

COMMUNITY COLLEGE NONTRADITIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
AND THEIR JOURNEY TO COLLEGE LEVEL WRITING: VOICES FROM THE
FIRST SEMESTER FRESHMAN ENGLISH
COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my great-grandmother Mrs. Bernice Goodman Andrews who not only provided an unlimited, unconditional amount of love, guidance, and educational, emotional, and spiritual support throughout both my K-12 and postsecondary education, but also assumed the role of mother to me upon the death of my biological mother Delinda Joyce Jones in 1983. You consistently encouraged me to accomplish all of my goals and to place God within the center of all things. I love you beyond words and you continue to be my inspiration. To my mother Delinda Joyce Jones who continues to be a guardian angel over me. I love you and I know you have been, and always will be with me in spirit. To my deceased grandmother Delores Jean Hargrove who also provided love and support throughout my educational journey and gave me the prestigious title of “Professor” at the early stage of my undergraduate degree as a result of your recognition of my passion for higher education, learning, and leading in the education field. I love you. To my loving aunt Gwendolyn Ann Craft and her husband Raymond Lee Craft who have also been superior parental figures in my life and have provided an unlimited amount of love and support throughout my educational journey. You both have presented strong examples of leadership, morality, and Christian values that continue to shape the man I am today. To Raymond Lee Craft Jr., my cousin, who has provided high levels of encouragement and support throughout my educational journey.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of nontraditional African American students' perceptions of their writing challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom, as well as the specific factors that contribute to these writing challenges and successes. The theoretical framework used for the study was *Interpretivism* and the methodology was narrative. This study focused on capturing the personal stories and experiences of the participants and the phenomenon of their challenging and successful writing experiences during their freshman English composition course experience. The guiding research question for the study was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom? Sub-questions for the study included (a) What specific teaching approaches to writing displayed by the instructor during the freshman English course experience seemed to help or hinder the learning process? And (b) How did ethnic, cultural, or social factors impact the student's development as a writer in the freshman English composition classroom?

A purposeful sampling method was used in the selection of participants. Twelve African American nontraditional students age 25 and older were selected for the study. The primary methods of data collection used for the study were open-ended semi-structured interviews and the collection of artifacts, which included past essay assignments, projects, and other pieces of writing completed by the participants during their freshman

English composition course experience. The open-ended interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and several key themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The findings of the study revealed five major themes with accompanying sub-themes which were (a) *Perceptions on High School Writing Preparation* with two sub-themes including (i) *Strong High School Writing Experiences and the impact on the English Composition Classroom Experience* and (ii) *Weak High School Writing Experiences and the Impact on the English Composition Classroom Experience*; (b) *Comfort Levels with Specific Essay Genres* with two sub-themes including (i) *Challenges with the Persuasive Essay Genre* and (ii) *Success and Comfort Found in the Narrative Essay Genre*; (c) *Growth as an Adult Community College Writer* with two sub-themes including (i) *Intense Study of the Academic Writing Process*, and (ii) *Awareness of Diverse College Writing Readiness Levels* (d) *The Role of Race in the English Composition Classroom* with three sub-themes including (i) *Race as a Minimal Element in Writing Success* (ii) *Race as a Significant Element in Writing Success*, and (iii) *Feelings of Racial Discrimination in the English Composition Classroom*; and (e) *Levels of Support in the Freshman English Composition Classroom* with two sub-themes including (i) *Desire for Stronger Levels of English Instructor Support* and (ii) *Students who Experienced Strong Levels of Instructor Support*. Overall, findings illuminated that the participants possessed a genuine desire for growth and development as adult college writers regardless of past or present academic challenges, ethnic or cultural barriers, or oppressive classroom experiences.

Overall, the majority of African American adult students that participated in this study did not feel that their African American culture or heritage was a roadblock to their development as professional, college-level writer in the English composition classroom, but rather, the English instructor who fails to acknowledge the educational, ethnic, and age *diversity* that comprises their classroom. The majority of participants felt that college-level writing success could be thoroughly accomplished through effective classroom leadership, nurturing, and most importantly the practice of a *can do* philosophy by the English instructor regardless of a student's past writing challenges or present writing readiness levels.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

During my tenure as an English composition instructor in the Lone Star College System in Houston, Texas, my observation of African American nontraditional students demonstrating writing weaknesses in first semester freshman English objectives as they progressed through advanced English courses was quite frequent. I often witnessed a struggle with basic elements of the writing process, critical thinking, reading comprehension, and analytical skills, which are all core objectives of the first semester freshman English classroom. As a result, I conducted this qualitative study and attempted to better understand and gain insight into some of the writing challenges and successes experienced by African American community college nontraditional students who have recently completed their first semester freshman English course. As Kenner and Weinerman (2011) assert, an increasing number of adult students are entering into the postsecondary setting with established ideas of effective learning, which could be helpful, or detrimental to the learning process. Chao & Good (2004) state that nontraditional students have increased from 4 million in 1980 to over 6 million in 2000, and also make up more than 40% of the U.S. undergraduate population.

First semester freshman English is one of the first credit level core courses that all entering college students at the undergraduate level regardless of college major are required to complete. As writing is an integral skill that is highly applicable across the disciplines, it is crucial for the older adult student to gain competency in this area. Nontraditional students often lack sufficient writing skills to succeed at the college level due to years of absence from a conventional academic setting, and if placed into credit-

level English upon admission, they rely upon the curriculum of first semester freshman English to sharpen or accurately acquire these skills. Depending upon their major, nontraditional students with plans to continue their education beyond the certificate or associate degree program and progress toward a Bachelor's degree are required to complete second semester freshman English. They must possess proficient writing competency to ensure success in this second semester English course, as well as other writing intensive courses required for attainment of the Bachelor's degree. Connors (1982) states, "In recent years, a growing number of older students have begun or have returned to college. These include housewives, veterans, clerical workers, and professionals such as registered nurses, all of whom are seeking bachelor's degrees" (p. 263). Connors illustrates here the diverse range of adult students who are more frequently entering into the post-secondary setting to pursue an advanced education, and therefore, must complete the universal undergraduate core requirement of freshman English composition.

Statement of the Problem

As a professional community college English instructor, I have seen that many African American nontraditional students entering second semester freshman English and other advanced English courses demonstrate weaknesses in the course objectives of first semester freshman English composition. First semester English is a prerequisite course for entrance into second semester freshman English and all college-level advanced English courses thereafter. There are eight specific first semester freshman English objectives that students are expected to have attained strong competency in prior to entrance into second semester freshman English and beyond. These objectives are (1) to

understand the basic concepts and modalities of English grammar; (2) to use punctuation properly in writing assignments; (3) to write clear and correct English sentences; (4) to compose coherent and well developed paragraphs; (5) to understand and use the writing process (including brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and editing); (6) to compose multi-paragraph essays in traditional expository modes; (7) to conduct and present research in a clear, organized, and appropriate manner; and (8) to employ critical-analytical strategies in reading and writing assignments. Many nontraditional students demonstrate weaknesses in these first semester English competencies upon entrance into the second semester freshman English course, which focuses heavily on analysis of literary text such as poetry, drama, and the short story, and critical reading and writing assignments. This study was focused on gaining insight into the experiences of African American nontraditional students recently enrolled in a first semester freshman English course, including the challenges and successes experienced and the factors to which they attribute these challenges and successes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to (a) better understand African American nontraditional students' perceptions of their successful and unsuccessful writing experiences in the community college first semester freshman English classroom, (b) to inform advanced-level English instructors of some of the reasons that African American students struggle with advanced writing assignments, and (c) to make recommendations for teaching this particular student group.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the interpretivist paradigm. It focused on the personal narratives of nontraditional students with the aim of revealing a comprehensive understanding or interpretation of their writing challenges and successes in the community college first semester freshman English classroom. Interpretivism asserts that the holistic experience must be analyzed in an effort to thoroughly understand and gain insight into a particular phenomenon. Patton (2002) states, “A phenomenon that is the focus of inquiry may be an emotion – loneliness, jealousy, anger. The phenomenon may be a relationship, a marriage, or a job. The phenomenon may be a program, an organization, or a culture” (pp. 104-105). In the case of this particular study, the phenomena are the challenging and successful writing experiences associated with nontraditional students acquiring a strong level of writing competency in the objectives of the community college first semester freshman English classroom. This study required participants to describe the nature, or essence of their writing challenges and successes in an effort to illuminate a better understanding of what their holistic writing experience was like in the first semester freshman English classroom.

Interpretivism concerns the act of humans becoming the meaning makers of their experiences, actions, situations, and their social reality as a whole (Crotty, 1998). It idealizes the broad range of possible individual perspectives and insights of the “individual,” and contradicts the positivistic approach which, entails searching for specific scientific answers and explanations for human behavior and social reality (Crotty, 1998):

A positivist approach would follow the methods of the natural sciences, and by way of allegedly value-free, detached observation, seek to identify universal features of humankind, society, and history that offer explanation and hence control and predictability. The interpretivist approach, to the contrary, *looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world.* (Crotty, 1998, p. 67)

Crotty is suggesting here that the positivist approach to research analyzes only portions of an experience, which limits the possibility of capturing the comprehensive essence of a phenomenon. Ultimately, the interpretivist approach to understanding human experiences enables an open-ended and holistic look at human experiences. It allows the human subject to tell their story through their own interpretive, imaginative perspective or lens and independently determine the definition of their particular experiences. I chose interpretivism as the framework for this study because my goal was to better understand the personal stories of nontraditional African American students' writing challenges and successes concerning meeting first semester freshman English course competencies.

Research Question

This was an interpretive study and the research topic focused on the writing experiences of community college nontraditional students age 25 and over during their experience in the first semester freshman English classroom. The research question for this study was designed to reveal insight into some of the major struggles with the writing process that this particular student group encounters, as well as shed light on factors contributing to their successful writing experiences in this course. The guiding research question was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American

heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom? Two sub-questions served to further direct the research.

1. What specific teaching approaches to writing displayed by the instructor during the freshman English course experience seemed to help or hinder the learning process?
2. How did ethnic, cultural, or social factors impact the student's development as a writer in the freshman English composition classroom?

Significance of the Study

Little research has been conducted on the experiences and perceptions of ethnically and culturally diverse nontraditional students in the area of writing skill development and writing curriculum satisfaction. It is hoped this research on the first semester English writing experiences of African American nontraditional students will create awareness among community college English composition instructors of the need to better acknowledge the special writing and learning needs of their diverse nontraditional student population. Bourland (2009) conducted a study that indicated 85% of faculty failed to modify their teaching style, type of assignments, tests, or quality of class discussion in their multigenerational classroom. This study also expands the body of literature by illuminating some of the *specific* writing challenges as well as successes that African American nontraditional students experience in the community college first semester freshman English classroom, which will in turn, be a useful resource for other community college first-year English instructors.

Definitions of Terms

Nontraditional Student: The term nontraditional student can carry several meanings such as students who dropped out of high school and are pursuing the GED (General Education Degree), students who are simply late-entry college students and began college at the age of 20 or 22 rather than at the traditional age of 18, students who are classified as part-time rather than traditional full-time students, and students who are working full-time with family obligations while pursuing their college education. For the purpose of this study, the term nontraditional student is defined here by the age-based definition most commonly seen in the literature, which is college students who are age 25 and over that are pursuing a Bachelor's degree or certificate program.

First Semester Freshman English: In most colleges and universities, first semester freshman English is a first semester core writing course required of all entering freshman college students. In many institutions, students must attain a given score on a college entrance placement exam, or complete required developmental coursework as a prerequisite in order to be placed into this credit-level course. First semester freshman English traditionally focuses heavily on several genres of writing including summary writing, expository, cause and effect, compare and contrast, personal narrative, persuasive, and argumentation. The course also focuses on critical aspects of the writing process including thesis statement development, brainstorming, supporting ideas, language development, grammatical competency, reading comprehension skills, the development of professional and ethical research skills, and proper MLA documentation.

Second Semester Freshman English: Second semester freshman English is a second semester continuation of First Semester English. In community colleges, this

course places a strong emphasis on literary analysis which entails the analysis of poetry, prose, drama, and the short story and depends heavily on critical and analytical thinking. Successful completion of first-semester freshman English is a prerequisite for entry into this course.

Rhetoric: The art of effectively writing or speaking.

THEA: THEA is the Texas Higher Education Assessment. The purpose of THEA is to assess the reading, writing, and mathematics skills that entering freshman level students should have if they should perform effectively in undergraduate certificate or degree programs in Texas public colleges or universities.

ACCUPLACER: The purpose of the ACCUPLACER test is to provide useful information about your academic skills in English, reading, and mathematics. The results of the assessment, in conjunction with the student's academic background, goals, and interests, are used by academic advisors and counselors to determine course selection. It is not possible to "pass" or "fail" this placement test, but it is very important to perform as well as possible on the test so that an accurate measure of academic skills can be assessed.

CLEP: CLEP is the College Level Examination Program. CLEP exams test mastery of college level knowledge in several subject areas that have been acquired in a variety of ways – through general academic instruction, significant independent study, on the job training, cultural experiences, internships, or extra-curricular work. CLEP exam takers include adults just entering or returning to school, military service members, and traditional students.

Researcher's Perspective

As a professional community college English instructor, I have taught a broad range of nontraditional students who demonstrate a vast range of deficient as well as proficient writing skills in their journey to becoming competent, college-level writers. Some of my key responsibilities as an English instructor include teaching the basic elements of the writing process including formal essay construction, thesis statement development, grammatical competency, analytical writing skills, proper Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation, and critical thinking and reading skills. These aspects of the composing process are taught in an effort to produce professional, confident, and competent writing skills that will result in rhetorical success within and beyond the walls of the academy. Therefore, I am bringing my professional experience of teaching nontraditional students, as well as first-hand knowledge of many of the writing challenges and successes that this student group commonly experiences within the first semester English classroom.

Moreover, as a professional English instructor with past experience as a community college first semester freshman English student, and as someone who holds a Master of Arts degree in English Literature, I have a thorough understanding of many of the emotional and cognitive challenges associated with meeting the formal standards of English rhetoric. My personal assumption going into this study was that I could offer sincere levels of both empathy and appreciation to these nontraditional students who have experienced the writing demands of first semester freshman English. I also assumed that I could ask pertinent questions based both on my past experience as a community college

first semester freshman English student, and my professional experience as a first year freshman English instructor.

Assumptions

Upon embarking upon this study, I assumed that the participants would be open to sharing their stories regarding the comprehensive experiences with college writing that they have experienced in the community college first semester freshman English classroom. I assumed that they would highly value their unique perspectives and would be willing to complete one or two qualitative interviews. It was also assumed that considering the participants had very recently completed first semester freshman English, their recollections of their specific challenges and successes would be as accurate as possible, and would not be minimized or augmented. Moreover, it was assumed that although some nontraditional students' challenging and successful writing experiences with college level writing would be similar, each students' experience would be unique.

Delimitations

The focus of this study was on the community college first semester freshman English writing challenges and successes of African American nontraditional students age 25 and over. Younger students were not included in the study. Ethnically and culturally diverse nontraditional students tend to dominate my particular research setting, which led me as the researcher to pursue this focus for my research. Moreover, the research was intentionally conducted at two community colleges; one in Houston, Texas, and the other in Baytown, Texas although potential participants could have experienced similar writing challenges and successes within any community college first semester freshman English classroom.

Limitations

A limitation of this study materialized in the sense that some of the participant's recollections of their writing challenges and successes could have been less than fully accurate due to failure to remember certain details regarding their classroom writing challenges and successful experiences.

Chapter Summary

The primary goal of the study was to take an interpretive look at the writing challenges and successes experienced by African American adult students in an effort to reveal insight into these challenges and successes. This chapter presented other foundational aspects for the study including the research question, the researcher's perspective on the study, assumptions, delimitations, and the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The topic that this literature review centers around is the writing challenges and successes experienced by nontraditional students in the first semester English composition classroom. The guiding research question was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English classroom? The literature was very unbalanced with a heavy focus on *negative challenges* to the writing process and minimal information regarding the *successful* writing experiences of students and the factors that contribute to these successful writing experiences.

A review of the literature illustrates that a significant challenge that many adult beginning writing students face is the label of “the other,” which their instructor has placed on them due to a lack of advanced writing skills. Hansman and Wilson (1998) discuss the broad spectrum of adult writing students that enter into the community college setting, and the challenges they often face with the writing process. Wyatt (2011) discusses how the nontraditional student population is not only the fastest growing student population in higher education, but is also a very *diverse* population. As much research in the area of community college composition has shown, there seems to be a diverse community of writers that stand as the nucleus of American writing programs (Hansman & Wilson, 1998). Wyatt (2011) states, “The increase in the number of nontraditional students returning to college campuses has resulted in a need for colleges and universities to look at the various factors and attributes of this population of students and what institutions need to do in order to serve their unique needs” (p. 10). Moreover,

Clark (2012) states, “In the 2002 study on nontraditional undergraduates, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported 73% of college students as nontraditional” (p. 36). Many adults who enter into higher education have been out of formal academic settings for many years and possess multiple levels of writing abilities. For nontraditional students who have not experienced an extended absence from the formal academic setting, many have experienced a very poor high school literacy education which greatly contributes to their poor writing performance upon entrance into postsecondary education (Spack, 1988). A recent study at the University of Texas at El Paso states that many of the students there are first-generation students who return to school after extended time in the workforce or raising a family (Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008). In regard to ethnicity, a study based on 2006 statistics indicates that 76 percent of nontraditional students at UTEP are of Hispanic heritage (Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008). As Hansman and Wilson (1998) note, for many among the nontraditional students, the most recent writing experience is writing an academic essay to pass the GED exam.

There is a significant gap in the literature focusing on the adult student’s writing experience concerning how African American nontraditional English composition students perceive the challenges as well as the successes to meeting the objectives of the first semester freshman English classroom. The body of literature reviewed was heavily slanted toward “non-native” speakers of English, or English language learners (ELL) and their negative writing challenges. ELLs are those students who are in the process of learning the English language, learning proper written English, and possess very limited English speaking and writing skills as a whole. This was ultimately a limited

representation of today's college classrooms. The literature points to a need for ethnically inclusive documentation of the holistic personal accounts of nontraditional students regarding the comprehensive range of challenges and successes they experience in meeting the writing objectives of first semester English composition. Since this study focused on the writing challenges and successes of adult students in the first semester English composition classroom, I looked at five pertinent areas represented in the literature. These areas were (a) the role of the first semester English course, (b) the discrimination resulting from protecting the academy from the deficient writer (c) labeling as a challenge for beginning writers, (d) students' loss of identity and suppression of the imagination, and (e) adult students as participants in the first semester freshman English classroom.

The Role of the First Semester English Composition Course

A major role of the first semester English composition course for entering college students is to establish a strong level of competency in the composition of diverse writing genres including persuasive, argumentative, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and the personal narrative essay (Witte, 1982, p. 12). A current aim of such courses is to prepare students to write across the disciplines and to initiate students into a broad discourse community (Bizzell, 1982; Downs & Wardle, 2007). The courses also typically focus on the development of strong critical thinking skills, reading comprehension, and proper MLA documentation of scholarly and professional sources. Although the development of reading composition skills is not the centralized focus of the English composition course, it is commonly a major learning objective of the course (Bosley, 2008). In regard to the aspects of reading, writing and critical thinking, the first semester

English course is also aimed at training students to engage in a sense of critical awareness of the community, diverse social issues surrounding the community, and to take firm positions on various social, political, educational, and many other issues that impact society as a whole. Durst (2006) states,

The curriculum increasingly calls upon instructors to develop in students – through reading, writing, critical thinking, and discussion—a certain sensibility, a way of looking at the world or disposition of mind in which the student writer is taught a commitment to community service, an awareness of inequities, a critical stance toward authority, and a questioning nature regarding established ways of thinking. (p. 88)

Durst highlights here how the English composition course goes beyond teaching the academic writing process and ultimately prepares students to become critical agents of their surrounding community and the world at large. The course is also aimed at training students to ask probing questions regarding critical issues and to challenge conventional, established schools of thought. The literature illuminates how beginning composition courses maximize their effectiveness and practicality to adult students by integrating elements related to work:

Introductory writing courses that use interdisciplinary approaches and job related materials help motivate students to spend the time, energy, and effort needed for sustained improvement. By teaching the practical application of writing strategies in composition courses, we help students learn to apply writing skills and we encourage them to sharpen and polish their writing competencies throughout their college careers. (Silver, 1982, p. 33)

Here, Silver (1982) discusses the benefits and results of bridging the gap between academic writing and the practical writing needs of the workforce that many nontraditional English composition students desire. Romesburg (2011) suggests that English instructors must work to acknowledge the unique writing needs of their working-class adult students and make strong efforts to integrate writing assignments that will benefit both their *traditional*, as well as their *nontraditional* student population. Moreover, Kenner and Weinerman (2011) assert that as adult learners continuously enroll in their beginning level courses, instructors must realize that their adult learners present very different needs from the traditional younger student population.

There is a need in the field of English instruction to determine the specific written and oral skills needed for the adult student's success in the business and workforce industry. There is a need to reach beyond the traditional curriculum to bring these skills into the English classroom to serve as the basis of writing instruction (Silver, 1982, pp. 33-34). For instance, Silver's (1982) article highlights how integrating the concerns of work-related writing into the composition classroom can play a major role in not only the practical application of the adult student's skills, but ultimately their retention. The experienced adult student is likely to maintain their academic interest if they are allowed to utilize their life skills and experience in their classroom writing experience.

Placement exams also play a critical role in the success of entering first semester English students. Placement by examination is traditionally the prerequisite for entrance into first-year freshman composition. This usually involves standardized tests or timed writing samples (Luna, 2003, p. 377). Currently, the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) or the ACCUPLACER are the two standardized tests that must be completed

with a specific minimum score for a student to be placed into college level English composition in the state of Texas. Although completion of placement exams is currently the conventional prerequisite for determining college course placement level, this criterion is attached to several drawbacks. For example, Carter (2006) states,

THEA measures the literacy “skills” deemed necessary to “function” in college according to the test taker’s responses to multiple-choice, “objective” questions about grammar and usage and a single persuasive “writing sample” written within a given time limit, despite the fact that, as the CCCC Position Statement on Assessment reminds us, “choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing . . . [and] . . . one piece of writing – even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions – can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions. (p. 95)

Carter illustrates here how the standardized test, especially in the area of writing and grammar usage fails to measure a student’s authentic level of literacy within one exam sitting. Moreover, Matzen and Hoyt (2004) assert that placement exams, specifically timed essays carry strong limitations such as reliability of scores, bias essay prompts, and pre-written essay responses. Minority students are at an even greater risk of performing poorly on the standardized test. Carter (2006) states, “Standardized tests are also wildly unfair, as high-stakes measures like these place students of color and—especially—those from poorer neighborhoods at an even greater disadvantage” (p. 95). Students are not allowed to bypass first-year English composition without demonstrating acceptable performance on one of these exams unless they place out of the course by the College Level Examination Program (CLEP).

For years, an increasing number of students have entered the classroom at a very basic stage of writing ability and are expected to participate in college level academic discourse. Many students enter the college classroom with pre-established ideas about learning that are inaccurate, as well as possessing inaccurate ideas regarding the demands of the college-level classroom. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) assert that many adult learners enter into higher education with preconceived learning styles and life experiences that may help or hinder their academic success. Hence, Bizzell (1982) discusses the strong need for placement exams in an effort for college admission officials to properly place students in the appropriate classroom environment. As Noreen (1977) states,

With the growing concern over the large number of students entering college poorly prepared in writing, more and more colleges and universities are testing students' writing proficiency as they enter in order to place them in appropriate classes where they might best be taught what they need to know. (p. 141)

Ultimately, what Bizzell (1982) and Noreen (1977) are suggesting is that when a student is placed incorrectly into a classroom setting where the writing demands far exceed their current skill level, the learning and developmental writing process can be severely deterred.

Development of Essay Revision Strategies in First Semester English

Other key roles of the beginning English composition course include providing students with effective instructor evaluation of writing progress, developing effective essay revision strategies, and enabling students to comprehend their ultimate writing goals during the revision process, in addition to learning effective peer review techniques.

In regard to the adult student, author Nancy Sommers conducted a qualitative case study entitled *Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers*:

Each writer wrote three essays, expressive, explanatory, and persuasive, and rewrote each essay twice, producing nine written products in draft and final form. Each writer suggested revisions for a composition written by an anonymous author. Thus extensive written and spoken documents were obtained from each writer. (Sommers, 1980, p. 380)

This revising experience provided adult students with valuable insight regarding the mental, analytical, and academic processes that comprise the essay revision process. Burkland and Grimm (2010) suggest how the essay revision process is an ideal teaching and motivation tool. Moreover, an English instructor's focus on implementing a strong practice of essay revision strategies into the classroom can dramatically improve a student's writing performance. The literature discusses how the English instructor must abandon the conventional, robotic practice of simply assigning grades to a student's essay and providing commentary to explain the given grade. Burkland and Grimm (2010) states,

Many of us abandon our "teacher-as-helper" role entirely at this point, reading the paper as if we had no knowledge of the student or process behind it. Rather than offering suggestions for improving the piece, we are likely to place a grade on it, offer some justification for it, and then try to soften the effect with some encouraging words. (p. 240)

Burkland and Grimm cautions the English instructor to remain aware of the educational value of revising the essay, rather than over prioritizing the conventional practice of

numerically ranking a student's writing ability and potential. Most students need the opportunity to shape and develop their ideas on an organized level. According to Sommers (1980), the primary goal of adult writers is to find the form or shape of their argument:

One writer explained, "I have learned from experience that I need to keep writing a first draft until I figure out what I want to say. Then in a second draft, I begin to see the structure of an argument and how all the various sub-arguments which are buried beneath the surface of all those sentences are related." (p. 384)

Ultimately, what Sommers is asserting in this study is that writing is analogous to a "seed" in the development process. It confuses beginning and end, conception and production and illustrates how writing is a cyclical process (Sommers, 1980, p. 384).

Overall, revision is a process of strategic thinking and analysis that ultimately develops the beginning composition student into a competent and confident rhetorician. Studies indicate that many students prefer to revise their essays and place high value on commentary that asks them to provide more development into their essays. Burkland and Grimm (2010) conducted a survey focusing on student perceptions of revision. The students surveyed preferred to have even final drafts treated as papers to be revised. When asked whether they found comments on development, organization, style, or mechanics most helpful on final drafts, the greatest number of students chose development comments like "Give Example" or "Explain how this is different from point in previous paragraph (p. 242).

This study clearly illustrates how some students can see the educational value in the revision process and are willing to take the necessary time and effort to prioritize their

growth as beginning writers. Moreover, Reed and Burton (2010) assert that instructors should also make efforts to survey students on their perceptions of what type of commentary best benefits them, as well as what type of instructor evaluation provides the least amount of growth and development. They state,

We need to ask our students what kind of evaluation helps them the most, or, better yet, what kind of evaluation offends them the most or helps them the least? Because we need to view essay feedback as having a cyclical effect, we should turn to our students and ask them what kind of evaluation is the most effective? After all, if our feedback is not effective to *them* specifically, our well-meaning attempts at providing effective feedback are lost. (p. 271)

Dragga (2010) also presents an enlightening student perception on the value of essay revision. He states, “I myself like knowing exactly what I did incorrectly so that I can correct errors . . . The best way to grade would be to join the positive and negative together” (p. 46). What the literature as a whole is suggesting is that revising the essay is a didactic, creative process of trial and error that transcends the beginning writer’s skill to a professional, scholarly level of college writing, which is the ultimate goal of the first-year English composition course as a whole.

Protecting the Academy from the Deficient Writer

Shaughnessy makes a critical argument highlighting how all beginning writing students should be given the opportunity to develop the rhetorical skills and abilities at their chosen institution of higher learning without being labeled as *the other* by authoritative figures within the writing instruction field. In her essay on *Guarding the Tower*, Shaughnessy (1976) asserts that during the Guarding the Tower stage, “the

teacher is in one way or another concentrating on protecting the academy (including himself) from the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong in the community of learners” (p. 312). This is a very powerful claim that Shaughnessy makes in this passage. She is challenging instructors to realize that authoritative figures of higher learning who guard the tower are ultimately ridding the institution of diversity and suggesting that learning, thinking, and imagination combined is a one way street paved for the finely tuned, well-polished, and intellectually privileged scholar who has been previously prepared for the rigorous demands of the academy.

Echoing Shaughnessy’s views on *otherizing* the basic writing student is Bartholomae (1985) in his essay entitled *Inventing the University*. Bartholomae argues how the beginning writing student is immediately placed into the *hot seat* of the high academic demands of the academy, without first obtaining the appropriate training which would enable them to meet these demands. Curry (2003) states, “With an increasing diverse student population, whether students’ pre-existing forms of oral and written communication fit comfortably with those of the academy becomes crucial to students’ success” (p. 5). Moreover, Bartholomae similarly makes the point that many beginning writing students – not only within the English Department but across the disciplines – are frequently labeled as outcasts resulting in an emotional and psychological melt-down as a result of their inability to meet the rhetorical demands of the academy. Bartholomae (1985) states,

every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our

language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (p. 623)

Bartholomae is illuminating here how the authoritative figures of the academy not only reject and discriminate against the beginning writer's lack of rhetorical advancement, but how they also look for a clone of themselves when they evaluate the beginning writer. Rather than taking the beginning writer under their wing and leading, guiding, and nurturing them with patience and understanding, they expect nothing less than a reflection of a fully trained scholar. Moreover, Bartholomae also challenges composition instructors to acknowledge the darker side of this discrimination by the academy. By expecting the beginning writer to enter the academy fully trained and ready to embrace the highest of scholarly tasks and reflect a mirror image of its finest teachers, the academy risks demoralizing and dehumanizing the student's emotional, psychological, and imaginative spirit. By otherizing their ability as basic writers, their sense of self-efficacy may be dramatically reduced, resulting in the student forming an identity as an unqualified individual, unworthy to exist among the elite scholars of the academy. Bartholomae (1985) presents a compelling argument regarding how fear of failure or disapproval by authoritative figures within the academy has actually caused many beginning writers to simply compose thoughts and ideas that will please their audience, rather than composing from the soul:

A text, he [Bartholomae] says, in being written passes through the codes that govern writing and becomes "de-originated," becomes a fragment of something that has always been *already* read, seen, done, experienced . . . Alongside a text

we have always the presence of off-stage voices,” the oversound of all that has been said . . . These voices . . . stand in defiance of a writer’s desire for originality and determine what might be said. A writer does not write (and this is Barthes’s famous paradox) but is, himself, written by the languages available to him. (p. 631)

In this passage, Bartholomae seems to suggest by definition that no writing is truly original. When students compose, they are actually composing based on language that has been previously made available to him. Students may be engulfed with the fear of being rejected, ridiculed, or branded as “the other” if their writing contradicts the views of their instructor, and as a result, they ultimately become victims of intellectual conformity who simply duplicate ideas which have been previously generated.

Labeling as a Challenge for Beginning Writers

Beginning writers may be adversely affected by the assumptions made about them by writing instructors. Spack (1988) states, “Students’ social situation and previous training may hamper their ability to succeed in the academy” (p. 30). What instructors must realize is that students’ weaknesses in academic writing may not be the result of an innate lack of academic writing ability, but the social and cultural factors that impact their writing (Spack, 1988). Adult basic writing students at the community college level in some cases experience an enormous set-back in the development of their writing ability due to being labeled as *the other* as a result of their inability to write on an advanced level.

After a close reading of several scholarly sources which highlight the many challenges of beginning writers, as well as very enlightening essays presented in the book

Cross-Talk in Comp Theory, it is clear that these authors and theorists expose the otherization that many adult basic writers suffer daily on both an emotional and psychological level. For example, Rodriguez (1999) discusses the discrimination based on culture she experienced as a non-native student in her English composition course, which initiated her passion to change this very common discriminatory phenomena. Rodriguez (1999) states, “The instructor told me that my second language was interfering with my thinking, and therefore my writing. I was angry. I knew she was wrong” (p. 2). This is an explicit example of the academic and cultural otherization that often occurs in the English composition classroom. On the other hand, studies indicate that student-centered classes have a strong relation with high academic performance (Miglietti & Strange, 1998). In the words of Eighteenth-Century / Romantic poet William Blake, the “mind forg’d manacles” of the authoritative writing community has suppressed all levels of individuality, inspiration, and courage within the beginning writer, leaving them vulnerable to doubt and cynicism which has diminished their innate rhetorical talents.

The literature asserts that a common ground can be established between teacher and student, and labeling can be avoided in the composition classroom through psychoanalysis of the student’s writing, a radical metamorphosis of the writing instructor’s identity from conventional teacher to the role of editor, and also through the implementation of writing workshops in the classroom.

Cognitive Development vs. Strategy Development

Illustrating the negativity that has plagued many beginning writers for generations, one theorist who presents a very controversial argument on the issue of cognitive development is Lunsford (1979). In her essay entitled *Cognitive Development*

and the Basic Writer, she makes an interesting assertion that beginning writers lack the ability to think on a diverse, analytical, and academic level, ultimately failing to transfer their individual, personal thinking ability within one discipline to another. She states that in her study of basic writers, their strategies, processes, and products lead her to believe that they have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions:

That is, they are most often unable to practice analysis and synthesis and to apply successfully the principles thus derived to college tasks. In short, our students might well perform a given task in a specific situation, but they have great difficulty abstracting it or replicating it in another context. (p. 299)

In this passage, Lunsford is suggesting that beginning writers lack adequate cognitive development to perform as competent writers. She asserts that they must be exposed to a specific set of tools and pedagogical resources in an effort to adapt to a multitude of academic tasks, rather than a singular task within a specific discipline. Many would question Lunsford's assertion that beginning writers lack the intellectual ability to be multi-tasked in the area of writing or otherwise because many students' abilities are suppressed by various emotional, cultural, and educational roadblocks, making it impossible for them to exhibit their true level of literacy. Moreover, other writing theorists such as Berlin (1982), Bizzell (1984), and Rose (1988) firmly reject Lunsford's narrow view of beginning writer's cognitive development stating that all students indeed possess the ability to analyze and synthesize, and have potential for success within the academy. In Rose's (1988) essay entitled *Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism*, he discusses the "I.Q. Movement" in relation to

basic and remedial writers. He asserts that poor academic performance in American Schools is often interpreted as the result of poor cognitive development:

we see it in our field in those discussions of basic and remedial writers that suggests that unsuccessful writers think in fundamentally different ways from successful writers. Writing that is limited to the concrete, that doesn't evidence abstraction or analysis, that seems illogical is seen, in this framework, as revealing basic differences in perception, reasoning, or language. (p. 345)

In this passage, Rose is asserting that many beginning writers initially tend to think in a very linear fashion that lacks depth and analysis which ultimately results in illogical levels of writing. He refers to writing that is limited in the areas of analytical depth and organization. Rose suggests this type of writing yields from weaknesses in the thinking process, which is in contrast to more advanced, successful writers. Overall, Rose is firmly defending beginning writers and the rhetorical struggles that they endure. He is exhibiting his advocacy with Bartholomae here that beginning writing students should be taught proper writing, as well as critical thinking strategies of the academy so that they are successful in the English composition classroom.

Contrary to Lunsford's assumptions, Zeller (1987), a writing professor at Southeast Missouri State University works with his students to develop inferential reasoning. In his article entitled *Developing the Inferential Reasoning of Basic Writers*, he discusses how he gathered photographs and oral histories so that his students could practice strengthening their abilities to analyze and synthesize information. The goal was to make students aware of their mental processes and their ability to analyze on multifaceted levels. Writing theorist Berthoff (1984) asserts that the teacher's job is to

create a series of assignments that encourage conscientization and the discovery of the mind in action (p. 775).

Mastery of the writing process for the adult writer involves much more than mirroring scholarly characteristics of the academy, or simply acquiring the ability to be multi-tasked with various academic subjects. Learning to write proficiently within the academy regardless of subject area is a highly complex art form that is better enacted within the intimacy of writing workshops where original thinking, collaborative engagement, imagination, and a higher level of comprehension is likely to take place. Darabi (2006) asserts that the incorporation of learning communities into the writing classroom, which exist in the forms of linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies are ideal methods of improving student retention. Moreover, Darabi (2006) states,

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses-or actually restructure the curriculum entirely-so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (p.55)

Siha (2012) suggests that stimulating student engagement in the community college writing classroom in the forms of writing groups, collaboration, and dialogue where students of diverse ages and ethnicities listen to each other and critique each other's work can create a collaborative, democratic classroom experience. Moreover, Wyatt (2011) suggests that the elements of engagement and collaborative participation among

nontraditional students are highly important to academic success on community college and university campuses across the United States.

Ritchie (1989) presents an enlightening passage in her essay entitled *Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity* which highlights the rhetorical benefits that basic writers reap from experiencing a “dialogic” classroom setting:

Students in writing workshops are . . . encouraged to explore new forms of thinking and writing and to find new ways to organize and understand their experience. They work with their peers in small groups to gain a better grasp of the perspective of their audience, to learn more about the varied viewpoints a writer might address, and to experiment with effective strategies for writing . . .

This gives the beginning writer an opportunity to develop new ideas and new forms of writing, but it also allows her to try on new identities through the writing process . . .the beginning writer can draw from the array of voices in the multiple perspectives articulated in the writing workshop to construct a viable, if not completely modulated, voice of her own. (p. 155)

Ritchie is illuminating how the beginning writer inherits a strong sense of individuality, confidence, creativity, and self-efficacy about writing while participating in writing workshops. Classroom activities that involve collaborative learning and peer interaction as the literature discusses above have a significant impact on student writing and student attitudes toward writing (Callahan, 1999; & Dobie, 1992). Students are exposed to a multitude of perspectives from other peers that tend to ignite new effective ways to brainstorm rhetorical ideas that they had not encountered within the conventional, teacher-centered classroom setting.

Darabi (2006) states, “Collaborative learning demonstrably helps students learn better – more thoroughly, more deeply, more efficiently – than learning alone” (p. 65). Collaborative peer interaction is also a healthy activity in regard to peer revision. Revising others essays not only trains students in the revision process, but also teaches the value of the revision process (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997). The student is exposed to a variety of thought processes and personalities displayed by his or her peers, which allows them the flexibility, and freedom to absorb unlimited levels of imagination and inspiration. This workshop experience will ultimately aid the beginning writer to galvanize his writing in a manner never before experienced individually. The workshop experience seems to be an integral step in eliminating the curse of *otherizing* basic writing students in the composition classroom, and allowing writing instructors to see beyond initial grammatical, structural, and illogical writing flaws which are the roots of basic writing students being isolated, and labeled incompetent within the academy.

The Prioritization of Mechanical Writing Aspects vs. Creative Content

In relation to the literature’s discussion of labeling the beginning writer, Shaughnessy (1976) presents a very compelling argument that mirrors a key aspect of my own views of literacy education. In her essay entitled *Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing*, she discusses how as writing instructors we tend to automatically label the basic writing student as a “weak link” in the area of grammar: “The phrase ‘catching up,’ so often used to describe the progress of basic writing students, is illuminated here, suggesting as it does that the only person who must move in the teaching situation is the student” (p. 311). Sommers (1980) asserts the importance of teaching students the value of focusing as much time and energy into developing strong content within their writing as they do

on grammatical and stylistic aspects. This perspective is a powerful one because it vividly highlights the reality of how many writing instructors tend to prioritize the grammatical aspects of a student's essay, ultimately disregarding the analytical quality and creative content of the essay. Fuller (2010) suggests that instructors must begin to place a strong focus on the core message that students are communicating in their essays, the student's character being reflected in their writing, as well as the actual function and context of their writing. Fuller is highlighting here how English instructors easily allow themselves to become overly focused on the mechanical, formulaic, structural elements of a student's essay during the grading process. They ultimately lose sight of the insightful, creative elements of the student's essay, which can provide valuable insight into their true writing ability. Instructors must begin to view the multifaceted levels of knowledge often presented in students' essays and gain a holistic sense of the context, rather than grading their essays solely on the robotic elements of *right* and *wrong*. Fuller (2010) states, "The traditional 'product-centered' commentary does not require a sensitivity for and broad view of the writing context, since the focus is on the text, what the text 'did' correctly and incorrectly" (p. 309). Fuller highlights here how English instructors have been conventionally trained to evaluate the student essay as a piece of work that must contain certain specific elements of *idealistic* academic writing style, form and structure, but in the process, they fail to acknowledge key creative elements and characteristics within the content and overall context of the student's essay, which can dramatically shed light on the student's true writing ability. Fuller (2010) suggests that the English instructor must refrain from focusing on individual parts of a student's essay and attempting to judge their writing solely on their expert English instructor standards, but rather, develop an

appreciation and respect for what the student is saying in their essay and recognize the *holistic* message that the student is presenting in their writing.

Shaughnessy asserts that writing instructors should place a much greater emphasis on the content of a student's essay, rather than prioritizing grammatical competence as the single, and ideal determiner of writing quality. Although many students generally appreciate critical feedback from their English instructor, they experience a growth in self-esteem when the instructor provides commentary on the rhetorical content of their writing (Treglia, 2008). The instructor must also play an active role in the student's growth as a writer by teaching the grammatical aspects of writing while also praising the analytical depth and creative content of the student's writing. They must be able to adapt the nurturing role of editor as discussed above in an effort to become *one* with the student's rhetorical struggles, and work to rectify the student's weaknesses as a writer. Fuller (2010) discusses the unique and innovative concept of the instructor becoming a participant in the writing assignments with students. She suggests that if instructors would be willing to complete various writing assignments with their students that this would provide them a unique opportunity to enter into the thinking processes, their struggles, areas of confusion, as well as areas of success that their students may experience with a particular writing assignment. Fuller (2010) asserts that teachers who participate in the same assignments that they give their students are able to provide more constructive feedback on their assignment.

These teachers become familiar with the demands associated with the writing and thus more understanding of the students. Of course teachers do not have the time to participate as the students do in all assignments, but at least with periodic

participation teachers can understand difficulties and the demands of writing and as a result respond and communicate more sympathetically and effectively (p. 310).

Ultimately, the instructor must be willing to *catch up* to the student's diverse writing abilities, fears, and insecurities in an effort to finally bridge the gap between teacher and student. They must become an active participant in their students' classroom writing experiences in an effort to more thoroughly understand, and rate their students' writing growth and development more so on the core content of the particular writing assignment, rather than becoming overly prioritized with the robotic, technical elements and structure of the student's essay. This innovative approach to grading the English essay will not only create confident, eager, and imaginative basic writing students allowing them to compose insightful pieces of rhetoric, which reflect their genuine potential as writers, but will also cause them to experience an elevation in morale and self-efficacy as writers in the beginning composition classroom.

Analysis of the Students' Writing

Several authors present the concept of thoroughly analyzing the student's writing as a means to overcoming labeling. To analyze a student's writing is to observe with the utmost care and attentiveness the flaws exhibited in the rhetoric as well as discern logic and creativity from these writing flaws. The literature indicates that non-native speakers of English would especially benefit from a thorough analysis of their writing due to their natural lack of experience with standard academic English writing (Rahilly, 2004). Moreover, the non-native writer seems to be becoming the dominant face of the college and university English composition classroom and has been continuously increasing for

four decades (Matsuda, 1999). Observing and discussing the flaws with the student and inquiring with the student why he/she made specific writing choices, can ultimately give the instructor insight into the student's thinking process and a stronger foundation to constructively criticize the student's weaknesses in writing. Interestingly, Rahilly's (2004) study indicated that many adult ESL students demonstrated weaknesses in the basic conventions of academic writing in both their native language, and English.

The adult writer's lack of advanced composing ability may be due to lack of adequate training at the high school, extended absence from the conventional classroom, or the instructor's act of labeling them as the other (Gillam, 1991). This labeling of students in the classroom can be eliminated if the instructor dedicates a reasonable amount of time to closely evaluating the text and the grammatical errors of the student's writing to ultimately gain insight into why these errors are occurring, and also insight into the student's thought process at the time of composition. Also, integrating interactive writing activities into the classroom and observing students' learning response to these activities can provide insight into writing weaknesses that the student is exhibiting (Ocak, Ozcalisan, & Kuru, 2010). Writing is a very intimate art form and quite often, one's innermost obstacles and struggles are expressed through writing.

Establishing a New Identity

The literature also discusses how the instructor establishing a new identity is an effective method of eliminating the frequency of alienation and labeling in the English composition classroom. Most instructors have been so heavily conditioned to exhibit the persona of the highly skilled, authoritative expert on writing that they do not exercise their ability to play a collaborative, partner-oriented role in the basic writer's

development. Lueders (1959) presents an insightful discussion in his essay entitled *The Writing Instructor: A New Identity*. In the essay, Lueders asserts how if the writing instructor would be willing to adapt the role of “editor” and retire his conventional role of “English teacher,” the student would develop a much deeper respect and value for his own writing due to the collaborative nature of editor’s work.

Lueders (1959) makes a very interesting point in this essay regarding professional editors and writing instructors. He states “The obvious distinction is that the editor works with professional writing; but I maintain that the college teacher should work *professionally with writing* – and that differences are of degree rather than of kind” (p 284). Lueders is asserting here that writing instructors should practice a more sensitive, conscious, and nurturing approach toward their students’ writing. The editor presents constructive questions to a writer and presents effective writing strategies. He suggests alterations in content and structural form that the writer may have possibly attempted to include in his writing, but was unsure how to implement. What Lueders is ultimately suggesting in the essay is that when the writing instructor adapts the role of editor, there is a unique bond that develops between teacher and student. They are two writers united as one in an effort to create an insightful, scholarly, and thoughtful piece of rhetoric:

Between the two develops a curious mixture of friendship and rivalry that absorbs them both in what otherwise might be the dull practical business of getting a manuscript into the shape and style best suited for its purpose and readers . . .

When the composition teacher assumes the attitudes, the responsibilities, and the authority of an editor, everyone stands to benefit. The teacher himself becomes reasonable rather than arbitrary, an individual first and a representative second.

(Lueders, 1959, p. 284)

Lueders is suggesting that this union and academic level of camaraderie between teacher and student is a kind of portal that transports them to an equilateral, and collaborative level of compromise and constructive criticism that ultimately eliminates the fear, anxiety, and other barriers that tend to deter the teaching and learning process as a whole. Complementing Lueder's view of the English instructor establishing a new identity is Fuller (2010) who suggests that instructors should detached themselves from the singular, conventional, robotic role of *grader* and become an active participant in their students' writing assignments. They should become an active participant by completing various assignments along with them in an effort to gain a closer understanding of the student's thought processes when composing various writing assignments. Fuller (2010) states, "Without a full understanding and sensibility for the context, an instructor may be forced to address formal features of a 'text' and ignore the writer who produced the text" (p. 310). Here, Fuller echoes Lueders in advocating for a stronger level of unity and camaraderie between instructor and student during the writing process. According to Freeland (2002), as instructors, we often have to rethink the way we teach writing and detach ourselves from the conventional authoritative persona and assume the role of collaborator in an effort for students to assume control of their writing. Freeland suggests that in a teacher/editor and student scenario, the two can effectively argue and negotiate rhetorical issues in an essay. The instructor obviously continues to be the professional figure of authority in this situation, but each experiences a unique freedom to express originality of thought and individuality of the self. This newly found expression is allowed to exist without the rigid regulations conventionally associated with

a student teacher relationship, which frequently suppresses growth and development of the basic writer.

Students' Loss of Identity and Suppression of the Imagination

An interesting, and perhaps darker side to the stereotypical views that plague beginning writers is that their identity is often sacrificed by suppressing originality of thought. As Lavelle and Zuercher (2001) discuss, writing is a process of externalization and the remaking of thinking, which ultimately characterizes the writer as meaning maker. The argument can be made that suppressing the imagination has been a major epidemic within the writing community for quite some time. On the idea of cognitive development, Horner (1999) presents an interesting passage regarding how this issue truly relates to the basic writer. In his essay entitled *Mapping Errors and Expectations for Basic Writing: From the 'Frontier Field' to 'Border Country'*, he discusses how lack of cognitive development is not the real roadblock for many basic writers, but rather, the worldviews which students have that may be different from those expected in the writing classroom:

The problems of basic writers . . . are signs not of cognitive immaturity; rather, they signal a difference in "world view," . . . "values," or a lack of familiarity with certain discourse conventions . . . In keeping with these two ways of viewing basic writers there have developed two different sets of metaphors for thinking about changes in the students' writing and the role of basic writing teachers: metaphors of "growth" and of "initiation." If we think of BW students as cognitively immature beginners, then "improvements" in their writing are signs of cognitive *growth*, with BW teachers *fostering* such growth. If we think of BW

students as *foreigners*, then changes in their writing represent changes in their social or cultural identities *initiated* at least in part by writing courses. (p. 120)

In this passage, Horner challenges us to avoid allowing ourselves as writing instructors to become overly preoccupied with a basic writing student's current ability as a writer, and acknowledge the changes that a student experiences in his writing, which can ultimately change the label that we have placed on them. For example, a student may begin the semester illustrating many writing flaws in their essays and after several writing workshop experiences, his writing could exhibit a vast improvement in the areas of grammar, imagination, structure, and style, therefore upgrading his writing ability status from mediocre to highly improved. The classroom writing workshop experience would be the vehicle that helps to eliminate labels such as "The Other" from the composition classroom. Horner's primary message here is that rather than prematurely labeling basic writing students as cognitively, aesthetically, or otherwise deficient, writing instructors must monitor closely their improvements and developments throughout the semester, and allow their writing to determine their true identity.

Adults as Participants in First Semester English Composition

The literature related specifically to *adult's* writing experiences in the first semester freshman English classroom is limited, although, the existing literature strongly highlights the diverse writing challenges and backgrounds that were investigated through this study. An important idea presented in the literature is the need for instructors to proceed with caution when critically evaluating the work of the adult student in an effort to avoid creating a negative atmosphere for growth and development (Roberts, 1961; Dobie, 1992). Adult *nontraditional students* tend to come from such a vast range of

cultural, professional, social, and educational experiences, such that the instructor is faced with a great challenge in the teaching and evaluation of writing. Oftentimes, the freshman composition instructor becomes so comfortable and familiar with their *traditional student* population that they become oblivious to the diverse educational learning needs of their *nontraditional student* population (Sommer, 1989; Connors, 1982).

A case study on writing and learning experiences was conducted with 3578 traditional students at the Newark College of Arts and Sciences (NCAS) and 1962 nontraditional students enrolled at University College (UC), and 444 enrolled at the College of Nursing, ranging in age from 16 years old to 65+ (Sommer, 1989). Ultimately, this study indicated that NCAS traditional students had very successful high school writing experiences and exhibited strengths in their college level writing, while the UC nontraditional students were very distant from their last formal writing experience and therefore, exhibited weaknesses and challenges with college level writing (Sommer, 1989). Overall, an array of writing backgrounds was found among the traditional to nontraditional student spectrum and Sommer suggests freshman English composition instructors must monitor this phenomenon, and the special needs of the adult composition student diligently. Connors (1982) states, “Although there are a few special courses and programs for these students, most of them are mainstreamed at once into classes with students of traditional college age. The growing number of nontraditional students in freshman composition courses, in particular, raises questions about whether they should be taught in the same way as their younger classmates” (p. 263). Connors highlights and reinforces in her article the need for English composition instructors to develop a keen

awareness of the contrasting learning needs that exists between their traditional and nontraditional student groups within the English classroom.

Gillam (1991) discussed the specific accounts of three adult students from diverse backgrounds exhibiting various writing challenges in the freshman English classroom. A thirty-one year old secretary and college student named Alana struggled with the production of an essay draft for her first-year composition course (Gillam, 1991). Alana expressed how she has no conception of how to begin composing the draft and spent several hours thinking through this process. As a result, she experienced feelings of fear of failing the university's ninety-minute writing proficiency exam that all students must pass in order to progress to junior level standing (Gillam, 1991). A thirty-year-old computer programmer by the name of Robert was faced with the task of writing a profile of his past high school football coach, yet he was only able to compose 250 words which is only half of the essay's required length (Gillam, 1991). Gillam (1991) states, "Later, he complained to an interviewer, 'As time went on, I became frustrated while trying to fulfill the teacher's desire for descriptive sentences. I'm more of a factual writer'" (p. 1). A forty-year-old housewife by the name of Patti wrote a narrative essay about the multiple interruptions that typically characterize her daily life and a second essay illuminating the challenges she encountered in her journey to quit smoking, in which she incorporated secondary academic sources (Gillam, 1991). According to Gillam, Patti utilized a contrasting tone of voice for each essay and experienced difficulty transitioning between personal narrative and academic writing for the second essay (Gillam, 1991). As Gillam notes, these three first-hand accounts of adult writing challenges in the freshman English classroom illuminate the diversity of professional backgrounds, writing

weaknesses, and age groups that typically characterizes the beginning freshman English classroom:

For some, the years out of school have involved little writing beyond grocery lists, insurance forms, and notes to a child's teacher. For others, the intervening years have included regular writing on the job or frequent personal correspondence with family and friends. But it is unlikely that the years of school have afforded opportunities to practice the kind of writing required by the academy. (Gillam, 1991, p. 2)

In this passage, Gillam clearly illustrates how writing for work and for the typical domestic duties of the adult student is in contrast to the formal, academic conventions of writing required within the college English classroom. Connors (1982) also provides insight into the diverse writing needs of adult students based on the perceptions of adult students from her own classroom study, as well as illustrates the contrasting levels of direction that many often request as they encounter a writing assignment:

I was particularly interested in the responses to two statements directly related to classroom practices: "When I am given a writing assignment, I prefer to have complete freedom in what I write, with no directions or specifications"; "I prefer to have directions or limitations when given a writing assignment." The responses suggests that most students, regardless of age, want some directions or limitations; most do not want complete freedom. My impressions of nontraditional students had been that they are even more inclined than traditional students to ask, "What am I *supposed* to say? How am I *supposed* to say it? How long do *you* want it to be? What are you *looking for*? The statistics confirmed this

impression; a statistically significant difference between the groups occurred in response to both questions. (p. 265)

As Connors illustrates from her study on adult students' writing experiences, adult writers exhibit diverse preferences in terms of writing freely, as well as writing with strict guidelines. Many may be overly inclined to please their English instructor as illustrated by asking a series of specific questions regarding what the content of their essay should be comprised of, rather than utilizing their own analysis, imagination, and intuition when composing, while others are less question oriented.

Similarly, Roberts (1961) discusses the diversity of writing and speaking skills among his adult composition students in the Division of Adult Education of Wayne State University and The University of Michigan:

I found that adults in the same large composition class brought a wide range of problems, including those of one foreign-born woman who spelled "year" as "jahr" and "of course" as "awcoars," those of the businessman trying to achieve advancement and superior status through the application of good English, those of young people trying to make up ordinary deficiencies in composition in order to prepare for college entrance, and those of adults with really superior ability but no training whatsoever. (pp. 47-48)

The dominant question here is how can the English composition instructor accommodate the rhetorical needs of such a diverse group of adults? Roberts continues to discuss how identifying an appropriate teaching method for the adult freshman composition student is a great challenge for English composition instructors in the field. Roberts (1961) states that from his experience teaching composition to adults,

the straight discussion method was of limited use at best . . . Outside personal conferences were impossible, because most adults have jobs and families, and therefore have little or no time left over beyond their one night a week.

Consequently, with the conventional freshman English approach, a high percentage of the adults, unlike regular students who had the incentive of grades and graduation, tended to drop by the wayside: a typical class beginning with twenty-five adults would contain an average of only eight to twelve at the end of the semester. (p. 48)

What Roberts is asserting is that teaching approach can greatly impact the retention of adults in the freshman English composition classroom. He suggests composition instructors can enhance the writing success of adult students by taking more of a collaborative approach to teaching and working to build an enthusiastic classroom climate, which ultimately plays a critical role in the adult student's college retention rate (Dobie, 1992). Adult students are characterized as having a vast range of lifestyles, as well as educational challenges, self-confidence, and self-efficacy levels compared to their younger traditional student counterparts.

Synthesis of the Literature

The review of the literature focused on the various challenges facing the adult writing student within the academy. The literature sent an overall message to create a positive, participatory writing environment for beginning freshman composition students in an effort to foster both the student's self-esteem and self-efficacy as a writer. Moreover, the various authors and theorists illuminated major issues of change that need to be implemented within the field of writing instruction such as teaching approaches,

increased awareness of the adult writer's cultural and social backgrounds, recognition of diverse writing backgrounds, and methods to overcome discriminatory attitudes toward beginning academic writers as a whole. One gap that the literature illuminated, however, is the absence of personal, first-hand accounts of how specific sub-groups of beginning writers such as African American nontraditional students perceive both the challenges and successes to becoming a competent academic writer in the first semester English composition classroom, as well as factors contributing to their challenging and successful classroom writing experiences. Documentation which illuminates the comprehensive stories of how adult African American students interpret their holistic experiences, both negative and positive in their journey to becoming a competent college level writer appeared to be severely lacking in the body of literature. This was ultimately a poor representation of today's college writing classroom as diversity in the forms of ethnicity and experiences are center stage in this modern day of post-secondary education. This is what my study contributes to the body of literature and the field of college level English composition instruction.

The face of the English composition classroom is consistently changing in regard to the understandings of diverse student backgrounds, institutional writing standards, and instructor teaching strategies which all play a major role in student writing achievement. The voices of diverse writing students must begin to come to the forefront in understanding how current composition classroom practices may act as positive or negative forces toward their writing success. Failing to acknowledge the diverse, comprehensive range of students' personal stories regarding their classroom writing experiences will result in students being frozen within the shadows of writing

competency, and being unprepared for the rigorous writing demands and expectations within the academy, and beyond.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study was a qualitative study in which I attempted to better understand and gain insight into the writing challenges and successes of African American community college nontraditional students age 25 and older who had recently completed their first semester of freshman English composition. The research question guiding this study was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom? Sub-questions for the study included (a) what specific teaching approaches to writing displayed by the instructor during the freshman English course experience seemed to help or hinder the learning process?, and (b) How did ethnic, cultural, or social factors impact the student's development as a writer in the freshman English composition classroom? The large number of nontraditional students transitioning into higher education is a social trend that continues and as a result, the face of the freshman English composition classroom reflects this increasing predominance of the adult writing student:

The number of college students 25 years and older has grown from fewer than 4 million in 1980 to more than 6 million in 2000. Nontraditional students now make up more than 40% of the total U.S. undergraduate population according to the National Center for Education Statistics. (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 5).

The ultimate goal of the above research question combined with the three sub-questions was to reveal insight not only into the challenges and successes that African American nontraditional students encounter in the English classroom, but also into some of the factors that contribute to the challenges and successes.

Research Design

This study employed a design intended to enable an understanding of the challenges and successes that nontraditional students age 25 and older experience in regard to meeting the writing objectives of the community college freshman semester English classroom. Qualitative research involves documenting participant's holistic experiences or attempting to recapture a certain phenomenon. Qualitative research allows multiple layers of a participant's story or a life phenomenon to be revealed for diverse levels of interpretation and analysis. Qualitative research also entails the description of mood, personality, body language, photographs, letters, and other artifacts that attempt to paint a cohesive and inclusive portrait of a particular experience. In this particular study, I asked participants to bring past graded essays and other significant writing assignments completed during their first semester English experience. This aided them in recapturing significant emotions and classroom writing experiences with peers, which helped to recreate the phenomenon of their writing challenges and successes:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible.

Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4)

As Denzin and Lincoln discuss, qualitative research focuses on the open-ended premise of interpreting and describing experiences in an effort to bring life to them through the lens of the participants. Ultimately, my goal as the researcher was to capture the *phenomenon* of nontraditional students' writing challenges and successes in the first

semester English classroom. I was interested in gaining an understanding of participants' writing experiences as they perceived them through their own lens. Patton (2002) states, "The phenomenologist is committed to *understanding* social phenomena from the actor's own perspective. He or she examines how the world is experienced" (p. 69). A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because it best illuminated the experiences of the participants as they revealed them through qualitative interviews:

The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories. (Patton, 2002, p. 341)

The use of open-ended qualitative interviews and analysis of artifacts were the methods for gathering data and identifying themes in the data. This was an interpretive study that relied upon the perceptions of the participants, and the interviews allowed the participants to yield open-ended responses regarding the challenges and successes they experienced in regard to meeting the objectives of the first semester freshman English classroom. It was hoped that the insight gained from the participant's responses would increase my understanding and awareness as the researcher, as well as that of other English composition instructors regarding the overall *phenomenon* of writing challenges and successes experienced by nontraditional students in the freshman English composition classroom. As Crotty (1998) states,

Phenomenology suggests that, if we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of

them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning. (p. 78)

This was the ultimate goal of this phenomenological based study; to bring pre-existing ideas and perspectives regarding the vast writing experiences of adult African American students to the forefront, and ultimately gain an understanding of these experiences through their eyes, as well as view these students' classroom experiences in a new light.

Description of the Study Site and Participants

The setting of my research was two community colleges located in the Houston metropolitan area. These two community colleges were ideal, information rich settings for this study because the student populations greatly reflected African American nontraditional students age 25 and older that I was interested in for the study.

Participants in qualitative research are the people being studied in an effort to gather data on a particular research topic. The participants in my study included a focus on African American nontraditional students ages 25 and older who had recently completed their first semester of freshman English composition. The focus on African American nontraditional students' writing challenges and successes was an effort to broaden the current body of literature to include this segment of the student population.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

For this study, I utilized a purposeful sampling method in an effort to acquire the most thorough, meaningful data possible from the participants:

The logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under

investigation. This method is in contrast to the random sampling procedures that characterize quantitative research, which is based on statistical probability theory.

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 69)

Selecting a small sample of students who had recently completed the first semester freshman English classroom enabled me as the researcher to conduct a very thorough, purposeful, information-rich study as student experiences were highly likely to be fresh upon data collection which ultimately strengthened the validity, and illuminated the primary purpose of the study. Patton (2002) suggests how purposeful sampling prioritizes the thorough analysis of a small group of participants in an effort to maximize understanding and illuminate authentic answers to the initial questions that the study is based upon. Purposeful sampling also involves the selection of participants or cases that will yield meaningful and valuable information related to the particular study.

The sample of my study included twelve African American nontraditional students age 25 and older who had successfully completed their first semester of freshman English composition. Most participants were enrolled in second semester freshman English composition upon recently completing first semester freshman English composition. It was expected that students who had recently completed their first semester of freshman English would possess a wealth of current, clear, vivid details and emotions regarding their challenges and successes in meeting the course objectives.

In regard to recruiting participants for this study I first contacted a second semester freshman English instructor at my proposed setting, explained my dissertation study to the instructor, and discussed recruitment options. After discussing my dissertation study with the course instructors, I sent them a flyer to share with their

classes to initiate recruitment. If students that were appropriate for this particular study responded with interest in being a participant, I then sent them a formal letter or e-mail inviting their participation. The letter or e-mail explained the nature of the study in more detail and what would be expected of the students as participants including the plan to conduct audio taped individual interviews. I also sent the students a written consent form for them to review and sign. The potential participants had a two-week time frame to respond that they agreed to become a participant in my study.

Data Collection Process

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing and analysis of artifacts in the form of past graded papers were the two primary data collection methods for this study. My interview questions were organized with regard to past, present, and future in an effort to gain a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of the participant's challenges and successes in regard to writing development. The first interview was focused on past and present writing challenges and successes, and the second interview was focused on additional topics such as clarifying interpretations from the first interview and gathering future recommendations for English departments and first semester English instructors in regard to enhancing the writing competency and overall success of the nontraditional student:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to "evaluate" as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (Seidman, 2006, p. 9)

As Seidman suggests, in-depth interviewing is the key to experiencing the full phenomenon of the participant's story. As I conducted interviews, I utilized a digital

recorder to ask participants a selection of open-ended questions related to the research topic of nontraditional students' challenges and successes in meeting the core writing objectives in the community college first semester freshman English classroom:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. . . . We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective.

(Patton, 2002, pp. 340-341)

Patton is suggesting here that interviewing allows the researcher to gain an intimate perspective into a participant's life to analyze important aspects that cannot be recaptured by other means.

The second method of data collection that I used to conduct this study was the analysis of past graded essays and other writing assignments that the students completed for their first-semester freshman English course. In regard to how these artifacts were utilized in the data collection process, I asked participants to reflect on specific types of essays and other writing assignments completed during their first semester freshman English course, and to describe the challenging, as well as the successful encounters they experienced with the particular writing assignments. As students reflected upon these past essays and various other writing projects, they were able to recall specific writing victories experienced, writing difficulties, a vast range of feelings that they experienced upon receiving certain grades, instructor commentary, as well as various levels of instructor support received during their completion of certain writing assignments. Having the participants reflect and comment on past writing assignments for this course

such as major essays, projects, and journal writings, as well as allowing the participants an opportunity to discuss these artifacts from their own perspective provided me as the researcher insight into many of the writing challenges and successes that my participants experienced in the course, as well as insight into their thinking processes as they were composing the assignments. Discussing the past graded writing assignments provided participants an opportunity to comment specifically on various writing objectives of their English course that were particularly challenging, as well as those that were less challenging. They also provided participants an opportunity to comment on specific writing instruction strategies presented by their English instructor that resulted in a challenging or successful writing experience, or caused feelings of otherization or alienation in the classroom.

Data Analysis Process

Upon completion of data collection, I developed a color-coding system for my field notes. This was very helpful when I as the researcher began “piecing together patterns, defining categories for data analysis, planning future data collection, and for writing the final product” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 148). Transcribing participant’s interviews into word documents allowed me as the researcher to develop a strong level of intimacy with the participant’s stories regarding their writing challenges and successes. The interview transcripts were also printed out allowing written codes, color-coding, and highlighting to be applied as part of the data analysis process.

I followed the analysis process suggested by Tesch (1990). Tesch (1990) utilizes an eight-step structure to analyze qualitative data highlighting raw data itself over “research questions, the research instrument, and concepts and categories used by other

authors in previous related studies” as the ideal source for organizing specific information acquired post the collection process (p. 141). Tesch (1990) states, “Since most qualitative research is inductive, or if none of the first three are available to you, the data themselves remain the most suitable and the richest source for the development of an organized system” (p. 142). She recommends to (a) gather a sense of the whole picture by conducting a full read through of each transcript, (b) go over each transcript and write my thoughts within the margin, (c) make a list of topics and cluster together similar topics, (d) return to my data and abbreviate topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text, which will allow me to see if new categories and codes emerge, (e) look for descriptive words that relate to each other and place them into specific categories, (f) make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes, (g) assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis, and finally (h) recode my existing data if necessary. Through a thorough completion of this data analysis process, I uncovered the primary findings of the data, which were instrumental in my goal of expanding the body of literature in my specific research area.

Researcher’s Role and Biases

Merriam (2009) cites Stake (2005) in stating, “Investigators need to explain their biases, disposition, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken. . . . Such a clarification allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (p. 219).

The biases that I am aware I possessed as the researcher of this study are that I am a community college English composition instructor who has witnessed nontraditional

students experience a vast range of challenges, as well as successes with various writing assignments. I have witnessed students fail to seek needed assistance from me as the instructor and also the campus writing center regarding writing assignments, and I have also witnessed students utilize these resources successfully and grow as college writers. This professional experience with this classroom issue is what inspired me to pursue an intimate, in-depth look into nontraditional students' challenges and successes in meeting the writing objectives of the first semester English classroom and gain insight into the factors that contribute to their challenges and successes. I also strongly felt that the body of literature regarding the educational needs of nontraditional African American students' needed to be expanded with regard to this specific subject area study.

Ethical Procedures to Collect and Handle Data

To insure the ethical nature of the study, I acquired informed consent from my participants and assured them that a pseudonym would be substituted for their name to assure confidentiality in presentations or write-ups of the study. I also secured the data obtained from participants in a locked file cabinet. These are important ethical steps in the qualitative interviewing and research process. Merriam (2009) states, "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (p. 231). Ultimately, the informed consent form is a document that insures ethical protection of the participant during the interview process and beyond. Warren (2002) states, "From an IRB perspective, human subjects regulation of interview research seeks to protect respondents from such things as invasion of privacy, breaches of confidentiality or anonymity, and distress caused by topics raised in the interview process itself" (p. 89).

Moreover, a participant becoming highly emotional and psychologically distressed during the interview process is also a dilemma that researchers might encounter. If any of my participants had experienced any episode of emotional or psychological distress during the interview process, I was prepared to make it a priority to provide the participant with a list of free counseling and psychological services to assist them with coping with any emotional or psychological issues that emerge:

Deciding to continue would indicate that the researcher considers that the value of the data obtained from the distressing experience outweighs the participant's distress. . . . Stopping the interview and searching for possible solutions for the participant's distress indicates that researchers are aware of the vulnerability of participants and their rights. (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001, p. 94)

This passage illuminates how the moral, ethical nature of the research must remain a priority, and the emotional or psychological stability of the participant must not be compromised on any level regardless of how valuable the obtained data may be. I took proper measures to insure that this study entailed minimal to no risk of psychological or emotional harm to participants.

Establishing Trustworthiness

In regard to the trustworthy nature of the study, the elements of triangulation, credibility, transferability, and dependability were applied to the study. In regard to triangulation, it is the most well-known method of ensuring the validity of a study (Merriam, 2009):

Usually associated with navigation or land surveying wherein two or three

Measurement points enable convergence on a site, the best known discussion of

Triangulation is Denzin's (2008), in which he proposes four types of triangulation: the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings.

(Merriam, 2009, p. 215)

Considering that data collection for this particular study was exhibited by means of interviews and artifacts in the form of past graded essays and other writing assignments, triangulation was illustrated by means of the second type stated above which is by using multiple sources of data. Merriam (2009) states, "What someone tells you in an interview can be checked against what you observe on site or what you read about in documents relevant to the phenomenon of interest" (p. 216). Dependability was also established with the use of triangulation. In qualitative research, dependability or consistency means establishing whether the results of a study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2009). In regard to triangulation, in this study interviews and artifacts were the primary tangible pieces of data that illustrated how the findings from the study are dependable in relation to the overall context of the study. Merriam (2009) states, "The use of multiple methods of collecting data (methods triangulation), for example, can be seen as a strategy for obtaining consistent and dependable data, as well as data that are most congruent with reality as understood by participants" (p. 222). Ultimately, dependability was established when the data yielded from the participant interviews and the artifacts support the findings of the study or vice versa.

The credibility or internal validity for this study was established by an interpretation of how well the findings of the study matched the data that were yielded from the interviews and analysis of the artifacts. Merriam (2009) states, "Internal

validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality. How congruent are the findings with reality? Do the findings capture what is really there? Are investigators observing or measuring what they think they are measuring” (p. 213). Reality in terms of this qualitative research study is meaning inherent in the participant’s personal stories and the graded essays from their first semester English composition experience. Overall, credibility was established through the thick, rich data presented from the interviews and artifacts. Merriam (2009) also discusses how trustworthiness, integrity, and ethics must be a part of a researcher’s innate personality, rather than data referenced to in books and manuals.

Transferability must be judged by the reader and depends on the researcher providing a thick, rich description of the research findings so that the purpose, meaning, and significance of the study can be effectively transferred to the reader. Merriam (2009) presents an excellent illustration of how transferability is much more effectively enacted when conducting an in-depth study with a purposeful sample rather than a random sample:

It has been argued that applying generalizations from the aggregated data of enormous, random samples to individuals is hardly useful. A study might reveal, for example, that absenteeism is highly correlated with poor academic performance – that 80percent of students with failing grades are found to be absent more than half the time. If student Alice has been absent more than half the time, does it also mean that she is failing? There is no way of knowing without looking at her record. Actually, an individual case study of Alice would allow for a much better prediction of her academic performance, for then the

particulars that are important to her situation could be discovered. (p. 224)

What Merriam skillfully illustrates is how the element of transferability is much stronger when the researcher utilizes a smaller, more purposeful sample of participants in a research study, rather than a large random sample of participants where thorough, detailed, and information-rich data is highly minimized, if not completely non-existent. I made transferability possible by studying a small group of African American nontraditional students in-depth and providing the most rich, vivid, and descriptive detail possible. The goal was to capture on an intimate, in-depth, level the essence of the students' stories regarding their writing challenges and successes experienced within the freshman English composition classroom. This is ultimately the core and essence of qualitative inquiry. Merriam (2009) asserts, "In qualitative research, a single case or small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p. 224). This was my goal with this study

Chapter Summary

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the stories and overall essence of writing challenges and successes experienced by African American nontraditional students in the community college first semester English classroom. A phenomenological design was used in an effort to reveal and better understand the writing challenges and successes of the participants as revealed by them during their qualitative interviews. An interview guide composed of open-ended questions allowed me as the researcher to gather data and identify emerging themes. The theoretical framework for this study which is interpretivism relied upon the experiences and

perceptions of the participants. The interviews enabled open-ended responses from the participants. Purposeful sampling limited the participants to nontraditional students who had recently completed first semester freshman English composition. This ultimately yielded a very information-rich sample of participants as their challenging and successful writing experiences were both psychologically and emotionally fresh.

After potential participants were identified, they were sent detailed information explaining the essence of the study. Once participants agreed to participate, I scheduled meetings for each participant during which they signed a consent form, chose a pseudonym to protect their identity, and completed a qualitative interview of approximately one hour and a half. A follow-up interview was conducted for participants as needed. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed, and the data that were yielded from the transcriptions were color-coded and categorized, which ultimately revealed the themes within the data.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONAL PROFILES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to attempt to better understand and gain insight into the writing challenges and successes of African American community college nontraditional students age 25 and over who have recently completed their first semester of freshman English composition. All students were highly motivated and had fully completed and passed their first semester freshman English composition course and were currently enrolled in their second semester freshman English course, or higher. The research question guiding this interpretivist study was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom? It was hoped that the findings from this study would (a) assist adult African American students who are planning to enter the community college freshman English composition classroom in gaining insight into other African American adult students' successful and unsuccessful writing experiences in the community college first semester freshman English classroom, (b) inform advanced-level English instructors of some of the reasons that African American students may struggle with advanced writing assignments, as well as experience success with various writing assignments, and (c) add to the limited knowledge base on adult student writers in the community college setting. A portrait of these students' overall writing experiences during their first semester freshman English course emerges from the analysis of the data from purposefully selected students.

The data that emerged from the interview questions as well as the artifacts, allowed for the creation of profiles of each student. Notes from the researcher's personal

journal, the interview transcripts, and the organization of a matrix containing significant quotations from the participants were used to gain insight into the participants' writing background and their general perspective of academic writing as a whole. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to insure confidentiality of the study. Twelve participants were included in this study. These students ranged in age from 25 to 46 at the time of his or her freshman English course as well as their personal interview for this study. Each student clearly identified him or herself as African American in heritage. Each also expressed not only a strong interest in general academic achievement, but more specifically, a passion for growth and development as a college academic writer. They also expressed an authentic interest in improving the quality of English department writing instruction and instructor support in an effort to maximize the adult student's transformation into a strong college-level writer

As I interviewed each African American writing student about his or her writing experiences in the English classroom, they provided close, intimate details of the writing challenges and successes they experienced during their course experience. It was intriguing to listen to the broad ranges of growth and development that these men and women had experienced in the area of college writing, as well as their perceptions regarding the factors that have contributed to their moments of writing growth and development. The specific images, emotions, and artifacts that these students shared with their stories were not only enlightening and deeply thought provoking, but provided a very interesting range of perspectives regarding both the positive and negative pedagogical writing approaches that are currently taking place within the college writing classroom. It was also very interesting to hear their perspectives of how these approaches

transform the adult African American student's writing ability and perspectives on college writing courses as a whole. The following are personal profiles of the 12 participants intended to enlighten the reader to the writing challenges and successes that they encountered in their first semester freshman English course, as well as provide the reader with a brief portrait of who these students were as developing adult writers in the college classroom.

Kimberly

Kimberly, age 25 felt that she was very well prepared upon entrance into freshman English after a five year absence from formal academic writing. She came from a rigorous high school English course that she felt prepared her for the college-level writing assignments she encountered in this course. Kimberly stated, "The work in high school was very rigorous, very identical to the work that I had to complete during this course. Also, I would say that it prepared me for what I was to expect." Here, Kimberly is exhibiting how having a strong high school writing experience ultimately created a smooth transition for her entering the college English classroom after a five year absence. Although she experienced a smooth entrance into the classroom and felt prepared for most assignments given to her in her freshman English course, Kimberly described some specific challenging and successful writing assignments that she encountered in the course.

With regard to unsuccessful writing experiences, she expressed that she had difficulty writing within the persuasive/argumentative essay genre. Kimberly states, "Our final argumentative essay was the most challenging because we had to not only use our point of view, but we had to consider a counter argument and it was kind of difficult

to structure our point of view around that counter argument, but I was always up for a challenge.” Kimberly also stated “I felt a bit challenged because it was my first time actually having to write an argumentative essay. The idea was fairly new. It was unfamiliar territory, so I had to go in and you know just do the best that I could. These responses illuminate Kimberly’s willingness as an adult writing student to overcome her fear of composing the traditional argumentative essay and accept the challenge to grow as a writer, rather than allowing her writing weaknesses to suppress her potential to grow as a writer.

Kimberly also described a key time when she felt successful as a writer. She stated, “The first time I felt successful as a writer during my freshman English class would have been when I got my first essay back and I had a 95 on it.” Kimberly expressed great joy as she reflected back on the moment that she was handed her assignment back. The assignment was to write a research paper on an educational documentary that she watched in class and take a stand of *for* or *against* the specific topic. Kimberly also stated, “Through the help of my instructor and his willingness to meet with me outside of class to work on the issues that I was having trouble with, I was able to gain confidence and achieve an A on this assignment.” She went on to say that her English instructor exhibited a strong prioritization toward her learning and writing success as an African American adult student. Kimberly stated, “I would say that my instructor was very detailed. If there was something that we didn’t understand, he would further break it down and he wouldn’t hesitate to go over it again.” As Kimberly came into the college writing classroom with very little experience doing library research and writing critically on various controversial topics, it was enlightening to listen to her

describe the level of joy she felt as an adult student newly entering the college-level English classroom when she received a grade of “A” on her first essay, as well as to hear her speak of the inspiring level of writing support that her English instructor showed her. This highlights how many adult students entering the college classroom frequently possess a very low level of self-confidence as well as *self-efficacy* regarding their overall ability to succeed in their coursework and meet the general academic standards of the college-level classroom as a whole.

Overall, the most compelling feature of Kimberly’s interview that was her attribution of her mother’s lack of a high school or college education as inspiration to her striving toward the highest level of academic writing achievement possible. Kimberly stated, “Having a mother who didn’t graduate from high school or college is one of the things that further pushed me to you know, come to class and do what I had to do to make sure that I was getting the grade that I needing to get.” This reveals Kimberly’s internal motivation to transcend her mother’s fate and progress toward academic success at all costs.

Danielle

Danielle, age 27 is a very confident, mature, strong-minded African American woman who presented herself as an adult student who was determined to acquire writing success and thoroughly values the time she is investing in her college education. She acknowledged her need to improve her English grammar and writing skills early during her high school years as a 9th grader as a result of the “improper” speech and writing that she witnessed her other African American peers using in high school. Danielle stated, “I am a student of color and I have noticed a selection of African Americans use some sort

of slang or improper grammar while they are writing. From my viewpoint, I believe we should try to develop a better writing structure.” Danielle made the decision to enroll in pre-AP classes her 10th grade year in an effort to surpass her peer’s poor grammatical and writing skills. Danielle stated, “In my English class, we focused on one part of the essay at a time such as the thesis statement, introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusions. Also, by me taking this class I learned a lot about sentence fragments, run-ons, punctuations and others, but the main focal point was on different types of essays using the modes of argumentation *Logos, Pathos, and Ethos*.” She reports having a high level of ambition toward becoming a better writer as a “pre-adult,” beginning when she was in high school, which was very inspiring to hear. Danielle also expressed how this early dedication to improve her writing and grammatical skills in high school provided her the self-confidence to strive toward writing success when she entered into the college-level English classroom. Danielle stated, “My journey of high school English helped me become better in some parts of writing and when I started my life of college as a freshman in English, I knew that I was going to manage my writing abilities even better just by me experiencing it in high school.” This statement clearly shows how Danielle entered into the college classroom with a *can do* mentality and a desire to overcome all academic odds that met her as an adult writing student.

Despite her high level of writing preparation upon her entrance into the community college English classroom, there were both *successful* as well as *unsuccessful* writing experiences that she encountered in freshman English that greatly impacted her inner drive as an adult college writer, as well as her morale as an adult college writer. Danielle stated, “There was a moment when I had to write about a film called *Wal-Mart*:

The High Cost of Low Price. This was an argumentative essay where I had to write about whether I felt Wal-Mart had a positive or negative impact on America. My instructor gave me a 95 on this essay, so I knew I did good. I felt very successful.” Here, Danielle is describing her writing success on one of the major essay genres of the freshman English course, which is the argumentative essay. The score of 95 on the assignment, which is an A filled her heart with joy and confirmed to her that she was being successful as a college writer. In regard to her unsuccessful experiences in the college English classroom, Danielle’s major challenge was trying to comprehend complex words and reading a selected essay or other reading assignment for class. Her instructor recommended that she keep a dictionary with her at all times at school so that she would be able to look up the definition of words whenever she needed to, which Danielle expressed made her feel less than competent as an adult college student.

A very compelling aspect of Danielle’s drive for writing success was revealed when she discussed her perception of how her African American family culture impacted her success as an African American Adult student. Danielle expressed that many of her own family members frequently belittled her desire to excel not only as a college writer and proper speaker, but as a college educated woman in general. Danielle stated, “Being part of an African American family, I have noticed the *Crab in the Bucket Syndrome* which refers to one family succeeding and the others attempting to hold them back from success. I am very confident that I came to college to enter English composition to learn how to write better and differently from my family members.” Danielle is highlighting how she refuses to allow the suppressive mentality of her family members to prevent her from academic growth and successful writing development. Overall, Danielle expressed

that African Americans too often fail to support each other in their quest to better themselves with a higher education, and this type of suppression must come to an end. Danielle entered into the college classroom with a dedicated drive to succeed and made a vow to herself that she would continue to embrace her journey of writing development regardless of her perceived lack of support within her community, or any other negative, suppressive obstacles.

Laura

Laura, age 46 presented a very confident, authoritative persona during her interview. Laura is actually a second-time nontraditional community college student who had previously attempted college and recently returned to the classroom to focus fully on pursuing her education. Laura strongly expressed her enthusiasm about returning to the English classroom in this more modern day of higher education. When she attempted college the first time in the mid to late 80s and early 90s, the freshman English composition course curriculum that she experienced was much different than it is currently. Grammar competency was the focus and very little attention was given to traditional essay composition, formal MLA documentation, peer review sessions, college-level research skills and many other learning components currently presented in today's modern freshman English composition classroom. Laura admitted her fear of returning to the modern English classroom after so many years of absence and expressed how unsettling the transition was for her. Laura stated, "I thought, me going back to English and I'm in my 40's, I was scared! I didn't know if I could do it. I wanted to give up several times, but it was a challenge, because in high school and my first time in college we were taught different English. We weren't taught how to write essays, arguments,

and stuff like that. It was always nouns, pronouns, verbs, and other aspects of grammar.” Laura indicated that her very limited past English education was due to the type of schools she attended as a young woman. She indicated that she attended a very “country” style public school education system and the teachers were very out of date in regard to their teaching style, and neglected the teaching of traditional essay composition. Laura stated, “I never wrote argument essays because the school that I went to was in the country. The teachers were not broad-minded to teach stuff like that.” This perceived inferior education made Laura feel very unsuccessful as a returning college student and made her feel as though she did not have the tools to be proper rhetorical tools to be successful in the course.

Moreover, the weakness of her English education in high school and her previous college experience severely hindered Laura’s writing success in the modern English composition classroom, because when faced with her first contemporary English essay assignment, which was to write a *narrative essay* on a significant event where she was expected to produce formal essay structure was a challenge for her. Laura stated, “The first paper I had to write in community college was a paper about something that devastated my life. I didn’t know how to put it into words, because I didn’t know how to incorporate the details of starting an introductory paragraph, the body paragraphs, and adding the details of the story in it, and also the closing paragraph of the paper. I didn’t know how to do it so that scared me!” This clearly exhibits Laura’s fear of composing in this very conventional essay format, but she expressed that once she met with her English composition instructor and worked on elaborating on her ideas and composing in proper essay structure, this *narrative essay* assignment ultimately became her most *successful*

writing experience in the course. Laura stated, “I wrote about my sister having an aneurism at age 42 and when my instructor told me to write on this topic, it was easy because I was writing about *myself*. I knew how to start it off and how to end it, and that’s when I thought *I can do this!* The paper I wrote was good, because I made an A on it and it just came to me so easy how to do it.” Here, Laura is highlighting how the personal narrative essay enabled her to freely express her ideas on paper and provide the detail that she needed to provide in an effort to effectively tell her story. Once she received guidance from her instructor regarding the foundational components of academic writing she was able to apply this knowledge to an essay genre that enabled her to write expressing her innermost self, ultimately enhancing her morale as an adult student writer.

One of the most powerful aspects of Laura’s very goal oriented persona as an adult writing student was revealed when she discussed a time when she experienced moments of racial discrimination during the first time she took her freshman English composition course back in the late 80’s – early 90’s. Laura expressed that she had a White teacher that strongly prioritized her teaching and support toward the other younger White students in the class while ignoring her and the other two Black students in the class due to their age and ethnicity. Laura stated, “The instructor was helping the White kids more than she helped us three Black students I guess because we were older people from an older generation in class and she felt like we weren’t gonna get it anyway. She was more focused on the younger kids like they were going to last the longest. She thought us three Black older students were just gonna quit!” Laura stated, “I thought she just wanted us to give up and that made me challenge myself to write better English the

way she was teaching us and the way she acted toward us three older ladies in class. So, that just made me want to stick with it more!” This powerful expression of this incident provided great insight into Laura’s overall character of strength, motivation, and dedication as an adult African American student returning to the freshman English composition course. It highlighted her ability to use this instructor’s poor pedagogical style as *negative reinforcement* to ultimately push her to strive more intensely toward writing success not only as an English composition student, but as an adult African American student determined to acquire a higher education regardless of oppressive circumstances.

Michael

Michael, age 25 entered the freshman English composition classroom with a clear idea of what was to be expected of him in regard to becoming a successful college-level writer. He had very minimal information to share regarding his high school writing experiences, stating that he was not very engaged during his high school English courses and that the content was somewhat bland through the high school years. He indicated that his high school writing education was very basic and average, and that there was not very much to elaborate on as a result of the average nature of his high school English courses. Entering the formal college English was a struggle for him initially and it took him an extended amount of time to acquire the proper study skills, motivation, and discipline that was required of an adult writer in freshman English. Michael stated, “I knew that there would be a lot of writing assignments and major essays that I would have to write, which definitely proved to be true about freshman English.” Here, Michael shared his preconceived notions of the rigorous, challenging writing demands that would

be required of him upon entrance into freshman English and how these notions were ultimately realized during his experience as an adult writing student. Michael stated,

The most challenging part of freshman English was the actual preparation work that I had to do prior to writing the actual essay. Prep-work such as brainstorming a topic, constructing an outline, doing research to locate secondary sources, and learning proper MLA format. Proofreading and editing my essays were also very difficult as sometimes I really didn't know exactly what to look for to improve my essay.

Michael also shared his feelings of great disappointment after receiving a poor grade on a *persuasive essay* assignment that he failed to fully apply himself on, which ultimately negatively affected his self-esteem as an adult writer. Michael stated, "After receiving this bad grade on this persuasive essay, it severely affected my self-confidence in the class and it made me feel like I couldn't make it in the class . . . After this negative experience, I pushed myself to try to do better from that point on." This illustrates Michael's strong sense of drive for self-improvement as a student. He is refusing to succumb to the suppressive powers of failure that demonstrates his strong will as an adult student.

Michael did however express feelings of pride and joy when he spoke of the success he experienced on *one* specific writing assignment in his freshman English composition course called the *Narrative Essay*. This essay assignment enabled Michael to express himself freely and write very confidently on a topic that was of high interest to him. Michael stated, "Writing the personal narrative essay was the assignment that I felt the most successful on because I was able to be creative and focus on an experience that

was meaningful and unique to me.” This assignment allowed Michael to be *himself* as an adult writer and focus holistically on writing from his *heart*. Michael stated, “I enjoyed being able to use vivid details, elaborations, colorful phrases, and dialogue to tell my story. This made my story come to life and actually recreated the experience for me.” Overall, the *Narrative Essay* genre is the assignment that awakened his innermost creativity in the freshman English composition classroom. This is the assignment that enabled him to embrace creativity and write in a much more focused manner that ultimately revealed his true self as an adult writer. Through the narrative essay, his shy persona and average high school writing background was overshadowed by creativity. Interestingly, the narrative essay assignment is the assignment that ignited a high level of learning in Michael as an adult writer and was the *spark* that planted the rhetorical seed of motivation, imagination, and creativity, within his spirit as an adult English composition student.

Shannon

Shannon, age 28, came from a very poor high school English education in regard to writing experience. The difficulty of transitioning from a very poor high school English program into an advanced college-level writing environment was the heart of her interview, and she provided great insight into her inner ambition to grow and develop as an adult college-level writer. She expressed how underprepared she felt in the area of writing upon entering the college-level English classroom due to her lack of knowledge and experience with formal essay structure, source documentation, paragraph development, and many of the other foundational aspects integral to developing a strong writing background. Shannon stated, “As a high school student, I didn’t do much writing.

I did a lot of reading. It impacted me being successful in the college-level writing classroom because I had difficulty doing the MLA format properly, as well as writing a persuasive or argumentative paper.” This suggests that with Shannon’s high school English course placing such a strong emphasis on *reading*, she failed to develop her academic writing skills properly. Shannon seemed to place a heavy emphasis during her interview on her poor high school writing education as the cause for her being so underprepared for the demands of the college-level English classroom and clearly expressed her goal of developing herself as a college-level writer during her freshman English composition experience. A strong *writing* education is what she feels she needed, as well as desired. When asked what she wanted to gain as an adult freshman English composition student when she entered her freshman English composition course, Shannon firmly stated, “My expectation was to learn to write a strong college-level paper using proper MLA format, write a strong thesis statement, and just learn to generally become a better college-level writer as a whole.” It was clear from Shannon’s statement that she was determined to grow and develop herself as a college-level adult writer regardless of her poor high school writing background.

Interestingly, Shannon did not describe a specific essay assignment that she felt successful on as a writer, but rather an *activity* that helped her develop the technical writing skills to become a better writer. This activity is called *peer reviewing*. Shannon stated,

In freshman English, one of our assignments was to pick our own topic and write about it. Our peers had to review it for grammar, punctuation, thesis statement strength or weakness and things of that sort. We edited our papers then gave them

back to the instructor to review as well. By this time, the semester had progressed further along and I felt really good, because I had strong feedback on my papers as a result of the intense level of peer review from my peers, as well as my instructor. I felt successful because my writing skills were gradually improving! I could see a big difference in my writing abilities!

Shannon illustrates how this college level peer review experience is the constructive feedback she needed to ultimately grow as an adult writer. The constructive focus on writing development which she lacked in her high school English course experiences was finally attained once she entered the college-level English classroom. It seems as though this was the learning experience that she needed to transcend her writing ability out of the shadows of ineffective high school writing training. This college-level peer reviewing experience enabled her to find her identity as an adult writer, ultimately giving her the tools, self-confidence, as well as self-efficacy to successfully perform as an adult freshman English composition student.

Jonathan

Jonathan, age 25, entered into the community college freshman English composition classroom with a very high level of confidence. He reported that he had come from a very well established high school English program and the AP classes that he had completed provided him with a strong writing foundation for the college writing assignments he encountered. Jonathan stated, “My high school English experience entailed taking AP and Pre-AP English classes and as a result, I think it helped me to be a little bit more confident when returning to the classroom in college. I think it gave me a basic understanding of MLA and the structure of an essay overall.” Interestingly,

Jonathan's interview revealed that his writing background in high school was so exceptionally strong that in some ways he felt *overly prepared* for the work he encountered in college-level freshman English. Most of the work he encountered in freshman English was much more *simplified* than he had expected for a college-level course. Jonathan stated, "The first experience where I felt unsuccessful as a writer in freshman English was when I wrote my first persuasive. I thought that the format of the essay would be at least the same advanced level as the high school papers that I wrote, but they wanted something a little bit more *simplified*. I think this more simplified writing experience helped bring about some clarity in my writing as well." Here, Jonathan explains how although he entered the college classroom with an advanced level of writing skills due to his AP courses taken in high school, he saw the simplified level of writing required of him in college-level freshman English as an opportunity to more closely fine tune his writing, as well as clarify writing inadequacies in his writing style. Rather than viewing his more simplified freshman English course as a *negative*, he viewed it as a *positive*. He saw it as an opportunity to grow, develop, and expand his abilities as an adult writer.

Jonathan also provided insight into how a specific assignment completed during his freshman English course helped him to visualize his place in society as an African American adult student. Jonathan spoke very sincerely about a book that he read in the course called *Battle Royale*. The book focused heavily on the essence of the African American culture and how African American's are viewed in the general context of society. Jonathan discussed how the book highlights an African American student winning a scholarship and achieving academic success. Jonathan stated, "It was an eye-

opener in some way because it allowed me to see the reality of our society as a whole in terms of being an African American, and where we are placed in society. It allowed me to see people's idea of the African American and where we are in society as far as social classes." Moreover, Jonathan stated, "It allowed me to see that our color if anything does not limit us, but it helps us to see things from many perspectives. I think it just helped me overall to just see the world from a different perspective and it helped me to understand the condition of the African American in our society." This very powerful statement reveals Jonathan as not only an adult African American student with strong writing goals and expectations, but also an adult student who allowed himself to utilize a given piece of literature from his freshman English composition course as a kind of *cultural lens*. He used this text to critically think about and analyze his place, essence, and uniqueness as an African American adult male in today's society, as well as how the African American culture is viewed by society as a whole. Overall, Jonathan utilized his freshman English course experience as not only a means to an end of a course grade, he used the assigned literature in this course to become more in tune with his *identity* as an African American adult man and ultimately enhance his critical thinking, imagination, and rhetorical abilities on multifaceted levels.

Sherry

Sherry, age 26, entered the freshman English composition classroom with a very weak writing background. She expressed that she had an instant fear of not meeting college-level standards due to her weak background in English, especially in the area of grammatical competence. Sherry stated, "The quality of my high school writing education was very poor. I had very bad grammar usage as well as punctuation. It

impacted my performance as a writer returning to the college classroom, because I didn't have a clue as to how to use proper grammar." Not only did Sherry express weakness in the area of grammar, but also with writing in the *persuasive essay* genre. Due to her poor high school writing background, she was forced to enter into the college classroom with very weak persuasive writing skills, as well as weaknesses in supporting her points, which was a serious struggle for her during the freshman English course. Sherry stated, "The persuasive essay was very challenging for me because I am very weak at persuading people to transfer their thinking to a certain viewpoint, as well as finding strong evidence to support my points. Persuasive / argumentative writing skills are a major part of the freshman English course and I felt I was very weak in this area." As persuasive and argumentative writing is one of the major objectives and writing genres of the freshman English course, it was clear that Sherry was very worried about her performance as a writer during her course experience and firmly acknowledged that developing *persuasive* skills, as well as providing *support* for her ideas were the two primary areas that she struggled with in this course. Sherry expressed great detail on a specific research paper assignment that required her to present a strong level of persuasion and support in her writing, and how she struggled to complete this major writing assignment successfully due to her weaknesses in these areas. Sherry stated, "This assignment was very difficult for me because the quality of the essay was very unorganized, my ideas were vague, and I did not elaborate very well on my points. I also did not provide any support for my ideas." Sherry's mood and body language dramatically changed during the interview as she reflected upon this assignment as she expressed how the experience caused her to feel very disappointed in herself as an adult writer.

Sherry also shared a very powerful aspect of her experience as an African American Adult student in freshman English which entailed her having feelings of racial discrimination against her African American cultural heritage. Sherry expressed that she feared her English instructor was possibly associating her writing weakness with persuasive writing and her challenge with supporting her ideas as a writer with all African American students. Sherry stated,

“She doubted our ability to be strong writers. She automatically assumed that all African Americans had bad grammar and generally poor writing skills . . . She built a wall between the black and white students in class. I felt like she alienated us from other students and it made us as black students feel like we had to specifically show her that we could write just as good as anybody else.

Although, this oppressive, discriminatory atmosphere angered Sherry and caused her to feel very threatened as an African American student, she ultimately viewed this dark experience as *negative reinforcement*. Sherry stated, “This impacted my overall learning experience because I knew I had to do it! I had to prove to my teacher that I could write just as good as any of the other White students in the class.” Here, Sherry reports not only a defense of her African American culture, but also of her ability to successfully perform as an adult writer in the freshman English composition classroom. Regardless of her anger and disappointment at her English instructor’s approach to her and other African American students in the class that she perceived as racist, she was determined to develop her writing skills up to college-level and refused to allow her poor high school writing *past*, or the ignorance of the *present* suppress her aspiration, self-esteem, or her

self-efficacy as she continues to learn and progress as a community college African American adult writer.

Barbara

Barbara, age 26 seemed to focus strongly on her difficulties with providing sufficient elaborative detail in her writing and stated that this was a major weakness that affected her overall writing success in the freshman English composition course. She expressed that her high school writing background was on an average level, but wasn't as strong as it could have been in regard to preparing her how to elaborate well in her writing. Barbara's primary goal when she entered freshman English was to acquire skills in elaboration and learn how to better explain her thoughts and ideas on paper. Barbara stated, "My expectations were to learn a little bit more about how to write and explain myself better, because usually when I write I don't go into as much detail as I need to." Barbara stated that if she were to learn how to provide more detail into her writing she would be more successful in reaching an audience's interest. Barbara worked diligently on her elaborative writing skills with her instructor as well as her peers throughout her freshman English course, and ultimately was able to reach an effective level of detailed writing in her assignments. Barbara stated,

One assignment I did was a timed-writing and it was about my vacation experience. I used what I learned from my instructor and my peers to go into more specific, vivid, elaborative detail about my vacation experience, rather than just writing vague statements with no explanations. Since I focused so much detail and elaboration in my writing, I felt this was a pretty strong paper that I wrote. It presented a lot of detail! This was the best paper I ever wrote!

Here, Barbara describes how she excelled in the skill of elaborative and detailed writing within the *narrative essay* genre through working closely with her instructor and peers in class. This was an inspiring experience for her in the sense that she acquired a high level of pride in the amount of detail and elaboration she was able to confidently use in the essay, especially in narrative writing which relies so heavily on extensive detail and elaboration. Moreover, Barbara expressed that when writing essays focused on cultural topics, specifically the African American culture she was able to utilize the elaboration skills she acquired from working with her instructor and peers to communicate her ideas effectively. Barbara stated,

Topics such as African American religious customs, hair styles, African American history, great African American leaders, and general social issues that are common to the African American community was easy for me to write about and was a good impact on my grade because I was able to write with more detail on these topics of great personal interest to me.

Overall, Barbara felt as though she had overcome a major obstacle in her writing ability by the end of her freshman English composition course.

Aaron

Aaron, age 25 entered into freshman English composition with a very strong writing background due to his AP English courses taken during high school. Aaron had a very shy, yet confident demeanor about him and it was obvious that he took being an adult college-level English student very seriously. He expressed that he felt very confident in his abilities upon entrance to the course. Aaron stated, “In high school, they enrolled me in AP English classes upon entrance as a freshman and I had a great teacher

who taught me a lot about writing on the college level. I learned a lot that prepared me for college-level demands.” Interestingly, although Aaron felt his high school AP classes prepared him for college-level writing expectations, he did highlight that he had weaknesses in the area of meeting *page quota* requirements for his major essay assignments and incorporating effective *content within his essays*, especially with the *persuasive / argumentative* essay genre, which is a major essay genre taught in the freshman English composition course. Aaron stated, “The writing assignments that I thought were the most challenging were the persuasive essays, which had to be 6-8 pages and this was a lot of work. I usually tried to fill in the paper with nonsense, vague ideas, and shallow statements in an effort to stretch the paper longer.” It was clear from Aaron’s interview responses that his high school writing background was more focused on acquiring skill in the areas of writing structure and style, rather than practice in composing *content* heavy essays. Moreover, Aaron related that when he was given text analysis assignments in which he was required to read a long, extensively written text and then compose a written analysis on a selected idea or theme presented in this text, he felt more successful as a writer, rather than when he was forced to write and respond to shorter works where there would be less information to extract from the text. Aaron stated, “I can’t remember the name of the book at this time, but we had to read a book which was around 100 pages long. There was a lot of detailed, interesting, and dramatic information related to plot, character traits, mood, setting etc. for me to take from this book to write my paper.” Aaron was very pleased with his performance on this essay assignment because he felt that he effectively wrote using the amount of detail, description, and elaboration needed to present strong content within his writing. In

addition, Aaron expressed how the *detailed* writing required of him on his job positively affected his development as a college-level writer. Aaron stated,

On my job, I write a lot. I work in security and we have to write very detailed, organized information related to what we see. In the academic classroom, this experience writing very detailed and organized on the job has transferred over into my academic essays in freshman English composition. When I read books, short stories, or professional essays and then was asked to respond in an essay to a certain theme or idea presented in the work, I was able to write very detailed, organized, and elaborate well on my points because I was used to this type of writing on my job.

Aaron reveals how the detailed, elaborative writing used within his professional work setting was reflected in his academic writing within the college classroom setting. Aaron highlights how the basic skill of writing is ultimately utilized across multiple spaces. Here, the professional work setting and the academic school setting are working in harmony with each other, ultimately exhibiting how the art of effective writing is not only interchangeable, but a necessary skill across the disciplines.

Jessica

Jessica, age 32 entered into the college classroom after a 9-year absence from the academic setting and had no clear goals of how she planned on developing herself into a college level writer. She began her college courses by completing the developmental writing and reading course sequence, which allowed her to focus heavily on grammar, thesis statement development, paragraph formation, word choice, and reading comprehension skills. The focus of Jessica's interview responses and the core issue that

she seemed to highlight the most as her challenge to achieving success as a writer is her tendency to transfer *casual conversation style* to her academic writing, as well as using incorrect grammar. Jessica stated that she was actually a *repeat* English composition course student and her weaknesses with using proper grammar in her writing assignments played a major role in her failing the course the first time she took it. Poor grammar and the use of *street slang language* is one of the major taboos in regard to formal academic writing, especially within the area of English. Jessica stated, “I always felt that I write pretty good, but my English composition instructor said that I *write like I talk* and that is the improper way to write . . . As far as using correct English grammar in my writing, this continues to be a challenge.” Jessica went on to express how the use of poor word choice and casual slang ultimately caused her to fail her freshman English composition course the first time she took the course, which was actually in an online format. Jessica stated, “I know the biggest problem with my writing is grammar; knowing where to place a comma, a period, a semicolon and trying to remember all of the many other rules of English grammar.” Jessica expressed very emotionally how *unsuccessful* this experience made her feel as an adult college-level writer. She tried her best in this course, yet she ultimately ended up failing the class. Jessica stated, “Even now I still don’t feel that I’m a successful writer and I’m still trying to reach the label of *successful writer* in my current English course. The experience made me feel horrible! I cried because I felt that I had done my very best in this class, yet it still wasn’t enough for the professor!” Jessica is clearly illuminating here not only her *ongoing* quest as an adult writing student to overcome her challenges with the core writing components of the freshman English composition course, but also how failing to reach this goal affected her on an *emotional*

level. Ultimately, this very emotional response highlighted Jessica's desire and sincere level of dedication for an authentic level of *adult learning*, as well as undergo a *transformation* into a competent and successful adult college-level writer.

Ryan

Ryan, age 27 described the same challenge in the freshman English composition course as Sherry did, which is the tendency to write in the manner he speaks. Ryan expressed that his high school English instructor was so immersed in teaching skills related to the TAKS test, that traditional writing instruction was omitted from the high school English course curriculum.

My high school writing education impacted my performance as a college writer because I write how I talk. In high school, teachers are too concerned with the TAKS test, rather than writing instruction. I didn't have much opportunity to practice on my grammar skills. My grammar and the way I write is in slang, so this is how my performance as a writer was negatively impacted returning back to the classroom.

Ryan is expressing here how he feels that his high school writing instructor served him an injustice in regard to preparing him adequately for college-level writing. Ryan stated that his primary goal upon entering his college-level freshman English course was to learn how to write much better than he was taught to write in high school. Ryan also discussed how his best writing results are revealed when he is allowed to write on topics very significant and personal to him on some level. Ryan stated, "I would say the most successful paper that I wrote in my freshman English course was the *narrative essay*, because in this essay I had a chance to speak about *me* . . . I knew how to be descriptive,

elaborate on ideas, and put information where it belonged in the essay.” The *biographical* writing genre seemed to be the primary love and interest of Ryan in regard to writing essays, because in this genre, he is allowed to focus on the personal aspects of the *self* which he expressed his most successful level of writing is illuminated.

The most striking aspect of Ryan’s interview, which provided great insight into the core of his persona as an adult student was how he attributed his drive to learn, succeed, and grow as a college student to the roots of his African American culture. Ryan stated, “The position I was in when I enrolled in freshman English is that I had a strong drive to learn and improve on my grammar and vocabulary. This is what I inherited from my African American culture; the drive, the ambition to do well and be successful in *all* that I do, not just my English courses.” This very powerful statement made by Ryan during his interview helped shed tremendous light on not only his drive to excel academically, but also his strong sense of respect for his African American *cultural values*, as well as his awareness that success is only attained through hard work, dedication, and commitment.

Tanya

Tanya, age 34 displayed a very confident mentality at the time of her interview and was very open about her weaknesses as an adult college writer. Tanya is a repeat freshman English composition student who has been absent from the formal academic classroom for sixteen years. She primarily focused on how she felt that freshman English composition instructors should conduct a review of the basic elements of effective writing, mainly *grammar* before proceeding on to advanced stages of writing. Tanya highlighted her weakness in grammatical competence as her downfall in the freshman

English composition classroom and ultimately caused her to remain in an academically *stagnant* state as an adult college-level writer. Tanya stated, “I was looking forward to being refreshed on grammar and things of that sort. I did receive some refreshing on some areas of writing, but I thought it would have been a lot more. This was my expectation upon entering into the course.” It was clear that a desire for increased knowledge in the area of grammar was the nucleus of Tanya’s desire to improve as an adult writer. Tanya felt that a weakness in the area of grammar competency was the primary challenge that prevented her from progressing to an advanced level and becoming a successful writer in the freshman English composition course. She felt that her instructor failed to prepare her, as well as other students in the course in this very critical area of writing. Tanya stated,

My first time taking English 1301, my instructor reviewed a little bit of grammar and then just expected us to go on . . . I basically had to like Google or find some type of resources on my own to try to make sure that I had the proper tools that I needed to make sure my grammar and everything was correct in the paper, and how I constructed the paper.

Tanya not only exhibits her high level of frustration toward her lack of grammar competency, which is preventing her from successfully performing as a writer, but ultimately her instructor’s lack of concern for the *diverse* writing knowledge and abilities that characterized her freshman English composition course. Moreover, Tanya felt that she should not have had to *self-educate* herself on a topic that should have been taught by the instructor. She felt alienated after this experience and felt that she was in some way doing the English instructor’s job for her.

In addition, even on assignments such as the *narrative essay* where Tanya felt that she was very successful as a writer in the areas of providing vivid detail, elaboration, and description, her lack of grammar skills caused her to receive a low grade on the essay. Tanya states, “I really thought I nailed it! . . . and when I got my grade back I was like – I received a D! I was like wow! Once again, the problem stemmed from the lack of grammar skills.” This experience was an eye-opening experience for Tanya, because she knew something had to be done in an effort to improve her performance as a writer as she knew that this essay assignment would not be her last. Overall, Tanya presented a very critical view of most English instructor’s pedagogical techniques expressing that many English instructors expect students to enter into the classroom competent in all areas of writing, and fail to acknowledge the diverse writing backgrounds that characterize their classrooms. Tanya stated, “There are things that they need to brush up on and I feel like a lot of instructors don’t provide this brush up time because they feel that students should already know the content.” Tanya expressed how she firmly believes that if students have the support they need in certain areas of writing performance levels will increase dramatically. Overall, Tanya’s primary message was that if instructors would acknowledge the *difference* in writing ability that dominates their classroom and accept the challenge of teaching *any* learning objectives needing to be taught, rather than shying away from certain learning objectives simply because the class has a certain title, not only will grades increase, but ultimately the overall morale of students will increase as well.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents profiles capturing the ages, writing backgrounds, and classroom writing and learning experiences that the twelve participants of this study encountered during their freshman English composition course. The participant profiles collectively present an image of a diverse group of adults that possess a broad range of learning experiences in the freshman English composition course. These learning experiences include positive writing experiences, negative writing experiences, strong levels of English instructor support, poor levels of English instructor support, as well as various oppressive learning experiences in the classroom. Moreover, the vast range of writing challenges and successes experienced by these participants ultimately led to a vast range of recommendations for English instructors, as well as English departments as a whole aimed at enhancing the overall learning experience of the adult freshman English composition student. These experiences have impacted their perceptions of themselves, of college writing, and of the larger academic society as a whole. Each participant presented explicit detail and elaboration regarding specific areas of writing development that they felt they needed to work on as adult English composition students. Each participant's story was unique in how it provided a depth of insight into the participant's character, attitude, and ultimate goals to excel as adult college writers in the freshman English composition classroom.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Upon completion of data analysis across participants, five primary themes and twelve sub-themes emerged from the data. This interpretive study allowed the researcher to better understand and gain insight into the writing challenges and successes of adult African American students, as well as the factors that attributed to these writing challenges and successes as perceived by them. The five primary themes that emerged were (a) *Perceptions on High School Writing Preparation* with two sub-themes including (i) *Strong High School Writing Experiences and the impact on the English Composition Classroom Experience* and (ii) *Poor High School Writing Experiences and the Impact on the English Composition Classroom Experience*; (b) *Comfort Levels with Specific Essay Genres* with two sub-themes including (i) *Challenges with the Persuasive Essay Genre* and (ii) *Success and Comfort Found in the Narrative Essay Genre*; (c) *Growth as an Adult Community College Writer* with two sub-themes including (i) *Intense Study of the Academic Writing Process*, and (ii) *Awareness of Diverse College Writing Readiness Levels*. (d) *The Role of Race in the English Composition Classroom* with three sub-themes including (i) *Race as a Minimal Element in Writing Success* (ii) *Race as a Significant Element in Writing Success*, and (iii) *Feelings of Racial Discrimination in the English Composition Classroom* and (e) *Levels of Support in the Freshman English Composition Classroom* with two sub-themes including (i) *Desire for Stronger Levels of English Instructor Support* and (ii) *Students who Experienced Strong Levels of Instructor Support*.

Perceptions of High School Writing Preparation

Participants provided clear insight into the writing preparation they received at the high school level. They explicitly expressed how their high school writing experience impacted their college-level writing performance either positively or negatively, and how they strived to grow as adult college writers regardless of prior preparation levels. The insight that participants provided highlighted the common phenomenon of adult students returning to the formal academic classroom setting with a vast range of college writing readiness levels, as well as a diverse range of general adult learning needs.

Strong High School Writing Experiences

Strong high school writing experiences were apparent across the interviews of several participants. Three students, Aaron, Jonathan, and Kimberly explicitly stood out in expressing the strength of their high school writing experience and how it positively impacted their college-level English classroom experience. These students expressed how they felt that the writing preparation that they received at the high school level, specifically their advanced placement (AP) English courses thoroughly prepared them for the writing demands of the college-level freshman English composition classroom, and also gave them the confidence they needed to succeed in the college level classroom. Aaron stated, “In high school, they enrolled me in AP classes upon entrance, so I had a great teacher who taught me a lot about writing on the college level. I learned a lot that prepared me for college-level demands.” Aaron displayed a very confident persona as he described his transition into the college English classroom. He entered freshman English ready to embrace any writing challenge that came before him and actually expected freshman English to be much more rigorous than he experienced. Aaron stated, “I

expected it to be much harder than it really was. I knew it was going to be a lot of writing and reading involved, so I just expected it to be much harder.” Aaron exhibits how his rigorous high school AP English courses ultimately surpassed the writing expectations and demands of the college-level English classroom. Similarly, Jonathan also credits his high school AP English classes for his strong level of confidence when entering the college-level English course. Jonathan stated, “My high school English experience entailed taking AP and pre AP English classes and as a result, I think it helped me to be a little bit more confident when returning to the classroom in college, and I think it just gave me a basic understanding of MLA and the structure of an essay overall.” Jonathan’s high school preparation thoroughly prepared him in the area of source documentation which was a valuable strength to enter freshman English with considering the beginning level research requirements common to freshman English composition courses. Kimberly also expressed how her high school AP English preparation thoroughly prepared her for the demands of freshman English. Kimberly noted, “I was an AP student in high school so I was pretty much prepared for the college work that I did encounter in this course. The work in high school was very rigorous, very identical to the work I completed during this course. Also, I would say that it better prepared me for what I was to expect.” Overall, these students credited their high school English courses for the smooth transition into the college-level freshman English composition classroom they experienced and strongly felt that this strong background in writing positively impacted their ultimate development as a college-level adult writer.

Poor High School Writing Experiences

Poor high school writing experiences were also a dominant theme expressed by five students across interviews. Shannon in particular provided a very interesting illumination of how English instructors must be careful in creating an imbalance between reading and writing in the English course. Shannon expressed how such a heavy emphasis on reading in her high school English courses tended to severely cripple her in the area of writing development and resulted in her being highly underprepared for the college-level English course:

As a high school writer, we didn't do much writing, we did a lot of reading. It impacted me being successful in the college-level writing classroom because I had difficulty doing the MLA format properly, as well as writing a persuasive or argumentative paper. Such a strong reading emphasis in high school English had a very negative effect because I didn't learn how to write properly in an academic sense.

Shannon relates how a lack of high school writing training impacted her college writing preparation in regard to specific skills and specific essay genres common to the freshman English composition course. She suffered in her ability to write in a college-level *academic* manner, which negatively affected her overall success and writing development in the course. Shannon stated,

Well, we had many writing prompts in my English course and when I first started the course, I was definitely clueless on how to write an essay because of my weak high school writing background. Our peers peer-reviewed my papers and wrote a lot of edits on them. I just felt horrible because I didn't

know what I was doing. Then my instructor also wrote a lot of edits on my papers as well and I was like, “This is horrible!” Me just not knowing how to write strongly and successfully as a college student made me feel unsuccessful!

Shannon provides insight into not only how her poor writing background hindered her performance in the area of college-level writing, but also how it lowered her sense of self-esteem as an adult writer. Mirroring Shannon’s story is Tanya’s who experienced a similar imbalanced Education in the high school English classroom. Tanya’s high school English instructor similarly focused heavily on the reading and analysis of literature rather than the basics of writing development and essay structure. Tanya stated, “Well, my high school writing education really wasn’t that great. I think they focused more on literature, but it wasn’t enough preparation for me to enter a college-level English classroom. It wasn’t effective enough.” As Tanya related, her high school English courses failed to prepare her in the basic foundational aspects of academic writing development, which is the core of the college-level first semester freshman English composition classroom.

Ryan also expressed discontent with his high school writing preparation. He discussed how the prioritization of preparing students to perform well on standardized tests ultimately dominated his high school English classroom, resulting in poor preparation for college level writing demands.

Well, it impacted my performance because I write how I talk. In high school, teachers are too concerned with the TAKS test, rather than writing instruction. I didn’t have much opportunity to practice on my grammar skills. My grammar

and the way I write is in slang and so this is how my performance as a writer was negatively impacted returning back to the classroom.

Not only is Ryan relating how the focus on standardized testing hindered his writing development, he is also expressing how his poor oral skills failed to improve and were ultimately transferred into his academic writing. His use of proper grammar skills and command of standard English failed to develop properly due to his high school English teacher's strong focus on teaching testing skills, rather than academic writing skills.

Likewise, Sherry also reported a lack of grammar instruction at the high school level that hindered her performance as a college-level adult writer. Sherry stated, "The quality of my high school writing education was very poor. I had very bad grammar usage, as well as punctuation. It impacted my performance as a writer returning to the classroom because I didn't have a clue as to how to use proper grammar skills." Barbara expressed that her poor high school writing education ultimately had a negative impact on her getting admitted into certain colleges, as well as obtaining scholarship awards to fund her college education.

My high school writing experience wasn't as strong as it could have been. It impacted my competitiveness with applying to different colleges, writing papers, and getting scholarships. It was hard because my writing wasn't as strong As it needed to be at the time, but when I returned to the classroom it was kind of shaky, but I picked up on it gradually.

Barbara highlights the need for high school English instructors to not only prepare their students for the writing demands of the college-level English classroom, but also for the writing expectations of academic scholarship committees. In this sense, students are

given the opportunity to effectively present their academic writing skills in a professional, effective, and scholarly manner.

Comfort Levels with Specific Essay Genres

Another theme across interviews dealt with distinct comfort levels with certain essay genres common to the freshman English composition course curriculum. The two specific essay genres that were most illuminated among participants were the *persuasive* and *narrative* essay genre. Participants often experienced either a challenge or success when encountering one of these two essay assignments.

Challenges with the Persuasive Essay Genre

Jonathan highlighted a situation when he encountered a challenging, yet educational experience with writing a persuasive essay due to his requirement to write in a much more basic, simplified manner than he was accustomed to during his advanced high school AP English courses. Jonathan stated,

The very first experience where I felt unsuccessful as a writer was when I wrote my very first persuasive essay. I thought that the format of the essay was going to be the same thing as the high school papers I wrote, but what they wanted was something a little bit more simplified. I think this more simplified writing experience helped bring across some clarity in my writing as well, so that would be the one paper that I thought I was most unsuccessful on. Also, this experience was unsuccessful because I didn't have a very clear thesis statement and I was just being introduced to a new way of writing a thesis statement. It basically made me feel discouraged in some way because I wasn't used to making a "C" on any

paper and just adjusting to this new type of academic writing was kind of difficult for me.

Jonathan revealed how his college-level English composition course standards forced him to break his writing down to basic elements in an effort to write in a more clarified, accurate manner, which was a foreign concept to him transitioning from the AP high school English classroom where this type of clarity was not expected of him. As this was Jonathan's first college-level persuasive essay, he was not accustomed to writing a clarified thesis statement for the persuasive essay as was expected of him in the college-level English composition classroom. Ultimately, this negative persuasive writing experience was also a very enlightening and transformative experience for Jonathan in the sense that he gained awareness to the high standards of clarity, detail, and precision that is required within a college-level piece of rhetoric.

Mirroring Jonathan's challenging experience with the persuasive essay genre is Kimberly who also experienced the persuasive/argumentative essay genre for the first time in freshman English composition. The content and structure of this essay genre was very much a foreign concept for her. Kimberly stated,

I feel that our last essay before the final was the most challenging, so I don't um, um, I'm not too sure on where I stand on that particular essay, um, I felt a bit challenged because it was my first time actually having to write a persuasive essay, so I was, the idea was fairly new, it was unfamiliar territory, so I had to go in and you know just do the best that I could. Hopefully, um, I excelled at it um, but, I felt like I was as prepared as I could get, um, my professor provided me with the material that I needed and I just took that and ran with it.

Kimberly also highlighted the phenomenon of *self-teaching* here in regard to learning the structure, components, and style of the academic writing process, which many freshman English composition instructors expect their students to do upon entrance to this very critical course. Key concepts of self-directed learning are that it enables adult learners to take control of their own learning, leads to transformational learning, promotes emancipatory learning, and guides the adult learner to engage in critical self-reflection (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Although adult education literature tends to idealize the idea of adult learners actively participating in self-teaching and self-directed learning, in this study the need for self-teaching appeared to be viewed negatively among participants. Participants that expressed high levels of discontent with English instructors expecting them to *self-teach* and *self-direct* themselves through the writing process did not possess an adequate level of writing readiness to reap the benefits of a self-taught and self-directed writing education. As Kimberly relates, she did not have the proper writing background to progress through her English course with a minimized level of instructor guidance and supervision. She longed for a more intense level of instructor direction as she progressed on her journey to becoming a competent, college-level writer. Kimberly stated, “my professor provided me with the material that I needed and I just took that and ran with it.” This statement suggests the need for freshman English composition instructors to more closely monitor the diverse learning needs of their adult students in the classroom and to go beyond merely presenting pedagogical material to students with the expectation that they compose an ideal college-level essay with no additional teaching.

Sherry and Aaron also highlighted difficulty with writing in the persuasive essay genre, but expressed different areas of difficulty. Sherry seemed to have difficulty with

the art of persuading others to see a certain viewpoint and supporting her analysis within the paper.

The persuasive essay was very challenging for me because I am very weak at persuading people to transfer their thinking to a ceretain view point, as well as finding strong evidence of support for my points. Persuasive / argumentative writing skills are a major part of the freshman English course and I felt I was very weak in this area.

Aaron reported his difficulty with the persuasive essay genre, but in terms of meeting the required page length requirement for the paper. Aaron stated, “The writing assignments that I thought were the most challenging were the persuasive essays, which had to be 6-8 pages and this was a lot of work. I usually tried to fill in the paper with nonsense, vague ideas, and shallow statements in an effort to stretch the paper longer.” Aaron’s challenging experience seems similar to Sherry’s experience in the sense that his tendency to pad his paper with “nonsense” and “vague ideas” signals a difficulty with effectively supporting his ideas with evidence. Michael also described his experience with the persuasive essay genre as challenging due to the general content and structural demands of this particular essay assignment combined with his outside job obligations.

To be honest, there was one specific time when I felt unsuccessful as a writer in the freshman English classroom. It was when I really didn’t apply myself to complete a major persuasive essay assignment. I made a bad grade as a result of this failure to apply myself. The writing demands of this particular essay combined with my everyday work schedule made it very hard to keep up with focusing on my writing assignments for class. After receiving this bad grade on

this persuasive essay, it severely affected my self-confidence in the class and it made me feel like I couldn't make it in the class. I asked my teacher if I could re-write the essay and she allowed me to do so. This helped me to get back on track. After this negative experience, I pushed myself to try harder to do better from that point on.

Michael highlights one of the traditional challenges that many adult students encounter when returning to the academic classroom to pursue a higher education, which is meeting the strict academic demands of an assignment while meeting the demands of a daily job obligation. Moreover, it appears that Michael possessed the ability to meet the writing demands of this particular essay genre, but failed to meet them due to lack of applying himself to the assignment due to the demands of his work schedule. As with Jonathan, Michael used this negative experience as inspirational fuel to improve his performance on future assignments.

Success and Comfort Found in the Narrative Essay Genre

Several participants expressed a high level of comfort with writing the personal narrative essay. The personal narrative is a kind of autobiographical essay which entails writing on a significant, personal, and intimate event related to one's life. Participants expressed that they felt comfortable and were much more successful in writing within this particular essay genre because they had the opportunity to express themselves on a more realistic, meaningful level and was able to pour more of their heart and soul into the writing. Laura expressed the success she experienced in writing a narrative essay in her English composition course. She stated,

When I got to the concept of learning how to put my stuff down in details and how to write my stuff into body paragraphs is when my teacher told me to write about an experience that was devastating to me. I wrote about my sister having an aneurism at age 42 and when she told me to write on this topic it was easy because I was writing about myself. I knew how to start it off and how to end it, and that's when I thought *I can do this!* The paper I wrote was good because I made an A on it and it just came to me so easy, how to do it.

Laura discusses how writing on the significant event of her sister's illness enabled her to experience a sense of ease in writing. She was comfortable in the composing process from start to finish, which ultimately gave her a strong sense of self-confidence. The grade of A that Laura received was also reassurance to her that she had done well and experienced success in writing this particular essay. Likewise, Barbara also expressed ease and comfort with writing in the narrative essay genre due to her freedom to use vivid detail and elaborative prose in her writing, which enabled her to tell her story through her own lens.

One assignment I did was a timed-writing and it was about my vacation experience. I used what I learned from my teachers and my peers to go into more specific, vivid, elaborative detail about my vacation experience, rather than just writing vague statements with no explanation. Since I focused on so much detail and elaboration in my writing, I felt this was a pretty strong paper that I wrote. It presented a lot of detail, so this was the best paper I ever wrote.

Barbara was able to explain herself more freely and explicitly in this type of essay and provide thorough detail as the topic was related to a significant, special experience in her

life. Barbara expressed that writing on a topic of this nature enabled the essence of her story to be illuminated. Barbara continued to discuss other narrative writing assignments that she completed during her freshman English composition course that related significantly to her place in society as an African American adult woman. Barbara stated,

Since I am African American, I learned that some of the topics that we wrote about was kind of like bias toward my culture such as African American religious customs, views on the church, hair styles, African American history, great African American leaders, African American struggles, general social issues etc. I could write easily about these topics because I know a lot of things about the culture that I'm from, so it was pretty easy for me to write about that type of stuff. It was a good impact on my grade because it was easier for me to write with more detail on topics of greater personal interest to me.

It appears that Barbara felt extremely comfortable writing on topics that focused on significant aspects of African American culture as these were opportunities for her to write intimately about herself as an African American woman. Moreover, writing on subjects of such a familiar nature enabled her to experience ease and confidence in her writing allowing her true creative essence as an adult African American student writer to be revealed.

Ryan also highlighted the narrative essay as his most successful writing experience in freshman English composition and like Barbara, expressed that he felt comfort and ease in writing this type of essay due to his ability to write on a significant aspect of himself. Ryan stated,

I would say the most successful paper that I wrote in my freshman English course was the *Narrative Essay* because in this essay I had a chance to speak about *me*, which is a topic I knew very well. I knew how to be descriptive, elaborate on ideas, put information where it belonged in the essay, because it was about my life story. So, with that said, when the instructor graded my paper and gave me the feedback on it, it was like she was able to relate to my story herself, because I put very intimate details about my life in to the paper. This felt so good because I let others in the class read my paper as well and everybody said “man, you need to write a book.” This made me feel very happy and very successful as a writer when I was able to write about myself and things that I’ve had to overcome in my life. Also, whenever I can write on a subject that I can relate to, I do much better, because I can understand what I need to write and I know how to get my words down on paper in a way that other people can understand it.

He felt closer to the writing and topic as it was focused on an aspect of his personal life story. The fact that Ryan allowed his peers in the class to read his paper and gain access to the intimate details of his life illustrates the high level of self-confidence that developed in completing this particular essay assignment. When his peers said to him “man, you need to write a book” upon reading his paper, this not only elevated Ryan’s self-confidence and pride as an adult writer, it also enabled him to see where he shines as an adult writer and where his creativity lies as a writer. Ultimately, Ryan’s successful writing experience with the narrative essay genre combined with the praise from his English instructor and peers, he was able to find his true talent as an adult writer, as well as utilize this successful experience as a foundation for future writing endeavours.

Tanya experienced a very unique eye-opening moment with her narrative essay writing experience. She felt comfortable writing her essay on a topic where the focus was on a significant aspect of the self and she felt that she was very successful on the paper due to the creativity that she invested into the paper, but she found later upon receiving her grade that she had much more growing to do as an adult writer, in spite of her feelings of success. Tanya stated,

Well, I remember a specific assignment where we had to write an *informative essay* and I felt I nailed it! I wrote about *myself* and the challenges that a *plus size* woman would have. I really thought I nailed it because I gave specific details and I informed my audience on the challenges we do have, and when I got my grade back I was like – I received a D! I was like wow!, but once again the problem stemmed from the grammar and my instructor felt that I didn't follow the instructions thoroughly. She stated that I hadn't um, give enough detail concerning the topic and I thought that I did. I was like wow! (laugh). So, after this experience, it made me realize that some more work needs to be done because if I followed the directions and when I get my grade back the instructor says I didn't, so I didn't want this to be a repeated cycle. Moving forward from that I was trying to figure out ways how to perform better, because I knew at that time that this assignment wasn't going to be the only paper I was going to write in that class.

Tanya reveals not only her comfort, pride, and feeling of success with writing on a topic related to herself as an African American *plus size* woman, but most importantly her sense of shock as she was issued a grade of D on this assignment. This was a moment of

realization for Tanya in the sense that she realized that she had to undergo more growth and development as an adult writer in an effort to reach the appropriate writing standards of the freshman English composition course. This was an adult *transformative learning* experience for Tanya. She chose to use this negative experience as a kind of negative reinforcement for self-improvement. This eye-opening experience inspired Tanya to take an assertive stance toward her writing education. As Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010) state,

Transformative learning is similar to experiential learning in that the learning is usually triggered by an experience or series of experiences. Whereas experiential learning results in an expansion of knowledge, transformative learning is both epistemological and ontological, often involving a change in world view. (p. 41)

Tanya used this experience not only as fuel to work toward a higher level of writing, learning, and academic development as a whole, but also as a moment of *reflective* awareness of the need to *change* her goals and views of writing in an effort to ultimately reach her goal of becoming the *college-level* writer.

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76)

Tanya's new perspective and conscious decision to closely reflect upon and examine her writing ability aligns well with Mezirow in the sense that she has chosen to take strong

academic *action* in response to her weak writing skills in form of working diligently to begin writing on a college level.

In addition, Michael also expressed that the personal narrative essay was the one specific essay encountered in the freshman English composition course that he felt the most comfortable with because he was able to write freely and focus on special, meaningful aspects of his own life story. Michael states,

My English class was not bad at first, because we started learning how the formal writing process works. Writing the personal narrative essay was the assignment that I felt the most successful on because I was able to be creative and focus on an experience that was meaningful and unique to me. I enjoyed being able to use vivid details, elaborations, and colorful phrases, and dialogue to tell my story.

This made my story come to life and actually recreated the experience for me. I made a very high grade on this essay assignment, because my instructor provided lots of outside assistance to me in an effort to help me do as well as possible. The instructor showed a unique interest in my being successful on this assignment and made sure I had the freedom to write in a way that truly captured my story. This showing of such a strong interest in my success made me feel great as a student.

My instructor was also very happy for me as well.

Michael credits his English composition instructor for providing the necessary nurturing, leadership, and guidance that he needed as a developing adult writer to perform successfully on this essay assignment. This calls attention to freshman English composition instructors of the critical importance of not only acknowledging the diverse range of adult learning needs that dominate their classroom setting, but ultimately the

continued need to provide pedagogical support to students beyond the confines of the classroom setting. Michael receiving the outside class time to work on his essay with his instructor played a unique role in building self-confidence within Michael's spirit as an adult writer. It also illuminated the instructor's true essence as an English instructor and the vital impact that their attitude, teaching approach, and ability to nurture students' diverse learning needs have on students' success on a daily basis.

Growth as an Adult Community College Writer

The desire to grow and develop as an adult college-level writer was also a dominant theme that was highlighted across participant interviews. Participants tended to express a call for English composition instructors to enhance the learning and writing ability of the adult writing student by focusing on two specific areas including (a) intense study of the academic writing process, and (b) awareness of diverse college writing readiness levels. Participants highlighted these two categories as they told their stories and expressed that these two areas were severely lacking during their freshman English composition course experience.

Intense Study of the Academic Writing Process

A call for a stronger focus on learning the detailed steps of the writing process and becoming familiar with the traditional essay structure was an important feature that was revealed in various participant interviews. Laura, a student who came from a writing background which focused strongly on the grammatical aspect of writing, noted that she lacked in-depth knowledge of the general writing process, as well as the steps of how to structure an academic essay successfully and would like to see freshman English composition courses present a stronger focus on this aspect of writing education.

I would like to see the teacher spending more time explaining more writing development in class, instead of the grammar aspects. Grammar is easy, you can always go and learn the concept of verbs, adjectives, and nouns, but I think it's hard on the people my age. Also, the students that are coming out of high school now focus more on writing papers and arguments. I think English instructors need to focus more on writing essays and the actual composition of writing and English, instead of verbs, adjectives, nouns and other grammatical aspects. We learned this in high school and I know the kids these days are still learning this in high school, but they are not learning how to write an essay. When they get in high school they just sit up looking like a bump on a log. So, writing skills is what I feel they should focus more on.

Laura indicates her desire to see college English instructors focus more heavily on the writing process rather than the grammatical portion of the curriculum. Laura's perspective also highlights the fact that strong argumentative and persuasive writing skills are needed not only within the academic setting, but also beyond the classroom as well. Jonathan expressed a similar view on implementing a stronger instructional focus on the basic elements of academic essay construction in the freshman English composition classroom.

I think that the beginning stages of English composition classes should focus more on just helping students understand what an ideal paper should look like based on the kind of essay as far as structure, creating a thesis, topic sentences, introductions and conclusions, also make students aware of the writing center if the college has one and letting them know that they can go to the writing center

for help. Just give students a heads up and help them to develop the proper guidelines of how to properly write a paper before they start writing.

Jonathan related not only his desire for a stronger focus on academic essay construction in the classroom, but also a need to make students aware of the campus writing center in an effort to receive additional needed assistance on their writing. Jonathan's view also highlights the need to create a general awareness of the campus resources that specialize and fosters student success. Barbara stated in her interview that her initial expectation upon entering the freshman English composition course was to learn how to utilize detail in her writing, as well as learning the foundational aspects of composing an academic essay.

My expectations were to learn a little bit more about how to write and explain myself better, because usually when I write I don't go into as much detail as I need to. I would just write just to get the grade, but I expected to learn a lot about the writing process as a whole and I did. I learned a very detailed amount about the college level writing process and what I needed to do to become a better writer.

Barbara gained the confidence to continue on her journey of developing into a successful college level adult writer, as well as awareness in regard to what it takes to maintain her writing on a college level. Jessica expressed a similar desire to become more knowledgeable of the general academic writing process in an effort to compose stronger college-level essays, and she also expressed a desire to write with much more detail just as Barbara.

Overall, I just hope to become a better writer and move away from writing in the way that I speak because I know this is bad writing form. I would also like to improve on the core elements of writing style such as thesis statement development, grammar, sentence structure etc. I would also like to learn how to elaborate better and more in-depth on my ideas. I want to become a better writer not just for college purposes, but for professional purposes as well. I know becoming a strong writer is a process and I really am working on it.

Similar to Barbara, Jessica expressed a strong desire to learn the core components of effective essay construction and proper academic writing style, but is also committed to eliminating her tendency to transfer everyday conversational speech into her academic writing. Jessica is also committed to improving her writing ability not only for academic classroom purposes, but for professional purposes as well. Overall, Jessica's goal is to develop her talents as an adult writer on multifaceted levels that will extend beyond the conventional realms of the academic English classroom.

Awareness of Diverse College Writing Readiness Levels

The need for freshman English composition instructors to recognize the diverse ranges of college writing readiness in the classroom was also revealed as a sub-theme across the interviews of selected participants. Participants described how crucial it is for instructors to acknowledge the multifaceted levels of writing abilities in their classes, especially considering the diverse ranges of ages that frequently characterize the community college classroom in this modern day of higher education. Laura stated,

I think the approach of the teacher that's teaching English should be different, because you are going to have people that's a different age, a different

background, and a different culture in your class. I think they should focus on trying to help *everybody* and not just giving up on the ones that they feel will not use academic writing skills that much saying : “*Oh they’re not going to use that that much, they’re older*” You don’t know that!, and I think the teacher should just focus on everybody, not just the young kids. They have to look at the fact that maybe when we were going to school in our younger days that we didn’t have formal English growing up, and now we are trying to make ourselves better to get this kind of English so that we can help our kids, and our grandkids with their English and their experience in going to college.

Laura passionately describes her frustration with instructors that seem to discriminate against the older adult learners in an English classroom taking for granted that they will not utilize a formal academic writing education as the younger, more traditional student population would. She feels that instructors must prioritize *all* students in the English composition classroom regardless of age, or college major and take into consideration that the older adult learners in their classroom possess equal, or possibly even greater academic aspirations than the younger traditional student groups.

Likewise, Ryan also suggested a need for English instructors to recognize the wide range of writing abilities and general academic needs in their classroom. Ryan stated,

At the beginning of the semester instructors have their plan, or course syllabus already made out and they want students to follow it without knowing the background of the students. Many students are coming in from high school very behind, also many students are coming into college that have been out of school

for 10 or 15 years, yet instructors already have a syllabus of what they want students to follow throughout the semester. Instructors need to get a good *feel* for the students in their classroom to see what students' abilities are. For example, the first essay for the semester may be 3 or 5 pages and certain students may have trouble writing it.

Ryan clearly calls on instructors to acknowledge the fact that writing abilities and backgrounds are often as diverse as the student body within a classroom. Instructors must take special care to closely understand this diversity in an effort to address the range of learning needs that have come before them. Michael mirrors Ryan's views in regard to English instructors' need to acknowledge diverse writing readiness levels as well as general academic skills. He stated,

The support that I would like to see implemented for African Americans is for the instructor to make sure that all students are on the same page. Some adult African American students, especially the older ones have trouble keeping up with the concepts discussed in class, the instructions for the writing assignments, and just the general curriculum guidelines for the freshman English course. This is especially true for the older students who have been out of the classroom for an extended period of time.

Tanya shared her frustration about how many English instructors often assume that all of their students in class are on the same advanced writing level and begin their courses with *advanced* writing techniques and advanced assignments in the English composition course, rather than beginning the course with a review of the basic elements of the writing process. She stated,

I feel that there should either be another class, or spend the first part of the semester, or a couple of weeks on refreshing the students on the skill of how to write a paper. Teaching them how to progress through the basics of the writing process. Also, show us how to become a more successful writer, rather than just having us jump right into writing advanced papers. A lot of students test out of the developmental English courses and I feel that you shouldn't be held back, because I know that everyone is on a time schedule, but I think at the end of the day I think instructors should keep in mind that everyone is not on the same level. Instructors should not just rush into critical analysis, audience analysis, writing about narrative voice and things of this nature. I feel that refreshing on these areas of advanced writing techniques is especially important for students like me who has recently came back into the higher educational system and have been absent from the formal classroom since 1997.

Similarly to Ryan, Tanya feels that English instructors must take special care to recognize that students in the English composition classroom often come from a variety of backgrounds and may not possess the advanced writing skills needed to successfully complete certain assignments in the course. An interesting point made here in Tanya's response is the fact that many students often test out of the developmental English course sequence where these basic English writing skills that Tanya speaks of would have been reviewed. For example, Tanya specifically highlights her weakness in grammar usage and how she struggled with this particular skill in during her English composition course. She feels that instructors must take into consideration that many students are weak in not only this particular basic skill area of writing, but many others as well that are necessary

as foundational knowledge when composing a well-written college-level essay. Kimberly mirrors Tanya's view of the need for English composition instructors to resist categorizing *all* students within the same level of writing ability. Kimberly stated, "Try not to you know, classify, even if there is certain entrance exams try not to, you know, just classify all students into one category based on that particular exam, because different students have different needs." Kimberly highlights the very critical phenomenon that dominates higher education, which is students frequently being misplaced by standardized testing into a college-level course before they have thoroughly acquired the proper college-level skills to succeed in that course. She highlights how adult students' learning needs often vary and are often misrepresented by a particular score on a standardized placement exam. Another critical point that Tanya highlights in her story is the how instructors must be watchful of assigning multiple assignments and activities at one time, and not allowing students to focus their attention on a given assignment or activity. As she stated, "I felt we were all over the place in this course. She expected us to complete the lab activities, the regular book assignments, as well as focus on writing essays in proper essay structure. It was too much! It was too complex!" The underlying message that Tanya has conveyed in her expression of frustration is that this lack of focus in a course can not only result in a high level of student frustration and declining academic performance, but can ultimately result in a phenomenon of *assignment overwhelm*, which can in turn negatively impact student retention.

The Role of Race in the English Composition Classroom

The subject of race was also a major theme that emerged across several participant interviews. Interestingly many participants felt that their African American

heritage played a very minimal role in their ultimate success or failure as an adult writer in the freshman English composition classroom. These students felt that their ultimate success or failure as developing adult writers depended highly upon their own *initiative*, *drive*, and *determination* to *want* to succeed as adult students and refused to believe that their skin color was influential to their success. Two participants, however, expressed very inspirational stories where African American ethnicity played a very significant role in writing success, while two participants expressed very significant stories regarding incidents of racial discrimination and feelings of suppression that they experienced at the hand of their English instructor in the classroom. These students utilized their negative classroom experience as fuel to overcome prejudice and work more intensely toward their goal of becoming a competent college-level writer.

Race as a Minimal Element in Writing Success

Laura insisted that her cultural heritage as an adult African American woman played no factor in her success as a developing college-level writer. She feels that it is ultimately the self, which determines success, rather than *skin color*. Laura stated,

I don't think I had any cultural factors that impacted my writing abilities. The only thing I think could impact my writing abilities in school was *me*, if I didn't apply myself, and just gave up. So, I don't think nothing to do with my ethnicity as an African American had anything to do with my success. I have to look at the situation as *myself*, being responsible for my success. If I failed on an assignment, it's because I wanted to fail. I wasn't trying.

Laura feels that her goal to become a strong college-level writer highly depends upon *herself*, rather than her ethnicity as an African American woman. She believes that if she

is ultimately unsuccessful at completing a particular assignment, or an entire course, she has herself to blame for not being responsible enough and putting forth the proper level of initiative as an adult student. Moreover, Laura continued to say,

I want to say that being an African American female and being a minority, the way I went to school and was brought up that it was a challenge getting through English classes and a challenge throughout a lot of courses, but English has been the hardest one. I want to say that its up to *you* if you want to make something out of your English writing skills, and if you want to fail it's up to *you*. So, the only way that us African Americans are going to make it in school is if we put it in our *mind* and in our *heart* that we can do it.

Laura provides a glimpse into her past struggles as a minority English student during her early years. Although English has always been her most challenging academic subject from her early teenage years, she continues to work toward being successful in the subject. Laura is strongly committed to the philosophy that the path to success is through hard work and determination, and is attainable only if the *individual* is willing and determined to achieve the desired level of success.

Mirroring Laura's view on cultural heritage not being a major element in his success as a developing college-level writer was Jonathan who stated, "I don't think there were really any cultural factors that may have affected my success as a writer," and Shannon who stated, "I don't think I had any cultural or ethnic factors that impacted my success. Just a lack of writing background in terms of academic writing impacted my success in the freshman English course." Shannon identifies a weak writing background as the cause of her lack of success as an adult writer, rather than her ethnicity. Similarly,

Jessica did not see her African American ethnicity as a factor in her success or failure as a developing college writer. Jessica stated, “I don’t think my African American culture had anything to do with any of the challenges I experienced in freshman English composition. I had not had any experiences of racial discrimination or cultural challenge of any sort.” Moreover, Michael expressed that the strong level of support of his English instructor was the factor that played a major role in his success as an adult writer, rather than his ethnicity as an African American man. Michael stated, “There was actually no cultural or ethnic factors that I can think of that impacted my success as a writing student. I was able to complete all of my writing assignments with the support of my English instructor and my race never seemed to be a barrier to that support.” Here, we see another example of credit given to the support of the English instructor for creating a successful adult writing experience in the classroom and ethnicity as a non factor in student success.

Race as a Significant Element in Writing Success

Two participants related very inspirational stories that revealed African American heritage as playing a vital role in academic success in the freshman English composition classroom. Kimberly presents a very powerful story in which she credits not only her own African American heritage for her continued drive for academic success, but also her mother. Kimberly stated,

I would say the fact that I am a young African American student in college, that’s one of the things that keeps me so driven to succeed at all that I do, and being that English is one of my stronger subjects, that’s another reason to keep me wanting to push and succeed, um, in English, um, I want to say having a mother who

didn't go to school and actually graduate, well, who didn't go to college, or actually graduate high school, that's one of the things that further pushed me more to you know, come to class, and do what I had to do to make sure that I was getting the grade that I needed to get.

Kimberly reveals not only her cultural knowledge of the academic challenges that many young African Americans face and the need to maintain a positive, dedicated attitude in an effort to overcome these obstacles and challenges, but also her mother's lack of a high school and college education and how this has greatly inspired her to succeed in her college education at all costs. She used her mother's lack of educational success as *negative reinforcement* to continue transcending to a higher level of educational success.

Aaron expressed a very interesting story in which he described having an African American English instructor as being a motivating factor in journey to becoming a successful college-level writer. Aaron stated,

I think having an African American English instructor positively impacted my success as a college writer. My instructor was very dedicated to guiding me through the writing assignments. The instructor felt like she could relate to me very well with certain topics because I was African American which gave me a high level of self-confidence. It was easy for me to relate to a teacher who not only shared my heritage, but was also able to understand the academic writing struggles that I was going through as an adult African American man.

Aaron highlights a unique *intellectual bonding* between he and his instructor in the sense that there was a mutual comfort with discussing certain topics that were related to the African American culture, as well as a mutual understanding of the given topic at hand.

Aaron experienced an elevation in self-esteem through this experience in the sense that he was able to cohesively interact and engage with his instructor on a very personal level due to their shared African American heritage. Aaron and his instructor appear to be in *intellectual communion* with each other.

Feelings of Racial Discrimination in the English Classroom

Feelings of being racially discriminated against in the freshman English composition classroom was also a noteworthy theme that emerged within two participants' stories. Sherry described a very explicit discriminatory experience that she endured as a student in her English class at the hands of her instructor. She felt very strongly that her instructor was minimizing her ability to succeed as a college-level writer due solely to her African American heritage. Sherry states,

I have felt that my African American cultural heritage as a writer was challenged by my English instructor because she doubted us. She doubted our ability to be strong writers. She automatically assumed that African Americans had bad grammar and generally poor writing skills. She kept emphasizing this point throughout the semester and I felt upset about this blatant racist attitude that the instructor was taking toward us as African American students. She built a wall between the black and white students in class. I felt like she alienated us from other students and it made us as black students feel like we had to specifically show her that we could write just as good as anybody else. This impacted my overall learning experience because I knew I had to do it and I had to prove to my teacher that I could write just as good as any of the other white students in the class.

Sherry is sharing how she was made to feel *less than* as a student due to her African American ethnicity. Her instructor instantly labeled her, as well as other African American students in the class as incompetent writers and incapable of writing a strong, well-written college-level paper as a result of their African American ethnicity.

Laura experienced a similar situation in which she felt that her white English instructor prioritized the other younger white students' writing education, whereas she and other older adult African American students were strongly alienated. Laura stated,

I remember the first time in English when I first started. I had a White teacher, and it was only about 2 or 3 Blacks in the class. Most of the students were White. The instructor was helping the White kids more than she helped us three Black students I guess because we were older people from an older generation in class and she felt like we were not gonna get it anyway, and she was more focused on the younger kids like *they were going to last the longest*. She thought us three Black older students were just gonna quit. The other Blacks in the class was probably in their 30's and 40's because they were older ladies. It's like this instructor didn't care if we made it or not and she made us feel like we couldn't do it. I thought she just wanted us to give up and that made me challenge myself to write better English the way she was teaching us and the way she acted toward us three older ladies in class. So, that just made me want to stick with it more.

Like Sherry, Laura also felt otherized in the classroom due to not only her African American ethnicity, but also her age. It appeared that Laura's instructor assumed that Laura and the other African American adult students in the English course would not utilize a formal English education as much as the younger traditional White students in

the class would. Like Kimberly, Laura utilized her oppressive classroom situation as *negative reinforcement* to work more aggressively toward her goal of becoming a college-level writer. Although her instructor negatively impacted her morale, as well as the other African American adult students in the class, Laura took this opportunity to overcome the attitude of her instructor and embrace the strong academic ability that she knew was deep within her spirit.

Levels of Support in the Freshman English Composition Classroom

Views and perspectives on enhancing student support systems in the freshman English composition classroom, as well as English departments as a whole was the strongest theme that emerged across participant interviews. All twelve participants in the study presented very strong, detailed views regarding strategies that would not only enhance the learning and writing success of adult English composition students, but enhance the morale and retention of the adult learner as well. The two primary categories that emerged across interviews were (a) desire for stronger levels of English instructor support, and (b) students who experienced strong levels of English instructor support

Desire for Stronger Levels of English Instructor Support

Shannon expressed a sincere desire to see English instructors exhibit a greater level of patience when working with students in their quest to become strong college-level writers. Shannon stated, “I would like to see instructors be more patient with his or her class and guide them more throughout the semester, rather than just throwing information out to the students and expecting them to succeed on their own.” Here, Shannon not only illuminates the need for English instructors to take more time with students and exhibit more of a nurturing approach in guiding them through the journey of

the writing process, but also how many instructors expect students to *self-teach*, which she felt caused a great deal of frustration to students. Tanya also highlighted the amount of *self-teaching* that many English instructors expect students to engage in. She expressed in her interview how a stronger level of teaching support and guidance should be practiced in English classrooms, because adult students should not feel the pressure to teach and guide themselves through the journey of becoming a college-level writer.

Tanya stated,

When it came to writing the papers, and also like I said the grammar aspect of writing, my first time taking English 1301, my instructor delt with a little bit of grammar and she explained just a little bit and just expected us just to go on. For me, this was a slow process because I couldn't remember a whole lot. Also, a lot of the study materials that was given wasn't enough. I basically had to like google or find some type of resource on my own to try to make sure that I had the proper tools that I needed to make sure my grammar and everything was correct in the paper, and how I constructed the paper. But Wow! (laugh) the writng assignments was crazy! I don't think enough material was given for us to be capable enough to handle the writng assignments on our own.

Tanya related how she was forced to conduct research on her own in an effort to locate pedagogical materials that would assist her in learning the rules of grammar, as well as how to structure her paper in the proper format. She suggests how instructors need to be mindful of issuing students an adequate amount of assignment study materials and detailed assignment instructions so that students will avoid situations of feeling underprepared to complete assignments given to them. Tanya also stated,

I feel that the instructors feel that you should already be a capable writer and be able to handle the assignments, because you are in college-level freshman English composition. They feel that you should be skilled enough to handle the class, but there are things that they need to brush up on and I feel like a lot of instructors don't provide this brush up time because they feel that students should already know the content. Also, maybe they don't have the patience or the time to go back and critique and coach you in certain areas of writing, but I feel that you need that support from your instructor, because if you don't have that support it makes you fall back if you're not able to seek outside help. So, once you are given that level of support, it makes you hunger for more success and I just feel like a lot of support wasn't given during my freshman English composition course experience. I think if I would have had more support I think I would have made a better grade in that class, and I ended up making a D in that class. So, I had to take the class over because I could not transfer to a university with a D on my transcript. So, overall, I feel I did not receive a lot of support in this class.

Tanya highlights how a lack of adequate instructor support and an instructor's assumption that all of the students in their class are already competent enough to perform on a college-level can be very damaging to not only a student's sense of self-confidence, but can also cause students to regress in the course as a whole. Tanya expressed concern regarding the complexity of topics presented in some English composition textbooks, as well as the little time that instructors spend utilizing the course textbook throughout the semester. Tanya stated,

I would like to give an opinion concerning the textbooks. I feel that more information should be added to the textbooks. The information should not be so complex that students cannot understand the material. Also, the instructors need to use the textbook more frequently that students are required to buy. For example, with the instructor I have now we basically just use the reader that is required, but we have another book that is not used. If you are not going to use a certain book for a class it should not be required. This is a major issue for me. Also, books are a *financial* investment and if I'm required to purchase a book that will not be used this is a financial loss to me. I am throwing money away that could have been used for something else.

Tanya highlights the needed awareness of instructors that fail to utilize required course textbooks to facilitate learning, as well as the financial responsibility that is placed upon students to purchase selected textbooks in an effort to facilitate course success. For many students, finances are a challenge to pursuing a higher education and funds that are spent toward textbooks that will not be used for a particular course are ultimately a financial waste to the student, and can in turn negatively impact retention.

Tanya presents an interesting and innovative concept regarding the integration of *specialized instructors* into the tutoring and writing centers on college campuses. These specialized instructors would be an upgrade from traditional student tutors in the sense that they are degreed professional instructors or faculty and can offer a much more specialized, indepth level of knowledge in a given subject area. Tanya stated,

Peer tutoring should not be the only option that they have. I think that at some point that there needs to be a *specialized instructor* there in the tutoring center that

is helping the students. I understand that some students feel that they are very confident and strong in a certain area, but sometimes you need a professional instructor to guide you through the areas that you feel you are extremely weak in. Also, sometimes instructors in the regular classroom setting may not have time to reiterate certain topics because of the time schedule on the syllabus, or the class time runs out. I think a specialized instructor should be a part of the tutoring staff so that students can schedule a certain time beyond normal class hours to speak with them concerning the areas that you feel you are not strong in.

Tanya suggests that such a specialized instructor in an academic area can provide a higher level of pedagogy, as well as constructive one-on-one time beyond regular class hours to work with students on academic issues they may be struggling with. A specialized, experienced instructor would also bring a more thorough range of experience in working with students possessing diverse levels of learning challenges in a given subject area.

Echoing Shannon and Tanya's views on students being expected to teach themselves in the English classroom, Aaron also expressed his frustration with English instructors not providing the needed amount of pedagogical support to students faced with complex assignments in the English classroom.

In some cases, I feel like some instructors don't try to help their students. Most of the time they will just give you a book, tell you to read it, and write about it on a specific topic. For some students this is very difficult, because coming out of high school or if you have been out of the formal academic setting for an extended period of time, you need a dedicated level of hands-on attention and

teaching. I feel if instructors would help students hands-on they would perform much better in class.

Aaron not only highlights the problem of many English instructors expecting students who are underprepared teach themselves, but also the value of providing focused one-on-one time with students coming in from high school with a weak writing background, as well as older nontraditional students who have been absent from the formal academic classroom setting. Aaron strongly feels that this type of focused, intimate pedagogical attention, especially within a classroom comprised of students possessing such a diverse range of writing backgrounds and abilities would greatly enhance the writing performance of students.

Jonathan also suggested very innovative, yet practical views on how to enhance student writing support within English departments. Jonathan states,

I think if teachers would set up one-on-one appointments with students at a certain time before classes start or within the first week, one in the middle of the semester, and one closer to the end. Also, if instructors would increase the number of peer reviews done throughout the semester I think this would help students become stronger writers.

Jonathan is expressing a desire to see English instructors initiate more one-on-one time with students outside of the conventional classroom setting. He would also like for instructors to increase practice in peer reviewing, which would assist students in gaining an intimate level of insight into their writing through having others critique their writing, and provide additional knowledge for writing growth and development. Jonathan would also like to see all freshman English composition instructors integrate a major research

paper into their courses in an effort to provide students a strong foundation and experience in the basic guidelines of college-level research. He stated,

In my English course, we had something called a seminar paper. I believe that most professors should probably try implementing this into their course curriculum. This paper helps students learn how to do *research papers*, and this is a skill that all students in college will need to learn eventually, just the ability to conduct a basic level of research. At the end of the semester, the instructor could have the student present their paper with a powerpoint in front of their peers and I think this way it will actually help with public speaking skills.

Jonathan not only advocates for the inclusion of a major research essay to provide students experience with the research process, but also offers pedagogical advice to the instructor on how to effectively integrate both a visual, as well as an oral component to the assignment. This approach surpasses the conventional practice of students merely composing a paper and turning it in for a grade; rather students are given the opportunity to share their work with the class and receive constructive feedback from the instructor, as well as peers.

Sherry echoes Jonathan in her view that English instructors need to provide more one-on-one time for students to grow and develop as writers, but she also feels passionately that instructors should effectively teach the difference between high school and college-level writing, considering the broad range of writing backgrounds that students commonly enter into the freshman course with. Sherry stated,

The future changes that I would like to see in the English department that I would like to see is for more instructors to help students more with their writing issues

on a one-on-one basis and also help students distinguish the difference between writing on a high school level and a college level. Many high school teachers do not teach you how to write on a college level or prepare you for the rigorous types of essays that you will have to write upon entrance into college. Students often get confused on high school versus college level standards of writing. Often you hear students say “in high school I wrote this way” or “in high school my teacher allowed this or that.” For example, when I first entered college freshman English last semester, I did not know that I had to use Times New Roman and 12-size font in writing my papers, which is part of MLA format. Also, I did not know that the standard length of a college-level freshman English was 4-5 pages, whereas in high school, 3 pages was the minimum length that I had to present for all of my papers. This difference in writing standards between high school and college is one thing that needs to be emphasized to students heavily upon entering the freshman English course in an effort to prepare students for the writing demands of the course.

Sherry provided very explicit details of the pedagogical approaches that she would like to see implemented into English classes. Sherry and Barbara presented identical perspectives as they expressed the need for an increase of student mentoring groups within English departments to assist adult students in their journey to becoming a college level writer. Sherry stated, “I would like to see a more aggressive mentoring program or peer groups implemented into English departments to broaden the writing support level for adult African American students.” Similarly, Barbara stated, “Currently, I don’t see a lot of clubs to help people. I know we have the tutoring center and the writing center, but

it would be helpful if we had some peer mentoring groups to collaboratively work on our weaknesses and our strengths together.” Both Sherry and Barbara feel that the development of mentoring groups for adult English composition students would greatly enhance writing development as well as develop a strong community of students with a strong initiative to grow as adult college-level writers. In addition, Barbara would also like to see English instructors provide general verbal support to adult students in the form of positive, encouraging words to assist in building up the morale of the adult learner. When asked what additional student support she would like to see implemented into English departments, Barbara stated,

More attention I guess for anybody that is having trouble with writing, but more attention to that student who needs that extra boost of encouragement. For example, like my professor provided encouraging words for me saying “hey, you can do this, I believe in you.” Not everybody has someone to believe in them. For some students, the instructor is the only sense of support system available to encourage and provide that high level of support.

As Barbara states in her response, for many students the only positive words of encouragement for some students comes from the school or work setting. Many lack a strong *verbal* support system within their home setting, so providing words of encouragement and a positive attitude can be the inspirational fuel moves a student forward toward a higher level of academic success.

Jessica also presented very interesting perspectives on how to enhance the writing development of adult English students including an increase of one-on-one tutoring time with the instructor to work on writing issues, as well as how freshman English

composition instructors can begin to extend a higher level of pedagogical writing support to students experiencing special challenges with writing in the classroom. Jessica stated,

Well, I would like to see more one-on-one time implemented into freshman English courses for students like myself who have struggles and challenges with writing academic essays. Also, eliminate such a high level of lecture in the English classes. Many students are very hands-on and visual learners and learn more effectively from a hands-on visual approach, rather than constant lecture. Personally, an instructor could lecture and explain something to me a hundred times and I won't understand what they are talking about, but if I visualize it I will internalize the lesson material much better.

In addition to English instructors implementing more one-on-one time with students to improve on their writing, Jessica also would like to see a decrease of *lecturing* in the classroom. Jessica calls awareness to how many students, especially in a course such as freshman English composition, which is frequently comprised of students with such a vast range of writing and learning backgrounds experience their highest level of learning through a *visually enhanced classroom*, as well as a *hands-on* focused classroom rather than conventional lecture.

Jessica also shared her perspective regarding preparatory methods at the developmental English level. Jessica would like to see developmental English courses utilize a textbook that will better prepare students for their transition in the college-level freshman English composition.

I would like to see a stronger developmental writing course textbook implemented that contained a heavier focus on grammar competency, thesis statement

development, and general academic essay structure. I would like to see the developmental English courses as a whole use a textbook that better prepared students for successful writing performance in freshman English composition. There should be a textbook used that focuses on more of a *college level* writing education, rather than such a basic, low level of writing. I feel like the developmental English instructors should teach more like the instructors do in credit-level freshman English composition. This will make students' transitions into freshman English much smoother.

Jessica not only advocates for a revisitation of developmental English content with the aim of better mirroring the freshman English composition curriculum, she also calls for developmental English instructors to modify their teaching approach to better mirror that of college-level freshman English composition instructors. Jessica also discussed how she would like to see a specialized course implemented into English departments that would act as a *preparatory bridge course* between developmental English and college-level freshman English composition. Jessica stated,

I think it would be useful for English departments to have a “specialty” class available for students to take right after their general developmental education course to prepare them for certain aspects of freshman credit-level English. For example, a course that specialized in thesis statement development, the longer more in-depth persuasive / argumentative essay, MLA documentation etc. many of the essays required in developmental English courses are very short, traditional two or three pages, whereas, in the freshman English composition courses the essay requirement is from five to seven pages. English departments should have a

class that's preparing students to meet this more extended page quota for essays so that students won't experience "page length shock" when they enter into college-level freshman English composition.

Jessica provides a very detailed description of the specific content that this special bridge course would be comprised of. She would also like to see instructors provide more one-on-one time to students that need additional assistance outside of regular class instruction, as well as more prompt e-mail responses to student questions and concerns. Jessica stated,

I would say more one-on-one attention and more private tutoring on specific writing issues. Also, I feel that instructors should have a faster response time to students' e-mails. Sometimes students rely on e-mail communication to get their questions and concerns addressed in an effort to perform as well as possible on their papers. Some students cannot stay after class or come to one-on-one tutoring sessions due to family or work obligations.

Jessica highlights here the importance of responding promptly to student e-mails as this can make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful learning experience. She also highlights the complex lifestyle of combined job and domestic obligations that commonly characterizes the life of the adult college student, and frequently results in a challenging educational journey.

Ryan emphasized the importance of an increased level of support from campus writing centers that he would like to see implemented. Ryan passionately feels that there is an integral need to increase the availability of hours at campus writing centers in an

effort to support students needing writing support beyond the English composition classroom. Ryan stated,

I would say that sometimes in colleges they have the money to make more hours available at the writing centers and we as students need that lab to be open more hours. There are a lot of times when the semester will start and the writing center will start two months later. This money should be invested in us as the students, because if they invest educational resources in us they will get it back in the form of professional, well educated adults. For some reason, some colleges don't look at it like that and to me this is a major problem. Also, English departments and colleges as a whole should prioritize making the students feel comfortable, If students feel comfortable, nine times out of ten we are gonna strive to do our best to make sure that we get our work done. Many instructors come into the classroom very frustrated and don't want students to ask questions, but you are a teacher and this is something that you should expect as a teacher. Answering questions is in your job description. If someone doesn't understand they should do all they can to make the student understand, rather than make the student feel like they're dumb, because if you make the students feel dumb they will drop the class and will feel too embarrassed to go back to an English course – not only an English course, but whatever kind of course that they need help in. If most English instructors just take time and acknowledge “these are students that just came back to school after 20 years” or “these students are fresh right out of high school.” If you approach these students the wrong way and these students truly

deep down have a strong desire to learn, backing them in a corner and making them feel useless as students will prevent them from learning.

Ryan presents thought-provoking and critical points here that not only call for changes in how writing centers are operated and the quality of service that is offered to students, but also illuminate how writing centers should be prioritized as a *student centered nucleus* of not only the English department, but the campus community of adult writers as a whole. Ryan feels that the delayed opening of campus writing centers can be detrimental to students' learning and success in a course as this is time that students may be forced to complete complex, challenging writing assignments with no assistance when assistance may be greatly needed. This can ultimately negatively impact student retention, as well as the morale of adult students. In regard to morale, Ryan makes a very insightful, compelling point here on how students will present a higher quality of academic *output* when the college invests a high quality of academic *input* toward their academic growth and development, which also includes investing college finances toward resources that foster student success. Ryan also calls on the awareness of English instructors to present more of an open mind to students who are struggling with comprehension issues in class and to create more of an inviting atmosphere for students who have various questions regarding the lesson content, or a specific assignment. A fear of failure can cause adult students to fall through the cracks of their educational journey, ultimately becoming a college drop-out statistic. This is especially true for adult students who have experienced extended absences from the formal academic classroom setting, as well as traditional younger students entering college from a weak high school English background.

Students who Experienced Strong Levels of Instructor Support

Several participants described very positive experiences with their English composition instructors and felt that the level of writing support that they received as adult students greatly enhanced their progress toward becoming college-level writers.

Jonathan states,

In our class, I believe that the teacher approached everybody in the same way, everybody was treated the same and we all had a chance to go speak to the professor during her office hours and sometimes after class. The instructor always allowed an hour and a half after class for discussion with students one-on-one and she would always encourage us to use her office hours.

Jonathan relates here how his instructor worked to establish a classroom atmosphere of *equality* in an effort to insure that all students received an equal opportunity to learn, grow, and progress in the journey to becoming a college level writer. His instructor also made time available to students outside of the classroom to assist students needing an extended level of academic assistance. This illustrates his instructor's high level of dedication to student success. Jonathan also stated, "Before we even started writing, my professor would give us guidelines detailing how to write a good paper as far as setting up the paper structure wise. I thought that was a good thing!" Sherry discussed a high level of instructor support as well and felt that her quality of writing had definitely improved by the time she reached the end of her freshman English composition course. Sherry stated,

My English instructor helped us. The support she gave throughout the semester was a lot of peer-editing opportunities which allowed us to get useful feedback

from both our peers, as well as the instructor. She also emphasized to us to avoid procrastination when working on essays. Do not wait until the last minute to start on your topic because this will severely limit the quality of the writing. She encouraged us to complete our essays about a week ahead of time so that we will have time to review it and edit as necessary. Overall, I felt my writing had improved by the end of the semester of freshman English.

Sherry describes not only how her instructor utilized peer review activities, but also how her instructor worked to instill a high level of *academic responsibility* within the class of students as a whole in regard to allowing themselves adequate time to complete essay assignments on a quality level.

Barbara described a high level of instructor support as well in the sense that her instructor provided her a combination of both pedagogical, as well as verbal encouragement, which greatly enhanced Barbara's morale as a developing adult college writer. Barbara stated,

My instructor supported me a lot. She paid more attention to me because of how weak my writing was. She encouraged me by saying "I believe you can do this." Just because you're African American doesn't mean that you can't do what you want to do as a writer. Her teaching impacted me a lot as an African American student because she actually cared about me and all of the other students' writing success. Overall, she was a pretty good instructor.

Barbara highlights how her instructor clearly eliminated any feelings of racial inferiority that Barbara may have been feeling in regard to her ability to succeed as an adult college writer. The instructor instilled the attitude in Barbara that her ethnicity was not a

roadblock to her success and that her abilities as a writer were limitless. Barbara could also sense the genuine level of care and concern within her instructor, which also positively impacted her morale as a developing adult college writer. Aaron had a similar experience with his freshman English composition instructor in the sense that his instructor utilized both pedagogical skill, as well as verbal encouragement to facilitate the learning environment in the classroom. Aaron stated,

I feel that my instructor really supported me a lot. She helped me with the writing process. When I first came to college, I knew a lot about writing, but I wasn't on the level I was supposed to be on when I got there. So, the instructor helped me a lot and by me being an African American student, I think she helped me a little bit more than some of the students that wasn't African American. She was African American also and I think she expected better out of me on some level and had a genuine desire for me to succeed. She taught with a very positive approach like "anything you put your mind to you can do it." If we had a writing assignment to complete she used various quotes that I can't remember specifically at this time, but she really motivated me to perform on a high level of writing on all of my papers, improve my writing technique, and to better myself academically in general as a college student.

Aaron described how his instructor took a special interest in him not only as a student, but as an *African American* student in the sense of enhancing her teaching efforts to assist him in becoming a strong college-level writer. Aaron could also sense his instructor's authentic level of concern for his education and success as an adult student, as well as her love of teaching. Aaron could also sense that his instructor had high academic

expectations of him as a student, which ultimately provided him the internal inspiration and drive to continue progressing toward success as an adult writing student.

Jessica expressed very high praise toward her English instructor's level of support as well. She experienced a thorough and highly focused support system, specifically in the area of revising and editing techniques, which taught her to review her writing much more critically.

My first English composition teacher was supportive. My freshman English instructor provided us out of class time to work on our writing issues such as grammar, thesis statement development, essay structure etc. We would write a first draft of our paper, then she would go through it with us one-on-one discussing with us what edits and revisions we needed to make before we turned in the final draft. I think this was a very good level of support for her to give us in this course. She critiqued our papers thoroughly, returned it to us, and allowed us to clean up our writing so we could learn from our mistakes and make a higher grade on the essay.

Jessica was very pleased not only with the dedicated amount of outside class time that her instructor spent with her in working on her writing, but also the intense experience she gained with learning how to edit her essays adequately prior to submitting final drafts. This education in revising and editing enabled her to internalize the writing process on a more intimate level, as well as gain insight from the constructive criticism of her instructor. Ryan discussed how his instructor was very supportive with his lack of reading skills during his freshman English composition course. He described how frustrated he would become with selected texts that were assigned in the course due to the

complexity of word choice and phrases contained in the text, his difficulty with word pronunciation, as well as his challenge in comprehending the text as a whole. Due to his lack of reading skills, Ryan also experienced challenges with writing his essay assignments and elaborating on ideas effectively. His instructor encouraged him to increase his reading as much as possible in an effort to build up his vocabulary, as well as reading comprehension skills. Ryan stated,

My instructor just told me that I needed to read more, read more, read more all types of books. She said that even though I may not like the books I'm reading, I still needed to read because frequent reading would help improve my reading skills, grammar, and writing ability. She also said that my reading comprehension skills would improve through increased reading and the reading of a variety of books, and would give me the vocabulary I needed to change my slang that I often talk and put into my writing.

Ryan's instructor was a very positive agent of support in this situation. Rather than ignore Ryan's lack of literacy skills in this composition course and otherize him due to his lack of college-level writing and reading ability, she provided positive pedagogical advice to him that would assist him in improving his reading and writing skills. She did not allow the course description or conventional status of the course title *freshman English composition* to prevent her from prioritizing Ryan's academic success as an adult student. Ryan also stated, "Many times I would ask question after question after question and an instructor needs to be very *patient* with this situation. I had a very good patient English instructor and this helped me out very much, because she was very patient and I could tell that she loved her job." Ryan could tell that his instructor possessed an

authentic passion for not only teaching, but also for desiring him to gain an improved level of literacy skills. Ryan's positive experience with his instructor also calls attention to what a critical difference an instructor can make in a student's academic development by presenting not only a professional attitude toward learning and student success in and outside the walls of the classroom, but most importantly a very *patient* and *caring* persona, which ultimately has the power to ignite the highest, most creative level of adult transformative learning.

Chapter Summary

The twelve participants in this study presented very unique perspectives on their challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom. The dominant message that was illuminated across participant interviews was the desire to grow, develop, and succeed as an adult college-level writer regardless of past or present academic obstacles, or rigorous writing standards of the freshman English composition classroom. In general, participants entered the freshman English course from a diverse range of writing backgrounds from the most advanced high school advanced placement (AP) courses to very weak or mediocre English courses where writing instruction was weak, or nearly nonexistent.

Participants ranged in age from 25-46 and all had experienced intervals of absence from the formal academic setting. They discussed several specific composition assignments that they experienced either a challenge, or had success with, but ultimately, the *persuasive* and *narrative* essay genres were discussed most consistently across the interviews. Overall, participants identified the persuasive essay as the most challenging due to a lack of background in composing this particular essay, as well as a weakness in

the skill of persuasion. In regard to the narrative essay, it was identified as the most comfortable to compose and structure due to the participant's comfort with writing on personal, autobiographical topics, which focused on intimate aspects of the self.

Positive and negative experiences involving the racial ethnicity of selected participants were also a key element illuminated in the data. Some participants experienced very racially oppressive classroom atmospheres in which they felt that the instructor was favoring the younger Caucasian student population in the class, while assuming that the older African American adult students would not benefit from a formal writing education. On the other hand, selected students also experienced classroom situations where their African American ethnicity worked in their favor. Some participants felt closer to their instructor due to their shared African American heritage and also felt that their African American instructor was able to connect with them intellectually, as well as relate to them at a greater depth, due to greater familiarity with aspects such as learning styles, perspectives on social issues, personal issues, and challenges common to the African American student.

In addition, many of the participants expressed desire for an in-depth review of the academic writing process and the formal structure of the academic essay at the beginning of the freshman English composition course due to the diversity of writing backgrounds and experiences that are common in this course. Moreover, all participants expressed the desire to see an elevated level of academic support provided to students in the English department. The types of support that participants indicated that they would like to see were increased writing center hours; increased one-on-one attention for students requiring assistance beyond normal classroom hours; a greater

acknowledgement of diverse writing backgrounds and abilities; and an increased level of *patience* with adult students experiencing challenges with class assignments, reading comprehension of texts and basic reading skills, as well as the general writing process as a whole.

Overall, some participants revealed that they endured discriminatory classroom writing and learning experiences, as well as negative interactions with their instructors. All participants shared in the perception that to succeed as an adult freshman English composition student, as well as an adult college student in general, one must demonstrate a highly dedicated, professional, and highly confident attitude in an effort to achieve the most effective and authentic educational transformation possible. Participants also unanimously believed that the highest level of writing success is yielded when the instructor prioritizes student learning and success above all, and uses a nurturing approach with students during times of instruction. Under these conditions, the highest, most creative and innovative levels of adult learning emerge to the forefront of the freshman English composition course.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief review of the research study. A second and major goal of this chapter is to discuss how the findings presented in the previous chapter relate and align to the existing theory and research literature presented in chapter two of the study. The focus will be on the five key themes that emerged from the study and these themes will be related to what the current literature in the field states about the research topic at hand. The topic of the study centers on the writing challenges and successes of nontraditional African American students in the first semester freshman English composition classroom. The literature is currently very unbalanced with a heavy focus on negative challenges to the writing process and minimal information regarding the *successful* writing experiences of students and the factors that contribute to these successful writing experiences.

The guiding research question for the study was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom? Sub-questions for the study included (a) What specific teaching approaches to writing displayed by the instructor during the freshman English course experience seemed to help or hinder the learning process? And (b) How did ethnic, cultural, or social factors impact the student's development as a writer in the freshman English composition classroom? This chapter will also discuss recommendations for future practice and research related to the study, as well as provide my reflection as the researcher.

Brief Overview of the Study

This section provides a brief summary of the study's first three chapters including the introduction to the study, literature review, and methodology. It presents the key components of these chapters which reveal how the study was structured and conducted. This section also provides details noting brief overviews of the specifics of these three chapters and highlights key details in an effort to recapture how the study unfolded.

Overview of the Introduction to the Study

During my tenure as an English composition instructor in the Lone Star College System in Houston, Texas, as well as Lee College in Baytown, Texas, the observation of African American nontraditional students demonstrating writing weaknesses in first semester freshman English objectives as they progressed through advanced English courses was quite frequent. I often witnessed a struggle with basic elements of the writing process, critical thinking, reading comprehension, and analytical skills, which are all core objectives of the first semester freshman English classroom. This study was a qualitative study in which I attempted to better understand and gain insight into some of the writing challenges and successes experienced by African American community college nontraditional students who have recently completed their first semester freshman English course.

Many nontraditional students demonstrate weaknesses in these first semester English competencies upon entrance into the second semester freshman English course, which focuses heavily on analysis of literary text such as poetry, drama, and the short story, and critical reading and writing assignments. There are eight specific first semester freshman English objectives that students are expected to have attained strong

competency in prior to entrance into second semester freshman English and beyond.

These objectives are (1) to understand the basic concepts and modalities of English grammar, (2) to use punctuation properly in writing assignments, (3) to write clear and correct English sentences, (4) to compose coherent and well developed paragraphs, (5) to understand and use the writing process (including brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and editing), (6) to compose multi-paragraph essays in traditional expository modes, (7) to conduct and present research in a clear, organized, and appropriate manner, and (8) to employ critical-analytical strategies in reading and writing assignments. Failure to gain competency in these first semester freshman English competencies typically result in various writing challenges and deficiencies upon entrance into more advanced English, or writing intensive college courses.

The purpose of this study was to (a) better understand African American nontraditional students' perceptions of their successful and unsuccessful writing experiences in the community college first semester freshman English classroom, (b) to inform advanced-level English instructors of some of the reasons that African American students struggle with advanced writing assignments, and (c) to make recommendations for teaching this particular student population. This study was based on the interpretivist paradigm. It focused on the personal narratives of nontraditional students with the aim of revealing a comprehensive understanding or interpretation of their writing challenges and successes in the community college first semester freshman English classroom. The study required participants to describe the nature, or essence of their writing challenges and successes in an effort to gain a better understanding of what their holistic writing experience was like in the first semester freshman English classroom.

The research question for this study was designed to provide insight into some of the major struggles with the writing process that this particular student group encounters, as well as shed light on factors contributing to their successful writing experiences in this course. The guiding research question was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom. Sub-questions included (a) What specific teaching approaches to writing displayed by the instructor during the freshman English course experience seemed to help or hinder the learning process? And (b) How did ethnic, cultural, or social factors impact the student's development as a writer in the freshman English composition classroom?

The significance of this study is that little research has been conducted on the experiences and perceptions of ethnically and culturally diverse nontraditional students in the area of writing skill development and writing curriculum satisfaction. Research on the first semester English writing experiences of African American nontraditional students will create awareness among community college English composition instructors of the need to better acknowledge the special writing needs of their diverse nontraditional student population. This study was conducted to expand the body of literature by illuminating some of the *specific* writing challenges as well as successes that African American nontraditional students experience in the community college first semester freshman English classroom, which will in turn, become a useful resource for other community college first-year English instructors.

In regard to delimitations, the focus of this study is on the community college first semester freshman English writing challenges and successes of African American

nontraditional students age 25 and over. Therefore, younger students were not included in the study. Ethnically and culturally diverse nontraditional students tend to dominate my particular research setting, which led me as the researcher to pursue a focus on African American adult students for my research. The research was intentionally conducted at two community colleges in the Houston Metropolitan area, although African American adult students enrolled in other community colleges may share similar experiences. A limitation of this study was that some of the participant's recollections of their writing challenges and successes could have been less than fully accurate due to failure to remember certain details regarding their classroom writing challenges and successful experiences.

Overview of the Literature Review

There is a significant gap in the literature focusing on the adult student's writing experience concerning how African American nontraditional English composition students perceive the challenges, as well as the successes to meeting the objectives of the first semester freshman English classroom. The literature is somewhat slanted toward "non-native" speakers of English, or English language learners (ELL) and their writing challenges. Stories regarding the writing challenges and successes of adult writing students, specifically African American adult students appear to be severely lacking within the literature. Wyatt (2011) discusses how the nontraditional student population is not only the fastest growing student population in higher education, but is also a very *diverse* population. For many, the most recent writing experience is writing an academic essay to pass the GED exam (Hansman & Wilson, 1998). In regard to standardized testing, minority students are at an even greater risk of performing poorly. Carter (2006)

states, “Standardized tests are also wildly unfair, as high-stakes measures like these place students of color and – especially – those from poorer neighborhoods at an even greater disadvantage” (p. 95). Students are not allowed to bypass first-year English composition without demonstrating acceptable performance on an appropriate standardized exam unless they place out of the course by the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). There is a need in the literature to report information regarding rhetorical skill deficit, as well as statistical information on the broad range of writing experiences displayed specifically by *African American* students.

This is ultimately a limited representation of today’s college classrooms in the existing literature on beginning English composition. There is a need within the literature for *ethnically inclusive* documentation of the holistic personal accounts of nontraditional students regarding the comprehensive range of challenges and successes they experienced in meeting the writing objectives of first semester English composition. Since this study focuses on the writing challenges and successes of adult students in the first semester English composition classroom, I looked at five pertinent areas represented in the literature. These areas are (a) the role of the first semester English course, (b) the discrimination resulting from protecting the academy from the deficient writer (c) labeling as a challenge for beginning writers, (d) students’ loss of identity and suppression of the imagination, and (e) adult students as participants in the first semester freshman English classroom. Ultimately, in regard to these five key areas as they relate to adult education instruction in the classroom, there is a need for instructors to acknowledge the vast range of diverse learning needs that this student group enters into the classroom with. Stallings (2010) suggests a need for English instructors to diversify

their teaching practices, as well as be willing to adopt certain instructional practices in an effort to meet the unique learning needs of adult learners. As Romesburg's (2011) suggests, adult students often bring a complex, yet enriching and dynamic presence to the classroom, and English instructors are continuously challenged to revisit and modify conventional composition pedagogical strategies, which are commonly designed for the *traditional* 18-year old audience.

Overview of Methods

This was a qualitative study in which I utilized phenomenology in an attempt to better understand and gain insight into the writing challenges and successes of African American community college nontraditional students age 25 and over who had recently completed their first semester of freshman English composition. My aim as the researcher was to capture the *phenomenon* of adult African American Students' writing experiences in the first semester English composition classroom. I was interested in gaining an understanding of participants' specific writing challenges and successes as they perceived them through their own lens. Patton (2002) states, "The phenomenologist is committed to *understanding* social phenomena from the actor's own perspective. He or she examines how the world is experienced" (p. 69). In this particular study, I used open-ended interviews and the analysis of artifacts, which helped to recreate the phenomenon of their writing challenges and successes. A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because it best illuminated the classroom writing experiences of the participants as they revealed them through qualitative interviews.

The setting of my research was two community colleges located in the Houston metropolitan area. These community colleges were ideal, information rich settings for

this study because the student populations greatly reflected African American nontraditional students age 25 and over. In regard to recruiting participants for this study, I utilized a purposeful sampling method in an effort to acquire the most thorough, meaningful data possible from the participants. The sample of my study included a small group of 12 nontraditional African American male and female students, age 25 and over, who had recently completed their first semester of freshman English composition. Selecting a small sample of students who had recently completed the first semester freshman English classroom enabled me to conduct a very thorough, information-rich study as student experiences were fresh upon data collection which strengthened the validity of the study.

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing and analysis of artifacts in the form of past graded papers were the two primary data collection methods for this study. My interview questions were organized with regard to past, present, and future in an effort to gain a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of the participant's challenges and successes in regard to writing development. The first interview focused on past and present writing challenges and successes, and the second interview focused on additional topics such as clarifying interpretations from the first interview and gathering future recommendations for English departments and first semester English instructors in regard to enhancing the writing competency and overall success of the nontraditional student. The second method of data collection that I used to conduct this study was the analysis of artifacts in the form of past graded essays and other writing assignments that the students completed during their first-semester freshman English course. In regard to how these artifacts were utilized in the data collection process, I asked participants to reflect on specific types of

essays and other writing assignments completed during their first semester freshman English course, some of which they brought examples of to the interview, and to describe the challenging, as well as the successful encounters they experienced with the particular writing assignments.

As I began the process of data analysis, I developed a color-coding system for my field notes. This was very helpful when I began “piecing together patterns, defining categories for data analysis, planning future data collection, and for writing the final product” (Marshall & Rossmann, 1999, p. 148). I utilized the analysis process of Tesch (1990). Tesch (1990) recommends an eight-step structure to analyze qualitative data, highlighting raw data itself over “research questions, the research instrument, and concepts and categories used by other authors in previous related studies” as the ideal source for organizing specific information acquired post the collection process (p. 141).

To ensure the ethical nature of the study, I acquired informed consent from my participants and assured them that a pseudonym would be substituted for their name to insure confidentiality in presentations or write-ups of the study. I also secured the data obtained from participants in a locked file cabinet. These are important ethical steps in the qualitative interviewing and research process. In regard to the trustworthy nature of the study, the elements of triangulation, credibility, transferability, and dependability were applied to the study. Considering that data collection for this particular study was conducted by means of interviews and artifacts in the form of past graded essays and other writing assignments, triangulation was illustrated by using multiple sources of data. Triangulation was employed by using two methods of data collection – qualitative

interviews and documents which were the students' past graded essays and other writing assignments.

Discussion of Study Findings

Five major themes with accompanying sub-themes emerged from the data which were (a) *Perceptions on High School Writing Preparation* with two sub-themes including (i) *Strong High School Writing Experiences and the impact on the English Composition Classroom Experience* and (ii) *Poor High School Writing Experiences and the Impact on the English Composition Classroom Experience*; (b) *Comfort Levels with Specific Essay Genres* with two sub-themes including (i) *Challenges with the Persuasive Essay Genre* and (ii) *Success and Comfort Found in the Narrative Essay Genre*; (c) *Growth as an Adult Community College Writer* with two sub-themes including (i) *Intense Study of the Academic Writing Process*, and (ii) *Awareness of Diverse College Writing Readiness Levels*. (d) *The Role of Race in the English Composition Classroom* with three sub-themes including (i) *Race as a Minimal Element in Writing Success* (ii) *Race as a Significant Element in Writing Success*, and (iii) *Feelings of Racial Discrimination in the English Composition Classroom* and (e) *Levels of Support in the Freshman English Composition Classroom* with two sub-themes including (i) *Desire for Stronger Levels of English Instructor Support* and (ii) *Students who Experienced Strong Levels of Instructor Support*. Overall, the primary message that was illuminated across participant interviews was the desire to grow, develop, and succeed as an adult college-level writer regardless of past or present academic obstacles or rigorous writing standards of the freshman English composition classroom.

Theme One: Perceptions on High School Writing Preparation

Findings from the study suggested that participants experienced a range of strong, as well as poor high school writing education, which dramatically impacted their transition into the college-level English classroom. Students that experienced very smooth, successful transitions into college-level freshman English composition credited their strong high school advanced placement (AP) courses for their overall college writing readiness.

Strong High School Writing Experiences. Three students, Aaron, Jonathan, and Kimberly stood out in expressing the high quality of their high school writing experience and how it positively impacted their college-level English classroom experience. These students expressed how they felt that the writing preparation that they received at the high school level, specifically their advanced placement (AP) English courses thoroughly prepared them for the writing demands of the college-level freshman English composition classroom, and also gave them the confidence they needed to succeed in the college level classroom. For example, Aaron stated, “In high school, they enrolled me in AP classes upon entrance, so I had a great teacher who taught me a lot about writing on the college level. I learned a lot that prepared me for college-level demands.” Aaron displayed a very confident persona as he described his transition into the college English classroom. He entered freshman English ready to embrace any writing challenge that came before him and actually expected freshman English to be much more rigorous than he experienced. Kimberly stated, “I was an AP student in high school so I was pretty prepared for the college work that I did encounter in this course. The work in high school was very rigorous, very identical to the work I completed during this course. Also, I

would say that it better prepared me for what I was to expect.” These findings highlighting the successful college-level English course experiences of these adult students are an important contribution to the existing literature as it is currently heavily focused on adult students who experienced *negative* and *challenging* writing experiences in the freshman English composition classroom.

Poor High School Writing Experiences. Adult students that experienced a very poor high school writing education, and as a result, entered the college classroom underprepared, also emerged in the findings. The perceptions of their challenging transition into the college-level English course aligned very well with what the current literature states on this issue. Shannon expressed how a high emphasis on reading and little focus on writing negatively impacted her strength as a college-level writer upon entrance into her English composition course. Shannon stated,

As a high school writer, we didn’t do much writing, we did a lot of reading. It impacted me being successful in the college-level writing classroom because I had difficulty doing the MLA format properly, as well as writing a persuasive or argumentative paper . . . I didn’t learn how to write properly in an academic sense.

Tanya experienced a similar imbalanced education in the high school English classroom. Tanya’s high school English instructor tended to focus heavily on the reading and analysis of literature, rather than the basics of writing development and essay structure. Tanya stated, “My high school writing education really wasn’t that great. I think they focused more on literature, but it wasn’t enough preparation for me to enter a college-level English classroom. It wasn’t effective enough.” As Gillam (1991) discusses, the

adult writer's lack of advanced composing ability may be due to a lack of adequate training at the high school level. Moreover, diversifying pedagogical approaches in the writing classroom can also greatly enhance academic success. Stallings (2010) suggests a need for English instructors to diversify their teaching practices, as well as be willing to adopt certain instructional practices in an effort to meet the unique learning needs of adult learners. As Hansman & Wilson (1998) state, for many adult students, the most recent writing experience is writing an academic essay to pass the GED exam. As a result of adult students frequently entering the college classroom with a poor writing background, literature suggests that adult students need a strong level of *external* classroom support to assist them in meeting the demands of the college-level English classroom. Stallings (2010) suggests that for adult students to engage in a high quality of self-directed learning, the availability of a strong, instructor led support system outside the classroom must be in place. As we see here, the literature confirms and aligns well with the study data of adult students revealing the repercussions of a poor high school writing education upon entrance into the college classroom. Many are underprepared for the writing demands of the college-level freshman English composition course and are in need of a focused, open-minded instructor that will place *student learning* and *student centeredness* at the forefront of the classroom.

Theme Two: Comfort Levels with Specific Essay Genres

Participants expressed distinct levels of comfort with *specific* essay genres, while expressing a high level of discomfort with others. The findings revealed a divide in terms of comfort and writing competency between the *personal narrative* and the *persuasive / argumentative* essay genre. The data revealed that half of the total number of participants

tended to favor the personal narrative essay genre due to their ability to freely express “the self” on a more authentic level, as well as present a more realistic level of elaboration on ideas.

Success and Comfort Found in the Narrative Essay Genre. Laura very sincerely related her experience with the narrative essay writing experience in her English composition course. She stated, “I wrote about my sister having an aneurism at age 42 . . . it was easy because I was writing about myself. I knew how to start it off and how to end it.” Barbara also described the high level of comfort she experienced when writing in the narrative essay genre and how well she was able to elaborate on her ideas. The literature on the power of personal narrative in the classroom aligns well with Barbara’s feeling of comfort when writing in this genre. Wallace (2000) states, “personal narrative somehow touches a unique cord in us-as listeners and as readers; perhaps hearing a self-reflective voice invites us also to reflect” (p. 434). Personal narrative writing enables students to engage in reflective modes of thinking, mentally and emotionally escape the present allowing the narrative essay to become a highly achievable effort (George, 2012). As Barbara stated, “I went into more specific, vivid, elaborative detail about my vacation experience. Since I focused on so much detail and elaboration in my writing, I felt this was a pretty strong paper that I wrote.” In addition, Ryan, Tanya, and Michael mirrored Laura and Barbara in the sense that they experienced high levels of comfort with being able to freely express their ideas and elaborate thoroughly when writing in the narrative essay genre. George (2012) suggests that when students engage in personal storytelling they are exposed to a liberating learning experience and are provided the opportunity to shape themselves, as well as their thinking processes. Ryan stated, “The most successful

paper that I wrote in my freshman English course was the *Narrative Essay* because in this essay I had a chance to speak about *me* . . . I knew how to be descriptive, put information where it belonged in the essay because it was about my life story.” Wallace (2000) supports the above views on how the personal narrative essay ignites a high level of comfort in regard to writing freely and expressing ideas. He states,

Certainly personal narrative does provide a relatively comfortable starting place for most students’ introduction to college writing because they are familiar with the genre, and an assignment that requires students to place themselves inside their writing up front helps establish a precedent early on that can combat the detached, generalizing third person voice many of them understand as the academic writing style. (p. 435)

Moreover, often, the personal narrative allows students to write from the perspective of their own identity (George, 2012). For instance, Tanya stated, “I remember a specific assignment where we had to write an informative essay and I felt I nailed it! I wrote about *myself* and the challenges that a plus-size woman would have.” Mlynarczyk (2006) asserts how a high level of writing development occurs when students are given the opportunity to use expressive language when writing on various topics, and write in language that is close and familiar to them. Moreover, Mlynarczyk (2006) also discusses how the opportunity to write on very personal, intimate topics is also very beneficial and special to various minority groups within the writing classroom. She states,

The chance to write from a deep personal core is especially important for students from previously marginalized groups – women, immigrants, students of color, working-class students. For students on the social margins, the opportunity to

articulate a perspective in writing on their own life experiences can be a bridge between their communities and the academy. Such student writing is also a potential source of knowledge about realities that are frequently misrepresented, diluted or altogether absent in mainstream depictions.

Overall, these participants expressed a thorough level of comfort with this particular essay genre as a result of their ability and freedom to write on a topic of an intimate, personal nature, rather than be bound by the ridged structural guidelines of the conventional academic essay.

Challenges with the Persuasive Essay Genre. Other participants expressed difficulty with not only writing, but also comprehending the overall structure of the *persuasive / argumentative* essay genre. For example, in reference to her experience writing in the persuasive essay genre, Kimberly stated, “I felt a bit challenged because it was my first time actually having to write a persuasive essay. The idea was fairly new. It was unfamiliar territory.” She also highlighted in her story the phenomenon of *self-teaching* that her composition instructor expected of her as she encountered the task of familiarizing herself with the structure and rhetorical methods of the persuasive essay. Kimberly’s instructor expected her to acquire the art of persuasive writing skills on her own as she was enrolled in a college-level course where this level of competence is expected of all students enrolled. Although Kimberly did not feel comfortable with approaching the task of persuasive writing considering her lack of writing experience in this area, her English instructor insisted on placing the burden of self-teaching on her, regardless of her lack of skill level. She stated, “My professor provided me with the material that I needed and I just took that and ran with it.” Likewise, Sherry and Aaron

also presented strong perceptions of their encounters with the persuasive essay genre. Sherry stated, “The persuasive essay was very challenging for me because I am very weak at persuading people to transfer their thinking to a certain viewpoint, as well as finding strong evidence of support for my points.” Likewise, Aaron stated, “The writing assignments that I thought were the most challenging were the persuasive essays . . . I usually tried to fill in the paper with nonsense, vague ideas, and shallow statements in an effort to stretch the paper longer.” Clearly, these students needed guidance and instruction in the areas of elaboration, effectively supporting ideas, as well as, persuasive writing skills related to this genre.

This type of divide in terms of writing ability and comfort among the essay genres is seen as a challenge within the field of English composition pedagogy in the sense that the primary duty of the freshman English composition instructor is to familiarize, produce writing competency, as well as instill writing comfort within a *broad range* of essay genres, rather than within one specific essay genre. These findings align with the theory of Witte, Cherry and Meyer (1982). Witte et al. suggests that the major role of the first semester English composition course for entering college students is to establish a strong level of competency in the composition of *diverse* writing genres including persuasive, argumentative, compare and contrast, cause and effect, and the personal narrative essay. Romesburg (2011) suggests that although adult students in the composition classroom frequently exhibit a strong work ethic toward writing success, they are likely to experience feelings of isolation as a result of their age, which ultimately can negatively impact their academic performance, their contributions, and willingness to embrace new ideas and methods of thinking in class. Moreover, Downs & Wardle (2007)

and Bizzell (1982) state that a current aim of the course is to prepare students to write across the disciplines and to initiate students into a broad discourse community.

Essentially, what the literature is suggesting is that English composition instructors should not allow students to develop a mentality of *tunnel vision* in regard to demonstrating effective writing ability and comfort within a *single* essay genre. This ultimately results in students becoming handicapped and very limited as college writers.

Theme Three: Growth as an Adult Community College Writer

Participants expressed a strong desire to excel as academic writers in the English classroom and presented a call to English composition instructors to focus more heavily on training students in the basic elements of the writing process. They also called on instructors to recognize the *diverse ranges* of college writing readiness levels, ages, and backgrounds that are frequently characterizing the freshman English composition classroom in this current day of higher education. The literature aligns well with this notion in the sense that oftentimes; instructors can become overly focused on their *traditional student* population, ultimately allowing their adult nontraditional student population to fade into the background of the English composition classroom. Siha (2012) conducted a study that found that implementing student engagement in the community college writing classroom in the forms of writing groups, collaboration, and dialogue where students of diverse ages and ethnicities listen to each other and critique each other's work can create a collaborative, democratic classroom experience. Sommer (1989) and Connors (1982) assert that freshman English composition instructors become so comfortable and familiar with their *traditional student* population that they become oblivious to the diverse educational learning needs of their *nontraditional student*

population. Romesburg (2011) suggests that although adult students often bring a complex, yet enriching and dynamic presence to the classroom, English instructors are continuously challenged to revisit and modify conventional composition pedagogical strategies, which are commonly designed for the *traditional* 18-year old audience.

Intense Study of the Academic Writing Process. A case study on writing and learning experiences was conducted at the Newark College of Arts and Sciences (NCAS) on nontraditional students enrolled in the University College. The study indicated that nontraditional students who were very distant from their last formal writing experience exhibited weaknesses and challenges with college level writing (Sommer, 1989). Laura stated, “I think it’s hard on the people my age . . . I think instructors need to focus more on writing essays and the actual composition of writing and English instead of verbs, adjectives, nouns and other grammatical aspects.” Laura highlights here the age diversity, as well as writing ability levels that frequently comprise the English composition classroom, which aligns well with the literature above. Moreover, she highlights how the older nontraditional student is likely to experience challenges to learning the basics of academic essay construction, contrary to her younger, adult student counterparts. She expresses her desire for instructors to place a higher pedagogical focus on the core elements of the writing process.

Awareness of Diverse College Writing Readiness Levels. Participants Ryan and Michael expressed their concern regarding the need for instructors to recognize the *diverse* writing abilities and educational backgrounds of adults entering their classroom. Ryan stated,

At the beginning of the semester, instructors have their plan, or course syllabus

already made out and they want students to follow it without having the background of the students . . . Instructors need to get a good *feel* for the students in their classroom to see what students' abilities are.

Here, Ryan highlights the common practice of many instructors categorizing *all* students in a class as possessing equal knowledge and ability. Ryan calls attention to English instructors to acknowledge *difference* in not only writing ability, but also the multifaceted writing backgrounds that commonly characterizes the freshman English classroom.

Laura shared a very powerful recollection of a discriminatory experience that she experienced during her English composition course experience in relation to the instructor prioritizing the younger traditional student's writing abilities and backgrounds above hers as a result of her age. Laura stated,

I think the approach of the teacher that's teaching English should be different, because you are going to have people that's a different age, a different background, and a different culture in your class. I think they should focus on trying to help *everybody* and not just giving up on the ones that they feel will not use academic writing skills that much saying : "*Oh they're not going to use that that much, they're older*" You don't know that!, and I think the teacher should just focus on everybody, not just the young kids.

Laura's experience dramatically highlights what the literature presents about the many diverse abilities, voices, ages, and learning needs that dominate today's freshman English composition classroom, and how the dual student population of *traditional* and *nontraditional* student is increasingly becoming the dominant face of the 21st Century English composition classroom. Wyatt (2011) discusses how the nontraditional student

population is not only the fastest growing student population in higher education, but is also a very *diverse* population. Connors (1982) states, “Although there are a few special courses and programs for these students, most of them are mainstreamed at once into classes with students of traditional college age” (p. 263). Moreover, Connors (1982) also states, “The growing number of nontraditional students in freshman composition courses, in particular, raises questions about whether they should be taught the same way as their younger classmates” (p. 263). Connors highlights and reinforces the need for English composition instructors to develop a keen awareness of the contrasting learning needs that exist between their traditional and nontraditional student groups within the freshman English composition classroom. Wyatt (2011) states, “The increase in the number of nontraditional students returning to college campuses has resulted in a need for colleges and universities to look at the various factors and attributes of this population of students and what institutions need to do in order to serve their unique needs” (p. 10). Wyatt highlights here how instructors must acknowledge the multitude of diversity that the adult student population commonly enters into the classroom with.

Gillam (1991) presents two adult student accounts illustrating diverse writing backgrounds, challenges, and abilities in the freshman English composition classroom that align with Laura’s experience above, as well as with other participants who advocated for greater instructor acknowledgement of the broad range of writing abilities and backgrounds that are presented among adult students in the English classroom. In his study, a thirty year old computer programmer named Robert and a thirty-one year old secretary and college student named Alana struggled with the production of an essay draft for their first-year composition course (Gillam, 1991). Moreover, Gillam candidly

discusses the diversity of professional backgrounds, writing weaknesses, and age groups that typically characterizes the beginning freshman English classroom:

For some, the years out of school have involved little writing beyond grocery lists, insurance forms, and notes to a child's teacher. For others, the intervening years have included regular writing on the job or frequent personal correspondence with family and friends. But it is unlikely that the years of school have afforded opportunities to practice the kind of writing required by the academy. (Gillam, 1991, p. 2)

Gillam notes how writing for work and for the typical domestic duties of the adult is in contrast to the formal, academic conventions of writing required within the college-level freshman English composition classroom. Tanya's story aligns cohesively with Gillam's conclusions above as she relates her candid expression of her frustration about how many English instructors assume that all of their students in class are on the same advanced writing level and begin their courses with *advanced* writing techniques and advanced assignments in the English composition course, rather than beginning the course with a review of the basic elements of the writing process. She stated,

I feel that there should either be another class, or spend the first part of the semester, or a couple of weeks on refreshing the students on the skill of how to write a paper. Teaching them how to progress through the basics of the writing process. Also, show us how to become a more successful writer, rather than just having us jump right into writing advanced papers. A lot of students test out of the developmental English courses and I feel that you shouldn't be held back, because I know that everyone is on a time schedule, but I think at the end of the

day I think instructors should keep in mind that everyone is not on the same level. Tanya feels that English instructors must take special care to recognize that adult students in the English composition classroom often come from a variety of backgrounds and do not possess the advanced writing skills needed to successfully complete required writing assignments for the course. Tanya's statements also align with Bartholomae (1985) in his view that many beginning writing students are immediately placed into the *hot seat* of meeting high writing standards without first obtaining the appropriate skills, which would enable them to more successfully meet the writing demands of the academy.

Theme Four: The Role of Race in the English Composition Classroom

In regard to the topic of race, findings emerged into three categories which were (a) *race as a minimal element in writing success*, (b) *race as a significant element in writing success*, and (c) *feelings of racial discrimination in the English composition classroom*. Some participants felt their ethnicity was a very minimal element in their success or failure as an emerging college-level writer. On the other hand, some participants expressed that race was a significant element in their success, with two participants presenting very noteworthy stories describing the *otherization* and *discrimination* they experienced as a result of their African American ethnicity, as well as their ability as a beginning adult writer in the English composition classroom.

Race as a Minimal Element in Writing Success. In regard to adult students who related stories about their ethnicity playing a minimal role in their development as a college-level writer, the current body of literature is relatively silent, so the findings yielded from participants in this area are strong contributions to the body of literature. Laura presented a very passionate, notable perspective during her interview on how she

feels her cultural heritage as an adult African American woman played no factor in her success as a developing college-level writer. She feels that it is ultimately the self that determines success, rather than *skin color*. Laura stated,

I don't think I had any cultural factors that impacted my writing abilities. The only thing I think could impact my writing abilities in school was *me*, if I didn't apply myself, and just gave up. So, I don't think nothing to do with my ethnicity as an African American had anything to do with my success. I have to look at the situation as *myself*, being responsible for my success. If I failed on an assignment, it's because I wanted to fail. I wasn't trying.

Laura strongly asserted her philosophy of *colorblindness* in her interview. Kandaswamy (2007) states,

Colorblind discourse asserts that any consideration of race is itself racism. It protects racism by making it invisible, and has been instrumental in the preservation of white privilege within universities through the dismantling of affirmative action in admissions and hiring, the delegitimization of scholarship that interrogates racism, and the marginalization of those of us who need to name the racism that we experience in our everyday lives. (p. 7)

It was found that the majority of literature regarding *colorblindness* in the African American community strongly contradicts Laura's view that skin color is a non-factor in academic success, and asserts that the idea of colorblindness is nothing more than an illusion within modern day society. Cooper (2012) conducted a study which found that despite society's notion of *colorblindness* and *post-racialism*, the oppressive experience of living as a woman of color in a male and white dominated society strongly contradicts

the race-neutral beliefs of many. Moreover, Jasper (2007) conducted a study on the experiences of four Black teachers from the post-Jim Crow era in the public school system who experienced, regardless of the idea of colorblindness, a vast range of racially discriminatory problems with white students, faculty, as well as administration in the sense that their subject area competence, and professional credibility was questioned as a result of their African American heritage. Laura strongly feels that her destiny to become a strong college-level writer highly depends upon *herself*, rather than her ethnicity as an African American woman. Behm (2008) also challenges Laura's strong sense of colorblindness. Behm argues how many composition textbooks are written to promote the illusion of *colorblindness* in the education field by ignoring the impact race has on adult students' writing processes, as well as denying the existence of racism in society altogether. Moreover, Behm (2008) also asserts how many first-year English composition textbooks tend to idealize *whiteness* while *otherizing* all nonwhite students as being exotic, abnormal, and inferior to other white ethnicities. Laura believes that if she is ultimately unsuccessful at completing a particular assignment, or an entire course she has herself to blame for not being responsible enough and putting forth the proper level of initiative as an adult student. Moreover, Laura continued to say,

I want to say that being an African American female and being a minority, the way I went to school and was brought up that it was a challenge getting through English classes and a challenge throughout a lot of courses, but English has been the hardest one. I want to say that it's up to *you* if you want to make something out of your English writing skills, and if you want to fail it's up to *you*. So, the

only way that us African Americans are going to make it in school is if we put it in our *mind* and in our *heart* that we can do it.

Laura thus provides us a glimpse into her past struggles as a minority English student during her early years. Although English has always been her most challenging academic subject, even from her early teenage years, she continues to work toward being successful in the subject. Laura's courageous and ambitious approach to achieving success as a college level writer strongly aligns with Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's (1996) article in which they discuss the courageous acts of black women as they return to the college classroom regardless of the negative, oppressive life experiences that defined their society and culture as a whole. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) state,

For each of the women in this study the act of returning to school was an act of personal courage. It meant going against the grain of their circle of friends and community. They approached school with a history of previous marginality. For most, early schooling was separate and unequal from the experiences of their White cohort; for all of them it involved lessons of survival. Even in all Black settings there seemed to be challenges. Yet, they all approached reentry as . . . "to make a way out of no way," an old adage from the Black community which depicts struggle against formidable odds. (p. 146)

Laura's attitude toward her journey to becoming a college-level writer strongly mirrors the old adage *make a way out of no way* in the sense that although she reentered college with a weak and challenging academic background in the area of English, she was determined to remain positive, ambitious, courageous, and to ultimately *make a way out of no way* on her journey toward becoming a strong adult African American English

student. Perhaps her *colorblind* mentality as an African American woman and her approach to her writing success explicitly proves her high level of ambition and desire to succeed at all costs. Adapting a *colorblind* mentality is perhaps her way of *making a way out of no way*. Laura feels that writing success can be acquired through practicing a very *vocal* and *aggressive* work ethic toward one's goals of becoming a strong English composition student regardless of skin color and oppressive racial forces in the classroom, or within society at large, which have a tendency sometimes to *silence* the African American student. To succeed within the academy, African American female students must refrain from silencing their voice in the English classroom as an African American woman, as well as attack their fear of learning the formal conventions of standard English in the composition classroom (Golar, 2012). Overall, Laura is strongly committed to the philosophy that the path to success is through hard work and determination, and is attainable only if the *individual* is willing and determined to achieve the desired level of success.

Jonathan and Shannon closely mirror Laura's mentality of *colorblindness* in their view on African American ethnicity playing a very minimal role in their success as college-level writers. Jonathan stated, "I don't think there were really any cultural factors that may have affected my success as a writer." Shannon stated, "I don't think I had any cultural or ethnic factors that impacted my success, just a lack of writing background in terms of academic writing impacted my success in the freshman English course." In addition, Jessica also felt that her African American ethnicity was not an element in her success or failure as a developing college-level writer. Jessica stated, "I don't think my African American culture had anything to do with any of the challenges I experienced in

freshman English composition. I have not had any experiences of racial discrimination or cultural challenges of any sort.” Michael credited the strong level of support that he received from his English instructor for his success as an adult college-level writer, rather than his ethnicity as an African American man. Michael stated, “There was actually no cultural or ethnic factors that I can think of that impacted my success as a writing student. I was able to complete all of my writing assignments with the support of my English instructor and my race never seemed to be a barrier to that support.”

Overall, what we see here are the authentic voices of adult learners that strongly credit not only individual initiative for success, or non-success in writing, but also the strong level of support from the freshman English composition instructor. We also witness the mentality of skin color being an irrelevant factor in academic success or failure, yet literature in the education field strongly contradicts this notion asserting how race is very much so a dominant entity in the classroom, regardless of one’s failure to acknowledge it. As Kandaswamy (2007) states,

The classroom is not a space outside of society, and students and teachers do not check their histories at the door when they enter it. Rather, the classroom reflects the inequalities in the world around us. In the classroom, just as in the society in which we live, there are no blank slates or level playing fields for any of us. (p. 7)

These findings in this particular area are an important contribution to the body of literature related to adult learning experiences specifically in the English composition classroom in the sense that the current literature reveals few instances of minority students, specifically African Americans discussing their perceptions of the impact of

their ethnicity on their success or failure as an adult college writer – including the perception that it has no impact.

Race as a Significant Element in Writing Success. Other findings from the study under the theme of *Race in the English Composition Classroom* identified two participants who relate very notable experiences regarding their African American ethnicity playing a significant role in their journey to becoming a successful adult college-level writer, and selected literature aligns well with these findings. These findings are also new and unique contributions to the current literature in the area of minority student writing experiences in the English composition classroom considering few pieces of literature focus on African Americans relating *positive* experiences and interactions with others regarding the impact of their ethnicity in a college classroom setting. Kimberly related a very powerful story in which she credits not only her own African American heritage for her continued drive for academic success, but also her African American mother. Kimberly stated,

I would say the fact that I am a young African American student in college, that's one of the things that keeps me so driven to succeed at all that I do, and being that English is one of my stronger subjects, that's another reason to keep me wanting to push and succeed, um, in English, um, I want to say having a mother who didn't go to school and actually graduate, well, who didn't go to college, or actually graduate high school, that's one of the things that further pushed me more to you know, come to class, and do what I had to do to make sure that I was getting the grade that I needed to get.

Kimberly conveyed not only her cultural knowledge of the academic challenges that many young African Americans face and the need to maintain a positive, dedicated attitude in an effort to overcome these obstacles and challenges, but also her African American mother's lack of a high school and college education and how this has greatly inspired her to succeed in her college education at all costs. She used her mother's lack of educational success as *negative reinforcement* to continue transcending to a higher level of educational success. Aaron expressed a very interesting story in which he described having an African American English instructor as a motivational figure in his journey to becoming a successful college-level writer. Aaron stated,

I think having an African American English instructor positively impacted my success as a college writer. My instructor was very dedicated to guiding me through the writing assignments. The instructor felt like she could relate to me very well with certain topics because I was African American which gave me a high level of self-confidence. It was easy for me to relate to a teacher who not only shared my heritage, but was also able to understand the academic writing struggles that I was going through as an adult African American man.

Aaron highlights a unique *intellectual bonding* between he and his instructor in the sense that there was a mutual comfort with discussing certain topics that were related to the African American culture, as well as a mutual understanding of the given topic at hand. Moreover, Aaron experienced an elevation in self-esteem through this experience in the sense that he was able to cohesively interact and engage with his instructor on a very personal level due to their shared African American heritage. He experienced a growth in self-confidence. Having a highly supportive instructor in the classroom is a factor

which can greatly empower Black male students to become proactive and self-assertive in attaining their academic success (Jordan, 2008). Aaron and his instructor were in an *intellectual communion* with each other. What we see here is the African American heritage between Aaron and his instructor acting as a kind of glue that is uniting two intellects together for one common purpose – to enhance Aaron’s writing ability and foster his continued path toward becoming a successful college-level writer. These significant experiences are very inspiring situations that not only provide a *positive* expansion to the body of literature, but also contrasts with the large portion of the literature where racial discrimination takes center stage in the classroom.

Feelings of Racial Discrimination in the English Composition Classroom. In regard to instances of racial discrimination in the classroom, findings also indicated that selected participants felt that they experienced oppressive learning experiences in the English composition classroom as a result of their African American ethnicity. Sherry and Laura described explicit discriminatory experiences that they endured as students in their freshman English composition course at the hands of their instructor. Both of these women felt very strongly that their English instructor was underestimating their ability to perform successfully as college-level writers, and ultimately *otherizing* them in the classroom due solely to their African American ethnicity. Sherry stated,

I have felt that my African American cultural heritage as a writer was challenged by my English instructor because she doubted us. She doubted our ability to be strong writers. She automatically assumed that African Americans had bad grammar and generally poor writing skills. She kept emphasizing this point

throughout the semester and I felt upset about this blatant racist attitude that the instructor was taking toward us as African American students.

Sherry expressed how she was made to feel *less than* as a student due to her African American ethnicity. Her instructor instantly labeled her, as well as other African American students in the class as incompetent writers and incapable of writing a strong, well-written college-level paper as a result of their African American ethnicity. The literature in the field concurs with this notion of how merely assuming students' ability levels can negatively affect overall morale. Spack (1988) suggests beginning writers may be adversely affected by the assumptions made about them by their writing instructors. Rodriguez (1999) also discusses the discrimination based on culture she experienced as a non-native student in her English composition course, which initiated her passion to change this very common discriminatory phenomena. Rodriguez (1999) states, "The instructor told me that my second language was interfering with my thinking, and therefore my writing. I was angry. I knew she was wrong" (p. 2). This is an explicit example of the racial and cultural *otherization* that often occurs in the English composition classroom. Moreover, Shaughnessy (1976) makes statements that align well with Sherry's discriminatory experience. He asserts that all beginning writers should be given the opportunity to develop the rhetorical skills and abilities at their chosen institution of higher learning, without being labeled as *the other* by their English instructors.

This makes instructors aware of how creating racially oppressive situations in a classroom setting can not only severely diminish a student's *self-esteem*, *self-confidence*, as well as *self-efficacy*, but ultimately their overall respect for the classroom as a whole.

This situation also indicates how academic competition between ethnicities should not be occurring in a classroom setting and is ultimately detrimental to not only the morale of students, but also the mutual respect and intellectual camaraderie between student and instructor, which is necessary for continuous student success.

Mirroring Sherry's experience of racial discrimination in the freshman English composition classroom is Laura's experience of *otherization*, which is also reflected in the literature. Laura experienced a similar situation in which she felt that her white English instructor prioritized the younger white students writing education, whereas her and other older adult African American students were strongly alienated. Laura stated,

I remember the first time in English when I first started. I had a White teacher, and it was only about 2 or 3 Blacks in the class. Most of the students were White. The instructor was helping the white kids more than she helped us three Black students I guess because we were older people from an older generation in class and she felt like we were not gonna get it anyway, and she was more focused on the younger kids like *they were going to last the longest*. She thought us three Black older students were just gonna quit.

Similarly to Sherry, Laura also felt very otherized in the classroom due to not only her African American ethnicity, but also her age. Bartholomae (1985) discusses in his article how many beginning writers across the disciplines including the English classroom are frequently labeled as *outcasts* resulting in an emotional and psychological melt-down. Bartholomae's perspective is consistent with how Laura, as well as the other African American women in the class experienced diminishing morale, as well as self-confidence as a result of the discriminatory actions of their English instructor. Laura's instructor

apparently assumed that Laura and the other African American adult students in the English course would not utilize a formal English education as much as the younger traditional white students in the class would. Like Kimberly, Laura used her negative classroom situation as *negative reinforcement* to work more aggressively toward her goal of becoming a college-level writer. Although her instructor negatively impacted her morale, as well as that of other African American adult students in the class, Laura took this opportunity to overcome the perceived prejudice of her instructor and embrace the strong academic ability that she knew was deep within her spirit. As in Sherry's racially discriminatory and oppressive classroom situation, Laura's story also calls on the awareness of college English instructors to avoid creating racially tense situations in the classroom as this can dramatically diminish the learning process, retention levels, as well as the morale of students in the classroom. Instructors must make a professional effort to provide equivalent instructional opportunities to *all* students in the classroom and establish *equal* expectations for *all* students regardless of ethnicity, educational background, or professional aspirations.

Theme Five: Levels of Support in the Freshman English Composition Classroom

The desire for English instructors and English departments as a whole to enhance the overall quality of *support systems* was a major finding of the study. This finding was overwhelming in that all twelve participants expressed on some level very specific and explicit recommendations that they felt would greatly enhance their quality of learning as adult college-level writers. Given that all participants expressed for the most part identical descriptions of what types of support they experienced in the English composition classroom, as well as support they would like to see implemented into the

classroom, or English departments as a whole, I highlight only selected examples from the study findings that strongly capture the essence of this thematic section.

Participants that expressed desires for stronger levels of English instructor support to be practiced in the classroom generally described how patience and a strong level of collaborative dialogue between student and instructor would enhance overall learning and writing experiences. The literature in the field supports this notion in the sense that it speaks to the potential benefits and students' strong level of growth in the area of writing when student and instructor are able to engage in effective dialogue regarding class assignments, rather than students working alone in an isolated fashion. Ritchie (1989) presents a very enlightening passage in her essay entitled *Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity* that highlights the rhetorical benefits that basic writers reap from experiencing a "dialogic" classroom setting. Ritchie states,

Students in writing workshops are . . . encouraged to explore new forms of thinking and writing and to find new ways to organize and understand their experience. They work with their peers in small groups to gain a better grasp of the perspective of their audience, to learn more about the varied viewpoints a writer might address, and to experiment with effective strategies for writing . . . This gives the beginning writer an opportunity to develop new ideas and new forms of writing, but it also allows her to try on new identities through the writing process . . . the beginning writer can draw from the array of voices in the multiple perspectives articulated in the writing workshop to construct a viable, if not completely modulated, voice of her own. (p.155)

Ritchie reports how the beginning writer inherits a strong sense of individuality, confidence, creativity, and self-efficacy about writing while participating in writing workshops. Classroom activities that involve collaborative learning and peer interaction have a significant impact on student writing and student attitudes toward writing (Callahan, 1999; & Dobie, 1992). They are exposed to a multitude of perspectives from other peers that tend to ignite new effective ways to brainstorm rhetorical ideas that they had not encountered within the conventional, teacher-centered classroom setting. This literature is also consistent with the recommendations of Sherry and Barbara as they present their perceptions on the implementation of collaborative peer mentoring groups in English departments in an effort to enhance the writing growth and development of adult students. Sherry stated, “I would like to see a more aggressive mentoring program or peer groups implemented into English departments to broaden the writing support level for adult African American students.” Similarly, Barbara states, “Currently, I don’t see a lot of clubs to help people. I know we have a tutoring center and the writing center, but it would be helpful if we had some peer mentoring groups to collaboratively work on our weaknesses and our strengths together.” Collaborative peer interaction is also a healthy activity in regard to peer revision. Revising others essays not only trains students in the revision process, but also teaches the value of the revision process (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997). The student is exposed to a variety of thought processes and personalities displayed by his other peers, which allows him the flexibility, and freedom to absorb unlimited levels of imagination and inspiration. This workshop experience will ultimately aid the beginning writer to galvanize his writing in a manner never before experienced individually. The workshop experience also seems to be an integral step in

eliminating the curse of *otherizing* basic writing students in the composition classroom, and allowing writing instructors to see beyond initial grammatical, structural, and illogical writing flaws which are the roots of basic writing students being isolated, and labeled incompetent within the academy.

Barbara expands on the body of literature in this area as she described the high value of the instructor providing simple *verbal encouragement* to students as they progress through their journey to becoming a strong college-level writer. Very little literature was located that speaks on the powerful impact that simple verbal encouragement can have on an adult student's writing performance. Barbara stated,

My professor provided encouraging words for me saying "hey, you can do this, I believe in you." Not everybody has someone to believe in them. For some students, the instructor is the only sense of support system available to encourage and provide that high level of support.

Barbara reveals here how simple phrases of verbal encouragement can be an educationally transformative force in an adult student's journey to becoming a competent college-level writer.

The concepts of *self-teaching* and a desire for more *one-on-one* student/instructor time are also two notable ideas that emerged from the findings and highlights the views of selected writing theorists in the field. Shannon stated, "I would like to see instructors be more patient with his or her class and guide them more throughout the semester, rather than just throwing information out to the students and expecting them to succeed on their own." In addition, Aaron related his perspective on how many English instructors expect

their students to self-teach themselves and travel the journey toward college-level writing alone. Aaron stated,

In some cases, I feel like some instructors don't try to help their students. Most of the time they will just give you a book, tell you to read it, and write about it on a specific topic. For some students this is very difficult, because coming out of high school or if you have been out of the formal academic setting for an extended period of time, you need a dedicated level of hands-on attention and teaching. I feel if instructors would help students hands-on they would perform much better in class.

Consistent with Aaron's perception. Miglietti & Strange (1998) assert that student-centered classes have a strong relation with high academic performance. Jonathan and Sherry also asserted that they would like to see not only more one-on-one time practiced between student and instructor in an effort to eliminate the solitary phenomenon of students being forced to self-teach themselves in the classroom, but also a higher level of collaborative learning as well.

Sherry shared a very noteworthy response regarding instructor's need to differentiate between the standards of high school and college-level writing considering the large number of adult students that enter the college English classroom possessing oftentimes only high school level writing skills. The current body of literature is extremely limited on this particular topic and thus Sherry's expression during her interview is very enlightening. Sherry stated,

Many high school teachers do not teach you how to write on a college level or prepare you for the rigorous types of essays that you will have to write upon

entrance into college. Students often get confused on high school versus college level standards of writing. Often you hear students say “in high school I wrote this way” or “in high school my teacher allowed this or that.”

One finding which emerged from the data that was very new and innovative was the idea of implementing *specialized professional instructors* as tutors in English department writing and tutoring centers. This finding is also an expansion of the existing literature as the majority of literature in this area focuses on the conventional *student* as peer tutor within writing centers. Tanya related her perception on this innovative idea stating that providing degreed instructors as tutors into writing centers would be an upgrade to the current system and would result in students receiving a more indepth level of knowledge and comprehension regarding aspects of the writing process. Tanya stated,

Peer tutoring should not be the only option that they have. I think that at some point that there needs to be a *specialized instructor* there in the tutoring center that is helping the students. . . I think a specialized instructor should be a part of the tutoring staff so that students can schedule a certain time beyond normal class hours to speak with them concerning the areas that you feel you are not strong in.

Overall, Tanya’s perspective on implementing specialized English instructors into writing centers would greatly modernize the current system of writing centers being staffed with conventional students. This not only expands the current body of literature, but also calls awareness of both community college and university English departments to the enhanced levels of student learning, as well as the educational transformation that could occur from restructuring the conventional writing center tutoring system.

Reccomendations for Future Practice and Research

Findings from the study illuminate key recommendations for future practice and research in the area of English composition pedagogy, as well as instruction for the adult student in the English composition classroom. Adult learners not only bring a multifaceted levels of educational backgrounds, challenges, and perspectives into the classroom, but they also bring with them the requirement for instructors to successfully mainstream them into the classroom with their traditional younger counterparts. Through a sincere, professional level of nurturing, instructional practice and leadership adult students can successful achieve their goal of receiving a college-level education, as well as achieve a unique, creative level of *transformative learning*.

Recommendations for Future Practice

1. English composition instructors should work to practice a higher level of awareness and sensitivity toward diverse levels of writing readiness in the classroom. Considering that adult students come into the college setting from a diverse range of academic writing backgrounds, instructors must maintain a keen eye on the multifaceted levels of writing ability that commonly emerge from these diverse backgrounds. A potential method of assessing levels of writing ability is for first semester freshman English instructors to assign a diagnostic writing assignment as the first class assignment for students, or alternatively to present students with a brief questionnaire regarding their academic writing history.
2. Considering the high level of comfort that participants expressed with writng in the *personal narrative* essay genre, English composition instructors should work to bridge the gap by establishing equal feelings of student comfort toward the

Persuasive essay genre, the *Compare and Contrast* essay genre, the *Cause and Effect* essay genre, as well as other major essay genres common to the freshman English composition course. This could possibly be accomplished by the English instructor spending more time on teaching the components of these other essay genres, as well as allowing students to more frequently write on *open* topics as they do with the *narrative* essay genre. This would allow them to focus on topics that may be more meaningful to them, given the personal nature of the narrative essay seems to be an important feature in its greater accessibility.

3. There is a need for the freshman English composition instructor to practice a higher level of *patience* with their nontraditional students who demonstrate difficulty in the areas of comprehension, writing style, and basic reading comprehension. Findings suggest that if the English instructor would make efforts to practice patience with their adult students who enter the classroom with poor writing and literacy backgrounds, they would ultimately gain the confidence and self-efficacy to perform at a higher level.
4. English composition instructors should make it a priority to conduct more frequent *one-on-one* tutoring sessions with their adult student population. Many adults that have entered the English classroom after an extended absence from the formal standards of academic writing are in need of intimate, detailed attention to the specific writing objectives that they are experiencing challenges with. Dedicated one-on-one tutoring sessions will not only enhance learning in challenging academic areas, but will also aid in raising the overall morale, self-confidence, as well as the self-efficacy of the adult learner.

5. English instructors should work to integrate a more diverse range of writing assignments and projects into the freshman English composition classroom that better reflect the diverse ranges of age and educational backgrounds that currently comprise today's classrooms. Adult students entering the classroom with extended absences often enter with a vast range of workforce and professional experiences, as well as domestic experience. A high level of retention, as well as general inspiration toward acquiring their college education could arise if this particular student population is allowed to connect their life experiences (professional and domestic) to core academic assignments of the English course.
6. Developmental English instructors should begin to structure their course curriculum to mirror, or at a minimum present the assignment characteristics of the freshman English composition course in an effort to create a smooth transition for students upon entrance into freshman English composition. Many adult students complain that their developmental English course lacked the high writing and reading standards of most freshman English composition courses, which ultimately causes students to experience a kind of *literacy shock* when faced with the rigorous, college-level demands of the freshman english composition classroom.
7. Freshman English composition instructors should begin to present a basic review of the formal academic writing process in consideration of the adult students who placed directly into their course as a result of standardized testing. These students did not progress though the developmental English course sequence and gain the advantage of reviewing the basic elements of writing and reading, which are

strong foundational prerequisites of the college-level English composition classroom.

8. Freshman English composition instructors must take care in avoiding differential treatment of their *traditional* and *nontraditional* student populations in regard to assuming levels of writing ability, as well as professional goals. All students in a classroom regardless of academic ability and educational background deserve to be exposed to the same level of professional instruction, as well as quality of instruction. English instructors should not assume that older nontraditional adult students in their classroom will not utilize formal writing skills on the level their traditional student counterparts would. Ultimately, instructors must make a conscious effort to refrain from *otherizing* the nontraditional student and focus on creating an atmosphere of educational *equality*.
9. English instructors and English department personell as a whole should make strong efforts to create awareness among their adult student population of the many campus resources that foster student success such as the campus writing center, the tutoring center, educational computer labs etc. Many nontraditional students who have experienced extended absences from the formal college setting, as well as the nontraditional students who are fully new to college life are unfamiliar with these resources, which are ultimately a major portion of their regular tuition and fees.
10. English departments should consider a specialized peer mentoring program for their nontraditional student population as a supplement to the currently in-place writing centers, tutoring centers, and other student success resources. Having a

nontraditional peer mentor that has completed and acquired experience in the English department course sequence would also provide new nontraditional students an experienced writing resource to refer to with questions, concerns, or other assignment related issues in addition to the primary instructor. Providing multiple resources to the nontraditional college student not only broadens their opportunities for educational growth and development, it also illustrates to them that they are not alone in their educational journey and that the academy's ultimate goal is for them to experience a high level of success.

11. English departments should make a conscious effort to integrate more *ethnically diverse* reading selections, specifically *African American* literature within the freshman English composition curriculum. The literature currently reveals that reading selections within English composition courses are highly limited with regard to ethnic diversity. The freshman English composition classroom is as diverse in skin color and culture as it is in education backgrounds and ages. Findings from the study and related literature indicated that students' performance level on reading assignments increases, as well as their overall interest in reading when engaged with reading assignments that align closely with their own identity, culture, and ethnicity.
12. Freshman English composition instructors should work to include more *teamwork* into their course curriculum in an effort to help bridge the gap between traditional and nontraditional student groups. Oftentimes, younger traditional students find it difficult to work on class projects with older, more experienced nontraditional students due to a variety of factors such as age, differences in perspectives, and a

general difference in learning approach. As a result, students from both groups may experience a strong sense of alienation in the classroom. Collaborative team focused projects will enable these two student groups to exchange ideas, closely listen to each other's perspectives, and engage creativity for a common purpose., and will ultimately build a strong sense of community in the English composition classroom as a whole.

13. English composition instructors should begin to attend professional development seminars that focus on increasing their level of awareness of individual student differences including those related to race and culture, as well as expanding their repertoire of English composition teaching strategies.

Recommendations for Future Research

Upon completion of this study, it was found that several other key areas needed to be researched in an effort to expand the body of literature in the area of adult African American students' writing experiences in the freshman English composition classroom.

1. Only nontraditional African American students attending *community college* were chosen as participants in this particular study. Research should also be conducted on nontraditional students' writing experiences in the *four-year university* freshman English composition classroom.
2. This study focused on the writing challenges and success of nontraditional African American students in the *college-level* freshman English composition classroom. Future research should be conducted on the writing challenges and successes of African American nontraditional students in the *developmental* English classroom.

3. This study focused on the *writing* challenges of nontraditional African American students in the freshman English composition classroom. Findings from the study indicate that future research should be conducted on the *reading* challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom considering that competency in these two elements of literacy are critical skills used in the English course.
4. A combination of African American men and women were included in this study. Further research should be conducted to focus specifically on nontraditional African American *men* or *women*'s writing challenges and successes. A specific focus on gender in regard to writing experiences could yield interesting and very cutting-edge insight into how specific genders respond to various pedagogical approaches to the writing process.
5. This study focused only on nontraditional *African American* students. Future research should focus on a comparative study between *African American* and *Caucasian* nontraditional students' writing experiences in an effort to investigate the dynamic of ethnic and cultural impact on writing success or, or failure in the English composition classroom.
6. This study focused only on *African American* nontraditional students' writing experiences in the freshman English composition classroom. Future research should be conducted on nontraditional African American students' writing experiences in other writing intensive core courses across the disciplines such as U.S. history, music history, art history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology.

7. This study focused on the writing experiences of nontraditional *African American students*. Future research should be conducted on the academic writing experiences of *other students of color*.
8. This study highlighted many participants who felt that their African American ethnicity had no impact on their success or failure as a developing college-level writer. Although some students may have expressed this feeling because they felt they could overcome obstacles they encountered, it appears some may have been inclined not to attribute obstacles to race or racism given a color-blind perspective that views discrimination as a thing of the past, no longer relevant to their lives today. A full study should be conducted on African Americans or students of color who exhibit a *colorblind* approach to their acquirement of a higher education in an effort to reveal how actual adult student voices align, as well as disalign with current literature.
9. This study focused on the writing experiences of nontraditional African American students with no physical, visual, or hearing impairments. Future research should be conducted on the writing and learning experiences of physically, visually, and aurally impaired nontraditional African American students in an effort to gain insight into the dynamic that these impairments impacted their success in a course that relies so heavily on visual and aural skills.
10. This study focused on the writing challenges and successes of nontraditional African American students at two generally ethnically diverse community colleges. Further research should be conducted focusing on the writing challenges and successes of nontraditional African American students attending

predominately *White* institutions, or institutions with less ethnic diversity among students and faculty.

11. Future research should be conducted on adult students entering postsecondary education with a high school English AP (Advanced Placement) program background. This research should focus on these students' level of writing readiness compared to adult students who lack AP course background in English.
12. This study overwhelmingly highlighted students' level of comfort they experienced when writing in the personal narrative/autobiographical essay genre. Future research should focus on how English instructors can effectively create a bridge from the comfort zone associated with the narrative essay genre to other forms of academic writing.
13. This study focused on students who had successfully passed their freshman English composition course. Future research should be conducted on the classroom experiences of students who were unsuccessful in freshman English composition, and ultimately failed the course.

Reflections

Upon achieving my Master of Arts degree in English Literature in 2008 and acquiring a community college English instructor position teaching freshman English composition, I soon began to notice a dynamic of writing challenges and successes among my minority adult students, more specifically, my adult African American students. I knew from early childhood that my ultimate professional goal was to pursue a Ph.D., but I was uncertain about the specific area of research that I desired to undertake at the doctoral level. As I began to notice my adult African American students experiencing

a broad range of writing challenges, as well as successes in the classroom, I had an enlightenment. I knew at that moment that this was the area of research that I wanted to pursue at the Ph.D. level. I wanted to investigate how African American students described their writing challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom. I became interested in their intimate stories and perceptions regarding their learning experiences in the classroom and ultimately what could be done to crystalize their classroom experiences as permanent knowledge to be contributed to the field of English composition pedagogy. As I embarked upon this study, I was uncertain about how many participants I would recruit, but ultimately, I was able to obtain twelve participants who provided very rich, detailed, and insightful data. This data provided a window into the participant's journey to becoming a college-level adult writer.

As the researcher, I was concerned that my bias as a freshman English composition instructor would impact the level of authenticity and sincerity in the data as participants shared their stories. Although some level of bias is inevitable in the research process, I believe I was able to adequately detach myself from the title of *English Composition Instructor* and minimize bias by maintaining an open-mind, refraining from personal judgement of participant responses, and maintaining a high level of ethical professionalism with all participants. Upon completion of the study, not only was valuable insight gained into participant's overall challenges and successes as developing college-level writers, but also insight into improving the quality of English composition instruction. Ultimately, this insight can be used as a vehicle to enhance the potential for adult English students to experience an effective level of *transformative learning* in the freshman English composition classroom. Moreover, although African American adult

students may enter the academy with an array of educational backgrounds, challenges, and life experiences that can help or hinder the learning process, through an instructor's proper nurturing, guidance, and an authentic interest in their success as adult learners, they can successfully attain their goal of becoming a competent, strong, college-level writer not only in the freshman English composition classroom, but also in classrooms across the disciplines.

Concluding Thoughts

It is my hope as an English composition instructor who is strongly passionate about the field of writing pedagogy, as well as the academic success of adult learners that we as postsecondary educators will begin to listen more effectively to the voices of the nontraditional students entering our classrooms. As the nontraditional student age 25 and older is increasingly becoming the dominant face of the modern postsecondary classroom, especially the community college setting, it is critical that we as instructors begin to modify our classroom curriculum in an effort to reflect this demographic shift. Regardless of ethnicity, educational background, family barriers, or job challenges presented by the nontraditional student, postsecondary educators must make a continuous effort to refrain from prejudices against this very vulnerable student population and make student learning center stage in the classroom. I have seen many positive, innovative, and progressive pedagogical approaches of community college freshman English composition instructors, as well as four-year university level freshman English composition instructors in regard to guiding the adult learner toward the status of successful college-level writer. On the contrary, I have also witnessed highly negative, oppressive, ineffective and otherizing pedagogical approaches to teaching adults, which

ultimately resulted in falling retention rates of the nontraditional student population.

Ultimately, we as professionals in the higher education field must focus on eliminating the latter from our classrooms. It is my hope that this study is not only a highly informative piece of literature within the field, but ultimately an enlightening *catalyst for change* that will ignite high levels of awareness among instructors to insure that effective, creative, and imaginative *transformative learning* is occurring among our community of adult learners.

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

This study was focused on gaining insight into the writing experiences of African American nontraditional students age 25 and over who was recently enrolled in a first semester freshman English course. I as the researcher investigated the challenges and successes experienced by this student group and the factors to which they attribute these challenges and successes. The guiding research question was: How do community college nontraditional students of African American heritage perceive their experiences in the first semester freshman English composition classroom?

First Interview Protocol

1. As an adult student of color, describe the quality of your highschool writing education and how it impacted your performance as a writer returning to the classroom.
2. What expectations about the freshman English course did you have prior to entering first semester freshman English?
3. What specific writing assignments in freshman English would you describe as challenging, and why?
4. Critical Incident Prompt: Reflect upon a time during your freshman English composition course experience when you felt successful as a writer. Discuss the specific assignment and describe the factors that you think contributed to this successful writing experience including feedback from your instructor or peers. How did this experience make you feel?

5. Critical Incident Prompt: Reflect upon a time during your freshman English composition course experience when you felt unsuccessful as a writer. Discuss the specific assignment and describe the factors that you think contributed to this unsuccessful writing experience including feedback from your instructor or peers. How did this experience make you feel?
6. Describe any cultural or ethnic factors that you feel impacted your success as a college-level writer in the freshman English composition classroom.
7. Critical Incident Prompt: Can you think of any time when you felt your African American cultural heritage or perspective as a writer was challenged in the freshman English composition classroom? If so, Describe what happened and how this experience made you feel. How do you think it impacted your overall learning experience, as well as your view of the freshman English composition course?
8. How do you think your experiences writing on the job have helped or hindered your success as an academic writer?
9. Critical Incident Prompt: Critically reflect upon your freshman English instructor's level of support for your writing development as an African American adult student? How would you describe their approach to teaching English composition and ability to understand your unique learning needs as a nontraditional African American student writer?
10. Is there anything more that you would like to share at this time that I did not ask you?

Second Interview Protocol

11. What future changes in English department faculty or administrative support would you like to see implemented in an effort to strengthen the nontraditional adult students' writing development?
12. Reflect for a moment on the ideal freshman English composition textbook. Describe future changes that you would like to see implemented into a freshman English course text in an effort to better prepare nontraditional students for the writing demands of upper-level undergraduate courses?
13. What would you like to see implemented into the undergraduate curriculum to enhance the writing skills of nontraditional students. Describe how you feel the particular course or courses would impact your learning as a nontraditional African American student.
14. What specific support would you like to see implemented into English departments specifically for nontraditional African American students?
15. Is there anything more that you would like to share at this time that I did not ask you?

(This second interview will also be used to share initial interpretations of the student's first interview and to check the degree to which the student is in agreement with those initial conclusions.)

APPENDIX B

Texas State University-San Marcos Consent

Form to Participate in the Study

I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in the dissertation research study entitled *Community College Nontraditional African American Students and their Journey to College Level Writing: Voices from the First Semester Freshman English Composition Classroom*, being conducted by **Mr. Philip R. Jones** as partial fulfillment of the requirements for his Ph.D. degree in Education with a major in Adult, Professional, and Community Education at Texas State University-San Marcos. Mr. Jones can be contacted by phone at 712-584-0504 or via e-mail at pj1049@txstate.edu My research is supervised by Dr. Jovita M. Ross-Gordon. Dr Ross-Gordon can be contacted by phone at (512) 245-8084 or via e-mail at jr24@txstate.edu

This study is a qualitative study which involves semi-structured qualitative interviewing and an analysis of artifacts in the form of past graded papers. Interview questions will be organized in the form of past, present, and future in an effort to gain a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of the participant's writing challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom, as well as the factors that attributed to these writing challenges and successes. The first interview will focus on past and present writing challenges and successes, and the second interview will focus on additional topics such as clarifying interpretations from the first interview and gathering future recommendations for English departments, as well as first semester English composition instructors in an effort to enhance the writing success of the adult African American student. All interviews will be audio recorded and will last 45-60 minutes; however, all personal information will remain **CONFIDENTIAL** and only known to the researcher. Moreover, pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants when presenting individual narratives unless otherwise requested by the participant. Once the audiotaped data for this research study has been transcribed, all recordings will be maintained in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's residence and deleted upon completion of the final study submission.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as an African American adult learner in a highly interactive educational environment. The results of this study may prove beneficial to you as an adult African American student ultimately giving you a voice to freely articulate your writing needs, experiences, and perspectives on college-level writing instruction, as well as provide you

with valuable insight to better understand some of the common writing challenges and successes experienced in the English composition course. It may also provide insightful information to faculty, administrators, and to the academic research field as a whole. A summary of the findings will be provided to you as a participant upon completion of the study at your request.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with the college. You may also choose not to answer any particular question for any reason.

This study has been approved by the University's IRB Committee (Approval #EXP2012U8735). Any pertinent questions about the research and research participant's rights should be directed to the IRB chairperson, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 or via e-mail to lasser@txstate.edu), or to the compliance specialist, Ms. Becky Northcut (512-245-2102).

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

Printed Name

(Researcher's Signature)

(Date)

Printed Name

APPENDIX C

Lone Star College System

Consent Form to Participate in the Study

I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in the dissertation research study entitled *Community College Nontraditional African American Students and their Journey to College Level Writing: Voices from the First Semester Freshman English Composition Classroom*, being conducted by **Mr. Philip R. Jones** as partial fulfillment of the requirements for his Ph.D. degree in Education with a major in Adult, Professional, and Community Education at Texas State University-San Marcos. Mr. Jones can be contacted by phone at 713-584-0504 or via e-mail at Philip.R.Jones@lonestar.edu. My research is supervised by Dr. Jovita M. Ross-Gordon. Dr. Ross-Gordon can be contacted by phone at (512) 245-8084 or via e-mail at jr24@txstate.edu

This study is a qualitative study which involves semi-structured qualitative interviewing and an analysis of artifacts in the form of past graded papers. Participants will be expected to provide preferably 2-3 graded papers for analysis from their English composition course experience as a requirement to participate in the study. Student names will not be associated with their respective assignments. Interview questions will be organized in the form of past, present, and future in an effort to gain a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of the participant's writing challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom, as well as the factors that attributed to these writing challenges and successes. The first interview will focus on past and present writing challenges and successes, and the second interview will focus on additional topics such as clarifying interpretations from the first interview and gathering future recommendations for English departments, as well as first semester English composition instructors in an effort to enhance the writing success of the adult minority student. All interviews will be audio recorded and will last 45-60 minutes; however, all personal information will remain **CONFIDENTIAL** and only known to the researcher. Moreover, pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants when presenting individual narratives unless otherwise requested by the participant. Once the audiotaped data for this research study has been transcribed, all recordings will be maintained in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's residence and deleted upon completion of the final study submission.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as an African American or Latino male or female adult learner in a highly

interactive educational environment. The results of this study may prove beneficial to you as an adult minority student ultimately giving you a voice to freely articulate your writing needs, experiences, and perspectives on college-level writing instruction, as well as provide you with valuable insight to better understand some of the common writing challenges and successes experienced in the English composition course. It may also provide insightful information to faculty, administrators, and to the academic research field as a whole. A summary of the findings will be provided to you as a participant upon completion of the study at your request.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with the college. You may also choose not to answer any particular question for any reason.

Any pertinent questions about the research and research participant's rights should be directed to the IRB Program Administrator, Debra Blackburn (832-813-6588 or via e-mail to IRB@LoneStar.edu)

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

Printed Name

(Researcher's Signature)

(Date)

Printed Name

APPENDIX D

Lee College

Consent Form to Participate in the Study

I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in the dissertation research study entitled *Community College Nontraditional African American Students and their Journey to College Level Writing: Voices from the First Semester Freshman English Composition Classroom*, being conducted by **Mr. Philip R. Jones** as partial fulfillment of the requirements for his Ph.D. degree in Education with a major in Adult, Professional, and Community Education at Texas State University-San Marcos. Mr. Jones can be contacted by phone at 713-584-0504 or via e-mail at pjones@lee.edu. My research is supervised by Dr. Jovita M. Ross-Gordon. Dr. Ross-Gordon can be contacted by phone at (512) 245-8084 or via e-mail at jr24@txstate.edu

This study is a qualitative study which involves semi-structured qualitative interviewing and an analysis of artifacts in the form of past graded papers. Interview questions will be organized in the form of past, present, and future in an effort to gain a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of the participant's writing challenges and successes in the freshman English composition classroom, as well as the factors that attributed to these writing challenges and successes. The first interview will focus on past and present writing challenges and successes, and the second interview will focus on additional topics such as clarifying interpretations from the first interview and gathering future recommendations for English departments, as well as first semester English composition instructors in an effort to enhance the writing success of the adult minority student. All interviews will be audio recorded and will last 45-60 minutes; however, all personal information will remain **CONFIDENTIAL** and only known to the researcher. Moreover, pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants when presenting individual narratives unless otherwise requested by the participant. Once the audiotaped data for this research study has been transcribed, all recordings will be maintained in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's residence and deleted upon completion of the final study submission.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as an African American or Latino male or female adult learner in a highly interactive educational environment. The results of this study may prove beneficial to you as an adult minority student ultimately giving you a voice to freely articulate your writing needs, experiences, and perspectives on college-level writing instruction, as well

as provide you with valuable insight to better understand some of the common writing challenges and successes experienced in the English composition course. It may also provide insightful information to faculty, administrators, and to the academic research field as a whole. A summary of the findings will be provided to you as a participant upon completion of the study at your request.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with the college. You may also choose not to answer any particular question for any reason.

Any pertinent questions about the research and research participant's rights should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Carolyn Lightfoot (281-425-6455) or via e-mail at IRB@lee.edu

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

Printed Name

(Researcher's Signature)

(Date)

Printed Name

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