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"IT'S THE WAY THAT THEY TALK TO YOU": INCREASING AGENCY IN BASIC WRITERS THROUGH A SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CARE

ABSTRACT: *As basic writing teachers, our goal is to help students to take on the role of responsible writers. Part of taking on this role involves students' using available resources in ways that enhance their development. This essay explores a question that troubled us as basic writing teachers: in a program that is heavily supported, why did relatively few students seek out and use those resources? Under what circumstances do students seek and not seek help with their writing? Our research revealed that while various factors influence students' decisions to use resources, one factor stands out: the perception of a context of care in the basic writing classroom. Students' perception of a context of care is crucial to their taking on the role of responsible writer.*

> *Interviewer*: "Would you go to the teachers or tutors for help if it was not required?"
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> *Carl*: "Probably not, unless. . . I think there was one time when I went when I wasn't required to, but that's just me. I mean, I can't speak for everyone. I think a lot of people seek out help without being told to. I'm just kind of independent..."

> *Interviewer*: ". . . in what kind of situations do you normally ask for help?"
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> *Carl*: ". . . I guess this goes back to my independent thing. I don't really ask for help a lot, I just kind of deal with it myself. No matter what kind of pain it causes me, I don't ask I guess, I just deal with it myself."

As writing teachers, we are familiar with students like Carl, students who cherish their independence and resist using outside resources such as teachers, students or peers as they write. This resis-

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tance to seeking help is especially troubling to us as basic writing teachers; we know that students must develop a social view of the writing process in order to become confident, responsible writers. What leads students to take a social view of the writing process, to solicit feedback actively from others? Through our study we have found that to our students, a crucial factor is a perception that the person they are seeking feedback from cares about them and their writing.

We teach in a well-funded, fully supported program, the Academic Development Program, at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Our class size is limited to fifteen students, and each section is assigned an undergraduate student TA who facilitates intensive one-on-one work. Indeed, the course's level of challenge led us to change the name from "Basic Writing" to "Intensive Writing." Students have access to the university's Writing Center and to personalized academic counseling. Adhering to the common knowledge in our field, that any successful writing program targeted to underprepared students include a range of support services, we designed our course so that the sixty students who participate in it each year have access to the kinds of support that will enable them to assume responsibility for their own writing, preparing them to succeed in a university setting.[1] Unlike our colleagues in other institutions who recount nightmare tales of administrative underfunding, poor facilities, and overcrowded classrooms, we are confident that the circumstances for teaching and learning are virtually ideal.

Yet we questioned our certainty in the Fall of 1993 when we noticed with increasing concern that not all students used the full range of resources available to them. While virtually every student worked with the instructors one-on-one (usually because we require conferences), significantly fewer followed up with one-on-one work with the student assistants, and even fewer used the Writing Center or other resources. Why? Was it a question of time management? Of low motivation? Was it possible that the conventional wisdom of the field did not apply in our circumstances? In order to find out why, in Fall 1994, we extensively surveyed all four Intensive Writing sections and conducted follow-up interviews in Spring, 1995.[2]

In the course of our research, we identified three variables that appeared to affect students' likelihood of getting help with their writing. The first two did not surprise us: first, students who held a collaborative view of the writing process sought help while those who held an individualistic view did not, and second, students who anticipated a negative, even shaming, response to their work did not seek help. There is considerable literature in the field of basic writing documenting the effect of negative feedback on student writers and the limitations that a rule-driven, non-collaborative view of process places on writers.[3]

What did surprise us were remarks which identified a third vari-

able, the importance of the affective domain in students' willingness to seek help with their writing. Ted, for example, describes the connection between his perception of the teacher's care and his own motivation: "It was like, the teachers, to me, it didn't seem like they cared. So, I didn't care. But you know, like in college, the teachers. . .that I've had so far, they seem like they care. I wanna go get help from them." Student after student echoed Ted's sentiments. They stressed how knowing that those responding to their writing cared about them helped them, both in their motivation to write and in their motivation to seek help with their writing. In our research, we wanted to understand more fully how students describe and experience the caring relationship which they define as crucial to their willingness to seek help.

Searching the field for scholarship on the role of affect in writing led to a short, but useful list of sources.[4] Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson assert the importance of attention to students' psychic needs in the teaching of writing. They provide a persuasive theory regarding the larger profession's lack of recognition of the significant work that writing teachers do in this area: while "[I]t is easy for the institution to sanction the work we do in helping students standardize their writing for the academy. . . the academic institution finds it very *uneasy* to sanction, to *intellectually* admit the bulk of the personal and interpersonal work that compositionists also do with students" (64). We agree and suspect that this lack of institutional recognition relates to the lack of research in the area of affect and writing.

This state of neglect is beginning to change, however. Recently, Susan H. McLeod, in *Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom*, has produced the most comprehensive discussion of the complex role of affect in composition. Grounding her work in her classroom experience as well as in both cognitive and social theories of composition, psychology, and sociology, McLeod presents numerous ways that writing teachers may draw on contemporary understandings of the affective domain in order to reach students more effectively. In her third chapter, "Motivation and Writing," McLeod points to the importance of students' perceiving control over writing situations; of their goals being focused on learning rather than on performance; and of their view of intelligence being incremental, not a stable entity. She introduces two sets of terms which have helped us reconsider the connection of care and student motivation. First, a student who sees learning as "incremental" is oriented towards learning something new, whereas one who sees intelligence as a "stable entity" is oriented to being judged by others as smart (57-58). McLeod's second set draws on the work of Richard deCharms and explains the link between students' motivation and their engaging in either "origin" or "pawn" behavior. "Origins" feel they have control over their behavior and thus "take personal responsibility for their actions, for their learning"

(49). Pawns, however, "see their behavior as determined by external forces beyond their control" and thus do not take responsibility (49). These sets of terms have been particularly useful to us as we have explored the connection of students' perceptions of care and their motivation to seek help with their writing, to take responsibility for their work. McLeod's work helps us to understand the complexity of the affective domain in the teaching of writing. As we work to understand that complexity, we must be cognizant of the assumptions about writing and learning that students bring to the class.

With our attention now focused on the role of affect in students' attitudes towards writing, in particular on the link between care and student agency, we together re-interviewed the six students in our original study who were still attending St. Thomas a year after our first interviews. We invited the students to respond to the transcripts of their first interviews and our interpretations of their comments.[5] Student responses clarified further how important the affective domain was in their assuming responsibility for their writing by seeking help. They also convinced us that students' perception of a context of care in the classroom is a crucial factor in building their confidence as writers and is inextricably linked to their assuming agency and responsibility for their own progress as writers.

Before we proceed with our case studies, we would like to define three key terms. By "agency" we mean a personal sense of empowerment, a sense of being the subject, not the object of action. "Responsibility" results from recognizing one's own agency, implying not only empowerment, but also a sense of accountability. Student writers, then, who recognize their own agency would see themselves as responsible for deciding what activities, such as using support services, fostered their own development as writers.[6] Our understanding of the term "care" is informed by the work of feminist philosopher Nel Noddings, who defines a reciprocal "ethic of care" based on the complete receptivity of both the care-giving teacher and the cared-for student.[7] According to Noddings, in a caring relationship, both the one-caring and the one-cared-for must be "receptive" to one another (30). The one-caring demonstrates her "engrossment" (17) or complete receptivity to the one-cared-for by her confirmation and support of his goals. This open and non-judgmental state is the essence of the caring relationship: "To the cared-for no act in his behalf is quite as important or influential as the attitude of the one-caring" (19-20). The one-cared-for confirms his corresponding receptivity by his response which need not be "gratitude or even . . . direct acknowledgment" but a "free, vigorous, and happy immersion in his own projects (toward which the one-caring has directed her own energy also)" (181). We would like to emphasize that when we discuss care it is not as an absolute term— e.g., that a teacher is either caring or not caring—but rather as a term

relative to the student's perception. One student may perceive a teacher as caring and another as not.

A perception of a context of care is important to the nine students we interviewed. Although not everyone uses the word "care," the interviews are rich with descriptions of caring (and not caring) teacher-student relationships. Kerri, for example, stresses the importance of a non-judgmental attitude on the part of a teacher or tutor. Identified by her instructor as a student who frequently seeks feedback and makes use of resources, Kerri describes how her attitude toward the Writing Center changed when she realized she was not going to be belittled:

> I didn't know what they would think of me. I didn't know if they would look at my work and go "Oh my god, she really doesn't know how to write a paper." But now it's no big deal because I've seen some other people down there seeking help and they're not down there to judge you; they're just down there to give you feedback and I think I had it set in my mind that they were just going to judge you and laugh at the door after you leave.

Once she is convinced that "they're not down there to judge you" she is willing to use the resource. Note that Kerri's is not simply a fear of negative feedback (expressed by many of our interviewees); it extends to a fear of her character being judged based on her writing. A non-judgmental attitude, even while offering a critique of a student's work, fits with Noddings' ethic of care.

The students also describe many instances of routine, brief, teacher-student interaction as caring encounters that spur their motivation. They cite, for example, the tone of their teachers' written and oral feedback, teachers' attempts to draw shy students into discussions in non-threatening ways, and, in one case, a teacher calling a student who has missed class to find out if she is okay. One student, Jim, vividly recalls a single remark:

> I remember distinctively [the instructor] saying "You're really on the ball on this book, [Jim], and I'm glad you're on the ball. You know what you're talking about." And that just drove me to read the whole book and write a good paper . . . You don't have to go on for days praising somebody. Just to say that was good, just a few words, it made me think that wow, at least she's noticing that and it's not a lost cause.

Comments like Jim's reveal that teacher demonstrations of care need not be elaborate or extended to be effective. Small comments and gestures clearly have a powerful effect in transmitting the attitude of care

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that Noddings defines as central to the caring relationship.

Ted, one student who explicitly mentions care in both interviews, highlights his teacher's affect of accessibility when asked to describe how he knew a teacher cared about him:

> It's the way that they talk to you . . . It's a kinda way that I feel, like I would be able to always talk to them . . . It's like a bond. Cause she . . . was there to help me whenever I needed it. So now I feel whenever I need help that I can go back to her. Or go back to one of my teachers that helped me. [It's] being available, and letting me know that, if you need help, I'll be there to help you.

Ted's perception of his teacher's accessibility emphasizes that caring is mutual and plays an important role in his willingness to ask for help.

Though the experiences and perceptions of each of the students we interviewed are complex and unique, several conclusions have become clear to us: (1) students feel that they can readily identify an attitude of care; as one noted, "you can tell the people that really care"; (2) by a caring attitude, they do not mean an extended intervention, but rather the teacher's day-to-day receptivity punctuated by occasional intense engrossment in their concerns (3) students are more willing to seek out help with their writing and take on the role of responsible writer when they perceive a context of care.

Now we would like to turn to two case studies, Max and Kathy, to demonstrate how a perception of a context of care can inform a student's willingness to take on the role of responsible writer.

Max: *"Yes, you can write if you want to."*

In his first interview with us, Max describes the lack of personal agency he felt as a writer in high school. He revised little, if at all, and his goal was merely to complete the assignment. How much work he put into a piece of writing depended solely on how much the grade counted. Because he perceived a context of care in his first year college writing classes, however, Max shifted in the course of two semesters to a position of responsible agency. From our interviews with him, we noted that two elements in this context of care are particularly important: (1) writing for a purpose—his own, not someone else's—and (2) open-minded, supportive readers.

If we looked at Max's writing alone, it is likely that we would label him as a student who made minimal progress in his first year at the university. In each of the three writing profiles he completed, he describes himself as a struggling writer. In the first profile, he writes, "I feel that it [writing] is difficult because I get confused with all the

writing symbols and ideas and the things to make a good paper." In the second profile, he identifies his "wordy expression and lack of depthness" as the reason for this difficulty. And in the final profile, he notes, "Writing is still difficult to me because I like to get ahead of myself and still have problems keeping ideas clear."

Despite this continual struggle with writing, Max makes tremendous progress as a writer, changing from a student who writes with the sole aim of getting papers finished to a teacher's satisfaction, to a student who writes to learn about himself and the material he is studying. The change in Max's attitude towards writing is evident in his survey answers to the question asking whether he likes to write. In his first response he says, "I like to write somewhat, only when it doesn't depend on a grade because I feel pressure on myself when the writing is graded." In his end-of-semester response, he notes, "I like to write because it's a way I can express my viewpoints and my ideas and it lets me understand my purpose." Max comes to take responsibility for his writing and learning, to feel a sense of agency and embrace the role of a writer; as a result, he fully utilizes the resources available to him: teachers, peers, and tutors.

Being encouraged to write for his own purposes, not the teacher's, is the first sign of care leading Max to increased agency. Max links his increased sense of responsibility as a writer to the *kind* of writing he is asked to do in college: "It's not what the book says or anything, it's more of what we think." Max's perception of control leads him to develop a sense of personal agency and responsibility, what McLeod calls "origin" behaviors. He notes that this sense of purpose "makes it more interesting to write as well as to read." Instead of simply reporting information or the teacher's opinions, Max becomes engaged with the process of trying to figure out and develop his own opinions on the subject matter.

Max elaborates on this shift to writing for his own purposes in both of his interviews. In high school, he says, he wrote simply to get the assignment done, usually at the last minute. He didn't engage with the subject matter, " I just kind of stayed up on top. You know — I really didn't get into the stuff." Max concludes, "You could either learn it or you could write it, or you could do both. And I just wrote it, you know. My purpose was just to write it . . . the purpose became both now [in college] — to learn and to write." By learning, Max seems to mean not only writing-to-discover, but also the more fundamental idea of a writer actually understanding what he has written. He says his writing class "gave us a challenge to write. But the challenge, I think, was mostly to understand what we're writing about. And that's a big thing that I learned, to understand what I'm writing about."

Max describes himself as "on the verge of being an active writer." When asked in the follow-up interview what he means by "active," he

notes that understanding what you are writing and being clear are only a part of what it means to write: "the understanding and clear part comes from what you do beforehand . . .what I mean by active is like making sure I'm doing the right things . . . I'm doing more steps in order to better my writing."

Connected to this internalized sense of purpose, the second major step that Max adds as he has become a more active, responsible writer is to solicit feedback from others as he revises. Although he still prefers to work alone on his writing, his attitude towards collaboration with others changes drastically in his first year. This changed attitude towards getting help — whether it is from the instructor, from student assistants, Writing Center tutors, or friends — was directly connected to the *kind* of help he received. In his interviews he stressed the importance of finding the right people: "I mean, if you find a person with an open mind, an open-minded person, then it's gonna be for the better." In his second interview he explained further that an open-minded person "would see both sides of the issue . . . so you can support what you're saying." The person, then, does not try to force Max to adjust to her agenda, but uses her knowledge of different viewpoints to help him to support *his* point.

Max also stresses the importance of supportive feedback, not simply criticism: "You don't need someone there, like, breathing down your neck saying no, this isn't right. I think you need more support than you do criticism." He doesn't discount criticism — "the negative is there just to keep you on track" — but notes:

> People with writing problems . . .they don't need to like look at all the red marks because they already know that they're gonna be coming . . .I think that's what leads a lot of people away from writing . . . A teacher can just hand it back with, "Well, you gotta work on it." Well he knows that. He knew he had to work on it.

Like many of the students we interviewed, Max emphasizes that what he means by support is far from elaborate or time-consuming. He mentions little things such as the teacher giving him a word of positive reinforcement: "I've never really been a good writer and I've always kinda struggled with it. So someone like me, I just kinda look for, you know, any little thing that's gonna help me. Like if the teacher says you're on the right track."

Max's perceptions of support and control cause him to take on the role of a responsible writer. On one level, his development is a direct result of the student-centered workshop pedagogy that Brooke and others advocate. He has come to see writing as a social process through which he learns and communicates to others for a purpose,

<u>his</u> purpose. Part of that process involves soliciting the feedback of others—not for 'the right answer," but for discussion that will lead him to achieve his goals as a writer. Indeed, our final interview with Max a semester before he graduated included the following exchange:

> *Interviewer:* "Would you say overall that you've been successful as a writer in terms of doing well on papers? Do you generally get decent grades for your writing?"
> *Max:* "I think that I've done well the past few years, yes. I don't think that I would judge how well I've done writing on my grades that I get . . . I think I would just judge the increased learning in writing."

Unlike his depiction of himself in high school, Max has become what McLeod calls an "incremental theorist," focusing on the learning process more than the product, the grade. Or as Brooke would say, he has moved from playing the role of student to adopting the role of an active, responsible writer.

We view Max's transformation from the role of student to the role of responsible writer as a response to the care he perceived in his first year at the university. Although Max never mentions the word "care" on his own in either interview, his accounts of writing for his own purposes, the open-minded reader and positive, helpful feedback fit exactly Noddings' description of the relationship between the one-caring and the one cared-for. When Max's teacher (the one-caring) displays an attitude of openness and support for his goals, Max (the cared-for) reciprocates by what Noddings characterizes as a "free, vigorous, and happy immersion" (181) in his own writing and his role as writer.

Max reinforced our interpretation at the end of the second interview when he asked us to describe our findings. When we mentioned how some other students had indicated the importance of care, Max agreed,

> I guess that's a big thing too. I guess I really didn't look at it that way. How people care, that's a positive thing itself. They say, "Yes, you can write if you want to." You know, people are looking for that.

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Kathy: " *I guess English isn't my subject*"

Kathy was identified by her Intensive Writing teacher as a student who did not seek help on her writing. In her first interview she confirms this perception, noting, "I'm just not the type to go and ask for help. I know I should, but I'm stubborn"; a year later, her attitude

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remains the same. Why is Kathy so resistant to using the resources available to her?

Unlike Max, Kathy does not identify herself as a successful writer over the course of her first-year writing classes, never taking on the role of responsible writer. At the time of our second interview, she remains both confused about and resistant to the role of a college writer with its emphasis on process. She continues to be very teacher-and grade-focused, seeing herself as what McLeod calls a "pawn" in a situation over which she has little control. Kathy clearly demonstrates an "entity" theory of intelligence, focusing on outcomes, particularly grades, and not on learning as a process.

In her first survey, completed at the beginning of her Intensive Writing class, Kathy ranks herself as a confident writer (4 out of 5); however, she expresses uncertainty and inadequacy about her ability as a writer: "I'm not really sure if I will improve or not. Writing is my main problem. I never really did well on my high school papers." By mid-semester her confidence has plummeted enough to drop to 1, the lowest possible score, "because I haven't received a good grade in my class at all." She links her negative attitude towards writing directly to her grade: "I don't like to write because the grade shows what is wrong with the paper. If I get a bad grade my self-esteem goes lower and I feel like I can't write at all."

Kathy's direct connection between her "bad grade" and her lack of self-esteem identifies her as highly dependent on external sources (the grade) for her motivation, and sets her up to be frustrated and to evade responsibility for learning to write (because of the bad grade she "can't write at all"). Kathy's focus on grades as an exclusive determiner of her success is all the more remarkable given that it occurred within the context of a portfolio evaluation system in which she could revise until the end of the semester. In her final survey, she remains grade-driven, ranking her confidence at 2: "when writing is difficult for someone it isn't much fun to get papers back with bad grades." She admits defeat in achieving the course's goals, noting "my writing has gotten progressively worse." One reason, then, for Kathy's resistance to utilizing outside resources in her writing is that throughout her first semester of college, she never identifies with the role of the writer. She continues to see herself as a pawn in a system where writing is a test to be graded and a process where the teacher is active but she is clearly passive.

One change that did occur by the end of Kathy's first semester, however, is in her attitude towards working with peers. Whereas at the beginning of the semester she prefers to work alone, by its end she recognizes the validity of peer feedback in which one gets comments that are "helpful for revising to make the paper all it can be."

In our interviews, we asked Kathy to elaborate on her use of peers

as resources.[8] We discovered that Kathy is most comfortable when the person giving her help in any context (e.g., writing class or sports) knows her. Yet, unlike Max's open-minded reader, Kathy's ideal caregiver shows her support by being directive about how exactly she should revise her paper. She believes that she is more likely to get this kind of help from peers she knows, whom she perceives as caring about her: "If you know the person and the person knows you, that they'll give you more true of an answer, 'cause they'll know how you react. Rather than the people that don't know you don't know how you'll react and they won't give you the full picture." She is suspicious of people who don't know her, like Writing Center tutors, who "might not give you what you wanted, what you need." When questioned about the kind of feedback she received from friends, she notes that she got feedback on "everything," from style to structure, and that the feedback was both supportive and direct about needed changes.

For Kathy, asking for help from teachers is more problematic. She perceives her college teachers as wanting her to write what they want, not want she wants. This experience contrasts with her memories of high school: "the teachers were kind of, more helpful. They were like, 'okay, just write what you feel is good, and then we'll go from there.'" The lack of control she perceives about her writing leads her to be frustrated in conferences with her teachers, where she expects help but does not get it: "they answer the question but not in the way I need them to answer it. They don't go into depth." On the one hand, Kathy wants the freedom to write what she wants (this is the situation in high school which made her feel confident), but on the other hand, when she seeks help, from either peers or teachers, she wants an exact answer: "If I need the help then I need the help in a serious way, that's all." Unlike Max, who perceives open-ended responses as invitations, Kathy perceives them as evidence of the teacher's lack of care: "You go in there and you ask for the help and they never give you the answer . . . or they give it in a roundabout way like they don't have the time." In short, as an entity theorist, she believes that teachers have the answer but that "they don't give you the answer" and this perception reinforces her passive, "pawn"-like view of herself as a writer: "I sit there and then, after I leave, I say huh? what am I supposed to do now?" Thus, Kathy avoids instructors, preferring to solicit feedback from friends who, in her perception, know her and care enough about her to be directive.

On one level, we might describe her dilemma as epistemological in nature. She seems caught between a relativistic view that writing and knowledge are all personal expression and therefore not subject to judgment (except, perhaps, in the area of proofreading, which seems to be what her friends helped her with the most) and a more dualistic paradigm in which writing is a puzzle to which there is an absolutely

correct answer known by the teacher. As Chris M. Anson, citing William Perry's stages, observes in his study of response styles, "As writers, students just making the transition into the multiplicity of relativism [from dualism] often believe that the teacher knows the 'correct' way to write an essay but is craftily withholding this wisdom for the sake of pedagogy" (335). From a developmental perspective, then, Kathy's resistance to taking on responsibility as a writer is connected to her position between two stages.

A developmental explanation does not fully account for Kathy's concerns, however. What was most crucial to her was more intangible; "It's totally the attitude aspect," she says, and that attitude must demonstrate care. She expresses willingness to connect with her teachers, but the teacher has to make the first move, "if the teacher is willing to get to know me, then I'm willing to get to know that person." When asked how a teacher could demonstrate care, she explains care as the teacher's personal attention to the needs of an individual student: "they don't just call on you because you're not talking in class . . . but also they actually take time to help you during the class to make you talk." For Kathy the teacher's actual behavior is not as important as her perception of the teacher's caring attitude toward her. Kathy clearly recognizes a context of care in the classroom when her teachers talk to her "on a friendly basis . . . not just as teacher but as a person."

No matter how caring Kathy's teachers may have been (her first semester teacher was characterized by other interviewees as extremely caring), her belief that her teachers' indirection was a case of withholding "correct" answers caused her to perceive them as not caring. Also, given the connection of Kathy's self esteem to grades, the teacher's role as a judge reinforces this perception. Since she perceives her environment as uncaring, Kathy rarely solicits feedback from her teachers and does not take on the role of an active writer. At the middle of her sophomore year Kathy remains frustrated: "I guess English isn't my subject," she concludes.

Conclusion

In reviewing our case studies of Max and Kathy, we can see that, despite their differences, they do agree in three areas. Both are dismissive of teachers who fill papers with red marks, disregarding students' ideas. Both identify a caring teacher as one who takes a personal interest in the student's success—as Kathy notes, "not just as teacher but as a person." Finally, in their first year of college, both Max and Kathy become more willing to solicit and value feedback from peers on their writing. Their understanding of the purpose of feedback, however, could not be more distinct, a direct result of their dif-

fering perceptions of care in their writing classes.

Though at the beginning of the course, Kathy ranked her confidence as a writer more highly than did Max, by the end of their first year, he is clearly the more confident writer with a developing sense of agency. He perceives himself as an active agent, in control of his writing processes and purposes (McLeod's "incremental theorist," who displays an "origin" attitude). When he solicits feedback, his aim is not only to improve the specific piece of writing he is working on, but also to improve as a writer. While Max is concerned with learning, Kathy is concerned with performance. She, unlike Max, sees writing ability as a fixed entity and engages in "pawn" behavior; she perceives herself as having less control over her writing as the year progresses, focusing almost entirely on grades as a means of measuring success. When she *does* solicit feedback, she wants either complete affirmation or to be told, in a directive way, exactly what to change.

Our research reveals that when students perceive a context of care in the basic writing classroom, they are more likely to take on "responsible" attitudes and behaviors—such as valuing and seeking out feedback from others on their writing. This context of care is a complex, dynamic and mutual relationship between the student and the person giving feedback. It would be easy simply to label Max as a "mature" and "responsible" writer and Kathy as "immature" and "irresponsible," but that would be unfair to them both. For Max, a context of care is present when he perceives control over his purpose in writing, receives open-minded, non-judgmental feedback and small expressions of acknowledgment and support. He responds to this perception of care by taking on the role of responsible writer. For Kathy, on the other hand, these forms of care do not register since she focuses almost exclusively on her grades. She perceives herself as not being listened to ("I want to write what I want to write"), and as a result shuts down. She remains paralyzed, fixed on writing for grades, unable to perceive and enter the caring relationship.

How do we create a context of care in our classrooms, knowing that some students may perceive that care differently than we intend? What can we as basic writing teachers do to reach the Kathys in our courses—students whose assumptions about writing and learning lead them to take a passive role in their education—especially since they tend to outnumber students such as Max? How can we invite them to engage with their teachers, peers and their own ideas in the serious way that promotes their becoming active writers, writers who will seek out and utilize resources?

In the semesters since we began our study, we as teachers have found it helpful to think more about the relational part of teacher-student interaction as defined by Noddings; to explore more fully how our classrooms function as contexts for caring relationships; and to

reflect on how our students are perceiving our attempts at demonstrating care. As our respondents told us repeatedly, our demonstrations of care do not have to be elaborate or time-consuming, but they do need to be consistent and positive. We and our teaching assistants are more consciously employing strategies — casual, informal conversation before class, for example — which students perceive as caring and which demonstrate to them that we recognize them as individuals. We look for ways to give students more choice and control over how the class is structured, how writing topics are determined, and how their writing is evaluated. We continue to use pedagogical approaches such as portfolio evaluation which de-emphasize our role as judge, a role that interferes with students' ability to perceive a context of care and assume responsibility for their writing.

But most importantly, we have become more explicit about expressing care. As we learned from Kathy, we can't assume that a student perceives the care we think we are demonstrating. We find ourselves frequently using phrases such as these: "It matters to me that you understand this," "I know getting a good grade is important to you," "It's helpful to me to understand what's confusing you," and "I'm suggesting this because I care about you." When we encourage students to seek outside resources such as the Writing Center, we stress to them that the staff they will encounter in these settings care about them and their writing. All of these strategies invite our students, through dialogue and collaboration, into caring relationships

We tend to think of student responsibility as a freestanding entity, as something over which we as teachers have no control. It's true: you can't *make* someone be responsible, to feel a sense of agency, or take on the role of writer. But what we're learning from our students suggests that responsibility does come *in response* — in response to a surrounding context which includes care.

Notes

1. According to "Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs" (1979), in an effective program "Teachers and students have access to and make regular use of a wide range of resources (e.g., library services, media, teaching materials, duplicating facilities, supplies) for support

of the writing program" (222). Today, this range of resources would also include access to one-on-one tutoring such as that available in writing centers.

2. We surveyed students at the beginning of the semester, at the mid-point, and at the end. In the survey we asked students about their writing processes, their attitudes towards writing, and their attitudes towards getting help on their writing (see Appendix 1). Based on the surveys and on classroom experiences recorded in our teaching journals, we chose nine students to interview in early Spring, 1995 (see Appendix 2 for interview questions). In cooperation with their instructors, we had identified these students as either extremely likely or extremely unlikely to seek help with their writing.

3. See, among others, Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, Rose, and Troyka.

4. Mike Rose's work, especially *Lives on the Boundary*, provides a groundbreaking first-hand account of the cognitive and emotional effects of being labeled "remedial." Lad Tobin, in *Writing Relationships* explores the role of the interpersonal in the writing class. Other scholars not only demonstrate the importance of affect and the interpersonal in teaching writing, but argue that it be given a legitimate space in the field of composition. Alice Brand notes the neglect of emotion as a significant variable in contemporary (often social constructivist) writing theory, arguing "Emotional processes are not hostile to cognitive or social ones. They are profoundly complementary" (402).

5. We would like to identify three measures we took to increase the "triangulation" and accuracy of our study. First, in 1994-1995 two undergraduate Research Assistants—Dana Simonson and Carrie Miller—collated the surveys, helped interview the students, transcribed the interview tapes, and (most importantly) participated in the interpretation of our data. Dana has gone on to present two papers based on our research at national undergraduate conferences. Second, to create some distance from our student subjects, in our initial interviews, we did not interview our own students. Finally, as noted, for those students we had the opportunity to interview a second time, we provided a transcript of the first interview for the students to correct and clarify.
 Despite these measures, we recognize that what we are presenting are our naturally limited readings of complex cognitive and affective phenomena. We agree with Anne J. Herrington that "unless participants participate as equals in writing the account of a study, the 'researcher'. . . is still the central one to construct the knowledge" (51). Since this ideal of student-participants co-authoring texts is not always

possible, Herrington stresses the importance of researchers' "self-reflection and open-minded dialogue and questioning with others" (65). We have attempted to conduct our research in this spirit.

6. As the work of Robert Brooke illustrates, taking responsibility is central to students' development as writers. Using identity negotiations theory, Brooke explores how students come to take on the role of the writer rather than the role of the student in college writing classes. Whereas the role of the student allows the teacher to direct the learning, the role of the writer invites students to take on a more active role, "deciding through practice how certain activities help or hinder one's own development of texts" (84). Brooke argues for the significance of this shift in pedagogy, noting, "it confronts students with a responsibility for their writing and learning which other classes do not" (84).

7. See also Patrocinio P. Schweickart's "Reading, Teaching, and the Ethic of Care," in which she interrogates various theories of reading in differing power situations. She advocates an ethic of care as an apt model for the instructor reading student papers (92). In this ethic of care, "although power is distributed in favor of the one caring, it is exercised in the service of the cared for" (91).

8. One of our discoveries about the students identified as not seeking help was that often they did seek feedback on their writing from friends, a situation about which the instructors were unaware. This phenomenon reinforced for us the limitations of our perspectives as teachers. We may assume a student is not collaborating with others because she does not approach us, participate enthusiastically in class writing groups, or visit the Writing Center. In reality, she simply may be seeking feedback outside of these "official" forums. We will explore the reason for this preference as we discuss Kathy's case further.

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Writing Profile   Name:_____

For each question, please circle the letter or number that best describes your experience. Feel free to write comments in the space provided and on the back of this sheet. Thank you!

1. In general, do you prefer to work

    a) alone
    b) with others
    c) it depends (please explain)

    Comment:

2. In general, how much do you like to write?

I dislike writing a lot				I enjoy writing a lot
1	2	3	4	5

    Comment:

3. How easy or difficult is writing for you?

extremely difficult				extremely easy
1	2	3	4	5

    Comment:

4. How confident are you as a writer right now?

not confident at all				extremely confident
1	2	3	4	5

    Comment:

5. How much do you expect your writing will improve this semester?

not at all				a lot
1	2	3	4	5

Comment:

6. *In the past,* which of these sources have you found are most helpful in improving your writing?

	least helpful				most helpful
a) family	1	2	3	4	5
b) friends (not in class)	1	2	3	4	5
c) classmates	1	2	3	4	5
d) teachers	1	2	3	4	5
e) tutors	1	2	3	4	5
f) other	1	2	3	4	5

Comment:

7. *This semester,* how helpful do you expect the following activities would be in improving your writing?

	not at all helpful				extremely helpful
A) Receiving feedback from:					
a) family	1	2	3	4	5
b) friends (not in class)	1	2	3	4	5

c) classmates	1	2	3	4	5
d) teachers	1	2	3	4	5
e) IDSC 100 student assistant	1	2	3	4	5
f) Writing Center tutors	1	2	3	4	5
g) Others	1	2	3	4	5

B) Working on my writing on my own without seeking help from other people

not at all helpful				extremely helpful
1	2	3	4	5

Please comment on back of page --

8. How likely are you to do the following things this semester?

	not likely			extremely likely

A)   Get help from others

a) family	1	2	3	4	5
b) friends (not in class)	1	2	3	4	5
c) classmates	1	2	3	4	5
d) teachers	1	2	3	4	5
e) IDSC 100 student assistant	1	2	3	4	5

f) Writing Center tutors	1	2	3	4	5
g) Others	1	2	3	4	5

B) Work on my writing on my own without seeking out help from other people

not likely				extremely likely
1	2	3	4	5

Please comment on back of page --

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

1. Describe the writing process you used before taking the Intensive Writing course last semester. Did you work in groups? Did you do drafts? Did teachers or tutors offer help? Was the help required? Did you seek it out on your own?

2. Describe the writing process you use now for your college papers. Same follow-ups as question 1.

3. How would you describe yourself as a writer when you were in high school?

4. How would you describe yourself as a writer now?

5. In what kinds of situations (not just academic) do you ask for help?

6. In what kinds of writing situations do you ask for help?

7. Are you more or less likely to ask for help now? Why or why not?