience

1. Write about the first time you can remember encountering an idea, ideally in your field, that was really difficult for you.
  2. Next, reflect on how (or if) you got a handle on the idea. Who helped you with it? Who hindered you? What did they do, and how did what they did contribute to or inhibit your work with the concept? How did your identity or identities come into play in this process of engagement with another? Once you feel like you started to move toward understanding of the idea—once you “got it” or even started to grasp pieces of it—what was that like?
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## Element 2: Naming Contexts

The second step in the practice of empathetic knowledge is to situate your own experiences and expertise within your field (community of practice). This builds on thinking you've done in previous chapters as you've closely analyzed the connections between your ideas about "good writing" and that field. Here, you will conduct a close analysis of some of the language you used to describe the experience. The words that experts use tend to be packed with meanings that make implicit sense to the expert insider, but which are not always explored or explained for novice learners. For example, you might have experienced a "Eureka!" moment when you worked through a challenge. By looking more closely at the language you used to describe that feeling, you can identify what it meant for you to do something in ways that were expected and also name feelings associated with that way of operating.

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### Activity 4.2: The Words You Use to Explain What Is Expected

Using the reflection you wrote for 4.1, circle the most prominent or striking descriptors associated with:

- the emotions that you've described in initially encountering the idea
- working through the challenge
- the key actions and/or language you described in conjunction with your recollection about who/what helped or hindered
- the language you used to describe the experience of coming through the moment

It's likely, maybe even probable, that much of what you're going to circle will be verbs (feelings, actions, activities . . .). Whatever you come up with, keep a list of what you identify in your reflection on part 1 of the activity. Ideally, you've started to learn about your own learning, especially the affective portion of that learning—and some of the emotions associated with that learning. This can help to remind you what it was like *for you*.

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## Element 3: Learning About Others' Perspectives

Activities 4.1 and 4.2 should have helped you recall some of your own experience as learners, potentially even reminding you about aspects of learning that you hadn't remembered until you started writing about them. The next step in the practice of developing empathetic knowledge is to learn about students' perspectives and experiences, especially the knowledge, commitments, and other assets that they bring to your classes. One easy way to do this is by surveying students. Even in the largest classes, you can create a survey using questions adopted from literacy educator Gholdy Muhammad (2020).

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### Activity 4.3: Learning about Others' Perspectives

Pick a class that you are teaching this term and create an online survey (using something like SurveyMonkey or Google forms). Give the survey to your class and collect responses for the next set of activities. Ask students some or all of the following questions:

- What would you like me to know about you as a learner?
  - How do you learn best?
  - How is <this course/field> important to you?
  - If you could tell me something to help me understand the connection between this course and what's important to you, what would it be?
  - What's something you do really well or are very proud of?
  - How could this course support your future goals?
  - What's one question you have about this course?
  - What's something you think might be challenging about this course? How have you approached similar challenges before?
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Once you receive responses to the survey, you can use what you learn to engage with the next element of empathetic knowledge.

### Element 4: Reflecting on Your Perspectives

Students' responses to a survey like this can provide some insight into learners' commitments and perspectives. As you read them, they might prompt agreement, questioning, or other conscious or unconscious responses—you might be surprised about something learners are proud of, or think that something that they find challenging about the course is something that they should know, for instance. If (or when) this happens, you might also find that you have sometimes unconsciously acted on your assumptions about what students know or have experienced. For instance, faculty often find that their students seem to know less about a subject than the instructors feel that *they* did at the same point in their college careers. They might then cover what they think students *should* know. But they also might make assumptions about students' abilities. This might lead them to leave out important review materials or suggest through comments that if students don't know something, they are behind or in need of remediation. While the faculty member may intend these comments to be helpful, showing students what is necessary for success in the field, students might receive them differently: as indications that the faculty member does not believe in their abilities, or that the faculty member does not believe in the abilities of students who are like them (a form of stereotype threat).

Activity 4.4 asks you to take a look at your own responses to see what you learn about students. Externalizing and observing can help you to meet

students where they are (rather than where you think they are or should be). Then, bringing in ideas from previous chapters, you can design or redesign courses to help students develop the knowledge and experiences you think are important for success. It's also useful to note that especially when students participate in sequential courses, this might require looking well beyond just one course to an entire sequence within a department, or even across multiple departments.

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#### Activity 4.4: Externalizing and Observing Your Responses

Reviewing students' surveys, start to put selected responses into a chart, as below:

Surprising or unexpected findings	Why the findings surprised you/were different from what you expected	Unsurprising or expected findings	Why you expected what you found

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### Element 5: Creating Opportunity

Analyzing your reactions to students' experiences and perspectives is another step toward creating opportunity, especially as you consider how those reactions compare to your own experiences as a learner. Creating opportunity also means making space for these different ways of approaching or thinking about a subject or a discipline. This can happen in many areas; there are many books and articles that discuss the importance of diversifying curriculum and using inclusive pedagogies. Since the focus of this book is *writing*, here you will be asked to reflect on how you create opportunity in some of the written artifacts that you provide students. Such written artifacts can create space and opportunity for students to bring their ideas, identities, and commitments to learning.

For Activity 4.5, focus on a document you've created for an undergraduate class (if possible), such as an assignment or a syllabus. You will use this artifact to identify where you include the kind of helpful pedagogical explanations discussed at the end of Chapter 3, and to study the perspective on learners in the document. For this, you will especially focus on where and whether the document reflects a deficit-based perspective and/or an asset-based perspective. Deficit thinking reflects a "*blame the victim* orientation" and often "emerge[s] in language that treats people as problems" (Davis & Museus, 2019b, np). For instance, some examples of deficit thinking include the idea that "grit" or individual determination is the key to success, or that students need "bootstrapping" or "bootcamp" learning to "close the achievement gap" between prior experience and what they "need to know" to succeed. In course documents,

deficit-based perspectives can be reflected sometimes in language about attention (“You must put your cell phones away in this course and pay attention. This is not a time for online shopping.”), or intellectual property (“Instances of cheating will result in an immediate failure of the assignment and reporting to the student judicial office”). Deficit-based perspectives and language convey a belief that learners have a deficit (of knowledge, of responsibility, of commitment) and the institution’s responsibility is to close it by helping students “try harder” or enact different “attitudes.”

Asset-based thinking is the opposite of deficit thinking; it places responsibility for inequity on the educational system and its elements (from instructors to curriculum to testing to pedagogy), then focuses on how to build on what learners bring to their learning. This is illustrated when instructors welcome students into a class; clearly outline what will be learned and why; invite students to reflect on what they know about the subject already, and describe how the course can build on students’ prior experiences and help them advance their commitments. Importantly, asset-based language doesn’t mean that you provide nothing but relentless encouragement. All learners, and especially learners who have been excluded or experienced bias, benefit from messages that affirm challenge, acknowledge struggle, and express confidence—for instance, “These are high standards! But we will work together, as a class, when we encounter moments of struggle, and the TAs and I are here to support you every step of the way” (see Cohen et al., 1999, for instance).

Activity 4.5 can help you to identify where your language starts to invite students to bring their knowledge and commitments to class. It might also show you where your language unconsciously reflects a deficit-based framework or some of the judgments that you identified earlier. If this is the case, it might point to places where you want to make changes. Fortunately, there are resources available to help. For example:

- USC’s syllabus checklist (<https://tinyurl.com/2p8ax36u>)
- University of Michigan’s inclusive syllabus language (<https://tinyurl.com/d4evkaf4>)
- Ann Marie Womack’s Accessible Syllabus project (<https://www.accessiblesyllabus.com>)

Books like *What Inclusive Instructors Do* (Addy et al., 2021) also focus on inclusive and equitable teaching strategies; texts like *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk* (McNair et al., 2020) focus on broader department- and campus-wide activities with a focus on creating space for students, as well.

Language in syllabi and assignments contributes in important ways to making space for opportunity. Researchers hypothesize that using welcoming language can help mitigate stereotype threat, lead to the perception by students that instructors are more accessible and contribute to students’ feelings of belonging and confidence (e.g., Cohen et al., 1999; Hammond, 2014).



### Activity 4.5: Language Review

Focusing on the course document you've selected, use the checklist below, adapted from studies of non-content talk referenced in Chapter 3 (Harrison et al., 2019; Seidel et al., 2015) to identify the presence (or absence) of particular kinds of language:

Present?	Category	Asset-Based Perspective Example
	Demonstrating respect for students	"People bring different experiences and knowledge to this question: I want to value what you bring in."
	Revealing (course related) secrets	"You don't need to copy the slides in lecture—those are posted. Instead, write down things you want to remember, things you want to ask, things that seem important."
	Boosting self-efficacy	"Your ideas are important for this assignment/activity because ____."
	Preframing/Connecting to key concepts	"This assignment/activity is a way for you to practice with <this/these key concepts>."
	Practicing <disciplinary> habits of mind	"This assignment/activity will reinforce the ways that you think like a <disciplinary participant>."
	Reinforcing community	"As you work on <activity/assignment>, be sure to talk/work with others."
	Using student work to drive choices	"It's due Sunday night no later than 6 p.m. so I can read it before I finish planning, because I want to be sure to be responsive to your thinking."
	Connecting <field> to "real world" and career/Fostering learning for the long term	"Completing <this> will also reinforce connections you're making between <this> and life outside of/beyond school, too. That's because ____."

While the categories included in this rubric in Activity 4.5 aren't the only ones that make space for opportunity, they provide a starting place for you to identify where and how your written documents reflect an asset-based, welcoming approach to teaching. From this initial examination, you can then consider other language, whether written or spoken. Figure 4.1, created by Sarita Shukla et al. (2022, p. 2), also provides a very useful summary of how deficit- and asset-based approaches lead to different framing of outcomes, which may contribute to your thinking beyond writing, as well:

Selection of research frameworks used to interrogate educational outcomes within and across demographics					
Research framework	Deficit models	Opportunity gaps	Educational debt	Community cultural wealth	Ethics of care
This framework...					
connects learning to	Deficiencies	Systemic discrimination		Personal, cultural, or other assets	
centers students from the	Dominant group	Historically or currently marginalized groups			
focuses on	Achievement gaps	Supports	Debts owed	Lived experiences	
		Barriers		Relationships	
assigns solutions to	Culture	Society		Culture	
		Institution			
	Instructor			Instructor	
	Student			Student	

Figure 4.1. How deficit- and asset-based approaches lead to different framing of outcomes. (Shukla et al. 2022. Used with permission.)

Looking at language, especially as you consider how that language reflects orientations toward students, is one way to create opportunity for students in your courses. A second approach is ensuring that your curriculum—course readings, textbooks, and materials you provide for students—represent diverse creators and perspectives. D. L. Stewart refers to this practice as “creating space: ensuring that curriculum includes diverse authors, as well as creating classroom space for people to share their ideas” (UERU, 2020). Writing activities can be designed to invite learners to bring their ideas (and even their identities) in the context of your discipline or field. These writing activities can be understood along a continuum. On one end are activities that are closely focused on what is sometimes referred to as *writing to learn (WTL)*. These provide students a chance to *practice with important knowledge*: key or threshold concepts, theories, methods, or approaches to problem-solving, for instance. On the other end of the spectrum are activities focused on what is called *learning to write (LTW)*. LTW activities focus on *using important features of written genres in the field*—for instance, producing a hypothesis or generating research results or incorporating evidence using the specific genre conventions expected in the course or field. (Chapter 5 will look more closely at various uses of writing.)

Creating WTL and LTW writing activities, which provide ways for students to practice with existing ideas and ways of writing, can also enable students to bring their knowledge and identities to a course. For instance, in large (120+ student) courses, instructors have incorporated structured writing/peer review activities that invite students to practice defining key concepts and discuss why and how they are relevant in students’ every day experience. You’ll find examples of peer review assignments like this from chemistry and international relations

in the Chapter 4 appendix.<sup>4</sup> Other efforts like Stem Cells Across the Curriculum (<https://stemcellcurriculum.org>) provide students with case studies such as HeLa cells and HPV genes and Stem Cells and Policy, then ask them to use writing (and other communication modalities, such as speaking and role playing) to define key scientific (as well as ethical) concepts, make connections between evidence from a variety of sources, traditions, and fields, and wrestle with the implications of the various perspectives on the history and use of stem cells (also see Chamany & Tanner, 2008).

This idea of defining and connecting key concept to students' commitments reflects Stewart's conception of "diverse and inclusive" teaching: it creates pathways for students to bring their identities to existing content knowledge, to think through connections between that content knowledge and things that they care about, and to situate what they believe is important in their day-to-day experience. This is an important step in creating disciplinary opportunity—that is, ensuring that diverse perspectives, ideas, and even ideologies contribute to disciplinary practice. Communication professor Walid Afifi modeled this when he described what happened after he asked students about the structure of a course they were taking in the middle of the term because he wanted to model the threshold concept of "reciprocity:"

I sort of landed on this concept of reciprocity with communities . . . the idea . . . that we work on everything communally and I'm not bringing my expertise to them. . . . And literally as we were talking about this idea about our communities we're working with I said what would it look like if I fully applied that ethic to this class? And I had them write [about what we were doing and what they wanted to do] and turn in stuff. My TA read [what they handed in] and said [students seemed to be complaining]. But I tried to pause and say . . . let's really honor them, which is what I was trying to do . . . [As a result of taking their feedback seriously], I changed the syllabus organization. I changed the number of assignments. I changed the type of assignments. I changed about a third of the things that I did . . . I really sort of pushed the idea of honoring students as a community myself, and how well I was doing that or not as part of this class. . . . (as quoted in Adler-Kassner, 2019, p. 52).

As Professor Afifi demonstrates, creating opportunity can also involve pushing the *boundaries* of disciplinary values and ideologies so that they reflect a variety of ideas, identities, and ideologies. William Spriggs, professor of economics

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4. In addition to linking directly to resources on the web, we provide archived versions of the materials in the appendix on this book's web page at <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/practice/expertise>.

and member of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Board of Governors, pushed this boundary even further, addressing the construction of his field (economics) in an open letter to economists urging the field to study the “deep and painful roots” of modern economics, which includes “a definition of race that fully incorporated the assumed superiority of [white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants] and bought into a notion of race as an exogenous variable” (Spriggs, 2020, p. 1). Spriggs goes on to suggest that this foundational assumption means “racial differences cannot be objectively approached. The model begins with a fallacy that assumes racial differences as a natural order. It biases the model, because there is a built-in excuse for disparities that cannot be solved” (Spriggs, 2020, pp. 1-2).

Disciplinary associations like the Ecological Society of American, the Society for American Biological Educational Research, the American Historical Association, and others have over the last several years examined their disciplinary roots and provided curriculum and pedagogy focused on inclusive and equitable teaching.

In literacy education, which includes our field of composition/writing studies as well as English education, many teacher-researchers have renewed calls for faculty to reject the teaching of White Mainstream English (WME) as a normative discourse. Rather than teach students—especially students whose home dialects are not WME, such as those who use African American English (Baker-Bell, 2020, uses the term Black Language [BL])—to code-switch between dialects, teacher-scholars advocate for composition and English language arts teachers to create classes where students can study “anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 2). This includes studying the grammatical features and rhetorical uses of Black Language; examining instances of raciolinguicism (i.e., personal judgments based on language and race; discriminatory practices based on language and race) (Charity Hudley et al., 2021); and engaging students in assignments that “move . . . students toward thinking about developing agency, taking a critical stance, and making political choices that support them in employing Black language for the purposes of various sorts of freedom, including dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 86). This approach to teaching writing (at the K-12 and/or college level), then, explicitly invites students to study and push against norms of WME, including WME as it is modified and employed in disciplinary genres. Instead, it invites students to bring their identities and commitments to writing, creating new ways of defining standards for what makes writing “good” or “right.”

How instructors elect to create opportunity in your courses to form and confirm knowledge with students will depend on many things—beliefs about the purposes of writing (in your fields and professions and beyond them, as well); stances toward language and language use, and more. The strategies in this chapter will help to identify your own beliefs, values, and perspectives, learn more about those of students, and deliberately consider how to learn *about* and *with* learners in systematic ways.

## Conclusion

This chapter has built on previous chapters in order to help you consider not only what your field already knows, does, and values (through its threshold concepts, values, and conventions of language use), but also to consider what it *could* know, do, and value by inviting in the perspectives and experiences of diverse learners. It has invited you to think about what students bring with them, and how their identities, feelings, and prior knowledge influence their ability to participate and learn in your classrooms. By examining your own attitudes and language in course materials, and remembering your own experiences as a learner, you can better ensure that all learners find a supportive environment where they can thrive—and also contribute new knowledge to your field.

## Preparing for Chapter 5

The next chapter invites you to apply all that you have learned throughout this book and consider specific aspects of learning theory and writing research in order to redesign aspects of one course. Before you begin reading, review the notes you made for yourself at the end of Chapter 3. Supplement these with any connections you've made to learning about the writers in your classes after concluding this chapter.