MODEL STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF MODELING AND

REFLECTION TO SUPPLEMENT LEARNING

IN THE GRADUATE

CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

      I'd like to dedicate this thesis to a very special group of people- Morgan, Julia, Alyssa, Manny, Justin, and Amanda. Your friendship was the inspiration for this research. Thank you.

      To Casie, my friend, my mentor, and my St. Louis partner-in-crime, this is for you.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Those who have had the biggest impact on my academic life and learning are the classmates with whom I have traded papers and spent many enjoyable and productive hours revising, crafting, and then revising again. More than that, these informal sessions provided friendships and sounding boards. With these friendships we became invested in each other's success. As Hannah Arendt once said, "for excellence, the presence of others is always required." I attribute much of my academic success and writing development to these informal after-hours writing groups.

These experiences led me to reflect upon and question how my writing evolved through those hours spent with what I later learned were called "informal learning communities." I noticed not only that my writing evolved as I became more familiar with the conventions and conversations in composition, but that my writing process evolved as well. In an environment with other writers and novice compositionists I was able to draw upon peers' experiences drafting articles and research papers. This environment is different from that of the classroom due in part to the power structure that exists between professors and students, no matter how student centered the classroom. I observed and listened to my peers as they talked about their writing processes and how these processes related to their experience in the classroom, and in interacting with their peers and professors. It became apparent that learning was not necessarily solely about understanding the text, but also pertained to learning how to negotiate relationships and networks within the community. I began to wonder what research existed on this issue and what my peers thought about informal means of learning. In what ways did these

learning communities supplement my and my peers' learning in classes, through reading, or from professor feedback?

Research Questions

In my thesis, I aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do graduate students conceptualize their own learning and to what elements do they attribute this learning?
- In particular, what do graduate students say about the role informal learning communities play in their ongoing learning and writing development?

This research is relevant and important because students in masters programs represent a diverse population (Vandenberg et al., Einaudi, 2011). We do not know much about the graduate population at the Master (MA) level since most research to date focuses on the PhD student and how he/she progresses through a program. The growing diversity of students in MA classrooms likely means diversity in how students learn and learn to write. Because of that, it is important to understand the evolution of students' writing and learning, and speculate about ways we might aid them in their process.

Further, this study provides one of only a few studies of graduate student learning in rhetoric and composition. I share the disappointment of Jessica Restaino about the lack of research conducted on graduate students (and in the writing program) especially research with practical application (18). Additionally, there is a need to address the personal reflection about one's own writing. For example, when given the opportunity to talk out loud, the students I interviewed were able to articulate and reflect upon what they

thought worked and what didn't, in terms of writing successfully. Their self-defined measure of success varied between good grades, a product of which they were proud, and work that could potentially be published in an academic journal.

Too, the research I provide is valuable because it helps us understand the social nature of learning among MA students with the intention of shedding light on previous discussions regarding the social nature of writing. My research thus mirrors the epistemological turn in the field to postmodern understandings of self and knowledge making (Berlin, Trimbur, George, Brodkey). I am researching what I believe is the inherently social nature of learning to write: learning to write or learning in general is not a solitary act, but a social one. Therefore, research that delves into the social nature of learning and learning to write is important. Both areas are important to the conversation because they draw attention to how one learns, which in turn brings awareness to the act of teaching writing.

Review of Literature

To establish the foundation for my own research, I draw upon published work in three areas: first, communities of practice and developmental network theory, which includes discussions of mentoring; second, peer relationships in the classroom; and finally, informal learning groups in the workplace.

Communities of Practice

The work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger served as a broad foundation for this thesis. Lave and Wenger speak to the social aspect of learning in their work, specifically

that communities of practice allow people to form learning partnerships within their cohort. Their perspective is that students, as novices in their field, are inclined to learn from and seek partnerships with those in their community. They go on to say that "learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community" (100). In other words, the more one is involved within a community of peers, the more he/she will learn. This provides further overarching research regarding networks because it reinforces the idea of vertical learning: that students learn as much from their peers as from their professors.

Students in MA programs are able to engage with and contribute to the overall conversation in their respective fields, not only by contributing research but also simply through their time in the program. Lave and Wenger state "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (29). The MA students begin as novices and over time become the expert practitioners in communities of practice. This is because "knowledge between peers and near-peers… spreads exceedingly rapidly and effectively" both in and out of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 93). This rings true especially considering the amount of time students spend reading and discussing theories with one another and with their professors, based on personal experience and what participants shared during their interviews. The more students participate with their peers, both inside and out of the classroom, the more knowledge they gain (Lave & Wenger). Now I will discuss developmental network theory and the importance of applying it to MA programs.

Developmental Networks

Developmental network theory explains how networks such as peer networks affect and influence academic growth in the academy as well as in people's careers outside the classroom. It does so by researching and analyzing the connections novices form with their more experienced peers, and the ways those connections impact their success in their respective field. Drawing upon developmental network theory, and based on the framework, I examine the ways in which students reach out to many people in order to further their learning, instead of reaching out solely to their mentors. As Monica Higgins and Kathy Kram explain, a student's support comes from many people within their social and professional circle. In other words, while we may have formal mentors, such as our professors in the field, we are mentored as well by an extensive network of family and friends. I wish to focus on an individual's peers in graduate school as one area of support because, as Higgins and Kram say, "individuals rely on not just one but multiple individuals for developmental support in their careers" (264).

Specifically, Higgins and Kram argue that people draw support from various groups as they work towards a successful career or, in this case, a Masters degree (267). The networks that are available to graduate students are not infinite by any means although they are extensive. Using developmental network theory as a frame allows us in the rhetoric and composition field another lens through which to view mentoring within graduate classrooms (Higgins & Kram 264).

Equally valuable is a developmental network theory that focuses on students' formal and informal networks. Students' networks evolve and change over time, as Vicki Sweitzer observes in her article "Towards a Theory of Doctoral Student Professional

Identity Development: A Developmental Networks Approach." Sweitzer says that a student's "developmental networks are likely to change as career needs change resulting in the development of new relationships and the loss of others" (5). Students may enroll in different courses, their focus may shift, or they may develop bonds with professors and students outside of their fields. One can gather that each new connection made means a potential new dimension is added to the student's writing and advances them further into the field.

While Sweitzer seeks to examine the ways students are supported by their networks, I want to understand what these networks are, and how students experience the networks contributing to their learning. After my research, it is evident that bonds are formed while discussing assignments and projects being completed, but how do students view these relationships and what do they get from them? Do students attribute those bonds to their success in the program or to an improvement in their writing? According to Sweitzer, students do question how they fit within the academic community based on their interaction with their network and peers (12). Thus, understanding how networks affect students' perceptions of themselves and the program can lead to evolution of mentorship programs at the MA level.

Higgins and Kram's work parallels Sweitzer's in its agreement that forming networks within an individual's field is important to his/her success. Not only do students build a support network that keeps them grounded when stress or problems arise, but also they learn something from each person they network with. The cyclical transfer and evolution of what students learn from classroom conversations and pass onto one another is fascinating, especially when we consider how "students' relationships with faculty and

peers from within their respective academic programs" are vital to their academic and

professional progress (Sweitzer 3). It is through these relationships that students learn the

norms and vocabulary of the field that they will use throughout their careers.

The relationships Sweitzer discusses are a reason that composition is typically

viewed as supportive field and is especially so when one is enrolled as a student.

Professors are often willing to invest in the students who are committed to becoming

active in the conversation, and students are often supportive of their peers and their plight

to earn a degree. During graduate school, students are arguably more involved with their

professor and peers than undergraduates, so their networks may shift slightly from those

they maintained before entering graduate school. While they still have their support

networks on the outside, such as their family, co-workers, and friends, they will likely

spend more time with their peers in the program because "an individual's developmental

network is a subset of his or her entire social network" (Higgins & Kram 268). Due to

their proximity these students may form friendships that extend outside of the

classrooms. The connections formed present new experiences for the students and new

lenses from which they view the world.

Mentoring

Other researchers discuss the relationship between networks and learning through

the lens of mentoring. The idea of students as mentors to their peers is expanded upon in

"Mentoring Alternatives: The Role of Peer Relationships in Career Development." Kathy

Kram and Lynn Isabella explore the student's growth as an individual while being part of

a "core group from which the individual learns new behaviors and gains a positive sense

of self" (111). This sense of self that Kram and Isabella mention above is learned through trial and error from the students. Attempting an unfamiliar writing style or voice can be daunting but these styles or behaviors are learned via observation of, and feedback from, mentors who are also friends.

In this precursor to her article with Higgins, Kram discusses the importance of mentoring and networking with people who have more experience in the field. For my purposes here, I define those with more experience as experienced peers or people who have been in the program for a longer period of time. For example, Kram and Isabella examine the importance of peers mentoring one another, as well as the networks that form among peers instead of just those with bosses or professors. They state "peer relationships appear to have the potential to serve some of the same critical functions as mentoring, and also appear more likely to be available to individuals" (112). If students are nervous to approach their professors with a new idea or want to work through possible research topics, their peers may be accessible and able to act as sounding boards and brainstorming partners. The variety of people enrolled in graduate programs also offers a varied selection of ideas and viewpoints for the student to consider. This leads me to discuss research on peer relationships in graduate classrooms.

Informal Networks Are Co-Existent with the Classroom

We have moved from the broad umbrella of communities of practice, developmental networks, and mentoring to formal and informal student networks, and finally to the particular setting of the classroom. Based on previous research, it is no secret that groups and relationships between students form over time within the

classroom. But it is what happens in those groups that calls for a closer look. According to Kram and Isabella "a peer relationship can support an individual's sense of competence and confidence in a professional role" (117). This differs from the networks described earlier by Lave & Wenger, Sweitzer, and Higgins & Kram because the networks occur within the physical classroom as opposed to the professional academic field outside of the classroom.

Lynne Anderson and John Carta-Falsa's article "Factors that make Faculty and Student Relationships Effective" peers into the power of choosing one's network versus being assigned a group. To Anderson and Carta-Falsa, research on being able to choose one's network is valuable to the conversation because it encourages students to actively seek out those who inspire and challenge them versus taking a passive role in their learning.

A large part of success is due to students or colleagues feeling supported and secure with sharing their ideas, something that happens when one is among a trusted group of peers (134). Yes, that may happen over time when one is assigned a group to work with, but based on personal experience and prior research, it occurs at a faster rate when the individual connects with their peers on their own.

When an informal network "consists of relationships among individuals within the larger group" those individuals are concerned with the success of those in the group instead of their own (Anderson & Carta-Falsa 135). By "group success" I mean that everyone in the group wants everyone else to do well and will work hard to make that happen. Based on personal experience, in certain cases, this may mean taking 45 minutes to read through a paper when they also need to work on their own projects, or it could

mean listening to a peer's problems and giving advice if needed. The results of Anderson and Carta-Falsa's research indicate that students would rather work and collaborate with one another than with the professor, indicating a strong attachment to the informal groups that had formed. This was backed up by the students they interviewed indicating they sought "friendships and to work with each other" (137). That the students realized they wanted to work with friends shows they understand the importance of informal learning groups, even if they do not know what to call them.

In "Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions," Anne DiPardo and Sarah Warshauer Freedman study how peer groups impact the writing process. While the thrust of their article is on formally established peer groups, these researchers also found evidence that a students' writing "grows in relation to the entire stream of social interaction" within their learning environment (141). In addition they seek to understand the ways students interact with each other within those groups. This early research found that besides commenting and editing their peer's work, students belonged to these groups for reasons other than writing (120). These reasons could include anything from help planning next semester's schedule, discussing personal problems, to dealing with the stresses of graduate school. In other words, these informal networks developed alongside formal networks and contributed to the students' well being, identity, and feelings of belonging.

While DiPardo and Freedman study formal learning groups, their findings coincide with Anderson and Carta-Falsa's research that students belong to their networks for more than just writing; a sense of camaraderie pervades these groups and networks. DiPardo and Freedman conclude, "peer response groups represent a step toward allowing

student talk its due role in fostering the writing process" (144). I must stress again that they are speaking of formal learning groups. However, this research is worth reviewing because DiPardo and Freedman realized the importance of students working together to discuss their work within more intimate groups.

Robert Weaver and Jiang Qi speak to students' perceptions of their peers' influence on their academic experience in their article "Classroom Organization and Participation: College Students' Perceptions." It is clear that influence exists among students within the classroom based on students' responses to those who monopolize discussions or digress on extreme tangents (576). Those who don't quite fit in with the groups within the classroom are somewhat ostracized. While this particular issue is not central to my own research, this research does demonstrate how powerful informal peer groups and alliances are in the classroom. Weaver and Qi say "[i]nformal peer networks influence the classroom's emotional climate," which manifests in silence when the groups disagree or are bored with the speaker, or in lively discussion and debate when they are engaged (575). If informal networks develop within classrooms and shape students' responses to each other, it would seem reasonable that these same networks might exert some type of influence on the students' motivation to cultivate an engaging classroom.

As Higgins, Kram, Sweitzer, and Isabella suggest, motivation is imperative for graduate students since they complete their Masters degrees in two to three years. A strong peer group fosters a sense of camaraderie that is not lost on the students (Higgins, Kram, Sweitzer, & Isabella). They realize that being able to participate in a close-knit group within the larger community of graduate school gives them an advantage. They

have access to people able critique and edit their work when their professors are not available. When students form their own peer groups they take a much more active role in their learning and in one another's success. Discussing potential paper topics allows students the opportunity to receive feedback as well as gives others the chance to share what they know or send any related articles to that student. Students do not pass up the chance to share any related knowledge they have in order to assist a peer, who in turn has the possibility to be a colleague in the future. The networks formed in graduate composition courses extend into the professional realm and influence the community of composition. It is of note that peer networks inside the classroom feed into peer networks outside of the classroom. Therefore, the stronger the network inside the classroom, the stronger the network outside of the classroom will be (Kram & Isabella).

Additionally, within any community it is the peers who dictate the social norms and values for that specific group. Understanding how these norms are created helps us to conceptualize learning communities and their importance in MA programs and beyond. According to Carolyn Shields "a sense of what community means has developed from the interplay of attributes and values that have been assumed, frequently implicitly, to be dominant within each community" ("Learning from Difference: Considerations for Schools as Communities" 279). These implicit cues become apparent to those who engage with the network of peers and they differ from group to group. In regards to editing drafts, for example, the time between peer editing and the final due date may vary depending on the group members. Peers quickly figure out with whom they work best and what works in terms of draft sharing, motivation, and editing styles. This is an example of the development of one network.

Building trust is an essential part of belonging to a network. David Boud and

Heather Middleton illustrate the importance of trust in their article "Learning From

Others at Work: Communities of Practice and Informal Learning." Perhaps one of the

biggest advantages to working within a close group is that students come to trust their

peers to enhance their writing whether it is by challenging an idea, helping with grammar,

or giving examples of other texts. Boud and Middleton discuss the importance of trust

within the classroom when they argue that informal learning shapes not only students'

writing for the classroom, but can expand into their careers after graduate school.

Furthermore, Boud and Middleton explore the ways peers learn from one another in the

classroom. They write "a community of practice may be strongly framed when

transmission of knowledge occurs closely between members" (201). Due to the smaller

class sizes, graduate students are able to work together and share what they know with

their peers on a more intimate scale.

Still, Boud and Middleton say that peers working with one another outside the

classroom are a strong indicator about the "contribution to discussions about the learning

that occurs unprompted by deliberate facilitation" (194). Boud and Middle suggest that

when students are talking together in a relaxed setting new ideas have the opportunity to

be introduced to the conversation. These conversations have the ability to meander and

wind around topics whereas in class they would most likely be restrained by a time limit

or not allowed to digress from the original comment too much. The natural flow of

dialogue encourages learning in an ostensibly effortless manner because students are used

to taking in ideas from their peers through conversations on a daily basis within the

classroom, and applying that information to conversations with their peers outside of the

classroom. Next I move from informal networks in classrooms (in my case, the MA classroom) to the informal networks that develop in the workplace.

Informal Networks: From the Classroom to the Workplace

This section provides another layer of theoretical scaffolding, moving from informal learning groups in the classroom to informal networks in the workplace. This compliments and provides insight into the research done on informal groups in the classroom. Connie Gersick, Jean Bartunek, and Jane Dutton studied the similarities between the informal groups among students and those within the workplace. The bridge from academia to professional life can be crossed easily with the knowledge and networks that students form while in graduate school. Gersick et al.'s article, "Learning from Academia: The Importance of Relationships in Professional Life" discusses how relationships and networks formed by students mirrors those formed by professionals and discuss the ways networks can assist those with success in their fields: "[o]rganizational researchers have consistently described workplace relationships as providing two types of benefits: instrumental career help and emotional support" (1028), both of which graduate students need to feel connected to their academic community and produce quality work.

In other words, emotional support and academic help are key parts to success in graduate school. Networks comprised of the student's peers are essential to providing the emotional and academic support necessary. This is similar to the support received from a network of co-workers who share similar roles (Gersick). Moreover since professionals do not operate within a bubble, they also require emotional and career support in order to succeed. Graduate students are at an advantage in that they are able to form networks that

act similarly to those one will find in their career. Gersick et al. explains this by saying "colleagues help to define what counts as good and interesting in one's field; they heavily influence one's potential to obtain day-to-day respect and enjoyment at work" (1039).

In fact, according to Herminia Ibarra, colleagues use their peers to adapt to different situations and use those adaptations to elevate themselves in their respective field. In "Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation" Ibarra explains that people must adapt or "create new repertoires of possibilities" when they experience changes in their situations (765). These changes can include switching fields of study for graduate students, graduating and moving into the professional realm of study, and advancing further into one's career. Forming and maintaining a network of peers and colleagues of one's own volition can ease these transitions and adaptations, while allowing the student or professional to maintain their identity. This research is important because it highlights how people gravitate towards those who are similar to them or to those who they want to imitate. Because they are not assigned these groups, the networking is that much more powerful.

Description of Chapters

In this first chapter I present my review of literature, my main arguments, and my key findings. I explain my interest in formal and informal learning communities, as well as the impact this research has on the field of rhetoric and composition. This situates my research within the current conversation of developmental networks and informal learning communities.

In the second chapter I present the methods used in my interview process. I use the qualitative interviews of eight MA students to address my research questions. I explain how I was introduced to the students interviewed, and their demographics. In the third chapter I present the findings of my qualitative research. I draw upon the interviews conducted with current graduate students within the rhetoric and composition program to learn how these students experience learning in their program, and to what features they attribute that learning. I found that students are able to conceptualize their learning. I also argue that while informal learning communities did play a part in students' learning, most attributed their learning to modeling themselves after successful peers and professors, and personal reflection.

In the fourth and final chapter I discuss the implications of my findings. I go on to argue that personal reflection aids learning, specifically when it is facilitated. The implications of this study provide a foundation for further research into the writing development of MA students, specifically benefitting those students working on a thesis or portfolio project, as well as professors who are directing the students.

CHAPTER II

Methodology

To address my research questions, I conducted qualitative interviews with eight students currently enrolled in the rhetoric and composition graduate program at Texas State University. Using qualitative methods of research was ideal for this study because it allowed me to learn about the "how" and "why" each participant did something, not just look at "what" they did (Creswell). Qualitative methods are popular among smaller studies because they allow the researcher to spend more time listening to each participant and then make wider implications for the findings. I am also very comfortable with Creswell's qualitative research methods because of my undergraduate experiences with social sciences, which is another reason I chose to use qualitative interviews as my research method.

However, before I discuss my methodology, I will situate myself in the research in order to recognize any biases that may have influenced my analysis. I am a 29 year-old Caucasian female raised in a West Texas town on the border of Texas and Mexico. I'm privileged to have grown up in an upper middle class family, with access to good public schools. Academic success was expected and rewarded. It was also expected that my brother and I would attend college and earn an undergraduate degree. I'm fortunate that I was able to pursue an MA degree based on interest in the subject and not professional necessity, and that I had my family's emotional support while pursuing my MA degree.

My director placed me in contact with ten graduate students currently enrolled in the Master of Rhetoric and Composition (MARC) program. Of the ten, six responded and were agreeable to being interviewed for my thesis. Below, I share brief profiles of each

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participant in order to situate them in this research as I situated myself. The names I use are pseudonyms to respect those who wished to remain anonymous.

Juan: Juan was in his second semester at the time of the interview. He is 23 years old and chose not to identify his ethnicity. He grew up in South Texas and chose Texas State University because of its classification as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). He knew when he was in high school that he wanted to become a professor, and made academic choices in order to accomplish this goal.

Cindy: Cindy was also in her second semester at the time of the interview and chose not to identify her age or ethnic background. Cindy chose the MARC program at Texas State because of her mentor at the writing center, and the opportunities it provided her within the field. She also chose Texas State because of the quality of the professors, both in the MARC and Literature program.

Brittany: Brittany chose Texas State because of the initial relationship she formed with a professor and current MARC student before applying to the program. The outreach and informational sessions provided by the professor and MARC student served to raise her interest in the MARC program, and it was the follow-up with the professor that solidified Brittany's choice of program. She identified as a 21 year-old Caucasian woman in her second semester at the time of the interview.

Kathryn: Kathryn was in her second semester at the time of the interview and chose not to identify her ethnicity or her age. She chose the MARC program after re-evaluating her life and what she considered to be most fulfilling, which was working in a writing center. The opportunity to study writing center pedagogy is what attracted her most to the MARC program.

Lisa: Lisa was in her fourth and final semester at the time of the interview. She identified as a 23 year-old Caucasian woman from the Midwest. She chose to pursue her MA degree because it was an expected step within her family. Her background is in English and creative writing, but her work in a writing center is what attracted her to the MARC program.

Kerri: Kerri was in her fourth semester at Texas State at the time of the interview. She identified as a 28 year-old Caucasian woman. She is a Literature student with a cognate in film and chose both the school and the program in order to make a change in her life. She met all requirements for admission, which also served as motivation to apply at Texas State. Kerri took two courses in the MARC program before she was informed that they would not count toward her major, so she refocused her studies to Literature with a cognate in Film.

Samantha: Samantha chose not to identify her ethnic background, age, or time in the program. However, from the interview it can be gathered that she had been enrolled for three years, taking one semester off from classes. She enrolled in the Counseling program because of her interest and desire to counsel others. At the time of the interview she was expecting to graduate in one more semester. Samantha had no connection to the MARC program aside from students she encountered in the writing center.

Greg: Greg identified himself as a 28 year-old Caucasian male in his first semester as an MA student. He chose the MARC program because of its proximity to Austin, where he was already living. He learned about the program at a writing center conference and already knew he wanted to make a living off of writing, so the MARC program seemed as if it would meet that desire.

The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 29, there were 2 males and 6 females who participated. This range or participants was ideal for my purposes because it offered me a way to examine what is called a horizontal approach for peer mentors versus the vertical approach typical for students and professors, which is generally the focus for most research. In the vertical approach, the student discusses concerns and questions with his or her professor exclusively (Lave and Wenger). Information is distributed from the top down, in this case from the professor down to the student. In the horizontal approach students share information with one another, utilizing each other as resources and practitioners of rhetoric and composition.

I maintain the horizontal approach by inquiring about the experiences of MA rhetoric and composition students through the qualitative interviews I conducted. Irving Seidman explores the importance of interviews as research in his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. In chapter one, "Why Interview?" Seidman writes that "an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" is why interviewing is such an important method of research (9). Because of the shared experience with my peers, I have a strong interest in exploring the meaning they made of their experiences in the MA program. This is in agreement with Seidman's opinion that interviews are the "best avenue of inquiry" because I am interested in "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (11).

In addition I have perspective on and understand any jargon the participants use during the interviews; this comes from my own status as a graduate student, particularly in the MARC program at Texas State University, as well as the "I-thou rapport" I

developed with my peers (Seidman 96). In other words, I recognize the participant as a "fellow person," but am able to differentiate between their experiences and my own (Seidman 95). This rapport is a key element of qualitative research and Seidman stresses the importance of keeping the relationship developed with participants from becoming a "we" relationship so as to maintain separation between interviewer and interviewee (97). This is possible because I interviewed students at different stages of their MA career, yet we shared the bond of progressing through the MARC program within the last three years.

One potentially challenging technique was the question of persona to take on while interviewing. Being close in age to the participants, as well as having most of the professors in common, I had to make sure I crafted a persona that took nothing they said for granted, yet showed that I was able to empathize with what they were communicating with me. The empathy allowed for me to understand the students' experiences, all the while maintaining an awareness that everything the student said is valuable information. Similarly, Seidman urges the interviewer to have enough distance from participants for the same reason, so that nothing is taken for granted (42). I had never met five of the eight participants so I am confident that I was able to maintain an appropriate distance from the participants' stories and shared information. However, I had previously taken two courses with two of the female participants: Lisa and Kerri. Because over a semester had passed since our last course together, and we had no contact other than brief contact over social media sites, I was not overly concerned with the amount of familiarity between us during the interview. We were acquainted with each other, but not overly comfortable, which is where words and meanings are taken for granted.

Previously, I mentioned the relationship with the participants as one key element of qualitative research, and next I will discuss the other key elements: the method of interviewing and the analysis of the data, specifically, the way each element interacts with the other. For instance, the relationship with the participant can impact the method of interview unless the interviewer is prepared. This means taking nothing for granted, and following Seidman's advice of building and controlling a rapport with a participant: the "interviewing relationship can be friendly but not a friendship," meaning participant and interviewer can, and will, develop rapport, but should not cross those lines in an interview situation (97).

The reasons for not crossing the boundaries of interviewer/participant are many, but are specifically related to the analysis that happens after an interview. If a friendship forms, the potential for information to be overlooked is large. While interviewing or analyzing, data can be missed this way, resulting in questionable results.

The next portion of the qualitative interviewing method is the actual interview[1]. Each interview was semi-structured and approximately an hour in length. By asking open-ended questions I allowed the students to tell me stories of their own experiences with formal and informal learning communities, resources in the classroom that improved their writing, and writing development. However, asking open-ended questions is not enough in regards to the qualitative interview method. With Seidman for my guide, I used "listen[ed] more, talk[ed] less" as my mantra and fully heard each participants' answers

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[1] I began the process by attaining my Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption on September 15, 2011, Exemption Request EXP2011Y2171. I created a letter of consent for participants to sign before their interview. In this letter I described the research I was conducting, informed participants I would be taking notes as well as audio recording, described the very low risk of participating, and stated they could withdraw at any time.

(87). For example, I requested clarification when I was unsure of what a participant meant. I asked participants to "tell me more," or asked them "what do you mean by that?" This allowed each story and each answer to be clarified by their own telling, rather than through my interpretation. This is a technique Restaino implemented in her study of first year teaching assistants. Her method of interviewing participants reinforced the value of conversation and dialogue as research. This serves as one way of understanding the social needs of MA students in their learning.

Here I provide an example of questions I asked to understand the social needs of MA students in their learning. For the full list of interview questions, see Appendix 1.

- Who do you confide in or share information with about the program or class related issues?

- As you have spent more time in the program, what would you say your role in the community is?

- How do you feel being part of this community has affected your learning?

However, as my overarching research questions suggest, I sought to learn how MA students conceptualized their learning, and to what they attributed to their learning. Below is an example of those questions. In asking them, I was able to listen for instances or factors that appeared more than once. By using the methods of Seidman and Restaino, I was able to ask follow-up questions and create an open dialogue when the situation allowed.

- What factors contribute to your learning?

- Tell me about your learning style. How do you learn?

- How do you process new information?

The final parts of the qualitative interview method are the transcription and analysis of each interview. It is during the transcription and analysis portions that I located significance in each participant's answer and the stories they told (Seidman 118). Studying these stories I examined them for patterns and themes that emerged, both as they appeared in an individual participant's interview, and as they emerged throughout multiple interview transcriptions. For example, I was aware of the tone of voice used to describe assignments, how often participants mentioned their professors, and whether participants referred to their cohorts as "peers," "friends," or "classmates."

After the research was analyzed, I began to consider implications of my findings. These implications apply to current pedagogy as well as future research in the field of rhetoric and composition. In the next chapter I will share my findings and discuss my analysis. It is worth noting that through my personal experience within the MARC program, I expected to find stronger results connecting informal learning communities to academic success. Because of that expectation, I crafted interview questions that would allow participants to fully share their experience with community, their peers, and how that impacted their learning. While the participants did engage in informal communities, after examining the findings, it became clear that students credited modeling and personal reflection for their academic success.

CHAPTER III

Findings and Case Studies

In this chapter I present and discuss my findings. The graduate students I interviewed did make use of informal learning networks, especially as aids to their writing process. In addition to informal learning networks, interviewees also identified modeling and personal reflection as significant factors in their writing and learning development. Moreover, reflection presented itself in three stages: participants talked about the reflection they already utilized in their academic life during the interview; participants demonstrated active reflection, using the interview as an invitation to reflect; and participants sent written reflections after the interview. However, in discussing themes from the interviews, I refer only to the first instance of reflection: reflection participants talked about explicitly *as* reflection during the interview. The two other examples of reflection I discuss as interesting and important consequences of interviewing as a method. I discuss each of the themes below, using examples from across the interviews to illustrate my points. I conclude the chapter with two case studies that provide a richer picture of graduate student learning and writing, particularly as these relate to the role of modeling for learning and the use of personal reflection in order to process new information.

Informal Learning Networks Shape The Writing Process

I start by discussing the role interviewees say that informal learning networks plays in their writing processes because it was in this discussion that the two most pervasive themes—personal reflection and modeling—emerged. That is, the role of

modeling and the role of reflection emerged when participants spoke about informal learning and development of their own writing processes. Six of the interviewees, established informal learning networks with professors, networks that shape their writing processes, identities, and experiences. These informal learning networks emerged outside the formal classroom setting and were characterized by conversations during office hours, while passing in the hallway, before class, and during breaks. The end result is what Ricardo D. Stanton-Salazar calls *confianza,* a term he uses to describe "close attachments to school agents [which] emerge out of a series of episodes that create a basis for lasting trust" (169). Stanton-Salazar places emphasis on the informal aspect of mentorship that develops from mutual respect (167). These relationships form organically through repeated contact. What's more, they foster learning through suggestions that emerge in conversation.

For instance, Greg tells us that his goal to publish arose from several conversations with his mentor, a professor whose work he respected. He utilizes advice from his professor and writes with the goal of being published. Initially Greg, "went to her to see if she had any…like…internships, or just…I didn't know exactly. But we just connected... she gave me the advice to write as if I was publishing." Here we see Greg not only experiencing *confianza*, but also the introduction of modeling as a facilitator to learning and the beginning of academic writing via informal learning processes (Anderson & Carta-Falsa).

Brittany also experienced *confianza* with her professor and utilized it to motivate herself when she "experienced roadblocks." This highlights the common notion that while the act of writing itself may be a solo endeavor, writing is also "a constitutive,

invariably social activity" (Powell 577). For Brittany, she uses informal conversations to seek more than mentorship and academic support from her professor. During our interview, she discussed being from a small southern family and not having the support that comes from understanding the rigors of an MA program. For that understanding she turns to her director because "…she is so comforting. She lets me know it's normal. Like when I freak out and am just so overwhelmed and don't feel like I belong. She lets me know that I'm fine." In these cases informal conversations serve to shape identity, which in turn shapes students' writing, or at least, confidence in their writing.

Furthermore, informal conversations with peers and professors, reading, and reflection are activities that all students I interviewed, participate in. For instance, Lisa compiles mental notes and utilizes peer conversations outside of class to help settle on a paper topic. She then procrastinates the start of the paper by cooking and running. When she is ready to begin, she uses social media, mainly Facebook, to stay in touch with her peers and check their progress on the assignment.

Where Lisa uses peer conversations and Facebook to stay in touch with her community to maintain both a social and academic relationship with her peers while working on projects, the solo aspect of writing happens when she physically sits down to work on her paper. Like each student I interviewed, she isolates herself from outside stimuli during the physical act of writing yet seeks help in the form of informal check-ins with peers when necessary.

Likewise, Kerri talks about informal conversations with her peers as a way to work through writing blocks and narrow down topics for her papers. She "engaged herself [with the paper topics] by discussing" course material, writing prompts, or

potential areas of research with her peers. This discussion helps her to "process what [she] read," so that she can then "flesh out" her ideas "with other people to [further] process" the information. In fact, she finds that she benefits from talking about her ideas with people who are not in her program because she gained knowledge by "bouncing ideas" around with others in general, as well as receiving reassurance that she was on the right track.

Kathryn also uses informal conversations as guideposts for her progress, academically. She utilizes in-class discussions for the new perspectives they allowed, and follows up with professors and her peers if she doesn't understand a theory. She stated it was the "personal one-on-one conversations" that help to "bring it all together." In fact, "talking about ideas" was a phrase that appeared in every transcript. It was nearly split in half the times the students used this phrase to describe their informal work with peers, while, at others times the phrasing referred to students' conversations with their professors. What remained constant was the desire and need to verbally process information in order to learn. The findings were the same for each student I interviewed, although some relied more on informal conversations with their professors than their peers, and the topics were not always academically centered. I suggest that this is an example of what Anis Bawarshi calls invention or "the act of locating oneself socially" (104). While Bawarshi speaks in regards to locating oneself within a genre, this same idea is applicable to participants' experiences in their first year as MA students. As first year MA students, they must locate themselves within their peer group and within the larger disciplinary community, which other students in that program are trying to enter.

They must "invent themselves" within this community. Participants identify opportunities for modeling as one of they key advantages of both types of informal learning networks.

The Importance of Modeling for Learning

Participants identified modeling as having one of the most significant impacts on their writing, their writing processes, and their learning. Of the eight students I interviewed, six (75%) described using modeling as a way to learn. Of course my findings compliment research that shows modeling to be an important tool for learning (Lave & Wenger, Elizabeth A. Stolarek). This finding seems to coincide with behavior researched under the developmental network theory I discussed in Chapter 1, where new employees model their behavior after their mentors, or more senior employees. However my research shows that participants learn from both experts and fellow novices, that is, from people with varying degrees of knowledge. The degrees of knowledge varied widely, for example, between a student in her first semester of graduate school who serves as a model to her peers, to an assistant professor who changes the way a student approaches his research, and to an associate professor who serves as a model for ways to conduct discussion facilitations.

Samantha is an excellent example of modeling because she indicates that she models her study habits and writing style after successful students she met in her classes. She shared that at the beginning of each semester she found different students to model herself after: "there's always that really great student in my life and they have a learning style that I adopt." In this way she adapts to the different course structures and requirements. The other end of the spectrum was Greg who, after discussions with his

professor, models himself after her and changed his approach to research and writing. This will be discussed in the first case study, and is important to mention here because it was so prevalent in his interview.

Brittany said she learned how to keep up with her reading by watching her older peers. She utilizes their behaviors to influence her own. For example, she modeled herself after a student who always carried a textbook with him in case he had an opportunity to read. In this case her modeling behavior resulted in more efficient reading habits and therefore helps her retain more information.

Lisa acknowledged that her inspiration was sometimes off topic, but she took her inspiration from sources she admired, such as various websites and social media feeds like Twitter, and tried to emulate. She describes getting inspiration for her blog posts after seeing different things online, pulling resources from mostly pop-culture references: "I really like to base [my blog posts] off of something I've seen elsewhere online. Bring something different- bring a meme into it. Depending on the classes or a different article, something to help me connect with the material more." Of the participants who discussed modeling, Lisa was the only one who also looked outside the academic world for ways of being. While she seeks reassurance from her peers and professors, she models her learning after various situations outside of academia.

Juan, on the other hand, very much models his behavior after people within academia. He uses two professors in the program as models. He looks toward them in order to help shape his academic career as a future professor. Because of informal conversations with these two professors, Juan compares his future to that of his professors as they are now, providing him with a version of success he lacked before he

started the program, "I want to work from within [academia] like [two of his professors]. Like when I get a PhD, I want to use it within the confines of the academy where it's [the occurrence of Chicanos with PhD degrees] not proportional- the demographics aren't proportional." This expands on Higgins and Kram's discussion of mentors within developmental network where they say "individuals rely on not just one but multiple individuals for developmental support in their careers" (264). Here, Juan illustrates that it is not necessarily better to have one single mentor. Further, he demonstrates that through informal conversations with two professors, he develops a wider breadth of knowledge and behavior because he models himself after two professors. Similarly, Kathryn prepares her discussion facilitation by framing her opening statements like one of her professors because she admires that professor and feels a connection. She says this makes her less nervous and more prepared to teach, resulting in a method that improves her learning.

From here I will discuss the role of personal reflection for academic development, something that the majority of participants utilize in their MA program. We already see Kathryn applying it order to come to the conclusion that modeling herself after her professor would benefit her development.

The Role of Personal Reflection for Academic Development

Because there can be multiple understandings of the term "reflection," I will use Yancey's definitions: "1) the processes by which we know what we have accomplished and by which we articulate accomplishment and 2) the products of those processes (6). In addition to modeling, interviewees noted the role personal reflection play in their

academic development. In fact, of the 8 participants, 6 (75%) talked about personal reflection in terms of their writing process, learning process, or both. What is interesting is that while this percentage mirrors the percentage of students identifying modeling as important, the percentage is comprised of different students.

Juan provides a good example of this kind of interview-based reflection. He indicated that he does a great deal of personal reflection in class listening to his peers, as well as when he gets home. Phrases like "…well what I do is…" and "I look back on…" illustrate his awareness of his reflection and ability to apply it to his learning. This same participant extended reflection beyond the interview by crafting and then sending me a one-page reflection paper the evening after our interview as well as in the consistent use of the phrase "reflect on." In this instance, Juan is aware of, and utilizes, personal reflection for his academic development and I will discuss this in my final chapter.

Lisa also uses reflection to conceptualize her learning, and on many occasions she refers to herself as a "sponge" in our interview, soaking up information from class discussions and her peers. When asked about what factors contribute to her learning, she told me, "actually talking about it myself." Lisa went on to share that she took part in study groups in her undergraduate program, but it wasn't until she enrolled in Texas State that "based on my grades in undergrad…I knew I had to do something different [as an MA student]." Here we see how her personal reflection impacted the way she approached her classes and her writing assignments in the MARC program.

When asked, I found that the typical writing process of pre-write, outline, write, and then edit was not a formula that the participants followed. The participants were able talk about ways they reflected upon their actual writing process, but with the exception of

Cindy, not about what they put into their papers. Cindy is very detailed about the process of writing each page, which shows just how aware she was of her process; and that it worked for her. Although the students I interviewed are not as detailed in their writing process, they are aware of ways they can improve and help one another.

Kathryn suggests that writing is her mode of reflection. This in turn became her method of learning. She talks about using blog posts, reflection papers and responses to peers' blog posts as opportunities to interact with the material and reflect on what aids her learning. She said, "If I write down my thoughts, it's easier to understand them." Because she did not pause before she said this, unlike Brittany, it suggests that Kathryn was aware of the role her writing played as a means to reflect. This illustrates an instance where the participant talked about reflection, and didn't use the interview to actively reflect.

Kerri talked about personal reflection when she referred to the times in class her papers were peer edited. She dislikes the feeling of being judged, but over three semesters she found herself engaging in peer editing more and more because it helped her paper. "Because I'm a sensitive person and I generally have somewhat of an ego, I think I am very reactionary about [peer editing]. But after… but after reflecting on it later… ehh... after reflecting on it later I realized it was beneficial if I could put those feelings aside. In the moment I probably would have gotten a lot out of it." Lisa, Kathryn, and Samantha also shared their fear of being judged by their peers in a negative sense. The difference between Kerri's initial reaction to peer editing and her current feelings depended on the method used in class. When "forced" or assigned a peer editor, she had negative feelings. However, when she was allowed to choose her own partner, she was more comfortable.

This reaffirms how highly they value their peers' acceptance and moreover, acceptance through their MA program. This was uncovered and accepted during my interview with Kerri. With that acceptance came a positive sense of self, manifested in quality work. It can be argued, then, that peer workshops should not be oversimplified into a one-day assignment. Per Restaino's urging to reflect on one's writing, and according to my research here, the connection a student feels with his or her community has more value than a day of in-class editing (Restaino 29).

I now turn to two case studies, which serve as detailed examples of ways modeling and talking about reflection became themes within the pool of participants. Each case study embodied modeling for learning and the role of personal reflection for academic development, respectively.

Case Studies

I present these case studies after my general findings to focus in more detail upon the findings of my research. Greg and Lisa serve as the case studies for ways in which modeling and personal reflection, respectively, impact the learning process.

Greg: The Role that Modeling Plays in Becoming a Published Author

Greg is a Caucasian male, 28 years old and in his second semester at the time of the interview. Greg most clearly illustrated the benefits of modeling for learning. He chose the MARC program at Texas State in order to "make a living off writing, either creatively or through grant writing. And [he] was interested in teaching at the college level." He left his job in the IT industry because he wasn't challenged, nor was he happy

with his job. He expressed disappointment and a little surprise because his class work was "easy until the very end of the semester." It was not what he was expecting as a graduate student. For this participant, modeling himself after his professors and their writing was a way to get as much out of the program as possible, a way he leveraged the program to meet his professional goals: "Then I talked to one of my professors and they gave me some good advice, which was to approach every single assignment like it's something I could maybe get published." The conversation he had with his professor happened in her office, outside of classroom hours. "I think that really changed my outlook. Instead of worrying about a grade, I started thinking about… [pause] how can I turn this assignment into something that could get published?" "I started changing which topics I chose… and that just motivated me a lot more." It's of note to address the value he places on his professor, now thesis director, particularly for the role she plays in modeling. He said, "I just connected to her" when asked to reflect on what made her so important to his graduate experience. "I need my time to be occupied or I won't be productive," and Greg is grateful for his professor for being a model of ways to approach writing in order to be published. Greg began implementing his professor's advice immediately.

This, in turn, changed how he researched: "I don't really search for material anymore. It's more going off bibliographies. I'd say the majority of the sources I find now are through bibliographies as opposed to just going out and searching through stuff on JSTOR." When I asked if he looked for titles or authors he was interested in, or pulled quotes. He said "going back to "I want to get published," and approaching every assignment as though it could get published. And one of the things that, it's not

necessarily a positive thing, but if I want to get published…one of the things is I need to nod towards specific authors. So I pay attention to which authors are mentioned the most." Greg had found a method of making coursework meaningful in relation to his larger goals. What we see here is Greg modeling himself after published authors in order to one-day become a published author himself on various topics.

Regardless of the paper topic, Greg maintained the physically solitary aspect of writing while drawing upon his professor, the writing center, and peers after he had first written an outline. Even note taking was solitary: he would re-write quotes from articles, or paraphrase them. In class he would make notes about his notes from the reading, all reflective acts. "The majority of my notes are on stuff [he has] already taken notes on" and less on what is discussed in class. Greg would then take his notes and "lock [him]self in the library" to write the first draft. The cycle would begin again, where he showed his draft to peers to edit, and then again head to the library to write alone. As Greg's experiences demonstrate, informal networks are integral to the writing process, providing a forum for testing ideas, and an outlet to seek reassurance. Not only that, but because Greg now seeks resources from bibliographies instead of other people, a method he learned through modeling and one that "really changed [his] outlook", he maintains the solitary aspect of writing.

While he may have created his writing while he was alone, Greg relied on his peers to help him make a connection he was missing and introduce him to other authors he would be able to model his writing after. Greg demonstrates the role of "strong ties" in intellectual development (Hunt, Mair, Atkinson). More importantly he went on to say "…and my cohort and I seem very tight-knit as far as knowing what other people are

interested in." This reinforced the moments of reflection- thinking about research and how it my help a peer, as well as the connections formed with peers.

Some of these connections are maintained through social media. Greg told me he is "pretty active online with twitter and Facebook and blog posts and that sort of thing. I stay connected through that." He went on to tell me that "I get to know my peers better in class. But I think that class is kind of the intro and Facebook is the way to facilitate that relationship." Because he lives an hour away from campus, it is a means for him to stay connected to his peers. However it doesn't help when it comes to "talking about conferences and the peripheral stuff. That's the stuff I don't feel as connected on." The connection students have with each other is the reason Restaino pursued her research, and is evident in Greg's statement (17). What is important to note here is that Greg notes the value of being active in the community. He is aware that to succeed students should model themselves after an active member in the community.

As if to illustrate this, Greg verbalized the importance of being active in the community that is graduate school here saying, "you know, part of it is realizing that classwork isn't what you're here for. This distance is difficult, but not for the reasons I thought. The distance is more difficult for the small things, like the candidate interviews." Sometimes he debates about not making the hour long drive, "but that makes me less connected to the community. So it's all these small extra things" that he uses in order to model himself after peers and professors to succeed in his community.

In response to a question about having conversations with his peers he said, "it sounds kind of weird because, the projects are so… so… different. But a certain aspect of someone's project might trigger something in my head." That trigger started a domino

effect, which allowed him to write a paper for his research methods course; one that he had difficult time writing because he did not have a high interest in it. Again, this is where he turns to published authors in his field. He was able to model his approach after those he read in his research method's course.

Greg is also very clear about the conscious choices he has made in his writing despite not having immediate face-to-face conversations with his peers, for example, over beers after class. The word "recognize" was used several times when he talked about the different choices he makes in his writing: whether it is to model his style after authors being published in academic journals, to take on the same styles as those he writes about, or to use different citations than MLA. "…Thinking about the David Foster Wallace essay, I didn't do it in MLA style because it's an essay about David Foster Wallace. So I have to use footnotes [he laughed]. So I trusted [his professor] to recognize that I'm making that choice and not just talking about a narrow range of topics." After one semester, he realized, with the help of his professor and peers that he can make choices within his writing style. This student thinks about himself as a professional and expects his professors to view him as such. He trusts in his ability to make choices that reflect his larger goals, and in his professors to respect those choices.

When I asked him what strategies he's developed, he knew exactly what has helped him progress as a writer in just one semester: A raised awareness of authors in his field, which is the way his director researches. Modeling his research habits after his director's, combined with staying connected with his peers, even if through social media, and a reformed way of researching impacted Greg's writing. In this case, modeling

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himself after a professor he views as successful is one of the reasons he is so successful within the MA program.

Lisa: The Role of Reflection in Processing New Information

Lisa is a Caucasian female, 23, and in her 4th semester in the MARC program at the time of the interview. She chose this program because her writing center director at her undergraduate school in the Midwest told her about Texas State. In our interview, Lisa talks about the role of reflection and how it aids her learning. Unlike Greg, Lisa was initially overwhelmed with the course load, especially because she had an Instructional Assistant position. She had been warned by professors and older peers, but was not ready for the "unexpected…sort of a jolt into the general franticness [laughs] that has remained to this day." For this participant, reflection on reading and class discussions is paramount to learning, that is, making sense of the vast amount of new information she was engaged with.

Reflection is evident in her use of the word "absorb." "I absorb things," she says. Continuing to talk about reflection, she says, "I tend to not always participate too much in class discussions. I sort of sit there and absorb the information. [Laughs]." She explains that what she does next is further reflect on what she hears in class discussion in blog posts. This process of "absorbing" new information and then processing it through reflection takes time. Through "working it out" in her head, she is able to "latch onto an idea. And come to class ready to contribute." While Lisa processed the material when she wrote, she also processed through and with informal conversations with peers outside of class, which became "a bonding experience with other classmates." She went on to say

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that being in classes where "people participate a lot helped [her to] understand," and she could reflect later on what they said in class. The problem is that this process, a time-consuming but necessary one, runs counter to the fast pace of graduate study. It was Lisa's awareness of and need for active reflection that created the "jolt" she described when she first encountered the quick pace of the MA program, and the shock of "general franticness."

Informal conversation with peers was an important part of the writing process, but writing itself is a solitary activity for Lisa. She approaches writing "like a puzzle" and combines several Word documents of notes and drafts in different stages to comprise the final document. The different pages and drafts allow her to "start arranging and categorizing [her] thoughts in a different way… I think it helps me project my ideas better." Lisa's continual use of the phrase "I think" after she pauses shows active reflection upon her activity and method of writing. She goes on to say that because, "surprisingly," she didn't write a full-length paper until the first semester that she "realized" she felt more nervous than expected. Again, we hear her reflecting upon what she thought would happen versus what she actually felt, "but I came to find that it wasn't all that different than papers I wrote in undergrad. Or maybe it didn't feel that different because I was prepared. It could have been that too." Thus even though the paper in question was written several semesters ago, personal reflection allows one to process information at any point in time.

Lisa continued to talk about her writing process, which is to "just sit there and free-write for a while and know that I can come back to things later." Where Kerri made a "book cave" in the library, Lisa also creates a "fortress" to write in. Admittedly, the

fortress is imagined, but she shared that her fiancé knows not to disrupt her when she's

writing: "That started happening at the end of the first semester when I was really frantic

and stressed." She "knew at the time" that her old process "wasn't working for [her]

anymore" and took steps to change it, which resulted in her building a writing fortress.

Next, in terms of informal networks, she spoke about "add[ing] your classmates on

Facebook, and you can message and e-mail each other about how frustrating the reading

assignment was, or how frustrated with the class in general [you are]…" For Lisa, social

media plays a large part in reaching out to peers for support, both emotional and

academic. When asked how social media helps she said, "it helps to have that support

system" when the class isn't interesting or she felt confused. It helped during times of

"shared apprehension" before class, and when she was looking for a partner for the

project mentioned above, during the previous semester. The support system, or strong ties

according to Hunt et al., allowed Lisa to examine and reflect upon what worked for

different people, especially through collaborations.

After the collaboration was finished, she continued to reach out to that peer, if

only for reassurance: "I think I would probably send him things more when I was

panicking like, "I don't know what I'm doing." He would be more reassuring, you know,

that it made sense to him. I always needed to hear because it doesn't always make sense

in my head."

She spoke of the "community" and "cohorts" formed during her four semesters,

and how they shifted slightly when people graduated and incoming 1st years were

introduced. She realized where she had asked for advice and reassurance, from peers

first- and then from professors; that now she is being looked to for her "advice from time

to time." Specifically she gave advice on course suggestions, professors, and her thoughts on the program.

Both Greg and Lisa have their own processes for learning and writing: modeling to become a published author and the role of reflection in processing new information, respectively. They each utilized active reflection during our interviews regarding what aids their learning, and the roles informal peer networks play in their MA experience. Moreover, in the case studies we saw that cohorts played almost as big a role as solitary writing. This is important because the cohorts served as support for each participant, so they could write in solitude when the time came.

In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the implications of this research, and further research that stems from these findings.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

As I discussed in the previous chapters, informal learning communities do impact MA students' writing development. Equally important, MA students noted the roles that modeling and reflection of various sorts play in their learning. In this chapter I reflect upon my experience throughout the process, and discuss implications of my findings for teaching and future research.

I must acknowledge that my findings were very different from themes I initially expected would emerge. Based on the personal experience that inspired me to conduct this research I believed I would find data that coincided with research conducted by Higgins, Kram, Isabella, and Lave & Wenger. However, Brittany was the only student who spoke as highly and as often about the role of informal community in her learning as I expected most students would. In that sense, Brittany was an outlier to this study. However, if this study were expanded to a larger group, there is the possibility that more students would speak to the role of community in their learning process.

What I did find, while not central to informal learning communities, is that students learn through modeling and reflection and that they are able to very clearly identify and discuss these processes. In the next section, I discuss some of the implications of these findings for work both inside and outside the classroom.

Discussion and Implications of Active Reflection

While 75% of the students did talk about reflection and the role it played in their learning, several students used the interview itself as a forum for reflecting further, what I

called "active reflection," or reflection stimulated by the interview as a methodological tool. That is, the interview process itself seemed to stimulate further reflective "aha" moments for each of the students involved. This suggests the value of qualitative interviewing, particularly its ability to stimulate deeper reflection that might not have occurred at all outside the interview setting.

If we know that active reflection happens in an interview setting, it can be said that the same will likely happen if students are provided with a similar guide to prompt thinking and reflection during peer review sessions. Students could be given one or two days to complete an interview about the paper topic and what the student was choosing to write about in order to engage the student in active reflection, versus one class period to exchange papers. This would benefit students because they would have time to make edits based on their reflections before the final draft is turned in. Juan and Samantha spent hours and days, respectively, reflecting on our conversations and reached out to tell me about them. When Juan wrote "I just noticed that I am more open to express myself freely and elaborate on certain issues when I'm asked directly by someone else who shows genuine interest," we see the value of reflection in promoting self awareness and, perhaps, shaping classroom behavior. He goes on to say, "I like to hear people talk about these issues to see where I fit in, so I can imagine that not hearing other people's perspectives on the issues may be detrimental to the other students." The phrase, "I can imagine" illustrates active reflection, and his application of it allows him to conceptualize how it affects his learning inside the classroom. What I experienced with Juan was reflection-in-action because he went back (recursive) and was able to generate learnings from his own interview.

Similar to Juan, Samantha also reflected on past experiences during our interview and suggested that reflection might impact her action moving forward. She told me at the end of our interview that it took speaking about her past to realize how she best learned, which was through modeling. This realization, she told me, will help her to focus on maintaining the positive habits she learns each semester, and applying them in the future. This aligns with Yancey's statement that reflection, specifically what she calls reflection-in-action is "thus recursive and generative. It's not either a process/ or a product, but both processes and products" (24).

We can then hypothesize that through reflection, especially active reflection, the writing of MA students will become stronger; especially among those who understand the value of reflection as a method they can implement to improve their writing process. This will also impact MA students who are pursuing the portfolio route versus a thesis route, because portfolio students have the opportunity to reflect on their writing over an extended period of time. With the tool of active reflection, it can be implied that these students will have very strong portfolios indeed.

The MARC program itself can leverage this finding by asking students to complete mini-interviews with each other at the end of the year. This could be done through a focus group, with an experienced student or the program director's assistant leading it and gathering the data. The data would then be analyzed by the program director and professors and programmatic changes would be applied as soon as possible, ideally in time for the next semester.

One way to potentially leverage modeling is to set up formal mentorships between students, as well as between students and faculty. Initially students would be set up with a

professor in their program to help guide them through the first semester. As the student navigated the ins and outs of graduate school, the professor would assist them in locating peers with similar interests who were successful in the program. In turn, these peer groups may serve an equally important modeling function, with students modeling practices and behaviors exhibited by their successful peers. The effectiveness of this program would be explored during the focus groups at the end of the semester.

Implications Beyond the Classroom

This study has wider implications than just in graduate classrooms and portfolios. Through conducting the research I was also made aware of the roles modeling and reflection plays in my daily life, both in my professional as well as my academic career. As I stated above, the knowledge of ways to implement active reflection in one's life can be applied to daily interactions well beyond the classroom. If we are able to realize and understand the strong possibility that less experienced students (or others in our lives) will model themselves after our behaviors and actions then it is vital we carry ourselves as such.

We saw through Higgins & Kram the value of mentors in the respective communities. Modeling is a less formal version of being mentored, mainly because it is one-sided, practiced explicitly at least by the one doing the modeling, not the model. I suspect that it is the best students who somehow "know" to do this and how to do this, but not all students are "best" students. As consequence, teachers could be more explicit about the important role that modeling will play in their learning. There may be ways we can leverage the inclination to model among the best students and make it something we

formally and explicitly encourage rather than hoping it's what students are doing in the background.

Future Research

Future research would expand this study to a wider population. This research would include a study at the national level of rhetoric and composition programs looking at how MA students conceptualize their learning, and to what they credit their academic success. This big picture view would allow us to track differences among genders, ethnic backgrounds, and areas of interest. Recalling Brittany's experience with the role of community attracting her to the MARC program, a larger study would also have implications for the role of informal learning communities at a national level.

Future research could also recreate this study using different lenses. I suggest feminist or multicultural frameworks as they lend themselves to examining the way potential minorities conceptualize learning. A feminist lens would be valuable to examine the assumption that women are more likely to utilize a community for academic success-either through modeling, active reflection, or both. A multicultural lens would challenge and critically examine the way groups other than the typical white male interact with their peers, and what impact those interactions have with their academic success; whether or not they utilize modeling or reflection in order to navigate various MA programs; and to what they attribute their academic success.

Yancey asks us to consider the following, "suppose I began to ask … questions with my students, regularly. Suppose their answers written, were visible. Suppose those answers contextualized my reading" (23). This will encourage reflection both inside and

out of the classroom. The more research that is done, the more refined and strategic the questions will become. We see that reflection is a theme within this small sampling; further research may find the same. According to my study and Yancey's research, the implications would be that professors can structure reflection essay prompts in a way that students would first reflect (retrospection) and then learn more about proactively reflecting (projection) (Yancey 25).

While there is not a lot of current research done on modeling that does not have to do with students' written text, specifically in the field of rhetoric and composition, Elizabeth A. Stolarek says modeling is "a text which is seen as being exemplary of its kind, and developing methods of duplicating these defining characteristics using different content" (154). I would say, based on this research especially, that "exemplary texts" are exemplary students and professors. The most successful students will learn how to "read" these exemplary students and professors. The implications for research then would benefit from larger sample sizes. Building on Stolarek's research of modeling as a mode of learning, as well as that of Higgins & Kram, professors would be able to create classroom environments that foster peer modeling through conversations, thus building stronger connections between students and their peers as well as students and their professors.

I'd like to conclude by revisiting the statement made by Juan when he reflected on what aided his learning, "I like to hear people talk about these issues to see where I fit in [the academic conversation], so I can imagine that not hearing other people's perspectives on the issues may be detrimental to the other students. I know that what goes on in the class is a learning process but I still feel there's plenty of responsibility behind

it." This quotation seems a fitting way to end this thesis because it emphasizes the value of reflection about informal conversations. Listening to our students is important. They tell us what we need to do to help them succeed in our programs and become members of our discipline. It's likely, too, that they will use what they've learned about their own learning to help the students they teach. In that way, we come full circle: students teaching teachers teaching students.

APPENDIX A

Note: Questions in italics served as prompts to the participants in case they were unsure

of how to answer, or were especially shy.

- When did you know you wanted to go to grad school?

- How did you decide on this program?

- Walk me through your 1st semester of grad school…

    o *What were you feeling?*

    o *Where did you sit?*

    o *Who did you talk to?*

- Tell me how grad school did or did not meet your expectations. What did you

    think about the workload?

    o About the way classes were organized?

- Tell me your learning style. How do you learn?

- How do you process new information?

- Tell me how you write a paper/blog post/ discussion facilitation/ prepare for a

    test/etc…

- What supplements your learning?

    o What do you need in order to feel prepared to write your papers (or

        anything above)?

    o To be prepared for class discussions?

- What was your 1st paper writing experience for that semester?

    o How did you accomplish it?

- Did you exchange papers with your peers? If so, with whom?

- - If you did not exchange papers- why not?

- Whether or not you exchanged papers, how did the process go?

- What was your comfort level at the beginning of the exchange? At the end?

- Who do you confide in or share information with about the program or class related issues?

- *Who were your friends in school? Were they in the program with you?*

- What factors contribute to your learning?

- What factors inhibit your learning?

- What, if any, learning strategies have you developed since being in grad school?

- As you have spent more time in the program, what would you say your role in the community is?

- How do you feel being a part of this community has affected your learning?

  - What changes have you noticed in your writing process?

- What has been your most challenging moment? How did you handle it?

- What do you do when you're overwhelmed/stressed?

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