

Chapter 6. Influence of the College Composition Classroom on Students' Values and Beliefs

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When composing essays for their college composition class, students often reveal their values and beliefs, particularly when they must take—and defend—a position in persuasive essays. The ability of students to not only state their position on an issue but also to clearly articulate—and defend—the rationale for that position is part of their ethical development that occurs during the college years as they become autonomous adults. Moreover, possessing a clarity of perspective, a rationale for that perspective, and the capability to articulate both can greatly contribute to students' success both in college and in their professional lives.

While many first-year students in a composition class may find it easy to state their position on issues, they often struggle to provide the rationale for those positions. That is, while they know *what* they believe, they don't seem certain of *why* they believe it.

On what, then, do they base their beliefs? While it may seem logical to assume that students, particularly traditional-age first-year college students, have simply adopted the values and beliefs of their parents, a review of the literature revealed little research to support or disprove this assumption.

What the research did reveal was that, even when challenged to examine and support their values and beliefs, students who have an established position on an issue are not likely to critique their position or consider alternatives (Perkins 568). However, a single experience with one student in a first-year composition classroom that contradicted this expectation led us to conduct a pilot study to examine the genesis of students' values and beliefs, and to assess the influence of the college composition class on those values and beliefs.

Several years ago, PJ (a pseudonym), a traditional-age student in my college composition class, chose the controversy over the Georgia state flag as the topic of his persuasive essay. At that time, a public debate over the existing “stars and bars” design was quite prominent, pitting those who advocated changing the flag's design based on the argument that the “stars and bars” was representative of 1950s-era discrimination (Dembner F11; Rankin C8; Schmukler 34) against those who viewed the flag as a distinctive symbol of their Southern heritage and, therefore, opposed any change to it.

PJ fell into the latter group and planned to write a persuasive essay arguing in favor of maintaining the flag's existing design. When he submitted his final paper

at the end of the semester, the essay offered a thorough and detailed argument in favor of *changing* the design of the Georgia state flag—a position completely opposite of that he had defended in class discussions at the start of the semester. He later explained that the findings of his research had led him to question his beliefs and the evidence had persuaded him to reconsider his position.

That PJ learned much about his topic through the research he conducted was not surprising. Numerous researchers have found that writing can influence learning, noting that “writing is a powerful means of learning” (Gere 2) and “a unique way of knowing and . . . reaching understanding” (Fulwiler x). What *was* surprising was the dramatic change in PJ’s position on the issue of the Georgia state flag in just a few short months. PJ clearly defies Perkins’ finding that students are not likely to critique the positions they hold, and, in fact, PJ’s shift in perspective may represent the type of personal growth that writing and the composition classroom *could*—and maybe should—foster.

That such a profound shift in belief is possible through the writing process has been promoted and supported by numerous researchers. For example, Toby Fulwiler argues that we “write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality . . . to order and represent our own understanding. In this sense, language . . . becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning” (Fulwiler x). Similarly, Syrene Forsman contends that writing instructors can make a conscious choice to facilitate students’ ability to think rather than “sentencing [them] to thoughtless mechanical operations” and believes that students who are “encouraged to try a variety of thought processes in classes . . . [can] develop considerable mental power” (162). But perhaps it is Barbara Walvoord who gives voice to the most elevated expectations of writing, choosing to view writing skills as a “climbing rope whereby students can hoist themselves to the next level of intellectual maturity” (5)—an intellectual maturity demonstrated by PJ when he altered his belief based on the evidence he found. He could now articulate the *why* behind his belief.

The profound shift in perspective that PJ underwent after extensive research suggests he experienced in-depth learning and demonstrates that he was able to synthesize information into an informed position on the issue. However, this shift also calls into question the genesis of PJ’s original position. That is, since the available evidence led him to support changing the design of the Georgia state flag, it seems likely that his original position opposing the change was not based on available evidence but rather shaped by other influences.

To better understand the influences that may shape the beliefs and values of PJ and other college composition students, we conducted a pilot study of 11 traditional-age first-year students enrolled in a second-semester Honors English composition course at a large public university. In this course, students spent the semester focused on academic research and argumentation in the production of documented persuasive essays.

As part of the study, we administered surveys (at the start and end of the se-

mester) that asked students to rank a list of values, to state their position on the issues they had ranked, and to indicate who or what had influenced their values and beliefs. Additionally, we conducted one-on-one discussions with students throughout the semester, invited them to participate in an end-of-the-semester interview (offered as either a face-to-face option or an email interview), and conducted an analysis of students' papers as they progressed from their initial drafts to the final versions of those essays.

Several limitations affected the outcome of this study. The greatest of these limitations was the small number of participants. Since the participants were part of an Honors section of English composition, the class size was intentionally limited to 15 students. Of these, three were ineligible to participate in the study because they were under the age of 18. Furthermore, only 11 of the 12 eligible students chose to complete the survey at the start of the semester, and of those 11, only two attempted the end-of-the-semester survey but neither completed it in its entirety. Finally, although several students indicated a willingness to participate in end-of-semester interviews, only one ultimately participated. Thus, while we were able to identify the values of students at the start of the semester, there was insufficient data from the end-of-semester surveys to allow us to conclusively determine if any shift in students' values occurred during the course of the semester.

A second limitation was that participants ranked only those values listed on the research instrument and did not add any additional values, even though they were invited to do so. Consequently, the results represent only the ranking of those values presented by the researchers although additional values of importance to the participants may exist.

Finally, since the students were fairly homogenous academically (all were Honors students), roughly the same age (18-19), and mostly female (9 of the 11), our findings should not be seen as representative of all college composition students but rather suggest avenues for future research.

In the surveys, students were asked to rank eight values from most to least important. Those values were religion/spirituality, health, financial stability, security, knowledge, family, sense of belonging, and friends. The three values that were rated most important by a majority of students were, in order from most to least important, (1) family, (2) religion/spirituality, and (3) sense of belonging. The least important values were (6) knowledge, (7) health, and (8) friends. Figure 6.1 indicates the percentage of students that ranked each of the eight values as most important or least important to them. For example, the table shows that nearly 90% of the students surveyed ranked *family* as one of their most important values, while 50% of the respondents claimed that *friends* ranked as one of their least important values.

Students were also asked to indicate which of 19 current issues were of greatest concern to them personally; as a neutral response, students could indicate that they had insufficient knowledge to understand an issue. Open-ended questions invited students to share their views and/or positions on these issues. Figure

6.2 provides a complete listing of the issues that were presented to students and shows the percentage of student respondents who *strongly agree/agree* or *disagree/strongly disagree* that the issue cited is of concern to them.

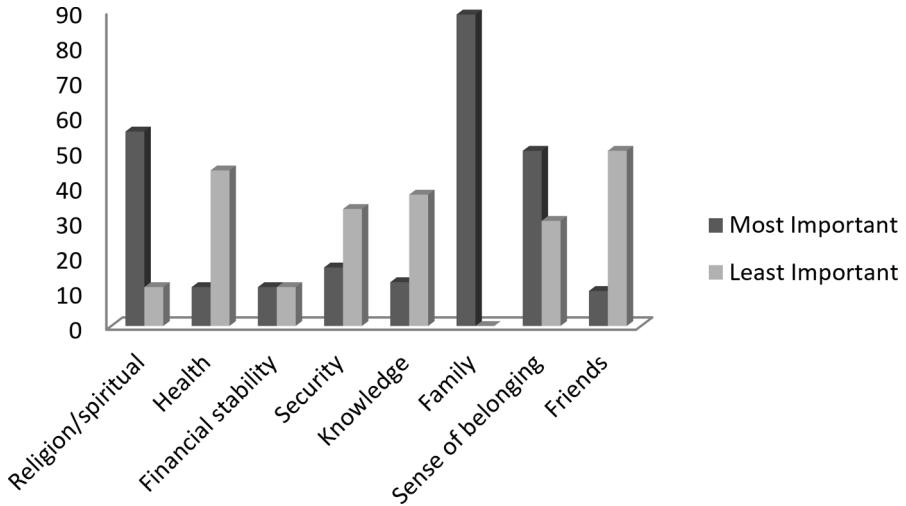


Figure 6.1. Percentage of students rating values most and least important

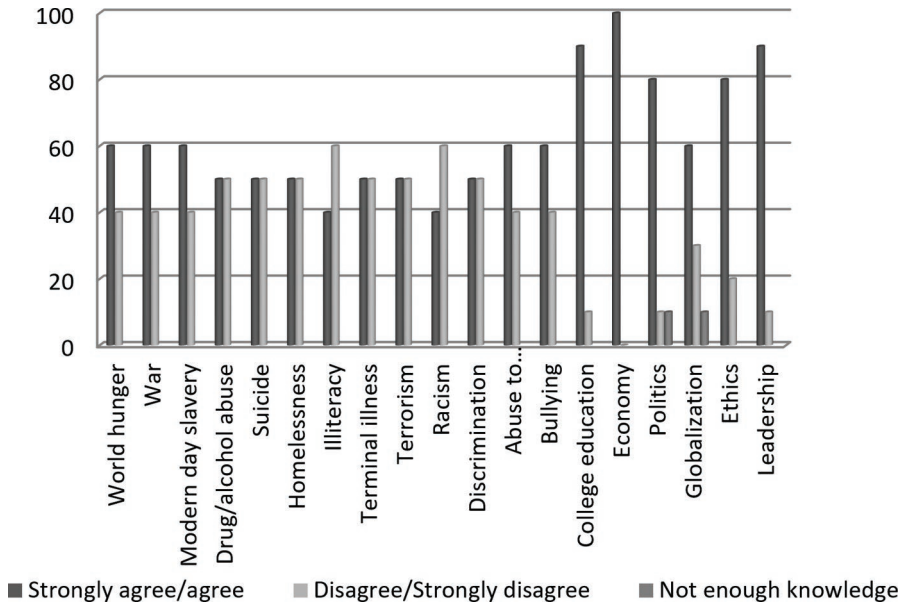


Figure 6.2. Percentage of students indicating concern with issues

The issue of greatest concern to participants in this study was the economy, with a full 100% of the students *strongly agreeing/agreeing* that this was an issue

of concern to them, and nearly 90% *strongly agreeing/agreeing* that both a college education and leadership was important to them. For the majority of the remaining issues, 50%-60% of participants *strongly agreed/agreed* that these issues were of concern. Two notable exceptions were illiteracy and racism; for both of these, only 40% of participants *strongly agreed/agreed* that these issues were of concern.

The open-ended questions asking students for their opinion/position on each issue resulted in a wide range of responses. For three of the 19 issues—illiteracy, terminal illness, and politics—participants provided no comments or positions. The remaining 16 issues received from one to five comments each, several of which stated participants' positions/views on the issues, such as:

- War is inevitable, so we must be ready to fight. (War)
- I don't think that drugs such as marijuana should be legalized. (Drug/Alcohol Abuse)
- There should be a cap to the unemployment checks. (Homelessness)
- Everyone is entitled to a college education. (College Education)

Other comments were simply observations or judgments rather than actual views/positions on an issue:

- People starve everyday while we eat ten Big Macs per day. (World Hunger)
- I work with an organization that strives to help people with suicidal tendencies. (Suicide)
- Colorblind for the win! (Racism)
- Boo Mike Vick. (Abuse to Humans/Animals)
- I am currently in college. (College Education)

In response to the open-ended question regarding the factors or individuals that influenced the development of their views and positions on the various issues, students most often cited parents and teachers as having the greatest impact.

Only one student participated in the end-of-semester email interview that asked open-ended questions designed to gauge whether the participants' values remained consistent throughout the semester and to identify those factors that shaped their values and positions on the various issues. The interviewee indicated that her values remained consistent throughout the semester but that, through her composition class, she came to understand "the importance of basing arguments in current, scientific data, as well as how media can skew certain issues and greatly sway public opinion." Regarding those influences that shaped her views, the respondent wrote:

I have been profoundly influenced by the authority figures in my life. It is their wisdom and life experiences that have shaped the paradigm that I have. My parents, pastors, and certain key teachers have helped me develop a worldview that causes me to have many similar opinions on issues such as economic

structures, religious choice, and political orientation. I am not ashamed to say that I would probably follow very closely with their beliefs and opinions if they were presented to me.

This participant further indicated that:

it is important to have a founded worldview from which you draw positions on current issues. If your opinions flow from a tested, challenged, yet stronger worldview, they will have continuity and you will be able to defend the positions you take. Without a stance on issues that face society, it is impossible to call for change. At times, though, you must be able to yield to authorities who you trust have more informed opinions and reference them when you realize that you simply do not have the knowledge to substantiate your own opinion on issues.

An analysis of the participants' writing and the one-on-one discussions conducted with students revealed that a majority of participants maintained the same position on the issue they were researching from the first draft through the final version. The two exceptions were CH and HS. CH was interested in piracy on the Internet, particularly free music downloads (of which she was in favor). Her first draft was a strictly informative essay in which she explored the evolution of the music industry and current music downloading practices. As she struggled to develop a thesis and identify claims for her persuasive essay, CH had great difficulty defining piracy and even greater difficulty developing claims and locating documented evidence in support of free music downloads. Consequently, CH changed her thesis when, based on her research, she concluded that the Internet was of greater benefit to small bands trying to gain a following than it was to larger, well-established bands. Therefore, her final persuasive paper argued in favor of free music downloading as a means for small bands to gain wider visibility and increase their fan base.

HS had a similar experience in drafting his essay. Much like CH, he had identified a topic (AIDS/HIV) and wrote a first draft that was informative and exploratory. However, the topic proved too broad, and he decided to narrow his focus to a particular aspect of AIDS/HIV. In the second draft of his paper, HS refined his essay to include a clearly stated thesis: "Today's laws regarding HIV/AIDS need to be reevaluated. Some are outdated, some need to be altered, and still others need to be created." One of the laws HS identified as being in need of change prohibited homosexual males from donating blood. In his paper, HS argued that advanced testing methods for screening blood make this law obsolete and unnecessary, stating, "The blood is screened using very accurate tests, reducing the risk of tainted blood to virtually zero." While he makes a valid point, this is the extent of the evidence he offered in support of changing the law regarding homosexual blood donors. However, in the conclusion of his essay, he wrote: "Archaic laws,

such as being unable to donate blood, greatly diminish the blood supply and discriminate against certain groups.” That this statement does not appear until the final paragraph of his paper suggests that he may have drawn this conclusion as a result of the writing process itself by reflecting on the sources he had gathered and synthesizing that material into a coherent position on the issue.

The remaining study participants developed thesis statements in their original drafts that articulated their position on an issue, and they maintained that position throughout the semester. While these students easily stated their positions based on the knowledge they already possessed, they had difficulty identifying claims and locating evidence to support those positions. For example, in the first draft of her essay, BK began with the thesis, “Nurses need to work shorter shifts to protect themselves and their patients and coworkers.” While she was firm in her conviction, BK’s limited knowledge on the subject led her to speculate on possible claims to support her thesis. When her attempts to find evidence in support of her speculative claims proved difficult, she was forced to rethink her thesis.

While our intent was to compare students’ rankings of their values at the start of the semester with those at the end of the semester, the poor rate of return on the post-test surveys did not allow for any meaningful comparative analysis. However, the data we were able to collect offered some valuable insight.

Given the age of the participants, their ranking of values was unremarkable (for example, all participants ranked *family* as most important), with the possible exception of *friends*, which was ranked least important of all the values listed. This seems to contradict the importance they place on *sense of belonging*, which ranked third, although one might conclude that their *sense of belonging* is derived through family (the highest ranked value) rather than friends. Alternatively, they may have viewed *friends* as being encompassed by *sense of belonging* and did not regard *friends* as a wholly separate value. Given that *friends* ranked so low among the participants, and that this was unexpected given the age of the respondents, this finding may not be indicative of the values of most first-year college students. Further study is warranted before any definitive conclusions can be drawn.

In addition to ranking their values, students were asked to indicate which current issues, from a list of 19, were of concern to them. Eight of the issues were not of concern to 50% of the respondents; these were *drug/alcohol abuse*, *suicide*, *homelessness*, *illiteracy*, *terminal illness*, *terrorism*, *racism*, and *discrimination*. This is not surprising given that, based on the demographic of the participants, it is likely that none of these issues affected them directly. Conversely, *economy*, *college education*, and *leadership* were rated as issues of concern by 100%, 90%, and 90% of the study participants, respectively. However, the comments they provided suggest a superficial understanding of these issues that belies their purported level of concern. Only one respondent provided a comment on *economy*, and this was a statement of fact rather than an actual position: “It is hard to find work.” Regarding *college education*, two of the three responses provided could be loosely defined as positions on the issue: “Everyone is entitled to a college education”

and “It’s important.” The other response was simply a statement of fact: “I am currently in college.” Finally, regarding *leadership*, only one respondent provided a position on the issue: “Our country needs better leaders and role models.”

Finally, though a majority of students (60%) indicated that *racism*, *globalization*, and *world hunger* were of concern to them, the comments they provided when asked to state their position on the issues raise some doubts regarding the depth and seriousness of their concern—as well as the extent of their knowledge about these issues. For example, student responses included such statements as, “There isn’t racism anymore. We have a black president,” as well as “Why are people in India taking American jobs?” and “People starve everyday while we eat ten Big Macs per day.”

Our research indicates that first-year composition students have a clear sense of their values and often have positions on many of today’s issues but generally lack the knowledge and life experience to articulate the reasons for the beliefs they hold. Additionally, what knowledge they do possess regarding the issues may be rudimentary or superficial, limiting their ability to develop their opinions wholly separate from those held by the authority figures in their lives. Consequently, it would seem that either their beliefs and opinions may be poorly formed because of a simplistic understanding of an issue or they have merely adopted the opinions and views of influential adults in their lives, such as parents or teachers. Finally, the evolution of thought apparent in the drafts of their papers suggests that the research and reflection necessary when writing an essay for a college composition class can lead to the acquisition of new knowledge, a questioning of values/beliefs, and the development of a student’s own voice.

Since teachers were cited among those authority figures whose opinions influenced students’ values and beliefs, it is possible that what takes place in the composition classroom could potentially impact the values of students, particularly since writing can be viewed as “a value-forming activity, a means of finding our voice as well as making our voice heard. . . [and] this value-forming activity is perhaps the most personally and socially significant role writing plays in our education” (Fulwiler x). Therefore, instructors should be intentional in the manner in which they guide students through the writing process in order to provide opportunities for students to form their values and find their voices.

For example, composition instructors can identify and introduce for class discussion controversial issues of interest to students. Such discussions can reveal a tremendous diversity of thought and attitudes regarding current events or hotly debated topics. Consequently, in order to ensure such discussions remain civil and productive, instructors must demand that students respect one another’s viewpoints and comport themselves appropriately. Instructors should also take care to remain neutral on these issues so that students are free to form their own conclusions without being influenced by the instructors’ personal views.

Additionally, students should be required to research the issues thoroughly, locating and considering supporting evidence—from valid, reputable sources—for

both sides of an issue, thereby offering students the opportunity to synthesize the evidence and develop their own perspective on the topic. Requiring students to write multiple drafts of an essay that incorporates this evidence will demand that they repeatedly reconsider the issue (and evidence) and may lead to the levels of understanding and intellectual maturity of which Fulwiler and Walvoord spoke.

Finally, composition students might be challenged to write a persuasive essay in support of a position that is directly opposite of the one they actually hold. In challenging them to make an argument in support of a belief they oppose, instructors can help students take a fresh look at the available evidence, evaluate the overwhelming amount of information made available through technological advances, and perhaps gain an understanding of the rationale of “the other side.”

Most first-year students come to college fresh from high school with clear values and beliefs. However, while these students may know *what* they believe, they are often unable to articulate *why*. While it may not be common for first-year composition students to experience a dramatic shift in opinion during the course of one semester in the composition classroom, the fact that it occurred in the instance of PJ demonstrates the profound impact a first-year composition course can have. Through the process of researching and writing in their college composition courses, some students may finally be able to articulate *why* they believe as they do, while others may for the first time adopt a position on an issue as an entity wholly separate from their parents, making their initial forays into the adult world and forging their identities as individuals.

If composition instructors choose to embrace the notion that the goal of college is to “encourage each student to develop the capacity to judge wisely in matters of life and conduct. . . [and] set [students] free in a world of ideas and provide a climate in which ethical and moral choices can be thoughtfully examined, and convictions formed” (Halloran 61), and if they seek the means to promote such development, the composition classroom has the potential to promote personal growth, to provide students the opportunity to find their own voices, and to facilitate intellectual maturity.

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