CHAPTER 7.

ACCESSING CRITICAL REFLECTION TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVITY IN WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES

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More than a century ago, John Dewey (1910) introduced the term "reflective thinking," describing a systematic action wherein the "successive portions of reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another" (p. 3). In his succeeding pages, Dewey develops a theory of intellectual thought that favors a balance of product and process, evidence-based choice making, and thoughtful inference—an iterative process we'd call "critical thinking" in our modern parlance. Similarly, in "Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking," Carol Rodgers (2002) revisits Dewey's foundational work and concludes, "Over the past 15 years, reflection has suffered from a loss of meaning. In becoming everything to everybody, it has lost the ability to be seen" (p. 843).

This loss of meaning is illustrated in the varied definitions of "reflection" across disciplines and contexts. In the sciences, reflection is sometimes defined through its metacognitive functions—namely, thinking about thinking or "self-understanding" and thinking about process or "self-regulation." (Brown, 1987). Other theorists focus on the social purpose of reflection in higher education with its goal to "transform practice in some way, whether it is the practice of learning or the practice of the discipline or the profession" (Ryan, 2011, p. 103).

Extending the conversation to adult learning communities, Stephen Brookfield (1996) developed a theory of *critical* reflection that is activated via experiential learning and requires adult learners to "question and then replace or reframe an assumption [by] recognizing the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values" (p. 376). However, though these pedagogues have been writing about reflective thinking for nearly a century, as Kathleen Blake Yancey (1998) writes, even in composition classrooms, "reflection has played but a small role in [the] history of composing" (p. 7).

Our exploration of reflection in writing intensive (WI) classes at our university began amidst the social and political turmoil following the 2015 University

of Missouri student protests and the 2016 presidential election. While we were engaging in real time discussion and reflection on our campus, we noticed that our dataset—i.e., WI course proposals—contained much about *argument* but little about *reflection.* Of course, the disparity in representation of these genres is not surprising. The trend echoes James Britton et al.'s (1975) findings about transactional versus expressive language in secondary writing and mirrors Dan Melzer's (2014) wide-reaching study of postsecondary writing assignments. However, while Melzer laments how infrequently students are required to "relate course content to personal experiences and interests, use personal experiences to develop and support their arguments, or reflect on their own learning" (p. 33), he also highlights the unique position of WAC programs to continue to increase writing variety, including reflective writing. As WAC administrators, we saw the local and national discussions about racial equity, justice, free speech, and the facade of neutrality as a catalyst (Seltzer, 2018). This intersection of context and research provided us with an opportunity to investigate the current state of reflective writing in WI courses, and it allowed us to consider the possibilities of reflective writing to produce more inclusive teaching across the disciplines.

In this chapter, we examine how reflective writing emerges in WI course design for various disciplines at our institution. We overview our established WAC program, use grounded theory methodology to create a definition, examine the qualities of reflective writing described by WI instructors, and suggest ways reflective writing can be incorporated in writing courses as inclusive pedagogy.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Situated at a large flagship and land grant university with a robust WAC program, our study drew on a comprehensive data set. Each semester a WI course is taught, the instructor must submit a proposal for approval to meet the WI guidelines. This WI proposal includes responding to the question: "Explain briefly the nature of the assignment(s) which address(es) a question for which there is more than one acceptable interpretation, explanation, analysis or evaluation." For this study, we analyzed the responses to this question in 351 WI course proposals equally situated across the natural and applied sciences (n=116), humanities and arts (n=117), and education and social science courses (n=118).

Data Analysis

We used grounded theory analyses to position our study in the "social, historical, local, and interactional context" of our institution and program (Charmaz, 2014, p. 322). In our previous study (Goldsmith, Birt, & Lannin, 2019), we broadly

categorized the instructors' responses (n=351) into six types of writing assignments that engage students in complex problems in their discipline. For this study, we focused on the category with the fewest instances: critical reflection (n=26).

Our first round of analysis centered on developing a final definition for critical reflection. We had originally created an initial definition that forefronted individual positionality: "Writing assignments that ask students to think critically about their own positionality while reflecting on course material or course experiences." During this round of analysis, we investigated ways in which the identified responses either agreed or disagreed with our initial definition for critical reflection. However, as we focused only on the assignments we collectively coded as "critical reflection," we found that our previous definition of reflection was too limited. Our new definition of critical reflection, which incorporated those responses that disagreed with our original definition, then became:

> writing assignments where instructors do more than ask
> students to turn inward, they ask students to deepen their
> disciplinary learning by thinking critically about any (or all)
> of the following: their own positionality, the choices made
> in their project, the audience of their work and/or the course
> material.

We created this broader definition of reflection before moving into deeper analyses of the specific characteristics of reflection.

Next, we reviewed the critical reflection instructor responses and categorized seven qualities identified in the data through open coding using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2010). For example, Julie developed the *subjective with no right answer* code, which included responses such as "not necessarily the 'correctness' of ideas" and "their unique response is celebrated rather than questioned." Christy created the *to uncover something hidden or ignored* code, which included responses such as "uncover hidden meaning, and explore underlying assumptions" and "explore own belief system and moral compass." During research team meetings, we reached agreement on codes and further condensed these seven categories based on commonalities across both researchers' codes to generate the final findings described below. We recorded individual and team interpretations and categorizations of the data in memos for record-keeping of the data analysis process.

FINDINGS

Our broader definition of reflection, which included asking students to think critically beyond themselves, helped to sketch a clearer picture of the qualities

and types of reflective writing in WI writing assignments, expanding the possibilities for including reflection in WI classes.

FINDING #1: QUALITIES OF WI REFLECTIVE WRITING

We found that, in WI courses, critical reflection included three overarching qualities: responding subjectively, moving from personal to social, and contemplating contextually-bound problems.

Responding Subjectively

Within the reflective writing activities, we see a focus on the "room" or "space" for individual student experiences. In many instances, instructors expect students to respond subjectively to a writing prompt, which is often a departure from more traditional content-first approaches in the disciplines. For example, one instructor describes an assignment requiring students to "adapt forms from readings to accommodate their own autobiographies."[1] Another instructor assigns reading responses to "invite students to take passages from the readings and critique, question, and connect to their own lives." In a theater course, students analyze screen plays, "based primarily in phenomenology, with students first noting their subjective response to a work and coming up with an essence for that work, bracketing out any received wisdom, so that their unique response is celebrated rather than questioned." These types of assignments illustrate how instructors allow students space to integrate, and even celebrate, their own experiences while learning the content of the course.

Moving from Personal to Social

Instructors also ask students to consider how their individual experiences interact with the larger social environment and even reflect that backwards on themselves. In one course, students reflect on "their own personalities and biographies and bring these into conversation with questions of global citizenship and planetary responsibility." Another instance prompts film students to "first . . . read and write about the opinions of others. Then . . . begin with their own reactions and evaluations of film work."

Students may also be expected to consider their own life experiences before analyzing the experiences of a culture outside of their own. One instructor plans writing assignments that "involve a personal side which is up to the individual's experience in terms of how they respond and draw parallels with the Amish." In another instance, students are asked to move from being one scholar/student to consider the larger research community. In all of these instances, students must acknowledge

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1   Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from individual course proposals, which were categorized as an example of reflection.

their subject position and negotiate the course content—and often the social aspect of the topic—to produce a unique interpretation for the writing prompt.

Contemplating Contextually-Bound Problems

Overall, we established that these reflective writing assignments take place in context—whether it is the context of the classroom, course content, or an individual student's prior experiences. We first noted context as important in the data via an assignment that asks students "to bring their individual experiences with service into the context of the classroom and texts." This assignment led us to notice context in many other assignments. For example, in another course, students tackle "sensitive and challenging issues on which there may be considerable disagreement (e.g., purpose of Black Lives Matter movement, ban on refugees from Muslim-majority countries, etc.)."

WI instructors also make clear to their students that context can affect their writing. This focus on contextual writing is shown more explicitly in one reflective writing assignment from the social sciences: "Leadership concepts, to a large extent, are influenced by contextual factors and perceptions of leaders and followers, based upon their unique situation. The instructor embraces the notion that students will have different experiences and multiple perspectives regarding interpersonal interactions." Thus, there are multiple ways instructors leverage context to provide a place for students' reflective writing.

These overarching characteristics speak to the ways reflective writing activities can deepen disciplinary learning while also engaging students' experiences and knowledge. The qualities present in reflection—responding subjectively, moving from personal to social, and contemplating contextually-bound problems—emphasize the power of language to support examination of individual beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions.

FINDING #2: SPECIFIC TYPES OF WI REFLECTIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Through creating metaphorical buckets in which instances of WI reflective writing could be placed, our second finding categorized specific types of reflective writing in our dataset. *Traditional* reflective writing tasks focus the students' reflection inward while *reflection for metacognition* and *reflection to grapple with belief systems* require students to critically analyze the learning process and explore belief systems outside of their own.

Traditional Reflective Writing

We found the more novel reflection assignments—the ones that spoke to our expanded definition of critical reflection—to be the most interesting, but we

must acknowledge that our dataset also contained traditional reflection tasks (Calderhead, 1989; Farrah, 1988; Gore & Zeichner, 1991), asking students to wrestle with their own viewpoints. In these assignments, students often consider an evocative situation and interrogate their own positionality. In a humanities class, students must "write beyond 'the reading made me feel. . .'" In a social sciences class, students might be required to "focus [their] attention on an aspect of our social lives we tacitly agree to ignore." In these instances, students perform individual, isolated reflection that has the capacity to get them to think more deeply about their learning or positionality (Elbow, 1991; Greene, 2011; Lawrence, 2013; Yancey, 1998) but which does not foster inclusion as powerfully as the other two categories of reflective writing assignments: *reflection for metacognition* and *reflection to grapple with belief systems*.

Reflection for Metacognition

Reflection for metacognition requires students to think beyond their individual reaction and move towards action, often requiring revision of previous writing/thinking or motivating different choices for the future. Assignments in this category of critical reflective writing might require students to "evaluate their own learning in the context of the themes [the class] proposes," or instructors might ask students to "[go] back, [review their] decisions, and [not make] the same mistake twice." Xiang Huang and Calvin S. Kalman (2012) describe this type of reflective writing that asks students to work in a "hermeneutical circle" by going back and forth between the textbook and their experiences, all while considering their own understanding of the course concepts. In short, these metacognitive reflective writing tasks engage students in writing with the goal of impacting their future course performance and disciplinary decision-making. In contrast to more traditional reflection tasks that ask writers to only consider their individual viewpoint, metacognitive reflection tasks ask writers to negotiate both their own positionality and their content learning.

Reflection to Grapple with Belief Systems

We were especially interested in one instructor who used the verb "grapple" to characterize their reflective writing assignment. This literature professor required students to "describe [their] response to a specific literary work from class, to explain what it is about the work that evokes that response, and then to 'grapple' with that response in some way." We see this particular assignment as a bridge between more traditional reflective writing (which focuses on the self) to our more expansive definition of reflection that explores broader social concepts. In this category—*grapple with belief systems*—students must reflect on concepts by applying belief systems outside their own.

We define "belief systems" broadly to mean not only religious or political beliefs but also beliefs about the ways we *do* certain disciplines—i.e., composing a journalistic piece or completing an engineering model. For example, one task requires that "students examine the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons from the perspective of those in the target area." Another instructor asks students to identify their own perspective in one discussion board post and then "take the opposite position [of] their initial post in reply to another student's post." In this category, WI instructors require students not only to be aware of their individual choices within the context of the discipline; they require students to interrogate the ways in which disciplines are constituted.

From the traditional writing tasks that ask students to analyze their positionality to the more active tasks where students have to negotiate their learning, the diversity of approaches reflected in our data reveal multiple entry points into reflective writing available to instructors.

IMPLICATIONS: REFLECTION AS AN INCLUSIONARY PROCESS

Through our iterative analysis process, we expanded our focus to encapsulate all applications of reflective writing that we saw in our WI course assignments. We believe our particular findings speak to the powerful connection between an expansive view of critical reflection and inclusive WI teaching. In their article arguing to legitimize reflective writing in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), Alison Cook-Sather, Sophia Abbot, and Peter Felten (2019) write, "The genre of reflective writing constitutes a kind of brave space; it does not promise to protect and exempt people from the challenge that real learning and growth require" (p. 19). We echo their words and suggest that broadening what counts as reflection in undergraduate education has the potential to produce more inclusive WI classes. In the following discussion, we define inclusion through the lens of our university, create a model of critical reflection for use in faculty development sessions, and conclude by considering the impact of reflective writing across contexts.

Defining Inclusion

The Inclusive Excellence Framework at our university provides the following definition of inclusion:

> The active, intentional, and on-going engagement with diversity—in people, in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum,

> and in communities with which individuals might connect—
> in ways that increase one's awareness, content knowledge,
> cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the
> complex ways individuals interact with and within systems
> and institutions. (Office of Institutional Equity, 2022)

We contend that the reflective writing qualities and types we detail here meet the components of inclusion in our institution's Inclusive Excellence Framework. Through reflective writing, instructors support students as they explore complex and varying viewpoints while also furthering content learning in disciplinary courses. Specifically, critical reflective writing assignments are a way for instructors to draw on the unique experiences of the diverse set of students in their classrooms. For example, the negotiation required in metacognitive reflective writing is an active process, often calling for students to reevaluate and/or navigate their learning with peers. Through critical reflection, students are invited to explore, consider, and analyze a variety of viewpoints that reveal the "complex ways individuals interact with and within systems and institutions" (Office of Institutional Equity, 2022).

In his review of the reflection and inclusion literature in K-12 schools, Mark Minott (2019) found that a combination of reflective writing characteristics deepen the possibilities for inclusive learning. We heartily agree, but we are also cognizant that critical reflective writing, especially, might be a new endeavor for university instructors. Our analysis also reminded us that powerful reflective writing activities can take many forms—informal or formal, low or high stakes—and serve a variety of purposes, highlighting personal or social experiences, spurring thought or action. If we view these reflective writing activities as fluid and interconnected, we open up multiple entry points for disciplinary faculty to engage with reflective writing in their courses. Faculty can capitalize on the disciplinary discourse practices around the actual term "critical reflection" to make the practice more approachable for instructors who may be hesitant. If, for example, engineering instructors (such as those in our program) already include reflection for metacognition in their courses, a discussion of the other types of reflective writing might give them gentle encouragement to experiment with new reflective writing activities, which can become a low-stakes way to support students' engineering planning and design (Runnel et al., 2013).

A Reflection Continuum Toward a More Inclusive WI Pedagogy

We see the reflective writing assignments identified here not as a hierarchy—i.e., one type of reflective writing isn't necessarily "better" or "more inclusive" than others—but rather as a continuum (see Figure 7.1).
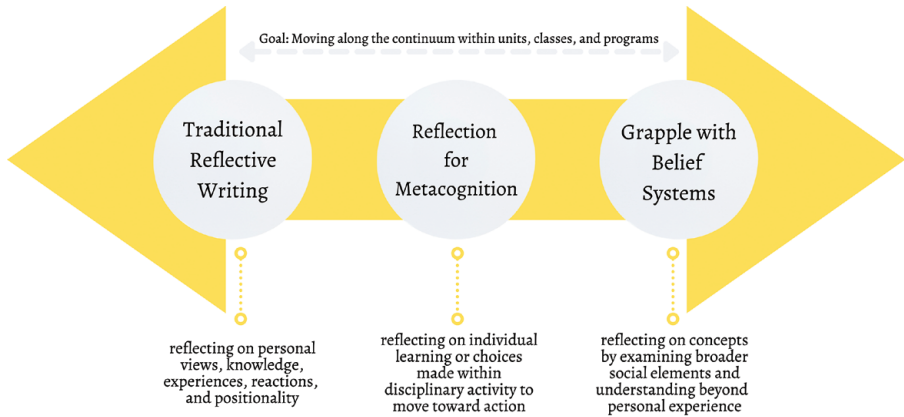
Figure 7.1. Continuum of Reflective Writing. This continuum moves from
more traditional (left) to more complex (right) reflection practices.

We situated each type of reflective writing horizontally to highlight the fluidity of movement possible between the category with a brief definition below the category name. The variety of outcomes indicated in this continuum—reflecting on personal views, individual learning, and broader social understanding—are outcomes we see in nearly all undergraduate majors in our WAC program. This continuum allows multiple entry points of engagement, and it highlights our eventual aim or endpoint: to move towards more inclusive WI classes via the integration of critical reflection where students use writing to grapple with belief systems in all disciplinary literacy courses.

As we can see from these writing elements and assignments, including critical reflection in any form serves to push against simplistic binary views of complex disciplinary issues and reveals that there is no universal process for learning. The more traditional reflective writing assignments are a way for instructors to draw on—and value—the unique experiences of diverse sets of students in their classrooms. The more complex forms of critical reflection ask students to interrogate disciplinary, social, or belief systems. Further, these assignments provide a relatively low-stakes way to write toward and beyond the content, asking students to grapple with this complexity without adding additional time for planning or grading.

As instructors design activities to move students along the critical reflective writing continuum, they create a space for critical thinking around new or contrasting ideas and highlight the value of exploring multiple pathways toward a solution. Rafael Otfinowski and Marina Silva-Opps (2015) demonstrate the possibilities that accompany thoughtful reflective writing exercises in the science classroom. Through explicit modeling of reflective writing in their biology

course, they found that students were able to expand their critical thinking with greater confidence to challenge existing scientific concepts. Finally, by increasing opportunities for free writes, quick writes, and other informal writing activities, reflective assignments add value to writing-to-learn, an already key component of WAC philosophy.

We think these findings about WI critical reflective writing assignments have significant implications for the WAC/WID field. Most importantly, our findings begin to answer Brookfield's (1996) call for "more attention to how making meaning [and] critical thinking . . . are viscerally experienced processes" (p. 379). For students, learning can feel like a simple input (e.g., lecture or textbook reading) to a final output (e.g., exam or essay). Critical reflective writing activities make the learning process more complex for students, upending the simple input/output model and producing the "visceral experience" that Brookfield describes. Reflection highlights the ways learning is connected to values and prior knowledge, and it helps students see learning as something experienced through a process. Importantly, critical reflection extends learning even after the content is mastered or the project is completed.

If we return to the context with which we began this investigation, we are reminded of the ways the social and institutional climate impacts classroom learning. For example, on our campus during the 2015 student protests, some instructors made space for discussion and reflective writing to help students process their experiences *before* or even *while* they were engaging with course content. Abraham H. Maslow (1981) reminds us that students are unable to focus on cognitive learning if they don't feel a connection to their learning communities. Incorporating more reflection can provide students with that connection. If we expand reflective writing to go beyond the person and beyond metacognition—and if we encourage a variety of applications for critical reflection—we produce deeper learning and more inclusive WI classes. Further, this expansion has the possibility to increase student engagement and sense of belonging as students feel seen for their experiences and existing knowledge (Otfinowski & Silva-Opps, 2015). This sense of belonging is both a central tenet of our university's strategic plan and a core value of our WAC program.

Further highlighting the impact of the institutional climate, like many universities, budget considerations on our campus necessitate a direct connection between our WAC program's value and the mission of our university. Our analysis of the varied uses of critical reflection in WI classes has reaffirmed the value of reflection for us as WAC administrators and reminded us that, as Dewey (1910) wrote, reflective thinking has the quality to "grow" and "support" students' disciplinary thinking. The reflective thinking categories we establish here push Dewey's definition further, creating possibilities for inclusive WI classes

rich with content learning *and* space for students to consider experiences, solutions, and identities outside of their own.

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