

**A REFLECTION ON VALUES:**

**EXAMINING THE CREATION OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH WRITING PROMPTS**

**THESIS**

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **LOOKING BEYOND GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PROMPTS**

#### **Introduction**

I became a writing teacher because I loved writing and reading others' writing. I imagine most writing teachers want to share their love for writing and its rewards.

Writing helps us express ourselves. It helps us think more clearly. It helps us become valued members of different communities. It helps us make a difference. Each writing assignment we give to our students becomes an opportunity to share that appreciation for writing and its benefits.

Most of my instructors in high school and undergraduate classes designed writing assignments very differently. Some wrote a question to be answered. Others gave several topics based on course content. Some just said, "Write an argumentative paper, using anything we've done in this course." Still, others wrote out a page of information for an assignment, giving specific instructions about how the paper should be structured and formatted. Though some prompts confused me and others were highly enjoyable, I never really thought about why these different teachers chose to create a writing prompt in a specific way. Once I became a teacher and began making decisions about writing prompts for my classes, I began to question what made some writing prompts more appropriate for my writing class than others did.

My first year of teaching high school, I was required to assign a research paper during the course of the year. After facing several classes who moaned and groaned throughout the entire process of the traditional academic research paper and finding myself frustrated with issues of plagiarism, lack of interest, and sloppy papers, I decided to try something different the next year. I remember my high school teachers dreading the research paper for the very same reasons, so I thought that a different type of assignment might alleviate these problems. Instead of demanding a traditional academic research essay, I offered students the freedom to research any topic and present it in any form that they chose. I suggested options for final projects like brochures, websites, powerpoint presentations, and videos. These suggestions piqued the students' interest, and I hoped that the openness of the assignment caused their creative juices to start flowing. This assignment might not only be useful, but also enjoyable. It would allow students to display their unique interests and writing abilities and motivate them to consider the rhetorical use of different forms in writing for different audiences and different purposes.

The principal of the school, however, had a slightly different perspective. While he encouraged creativity in the writing class, he reminded me to focus on the objectives of the class, primarily preparing the students for the type of writing they would do in college. He told me that the traditional, academic essay, often taught in high school as the five-paragraph essay, got him through his master's program. His perspective on appropriate writing assignments revealed his allegiance to the values of the institution and the responsibility he felt to students and parents to prepare students primarily for college level writing. Even though I knew that different classes in college and different

jobs after college required different forms of writing and presentation of research, I also knew that required writing intensive courses in the first two years of college emphasized traditional, academic writing in the form of the five-paragraph essay. My new goal, then, was to emphasize features of traditional academic writing and presenting research while also giving students the chance to present this information in a unique, more rhetorically sensitive form. As a novice teacher, articulating and achieving my desire for this balance was difficult.

The students, like me, had difficulty with this freedom. Of course, several of the students loved the idea of the assignment at first, but most of the students ended up choosing to write a traditional formal, academic essay. It was safe, and they knew how to earn their “reward”—a good grade. Based on my oral and written emphasis on the content and organization of the research, I believe they concluded that I valued formal writing, even at the expense of more experimentation with creative, more explicitly rhetorical projects. One student began with a unique twist on the project; he would write and design a magazine article that traced the patterns of gang life in the 1990s to offer as a visual for a high school history class. After conferencing with me about his idea and the requirements of the assignment, he changed his project and ended up writing a stale explanation on why genetic engineering of plants is useful to society. He admitted that the second idea did not interest him as much, but he felt that it was “the easier way” to get the research while focusing on his academic style.

In the end, I was disappointed with the paper, but I was more disappointed that I had not been clear about what I valued. My values seemed to be in conflict with one another. On one hand, I wanted to make the assignment interesting based on my personal

love for writing, and I wanted to show the students that I value writing that promotes individual creativity, attention to different rhetorical situations, and students' interests. On the other hand, I had a responsibility to value a particular form of academic writing and the school objectives for high school writing, so that they would be prepared for college writing.

In another assignment, I wanted the students to be able to write a persuasive essay on any topic they were passionate about. We had read other writers' persuasive speeches, and I wanted the students to be able to use some of the same strategies in their own attempt to write about what they knew and believed. I presented myself as a neutral audience who was open to hear about any topic. I prepared myself to listen openly to controversial issues and focus primarily on the logic, support, organization, and technique of the argument; however, I did not expect one student to stand up before the class and read a cleverly written persuasive speech from the point of view of a soldier during the Texas Revolution. The speech displayed clear organization and thinking, passion, persuasive techniques, and the student's personal interest in history; he followed the prompt precisely. For some reason, however, for some reason, I was slightly disappointed at his interpretation of my prompt. I had envisioned persuasive topics that could relate to the others in the class, reflect current issues in society, and incite discussion and perhaps friendly debate, yet I never actually articulated those desires for the classroom because I had unknowingly disguised myself in a cloak of neutrality that did not reveal what I valued most about writing in this context.

In his book *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*, George Hillocks Jr. recounts a similar dilemma he faced in his class. He says that he wanted his teaching to be

“apolitical” so that he did not “influence students for or against any particular political issue” (52). After reflection, though, he says that he realizes that “even such a goal has clear political implications” (52). In much the same way, I say that I do not want to influence students’ interests, yet at the same time, I indicate that I want them to become participants in dialogue about current issues. I find myself juggling different beliefs about writing and its purposes. Do I value the form and presentation of the persuasive writing assignment or the effects of the writing on community dialogue? On one hand, I valued the institutional expectations that students can use a persuasive form and style of writing as a specific skill. On the other hand, I valued the scholarly discussion in composition and rhetoric that sees writing as a process of making meaning in communities.

As I reflect on my experiences, I see that writing prompts are not just tools, but are one means by which a teacher indicates what she values about writing skills and purposes as well as her own position in the classroom. Though the teacher expresses values in the context of the class in many other ways such as course syllabi, class discussion, atmosphere, selected readings, conferences, assessments, etc, in this thesis, I look specifically at how teachers articulate values through writing prompts. As I discuss further on, much of the research on developing prompts seeks to combine theories and experiences into a universal heuristics for teachers and test-makers without exploring how each teacher brings unique values and interpretations of objectives to the classroom or whether or not such a “universal heuristic” is possible or even valuable.

In order to clarify the idea of teacher’s “values,” I turn to Bob Broad’s book *What We Really Value* as a guide for the categorization of values. While his study focuses on values seen in assessment practices, his ultimate premise is that in this age when we are

moving away from a positivistic expression of values in composition, we need to realize and examine the diverse values teachers bring to the classroom in order to “embrace complexity” of writing, rather than viewing the practice of writing and teaching as generalizable and a-contextual (137). As writing teachers, we base our understanding of good writing on many of the textual and contextual criteria Broad uncovers in his book. Using data from actual writing teachers, Broad draws up an extensive list of criteria that those teachers say make up good writing: surface textual features like mechanics, grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, length; rhetorical textual features like audience, purpose, interest, writer’s attitude and voice; contextual criteria like purpose of the course, progress of student, cultural difference, attitudes and behaviors of students, and so on.

In Broad’s argument, he presents teachers’ lists of criteria as reflections of what they value. While I agree with Broad that criteria always reflect values, I would add to this that the values themselves come from the writing teachers’ multiple identities—their allegiances to multiple communities. If a teacher values her role as a member of an academic discourse community who must uphold institutional requirements, she may emphasize features like grammar and MLA style because this is how she interprets the expectations of academic writing. If a teacher values her role as an emerging scholar in the discussion of rhetoric and composition, she may emphasize rhetorical features like audience or critical thinking about cultural differences in writing. If a teacher values her own experiences, she may assign a type of paper that she enjoyed writing as a student. Novice teachers, especially, are just beginning to grapple with the different identities that influence their values. They must recognize institutional values while developing their

understanding of writing in the composition community and acknowledging their own interests and experiences; however, research on writing prompts has generally presented novice teachers with a set of guidelines on the development of writing prompts rather than exposing writing prompt development as a process involving a complicated interplay of values.

### **Statement of Argument and Value of Study**

This complex interplay of values is what I seek to describe and examine in the current study. I ask how new teachers with different disciplinary interests and backgrounds—specifically Teaching Assistants (TAs) at Texas State University-San Marcos—create their writing prompts, what they say they value, and what their prompts suggest about what they value. I argue that TAs’ writing prompts and their explanations about the creation of their writing prompts suggest that they must negotiate different values they hold about writing and their position as writing teacher based on their multiple identities as instructors within the university, scholars of specific sub-disciplines of English, individuals with personal teaching and writing experiences.

Much of the literature that I discuss in the following sections responds to the difficulties in creating writing prompts by trying to create set of criteria upon which good writing prompts can be developed. Though literature on writing prompts provides useful heuristics for teachers to follow in creating writing prompts, my study looks beyond the formation of more guidelines. Instead, I explore the interplay and conflict of values in the creation of writing prompts in order to promote reflective practice among teachers and writing programs, so that there can be a better examination of the training of TAs and the interpretation of FYE course goals on a continual basis. As teachers are more honest

and reflective about these values, they will be able to negotiate them more effectively and create prompts that are best suited for specific contexts and purposes.

### **Literature Review**

Much of the literature on creating writing prompts indicates educators' constant goal to formulate standards for developing and explaining good prompts. The research highlights the need to create "student-based" assignments and to teach rhetorical principles to students, but it rarely reveals the chaos of the actual rhetorical situation in which students write, a situation complicated by the values the instructor brings to the table as well. While heuristics for writing prompts are extremely helpful in training teachers and providing guidance in the composition classroom, novice teachers might learn even more by analyzing the values and beliefs that influence and get left out of these guidelines.

Scholars like Edmund Farrell, William Irmscher, James E. Middleton, John D. Reiff and others who have compiled multiple lists of criteria for creating good writing prompts emphasize the necessity of "student-based" writing, writing that is purposeful to the student; however, these scholars reveal different values and beliefs about what student-based writing is and looks like based on their different identities. In "The Beginning Begets: Making Composition Assignments," (1965) Edmund Farrell designs his writing assignments based on the principle that student-based writing gives students opportunities to practice writing in different styles based on the different roles and "selves" they bring to various writing situations. For instance, he may ask students to practice writing to a private, internal audience by taking on the role of Lady MacBeth and writing a diary as her character; or he may ask students to address a personal audience by

writing a letter as one character in a story to another. As a literature teacher, he reveals that he is not only interested in giving students opportunities to practice writing in different styles and to different audiences; he also believes student writing should reflect their abilities to interpret literature. His focus in the writing class appears to be based on the value he places on his identity as a literature scholar.

In a different understanding of student-based writing, William Irmscher (1979), a former president of the National Council of Teachers of English, advises teachers to create writing prompts that are “meaningful within the student’s experience” (Ruth and Murphy 27). He reveals through this statement that he values the belief in composition studies that experience of the writer provides credible and meaningful contribution to argument. He reveals what he values about writing based on his scholarship in composition theory, reflecting an interest in expressionist theories of writing that are not solely based upon literature.

Other understandings of student-based writing in composition studies place emphasis on the rhetorical features of audience and purpose. In their report, “A ‘Student-Based’ Approach to Writing Assignments” (1985) James E. Middleton and John D. Reiff list the goals of writing instruction from a student-based perspective that includes attention to rhetorical details. They say that a good writing assignment allows the student to “determine the content and the design” but asks the students to learn “real-world writing and problem-solving” (234). In their explanation of “student-based” writing, Middleton and Reiff show that they value the social dimension of writing, revealing their identities as scholars during the emergence of social constructionist theories in rhetoric and composition studies. Based on these scholarly values, they emphasize the ability of

the student to use writing as a means to enter and participate in real-world, possibly non-academic discourse communities. Each of these scholars who have contributed to criteria for good writing prompts reveal how their unique identities in particular fields of scholarship influence the value and emphases they place on different criteria for good writing.

As scholarship progresses, researchers are looking more and more at the teachers' roles in relationship to the creation of writing prompts. Chris Magden, in his article, "Improving Writing Assignments with Communication Theory (1985)" examines the role of the immediate audience, the teacher. He says that the teacher as "reader" takes on different roles in the classroom. Often, he says, teachers "evaluate students by asking them to assume roles for which teachers are not the appropriate audiences" (187). He does not criticize the practice, but he points out that as teachers create rhetorical situations for their students, they are forced into role-playing others. Madigan calls this writing situation an "imbedded situation" in which the student must not only write to their own understanding of the created audience, but also the teacher's understanding (188). He says that a student must "know how the teacher interprets the situation" in order to be successful in writing (188). His statement acknowledges the immediate rhetorical context of the classroom, and his understanding leaves a gap in the research that invites closer examination of the complexity of how and why teachers create these prompts.

In light of composition studies' emphasis on student-based writing assignments that incorporate rhetorical analysis of audience and purpose, researchers are discussing how to create good writing prompts along with the teacher's role in explaining the

prompts and their purposes. In her article “De-Coding Writing Assignments,” (1991) Linda Simon explores ways in which teachers can de-code the language of their writing prompts in order to help students more successfully complete the project. While some of the other research places the teacher in a somewhat neutral and objective role, she admits that teachers often do have an ideal model in their minds, and she wants to find ways in which students can meet that teachers’ values and expectations. She reveals her own beliefs about writing from her own experiences and observations: that just as “professional authors want to please their audience...essentially students want the same things: to please their instructors and classmates...” (149). Her solution, as seen by her explanations on how to “de-code” assignments, is that teachers unveil this ideal model so that students can successfully please the teacher. Still, her article focuses on how teachers can explain an objective “right answer” model without addressing *why* teachers may expect a certain model of writing. By merely providing clearer instructions for students on how to “write an essay,” or “support a thesis,” a teacher can still be unaware of the values that influence her interpretation of successful writing in the classroom.

As the research on writing prompts has developed, teachers and compositionists are beginning to ask the uncomfortable questions that expose the values in play behind the appearance of objective, generalized rules for writing prompts. Lad Tobin, in his article “Reading Students, Reading Ourselves: Revising the Teacher’s Role in the Writing Class,” (1991), says that as teachers we “*create* the meaning of our students’ texts” which “violates our role as objective reader” (336). Tobin dispels the notion that teachers can be objective when creating writing prompts, noting that

We are not unaware that we bring to our teaching of writing and our reading of student essays strong beliefs and biases. We know, for example, how we feel about abortion and gun control, how we respond more favorably to some rhetorical strategies than to others, even how we like some students much better than others. But we conveniently forget those issues and pretend that we can willingly suspend those beliefs and disbeliefs. We see ourselves as neutral, objective, open-minded. We give each student an equal chance. We are ready to like essays on any topic in any mode. We just want students to find their own voices, to find themselves (336).

In his own statement, he exposes his own diverse values about writing, but he also makes the admission of these values more acceptable.

Tobin does not promote a relative or capricious approach to creating writing prompts, but he opens the floodgates of composition research by bringing to the table what had been previously unacknowledged. His frank admission works to reveal the disguises of the past in an attempt to uncover the direction for the future. He says, “In the traditional class the writing teacher played several roles—provider of information, lecturer, upholder of standards, corrector—but each was relatively static, unilateral: the teacher provided the students with rules and models of good writing and then graded them according to how closely the results approximated those rules and models. Not only did this role fail to reflect the complexity and pleasure of the writer, it failed to acknowledge the intelligence, creativity, and interests of the teacher” (338). He goes on to say that these teachers still “describe themselves as ‘facilitators’ (as if they have no

agenda of their own, or rather, as if their agenda is not important)” (338). His argument reveals that behind all the guidelines for writing prompts, there are teachers, instructors, researchers who have agendas, interests, values, and responsibilities. In order to construct heuristics for good writing prompts, writing instructors must consciously negotiate conflicts of their own values and others’ values within very specific contexts.

While teachers may quickly become defensive in response to Tobin’s argument—that they are incapable of remaining objective and neutral, the book *Scenarios for Teaching Writing* actually details instructors’ personal experiences when they could not hide behind the disguise of an objective, neutral reader. Chris, for example, is a dedicated, open-minded teacher who presented his class with a personal narrative assignment that asked the students to “elaborate on a specific event or memory...try to feel the event or action; try to see it; try to hear it; try to re-create and re-experience it” (14). He was open to all types of papers and he believed he expressed his own values in the prompt, especially by underlining the important techniques the students should use in the paper. His plan backfired, however, when he received a paper from his student Anna, who wrote an openly pornographic paper based on her experience living in a house with three boys and two girls who daily participated in drug and experimental sexual activities. Chris was disturbed, for while Anna had followed the assignment instructions, she failed to recognize (or rejected) what her audience (Chris) might value as appropriate or inappropriate. Despite Anna’s intentions, Chris faced the dilemma of sorting through his own values, particularly how he had presented or failed to present his values.

As Chris’s case demonstrates, writing teachers must learn to think honestly about what values are most important to emphasize in certain contexts. Chris assigned a

personal narrative because he valued the expression of individual experience as good writing within the context of his class. In order to emphasize the value he placed on personal narrative, he used the cover of objective reader, which actually suppressed the value that he placed on principals of public discourse or one's ethos within an academic community of writers. The lack of neutrality would not have made him a subjective, reactionary teacher, but rather a teacher who better articulated what he considered appropriate values for writing in that context.

Of course, not all writing assignments will produce the same degree of conflict in values, but teachers need to reflect on their values—whether those values are derived from institutional requirements, established composition theories and practices, personal experiences and preferences, or something else--in order to manage and articulate their expectations better when designing a writing assignment. Tobin says that “Many writing teachers deny their role as co-authors and their tremendous authority in the classroom because it does not fit with the image they would like to project” (338). Instead of ignoring their role and their values, Tobin encourages teachers to engage in self reflection, “understanding where our responses (or creation of writing prompts) are not neutral or objective” (342). Talking about our values does not create disorder or a breakdown of standards and guidelines. Instead, it allows us to be more honest and critical about our decisions in the classroom.

As the literature on developing writing prompts shows, most authors want to create a standard, guide, or list for teachers to follow in order to make writing prompts “work.” The motive seems reasonable and even very helpful when training novice teachers who lack the experiences and research that have helped shape these guidelines,

yet while these heuristics may have some value, we must recognize the reality of complexity and competing ideas within the writing community, especially in first-year college English. Instead of using my research to develop guidelines for writing prompts, I believe that my research will inform teachers and writing program administrators about how to be more reflective in order to create writing prompts that better articulate the values on which the program and the teachers design the course.

Reflective practice, though, must not only bring values to the forefront, but also encourage teachers to consider and evaluate their roles within local contexts. Like Broad, Brian Huot, in his book *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* (2002), looks honestly at the complexities of writing assessment based factors we may want to ignore because of the desire to remain objective and standardized. While his focus is on writing assessment, Huot's principles regarding the nature of composition classes reflect the same principles reflective teachers and writing programs will incorporate. As we deal with the practical pressures in the writing classroom, he says "we must become aware of our beliefs and the assumptions" we hold about writing (17). We must be aware because our students are highly perceptive and, because as Huot says, the things we say in the classroom about what we value can impact the student's thinking or cause them to respond in a certain way (5). His criticism against the positivist bent of many writing classrooms that assume "writing...is a fixed, consistent, and a-contextual human trait" can be leveled against generalized rules for writing prompts as well (83). In composition theory today, we have rejected this positivistic notion, so we need to continue examining how teachers' multiple identities and articulation of values work in the writing class. While we as teachers may be scared to admit or accept the interference

of values with an objective view of writing, Huot actually recommends that we base our practices on acknowledgement of the “importance of individual and communal interpretation and values” (101). We cannot discard the complicated role individual values play in the classroom and the creation of writing prompts that direct students’ writing; neither should we just accept differences and base our decisions on whimsical choices. Instead, communities need to discuss these differences of values and make decisions and standards together.

As teachers change and grow, as writing programs change and grow, and as the culture around us changes and grows, our values shift and change. The values expressed by a teacher in her writing class may change from year to year, which is also why reflective practice is so important. Huot says, “Culture and privilege continue to evolve and be marked in different ways, and teachers’ reading of student writing is continuously influenced by their cultured sense of value” (118). Writing prompts and even writing objectives will not stay static, just as individual and communal values do not stay static. So, teachers need to be equipped with the ability to analyze their own articulation of values, like in the language of their writing prompts, on a continual basis.

Teaching communities like those that develop around TAs who are learning how to teach or in departments where teachers of writing regularly meet to discuss their curriculum and practices actually foster the reflection needed for effective practice. Shirley K. Rose and Margaret J. Finders argue in their article, “Thinking Together: Developing a Reciprocal Reflective Model for Approaches to Preparing College Teachers of Writing,” that reflective practice or “reciprocal reflection,” the practice of personal reflections that “occur between and among members of a teaching community” improves

the teaching of writing (75). They say that reciprocal reflection 1) “makes visible the assumptions that an individual teacher takes as ‘natural,’ 2) invites considerations of the immediate context from which beliefs/assumptions/practices emerged 3) solicits consideration beyond the immediate context of the classroom” (77). In fact, they continue to say that “the process of developing criteria that are always under revision is as important if not more important than the criteria themselves” (81). As teachers think more critically about how their own values influence their writing prompts, they help themselves to become more honest about the values they are passing on to students, and they help colleagues in the writing program to see a fuller picture of what values direct understanding of teaching writing in the present moment.

Drawing upon data from qualitative interviews, this study shows that TAs in the Texas State English program articulate competing values and multiple identities, in the writing prompts they develop for students and what they say about the creation of their writing prompts. I argue that, in addition to providing standardized guidelines to novice teachers, TA training should incorporate critical reflection and analysis in order to help TAs learn how to recognize and manage their values in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODOLOGY: A CASE STUDY ON WRITING PROMPTS**

In this chapter, I explain the importance of situating myself within the research and follow this with a basic overview of the research questions and subquestions that guide my study. Following the outline, I give a short narrative explanation of how I formed the research question and decided upon the research methods used to answer these questions. Last, I explain and justify my research methods and the design of my project before I transition into my observations and analysis.

#### **Locating Myself in the Research**

Gesa E. Kirsch and Joy S. Ritchie, in their article “Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research,” encourage researchers not only to put themselves in their research as a more honest reflection of the research, but also examine that personal perspective as a reflection of “ideology and culture” (524). In theorizing the “politics of location,” for example, Kirsch and Ritchie present questions that help researchers become more aware of their position in the research. For example, they ask, “How are our conflicting positions, histories, and desires for power implicated in our research questions, methodologies, and conclusions?” In the process of my research, I my own identities influence the questions I develop, methods I use, and conclusions I make. Interestingly, in the process of reviewing others’ values, my own

values about research and about writing influence how I collected data and how I interpreted that data.

Several identities or “conflicting positions, histories, and desires for power” play a role in my research: my position as a former undergraduate literature major, a teacher at a private, Christian high school, a graduate student in the Rhetoric and Composition program, a white, middle-class woman, a classmate, and a friend. Many of these identities directly affected the direction, process, and interpretation of my research.

Before I explain how these different identities guided my research project, I acknowledge Kirsch and Ritchie’s warning that I cannot fully “step outside” my “culture in order to examine...assumptions, values, and goals” (526). I select my data and read my data within the cultures I am a part of. My goal, then, is not to make “essentialist conclusions” (527) about the writing program I am studying or even about the specific TAs and their writing prompts. I want to examine the articulation of “values” within a given moment in order to demonstrate the need we have as composition teachers to constantly be reviewing our values and our articulation of values to our classes. This research, then, provides an analysis of values as articulated by writing prompts and TAs explanations of their creation of writing prompts. More importantly, it allows any writing teacher or writing program an opportunity to do what Kirsch and Ritche say few published accounts offer. This project allows me as a researcher to “reflect on the knowledge [I] gained about [myself] and [my] relations with others” throughout the paper, not only in the “preface or epilogue” (531), but throughout the entire work.

## **Research Question**

Several of my own identities influenced my decision to look at the writing prompts of TAs at Texas State. Below, I present my grand tour question and subquestions along with a short reflection on how my own identities as a teacher and a student influenced the concept of this project.

### *Grand Tour Question*

How do TAs from the various sub-disciplines in English at Texas State articulate what they value in their students' writing based on the language of their prompts and what they say about how and why they have developed their writing prompts?

### *Subquestions*

- What does analysis of the writing prompts themselves suggest about what TAs value in their students' writing?
  - What and how do TAs articulate what they value about writing within the university setting?
  - What and how do TAs articulate what they value about how students compose?
  - What and how do TAs articulate what they value about their own personal experiences in relation to writing and teaching?
  - What conflicts, if any, exist between the English department values and the instructor values?
  - What conflicts, if any, exist between what the instructor says he/she values and the actual writing prompt?

- Do TAs from different disciplines value different qualities about their students' writing?
- How can looking at writing prompts and what TAs say about writing prompts provide direction for the TA training, department development, and reflective teaching practices?

After being a student at Texas State for six years, I am familiar with the environment in the English department and with many of the basic goals and objectives the university has for first writing classes. The first year English syllabus, posted on the university website details these objectives so that students as well as instructors know what the department values in student writing. I also have very personal connections within the department. I spend most of my undergraduate years in the English department. I took one semester of first year writing and have had professors from each of the different emphases in the department: Literature, Creative Writing, Technical and Professional Writing, and Rhetoric and Composition. While each professor was a member of the Texas State University community, I could definitely detect different emphases on different values of writing, institutional standards, or personal opinions and experiences. In these classes, I began questioning the “neutrality” of the teacher and the “neutrality” of writing. Before I had even been introduced to the literature on “audience analysis,” I was already analyzing my audiences—my teachers. I studied prompts for clues as to what the professor valued. What did they really want to read? What was most important to them? What was the ultimate purpose of this prompt?

My research also reflects my identity as a teacher at a private Christian school. As soon as I became a teacher, I, too, wanted to transform into an all-accepting, objective

reader, but remembering my experiences with teachers' prompts as a student, I could not convince myself that I could hide my own values. I even questioned whether I really *should* hide them. As a teacher in high school, I saw value in preparing students for the academic standards that would be required of them in college, such as following a correct format, or avoiding "plagiarism," as it is defined by the university. I saw value in specific theories of writing like the writing process, collaboration, examining personal experiences and beliefs in order to develop critical thinking skills. Of course, I valued my own experiences too—becoming a "well-versed" member of "scholarly" society by reading, understanding, and being able to discuss the traditional canon of English literature. I also valued the freedom to write personal stories as a refreshing change from formal, impersonal analytical papers, or possibly the less defined and strict grading system that was often set up for these types of papers. I valued students' respect and admiration. If they did not like an assignment, I saw that as a potential criticism of me. I value the Christian heritage of the school and the opportunities many students have in the school to discuss their faith openly because I, too, had that opportunity in high school. In some way, I always created writing prompts by these guiding values—institutional requirements, theories of writing, or my own personal opinions and experience. Which values were legitimate? Which ones should I present to the class? What role was I playing in the shaping of their ideologies and values based on what I asked them to write about? I also wondered how these values might conflict, sending students mixed messages about how to complete a particular project successfully, even encourage or prohibit them from being successful.

The questions about teacher values and writing prompts that emerged from being a student and a teacher eventually developed into the overarching research question that guides this study. As Mary Sue McNealy reminds us, questions often arise when the researcher “notice(s) dissonances, ask(s) questions about them, and think(s) about possible methods for researching” (12). She also discusses the importance of collaborating in the process of creating the research question. While I had generally thought about prompts and how teachers articulate values, my study became more clear after talking to professors and other teachers, including some of the TAs in this study.

### **Research Methods and Design**

#### *Scope of Project*

Being a current graduate student in the Rhetoric and Composition program offers me unique relationships with other professors and teachers of different levels of experience and background. It has also given me the opportunity to study specific composition theories and pedagogies that relate to my current studies. My position in this department has informed my own values about writing as well as the lens by which I read others’ articulations of values. I discuss below my research procedure and design in light of this identity.

When I came to this research project, I faced the dilemma about how to decide on the breadth of my research. Could I stay within one school, even one department, and develop legitimate conclusions based on stories, sacrificing numbers? The difficulty of finding willing participants for the research also worried me as a researcher. How many TAs would I need to interview in order to produce legitimate conclusions? In answering these questions, I based my decisions on the advice Cindy Johanek provides to qualitative

researchers--to “find the best available means of knowing at a given time, in a given place” (102). Because the goal of my research is to begin a discussion about values by examining how a particular group of TAs articulate what they value both verbally and in their own writing prompts, I saw that my purposes and context justified my decision to do a small case study on a sample of TAs. My goal is not to generalize my findings to other TAs or writing programs. Rather, my goal is to look beyond prescriptions for how TAs should create writing prompts and begin to explore what values influence TAs’ choices in creating writing prompts. McNealy might identify my work as a case study, research involving a collection of information about “an event, situation, or small group of persons or objects for the purpose of exploring, describing, and/or explaining aspects not previously known or considered” (197). In this case study, then, I look at an area of writing prompts that has often been overlooked—the role of teachers’ values within the creation and written form of the writing prompt. As is the case with other studies of this nature, mine is small in scope and will be valuable in providing “insights into events and behaviors,” future “hypotheses for testing” as well as tools by which a writing program or teacher can reflect upon the values that impact writing prompts. The substance of this case study lies in the depth of the analysis I perform in looking at each individual response.

In this case study, I use two primary tools to collect my data: an interview with follow up questions and discourse analysis of that interview as well as TAs’ actual writing prompts. Below, I explain my procedure in selecting the participants for the study, creating the interview, and coding data for my text analysis.

### *Selection of Participants*

Just as I am familiar with the Texas State English program, I have also gained valuable insights for my own teaching based on what I learn from those I know personally within the department. Because I have friends and previous instructors who teach first year writing courses, I benefit from their personal experiences and often compare notes. In choosing TAs for this project, I did not step far out of that already established context, but rather I found, as Kirsch and Ritchie say, that researchers “can gather additional insights by getting to know participants in the context of their daily lives, and participants can gain new knowledge about themselves and their lives through the research project” (530).

I have known four out of the five TAs in this study personally and believe that my observations of them in other contexts helps support my analysis of their responses, although I do not discuss those observations within my analysis because they were not originally included in the research project or the informed consent. I want the research to stay focused on the reflection of specific information gathered from the actual writing prompts. While some may criticize this apparent bias, I see the bias as beneficial. It will help ensure that my analysis and criticism is tempered by a respect and understanding for other teachers who are novices, in a similar position as me. Kirsch and Ritchie remind us that “researchers cannot escape a position of power and the potential for appropriating or manipulating information,” but the relationships built within case studies helps the researchers gather information in order to benefit the participants, rather than to critique or manipulate their words (150). My own position as researcher and friend keeps me

more focused drawing observations rather than judgments from my analyses because I share the TAs' struggles.

In order to create some type of diversity in the sampling of participants, I initially invited ten participants, at least two TAs from each representative sub-discipline, Literature, Creative Writing, and Rhetoric and Composition, to participate in my study. (There are no TAs from the Technical Writing sub-discipline.) I wanted to see if and how TAs from different disciplines articulate values differently based on their specific focus and interests within the English department. Because of issues like time and work constraints, five TAs who were invited never completed their responses or backed out of the project. I assume that the established rapport I had with four of the five TAs who did respond may have influenced their decision to participate. For this project, I look at the writing prompts and explanations of those writing prompts from the following participants: Hillary, TA from English Literature program, Trey and Urania, TAs from English Creative Writing program, and Courtney and Collette, TAs from the English Rhetoric and Composition program.

#### *Designing and Conducting Email Interviews*

Designing a workable interview and means of conducting this interview were important to establishing the respectability of this case study. First, I acknowledge the benefit of face-to-face interviews, and if this study continued, I see the value in not only face-to-face interviews, but also possibly even focus group sessions that engage TAs in reflection as a community. However, time and location influenced my decision to do e-mail interviews for this particular study. Lokman I. Meho discusses both the benefits and drawbacks of either type of interview in his study "E-mail Interviewing in Qualitative

Research: A Methodological Discussion.” He says that the most common criticism of e-mail interviews is that they lack the “richer data” gathered in session where the interviewer can “read facial expressions and body language, make eye contact, or hear voice tones of the participants” (1289). At the same time, he says that e-mail reduces the interference of “visual or nonverbal cues” that may negatively affect data, such as race, gender, age, shyness, etc... (1289). E-mail also allows the researcher to contact those whose schedules or location discourage them from participating in the face-to-face interview. In my case, living and teaching in a different city made it difficult to coordinate face-to-face studies with the TAs who were on widely different schedules. Some also criticize e-mail interviews because the participants may not be as effective writers as they are speakers. I found in interviewing writing teachers that they all expressed themselves clearly and provided valuable information in their own writing for me to study. Meho highlights the fact that e-mail interviews allow “participants to take their time in answering questions and to take part in the interviews in a familiar environment, which may make them feel more relaxed expressing themselves and in responding when and how they feel comfortable” (1290). The interviewee can also revise and think about his or her answers before sending them, which I think is important to any study on values. In the end, the Meho lists at least four research studies that show “the quality of responses gained through online research is much the same as the responses produced by more traditional methods” if proper steps are taken to conduct effective interviews (1291).

In order to conduct effective e-mail interviews, then, I followed many of the guidelines he presents in his article. First, I contacted TAs individually rather than

through a mass email so that the participants would see their individual importance to the research. I introduced myself and my research interests in each e-mail, trying to balance a professional tone with a personal tone in order to gather serious, yet open interview results. After receiving an affirmative response, I sent out an informed consent explaining my project and how they would participate as well as the primary set of interview questions.

The initial interview for each participant consisted of the same questions, in the same in order to “reduce the risk of biased answers from some of the interviewees” (McNealy 201). In this first set of questions, I asked only open-ended questions so that the interviewees had the opportunity to explain answers as fully as they saw fit. I limited the number of initial questions in this first e-mail, as Meho recommends, so that the interview did not appear too laborious for the participants (1292). If I needed additional clarification or examples from any of the TAs, I sent them two or three specific follow up questions in second and third e-mails.

The drawback I found with e-mail interviews was the uncertainty of when or if I would receive them back. I did set up specific deadlines and reminders, but as I mentioned previously, some TAs who were initially invited and responded affirmatively to the request did not follow through with providing information. Their dropout, though, does not greatly hurt the research as I still see the sampling of five TAs to provide valuable data that speaks about the conflicting values TAs must face in the creation of writing prompts.

*Text Analysis*

The conclusions I draw from these interviews and from the writing prompts comes from an in depth text analysis. My purposes and methods in this text analysis model Thomas N. Huckin's description of a context-sensitive text analysis. He says that more researchers are looking at writers "not as an autonomous agent but as a member of one or more discourse communities, each having its own values, norms and ways of knowing and communicating" (84). He argues that context-sensitive text analysis helps researchers study writers within the context of their discourse communities "because discourse communities are defined primarily by texts, (and) those texts become a major part of the context within which any act of writing takes place" (84). In this case, the TAs in the English department show, through their own creation of writing prompts and articulation of how they create writing prompt, how their multiple identities work together or even compete within the discourse community of the classroom. I present writing prompts as context-sensitive texts rather than neutral tools because they, like any texts, articulate certain values that need to be critically examined.

Huckin also says that "text analysts make the epistemological assumption that analyzing these patterns (of language) in certain ways...can give us insight into the meaning-making practices of the community and its individual members" (86). Just as student writers attempt to make meaning for their primary audience, the teacher, TAs make meaning for their students as well. This study gives insight into the meaning-making practices of certain TA community and shows how different TAs present their students with specific ways of thinking about writing is taught and learned. As my

research study shows, writing prompts are not just transactional tools, they are texts that articulate values.

As TAs develop writing prompts based on their values, they must also manage the conflicts of values that arise. Huckin notes that “Writers belong to multiple discourse communities, and the texts they write often reflect their divided loyalties” (88). My research looks at the different discourse communities that influence the multiple identities and conflicting values of the TAs in this study. As writers of prompts for students, TAs draw upon multiple values coming from what Huckin describes as “a broad spectrum of contextual factors, including social, cultural, and other factors that are not readily formalizable” (89). Although this spectrum of values is too extensive to cover completely, I look at a selection of identities that reflect different values surfacing not only in my own experiences, but also in the texts of the TAs.

Though values are not easily coded, I find that an in depth text analysis allows me to discover certain themes that permit me to categorize a small section of the “spectrum.” McNealy says that for researchers the “tools for discourse analysis are based on one principle: categorization” (131). Because an individual’s values are constantly in flux, complicated, and influenced by multiple factors, I realize that categorizing values will always be oversimplified. Still, as Keith Grant-David says in “Coding Data: Issues of Validity, Reliability, and Interpretation,” “the main reason for dividing and classifying data is to simplify the material and impose order on it” (273). I impose order, then, on the data I collected in order to isolate specific identities and discourse communities that influence TAs and their meaning making within the classroom. Isolating certain types of values helps us look carefully at those segments of that spectrum in order to discuss what

is in conflict and how we may be more honest and effective in handling those conflicts of values.

Grant-Davie says, often researchers “may approach the data without clear expectations or with a range of alternative hypotheses. In these cases, researchers must negotiate with the data, searching from their memories for alternative schemas that might account for the data, revising the schemas they had brought to the analysis, or forming new schemas to account for the evidence” (273). In this study, the categorization process began as I looked at my own experiences and tried to discover the different types of values I presented in my writing prompts and my explanation of them. Though I came into the study with a vague idea of what categories of values I was most familiar with and might be most attuned to seeing, the research shaped my ideas into three specific categories of values that TAs present in writing prompts: institutional/academic roles, beliefs about writing, and personal interests or experiences. . In the next chapter, I describe, more thoroughly, specific categories of identity and how they represent novice teachers’ values.

I understand, though, that this type of categorization does not account for all values or all contexts of the TA’s articulation of values. Still, the writing prompts are one piece of the puzzle that we often ignore and do not examine for the values they present within the context of the classroom. Grant-Davie reminds researchers “no interpretation can be considered absolutely correct or valid” (281). However, this research study does not attempt to place absolute generalizations on TA’s construction of writing prompts or upon the specific TAs in the study. Neither does it place judgment upon certain identities or responses to the identities. It does, though, interpret the data, using certain categories

that are significant to the studies in current composition theory so that TAs and writing programs can be more equipped to discuss how these values can work effectively in the classroom setting.

As I develop personal strategies for teaching at the college or high school level, I realize that this type of analysis of others' values actually strengthens my own analysis of my values and the language I use to articulate them. It also encourages me to be a more reflective teacher and more aware of the context I create in my classrooms. I do not seek answers in order to lay out generalized findings about how TAs create writing prompts or what most TAs value. Instead, like the process of writing itself, the process of this research is the most important result in the study of values. Because I desire to see the research on creating writing prompts become more contextual, my process of researching TAs values shows one way in which to probe the articulations of values from unique individuals.

## CHAPTER III

### AN ANALYSIS OF WRITING PROMPTS AND TA INTERVIEWS

#### **Multiple Identities**

While the language in the five TA interviews and their various prompts suggest the influence of multiple values and identities, three categories of values emerged in my analysis as the most prominent themes relating to the specific context of teaching writing. I found that each instructor encountered and negotiated conflicts of values based on their identities as members of the university and academia, scholars in specific sub-disciplines of English, and novice teachers with personal writing and teaching experiences. In isolating these three categories of values based on particular identities, I do not dismiss other personal identities associated with gender, race, class, family background, professional memberships, and other cultural identities that affect a teachers' negotiation of values. These other identities should also be examined in further research on teacher values; however, they did not emerge as powerfully as categories related to academic identity, disciplinary identity and personal writing and teaching experience. The categories of values I found in the data begin the conversation about specific conflicts of values directly linked to the context of teaching First Year English (FYE).

All five TAs teach FYE (or English 1310) at Texas State while pursuing their own studies as graduate students within the department. All of them can define themselves as

college students and novice teachers based on their roles in the university. They all took a training course for their position as a TA and worked for a year as an instructional assistant in a large sophomore English literature lecture class before being given positions as teachers in their own classrooms. All English 1310 instructors are also given a standardized syllabus with a set of specific objectives along with a rubric that details not only for the students, but also for the teachers, what is required for the course.

Still, despite the TAs' similarities and common ground in the department, their unique identities based on their roles as students and teachers help shape their diverse interpretations of the FYE requirements. Hillary has a B.A. in English literature from Texas A&M University and is a student in the Texas State graduate literature program. She brings a year of high school teaching experience to her first year of teaching FYE at Texas State. Trey is a creative writing student, and along with his undergraduate English creative writing degree from Texas State, he minored in political science. He brings three years of experience as a writing center tutor to his first year of teaching FYE at Texas State. Urania began her studies as an English literature major at Sam Houston State University, but she transferred to Texas State and changed her major to creative writing because of her interest in writing fiction. She has been working in the writing center and teaching both developmental and first year English courses for four years, but still classifies herself as a "new teacher." Courtney has a B.A. in Writing and Religious Studies and an M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition. As an undergraduate, Courtney worked in a writing center and co-taught an "Introduction to College Life" common course for three years. Collette graduated with a double major in Communication and English Writing and Rhetoric, and she pursued Rhetoric and Composition as a graduate

student. She also assisted in teaching a Freshman Studies course as an undergraduate student for two semesters before she began teaching at Texas State.

The data I gathered and synthesized from writing prompts, interviews, and the profiles of five TAs provide some perspective of how they define their values. Based on my interpretation of the data, I see that each finds a unique way to emphasize these values. In collecting data from writing prompts, I looked at four prompts from Hillary, five prompts from Urania, and five prompts covering an entire semester from Trey, Courtney, and Collette, and each answered the same initial interview questions.

Within their prompts and interviews, I saw repeated references to the “form” of academic writing, the requirements of 1310 from the standard syllabus, and the assumed demands of college-level writing. I categorize these statements as institutional or academic values based on the TAs’ roles as hired teachers within the university. I also saw, in specific statements or just overall emphasis from the prompts and interviews, prominent ideas, theories, and practices relating to writing that come from the traditions and discussions within specific disciplinary discourses. I categorize these statements or emphases as scholarly values based on the TAs’ roles as students of a particular (or several) disciplines. Finally, each TA alludes to experiences he or she has had as a teacher of writing or a student of writing that influence the values in the classroom. I categorize these statements or emphases as values based on personal experiences, not just general experiences, but specifically within the contexts of teaching and writing.

As I examined their writing prompts and interviews, I also began to make connections between what they emphasized about writing and their multiple identities as

teachers and students based on what they explicitly stated in their interviews and what I inferred from their prompts alongside the information they provided me in their profiles.

In looking at how TAs articulated these values about writing, I noticed three specific types of statements or emphases about writing that helped me define the categories of values that I just discussed. Each TA made statements or placed emphasis on specific writing conventions and specific writing objectives that I argue reveal their negotiation of values. While I initially set out to look at how the writing prompts and interviews reflected their differing values about writing, I recognized that the writing prompts and interviews also revealed how they perceived their positions in the classroom and what they assumed about their students. These additional findings give some perspective as to *how* each TA might negotiate their values about writing. The same three identities that I saw influencing their values about writing—members of the institution, scholars in specific sub-disciplines of English, and individuals with unique experiences related to writing—also influenced the way each TA emphasized writing conventions and writing objectives as well as the way they represented their position to the class.

### **Reflecting Values: Emphases on Writing Conventions**

In my first reading through all the writing prompts, the various discussions of specific writing conventions caught my attention because each TA revealed unique emphases. In their interviews, the TAs often revealed their reasoning behind the emphasis on certain writing skills. Their reasoning processes show that even when two or more TAs emphasized the same writing practice, like using first person in academic

essays, they often had different explanations for why they emphasize that practice, indicating their diverse values and interpretations of those values.

The most obvious instance of conflicting values relating to writing conventions is the question about students' use of first person, an issue addressed in all of the TAs' prompts. Though this may seem like an insignificant issue in the larger scheme of the writing course, it was significant enough for all the TAs to address. Their responses to the issue of whether or not they allowed students to use first person in their essays shows the unique decision making process each TA faces when negotiating complex and conflicting values.

Out of the prompts that Hillary gave me, only one of them gave permission to the students to use first person. Though she gives few instructions compared to the other TAs, she is careful to note in her prompt for paper one: "(Hint: for this topic ONLY, it is OK to write in first-person.)" This prompt asks students to discuss an essay by Eric Liu's essay whiteness theory and to determine what category of "whiteness" the student falls under. The second option for this paper asks students to respond to articles by authors who discuss the "stereotypical" woman, by explaining what a "stereotypical man" would look like and how a woman could pass as a man; however, essays in response to this prompt option could not use first-person based on her instructions to the first option. She indicates that she is looking for a personal argument for one option and perhaps a more objective response to the other option.

Though Hillary does not explain in her interview or in the prompt instructions why one prompt merits a first-person response and the other does not, I see Hillary demonstrating that she is trying to uphold two institutional requirements that already

seem in conflict. On one hand, the English 1310 syllabus encourages students to use personal experiences as evidence in arguments; yet traditional academic form often requires students to present an objective argument that ignores overly subjective, personal influences. Hillary's prompts, by incorporating both sides to the "first-person" issue, show the value she places on teaching university standards even if the university standards seem conflicting.

Trey also addresses the use of "first person" in several of his prompts. At the end of his paper three prompts, Trey does not forbid first person, but he gives a warning in saying,

Be very careful with First Person—do not allow it to take the authority out of your argument.

An example:

Unnecessary First Person—"If the government provided everyone with free contraceptives, I think the impoverished would be economically well-served."

More authoritative—"The impoverished would be economically well-served if the government provided everyone with free contraceptives."

In another paper prompt, Trey tells students, "Personal essays are often more difficult to write than expository essays. Do not assume writing with 'I' is easier or better—often it can lead to unnecessary mistakes." Instead of merely requiring students to use or not use first person, Trey's various prompt instructions indicate that he wants to teach students the appropriate use of first person. His instructions, though, present this understanding of first person usage as a fixed standard. In his explanation, he shows that he values the traditional academic justification of the convention. Academic discourse has traditionally

decided that taking out first person is often “more authoritative,” which reflects, again, the institutional values of objective tone vs. subjective tone. Though his instructions sound more like advice than authoritative instruction, he, like Hillary, is still negotiating the university’s conflicting standards about valuing personal experience and learning academia’s constructed conventions of formal writing.

Urania’s prompts lend themselves to personal narrative more than any other TA’s, so she allows first person use in all of her prompts; however, she does not ask the students to use other works to argue or discuss an issue. Instead, each prompt allows the students to create an argument completely around their own experiences. For instance, one prompt asks students to evaluate their own writing by assigning grades to their diagnostic essays and justifying those grades. Another prompt asks students to write an ideal speech someone would give at their funerals. All of her papers require first person (even if the speaker is not the actual student.)

These paper prompts do not seem to place the same value on institutional requirements concerning traditional academic discourse, specifically regarding the use of first person. However, her discussion on her decisions in creating these writing prompts reveals her emphases on values based on her personal experiences. As a teacher, she says in her interview that personal essays are more interesting for her to read, and, more importantly, they help her remember the students. She shows that she values her personal experiences as a teacher influence how she decides to uphold traditional academic format regarding first person.

Her reasoning behind the decision to use only personal essays also reveals how her experiences as a teacher influence the value she places in another institutional and

scholarly requirement. She says that personal essays help “decrease chances of plagiarism.” Texas State, like many universities, has a strict code of integrity concerning plagiarism. Outside of the university, Western society treats breaches of intellectual property rights as criminal offences, so Urania chooses to prevent plagiarism even if it means giving up another traditional academic standard (objectivity or lack of personal bias). The value Urania places on her personal experience as a teacher, though, influenced this negotiation. She says that in her first year of teaching, she did require students to use outside readings, but she got tired of dealing with plagiarism, so she made the decision to focus on personal essays. So, Urania makes decisions about what university standards she values most by weighing in the value she places on her personal experiences.

Collette, like Urania, made the decision to let her students use first person on every prompt. All of Collette’s prompts included a statement at the end of the page saying, “You may use first person, i.e. ‘I believe...’ or ‘I will...’” She does not discuss specifically why she allows them to use first person, but I find it interesting that she would give the instruction at all. Collette’s prompts ask students to engage in a range of argumentative tasks. Her paper prompts requires students to engage in personal reflection and argumentative writing at the same time. For example, her paper two prompt asks students to argue, but emphasizes personal reflection: “How do these attributes (gender, language, race, role) affect/shape your identity as you perceive it?” Paper three prompt emphasizes argument, but allows personal reflection: “Write an essay in which you either support or refute the statement [from a list of statements] incorporating the text from which the quote is drawn and your own experience as

evidence to support your argument.” While she has different purposes for different prompts, she is explicit in her directions to use personal experience and first person.

In studying Collette’s interview, I see that she values institutional standards that students learn, as she says, to “appropriate academic discourse,” but she also values other composition scholarship when she says that she wants them to “discover their natural academic voice.” By allowing students to use first person, she shows that she values what she has learned in composition scholarship about validating the personal while still teaching the conventions of academia. While academic standards may be changing concerning the use of first person and the validation of personal experience, Collette recognizes that a conflict still exists and she is clear as to what position she values most. Collette indicates that she is more concerned with her scholarly values in this case because she believes that “students’ unique experiences are useful tools when writing,” and she believes it is her responsibility as a scholar of writing to “give voice to the marginalized students.” She does this by encouraging the use of first person.

Courtney is less consistent in her decisions about students’ use of first person. Her lack of consistency and her interview answers reveal the present struggle she faces between her institutional values, her scholarly values, and her personal experiences as a writer. She gives students the same diagnostic essay that Collette gives her class, asking the class to evaluate a value or belief and make conclusions about its validity in their lives. However, unlike Collette, Courtney, includes in her list of instructions, “(Do not Write in the first person (that means avoid using the words I, Me, or We. Also avoid You—you do not need to address your audience as such, I already know who you’re writing to!).” In her prompts for papers three, four, and five, Courtney changes her

instructions and allows students to write in first person. She modifies her expectation list to say, “You may use first person, i.e. ‘I believe...’ or ‘I will..’ but *not* “you.” In this shift of directions, Courtney shows that she wrestles with what is acceptable academic format and what values she is willing to forfeit for the sake of others. Courtney revealed to me in her interviews that she is a proponent and scholar of social-constructionist pedagogy as well as a somewhat expressionistic epistemology that values the voice and personal perspective of the student, and she tries to incorporate both of these in her prompts. So, while she values the traditional institutional standards enough to require students to begin writing without using first person, the changes she makes in prompts reveals that she may have decided that she places greater value her scholarly beliefs about writing practices and conventions.

Courtney also tells her students not to use “emoticons (smiley faces) in your essay.” No other TA addresses this more current, non-traditional academic practice. While her inclusion of this instruction reflects her institutional values about formal writing, I believe she also reveals how her personal writing experiences complicate her decisions. In her emails to me in response to my interview questions and casual conversation, Courtney uses emoticons on a regular basis because of the way they express her feelings. Her own prompts indicate the expression of her individual voice in her extensive use of exclamation marks and punctuation such as underlining and using boldface and italicized font. Though these patterns in her writing reflect the expressionistic theories from her composition scholarship, I see them as being part of her personal experience of writing. She even says that her favorite writing assignments are the informal assignments that allow her to respond less traditionally. In attempting to

balance her institutional and scholarly values as well as values from her personal experiences as a writer, she opts to experiment with different instructions.

Besides making the decision about students' use of first person, each TA emphasized different writing skills or conventions, and these emphases reveal their allegiance to or acceptance of certain values. While the English 1310 syllabus lays out the objectives of the first year writing course, teachers highlight what they see as the most valuable skills or conventions of writing for students to learn. Though two TAs may reveal similarities in their values, they may define those values differently based on their identities as a student and a teacher. For instance, even though several of the TAs' writing prompts enforce academic standards of writing because of the institutional values of the instructor, different TAs have different perceptions and interpretations of academic standards. Even as each TA articulates the most important FYE writing skills and conventions with a slightly different emphasis, I see their values and multiple identities at work.

Hillary's emphasis on basic writing skills reveals her values in academic standards within the context of this class. In her interview, she summarizes the primary goal of English 1310 by saying that students should "learn the basic writing skills needed for college-level writing" which include the abilities to "write a clear thesis and develop that thesis into a cohesive paper." Hillary mentions "college-level writing" a few times throughout her interview as the emphasis of the course. She shows that her focus is on preparing students to write specifically within the academic discourse community because she values the institutional standards that college demands.

Hillary's explanations of basic writing are simple and direct just like her prompts. She expects to see a clear thesis and a cohesive paper. In her prompts, she gives instructions to "be specific," "give examples," and "incorporate outside sources" in supporting arguments. Though I recognize the probability that Hillary has given other formatting requirements verbally or within her syllabus, her prompts reveal her focus, and the exclusion of these other requirements makes them secondary. Hillary's instructions focus on very specific conventions of academic writing, especially the proper way to use specific supports. By streamlining her requirements, Hillary gives students the opportunity to concentrate on fewer conventions in order to more successfully fulfill an immediate goal of FYE, which Hillary says is having students "master the course." Her personal goal for the class reflects the value she places on institutional standards that promote mastery and upward movement in college and academia.

Trey, too, values institutional goals, but he takes a completely different approach than Hillary, based on his interpretation of academic standards. He presents his prompts with more thoroughness than any other TA. All of his prompts fill up an entire page. Each begins with two lines of what he labels "basic requirements" consisting of word limits, font, font sizes, spacing, margins, cover page instructions, and "an effective and sufficiently narrow thesis statement." He also mentions in his interview that the goal of the class is to improve the writing ability of his students by improving an "understanding of punctuation, grammar, and syntax and paragraph construction." While Trey's prompts are not the only ones with extensive instructions on formatting and mechanics, I found his unique in that he placed the "basic requirements" at the very beginning and emphasized the equal importance of the paper's format with the narrow thesis statement.

His instructions do not reflect the same higher order importance that Hillary places upon relatively few academic requirements that she sees as most important. Actually, Trey seems to try to introduce students to the full picture of a traditional academic paper and all the details that will help them succeed in writing for other college-level classes. In fact, he not only lists basic requirements at the top of the page for each prompt, he also makes lists of extra instructions at the bottom of the page concluding with repeated reminders to proofread. Each paper contains a different version of his final note: “Proofread Proofread Proofread. And then do it again,” “PROOFREAD ALOUD! Like, REAL LOUD!” and “Proofread as if your life depends on it. Because it does.” The capital letters, repetition, exclamation marks, and hyperboles re-emphasize the features of basic writing that he values as most important—academic conventions—according to what he perceives about institutional standards and requirements.

While his emphasis seems to be on the final paper product, Trey does urge students to “come to thesis workshop and peer review ready to help and be helped.” He raves about the writing center saying, “They are miraculous.” Here, he shows that he values the process of writing, not so much as a scholarly theory of writing, but as a means of mastering the basics of writing in order to fulfill academic standards. His own experiences as an instructor and a tutor within the writing center have helped him value this community as a means of achieving academic standards.

Urania, like Trey, uses her prompts to reveal the values she places on learning certain academic conventions. Organization patterns and formatting requirements seem to be the basis for most of Urania’s paper prompts. Each of her prompts includes instructions on using “MLA format” with reference to information in the Scott Foresman

handbook. However, none of her prompts ask students to incorporate readings or outside sources, acts I associate with using the MLA format. She clarifies her instructions to use MLA format by explaining Microsoft Word settings on margins. In other words, understanding MLA format is important, primarily for setting up the paper with proper margins, spacing, etc., not for citing other authors. Here, she reveals her specific allegiance to an academic requirement in the English department—the knowledge of MLA format—and she values the packaging of her students’ writing as one of the more important academic conventions. Interestingly, she only references the Writing Center or collaboration to encourage students who are unsure or unfamiliar with their computer settings or MLA format to visit a lab proctor or Writing Center tutor. She places value on the surface level requirements that may be the first things noticed in academic papers.

In addition to Urania’s emphasis on the format of papers, she says that the primary goal of English 1310 is “to make students write college-level papers in terms of organization, grammar, and quality of argument.” Her prompts especially emphasize “college-level” organization, according to a very traditional understanding of academic papers. The diagnostic essay asks students to write a “five-paragraph essay,” and another prompt urges students to “make sure your essay follows a point-by point structure or subject-by-subject structure.” Though she includes emphasis in her prompts on standard organization, she does not discuss “quality of argument” in her prompts, and her prompts, because of their personal, reflective nature, do not offer much room for developed argument, as I will discuss further on as I discuss the objectives of her prompts.

As I mentioned before, Urania is also very concerned with the issue of plagiarism. She warns at the end of every prompt, “Remember I have the right to use Turnitin.com.

Do NOT plagiarize!” Because her prompts are all personal essays, I was confused about her emphasis on plagiarism. She seems to acknowledge this irony because she includes warnings such as “(Geeze, plagiarize a paper about your own progress? What’s wrong with you?)” or “(Really, plagiarize your own death/retirement speech? Give me a break!).” She works hard at controlling plagiarism and protecting intellectual property so much that she values student integrity above the act of engaging with other scholarly writing. Once again, she reveals strong values placed on very traditional academic standards, the ones that, I see, are more harshly punished and perhaps less related to critical thinking associated with the writing process. As I mentioned earlier, I see that her interpretation of the most important academic conventions also relates to the value she places on her first experiences as a teacher dealing with students’ plagiarism.

Collette’s prompts reveal her desire to teach higher order writing skills, while expecting her students to follow basic instructions about academic conventions. She divides each prompts into three sections. First, she gives a little discussion on the prompt and asks students to present an argument to question or statement. At the bottom of the page, she includes a specific bulleted list for “Format and for Expectations” and sometimes for “Schedule of Deadlines.” Under Format on each paper, she includes the length, font and size, MLA formatting, and Works Cited requirements. Under Expectations, she asks for introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, and an incorporation of texts, showing that she values the traditional form of academic writing within the context of her class.

Her emphasis in each prompt, though, lies within the general discussion of her question. She tells students in the prompt for their diagnostic essay “the general focus of

this class is on argumentative writing.” In her description of English 1310 goals, she says that students should learn: “how to write a thesis, organize an argument, support claims, and communicate in a clear and concise manner” as well as “develop critical thinking skills.” In each prompt, she includes discussion, quotes from a specific work, or questions to think about along with each question, but she puts the question for the prompt in bold and reminds students, after the discussion of the prompt, that their primary responsibility is answering the actual question in their thesis.

Collette’s goals for the class reflect the value that she places on academic discourse, but values academic conventions as secondary to the value she places on what she believes about writing, as a scholar of composition. She interprets academic conventions more broadly than just surface level errors, and sees academic discourse as one community of discourse that allows students to develop critical thinking skills. She is concerned that students “look at issues from all sides,” within an argumentative essay rather than trying to use a form and “mimic what they feel is an academic style.” In making this statement, Collette reveals that not only is she interested in institutional values, but also she is interested in what she believes about writing, especially within the current social constructionist movement. Because she values social constructionist theories that discuss language and writing as a means of thinking and creating meaning within communities, Collette wants students to learn to use language in this broader context of writing ability, not merely to satisfy institutional requirements.

Because Courtney and Collette collaborated on several of their prompts, Courtney’s prompt structure resembles Collette’s, with the addition of her own set of “Dos and Don’ts” at the bottom. Her articulation of goals is very similar as well.

Courtney says that the overarching goal of English 1310 is to “help students become acclimated to academic discourse communities.” The writing skills important to learn in this class primarily involve “critical thinking and analysis” that can be applied to any type of university “paper, presentation, speech, and discussion.” She adds that conventions such as “sentence-level editing” are only of secondary importance in the class. She clarifies this by saying that she expects revision, but grammar and mechanics are not as important in the classroom as concepts, ideas, details, tone, evidence, and other higher order issues. After all, a grammatically correct paper without an idea is not a good paper, according to Courtney. She, unlike the other TAs, expresses concern over how her understanding and others’ understanding of academic standards may conflict. She is often unsure if she provides a “disservice” to her students because she knows so many other classes on campus look for good grammar or the ability to use academic conventions properly as evidence of good writing, so she does not want to ignore the value she places on the standards of the university in general.

Her essay prompts, though, also reflect scholarly values from her studies in composition theory. She says that most of her prompts are based on a social-constructionist pedagogy “that allows students to critically explore their worlds and their knowledge” while at the same time recognizing how that “knowledge is shaped by social influences.” Because she values this theory, each of her prompts ask students to draw conclusions based on what they already know through experience as well as what others say in different readings. She also gives specific instructions on how to accomplish this task using academic conventions. For instance, in her prompt for paper two, she asks the students to explore how different attributes like gender, language, race, and role affect

their identities; and she tells them to quote or paraphrase each of the authors they have read who discuss identity in order to support their own understanding. So, she does teach students academic conventions (or writing skills) such as incorporating text and citing authors because she values the institutional requirements. However, because she values composition and language scholarship, she sees that the incorporation of authors is not merely an exercise in academic writing, but it engages students in community dialogue.

Because the writing conventions taught in English 1310 are directly associated with academic writing, TAs, by incorporating some emphasis on any writing conventions, reveal the values they place on institutional requirements. However, the ways in which individual TAs emphasize and interpret writing conventions for academic writing reflect individual negotiations. Hillary emphasizes the primary writing conventions, like developing thesis statements and cohesive papers, tasks important to her discipline—literature and other liberal arts programs. Because her scholarly values and institutional values are so aligned, I see little conflict between the two values. She negotiates within her institutional values in that she chooses to emphasize one or two primary conventions rather than focusing on as many conventions as she can. Trey and Urania also value institutional requirements in their emphasis on different academic conventions. Their emphases show what they see as the most important academic conventions as they focus on surface-level errors or, at most, place surface-level skills on an equal plane with higher order issues like argument, organization, and clarity. Neither one seem to privilege or incorporate their scholarly interests in creative writing within their understanding of the writing done in FYE, at least in the emphases on surface-level academic conventions. They do, however, make decisions about what conventions are

most important based on their personal experiences as instructors and writing center tutors. They value their personal experiences in helping them negotiate the focus of the course, in terms of what academic conventions to teach. Courtney and Collette, as well, value institutional requirements, but almost place them as secondary to their scholarly values. They teach academic conventions as only one means to a social-construction of knowledge. In privileging their scholarly values, they must decide which academic conventions are most appropriate in light of their scholarly values. Because academic conventions and their scholarly values may at times conflict, each shows a process of individual negotiation of these conflicts within their writing prompts and interviews.

### **Reflecting Values: Emphases on Specific Writing Objectives**

Though the English 1310 syllabus lays out general objectives, TAs have quite a bit of leeway as far as the actual content and discussion of their prompts. The teachers do have some guidelines, though. They are given a specific class reader to use and must emphasize “multiculturalism” in the context of writing; however, their interpretations of these two requirements are very diverse. As I looked at the content of the writing prompt questions, I saw that the TAs created different specific objectives for writing depending upon their interpretations of the more general course objectives, which is primarily to “study the principles of expository writing—the kind of objective, audience-directed prose used in college and beyond to explain and defend ideas.” The way each of the TAs’ prompt emphasize more specific objectives for writing, though, reveals another way these TAs negotiate the values they place on institutional requirements, scholarly influences, and personal experiences within the classroom.

The objectives of Hillary's writing prompts relate to her scholarly interests in literature and the study of texts. Hillary's writing prompts are drawn directly from the readings in the book. As mentioned previously, in one prompt, she asks students to look at Eric Liu's statement that "some are born white, others achieve whiteness, still others have whiteness thrust upon them" and then write an essay that explains which one of those categories they fit under and why. The prompt does not require students to engage in discussion with Eric Liu; it asks them to accept what he says as an authority and fit themselves within his categories. The wording of this prompt, as I interpret it, suggests that Hillary is concerned with the students' ability to understand the text and explain it in a thesis driven paper, using personal experiences for support. I see Hillary's decision in creating this type of prompt as a reflection of her scholarly values in the classroom. While this type of prompt provides opportunities for self-analysis and text-analysis, which are forms of critical thinking, its primary purpose reflects one of the objectives of traditional literature papers, which is reveal an understanding and appreciation of texts.

In another prompt, Hillary asks students to write an essay that asks students to argue for or against a specific violation of rights. She lists possible topics like the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, Native Americans, Women's Rights Movement, Gay Marriage, Disability Discrimination, and Domestic/Child Abuse. On the surface, the prompt appears to have an argumentative purpose, reflecting Hillary's institutional values since the English 1310 syllabus states that students learn argumentative writing. However, because Hillary's ethos as a teacher of multiculturalism affects the nature of the prompt so that it seems to favor one side of the argument—the "against" side—I see that the prompt lends itself to more of an explanation of one of these issues, rather than a

critical analysis. As a scholar of literature, Hillary most likely values the ability to take texts (even cultural texts like these issues) and explain them. She emphasizes, in this prompt, that the purpose of writing this paper is to present knowledge, not necessarily to think about an issue in a different light. She supports my conclusion when she says in her own words, “I would like for the students to learn about other cultures and understand them, but that is secondary” in relation to being able to write a thesis statement and a cohesive paper. The primary purpose of this prompt does not hinder critical thinking in argumentative form, but it places it secondary to presenting information. Hillary’s prompt indicates her scholarly values as a literature student, reflecting some of the traditional purposes of an English literature paper or lecture—to explain text and present knowledge.

The objectives of Trey’s prompts reveal less of his scholarly interest in creative writing and perhaps more of his scholarly interest in political science, which was his minor as an undergraduate. Trey’s prompts, as he admits, are designed to provide students with opportunities to deal with “larger social issues” that are possibly “over their heads.” The way he designs his prompts also reveals the value he places on his own experiences as a writer. He says that his favorite writing prompts as a student were the ones that forced him to think about or do something he had never done before, and he wants to provide his students an equal challenge. Though his writing prompts ask for a specific thesis and development of a paper, the tasks themselves are significantly more complicated than Hillary’s and often propose multiple objectives.

Most of Trey’s prompts reflect his scholarly interest in political science and asks students to consider how the government can be used to promote social justice. Many of

his prompts are also goal oriented, rather than focused specifically on argument, though, he like Hillary, uses the language of argumentation by requiring students to “form an argument” as the basis for each of his prompts in order to reflect English 1310 requirements. Instead of setting up arguments, Trey’s prompts often asks the students to assume the position he takes on an issue and use that position for completing a task.

For example, in one paper prompt, Trey asks students to develop a multi-tiered plan for the government to eliminate (or at least drastically reduce) the financial problems of poor, full time working adults. He adds, “Do not neglect to consider the impact of children, rent, transportation, and other costs in regards to your plan.” The prompt seems ambitious for FYE writing task. While it is not a specific argument, it requires creative thinking as well as a lot of outside information. In another prompt, Trey asks students to consider the pros and cons of imperialism (which he lays out for them) and they must consider “how best to encourage imperialism’s benefits while minimizing its negatives by formulating a multi-dimensional mindset for the United States future foreign policy.” He reminds them to “consider the mistakes of the past and current geopolitical climate as well as the United States’ assumed role as caretaker of the world.” He gives another option that asks students to “discuss how society could make the transition smoother for those who choose to “change sides” or perform gender-bending, “without making a judgment on whether gender-bending is right or wrong” while at the same time “discussing awareness, safety, public policy, and adjustments” society could enforce to make transitions smoother.

The purpose of these prompts does not seem to get students to form arguments about social issues; instead, because the prompts require students to assume Trey’s

positions, they become less argumentative and more goal-oriented. He also designs these prompts so that the students would probably need to perform extensive research in order to adequately answer the questions. In asking for students to tackle a question like these that many experienced government officials and other groups in societies are debating and working together to solve may present such a daunting task that students become caught up in the concept and overlook the basic writing conventions he also highly values. Here, the institutional values he holds regarding writing conventions and the scholarly values he holds regarding complicated writing objectives may come into conflict as students engage in these writing assignments. Trey understands his idealism, when he says of himself and his goals for the class, "One can only dream." This simple statement shows that Trey realizes and sees the less than satisfactory effects of the conflicting values and may need to negotiate more critically how the two values will work together more successfully in his classroom.

The specific objectives of Urania's prompts reflect the values she places on her experiences as a writing instructor. As I mentioned previously, they lack any connection to the readings in the class; and, out of all five TAs I interviewed, she gives the most personal and reflective assignments to her students. Her diagnostic essay asks students to choose a passion "anything, such as baseball, fishing, piano, democracy, George Washington, environmentalism, stamp collecting, your fraternity, tequila, a specific game" and explain why it deserves to be a passion. Students could also write a paper on the one thing they would change in the world or write a biography that someone would write about them in the future. Each of the diagnostic prompts gives students the opportunity to display their unique interests and personality in a very personal way.

Though I believe individual students' personalities would come out in other TAs' prompts as well, Urania puts specific emphasis on this objective in her writing prompts.

Her other prompts follow a similar pattern. She asks students in another paper to write an "ideal speech someone would give of you on your funeral day." They should consider questions like "What will you have accomplished by the end of your life? What do you hope people will remember most about you? How do you hope to have impacted other people in their lives? Which people in particular do you hope to have affected and how?" She told me she liked this assignment because it gives students the opportunity to practice a different format of writing (speech vs. essay). This prompt, like the diagnostic essay, encourages introspectiveness and little critical analysis.

In creating writing prompts for the purpose of personal reflection (and learning basic academic conventions), I not only see Urania's expressed values based on her experiences as a writing teacher, but also as a writer and scholar within the sub-discipline of creative writing. She says that her favorite assignments were "creative writing assignments" because she has loved writing stories since she was in the eighth grade. Still, as she tries to balance those personal values with university standards for English 1310 she says, "I see 1310 as a class on how to write essays, not stories. There's too much freshmen need to know about writing good essays for me to take out time to teach them good creative writing, which is a different class anyway." While she says this, her prompts suggest otherwise as she creates prompts that allow students to tell their own stories and expression their individuality. Rather than looking at story-telling as a feature of expressionist writing, she articulates a desire to separate it from academic writing altogether. Because she has been involved in many divisions of English such as

literature, developmental writing, creative writing, and FYE, she separates types of writing and purposes in writing; however, I do not see that she can fully separate her scholarly values from her institutional values. In failing to connect the relationship of her two sets of values that she reveals in the objectives of her writing prompts and the values she holds concerning academic conventions, she presents a conflict of values that is left un-interrogated. In order to better negotiate her values, looking at these conflicts she finds between her scholarly values and her institutional values may help her to better articulate the objectives she has for her writing class.

The objectives found in Courtney and Collette's prompts were nearly identical, and both of these TAs showed how they negotiated the institutional standards while incorporating the scholarship that has influenced them in their composition studies. First, the sequence of assignments indicated a progression of critical thought. For instance, both started out with an essay that asked students to explore and challenge an individual value or belief. In the next essay, they asked students to explore what factors influenced their identities while incorporating ideas of other authors who discuss identity. In the third prompt, the TAs allowed students argue from a position that confronted or supported scholars from required readings. Then, in the fourth prompt, students were challenged to create their own argument in any form (such as a brochure, website, song, or letter) and analyze it for its specific rhetorical effect. In sequencing the assignments, Courtney and Collette show that they value the process by which students become comfortable with their own voices and gradually enter into academic discourse. The emphasis Courtney and Collette place on their scholarly values influences how they design writing objectives, but being a teacher in the university, they do not ignore or

judge the institutional requirements that help students succeed within the system. At the same time, both purposefully diverged from the argumentative objectives in a traditional academic essays in the fourth paper prompt because they see writing as more than academic. Courtney describes how theories about social construction influence her goal as teachers not just to thrust the conventions of academic discourse upon the students, but rather to bring the students into the discourse by validating their own knowledge and contributions in making meaning within the community.

Though Collette's and Courtney's various writing prompts show diverse objectives that take into account both institutional values and scholarly values, Courtney's last paper prompt returns students to a more traditional, academic essay. She told me in her interview that when she thinks of prompts, she always remembers, in the back of her mind, that one of the primary objectives of the course is to teach academic discourse, so she felt like she needed to end with a re-iteration of that emphasis. Collette, on the other hand, continued her progression away from traditional academic readings and analyses and asked students to perform a visual rhetorical analysis. As these two TAs chose different final papers, they show that they are continuing to negotiate their values. Both ended with a traditional, academic essay, illustrating that they saw value in continuing to teach academic standards; but Collette was more ready to experiment and push the boundaries based on her scholarly interests in rhetoric while Courtney chose to return to the academic form she felt was more reflective of university objectives.

In looking at these TAs' development of writing objectives in addition to their emphases on specific academic conventions, I see layers of values working in quite complicated ways. Sometimes the TAs do not even recognize the conflicting values that

effect their decisions and other times, they are actively negotiating these conflicting values. Nevertheless, all five TAs face the complication of the same three categories of values. While I looked first at these two layers in the writing prompts, I noticed, too, that intimately connected to the TAs' reflection of values is their representations of their positions within the classroom as well. These representations of positions, including their assumptions about students, give more perspective to how they negotiate their values in the classroom.

### **Perceptions of Position and Assumptions about Students**

Within the system of hierarchies created by the university and academia in general, TAs take on a privileged position of authority in the classroom. That position allows them to require others to meet the same standards they did in order to gain status within the system. At the same time, TAs, as current and former students, draw upon their own experiences in facing the barriers to entering academic discourse. These experiences often influence how the TA interprets her position as more of a mentor, guiding another student into the inner circle of academic discourse, rather than as merely an authority figure. TAs, as scholars of composition, may define their position based on the influence of composition studies that discuss the de-centered or student-focused classrooms that break down structures of authority and acknowledge that the process of meaning-making happens within communities of people regardless of privilege. These values based on different identities shape the role a TA wishes to assume in the classroom. Below, I describe the positions I see each TA assuming in the classroom and discuss how these might affect their negotiation of values.

Hillary's prompts and description of how she creates her prompts reveals the confidence and value she places in her position as classroom authority. In my discussion with Hillary, I find that while her experiences as a student influence the creation of her writing prompts, she relies more on her position as academic authority in order to uphold the standards of the university.

Hillary notes that, personally, she is very interested in hearing what students enjoy about different texts and finding out what interests them; but ultimately, she designs the prompts based on what she thinks works the best to accomplish class goals. Though the prompts do not reveal this struggle, she shows, through her discussion, that she must negotiate how her values work together. She admits the complex nature of her values when she says she wants the students to be "able to choose" how to answer the prompt, but, at the same time, she admits, "It is extremely important that they understand the prompt the same way I understand it." In Hillary's discussion about how she creates prompts for the class, she shows that she must still wrestle with different values based on her own identities.

As a student, she says that she always enjoyed prompts that she could choose how to answer in her own way, and she wants to give that same freedom to her students. She values that personal classroom experience in which she could choose the direction of her papers. In order to duplicate that experience that she values, she wants to let students "tailor their paper to what interests them" so she tries to develop writing prompts based on what the students like to discuss in class. She shows a desire to let her students have some control, some voice of authority in the class, but her decision-making also reflects how she values her own university-instituted position as the final authority in the

classroom. She demonstrates confidence in her ability to assess her students' interests based on class discussions and use her expertise to design prompts that she believes will be profitable for students according to university standards that will best prepare them for other college-level papers. While she evaluates her prompts based on the level of enthusiasm the class exhibits when she presents them to the class, she told me that she has never altered a prompt. Three times in the interview, she repeats her desire to create and use her own prompts whenever possible. These statements emphasize that while her personal experience motivates her to listen to her students' voices, she ultimately values her academic expertise in creating effective prompts based on what she knows about university standards. Her perceived and projected position affects the choices she makes in negotiating her values in the creation of her class prompts.

Trey uses his position as a privileged authority in the university to promote academic standards and fulfill his personal aspirations of mentoring students to change them for the better. His prompts and discussion expose his personal assumptions regarding his first year writing students reveals as well as his attempt to define his position of authority. He exposes many of his own assumptions based on how he positions himself in the classroom in relation to what he perceives as his students' inexperience. The way he perceives his position and the assumptions he makes about his students help explain the way he negotiates his values.

In his interview, he says he wants to *instill* courage to attack the unanswerable questions, *facilitate* students' maturity, and *give* them the opportunity to make decisions for themselves (my emphasis). The language he uses in articulating his goals as a mentor is far from passive or objective. In each phrase, he shows his assumptions concerning

first year students—they lack maturity, they have not made many decisions themselves, and they lack courage. He enjoys the responsibility that he perceives is his to change these students for the better and succeed in college-level writing. In this position as mentor-authority, Trey emphasizes on certain institutional values about writing conventions and writing purposes correspond with his perception of his position. In another statement, Trey says that his goals for the classroom involve grounding students in the basics of writing, “while, at the same time, dealing with larger social issues that may be over their heads.” He values makes decisions and negotiates his values based on his own expertise, as not only a writing teacher but someone more trained in social issues, and he portrays a desire to share that expertise with his students.

In his prompts, he uses language that expresses this perceived position. He inserts dialogue with the students in his prompts in order to guide them in their answers. In his fifth paper prompt, he asks students to discuss injustices based on a passage by Martin Luther King, Jr., and he warns them, “This is a wide-open prompt, but be careful to approach it wisely and maturely.” He is able to use his position within the system to determine wise and mature thought, and he assumes that his prodding helps students to better answer the question. In his second paper prompt in which he asks students to discuss Thoreau and his principles for living, Trey warns students, “If you choose this prompt, be *very* careful not to slip into rambling gibberish.” Here he gives an example of what would not be considered mature writing. His position of authority allows him to steer students away from novice behavior in writing and thinking. Still, he maintains the desire to encourage students as he includes statements in his prompts like, “Take risks, but be sure to remain practical and realistic.”

Trey, though, does not appear to value his expertise as final. He reflects his identity as a scholar when he says that he likes “to be challenged too.” If a student breaks away from the idea for a paper or wants to take an “unusual stance on something,” Trey welcomes the experimentation and deviance from the prompt. He says that he would turn it into a “challenge” for them to prove to him “how and why their argument or stance is consistent with what (they) had been reading and discussing in class.” Here, Trey still maintains his position as authority in upholding university standards, but his goal is to see students become authorities in their own right. His prompts reveal an optimism in his abilities to move and influence students. Trey realizes that he places high value his personal ideals, dreams, and aspirations—to see students mature under his lead—and values his institutional role as the means to make those aspirations reality. The idealism that characterizes his position in the classroom seems to heavily influence how he negotiates (or fails to critically negotiate) his values.

Urania, like Trey, stresses her position of authority in the language of her prompts and in her explanation of how and why she creates them. She regards institutional values highly and notes her responsibility within the university to pass on her knowledge of writing skills to her students so that they reap the practical benefits she values from learning how to work within a system of rules. While Urania values some institutional requirements, she makes decisions about the most valuable writing conventions and paper objectives based on her perceptions of responsibility and her assumptions about how students learn writing. As Urania discusses the objectives of FYE, she claims that while “the multicultural component” of the class is important, she feels that her students “come in already fairly indoctrinated in the ideas” she would have “taught them anyway.”

Instead, she says that she “would prefer to teach them about other things they might need to know, like immediate ways of conserving more resources.” She chooses to discuss issues that she finds personally important and that students “need to know” by being “indoctrinated” by authority. She says that she uses her prompts to “make them think more deeply about the consequences of their actions,” and that “because they’re freshmen” she wants them to “really think about who they are and how they can positively impact society.” Like Trey, she sees her students as those in need of guidance, and she values the knowledge that she brings to the class from her personal experience and expertise within the university system. Her prompts, then, are designed to lead freshmen out of their positions of inexperience so that they succeed in the academic system and contribute positively to society.

Urania, though, expresses some doubt about the effectiveness of her prompts and admits that she sees flaws in her prompts because she is fairly new at teaching. However, she still expects her students to answer the prompt as she understands it because she relates their success in answering the prompts to the success they will have in the future when following instructions. She says, “If they go out into the workforce and don’t do the work they’re supposed to, they can be fired.” In this statement, she equates a student’s ability to comply with the teacher’s standards to a worker’s decision to comply with a boss’s standards. In saying this, she supports the hierarchy system of the university that places a great degree of importance on knowledge and experience within the system. She also reveals that her assumptions about the nature of students’ success influence her negotiation of values when emphasizing certain writing conventions.

Her prompts reflect the values she places on the standards and requirements of the university and her position as an administrator of those standards. For instance, at the bottom of each of her prompts she places the warning, “Remember, I have the right to use Turnitin.com. Do NOT plagiarize!” Urania is very concerned about staying within the system, so much so that she does not use other TA’s prompts for fear of breaking plagiarism codes. She told me one story that really affected her as a teacher. One of her students told her that he used to get horrible grades in another class because he did not know how to use MLA format. After her lesson and paper assignments requiring students to learn the MLA standard, he was able to get good grades in the other class. This story encouraged her and validated her work as a teacher. Her stories, her prompts, and her explanations about how she creates her prompts show that the assumptions she brings to the class influence her interpretations of institutional values. However, though her perceived position and assumptions help explain her emphasis on writing conventions, she underplays other roles she may be taking on within the classroom. For instance, because her prompt objectives are often personal in nature, she may also be trying to represent herself as more of a mentor and friend. As she looks more critically at all the values she reflects in her writing prompts, her perception and representation of her position as well as her assumptions about students may begin to change.

Collette views her position from her multiple identities and values. Her prompts and discussion demonstrate her desire to balance what she values about the institutional requirements with her scholarly values about writing. At the same time, she also makes assumptions about students, primarily based on her experiences in the classroom. She says that one of her primary goals is to “get students comfortable with the act of writing.”

This goal, she says, reflects her personal experiences as she often sees students who think of themselves as “bad writers.” Instead of merely valuing their inclusion in the academic discourse, which she does, she also wants them to enjoy writing in the same way she does and become less scared of the process. Like Trey, she values her authority as a means to motivate students through the process of writing and positions herself as a mentor to encourage students to put effort into their writing. “Good writing requires effort,” Collette says, and she rewards the students she sees trying.

Not only does she value her position as authority in order to reward and motivate students, she sees the classroom as a collaborative environment where good writing is not just passed from the teacher to the student, but is created in communities. In mentioning collaboration, Collette reveals how her scholarly values influence her perception of her position as well. For example, Collette created many of her prompts based on collaboration with other TAs and mentors in the department and tweaked prompts according to suggestions of students. Because scholarly ideas about collaboration influenced her identity as an authority and her assumptions about the way students learn, she negotiated her values about writing tasks according to these perceptions.

Courtney is the only TA who openly discusses her struggles in managing her values when creating prompts for her writing class. This struggle relates to her admitted struggle about her perception of her position in the classroom. In fact, while she represents her authority as a mentor, she also actively tries to break students’ perception of her as an institutional authority. This response is due to her developing scholarly values and her personal experiences with the “negative professor stereotype.”

She says that, personally, she wants to “reach” her students, “be liked,” and make students see that “professors aren’t mean, scary, heartless monsters.” While she acknowledges her role as instructor of the classroom, her discussion suggests that she wants to present herself as more of a friend than as an authority figure in her class. In fact, one of her goals is not just to get students comfortable with writing, but get students comfortable with conferencing, one-on-one with professors. She values that relationship between student and teacher as more of a friendship than as expert vs. novice. Courtney wants students to feel comfortable going to her with problems, and she encourages them to “try new things, take risks, and fully explore what it means ‘to argue.’” She uses expressions like “explore” to emphasize the action of the students rather than her own involvement as teacher of argumentative practices.

Her prompts reflect the complication of her self-presentation as a friend/authority figure. On her diagnostic essay, she includes a paragraph encouraging the students how to view the assignment. She says, “Take this assignment seriously (after all, it is an essay for a college course), but don’t be afraid of making mistakes! This is just the beginning of English 1310! Not only will this essay get you into the swing of writing (and of the class), but it will allow us to determine your strengths and weaknesses as a writer.” There are several interesting features about this statement. First, when she asks that they take the assignment seriously, she qualifies that statement to show that it is serious *within this context of college*. In this qualification, I see Courtney making a distinction between her position of authority within the university that values taking this type of writing seriously, while at the same time, distancing herself from that position in order to show that this assignment is serious only within this specific context, not necessarily in general

writing. She is the only TA who gives permission to make mistakes as explains the purpose of this diagnostic essay. In her “Dos and Don’ts list” at the bottom of her diagnostic essay, Courtney says, “*Try* to write in complete thoughts and sentences” and “*Try* to use correct grammar” (my emphasis). As her prompts progress throughout the year, though, she drops more of the dialogue with students and develops more concise, objective prompts.

Courtney takes her role of friend and collaborator seriously when designing prompts as well, revealing how she begins her negotiation of her different sets of values. She says that she actively brainstorms with her class when she passes out the prompt. After getting advice from other TAs and mentors in the department, she turns to her students and asks them for “feedback, ideas, suggestions, dislikes, likes” concerning the prompt. She, then, takes their suggestions and tailors the prompt to what she thinks will work most effectively. In fact, she admits that she often modifies prompts, and she bases this decision on her scholarly values, which include the de-centering of the classroom and acknowledging the contributions of students’ authority in the classroom as just as valid as her own. In the end, she says, “We come to a consensus on what works well,” and if the students come to her office and want to take different directions or understand prompts differently, she is “flexible” with their choices.

After this collaboration, though, she hopes that students understand the prompt *similarly* to the way she understands it (her emphasis). She qualifies this statement in her interview. Because she expects that each prompt have a specific purpose, especially in regards to the “college writing life,” as she calls it, she believes that students should understand the purpose of the prompt and address it accordingly. Like Urania, she values

these institutional requirements because she wants her students to succeed in other college courses that require writing, courses that, unlike hers, do not “encourage students to take risks or experiment with form and purpose.” In this qualification, Courtney is again trying to distance her position as friend and mentor from that of expert and authority in the university system. Although she obviously acts as an authority and values her position in the institution as a teacher of the composition class, she tries to present herself, in some ways, at odds with the stereotypical authority figure while preparing her students to face these types of professors in the future.

Experiences and contexts cause TAs to perceive their positions differently and influence their assumptions about students and the way students learn. As I have shown, each TA brings slightly different perceptions and assumptions to the classroom that impact the way they negotiate their values. As they become aware of their values, perceptions, and assumptions, they will be more equipped to negotiate the values that conflict within their teaching.

### **Summary of Analysis**

In this chapter, I have explained how each TA brings multiple identities and therefore multiple values into the writing class. I described what I saw within their prompts and interviews based on three specific categories of values that emerged from their discussions—institutional, scholarly, and personal values. In analyzing their prompts and discussion of their prompts, I have shown that TAs are constantly negotiating these institutional, scholarly, and personal values as they choose to emphasize different writing conventions and writing objectives. The way they negotiate these prompts is influenced by their perceived position in the classroom and the assumptions

they make about students' learning. In the next chapter, I discuss my understanding of the categories of values I see emerging in these interviews and prompts, using the language of other scholars. I examine the historical development of each of the English departments, as represented by these five TAs. I also discuss in the next chapter the future research and courses of action this specific study encourages regarding TA training and the creation of writing prompts for FYE classes.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I discuss how I interpret my findings in light of other composition research that relates to institutional values, disciplinary values, and values based on personal experience. I also suggest how this study is valuable and how it can be used for training teachers as well as promoting reflective practice.

#### **Categories of Values in Composition Literature**

As a researcher looking at values, I realize that my categorization of these values is based on my own personal interpretation of the texts within the context of my scholarly background. Other researchers may see different categories or interpret them differently; however, the categories I chose to look at—institutional, scholarly, and personal values—represent issues that arose from the data and that are being discussed already within composition studies. In creating these categories, I also acknowledge that these values are intimately connected and should not be analyzed as merely disassociated, conflicting value systems. However, separating them from each other helps us get a better picture of what types of negotiations TAs are in the process of making.

*Institutional values*

Institutional values relate to privileges found in belonging to the discourse community of academia. Respected composition scholars like Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae discuss different responses to institutional values, but they both acknowledge that teachers of college writing courses, because of their location within the university, must in some way grapple with issues of privilege and hierarchy. After all, those who enter college and take college writing value the steps they can take to garner status and perhaps wealth in society. Teachers also value the privileges and rewards (status, money, recognition, influence) that come from abiding by institutional standards or they would not be teaching in the university system. In her article “Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” Shaughnessy explains four different ways writing teachers can respond to institutional standards. She says some teachers respond to their values by “guarding the tower” in order to “protect the academy from outsiders” and protect the privileges they have earned within the system (311). Others respond by “converting the natives” or viewing learners as “empty vessels ready to be filled with new knowledge” (313). Still others respond by “sounding the depths” or examining writing tasks more seriously, to find out what is really going on in the classroom and what needs to be done (315). Finally, she encourages teachers to look past the institutional standards as holding the “truth” about writing and to become active students of their students in order to discover new truths and grow as a teacher (317). These responses, especially the first two, illustrate common attitudes TAs present based on the value they place on institutional requirements.

Bartholomae continues the discussion about institutional values with the assumption that writing teachers within the university value not just writing, but a specific academic discourse, that, once mastered, allows outsiders to enter a circle of privilege. He says in his article “Inventing the University,” that “it is difficult to imagine...how writers can have a purpose before they are located in a discourse, since it is the discourse with its projects and agendas that determines what writers can and will do” (628). For Bartholomae, college writing teachers must value the institutional requirements before they value the students’ own contribution of knowledge. The student must become part of the academic community and learn certain conventions of this language before his or her knowledge is legitimate. Institutional values, as I use the term, reflect both Shaughnessy’s and Bartholomae’s descriptions of attitudes. I recognize these values in my analysis based on the ways in which TAs emphasize the importance of status and privilege and following the rules within the academic hierarchies.

### *Scholarly Values*

While institutional standards are sometimes informed by scholarly theories, scholarly values represent a different category of values for the instructor because they reveal the instructor’s allegiance to a specific discipline. Whereas TAs express institutional values based on their understanding of university requirements—specifically in relation to the FYE syllabus, TAs express scholarly values by referencing and putting into practice specific writing traditions from their different disciplines. I look at these traditions from my own experiences as well as from a historical account by James Berlin.

While I do not want to make hasty generalizations about the nature of scholarship in each department based on my limited experiences in each (especially Creative Writing)

I still recognize the importance of discussion how TAs' identities as students with specific interests and differing scholarly backgrounds affect their negotiation of institutional standards.

Hillary's identity as a TA from the literature department helps shape her articulation of values to her class in her writing prompts. Early on, the literature department, according to James Berlin in his history of the English in American colleges, became the focal point of the English along with the prevalent ideology that the university was a "meritocracy" that offered upward mobility to those who could meet its standards (20-21). Because literature has held a place of esteem in the English department and is acknowledged as a privileged discourse, it has not had to struggle as much as the composition course to prove its worth or value within the university.

As a former literature student, I learned write from expert teachers whose authority and knowledge of the scholarship was established and rarely questioned. What they taught me about writing literature papers or traditional academic papers helped me move up in the university and established me as an "expert" within the high school literature class that I teach. Though I do not claim that literature teachers value meritocracy over critical challenges to traditional authority, they come from a tradition that endorses their expert knowledge and rewards those that learn the privileged academic discourse. According to this tradition, those with a background in English literature like Hillary and myself may choose to make decisions about writing prompts that support the steps to gaining that academic merit.

While Hillary sees value in argument and critical thinking, she also shows that she defers her personal values to the larger values of the institution. She sees English 1310 as

a course that teaches students how to move up within the university, and she uses her prompts to support that goal, even when that goal may not permit her to incorporate her own personal beliefs about writing.

The TAs from the Creative Writing department embrace two sets of values about writing—that it should be original, creative, and passionate and that it should be formulaic, standard, and correct. Their values based on their own scholarship in the field of creative writing reflects an expressionistic rhetoric that, to them, may seem very much at odds with the “current-traditional” practices they feel they are required to teach to first year English students. In an expressionistic rhetoric, according to Berlin, writing “can be learned but not taught” and the purpose of writing was to express the self, not necessarily to become socially aware (75-76). In fact, Berlin suggests that the influence of expressionism “encouraged the rise of creative writing courses in high schools and colleges” (79). Interestingly, Trey echoes some of this expressionistic language in his interview when he says that “self-exploration” is “invaluable and cannot be taught but only promoted.” Trey and Urania, both, emphasize characteristics of expressionist/creative writing principles in their courses, but they try to juxtapose those interests with writing that is more in line with academic standards such as social writing for Trey and formulaic writing for Urania. The distinction they place between types of writing seems to keep their competing values in conflict within their classes.

Courtney and Collette’s identities as students in the field of composition and rhetoric affect their decision-making processes in the classroom as well. They, too, attempt to create a balance between their scholarly and institutional values. However, because much of the scholarship in composition that they value has struggled to convince

the university of its merit, Courtney and Collette find themselves in a similar position, struggling to adapt what they believe about writing with the current academic standards. Their efforts reflect the historical tension that Berlin traces in his book as social epistemic rhetoricians worked to break down the current-traditional rhetoric prevalent in the universities. Still today, there remains a tension between the positivist epistemology of traditional academy and the social-constructionist theories of compositions even though there has been much progress in changing assumptions of academic writing. As a student in this field as well, I personally feel the tug between wanting to establish my authority as an expert and developing new beliefs about writing that do not always fit into ideas of meritocracy. This balancing act is demonstrated by the conscious choices TAs like Collette and Courtney make when making personal decisions to teach university standards or to challenge the tradition in light of what they believe is best for the students.

Finally, while the literature department seems most in agreement with the meritocracy, the composition department searches for compromise, the creative writing department seems to set ideas concerning different types of writing at odds with each other.

#### *Personal Experiences as a Writer and Teacher of Writing*

My final category division is one that, while it cannot be ignored, is difficult to define and separate from the other two. A TA's personal values based on personal experiences often incorporate institutional standards and composition theory, but they are expressions of a more individual nature. At times, TAs may base decisions on personal experiences that are not necessarily pedagogically sound, but rather emphasize the TAs

personal interests. In her article, “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston warns against this ideal of including social goals and personal interests of the teacher “before the educational needs of the student” (698). She argues that we as writing teachers “have no business getting into areas where we may have passion and conviction but no scholarly base from which to operate” (707). (Interestingly, she does not note how teachers should act even if they have a “scholarly base from which to operate.”) She disagrees with views of those who acknowledge the politicized classroom and use it to encourage student development according to their own agendas. Instead, she believes that the teachers’ personal goals may negatively bias and overshadow the purpose of the writing class—to teach students how to be confident writers. Whether we as teachers are open, subversive, ignorant, or evasive about our interests and agendas, they do influence the classroom as we value our own personal experiences as writers and teachers of writing. In understanding how we value our experiences that reflect our personal interests and agendas, we can begin talking about how we manage these values in the classroom.

### **Conclusions: Reflective Practice**

All teachers bring values into their classrooms; therefore, all teachers need to engage in reflective practice about their values in order to be better teachers. TAs represent a specific population of teachers, though, who are just beginning to develop their professional and scholarly identities. As seen in this research, with the multiple identities they bring into the classroom, they also bring multiple values. The students in college writing classes learn to write and learn about writing based on how these values influence the classroom.

Rose and Finders discuss the need for reciprocal, reflective practice in communities where TAs grow. While each teacher should be engaged in private reflective practice, a community of discussion about the different values influencing how we teach can help us more appropriately manage our values. Writing programs should be aware of the needs TAs have to be guided through these issues, especially if there are certain goals that the writing community may find are being misinterpreted in the TAs decisions and writing assignments.

Kathleen Blake Yancey, in discussing “The Professionalization of TA Development Programs,” argues that writing communities need to understand the identity issues involved in TA development. She says that a TA development programs need to ask questions like “What “larger” theories does the TA bring to the experience of teaching, and how can they be used to enhance the teaching of writing?” as well as “What new identity I encouraged by the TA development program?” (72). These questions acknowledge that TAs have valuable knowledge and backgrounds to contribute to the classroom, but they are in a state of growth, so the writing program needs to decide in what directions they want to foster the growth of identity.

This study leaves room for future research on teachers’ values. Because this study took a small sampling of TAs from one English department, it lacks breadth of information that could be gained by larger analyses of writing teachers’ prompts. This type of research could take many directions in the future. Local writing programs could conduct their own research within small groups and meetings, so that rather than having one researcher determine categories of values and how they are shown, the group could analyze their values together and talk through assumptions and plans for change. Others

could look, as Broad does, at the values teachers express in their evaluations and compare those values to the ones they express in their writing prompts and assignments. Because values are so complicated even within the creation of prompts, researchers may find incongruities between the assignment and the evaluation of the assignment. Others may find it valuable to observe writing classes over the course of a semester to see how TAs change in their identities in the class. My analysis presents only a segment of who these TAs are as people and does not discuss ways in which they learned and grew by teaching English 1310.

Finally, anyone involved in teaching, whether they are veterans or novices, need to recognize the need to look beyond standardized rules for guidance in their teaching practices. The writing assignments we give to students in college writing classes reveal our multiple identities and values. Instead of just forming rules to live by, writing teachers within the community of other writing teachers need to not only be able to analyze their own values, but find the best ways to negotiate and manage values that may come into conflict with each other.

## APPENDIX A

### Consent Form

#### A Reflection on Values: Examining the Creation of Writing Prompts

My name is Mary McCulley, and I am inviting you to participate in a study that looks at how and why TAs at Texas State University create their writing prompts and the ways in which the prompts reflect what they value in writing. I would like to see how TAs construct writing prompts differently based on their different backgrounds in theory, pedagogy, and personal experience. I am conducting this research as part of my master's thesis for the MA in Rhetoric and Composition program. I have asked you to participate in this study in order to represent a unique voice from one of the following programs: MA Literature, MFA Creative Writing, or MA Rhetoric and Composition. If you have any questions throughout any state of my research process, please feel free to contact me by email at [mm1260@txstate.edu](mailto:mm1260@txstate.edu) or by phone (210) 367-7982.

If you decide to participate, I would like to send you an email questionnaire, which you would fill out at your leisure by the end of the Spring 2008 semester. After receiving your responses to the interview questions, I would then send you a second email with follow up questions, asking for clarification or elaboration of your answers.

Your decision whether or not to participate in the interview process is completely voluntary and will not affect your future relations with Texas State University or your position as a TA in the English department—either negatively or positively. If you decide to participate, you may discontinue your participation and withdraw any information you have supplied at any time without prejudice. If I use any information gained from your interview, you may choose to remain anonymous in any publications. If you do not express a wish to remain anonymous, I may use your first name in publications. If you express a desire to remain anonymous, I will use a pseudonym when referencing your responses, and I will not include any information that may single you out as the interviewee. I will not use the information you give me about your writing prompts in any other way except as research for my thesis, and you will be given credit for the prompts you developed as an individual.

Although there is no compensation for participating in the interview, I hope that this research helps participating instructors to reflect upon the values they promote when creating writing prompts. Hopefully, this reflection will help you as an instructor become more aware of what you really value in writing and be able to teach these values to students through the creation of useful writing prompts. Because you have the option of remaining anonymous, this project poses no risk. However, if any questions in the interview make you uncomfortable in any way, you may choose not to answer those questions. You do not have to supply a reason for choosing not to answer a question, and your answers will not be used against you in your position as a TA in the English department.

Please, keep a copy of this form.

You are making a decision about whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. Should you choose to discontinue participation in this study, you may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions:

Please fill out the interview questions as thoughtfully and thoroughly as possible. Do not feel like you must repeat answers if certain questions overlap. When you are finished, please save this document with your answers and send it as a file attachment to my email: [mm1260@txstate.edu](mailto:mm1260@txstate.edu). I would like to have these interviews by April 30, 2008, but let me know if you need more time as the deadline approaches. Once you have completed the interview and have signed the consent form, let me know the best possible way to pick up the signed consent form from you. Thanks.

1. From your perspective, what are the overarching goals of English 1310, and what should students learn in this course?
2. What are your goals, personally, as a writing instructor?
3. What would be some secondary goals for the classroom, that you hope to achieve, but are perhaps not the most important or foundational?
4. Could you provide some examples of the prompts you have used in your 1310 class? (Preferably with the same wording and instructions you have used in your class).
5. How do you deliver the instructions for writing prompts? In other words, do you type out all the instructions and expectations or do you explain them orally in class?
6. In the act of creating writing prompts, how do you proceed? How long do you take to develop prompts? Do you use already established prompts? Modify them? Always create new ones? Reuse ones that have worked well before? Just tell me anything interesting that goes into the creation of your prompts.
7. Why did you choose these writing prompts? Tell me what type of theories, pedagogies, personal experiences, and/or other guides influenced the creation of these prompts.
9. How important is it that students understand the prompt the way you understand it? How important is it to you that they actually address the prompt? Why?
10. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of a writing prompt? Do you ever modify the prompt after you have given it out to the students?
11. What role do the students in the class or the classroom environment play in helping you develop your writing prompts?
12. Regardless of whether or not you base your assessment on personal preferences, do you “hope” or “expect” certain types of responses from students or are you open to any interpretation of the prompt? Why?
13. Are there any types of responses to prompts that you will not accept or that you discourage? Why?
14. What were some of your favorite writing assignments as a student? Why? How do these compare to the writing prompts you give?

Thank you so much for your time,

Mary McCulley

## APPENDIX C

### Exemption Request

Based on the information in the exemption request #24-14183, which you sent Monday, March 24, 2008, your project has been found exempt.

Your project is exempt from full or expedited review by the Texas State Institutional Review Board.

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Institutional Review Board

[ospirb@txstate.edu](mailto:ospirb@txstate.edu)

Office of Research Compliance

Texas State University-San Marcos

(ph) 512/245-2314 / (fax) 512/245-3847

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## VITA

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