Politics and ethics of student self-assessment in the composition classroom

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POLITICS AND ETHICS OF STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
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This thesis has been examined and approved.

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7/26/10
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Marie.
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ABSTRACT

POLITICS AND ETHICS OF STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

Mike Garcia

University of New Hampshire, September, 2010

While writing instructors often assign student self-assessment essays with the goal of motivating their students and helping them to develop writerly self-awareness, the reality of the classroom power dynamic limits what can be accomplished in such essays. Students might feel pressured to construct versions of their “selves” that are simply reproductions of traditional student roles rather than to engage in honest, meaningful reflection. Scholars in the fields of Education, Assessment and Composition Studies have noted the lack of research into the political and ethical implications of requiring students to compose these essays.

This dissertation answers the call for research into students’ complex negotiations of identity when presented with the task of self-assessment. Using case study methodology, it follows two college-level introductory writing courses that implemented student self-assessment and self-evaluation/grading. This study uses Robert Brooke’s Identity Negotiations Theory to demonstrate how instructors constructed the assignment via handouts and in-class discussions, often giving subtle cues to students regarding the versions of “self” that would be privileged, and how students responded to these cues in their self-assessments. Additionally, one-on-one interviews provide insight into instructors’ and students’ motivations during this process. The study catalogs a number of fully
cooperative or "bought in" student stances to the task of self-assessment, as well as apathetic/compliant and resistant stances. It also demonstrates how students shifted their stances throughout their essays as they attempted to define and negotiate their student and writer roles. Documented patterns include students' imitation and appropriation of academic discourse and narratives of academic progress; their construction of the persona of a developing or struggling writer (often accompanied by an attempt to mitigate the risk of revealing weaknesses); and their use of external standards and "safe" criteria such as effort when evaluating their own work. The study also highlights students who appeared to misread expectations and perform a student or writer role inconsistent with the values of the course, the instructor and the institution. This dissertation proposes an ethical implementation of self-assessment in which students and teachers attempt to build a "better version" of the task that acknowledges, critiques and incorporates role-based negotiations.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Example #1: Cassie

You can tell if a student takes class seriously by the good work s/he produces, if they show up to class on time, if they listen and participate in class, if they complete all their assignments on time and meet at least the basic requirements. . . . [T]hey may improve their work or make changes to certain things in order to improve their learning opportunity.

— Excerpt from Cassie’s final self-assessment, First-Year Writing, spring 2003

“Cassie,” a student in one of my First-Year Writing courses, was a combined English and theater major, a dancer and a singer. And she was a writer: she kept a daily journal, wrote poetry and submitted occasional pieces to the campus newspaper. Yet despite all the demands on her time, her enthusiasm for her college work was contagious; when we discussed a text in class, she often carried that discussion. Honestly, I don’t know what I would’ve done without her in that class. She brought the same attitude to her writing process: she would arrive at our one-on-one planning conferences early, full of energy and ideas. I had no reason to believe that her writing was going to be disappointing. But it was.

Don’t get me wrong; Cassie knew how to narrow a topic, organize her thoughts, gather evidence, refine an argument, follow MLA format and so on. I gave her As on most of her projects because she did these things particularly well, with more skill than nearly all of her classmates; there was very little for me to mark down. So when I say her writing was disappointing, I mean relative to what I knew she could produce. The finished products were thorough and sound, but the vibrant, creative 19-year-old I saw in person was absent. Writing wasn’t the problem; even nonfiction wasn’t the problem. She wrote interesting
pieces with a strong personal voice outside of class. Something in the nature of writing academic prose for a composition course was to blame. I never figured out how to address this problem. Cassie got an A- in the course, she gave me a good evaluation, and we both moved on. Academically, it was a successful transaction. But it felt like a giant missed opportunity.

Academic writing in an undergraduate course is a sophisticated rhetorical task; it's a simultaneous performance of "good writer" and "good student" roles. In fact, it's more complicated than that: there are often multiple, conflicting definitions of good writer and of good student simultaneously "in play" in the classroom. Some of these definitions are reinforced by the reward system of education and some aren't. The undergraduate experience embodies this conflict of roles, whether students realize it or not. And it shows in their writing. For example, the purpose of composing a rough draft is ostensibly to position oneself as a risk-taking, imperfect writer, and then to shape one's text into something worthy of an A in later drafts. But I've noticed that some of my students who are getting Bs and Cs sometimes seem more willing to do adopt these risky writing habits than the students who are getting As. I often suspect that the former are less inhibited and more willing take risks because they're less invested in maintaining a "perfect" student identity.

Reflective writing makes the roughness of the drafting process more visible. Susan Callahan writes: "Reflective writing . . . requires students to reveal the errors, confusion and uncertainty that are part of the messy activity of making meaning, to expose themselves as individuals in the way traditional academic writing does not" (59). And the act of writing a self-assessment, such as a reflection attached to a final draft or portfolio, is a particularly fascinating example of performance. Though usually a student's primary directive in such an essay is to assess his or her work on the project and/or in the course, there's also an inevitable assessment of self: he or she is implicitly saying, "This is the kind of student, and
the kind of writer (and maybe even the kind of person) I am now." Furthermore, students are asked to give this assessment of their "selves" within the context of a graded event. A self-assessment is thus a political piece of writing with a tangible element of risk, and as such requires a selective telling of the truth within a socially acceptable narrative framework. It should be no surprise that self-assessments, even more than traditional essays, are often rhetorical negotiations laid bare: from one paragraph to the next, personal introspection gives way to academic platitudes before moving to methodical process descriptions and looping back again to introspection.

Take a look at the paragraph from Cassie's self-assessment at the beginning of this chapter. It's a response to one of the many prompts in my final portfolio assignment: "What does it mean to be a good student? Describe the attributes of a good student, and then discuss your own effort in this course." To answer the prompt's question, Cassie approximates what she feels is an acceptable description of a good student; she draws, no doubt, on her previous teachers' characterizations. The language of this paragraph is at times eerily similar to something I might write in a course syllabus. Although Cassie moves beyond this general language to assess her own work more specifically later in her self-assessment, nothing she says there complicates or challenges her opening statements in any way. Her essay is designed to prove that she is that person she describes in such stilted, institutional language. Should I be encouraged or disturbed at my student's wholesale adoption of my program's and institution's stated values for writing and class work? Either way, I have no cause to complain – it's exactly what I asked for.

I should also comment on Cassie's specific word choice: this paragraph exhibits the patchy appropriation of language David Bartholomae describes when a student writer attempts to claim membership in an academic conversation (606). She employs the academically sanctioned "s/he" once before switching to the more comfortable "they," and
she concludes with the phrase “to improve their learning opportunity,” an awful bit of educational “outcomes-speak” that she has undoubtedly absorbed from untraceable documents and authority figures encountered throughout her years of schooling. She is, in fact, performing the role of one of these authorities – even though she’s setting up a narrative of personal experience. This is remarkable to me. In this opening paragraph, she’s already revealed herself to be a student in the art of being a good student. It’s too bad that Cassie can only perform this aspect of her identity by suppressing the others.

**Why do student self-assessment?**

I teach writing, which means that a large part of my job involves grading. I admit that I’ve used grading (that is, I’ve taken advantage of the presence – or threat – of eventual grading) to achieve and maintain control in my classroom. My syllabus is littered with grade-centered teacherisms (“Your level of participation, or lack thereof, will be reflected in your grade”) that essentially leverage my power to manipulate student behavior. My students, for the most part, don’t seem bothered by this. Grades are accepted as the primary motivators in the classroom, and teachers are accepted as the ones who get to do the grading. In essence, grading defines the teacher-student hierarchy, which is as ingrained and usually as unremarkable as desks and whiteboards.

So why can’t I just accept that grades are a fact of life and live with them? I guess I can’t overlook how far-reaching their effects are. When I first started teaching composition, I noticed that many of my students would do the bare minimum of work required to earn the grade they wanted and not much more. Of course, my inexperience was part of the problem, but even as I became a better teacher and had more interesting class sessions and conversations with students, I still felt that the classroom’s power imbalance, most tangibly expressed in the grading process, constrained what I could accomplish with many of them.
They deferred to me too easily. Even now, if I'm being honest, I'd still say grades are the most effective means of influence I have – more powerful than, say, my interesting course projects, my winsome personality or students' perceptions of me as an expert on writing. There's something wrong with that.

Marcy Bauman, a composition teacher at the University of Michigan, notes similar frustrations:

In my experience, no matter how much I try to make the assignments "real," no matter how I try to encourage students to write for their own purposes and to make their own discoveries, no matter how easy I make it for students to take risks, as long as I'm the one grading their papers, students tend to understand the writing situation as one in which their task is to please me so that they can get a better grade. When I give grades, they tend to ask questions like "How can I make this paper better? Why didn't it get an A? What do you want me to revise?" – all questions that indicate to me that they haven't seen the writing of that paper to be a communicative act, but a demonstrative one. (412)

Bauman goes on to describe her inability to motivate students not only to value and enjoy writing, but also to cultivate their own writerly instincts – to become better writers through risk-taking and self-reflection on their successes and failures. She's convinced that many of her students will continue to dutifully write predictable, safe papers in their future courses for the transactional purpose of demonstrating their competence and obtaining good grades. This is a potentially serious problem: if the right kind of motivation is lacking, students' development into independent writers could be impeded.

The mere existence of grading, even when unacknowledged in the classroom, is enough to create this effect. As Lynn Bloom notes, grades carry all the weight at the completion of the course, with rare exceptions – to everyone but the student and teacher, they are the only visible artifacts of the course (215). Students know this, obviously. As a result, teachers' genuine attempts to develop a good working relationship with students can be short-circuited as grading time draws closer, despite the best intentions of both: students can hardly be blamed if they stop paying close attention to their growth as writers.
and look ahead to the higher-stakes final grade. The authority of the teacher as the final arbiter of the grade is undeniable; because this role carries more weight in the end than the teacher's other roles (mentor, coach, expert writer, tutor, etc.), it can become dominant. The goal, as Bauman argues, becomes merely to please the teacher.

For this reason, many teachers have experimented with approaches to classroom assessment that attempt to temporarily shift the balance of authority, hoping to create an environment with more productive motivations. For example, Christopher Weaver's "process grading" approach (based in part on Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's *A Community of Writers*) removes the course essays from the grading scheme, shifting the emphasis to students' reflection on their writing processes. In Weaver's system, only reflective cover letters are graded: "[R]ather than base [students'] grade on whether or not their papers matched my expectations of what good writing should look like, I based their grade on how well their cover letters explained the different stages of their writing process and how well they persuaded me they were engaged in what I believed to be crucial issues of that process" (144). In short, Weaver rewards evidence of writerly self-awareness as revealed in a self-assessment. To Weaver, the effects of this reorientation are noticeable: he feels that he is no longer seen by students as "the [final] authority on their other writing – the papers to which the cover letters refer" (147). He believes that his students are motivated to "think seriously about the decisions involved in writing and revising their own work" and to internalize criteria for good writing rather than simply having them externally imposed (148). Weaver argues that success in the course is no longer tied to the short-term goal of improving a few papers, but rather to the broader ability of becoming better self-assessors of their own writing – an ability that will help them revise their work both during the course and well after its completion (149).
I'll discuss a few more examples in the following pages, but I feel Weaver enlists most of the rationales underlying the work of writing teachers, including myself, who have assigned some form of self-assessment. In composition, self-assessment has its roots in the "expressivist" era (Ken Macrorie's 1970 volume *Uptaught*, for example, proposes a system in which a student reflects on and makes independent decisions on his or her own paper after receiving and weighing teacher and peer feedback, 94-5), and those roots show: teachers who use it often see their classrooms as counterarguments to the allegedly rigid, authoritarian philosophies underlying traditional composition pedagogies. The narratives surrounding nontraditional grading experiments are liberatory in tone: they document a transition from an environment of oppression and drudgery with one of openness and increased student investment in their writing.¹

But classroom transformations are never truly that seamless, are they? Not when we pay attention to what's happening under the surface.

***Example #2: Scott***

In the fall of 2009, I was the second speaker in a conference panel on student self-assessment. The presenter before me gave an excellent close analysis of her first-year students' self-assessment essays. She described ways in which the successful self-assessments evidenced many of the skills that teachers hope their students develop in their first year: namely, awareness of the challenges awaiting them in their college writing careers and the construction of their own writerly identities. She supplied the audience with what she considered an exemplary self-assessment essay. I had no reason to disagree; the writer, "Scott," was very specific about his perceived development in the course, and,

¹ See, for example, my summaries of Kerry Weinbaum's article on portfolios (Ch. 2) and of the recent discussion surrounding Cathy Davidson's grading experiments (intro to Ch. 3).
according to his teacher, was accurate in enumerating his strengths and weaknesses. It was an engaging essay. Nevertheless, I saw some interesting features in the piece and decided on the spot to repurpose it to introduce my own presentation. Here's an excerpt from the beginning of Scott’s essay:

In our first text of this course . . . there were a host of ethical issues that we discussed. These were ethical issues that were quite debatable. Before this course I had one way of looking at ethical issues. I used to give straightforward answers to any debatable topic without doing a thorough analysis. I never had the chance to look at things from a broader picture. I was shortsighted. I was embarking on moral thinking rather than moral rationalization.

– and from the end of the essay:

In conclusion . . . I think I am in a better position going into any other class than I was before the course. My ethical reasoning has improved tremendously. This is evident in my recent papers and the grades.

Embedded in these excerpts are a few narrative elements you might recognize if you’ve ever assigned a self-assessment essay. Perhaps the most familiar is the transformation narrative, which goes like this (apologies for the parodic tone): “Before I took this class, I never paid much attention to [accepted good student behavior], but during this class I had an epiphany, thanks to you, teacher, and will embrace [the behavior] from now on.” This allusion to a single transformative event is common in this type of writing. In fact, it transcends genres (teachers’ exasperation with transformation narratives is perhaps the most significant reason for the recent decline of the “literacy narrative” trend in composition textbooks – though many literacy narrative assignments essentially require such narratives). The narrative is well worn enough to ring hollow to many of us, even on our less cynical days.

Additional stock narrative elements in Scott’s essay include obvious name-dropping of course-spanning concepts: “moral thinking,” “moral rationalization,” “ethical reasoning” – each of which he likely picked up from the course’s instructor. A generous reader might say that Scott has internalized these concepts and applied them independently to his
experience – a highly desired outcome of good teaching. A more cynical reader might say that Scott is simply a veteran of the game of education and knows that one of the strategies of the game is to flatter teachers by mimicking their language. For my part, I can’t help but notice that, in the rest of Scott’s essay, he doesn’t actually use the terms – there’s no evidence there that he understands them (though there may be elsewhere).

Still, when students claim transformation or name-drop our favorite terms, their teachers don’t often respond in the margin: “You get an F for lying!” Enlisting a narrative device isn’t exactly dishonest; it’s too acknowledged a technique in academic writing to count as an attempt at deception. In fact, it’s difficult to conceive of academic writing devoid of such devices. These students are picking up on subtle cues issued by the teacher and the educational environment, and either party is at least subconsciously aware of that fact.

For a typical portfolio cover essay, students are asked to reflect on the process of conceiving, outlining, drafting, revising and otherwise improving their major pieces of writing – in other words, to construct a progress narrative at the very least. Students are asked to self-assess – to describe their growth as writers – but also perhaps to attach a self-evaluation to their work. Each of these acts has its narrative conventions, which in turn are often hinted at in the assignment prompt. For example, here are a few self-assessment prompts from my Fall 2005 First-Year Writing final portfolio handout:

- What do you believe good writing is? Define it and talk about your own strengths as a writer. What is good about your own writing? Look at your own writing for ideas. You’ll be getting into your projects in detail elsewhere, but take some time to mention some general ideas about good writing here.
- Please talk about what you have improved on this semester in order to become a better writer (and how you’ve worked on it), and talk about the things you know you need to keep working on in the future. Also, talk about any technical or grammatical issues you’ve worked on. Please spend a couple of paragraphs talking about your writing strengths and weaknesses.
- Talk about how well your [argumentative] essay and letter to the editor turned out (describe these separately). Include all of your drafts [in the portfolio] and highlight the parts that you think are best with a
highlighter. What can you show the portfolio reader as evidence of your hard work for this the essay and letter? Refer to the highlighted parts in your paper. Quote from them. Talk about why they’re examples of particularly good observation, analysis or research, or a well-supported point . . .

- Talk about how you responded to feedback. What did you change, based on the comments given to you on each of your drafts? Why did you decide to make the changes in the way you did? What is better about your essay and letter now that you made the changes? Quote some of these changes.

This is just a fraction of the questions asked in the handout, and much of the contextual information is missing, but these questions give a good example of the type of narrative I asked students to construct at the end of this course. At face value, the questions are innocuous and not at all mean-spirited; as a matter of fact, I think they show I have a healthy interest in the progress of my students. But the problem I’m highlighting here is not in the questions themselves, but in the “selves” students must construct in writing in order to answer them – selves that are shaped to the perceived expectations of the surrounding environment.

For example, in order to write the self-assessment narrative prompted above, students must incorporate into their discoursal selves the identity of a writer (specifically, an improving writer), whether or not they consider themselves to be one or consider themselves to have stable writerly qualities; most students simply fill the strengths and weaknesses that have been pointed out by previous teachers. They’re also obliged to agree that writing is “hard work” and to show that they adopted the role of a hard-working writer while completing their argumentative essay. And they’re asked to show specifically how feedback bettered their essay, whether or not they felt they benefited from the feedback they received or even generally agree that feedback is useful. It’s not necessarily wrong to ask questions like these, but the questions arise: What are the implications if students must

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2 This term is Roz Ivanič’s: see Chapter 3.
lie (or stretch the truth) about their thought processes or experiences in order to fit these narratives? What sort of consequences might they face if they rebel against the implied rules or construct a counter-narrative? Or, perhaps most importantly, what happens if they do exactly what they think their teacher wants them to do, just as they would in a traditional grading situation, and don’t learn a thing from the experience? Why bother with “self-assessment” if it’s an empty exercise?

**Answering a call for research**

In this project, I’ll respond to the calls for ethical theorizing and research on self-assessment voiced in the work of Ellen Schendel and Peggy O’Neill ("Exploring the Theories and Consequences of Self-Assessment through Ethical Inquiry"); Susan Latta and Janice Lauer ("Student Self-Assessment: Some Issues and Concerns from Postmodern and Feminist Perspectives") and Rebecca Moore Howard ("Applications and Assumptions of Student Self-Assessment"). While most early writers on self-assessment in composition courses discussed either the arguments in favor of self-assessment or the logistics of their own classroom implementations; as I’ll show in the next chapter, these scholars question the implications of asking students to inject “themselves” and “their” voice into a classroom assessment conversation in which the voices of the teacher and institution have more power.

My research responds most directly to Schendel and O’Neill, who recommend that the “conflicted intents and consequences of self-assessments . . . be a site of attention for writing teachers” (200). Schendel and O’Neill argue that ethical research on self-assessment “requires inquiry into the practices, the assumptions, the theories, and the consequences of requiring students to assess themselves, their writing and their performances” (202). Schendel and O’Neill pose the following broad questions:
• What are the implications for students' selves, their writing, the classroom, the teachers, [and] the profession?
• What discourse does the field use to situate and discuss self-assessment? What do we neglect or overlook?
• Why now, at this particular time, is self-assessment becoming more attractive?
• What do we privilege in self-assessment? Who is rewarded and who is penalized? (202)

The last question in this list especially challenges the so-called "democratizing" function of self-assessment in contrast to traditional grading. Self-assessment may " privilege certain writers," Schendel and O'Neill argue. These include well-prepared writers, who according to early research often write better self-assessments. It also might include students who find ways to avoid "expos[ing] their own weaknesses" (200). More broadly, Schendel and O'Neill point out that students who practice self-assessment within such a context may end up "participat[ing] in their own surveillance and domination" (200). The "normalizing gaze" of schooling – its insistence that "individuals internalize and practice appropriate behaviors" (Schendel and O'Neill's paraphrase of Foucault's theory of discipline, 203) – will be a fundamental consideration in the literature review to follow.

A self-assessment narrative is tied (either explicitly or implicitly) to a relatively high-stakes result: the grade. So "[w]hat happens if the 'self,' or the subject position, the student assesses is not the 'self' the teacher or institution wants them to inscribe?" Latta and Lauer ask (26). Are students who fail to produce an acceptable self in response to a self-assessment prompt (that is, a self who can give an acceptable definition of good writing, a self who can trace a linear narrative of progress throughout each drafting process, and a self who values the teaching and learning philosophies underlying the course) penalized? Does their grade suffer? If their self-assessment factors into the grade, does it factor in less for

3 Interestingly, the teacher perceptions gathered in this study cast at least a shadow of a doubt on this truism. As you'll see in Chapter 6, both teachers felt that some excellent essay writers constructed mediocre self-assessments, and vice versa.
these students than it does for a student with a conventional (and perhaps less honest) narrative? In other words, which self do we truly want when we ask students to self-assess? Which self will we reward? These are important questions to answer, because as the classroom representatives of the "academic community," we hold the institutional power to determine the acceptability and value of a student's self-narrative.

Postmodern and feminist theories, which question the notion of the autonomous self, take into consideration the factors that dictate the parameters of public versions of the self. As Howard notes, these theories not only question whether student "writers can exert the agency requisite to assessing themselves" but also "suggest that any student self-assessment would merely affirm and reproduce the student's hierarchical place in the educational establishment" (37). Howard draws on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (as I do in Chapter 3), who have asserted that "the function of education is the reproduction of established power relations" (Howard 40). Education asks students to accept and reify their roles in the established power dynamic. Therefore, any sort of "liberatory" pedagogy will either "be contradicted and ultimately overpowered by the larger institution in which it takes place, or the liberatory pedagogy will itself unwittingly come to reproduce the status quo, even as it seeks to offer alternatives and to encourage resistance" (41).

Students who are sensitive to this state of affairs might see self-assessment merely as a camouflaged version of the traditional grading relationship: as "another means to an end – a way to get a grade" rather than as a "genuine inquiry into their writing and writing processes" (Schendel 208). Even students who embrace the possibility of genuine self-assessment might become confused in the act of writing one, as they find themselves unable to reconcile the task with the educational routine into which they have been socialized.

Although I'm a believer in self-assessment and incorporate it in some form into all of my courses, I recognize that the ideal version of self-assessment could only occur in a
It's fascinating to see how complicated such an endeavor becomes, for both teachers and students, when it’s located within the real-world composition classroom – a place where competing identities, roles and agendas intersect and compete for attention. No matter how well intentioned a teacher and her students are, no matter how successfully they accept temporary reorientations toward grading within the walls of their classroom, they can’t extricate themselves from the social structures surrounding that classroom. It’s the political “situatedness” of self-assessment that makes it so fascinating to me. The products of this situatedness – the documents that teachers and students negotiate and produce under its constraints – are the objects of research in this study. I believe there’s much to be learned from the teachers and students who take on the daunting task of “doing” self-assessment. What are they able to produce? How is their work shaped by the political context? And how can we learn from these findings to reshape our use of self-assessment in the future?

Whether they ask for it explicitly or not, teachers, programs and institutions need students to become self-assessors at some point; students must be able to evaluate their own work-in-progress and make their own decisions on how to proceed. They must come to know their own strengths and weaknesses. And they must understand the place of their coursework within their overall education and development. If they lack these abilities, their education has failed them. For this reason, I believe classroom based self-assessment projects are still valuable, despite all the complications I’ve described here. They deserve to be reconsidered, re-theorized and resituated until they allow meaningful self-assessment to take place. That’s the ultimate goal of this study and the work that proceeds from it.

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4 Though I have nothing specific to cite here, this is a point made in the “Assessment” chapter of William Condon and Wayne Butler’s Writing the Information Superhighway (1998).
An outline of the study

This qualitative research project examines student self-assessment in two college-level writing classrooms. It analyzes students’ and instructors’ responses to the task of structuring and implementing self-assessment writing projects (i.e. midterm, final and assignment-specific reflective “cover essays”) as integrated components of their courses. Specifically, this study examines the negotiation of teacher/student identity and authority that results from the shift away from traditional instructor-centered grading; in so doing, it aims to provide an answer to Schendel and O'Neill’s question: “What do we neglect or overlook” in discussions of self-assessment? (202). Through an analysis of the written artifacts of self-assessment pedagogy, I investigate the following questions in detail:

1. How do teachers and students renegotiate their roles in a classroom where the traditional authority structure has been disrupted?
2. How does this renegotiation manifest itself in the writing they produce as they construct the classroom's new assessment paradigm?
3. How does the turn toward self-evaluation or self-grading, specifically, highlight and intensify the role negotiation that takes place in these classrooms?

This collective case study features analyses of student-written self-assessment projects as well as the instructor handouts that situate and structure them within a specific classroom. In addition, it incorporates class visits and instructor interviews to contextualize discussions of the self-assessment process, its perceived value and its aims in these classrooms. This study is meant to capture role conflicts (whether real or imaginary) that stem from self-assessment pedagogy as they play out in the classroom. The methods through which I gathered this data are detailed in Chapter 4.

By outlining the negotiation process surrounding self-assessment, I hope to address concerns within the scholarly communities of composition and writing assessment...
regarding the consequences of self-assessment. These consequences have the potential to thwart the goal behind implementing self-assessment in the first place— that is, to balance institutional needs and expectations for assessment with teachers’ desires to develop self-aware, rhetorically savvy, independently motivated writers. My hope is that this study will outline ways in which the self-assessment process can become a conscientious examination into and negotiation of competing goals for education and needs for assessment.

**Chapter overview.** This dissertation consists of eight chapters. For the sake of brevity, I will describe these chapters in three groups: 1) introduction and literature review; 2) methodology and findings; and 3) conclusions and implications.

- **Introduction and literature review.** Chapter 1, which you are now concluding, sets up the ethical problem of self-assessment drawing from personal experience and an examination of the language of self-assessment assignments. Chapter 2 examines the progression of scholarship in writing assessment and Composition Studies on the topic of self-assessment. It shows how scholars have increasingly acknowledged the ethical and political considerations surrounding any such project, and it attempts to locate the theoretical impetus for these concerns. The chapter also suggests ways that this study could contribute to this small body of theory, research and practice. Chapter 3 frames this discussion within the work of Robert Brooke, Erving Goffman, Roz Ivanič and others, who offer research-based descriptions of how versions of the “self” are performed through language. They also show how identity is formed through taking personal stances toward social roles. This chapter also draws from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Richard Miller, Peter McLaren and others to discuss the conservative and reproductive functions of education. Through this line of inquiry, I analyze accepted portrayals of “good
students and writers. As I’ll demonstrate, students and teachers reference these portrayals, whether consciously or not, in their negotiations of self-assessment.

- **Methodology and findings.** Chapter 4 is the study framework and methods chapter; it describes the selective case study methodology employed in my research. It gives an overview of the two writing courses I studied and the teachers and students involved. It describes how the previous chapter's theoretical examinations informed the research design as well as the analysis of results in later chapters. Chapter 5 is an introduction to the classrooms I studied: it describes how teachers “set the stage” for self-assessment through handouts and class discussion; it also discusses how they (re)negotiated their identities and relationships throughout the semester in response to their student essays. Chapter 6 discusses students’ self-assessment essays and details their identity and role constructions in response to the self-assessment task. Chapter 7 is an analysis of the “grammar” of student self-assessments – the general patterns that nearly all of them followed.

- **Conclusions and implications.** Chapter 8 is a discussion of the political and ethical considerations of self-assessment, as revealed by the study, and their implications for assigning and teaching such projects. It extends the theoretical discussions of the literature review chapters and outlines possibilities for further research. It suggests conscientious ways of implementing self-assessment that involve classroom discussion and acknowledgement of power relationships, sources of motivation, consequences of success and failure, and subjectivity and objectivity in evaluation.

**A brief note on evaluative terms**

As Brian Huot points out in *ReArticulating Writing Assessment* (see Chapter 3), scholars in educational measurement and in Composition Studies have their own definitions for terms
such as *assessment* and *evaluation*, with or without the *self-* attached. So I should clarify my use of such terms. I use *self-assessment* as the broad term for all self-governed acts of judgment and decision-making in writing. In cases where more precision is required, I use terms that composition scholars have given more specific meaning: *reflection* to refer to the act describing one's writing process retrospectively; *self-evaluation* to refer to the act of judging the quality of one's writing or, more generally, one's work and effort; and *self-grading* to refer specifically to the act of arriving at a letter grade as a product of a self-evaluation process. Many similar terms will enter the discussion, and will be defined as they're used, but the important thing to note for our purposes is that *self-assessment* is a blanket term that doesn't necessarily involve self-grading or even direct self-evaluating. But the students in this study were purposefully asked by their instructor to do both.

To further complicate matters, new definitions arise when these terms are used as count nouns. For example, a *self-assessment* (or this student's *self-evaluation*, etc.) is typically a written or verbal instance of self-assessment, such as a portfolio cover essay, a reflective journal entry or a face-to-face self-assessment in a student teacher conference. Since distinctions between assessment, evaluation, etc., are not usually outlined when these written projects are assigned, these terms are basically interchangeable: a portfolio cover essay with a self-evaluative component might be called a *self-assessment*, a *reflection/reflective essay* or a *self-evaluation*. The use of these terms is embedded in both individual and local/programmatic practice, but from my observation, the name of such a project will depend mostly on the instructor's choices in framing it – i.e. the activity or activities they choose to foreground in the assignment. For example, a *reflection* is less likely to foreground the evaluative component, while a *self-evaluation* is more likely to do so. A *self-assessment* will likely encompass both activities in turn. But these aren't immutable rules, and this study will discuss the naming choices instructors make.
CHAPTER 2

SITUATING A STUDY OF SELF-ASSESSMENT

Origins of the practice of student self-assessment in writing courses

Self-assessment has arguably been an implied component of rhetorical education from the beginning. Aristotle’s definition of *rhetoric* – “the ability of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” – requires a form of self-assessment: the rhetor must evaluate his or her rhetorical repertoire before choosing how to proceed with an argument. And as I stated in the introduction, the process of composing a piece of writing assumes self-assessment, whether or not a teacher asks her students to articulate that process. The student must have a sense of how far along his or her writing is. “The best indicator of how successful a student writer will be in the future is whether or not that student has developed sound criteria for assessing his/her own writing” John Mayher says in *Uncommon Sense* (qtd. in Sandman 275). And, more broadly, a student must eventually “zoom out” from the details of his or her own writing to consider who she is as a writer. If the “subject” of a composition course is the students’ own writing (as Donald Murray, Wendy Bishop and others have suggested), then *self-assessment* is essentially a synonym for *learning*.

But the practice of articulating a self-assessment out loud or on paper (i.e. in a proposal, in mid-process notes or in a post-draft reflection) didn’t become commonplace in writing courses until a few decades ago. An early example is Peter Elbow’s advice in *Writing Without Teachers*: “If you stop involuntarily in the middle of a sentence when you suddenly see it’s turning out stupid or wrong . . . write to yourself whatever it is you have to say about
that sentence..." (74). The portfolio-based classroom arguably grew out of a desire to provide more extended opportunities for this kind of reflection.

Until the late 1970s, we had very little insight into what students were producing in the act of self-assessment. The first (and still probably the most cited) research project on student self-assessment in composition was Richard Beach's 1976 article in *College Composition and Communication*, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers." Beach's article sets the terms for the "good" self-assessment5: "Many students have difficulty in evaluating their own writing, difficulty in describing and judging the strengths and weaknesses of a draft, defining and predicting necessary changes for a subsequent draft, recognizing whether those changes were actually made on the subsequent draft, and judging the worth of those changes" (160).

The article provides a useful (if binary) classification for student writers: it distinguishes between "non-revisers" and "extensive revisers" (Beach implies that these labels fit certain students whether they were writing essays or conducting self-evaluations - in other words, he links students' writing proficiency with their self-evaluation proficiency). Beach argues that the students he termed "non-revisers" jumped from error to error in their self-assessments without commenting on their paper as a whole. They also engaged in simple mimicry in their language: they dealt only in "English teacher" terms and phrases such as "awkward," "lacking in details," and "in need of smoother transitions" (161). Here we might see a link to Bourdieu and Passeron's discussion of students' impoverished incantation of "magisterial discourse" (described in the next chapter). But Beach goes in a

5 Though I use this term, I should note that Beach uses the term *self-evaluation*, and the projects he describes are student recordings, not essays. So we might characterize them as something between Linda Flower and John Hayes' "Think-Aloud Protocols" (see page 22) and the self-assessments I'm examining in this study. Still, these self-evaluations (and Flower and Hayes' protocols) were arguably early templates for the portfolio cover letters/essays that would start appearing a few years later.
Piagetian direction instead: he labels the non-revisers as "egocentric" because they were unable (he uses the words "cognitively incapable") to detach from their own idiosyncratic micro-level decisions and generalize about writing (163). Meanwhile, Beach's "extensive revisers" were able to achieve an "aesthetic distance" from their writing and "consider alternative approaches" (163). They talked about their paper holistically and formulated a plan for the next draft (162). They also used language connected to the content of the paper (i.e. not just stock "English teacher terms") and suggested a concrete, step-by-step revision plan. Beach's criterion for successful self-evaluation is clear: it should adopt the response strategies of a good English teacher, one whose commentary is contextually situated and generative. He also notes that self-assessment requires a "willingness to be self-critical" (160), though he never explores the consequences of doing so. Might those who were used to receiving lower grades have perceived a risk in being too self-critical?

As noted by Hilgers et al., self-assessment became a serious object of scholarly concern after the advent of the Flower and Hayes model of the composing process in the early 1980s (7). The concept of the "monitor" (the portion of the writer's cognitive machinery that makes evaluations of writing as it is written) appeared in various incarnations throughout the 1980s as cognitive processes became an important area of research in composition. Hilgers et al. trace a small wave of studies on student self-assessment (for example, Ellen Nold's "Revising: Intentions and Conventions," 1980; Nancy Sommers' "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," 1980; and Susan Miller's "How Writers Evaluate their Own Writing," 1982) to the excitement surrounding Flower and Hayes' "monitor" (Hilgers 7). These studies focused mostly on the self-evaluative acts of writers outside the classroom (or classroom writers taking on the persona of professional writers), drawing contrasts between academic and "real world" standards and motivations for writing. But while Susan Miller's article also compares the
work of these two groups, she arrives at an important conclusion for both: that "those who do not evaluate their own writing do not gain from having written" (181). In other words, the ability to "achieve an aesthetic distance" from one's own writing, as Beach termed it, is not only what separates novice and experienced writers, but is also the definition of learning about writing.

Hilgers et al. point out a problem with this early work: for the most part, it "attempted to view self-assessment as a set of isolated acts. It did not explicitly recognize the social situations in which students learned strategies of self-assessment and, just as importantly, the socially contextualized criteria that individuals used in making their assessments" (8). More broadly, Faigley claims, depictions of the "self" in this era of composition scholarship relied primarily on a Westernized notion of the self as a "unified, individual consciousness conterminous with the physical body" (396), ignoring the complexities of the socially constructed self. In many cases, the writer's inner voice was unproblematically described as authentic, reliable and ideology-free. "That the self must be interpellated through language is denied," Faigley argues (410).

For example, Donald Murray's 1982 article "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader" was the first to connect the professional writer's "inner critic" with Flower and Hayes' "monitor" (142). The job of the teacher, Murray says is to "teach the other self" - the one that does the evaluating (144). The other self assesses the writing situation and determines how the writer can get from where they are to where they're going (141). In this description, Murray opens himself up to a critique common of his work: that the journey he describes is more typical of that of a creative writer or freelance journalist. He doesn't directly acknowledge that with student writing, sometimes the destination seems to be predetermined by external prompts rather than developed from within the writer's mind.
Critiquing the "self" in self-assessment

Later studies (Gesa Kirsch, "Students' Interpretations of Writing Tasks," 1988; Richard Haswell, "Student Self-Evaluations and Developmental Change," 1993; Richard Straub, "Students' Reactions to Teacher Comments: An Exploratory Study," 1997) went a long way toward remedying this problem, as they embedded their discussions of student decision-making within case studies of a whole classroom. Kirsch's article in particular makes one of the most important leaps: it goes beyond a study of students' evaluations of their own texts, tying these evaluations to discussions of their selves as developing writers. Her research subject, "Gene," is asked in his self-evaluations to speculate on what he is learning about writing and how that learning clashes with his previous conceptions of writing. Specifically, Kirsch discusses at length Gene's belief that "'creative' and 'analytical' writing [were] two dichotomous activities; [that] writing could only take one or the other form"; he experienced writer's block due to the fact that he couldn't make his analytical paper fit rigid standards for an "objective tone." His self-evaluation traces his gradual acceptance of the occasional anecdote into analytical writing, when the context allows it (85). In short, Kirsch constructs a narrative of the student in which his general concepts of writing (rather than just his drafts) develop and are traced through the self-evaluation process. In so doing, Kirsch describes Gene's discussions of discourse community and disciplinary expectations (though neither he nor Kirsch use these specific terms) – discussions that suggest Gene was considering his place in academia and his stage of development as an academic writer.

Kirsch's essay, published in the late 1980s, mirrors the field's growing emphasis on the social conceptions of the "good writer" and "good student", and their impact on institutional practice, during this era. See, for example, Chris Anson's "Response and the Social Construction of Error," which showed that teachers constructed "writer's personas" when reading essays, even when they hadn't met the student author, based on the patterns
of error; Kathryn R. Fitzgerald’s “Rhetorical Implications of School Discourse for Writing Placement,” which demonstrated that placement essay readers at the University of Utah equated “distance” from their subject (a value peculiar to academia) with “control” and conversely placed into basic writing students who couldn’t maintain this distance; Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams’ "Do As I Do, Not As I Say," which discussed placement exam readers’ strong preference for a nominal style over a verbal style; Michael Palmquist and Richard E. Young’s “Is Writing a Gift?,” which linked student’s belief in the concept of giftedness in writing to lower self-assessments of their own writing (517); and Faigley’s “Judging Writing, Judging Selves,” mentioned above, which pointed out biases toward confessional narrative and a Westernized portrayal of self in the popular composition reader What Makes Writing Good (404-5).

Studies on the implications of these social considerations for self-assessment (the Schendel and O’Neill and Bullock articles mentioned earlier) appeared in edited collections and journals, though given the proliferation of self-evaluative portfolio cover essays, the actual number of such articles was actually surprisingly low. Since the early 1990s, the few articles published on student involvement in their own assessment have been too far apart, generally, to engage in dialogue with each other. We could see a possible conversation, for example, between the argument of Bullock (who suggests an “open negotiation” of grades that would privilege “no one,” 200) and that of Glenda Conway (who questions whether true openness is possible and questions teachers’ motives in encouraging such “negotiation,” given that the final grade decisions are still theirs, 91). But only readers can make this connection – Conway’s article doesn’t reference Bullock’s.

One notable exception is Susan Callahan’s “Responding to the Invisible Student” and Sandra Murphy’s response in the same issue of Assessing Writing. Callahan’s article, which compares what teachers and students value in reflective texts, is probably the closest study
in terms of subject matter and design to the study underlying this dissertation. Callahan pays special attention to the effect of the content of such essays on a teacher's overall perception of a student (a topic I also explore). "Even when reflective writing is not formally graded," she says, "it becomes . . . part of the teacher's perception of the individual student, which is brought along with other visual and aural impressions to the end-of semester assessment process" (58). Consequently, Callahan argues that even seemingly well-designed and well-intentioned prompts "often elicit a kind of elaborate fiction in which everything is guided by an intense awareness of teacher as audience" (59). Callahan takes a step toward defining what I might call a compliant performance of the academic self\(^6\): that is, a performance that responds to reflective questions from the same perspective and set of values as the instructor. Specifically, her research suggests that students whose attributes most closely matched hers on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator were (generally) more likely to produce reflections that she valued highly, agreed with and paid the most attention to. The other readers in Callahan's study, each of whom was given a different "score" by the MBTI, also exhibited evaluative biases toward students whose attributes mirrored theirs. Callahan states that she found certain questions in her self-assessment prompts betrayed her personality type and that she had initially judged some students as not having understood these questions until discovering how they differed from her on the personality test (66). She then took a second look at their responses and realized they were often answering quite well, but from a different perspective. This is her conclusion: "Teachers are most favorably inclined towards texts that seem to embody their own values and . . . teacher responses are not always grounded so much in the actual content of a text as in the particular predisposition the teacher-reader brings to it" (60).

\(^6\) See Chapter 3 for a definition of this term.
Although this conclusion seems reasonable, Murphy takes issue with the reliance on MBTI tests in Callahan's study; she sees a danger in suggesting "that students and teachers have certain fixed, unchanging characteristics that determine how they construct reality" (87). She also expresses less discomfort than Callahan with the idea that students whose approaches mirror the teachers' might be valued more highly: "I empathize with Callahan's concerns . . . But I think that reflection, even vapid reflection, helps teachers get to know their students better – as individuals with their own goals and intentions and their own preferred individual ways of going about meeting them, even if their only goal is only to please the teacher" (87). Murphy's main critique of Callahan is that she, like many other scholars on this topic, devotes little attention to student voices in her study design, restricting these voices to what shows up on paper.

Though edited volumes such as Alternatives to Grading Student Writing (1997) Grading in the Post-Process Classroom (1997) and The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing (1998) each examined the issues of authority and teacher control in the processes of grading and assessment, the best scholarly "conversation" on self-assessment is the 2000 collection Self-Assessment and Development in Writing. Here the implementation of self-assessment is studied in detail, with topics ranging from grade inflation concerns to the frequency of self-assessment activities in the classroom. The articles by Howard ("Applications and Assumptions of Student Self-Assessment") and Latta and Lauer ("Student Self-Assessment: Some Issues and Concerns from Postmodern and Feminist Perspectives"), which along with Schendel and O'Neill's form the basis for my main ethical arguments in Chapter 1, appear in this volume. These articles, as well as the editors' closing chapter, discuss what is lacking in previous work on self-assessment in order to state a common desire: that classroom practice in self-assessment incorporate a component of research into itself. In other words, they feel the process should encourage students to
inquire into the conflict of "selves" that surround the self-assessment process. "Self-assessments should emphasize the rhetorical situatedness of writing," Latta and Lauer claim, "and should rhetorically situate the act of self-assessment itself" (31).

Kathleen Yancey and Jane Bowman Smith's conclusion to the volume list four social situations surrounding self-assessment that deserve inquiry in the classroom: "the rhetorical situation of a paper; the situation of a class, including peers and teachers; the situation of a student's prior learning; and the situation of what the student plans to do next" (172). They argue that students must be made aware of each of these contexts and address each of them in their self-assessments. These multiple framing activities are meaningful and instructive to both student and teacher.

**Contribution of my study**

To explain how my study will contribute to this body of research, I'd like to close this chapter with one more example of a teacher's research into her own students' self-assessments. In "Portfolios as a Vehicle for Student Empowerment and Teacher Change" (1991), Kerry Weinbaum describes a turning point in the middle of her portfolio-based writing course: dissatisfied with her students' motivation, she decided to give more control to her students over their topics and readings and more of a voice in their grades. In exchange, she asked for them to write fairly extensive portfolio cover letters to the portfolio reading committee and to her explaining how they took control of their work. From her perspective, students were empowered by the changes: they produced more writing of a higher quality than they had in the first half of the semester and they seemed to have developed a stronger interest in reading and writing. Weinbaum's evidence for the latter claim was the student's reflective self-assessment letters, which she believes "were the most important aspect of the portfolio process" because they "provided [her] with a window on
students' thinking" (214). Many students wrote about how the looser structure freed them up to think more creatively. Some of the quotes from these letters are similar to those I discussed in Chapter 1 (e.g. a transformation narrative: "As a reader, I was never interested in that subject. Now it is all I want to do . . .," 213). Weinbaum accepts these narratives as representing "what [students] learned and the progress they made" (214). Perhaps she does so too easily; it'd certainly be possible to offer a more cynical reading of her students' letters than she does.

But her article also prompts productive questions. Even read cynically, wasn't there value in this project? Didn't this project encourage a kind of thinking that otherwise might not have taken place? The letters seemed to provide a space for students to make good-faith efforts to reflect on their growth as writers. And the teacher did learn more about the details of their decision making and did get to know them better as writers, as Murphy suggests. We could also ask, How could Weinbaum have expanded on the opportunity she created? As I'll discuss in the next chapter, learning always involves taking on roles and adjusting for audience expectations – this isn't necessarily a negative thing. How might Weinbaum and her students have acknowledged and discussed this fact while framing their self-assessment cover letters as part of the broader course goal of learning how to become better writers?

I feel the ethical knots in self-assessment could very well be untangled within a conscientious implementation. Latta and Lauer believe that “student self-assessment ... could provide students with the opportunity to clarify for themselves the differences between their understandings of academic expectations and their own [expectations], and [it could provide] opportunity for students to genuinely engage with the academic institution on their own terms and to offer them a possible forum for critique" (30). In other words, the student could define him/herself “dialogically in a local context, rather than in
the autonomous, hermetic domains postulated by modernism" (Howard 41). In this way, self-assessment could fit into the spaces in writing curriculum as productive course content.

This dissertation will make steps toward articulating such a thoughtful and ethical approach. It will ask (and make a substantial attempt to answer) what really happens in student self-assessment. It will suggest ways to use the classroom discussions surrounding self-assessment to uncover and analyze performances of self and negotiations of student and teacher roles – and then to feed them back into the learning process. And it will outline how a “culture of self-assessment” built throughout an entire course will make specific self-assessment events more meaningful. Teachers can create this culture in a variety of ways: by being more forthcoming about standards and where they come from; by outlining with students the multiple stakeholders in their grades; by using student self-grades to initiate a discussion of personal decisions in evaluation; by discussing how the social aspects of genre apply to reflective writing; by demonstrating how experienced academic writers develop a meta-awareness of their own work; and by teaching students to consider the multiple “stages” on which they’ll perform as students and as writers. I’ll say more on this topic in the conclusion.
CHAPTER 3

TEACHER ROLES, STUDENT ROLES, AND ‘ACADEMIC SELVES’

Negotiating roles

One of the more popular recent articles on the Inside Higher Ed website (judging by the number of comments) is Scott Jaschik’s “No Grading, More Learning.” This short piece reports on a course taught by Duke University’s Cathy Davidson, in which students signed contracts agreeing to a set of written grade standards and collaboratively graded each other’s work throughout the semester using those standards. Davidson left the final grade decision to the students. The reaction to this report, best captured in Leonard Cassuto’s IHE follow-up "Why Grading Is Part of My Job," follows a pattern typical of published responses to articles on unorthodox grading practices. Cassuto accuses Davidson and teachers like her of “shirk[ing] necessary responsibility, avoid[ing] necessary comparison and put[ting] the humanities at even greater risk of being branded ‘soft’ than they already face.” He alludes to college teachers’ traditional duties as evaluators, representatives of higher education and representatives of their discipline. These duties might not be spelled out in a teacher’s job description, but the idea that they are part of the job is beyond question to Cassuto (and, judging by their responses, to many of the commenters on both articles). The fact that Davidson handed grading over to students seems to have negated her assertions that she continued to give evaluative feedback and discuss grading standards with her students. To Cassuto, declining to grade is a fatal disruption of the teacher-student relationship.

A sense of teacherly identity and duty underlies discussions like this. A teacher’s perceived role is a product of official policy, history and lore brought to bear on his or her
unique educational context; as such, it’s impossible to articulate as a set-in-stone code of behavior. Over my decade or so of teaching, I’ve become more conscious of the tensions among the roles I play as a teacher: expert in my field, authority figure, gatekeeper, standard-bearer, university employee and grader – but also mentor, coach, writing tutor and friend. I embrace the latter set of roles and resist the former more than the average teacher, I think, but when I make crucial decisions in the classroom, I feel compelled to swing back in the other direction. Therein lie the tensions – at times my performance shifts and I must become what I feel is less “true” to the teacherly identity I’ve consciously and unconsciously developed over my career.

Those of us who teach are only somewhat in control of our teacherly performance: upon reflection, we might be very good at recognizing the ways we’ve responded to our various roles, but we don’t often catch ourselves in the act of slipping from one response to the next. If we did, we’d probably stop ourselves fairly often. The first chapter of Lad Tobin’s Writing Relationships, in which Tobin describes his complex relationship with his student “Steve,” is an excellent example. As he discusses Steve’s occasionally brilliant, occasionally racist essay with his writing class (see 7-14), Tobin finds himself shifting: one moment, he’s an expressivist who wants students to write without restrictions; the next, he’s a leftistEnglish prof who subtly uses his authority to manipulate the politics of students’ writing. This is a complex performance: he identifies with the former identity but is pushed into the latter because he feels he must keep Steve from going in a bad direction with his writing (11). Tobin is unable to anticipate or fully control these shifts in real time because the classroom discussion surrounding Steve’s essay has positioned him directly on the tipping point. He doesn’t have the time to stop and calculate a performance that matches how he wants to be perceived.
The teacherly role comprises a variety of smaller roles, and, as I’ll discuss later in this chapter in my discussion of Robert Brooke’s Identity Negotiations Theory, a teacher takes different stances toward each of these roles to construct his or her unique teacherly identity. Consider the following role distinctions we could make between teachers and students: 1) teachers have disciplinary knowledge while students lack that knowledge; 2) teachers are in the classroom to teach and students are there to learn; and 3) teachers assess student learning while students remain uninvolved in this assessment. Of course, the mere act of articulating these roles opens them up to multiple challenges – there are many exceptions, some even endorsed by a teacher’s program or institution, and they can often be strongly resisted without any visible negative repercussions. But still, they’re present enough in the common experience of teaching and learning to require a responsive stance of some type, and they influence a teacher’s decision-making at critical points in her course. More specifically, the notion that the “grader” role belongs completely to the teacher is certainly contestable, but many teachers nevertheless practice that role without ever seriously contesting it throughout their careers. Some complain about it but still comply with it. Others build active resistance to it into their teacherly identity.

This role-playing is performed, in part, through teachers’ teacherly writing. As I read over my own handouts and responses to student writing, I see attempts to balance between more authoritarian and less authoritarian performances of their teacherly identity. It’s this "schizophrenia of roles" (Chris Anson’s term, 2) that shapes the classroom experience of assessment and grading (including self-assessment) and makes it so complicated.

The roles that students perform seem fewer – novice, learner, academic writer, rule-follower, classroom peer – but I wonder if this is simply due to the fact that we teachers don’t often have immediate access to the subtlety of our students’ experiences. The role of “academic writer,” for example, incorporates multiple disciplinary roles that research often
struggles to capture. Longitudinal study researchers in composition (most notably Lee Ann Carroll in 1993's *Rehearsing New Roles*) argue that students' definition of writing, as well as researchers', must be reconceived and rebuilt whenever they move into new "academic subcommunities" (Carroll's term, 116ff) and take on disciplinary roles. Also, it makes sense that students' "rule-follower" role would change each time they enter a setting with new rules – or each time they encounter a teacher with a different stance toward rule-following. The nature of interpersonal relationships is intricately networked, dialectical and fluid, and students sense and respond to the expectations set up by their teachers, as well as the other figures who "set the stages" for their student performances.

In short, the single word *student* refers to a complex, ever-changing identity, which like a teacher's identity is formed by stances toward the different roles with which the student is presented throughout his or her academic career. I'll refer to a student's felt sense of student identity as his or her *academic self* to distinguish it from the various roles she adopts when outside of academic situations (though these certainly have a bearing on who she is in the classroom). The "self" that appears in a student essay isn't quite what I'd call the academic self: instead, it's the product of partly conscious, partly unconscious attempts to *negotiate* one's academic self in a specific rhetorical context – suppressing parts of one's felt identity while emphasizing others. Teachers who read their students' work closely can see how their performances change from essay to essay, from page to page and perhaps even from sentence to sentence.

**Key observations of this literature review**

In this chapter, I’ll attempt to answer the following questions: What exactly does it mean to *perform self* in writing? When we ask students to write a self-assessment, what sort of self do we want students to inscribe, to paraphrase Latta and Lauer? And in what ways are
students' "academic selves" responses to the rhetorical performances of their teachers and educational institutions? I don't think we'll have a full answer to these questions at the end of the chapter, but we should have enough to frame an analysis of self-assessment essays.

The following are the key observations of this chapter.

1. **The "self" is performed in writing.** The first section of this chapter will deal with Erving Goffman's metaphor of performance (i.e. our conscious and unconscious efforts to control which version of our "selves" others see) and how students practice this kind of performance in their writing, whether or not the task at hand is labeled as "personal" writing. I also review literature that complicates the performance metaphor.

2. **Identity is constructed over time through stances toward role expectations.** Robert Brooke provides the basic theory behind my analytical framework in this study. Brooke's Identity Negotiations Theory, which incorporates a variety of identity theories, focuses Goffman's interactionist theories on the acts of compliance and resistance to social roles. As I point out, however, compliance and resistance are complex ideas in the context of student self-assessment. Since allowing students to self-assess can be seen an act of resistance in itself, student compliance and resistance can take place on a number of fronts. This literature review will attempt to capture this complexity and set up the discussion of identity-based stances in the data analysis section of the next chapter.

3. **The power imbalance of the classroom limits the possibilities of identity negotiation yet still allows room for resistance.** This section will discuss some of the influences that have constructed "the self we want students to inscribe" and demonstrate how the inscrutability of this "self" contributes to the seemingly
contradictory performances of self that appear both in student self-assessments and in the teacher handouts that set up self-assessment exercises.

The "self" is performed in writing.

**Defining performance.** When social theorists speak of “performance” as a metaphor for human behavior and expression, their work is likely connected in some way to Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959. Goffman notes that people have “many motives for trying to control the impression [others] receive” in a social situation. Impression control relies on a person’s *performance*, which Goffman defines as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence . . . any of the other participants” (15). Goffman focuses mostly on face-to-face interactions in traditional social settings rather than on writing specifically, so in this chapter, I’ll also refer to works that discuss the performance aspects of student writing in the context of teacher-student-institution relationships. Some of them also point out the limitations of Goffman’s metaphor of performance.

Goffman states that participants perform as *characters* on the various social “stages” of their lives; a “character” is “a figure . . . whose spirit, strength and qualities [the participant’s] performance [is] designed to evoke” (252). This so-called character is an idealization of an established social role and is therefore most likely at some distance from the individual: “When the individual presents himself7 before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (35). And conversely, “[if] an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal

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7 Goffman uses the male generic pronoun consistently; I preserve his phrasing in direct quotations, but I don’t attempt to replicate it elsewhere.
action which is inconsistent with these standards" (41). In other words, performance almost always involves a selective (re)presentation of a person's felt sense of "true" self – some things are added, some subtracted.

The motive for playing a character isn't always (or even usually) to deceive others, Goffman points out; often, such performance is implicitly acknowledged and "authorized" in a social setting in order to create and maintain harmony and goodwill within a social setting – i.e. a "veneer of consensus" (9). This includes a number of "white lies" that people tell in order to protect the feelings or interests of others (62) – or to use a term from sociolinguistics, to allow others to "save face." If we were to stop and reflect when in these situations, we might acknowledge that we're all quite noticeably engaging in "reciprocal" performances (Goffman's term, 82), yet we accept this as the stuff of social ritual – a mutual nod to each participant's place in a social hierarchy and his or her awareness of the protocol that maintains that hierarchy. In other words, even "false fronts" serve to communicate to others that each of us is a certain kind of person: one who is willing to play the roles designated for us. Our performance is important not only because it benefits us, Goffman says, but also because it's seen as contributing to the success of the overall "scene" (77).

For those of us who work in the classroom, this idea of expectations for performance is worth exploring. If we were to read the self-assessment excerpts in Chapter 1 under these terms, we might say they show two students' attempts to perform in the character of the "good student" – to present a "self" that closely aligns with the perceived expectations their teacher and institution have for students – by presenting their work and narrating their class experience in a conventional way. But they're not just doing so to make themselves look good – they're also doing their part to maintain the situation definition expected by everyone participating in the classroom context. Goffman notes that "an individual projects a definition of the situation" when he performs within it and the others
do the same; one of the goals of this mutual performance is to make sure this situation definition isn’t disrupted (9).

**Applying the performance metaphor.** To most of us, I imagine, this language of “performances,” “settings” and “characters” is uncontroversial; the metaphor of performance is so well established, so fundamental to our understanding of social behavior that it seems odd to use scare quotes around the various terms associated with it. But it is a metaphor, and it has limitations.

**Social constructionism and performance.** First, as Roz Ivanič reminds us in *Writing and Identity*, “dramaturgical metaphors suggest that ‘actors’ – that is, individuals – are in charge of their own situation, which is contrary to a social constructionist view of human action.” I should note that Ivanič isn’t specifically critiquing Goffman here, but rather the way his terms could be understood and applied. For his part, Goffman acknowledges the lack of full agency in such patterns of behavior: “Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case” (17). And Goffman devotes much of *The Presentation of Self* to describing the nuances of performance, role confusion and issues with anticipating and controlling one’s performance. Ivanič acknowledges this. Nevertheless, she reasonably insists that, when we use dramaturgical terms, we acknowledge the ways in which individuals in a social setting might not be as fully aware of or in control of their performances as actors on a stage usually are.

On the other hand, Ivanič suggests that “the social constructionist view” could do a better job of “theoriz[ing] the role of ‘the individual’” by taking cues from Goffman. It becomes clear that she’s referring specifically to the deterministic tendency of many of its theorists. She writes:

[As social constructionism asserts], individuals are constrained in their selection of discourses by those to which they have access, and by the
patterns of privileging which exist among them, but that does not dry up the alternatives altogether. I think Goffman’s work provides a productive metaphor to enrich our understanding of the local mechanisms by which the social construction of identity takes place, giving an insight into the sorts of subconscious selections among culturally available possibilities for self-hood\(^8\) that particular individuals make when confronted by particular others in particular social settings. (22-3)

Ivanič’s work is particularly useful because, in characterizing the performance of academic writers, she makes distinctions that balance social constructionism with these “local mechanisms.” First, Ivanič suggests that writers have an *autobiographical self* – “the identity which people bring with them to any act of writing” – which is “socially constructed and constantly changing as a consequence of their developing life-history” (24). This term is basically analogous to Goffman’s *performer* (and the aspects of the autobiographical self that carry into the classroom constitute what I’m calling the academic self). Ivanič’s term *discoursal self* – “the impression [that a writer] consciously or consciously conveys of themself [sic] in a particular written text” – can likewise be compared to Goffman’s *character*. It’s the role to which we aspire if we wish to fit within a perceived community of practice (25)\(^9\). Ivanič calls this self “discoursal” because our linguistic choices (conscious or not) constitute it; it doesn’t exist outside of discourse. Ivanič adds a third term, *self as author*, or the persona a writer constructs in an attempt to establish authority – again, in an effort to demonstrate his or her suitability for a certain role (26). These two “selves” are in tension with the autobiographical self (and, by extension, with the academic self).

Ivanič’s book is a study of student writing, so she focuses most closely on the discoursal self. “Some discourses are powerful, and/or more highly valued than others, and

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\(^8\) *Possibilities for self-hood* is Ivanič’s term for available social, cultural and institutional options – a term that, in her view, allows for a more “multifaceted” writerly identity than the comparatively fatalistic social constructionist term *subject positions* (see 27ff).

\(^9\) Interestingly (but not quite on the topic), Ivanič suggests that plagiarism might be a student’s attempt to “acquire discoursal self” (330).
people are under pressure to participate in them through adopting them in their writing," she notes. But "[in] spite of these powerful shaping social forces, individual writers participate in the construction of their discoursal identities through selection (mainly subconscious) among the subject positions they feel socially mandated, willing, or daring enough to occupy" (32). This notion seems compatible with contemporary understandings of the term discourse community in Composition Studies — a term that, as Ivanic notes, better describes how certain norms cluster in disciplinary settings than it indicates the existence of any homogenous "community" or "communities" (80). A student's discoursal self arises not necessarily from feeling he or she rightfully belongs to any particular group, but rather from a sense of fluency or competence in the subject positions and rhetorical stances available in a given situation.

Thomas Newkirk's The Performance of Self in Student Writing describes this "sense of competence" well — and like Ivanic, Newkirk downplays the notion of actor-like selectivity in performance.

Goffman's term 'presentation of self' suggests a distinction between "self" and "presentation" that he in fact dismantles in his discussion. We do not have a self that we selectively present, hiding x, revealing y. Rather the sense we have of being a "self" is rooted in a sense of competence primarily, but not exclusively, in social interaction. It is a sense of effectiveness, the robust feeling that we possess a repertoire of performances so natural that they cease to seem like performances at all. (5)

This notion of competence or fluency is important, I believe, because it's a bridge between the autobiographical and discoursal self. A student will feel confident when his or her academic self suggests a viable way to act and write in an academic situation — with no "lost" or confused feeling. Newkirk suggests that in writing, our "repertoire" of performances owes its existence to models, the conventions of which we adapt (sometimes
consciously, but more often unconsciously) to fill the rhetorical need at hand\(^\text{10}\); we draw our sense of competence from how successfully and effortlessly we can enact this process. Newkirk aligns this ability with the concept of *ethos* (5): a (felt and performed) rhetorical competence that establishes a person (privately and publicly) as qualified to speak, write and/or act within a local rhetorical exigency.\(^\text{11}\) One of his examples is a student who comfortably incorporates a professional essayist's "manner of self-presentation" into his reading response – an unconscious use of his repertoire that leads to positive results (8).

But Newkirk's book also describes a number of students who incorporate stock literary moves into their personal essays in seemingly miscalculated ways; although these moves seem equally "natural" and valuable to them, they come across as overly emotional or manipulative to their teachers. I'll refer to this as "misperformance" later in this dissertation. Newkirk's first inclination is to diagnose the problem as role confusion on the part of the students: they're performing as literary writers instead of academic writers due to their lack of knowledge of the difference between the two. But he also raises the possibility that we teachers might confuse our roles in this situation: in our eagerness to

\(^{10}\) Ivanič similarly designates "encounters with spoken and written texts" as the primary building blocks of discoursal competence; these texts provide students "the scaffolding (to use a Vygotskyan term) for acquiring the discoursal repertoire available to them at the moment of writing" (52).

\(^{11}\) Here I'm inclined to briefly mention James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium's *The Self We Live By*. Drawing on Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (which also suggests a definition of self not as an entity apart from its own performance, but as constituted by local rhetorical performances), Holstein and Gubrium point out that a "self coherence" arises from "interplay" between accumulated narratives of self and how an individual actually composes his or her own narrative (107-8). A competent manipulation of our "repertoire" effectively shapes our narrative and "positions our listeners" to observe us from a particular vantage point or within a particular context (115). Rhetorical fluency leads to greater narrative control and (to use Goffman's term) greater impression control – but it's also a means of articulating a sense of self, thus countering the "postmodern feeling" of being pulled apart and stripped of identity by the multitude of competing social forces (71) – the scattered notion of self described by Baudrillard and others.
perform the role of experts in academic discourse, we might too readily “disassociate our aesthetic response from the conventional emotional response the content would normally elicit” (27-8).

The role of resistance. Ivanić’s second critique of performance metaphors is that they tend to “background . . . tensions and conflicts inherent in social action, focusing on the smooth, ‘on-stage’ performance” (20). In Presentation of Self, we might focus on Goffman’s idea of “stages” or “regions” for an example of this. Goffman’s chapter on “Regions and Region Behavior” discusses the stages or front regions in which we all perform, the multitude of settings “bounded by some degree by barriers to perception” (106). But there are also backstage areas, he says, where “the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (112). Goffman’s examples of backstages include a hotel kitchen, the parts of a shop located behind the counter, or the parts of a mental hospital inaccessible to the public. He describes the backstage primarily as a place to construct social fronts and rehearse for performances. It’s also a place where socially unauthorized behaviors can take place beyond the gaze of the people one will eventually have to impress.

However, I see Goffman’s acknowledgement of “backstage” behavior as a hint that a more complex metaphor might be necessary. It seems clear that sometimes we value and want to identify with the interests, relationships and codes of conduct that we consider to be at odds with the social mainstream in a given context. Our resulting performance is defined by the nature and intensity of its opposition to the performance seemingly designated for us by the situation – in other words, the line between the performance and backstage areas becomes blurry. The two are complementary, symbiotic (i.e. they derive their meaning from each other), and in dialogue with each other. Furthermore, often our performance is neither fully aligned nor fully at odds with the values tacitly endorsed within a situation definition, but is located somewhere “in the dialogue” between the two. And the same goes for the
ideological positions of different members of our audience. Intentional and unintentional ruptures of the "smooth on-stage performance" take place that belie the definitional instability of a region. Sometimes we perform conformity while giving winks and nods to resistance (or vice versa); sometimes we might not fully know which we're performing. Frequently, there are multiple purposes and audiences for the same performance, each at different proximities to the most obvious socially approved stance. It's this nuanced environment for social behavior that makes real-life decision making so complex.

Goffman's concept of *underlife* (behavior that "places a barrier between the individual and the social unit in which he is supposed to be participating") in his next book, *Asylums*, addresses this notion to some extent:

> Whenever we look at a social establishment . . . we find that participants decline in some way to accept the official view of what they should be putting into and getting out of the organization, and behind this, of what sort of self and world they are to accept for themselves. . . . Whenever worlds are laid on, underlives develop. (304)

> We should expect some secondary adjustments to be empty of intrinsic gain and to function solely to express unauthorized distance – a self-preserving "rejection of one's rejectors" (315)

> Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. (320).

Goffman's examples of underlife include snide or ironic remarks out of earshot of authority figures but within earshot of peers and small "escape worlds" within a larger environment where unauthorized behavior is unnoticed or permitted (316, 309). Interestingly, Goffman describes environments (mental hospitals and prisons) in which a certain level of underlife behavior is noticed but tolerated by authority figures – a small concession that doesn't in any way endanger the established power relationship between them.

I'll give an example from an educational context. In *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, Peter McLaren examines the behavior a cohort of students in a small Catholic
school. He pays special attention to the transition between their "student" state – the set of compliant behaviors they exhibit in the classroom – and their "streetcorner state" – the social behaviors they exhibit before and after school and during recess. The "ritual" in McLaren's book is the precise schedule of study periods and breaks in a school day that sets the pattern of the children's mostly unconscious alternation between these roles (99). In the streetcorner state, the girls and boys engage in exaggerated emotional displays, physical play and working-class conversations in order to establish rapport with their fellow neighborhood children; in the student state, the girls and boys visibly perform their roles as fellow students, suppressing their emotional displays and following prescribed Catholic school behavior (90-1). McLaren discusses other "states" these young people enter at home and elsewhere, but these two are the most remarkable because, even though the difference between them is drastic, students slip back and forth between them with speed and precision. Even in drinking-fountain breaks of two or three minutes, the "streetcorner state" comes out in full force.

Up to this point, McLaren's description is confined to two (and only two) obvious regions for performance. But then he notes that teachers at this school designate parts of the school day as more casual, entertaining and student-centered. They do so by visibly adjusting their interactions to encourage students to drop their "student personae" (118). Some types of teaching and learning are more likely to succeed, the teachers have found, in an environment that resists the usual order. Of course, these "liminal lessons" still take place within a classroom, and the teachers continue to recognize the importance of maintaining distance between their students and themselves. These lessons pose no real threat to the classroom hierarchy, and their seeming concessions ultimately serve the teacher's ends. Still, there's clearly some dialogue between the student and streetcorner states in these settings; the students are genuinely more spontaneous and more
“themselves” (118-19). This seems slightly different from Goffman’s underlife in that the behavior is not only tolerated but also encouraged, as though underlife has over time been built into the system\textsuperscript{12}. Still, real consequences result from miscalculating the timing and intensity of one’s performance of compliance or resistance in a given setting. From the teachers’ perspective, the frequency of purely “streetcorner” performances at the wrong time and place (even in a more permissive classroom) separates the bad students from the good. Conversely, too much well-mannered or eager behavior in the classroom can cause a boy or girl to be described on the streetcorner as a “browner” (i.e. a brownnoser) or a “fairy” (88). Students must decide which consequences they’re willing to live with. McLaren notes that some students seem to be savvier in this regard than others are.

As McLaren’s study shows us, students have to take multiple stances both within the gaze of their authority figures and elsewhere – a complex overall performance of self to maintain and perform. Their role shifts are so nuanced that they’d only be able to manage them if they were socialized to their ritual and the shifts were largely unconscious – and yet ruptures in conformity and resistance still take place. I’ve discussed this example at length because, while it exemplifies Goffman’s idea of deftly switching between acceptable social roles in different settings, it also exposes some of the “social tensions” to which Ivanič refers – tensions between the subject positions one is “pressured” to take and those one is “willing” to take. It makes a case for the centrality of resistance (or various levels of resistant stances) in the theory of identity negotiations I’ll describe in the next section. And it accurately demonstrates the need to consider compliance and resistance in an analysis of

\textsuperscript{12} Here my mind keeps making an analogy to how rock and roll was gradually incorporated into the mainstream – still seen as “rebellious” in some ways but not as brazenly countercultural as it was in the 1950s. Now we might call it a form “sanctioned rebellion,” a term I’ll use elsewhere. Punk, metal, rap, etc. became new sites of “unsanctioned” rebellion until they, too, found a place within the mainstream, and so on.
educational environments, as well as how that balance can be manipulated both for and against pedagogical purposes.

**Identity is constructed over time through stances toward role expectations.**

In this study of student self-assessment essays, the term *performance* refers to student writers’ attempts to align themselves through writing with particular stances and the ways of thinking associated with those stances, and to reject others, often (but not always) in order to be favorably evaluated by the teacher who reads their work. In academic writing, students create a discoursal self to fit the rhetorical situation – which is in turn a selective presentation of the “academic self” they've developed while negotiating the various role expectations they've encountered throughout their academic careers. In many cases, performance also represents the writer’s genuine attempt at mapping out his or her discoursal identity (which, incidentally, might be a good way of defining *self-assessment*). As I state in the introduction, a “sense of competence” could be more difficult to reach in self-assessment essays than in many other academic genres – the roles student to which the student writer is expected to respond are multiple and mostly unarticulated. And due to the novelty of the genre for most students, rhetorical models provide limited guidance. For these reasons, I’ll argue for the self-assessment essay as an important place for students (and us teachers) to interrogate the notion of self-expression in an academic setting.

**Identity-based stances (toward a theoretical framework).** To frame the intellectual task of student self-assessment, I’ve chosen to use a variation of Robert Brooke’s Identity Negotiations Theory (INT), described in Chapter 2 of *Writing and Sense of Self*. This theory is Brooke’s attempt to reconcile multiple theories of identity formation in anthropology, social psychology and cultural theory; he suggests that “the differences between [these] views are
largely those of emphasis" (16) and that a theory that establishes a dialogue between the individual and the social could successfully incorporate many aspects of these theories. INT "highlights the development of the self within a complex arena of competing social forces."

Brooke describes how individuals attempt to affiliate themselves with some social groups and set themselves apart from others. How people choose to appear and behave and what they reveal about themselves are controlled by their ego identity (Goffman's term from *Stigma*), or their "alignment . . . toward the groups that surround them" (13-4). At its core, INT suggests that "individual identity (at any point in time) is best seen as a dynamic construct which comes into being through mitigation or compromise with the social definitions of self surrounding the individual" (12, emphasis mine). Brooke claims that a "sense of self" arises from a person's "patterns of affiliation and rejection" with "the many groups which provide these definitions" (12, 14). For example, Brooke describes how complementary teacher and student roles ("teacher as evaluator, student as performer"; teacher as "diagnostician," student as "developing adolescent," etc.) are embedded into school narratives and that progress and development are discussed in terms of the socially established relationship between these roles (39-42). Both students and teachers take stances toward these roles throughout their careers (To what extent does a teacher embrace her role as an evaluator? etc.). Every teacher and student is at a different place in their stance taking when they come into contact with each other, which is why their interaction throughout a course can be difficult to predict. Their changing stances toward their roles shape the story of their semester-long relationship.

The complexity of social situations is a factor in identity negotiations: in any given setting, we might perform in a way that effectively aligns us with one segment of the audience but distances us from another. Brooke's discussion of underlife (Goffman's concept) in the classroom is one such example: sometimes student writers engage in
classroom behavior that seems disruptive to the instructor but is also an attempt to maintain their own creative identities and perhaps to strengthen relationships among their classroom peers (25). These goals conflict to some extent, so there's no way for a student to satisfy all of them at once, but they still make an attempt.

Brooke's book primarily discusses the conflict between the "student role" and the "writer role," each of which is nurtured in the writing classroom. "Each writing classroom will, by its activities, establish a certain role for being a writer, a certain kind of behavior that is evaluated in that classroom as writerly behavior" (18). A student's response to that role determines whether she is seen as a good student, a bad student or someone in between. But "in many contemporary classrooms the roles for students and writers stand in opposition to each other" (25). A teacher might see his role as encouraging writerly habits - self-motivation and personal engagement - but the student, who has been socialized to traditional teacher-student roles, might see a classroom writerly role as passive. This latter view is often reinforced whenever a grading event draws near (research tells us that teachers' enforced values in grading are often different from what they say they are in their teaching). Brooke concludes, "Any one person's experience of schooling will thus be a result of the particular way she navigates her way through these conflicting expectations" (21). As an example, Brooke references Labov's Language in the Inner City, which describes a classroom populated by gang members in which "no way of behaving that can please all the role expectations." Similar to the observations of McLaren's study, obedience to the teacher "would assign a boy a 'good student' role for school officials, but would also assign him a 'lame' role for other gang members" (19).

Similar to how educational theorists (referenced later in this chapter) suggest that the primary function of education is not to teach content but to socialize students into "acceptable" patterns of behavior, Brooke argues for the centrality of role negotiation in a
student's development: "Learning is influenced more by the roles offered in school than by any particular content or material being taught, because it is in negotiating a response to these roles that individuals work out their future stances towards knowledge, towards authority and towards academic learning" (11). Role negotiation also determines the student's receptiveness to the course content:

Ideas, knowledge and skills become important not for their own sake alone, but because they enable people to improve social relationships they care about. Learning seems less important when it is linked to roles an individual rejects or merely complies with. Similarly, learning to write becomes important when it stems from writers' roles which enhance an individual's self. (27)

In other words, this process doesn't just set the mood for a student's learning experience; to a large extent, it is the learning experience. But studying or assessing it as such is complicated because for most students there is no single outcome, no signpost of progress, even within a short time frame. "Contexts overlap," Brooke states; "they are hard to keep separate" (19). A student rarely needs or wants to fully accept affiliation with one group and fully reject affiliation with another.13

This theory would seem to support Ivanič's description of the discoursal self as ever evolving and environmentally contingent. The discoursal self crystallized within a particular essay (self-assessment or not) will differ from one produced later in a semester or later in an educational career because the roles being negotiated, and the stances the student is taking toward them, have changed. The tension between Ivanič's autobiographical and discoursal selves seem to be mirrored in Brooke's theory as well: while he remains neutral on whether a true self exists at one's core, he acknowledges that we each have an "internally

13 I would add that many available roles might not be attached to a well-defined or stable "group," at least in academic settings. For the purposes of this study, then, I'll depart from Brooke's frequent use of the term group and focus more on the roles and stances themselves, as well as students' attempts to attach themselves to or distance themselves from certain roles and stances on a case-by-case basis.
felt sense of self.” For him, tensions between the self as internally felt and the self as externally perceived are the core problem of identity formation. "Whether or not there exists something inviolate in the core of the self,” Brooke states, "the self as experienced – as it comes to expression, value and meaning – is a function of cultural interaction" (12, 15).

As Brooke points out, the social tensions underlying the classroom situation complicate the way we perform within it. He argues that “classroom practices which promote an understanding of self as writer are likely to ‘teach’ writing more effectively than practices which focus only on expanding writing process or on internalizing formal rules” (5). Traditional classrooms “limit learning by restricting students’ identity negotiations to a narrow range of roles” (53). Brooke expands on these claims throughout *Writing and Sense of Self* to promote workshop-based courses where students can reflect on their own writerly identities.

**Complicating compliance and resistance.** Brooke outlines four possible stances we might take toward one of our perceived roles: embracing it, rejecting it, complying with it under duress and “swing[ing] between these positions as time passes” (22). If we consider the traditional binaries between student and teacher I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter (the teacher teaches while the student learns, etc.) to be the roles toward which we take our stances in the classroom, the number of possible options seems fairly manageable. But as I mentioned then, these roles are contingent and are constantly resisted to various degrees, making the negotiation of teacher and student roles a nuanced process.

**Instructor stances.** First, let’s consider the teacher’s stance toward his or her role. As I pointed out at the beginning of the chapter, a “teacher role” comprises a number of smaller roles, each of which we might choose to embrace, reject, etc. as our contexts and needs shift, making the overall performance of our teacher role dynamic and nearly impossible to
capture. Yet although we recognize the stable "teacher role" as a fiction, it serves a meaningful function— we teachers make the critical decisions of our courses based on the idea that there are culturally defined expectations for us. In other words, as anomalous and contingent as this role is, we still take stances toward it. At times, we directly assert our teacherly authority: we establish ourselves as indisputable authority figures in the classroom in order to enforce standards and ensure that the business of the classroom gets done. More often, we indirectly or passively assert our authority: we don't refer to it explicitly, but we use "I-centered" language in our syllabi or assert classroom rules as facts ("You need to do X in order to learn Y"). Even in these relatively complicit stances toward a traditional teacher-as-authority role, we can see elements of resistance starting to creep in largely because some of our smaller role expectations conflict with the larger one. Specifically, our role as a model or framer of learning compels us to explain why students need to follow the rules, rather than just to say, "Shut up and obey." And of course, there are more resistant stances toward a traditional teacher role: visibly reluctant acceptance of our authority; championing of an alternate identity to the passive student (such as Brooke's "writerly identity" or perhaps a more independent thinker than many classrooms seem to encourage); or even direct encouragements to rebellion against the usual classroom roles.

In any given classroom setting, and even in any single assignment sequence, an instructor moves along this continuum. A self-assessment essay assignment seems at times to be an encouragement to rebellion against the classroom definition, or at least to a temporary disruption of it. The teacher might define her role as "asking students to take more responsibility for their writing," or even "changing the power dynamics of grading," as Schendel and O'Neill put it (200). Yet when it's time to feed the self-assessment into the course grade, the teacher is compelled to adopt the role of a more traditional authority figure. In short, there's no way to pin down an "overall stance" that a teacher takes when
she assigns and implements a self-assessment essay, but the smaller stances within the process are important to recognize. As Brooke argues, they’re the true substance of the process.

**Student stances.** Already, judging from this short breakdown, an examination of identity-based stances in an environment of student self-assessment promises to be complex. But instructor stances, complex as they might be, aren’t even my main focus. The true object of this study is the negotiation of roles undertaken by the students and how this negotiation is mapped out in their self-assessment essays. Because their instructors have opened up new fronts for compliance and resistance, the stances students take are arguably even more complex. They could comply with or resist their traditional student roles, as they perceive them, but they could also *comply with or resist their teachers’ encouragements to resistance.* Or, depending on which role they see themselves playing at a given moment, they could try to do both.

We don’t have an example of “resisting resistance” in the research on self-assessment prior to this study, but I’ll point to something comparable: Cathy Spidell and William Thelin’s study of student perceptions of negotiated grading contracts. Since contracts were mandatory in the course Spidell and Thelin studied, many students saw them as yet another example of a teacher using her role as authority figure to compel them to do something they found unhelpful in their learning process, rather than as “liberatory” pedagogy. Though contract grading is usually framed within relatively traditional terms (the grade level descriptions in a contract often read like those in a rubric), students saw a point-based system as “more objective” and more reflective of their effort (40, 41). Many of the students saw the responsibility for their grade as an added layer of difficulty they would’ve preferred not to accept. Spidell and Thelin argue that the negotiatory contract system they studied truly did “alter the locus of power” by encouraging students to abandon
their roles as "passive recipients of present learning objectives and arbitrary standards" (43), and they (Spidell and Thelin) appear frustrated at student claims that they had given up clarity and control. "We feel, ultimately, that habituation to a non-liberatory system of grading – unilaterally established points – summoned the habits of resistance," they state. They see students' reactions as "an example of experimental hegemonic conditioning, wherein their first impulse is to seek instructional directives and to placate their teacher" (43).

It's true that teacher can't change the classroom power dynamic unilaterally; the students must also be willing to participate. And students can't help but consider the grading context surrounding the classroom, which remains unchanged. Whether or not these students' worries were well founded, and whether or not they should've made more good-faith efforts to recognize the purpose of the grading contracts, the end result was what it was: a source of frustration, anxiety and mistrust for them and their teacher. Ira Shor discusses a type of "sabotage" that happens in a classroom like this as a result of "resistance to empowerment" (Spidell and Thelin's phrasing, 42). "They expect me to install unilateral authority," Shor writes in When Students Have Power; "in some ways, they prefer or want it, more than just expect it." Shor outlines some of the reasons his students resist a shift in authority. His students

- don't want to share authority . . .
- don't like the negotiating process . . .
- don't know how to use authority or negotiate the curriculum . . .
- don't understand the explanatory discourse [he uses] to introduce power-sharing . . .
- don't trust [his] sincerity or the negotiation process even if it appeals to them . . .
- are reluctant to take public risks by speaking up in an unfamiliar process, because they are shy, or lack confidence . . . or feel at risk because they are female or minority and prefer not to draw attention to themselves in a masculinist or white environment (19)
As Shor points out, "critical inquiry and power-sharing have virtually no profile in student experience." As a result, he often feels compelled to use his "institutional authority to ease into a process of shared power" (19). This introduces an element of irony: his students might see his attempt to "empower" them as just another example of a teacher using his authority to make them do something.

However, in an online posting, Jeff Rice introduces another possibility: "Unwillingness to do something may be attributed to a number of factors. There may be resistance involved, but I wonder if the unwillingness, boredom, apathy, lack of interest and so on that so many of us observe while teaching is merely a condition of schooling, being a student, or simply, being human," rather than a result of unfamiliarity with a teaching method. "Maybe pedagogy . . . cannot always account for lack of desire," he adds. Sometimes our students are simply not motivated, and it might not be their teacher's fault. Opting for an easy way out might simply be "studenticity," Rice's term for "that image repertoire of items that make of the identity of a generic sense of being a student: late work, making friends, hanging out, putting off work, doing what is easiest, getting by" (my emphasis). Most of us teachers seem to understand that education occupies a small portion of young people's lives and that their student identity might not have an overriding influence on their sense of self, even when they're in the classroom.

So at the very least, there are three basic categories of stances students can have in response to their teacher's stances: students can be resistant, apathetic/compliant or (hopefully) genuinely engaged or "bought-in." How we read a student's stance depends on our perspective. For example if the teacher makes a point of taking a visibly resistant stance toward what she has established in the classroom as a "traditional" teacher role, student resistance toward that stance might actually be compliance with a traditional student-as-subordinate role. Similarly, a student might simply comply with a teacher's resistant stance
out of a sense of duty – as a result, though the teacher might see them as resisting the status quo “together,” the student still feels as though he’s “giving the teacher what she wants.”

Please see Chapter 3, Figure 3.2 and the description following for a breakdown of these teacher/student stances and how they intersect. This mapping of stances will guide how I examine the views, conversations and texts surrounding student self-assessment. Again, I’m arguing that analyzing teacher and student performances requires us to break down their roles (and their stances toward these roles) into small units and to accept that these stances will overlap and conflict with each other. But this analysis is necessary to help us understand why teachers and students give “overall” performances in the ways that they do, as well as why a student self-assessment essay is a complicated snapshot of a student’s performance.

The power imbalance of the classroom limits the possibilities of identity negotiation yet still allows room for resistance.

To this point, I’ve talked about the performance of self and the stances that students and teachers take toward the roles they are expected to perform. Now, I’d like to focus on the “traditional” teacher/student binary, and how those roles been socially constructed and indirectly communicated to students and teachers. The vague student-as-subordinate role is the “character” against which many students measure their own performances, though, as I’ve established, they might not gauge their level of success on how well they conform to this character.

In Tinkering Toward Utopia, David Tyack and Larry Cuban discuss the “grammar of schooling”: the ways subjects and levels of learning are divided, the mechanism of grading, the ritual of time and space in the day-to-day schedule (which McLaren describes), and so on. This grammar of schooling has “remained remarkably stable over the decades,” and the
reproductive nature of the system has largely confounded attempts at fundamental reform (85). "Most Americans have been to school and know what a 'real school' is like," Tyack and Cuban state. "Congruence with that cultural template has helped maintain the legitimacy of the institution in the eyes of the public" (9). Certainly, unwritten definitions of student and teacher identity and behavior seem to be part of this grammar of schooling. For example, Freire and other practitioners of critical pedagogy have established the notion of the "banking model" of education, the traditional view in which students are seen as empty vessels awaiting deposits of knowledge from their instructor. The dehumanization of the student – the implication that he brings nothing of note to the classroom and contributes nothing to the knowledge-building process – is the most offensive implication of the "banking" metaphor but at the same time is one of the most persistent underlying assumptions in curricular design, assessment and teacher training.

But what causes such models of education to persist? Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron argue that educational systems are essentially articulations of the dominant ideology in a society; they function in a symbiotic relationship with that ideology, each of them supporting and perpetuating the other. As Xin Liu Gale explains in her discussion of Bourdieu and Passeron, "the teacher is 'infallible' as long as he or she serves the traditional institution. And the academic institution, as long as it keeps its allegiance to the dominant classes by transmitting their style, is able to perpetuate itself and, in turn, designate its authority to the teacher." (10). Bourdieu and Passeron define pedagogic authority as an "arbitrary power," a form of "symbolic violence which manifests itself in the form of a right to impose legitimately" and at the same time conceals the dominant ideology from which it derives its power (13). It's the invisibility of the ideology that allows it to perpetuate itself largely beyond the boundaries of critique – an observation also made by
scholars in whiteness and American Studies – while also making those under its control more visible, measurable and subject to surveillance.14

It makes sense, then, that in the classroom “the teacher teaches the relation to language and culture that belongs to the dominant classes rather than language and culture per se, thus rendering service to the dominant classes and groups from which the traditional institution derives its authority,” as Gale claims (10). Bourdieu and Passeron spend considerable time focusing on the function of academic or “magisterial” discourse in this hegemonic process. “Unlike the distances inscribed in space [such as the physical positioning of students and teachers in a typical classroom] or guaranteed by regulation, the distance words create seems to owe nothing to the institution” (110). Yet because of its distance from student language, magisterial discourse imposes pedagogic authority on its content and distances students from teachers, casting them into a role of “unworthiness”:

Students are less likely to interrupt the professorial monologue when they do not understand it, because status resignation to approximate understanding is both the product and the condition of their adaptation to the university system: since they are supposed to understand, since they must have understood, they cannot accede to the idea that they have a right to understand and must therefore be content to lower their standards of understanding” (112).

The classroom, then, becomes the site of a rhetorical game – students fail to fully understand, yet they perform a version of understanding. They approximate the accepted discourse using “passwords or sacramental phrases . . . the poor man’s relativism,” and so on. Bourdieu and Passeron label this “the rhetoric of despair” (114).

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14 See Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, 170-7, as well as Sharon Crowley’s discussion of Foucault in the context of composition assessment (*Composition in the University* 69). Crowley focuses in particular on how the ideology underlying standards is invisible; this leaves individuals subject to the consequences of examinations while the underlying assumptions of the examinations avoid questioning.
**Authorized rebellion.** However, my experience impels me to push back against this idea. It seems fairly simple to understand how students, especially those with parents who have spent considerable time in educational systems, might be socially conditioned to this “game of fictitious communication” (Bourdieu 110). But as we’ve discussed, the educational environment is not so oppressive that students are irrevocably locked into predetermined stances. For example, David Bartholomae’s well-known article “Inventing the University” suggests that a “student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably at one with his audience . . . Or he must dare to speak it to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (607). He gives a helpful list of elements of this “specialized discourse”: conventional rituals and gestures, commonplaces, jargon, “textbook-like conclusions” or “perorations” (606), performance of a voice of authority, academic ways of connecting and synthesizing material, etc. Ivanič echoes much of this in her description of the *self as author* (i.e. the self a writer performs in order to establish his credibility/authority in an academic setting). *But* Ivanič also argues that Bartholomae fails to acknowledge the contestability of the specialized discourse – he “does not explore the possibility of students bringing alternative discourses to the academy that eventually have an effect on its conventions” (86). Also, higher education claims as one of its primary outcomes the development of “independent learners” and “critical thinkers” who create knowledge (a higher-order ability in Bloom’s Taxonomy) – all actions that run counter to Bourdieu and Passeron’s definition of the student role. Gale points out that “schools often exist in a contradictory relation to the dominant society, alternately supporting and challenging its basic assumptions” (a paraphrase of Aronowitz and Giroux). Teachers are “cultural agents to preserve the dominant culture” but are also often visibly opposed to this role (37). In other words, although we might regard terms like “critical
thinking" with cynicism (and rightly so), there's some room within a school setting for teachers and students not necessarily to fundamentally change the hierarchy of roles but at least to exercise symbolic resistance, and that opportunity is at least nominally supported within the language of the institution. As mentioned earlier, teachers' efforts to get students to see themselves as "writers first and students second," are part of this effort; they "change their pedagogy" to make room for this role – room that students couldn't make for themselves. (Brooke "Underlife" 229, 238).

Rebecca Moore Howard speaks of this opportunity in relation to student self-assessments. While she acknowledges that they, too, could simply function as reproductions of a socially overdetermined student role, she adds the following:

Each [system] has its lacunae, its interstices, its contradictory forces . . . It may be possible, therefore, to design student self-assessment to fit into spaces in the educational establishment in which the hegemonic forces of which Bourdieu and Passeron speak – forces that few theorists would categorically deny – subside. In those spaces, the subject, the student, may be able to exert agency in self-definition, especially if the self is being defined dialogically, in a local context . . . (41)

I'll discuss Howard's possibility of a "dialogic" self-assessment in more detail later in this dissertation, but here I wanted to mention her focus on the local nature of classroom assessment – its ability to step away from institutional ideas such as "B writer" and toward a more personal articulation of challenges and successes in the composition of a course's written essays – i.e. the opportunity for reflection (41). This seems to be a key tenet of critical pedagogy: that the local counters the hegemonic.

Unauthorized rebellion. Of course, students might choose to take such opportunities on their own, without encouragement from their teachers. The fact that these acts of rebellion are discouraged by our reward system means that they need to appear in more subtle forms. See, for example, Brooke's discussion of contained underlife, which "work[s] around
the institution to assert the actor’s difference from the assigned role” (rather than disrupting the institution as Freire intended to do) (“Underlife” 231). Also, in “The Arts of Complicity: Pragmatism and the Culture of Schooling,” Richard E. Miller uses the work of James Scott to distinguish between “public transcripts” and “hidden transcripts” within the culture of schooling. A public transcript appears in “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,” while a hidden transcript “describes the discourse ‘that takes place . . . beyond direct observation by powerholders’” (quoting Scott, 661). Miller uses this distinction to show how analyses of power often fail to consider hidden transcripts and therefore “ceaselessly [produce] evidence that the disempowered willingly and thoughtlessly participate in the system that ensures their own subordination” (661). Miller argues that no student work should be taken for granted as an authentic reinscription of powerless student identity – much if not all of it contains elements of the hidden transcript.

Student self-assessments are interesting pieces of writing within this framework because it’s not always clear whether they’re meant to be “public” or “hidden.” They’re characterized as “essays,” and as such are probably expected to conform to cultural expectations for essay writing (which includes performing one’s student role). But if the teacher establishes self-assessment as a subversive activity and establishes himself as also rebelling against “powerholders,” he might momentarily be able to “sell” a self-assessment essay as a hidden transcript (after all, in most cases only the teacher will read it). In these situations, might the student see herself as a “partner in crime”? Depending on the student, a self-assessment essay (or at least parts of it) might include open challenges to institutional authority, seemingly at the instructor’s behest. But because “[t]he classroom can tolerate all manner of nonconformity, but every classroom has its limit” (Miller 667), a student might choose to test the limits of the hidden transcript. Some student work contains an open questioning of teacher authority or competence, for example, or a stated lack of faith in the
goals of a classroom or an academic program. Or, as suggested earlier, they might see the teacher's efforts to challenge institutional authority as yet another iteration of the teacher-as-authority and take a stance in opposition. Given that a student knows the risks of such outward dissent, we could read these moments as purposeful rhetorical gambits. How will the teacher respond? How will this renegotiate authority in the classroom? And why make such statements when only the instructor/assessor is reading? These students are experimenting to find out the answers to these questions.

I should reiterate that my research examines students' and teachers' responses to their perceived roles, and that roles can be misperceived. I've raised the possibility that a student could rebel against a student self-assessment (which his teacher could have designed with the best of intentions) because he thinks it represents an incursion by the institution into his student identity and, in the act of rebellion, turn and fall right into the powerless student role that Bourdieu and Passeron describe – simply switching out one dominant ideology for another. Is this a "misperformance"? Or might I label it as such because of my tendency to speak from the teacher's perspective?

We can conclude that, although we have some insight into how the teacher/student binary is constructed and communicated, we can't definitively say what it is. It's defined and redefined locally and not often explicitly. So, while this study asks, What is the proximity of the student's "discoursal self" to the self suggested by the classroom context? it must conduct a fairly detailed examination into the courses in which these students are writing to discover the faint tracings of the latter. In both cases, I believe, the expected student performance fits neither Bourdieu's description nor Shor's. And from the students' perspective, these expectations might never be part of their conscious thought process – but we still see it negotiated in their self-assessments.
CHAPTER 4

STUDY FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

Defining the scope of this study

To phrase it as simply as I can, this is a study of how students responded to the task of self-assessment as negotiated in their classrooms by themselves and their instructor. The research project underlying this dissertation examined two Spring 2009 college-level composition classrooms in which self-assessment essays were assigned. I also conducted a pilot study, which I'll allude to from time to time, with a different classroom in Fall 2008.

In the conclusion to *Self-Assessment and Development in Writing*, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Jane Bowman Smith list a number of definitions for the term *self-assessment*, which range from mental processes to written products. This study is directed toward their fourth definition: a set of "heuristics that help students to establish a habit of critical inquiry that is active rather than passive, to integrate the learning into what is already known, and to project what more can or should be learned" (170-71). These heuristics are typically delivered in three ways: via classroom discussion, via self-assessment project handouts and, to a lesser extent, via feedback on self-assessment-related activities. I restrict my collection and analysis to these *tangible* (written and spoken) artifacts of self-assessment; I don't attempt to describe the workings of students' minds as they self-assess (à la Flower and Hayes) or the impact of self-assessment pedagogy on the process of composing other classroom writing. Definitive claims regarding the *effectiveness* of self-assessment are also beyond the scope of this study.
As described elsewhere, I'm most interested in the stances that students take toward the task of self-assessment and toward the project of articulating a discoursal self (Ivanič's term, see pages 39-40) – activities framed by their teacher and educational institution. While the research design of this study is broadly intended to capture the expectations for self-assessment as well as students' responses to those expectations, my analysis narrows those findings to patterns of identity/role/authority conflicts evident in the writing that comprises self-assessment projects. One might call this primarily a study of articulated and negotiated classroom relationships and power dynamics, rather than a study of writing or development (although the literature review in Chapter 2 alluded to these topics). Its implications and recommendations are framed within the network of competing expectations and demands associated with college-level writing courses.

My overarching research questions are stated in Chapter 1 (see page 15), but there are others connected to my specific data sources:

- How are departmental, institutional and professional expectations for student self-hood (explicit or implicit) encoded in the handouts, classroom discussions and other materials the instructors use to frame self-assessments?
- In written student self-assessments, where can we see evidence of a struggle among student stances toward the roles they play in the self-assessment process? What happens in the transitions among these stances?
- How do personal orientations toward self-assessment and toward the academic enterprise as a whole (as revealed in interviews) influence the way teachers and students negotiate the task of self-assessment?

**Setting.** This study took place within English 401 (First-Year Composition) courses within the undergraduate composition program at the University of New Hampshire, a midsize
doctorate granting institution. This single-semester course is the only individual course universally required in the undergraduate curriculum (except in the case of students who "place out" with an Advanced Placement-English score of 3 or greater), and as such offers between 40 and 60 sections per academic semester. The composition program is located within the English department, the largest department on campus. While the department currently employs around 40 tenure-track faculty, the majority of composition instructors are teaching assistants, adjunct faculty and non-tenure-track lecturers, whose teaching philosophies contribute greatly to the culture of instruction and the implementation of the stated course expectations within the program.

The program's ties to the "process movement" in composition shouldn't be understated: portfolios, conferences and other process-oriented pedagogical devices are already deeply ingrained into the curriculum and culture of the English 401 course. Self-assessment, often in the form of portfolio cover essays, is widely practiced. Also, though a recent course revision reoriented English 401 primarily toward analytical and research-based argumentative writing, personal narrative writing remains an important element of most sections of the course. And though the program is standardized in some ways (a common syllabus and textbook for beginning teachers; a common attendance policy; expected genres of writing for each course and section), there are no enforced department-wide grading rubrics or grade distribution policies. Therefore, assessment practices among possible participants vary significantly. This study (particularly my instructor interviews) examines these background factors.

**Participants and recruitment.** As mentioned above, the core study of this dissertation is situated within two Spring 2009 classrooms. I chose to work with two different instructors because I hoped to show how different instructors rhetorically construct the task of self-
assessment, affecting the way role negotiation plays out throughout the process; each instructor brings a unique approach regardless of similarities across sections of the course. In an email to composition faculty prior to the semester, I introduced my study, describing its scope and goals, the level of commitment required from participants and the benefits for participating. I explained that I wanted to find participants who were interested in experimenting with their approaches to assessment and grading by incorporating self-assessment and, in particular, some element of student self-grading. I gave out more information, including consent forms, to instructors who expressed interest. Out of those who maintained contact, I chose two teachers with different positions within the institution: a graduate TA (with full responsibilities for the course) and a tenure-track faculty member. The two instructors had differing levels of experience with student self-assessment in their courses and different (though similar) attitudes toward grading.

I conducted initial interviews with these instructors prior to the beginning of the semester – more details on these in a few pages. During the first week of the semester, I visited the courses to recruit student volunteers. I described the study and handed out paper consent forms, which were returned to me by the end of the course. For the core study in Spring 2009, the response rate was identical: 20 out of 24 students from each section consented to my collection of their self-assessment essays. A smaller number consented to be interviewed. Due to this excellent response rate, I do consider these populations to be representative of English 401 classrooms at this institution. But I make no claims to representation of "first-year composition" in general or to coverage of racial and cultural issues associated with self-assessment. The low population of nonwhite and international students in these courses (typical for a UNH classroom) would make such claims suspect. And although men and women were equally represented in these classrooms, my research design admittedly does little to explore gender-related issues in
self-assessment. I intend to explore this issue more closely in follow-up studies, as I think previous research has demonstrated that socially acceptable forms of compliance and resistance often break across gender lines.

I focus most closely on four students from "Karen's classroom” whose essays were chosen by their instructor as notable (high/middle/low) essays, although I do take a number of examples and note general patterns from the overall pool, many of whom turned in their self-assessments and were mentioned by their instructor in interviews. I examine the self-assessment work in “Marina's classroom” extensively as well, but Karen's classroom was the section in which more students agreed to an interview, in which more self-assessments were assigned (which led to more instructor interviews), and in which every student turned in every assigned self-assessment. Marina's classroom, as I'll explain in the next chapter, ran behind schedule for most of the semester, meaning that there was less course writing for students to self-assess in their first/midterm self-assessment, and although the second/final self-assessments were more comprehensive, some students never turned them in. While I reviewed and analyzed the data from this course thoroughly, there was less of it to study, so it's given a briefer treatment in the next two chapters.

**Study orientation.** This study is best described as an *collective instrumental case study,* defined by John W. Cresswell as a study of more than one case that is “used instrumentally to illustrate [an] issue” (62). Such a study draws on multiple sources of information, most notably interviews, observations and physical artifacts (in this case, as mentioned, instructor handouts and student self-assessments). These data are collected to enable a detailed description of each case. The interpretation of this data will consist of *within-case analyses* of each course narrative and specific student case narratives as well as a *cross-case analysis* that analyzes the common themes (this distinction in analyses is drawn from
There are more details on the organization and coding of results in the data analysis section later in this chapter. As with other case study research, “generalizability” is not a goal here (the main reason I’m studying two different classrooms is to demonstrate how a unique teacher’s orientation and approach to self-assessment impact the negotiation of this project); the richness of the data is considerably more important than the number of participants.

**Data collection: Spring 2009 core study**

**Figure 3.1: The courses in this study.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>&quot;Karen&quot; FT/TT assistant professor, English First year at UNH</th>
<th>&quot;Marina&quot; Teaching Assistant, English First year at UNH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment essays</td>
<td>Total of three essays (one after each major assignment)</td>
<td>Total of two essays (midterm and final)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students proposed an in-progress grade in all three essays and a course grade in the final essay</td>
<td>Students proposed a course grade in the final essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student participants</td>
<td>20 out of 24 students</td>
<td>20 out of 24 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amelia, Anna, Avery, Bella, Brody, Callie, Cameron, <strong>Cole (L)</strong>, <strong>Daniel (L)</strong>, Emma, Faith, Grace, <strong>Jacob (M)</strong>, Julia, Lily (H), <strong>Natalie (M)</strong>, Nathan, Owen, Sarah, <strong>Sydney (H)</strong></td>
<td>Alexis, Blake, Catherine, CJ, Claire, Drew, Eva, Jillian, Isobel (L), <strong>Joseph (M)</strong>, Max (H), Mia, Miles (L), Noah, Paige (H), Ruby, Scarlett, Seth, Sophie (H), Violet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H, M, L = instructors’ self-assessment rankings (high, middle, low)
Underlined names = interview participants
**Bold underlined names** = Ch. 6-7 extended case studies

The next two chapters provide a case study narrative for each of the Spring 2009 courses. These courses are based in part on plans for integrating self-assessment that the participant and I discussed prior to the semester, as indicated below; however, I had no involvement in
the design of the handouts or the course discussions that framed the activity. The bulk of my primary research was conducted during the semester, though interpretation and supporting secondary research obviously extends beyond this time frame. I'll outline my data sources in more detail below, but for the sake of reference, here's a comprehensive list:

- **Handouts.** I collected all self-assessment assignment sheets as well as other handouts (models, grading rubrics, etc.) distributed in the discussion of self-assessment in these two classrooms.

- **Field observations (classroom visits).** I observed the first three class sessions in each section in which self-assessment was being discussed and related in-class activities were taking place.

- **Recorded instructor interviews.** I conducted these prior to the semester and after each self-assessment. There were a total of four interviews with "Karen" and three with "Marina."

- **Recorded student interviews.** I conducted end-of-semester interviews with eight students: six from Karen's classroom and two from Marina's.

- **Self-assessment essays.** Karen assigned three self-assessments (one accompanying each major project) over the semester. Marina assigned two (midterm and final). Twenty students in each section consented to submit all of these essays. Out of this potential total of 100 essays, 94 were successfully collected by the instructor and passed on to me – 60 from Karen's classroom and 34 from Marina's.

As I've mentioned elsewhere, this is primarily a study of student-teacher negotiations of self-assessment with a focus on the self-assessment essays themselves. So I don't spend extensive time, say, analyzing instructor handouts as reflections of institutional or programmatic expectations (i.e. concerns with grade inflation and consistency, etc.) – though this would be a legitimate study in itself and I do touch on these topics throughout
this dissertation. These data are analyzed and described as part of the context or framing of student self-assessment; the student self-assessments are the data I analyze as “products.”

**Recorded initial instructor interview (before the beginning of the semester).** The goal of the initial interview was to determine each instructor’s attitude toward student self-assessment and ideas for implementing it. Rather than overdetermining the direction of the interview by focusing solely on the topics that concern this dissertation, I chose to ask broader contextual questions and select pertinent details in the analysis phase (see my discussion of data analysis and coding later in this chapter). Prior to this interview, I sent this list of questions to each participant:

1. In what ways do you exercise or maintain control in your course?
2. How do you use grades to accomplish your course goals?
3. How much evaluation do students need or want from an instructor, in your experience? At what stages do they need grading?
4. What are your grading/evaluation methods? Do you use rubrics or other guides? If so, when are they given out? What is not evaluated in your courses? What type of work is typically counted as credit/no-credit rather than given a letter grade?
5. How do institutional factors (concerns about grade inflation, etc.) affect your practice?
6. Have you worked with any form of self-assessment before? What have you done?
7. Generally speaking, how do you feel about your students’ abilities to assess their own work? Where do you see evidence that any of your students made successful independent judgments to improve their work from draft to draft,
from assignment to assignment, or across the span of the course [last semester]? Were any students noticeably unsuccessful at this?

8. Given that we're going to work on self-assessment this semester, what do you know you would like to do? What are some of your ideas for helping students to develop their skills of self-assessment? What would you like to see happen? What do you hope to get out of this study? What do you hope your students get out of it?

In our recorded interview, I asked each instructor to respond to these questions as we talked about possibilities for the semester. I asked follow-up questions as they arose. Before the interview, I suggested that instructors bring course projects and/or portfolio cover essays from the previous semester if doing so would help them answer the questions (such as #7) specifically.

Agenda setting for the project. Prior to the first interview, I supplied instructors with self-assessment assignments and handouts I had collected over the years, since neither of them had written detailed self-assessment prompts before. These handouts were simply for reference; the instructor made all decisions regarding which instruments for self-assessment, and which implementations of those instruments, best fit the existing structure of her course. Of course, the plans each instructor made addressed the changes she wished to see in her students' work, as outlined in the early-semester interview.

Additions to the course framework designed by the instructors ended up including short lectures and classroom discussions on values and expectations for academic writing; in-class grading of sample essays; in-class criteria mapping based on sample essays; peer and group response methods incorporating assessment language; and, of course, the assignment handouts for the self-assessment essays, which echoed the intellectual activity and terminology of the previous activities. In many ways, these additions follow the lead of
Asao B. Inoue ("Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy") who has created inductive models for student training in self- and group assessment based on sample "good writing" and student writing texts. Inoue in turn models much of his pedagogy on the concept of the "inductive rubric" introduced in Kathleen and James Strickland's "Demystifying Grading: Creating Student-Owned Evaluation Instruments" (Inoue 215ff; Strickland and Strickland 147ff). I'll discuss these strategies in more detail in Chapter 8.

Though each instructor decided on the method of implementation for self-assessment in her course, we did agree on the following details at the outset:

- Though the number of self-assessment activities could vary according to the instructor's preference, there would be, at a minimum, a midterm and final (end-of-semester) self-assessment essay assigned to each student. In other words, by the time we got to the final self-assessment, there would be at least one previous essay to compare it against. Self-assessment essays would be the only student-written projects I would collect for the study; other essays and homework projects would be collected as regular coursework by the instructor only.

- Though all students would turn in self-assessment essays as course assignments to be read by the instructor, any student could choose to decline participation in the study without penalty, as required under IRB and FERPA guidelines. The self-assessments would be collected in a Blackboard group space that was only accessible to the instructor and student; the instructor would add me to the group spaces of those who consented to join the study.

- As part of our agreement, each instructor would incorporate student self-grading, specifically, into the self-assessment process for the course. In other words, each student would be required at some point to propose and rationalize a course grade as a component of his/her self-assessment process. It was left to the instructor's
discretion how much weight to give these grades in the determination of the actual course grade, as well as whether to reveal how influential the students’ grades were in the overall scheme. We included this provision because, as Cathy Davidson noted in the study I described at the beginning of Chapter 3, the conversation around the specific topic of grading provides a “center” for in-class and one-on-one teacher/student conversations on assessment; it provides a way in to discussions of what different levels of evaluation symbolize, where criteria come from, and how subjectivity can factor in. In short, because of a grade’s symbolic weight (even if it had little or no actual weight in these instances), it can make the self-assessment conversation more concrete or “real.” And for the purposes of my research, the mere presence of the letter grade, weighted or not, changes the stakes of the course work substantially enough to produce an observable effect on the teacher-student dynamic. Some of the most interesting role negotiation evident in the students’ self-assessment essays took place in their arguments for particular grades.

**Handouts.** As mentioned above, I collected all handouts that described the midterm and final self-assessment projects specifically, as well as any others that defined the process of self-assessment, its value and its function in the course. Rather than collect these at particular junctures, I asked instructors to submit them to me by email throughout the semester as the students received them.

**Field observations (classroom visits).** In each course section I studied, there were a few days in which discussion and activities took place that defined the self-assessment projects. I was present for the first three of these class meetings in each section, which I felt provided a sufficient view into the way the instructor and students set the basic terms for class work
in self-assessment outside of the use of handouts. In my field notes, I focused on how the teacher framed the activity of self-assessment (as supplemental to the framing in handouts) as well as the self-assessment-related activities that day, such as model analysis. I also noted the language used while describing self-assessment and the classroom activities and the student-instructor exchanges that took place in the working out of these activities.

Hilgers et al. list topics for such classroom discussions, which include “a teacher’s description of an assignment and expectations” (which establish a baseline for discussing how these expectations vary across stakeholders); criteria generated in student-instructor conferences or peer-feedback groups; characterizations of “good writing” mentioned in discussion of readings and models; and so on (11). This series of discussions thus provided necessary context for a study of the self-assessment prompts and handouts; it filled in the gaps evident in these writings.

**Recorded instructor interviews (post-self-assessment).** I’m discussing follow-up interviews separately from the initial interview (page 70) because the purpose and subject matter of these interviews were different. I met with each the instructor following receipt of self-assessment drafts and asked them to update me on their perceptions of the class and their development in self-assessment. This discussion centered on the self-assessment drafts they (and I) had just read.

Second interview questions, emailed to the instructor in advance, included the following:

1. How satisfied are you with the self-assessment work you’ve received in this round of essays?
2. Please pick the top two self-assessments (from those who have consented to be part of the study). Please also pick the bottom two and two essays you would
consider middle/average. We'll talk about these essays in our interview and discuss the criteria you used to rank them.

3. Based on what you've received so far, is there anything you plan to add to the class discussion on self-assessment in preparation for self-assessment projects later in the semester?

In these interviews, I asked the instructor to answer these questions and to walk me through the chosen drafts. These students remained our focus for the remainder of the study – that is, the instructor didn't pick a new group of six students for each interview. Instead, our discussion focused on the changes these students made from one self-assessment to the next. This design gave me more material for “within-case” analyses of these students. Despite our focus on these six students, the instructors and I did talk briefly about some of the others and about the group as a whole. As I explain in more detail in Chapter 5, Marina's midterm self-assessment was brief and didn't yield enough variation, in her opinion, for her to differentiate much among essays, so she had less to say about her choices than Karen did.

Final interview questions\(^\text{15}\) included the following:

1. How satisfied are you with the final self-assessment essays you've received in this course?

2. Let's follow up on the six students whose work you picked for discussion in our midterm interview. What is your opinion of their final essays in comparison to the ones that came previously? Do they appear to have done similar work, improved, regressed, stagnated, etc.? In what ways?

\(^{15}\) This three-interview breakdown doesn't account for the additional (second-to-last) interview I conducted with Karen, who assigned one more self-assessment than Marina. The questions for this interview were the same as second interview questions #1 and #3 and final interview question #2.
3. Based on the results of this experiment, what do you think about the self-assessment process we worked out for this semester? In what ways did it change your course? Would you do it again? Would you change your approach at all if you did – and if so, how?

4. How has your role as an authority in the classroom and in assessment changed this semester? What do you think of the change? What aspects of it are positive, and which are negative? Which were unexpected?

End-of-semester student interviews. I contacted all students who consented to participate in the interview portion of the study (approximately a dozen from each classroom). From those, eight students – six from Karen's classroom and two from Marina's – scheduled an end-of-semester interview and followed through. Unfortunately, Marina's students completed their self-assessment at the end of finals week, meaning many students departed for the summer afterward, leaving fewer available for interviews. On the other hand, I was able to interview five out of the six high/middle/low case study students Karen and I discussed in our interviews (Lily was the exception).

The general interview questions were brief and few in number, but were meant to provoke long replies and multiple follow-up exchanges: What do you think about the self-assessment projects? What parts were easy or difficult for you? In what ways was your final essay different from the midterm – what was easier and what was more difficult? and so on. Most of the follow-up questions were essay specific – I asked each student about the topics and rhetorical moves in his or her self-assessments. There's more detail on these lines of questioning in the Chapter 6 and 7 case studies.
Self-assessment essays. The frequency and method of collecting these essays is described earlier in this chapter. In Marina's classroom, six self-assessment essays were never turned in to the instructor or me. Otherwise, all of the self-assessments were successfully collected and read by both myself and the instructor. These essays were not drafted, nor did they receive written feedback, so the electronic copies I received via Blackboard represented the whole of the self-assessment “product” at the heart of this study.

Fall 2008 pilot study

Though I was unable to secure a pilot study participant who was teaching a first-year writing course, I did conduct a study in a sophomore-level Persuasive Writing course at UNH to help me refine my data collection methods and research questions, using the same methods described above. The study was more compact in design, focusing only on a midterm self-assessment essay. I collected four of these student essays and the instructor's course handouts, conduct instructor interviews before and after the self-assessment and visited three class sessions. This study didn't include a final essay or student interviews. I did receive permission from the instructor and students to publish my findings, but because the scope of this study was much smaller, I allude to these findings only occasionally, and then always as a supplement to findings in the core Spring 2009 study.

Most of my research methods and interview questions remained intact following the pilot study. I did change my data collection methods – my pilot system for ensuring I received self-assessment drafts was less successful. But a more significant change was the addition of student interviews, which, as I anticipated, told me much more about student perceptions of self-assessment and their instructor's implementation of it. Finally, my pilot study readings of self-assessments, along with my previous experience assigning them,
suggested to me the categorical extension of Brooke’s Identity Negotiations Theory that I used for coding my data.

**Data analysis**

**Identity-based stances toward the task of self-assessment.** In this study, handouts, interviews, observations and self-assessment essays are analyzed together within a single interpretive framework. Because self-assessment essays have rarely been analyzed in published scholarship since the 1980s (and since self-grading in writing courses has never been studied, to my knowledge) no framework has been established for this analysis; therefore, my coding schema for these essays was emergent. However, my overarching categorization/coding framework draws from Brooke’s Identity Negotiations Theory (which in turn draws from Goffman’s interactionist theories), as mentioned above and in Chapter 3. This work establishes a basic premise underlying my analysis: that both students and teachers perform roles and identities (whether consciously or not) to negotiate perceived roles and their attached expectations within an educational environment. Brooke discusses how student and teacher identity is constructed through identity-based stances toward these roles, as described in Chapter 3. As I noted in that discussion, Brooke’s distinction between compliant and resistant stances is complicated in self-assessment because instructors and students must continually reposition themselves along a “continuum” between compliance and resistance as they focus on different classroom goals and objects for their compliance and resistance.

In my analysis, I locate direct and indirect performances of identity-based stances (see Figure 3.2 later in this chapter) in the written self-assessment data; I characterize the way they rhetorically construct these stances (i.e. perform their roles). I pay attention to shifts in the way an instructor or student performs his/her role relative to the other –
consciously or not – and I attempt to locate the contextual factors that have prompted these shifts. I note the ways a student explicitly characterizes his/her roles or those of the teacher, and vice versa, as well as how these roles are clarified or developed; I also judge to what extent teachers and students acknowledge and attempt to resolve the conflicts in different roles and expectations. Finally, I analyze how these rhetorical acts shape and constrain the actual content of students' self-assessment essays.

I consider these stances to be identity-based, to use Brooke's original terminology: instructors and students adopt them to suit the role expectation they are responding to at any given time. As mentioned in Chapter 1, students create an overarching narrative that allows space for different stances to coexist within a single self-assessment essay – but the mixture of deft and awkward transitions among stances indicates differing levels of consciousness in this rhetorical framing. At times, consequently, my analysis must map out the larger structure and transitional patterns in these essays.

As is typical in case study design16, I construct an overview of each course and instructor, and then move into closer descriptions of major classroom events related to self-assessment as well as patterns in self-assessment writing. I use categorical aggregation within and across cases and direct interpretation of individual cases to describe the rhetoric of a particular stance; I use pattern analysis to demonstrate how teacher and student stances respond to each other. Finally, I make naturalistic generalizations from the analyzed data to show what could be applied from these cases to the general practice of self-assessment.

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16 See Cresswell 153-54 for more information on the processes I describe in this paragraph.
Coding text. To aid in coding, I define "research units" along the same lines as Keith Grant-Davie's "episodic units," which are based on the categories in the researcher's coding system. Episodic units can range from very brief to lengthy, "lasting for as long as the subject continues to make the same kind of comment" – or in my case, continues to perform the same kind of stance (Grant-Davie 276). "Episodic units force researchers to treat division and classification as inseparable coding activities," Grant-Davie writes; "one unit ends and another begins when the reader shifts" from one category of data to another (276). Please see pages 80-81 for an example of this.

Based on Brooke's schema, my past experience with self-assessment essays and my findings in this study, I've constructed the following map of stances toward classroom roles along a "compliance-resistance continuum." I contend that instructors adopt the nine stances toward the teacher-as authority role in the left column at different points in the process of assigning, teaching and responding to self-assessments (and these are my coding categories – there are certainly gradations between them). In other words, they sometimes adopt a stance embodying and voicing the full authority granted them by their institution; at other times, they use language that resists or deflects that same authority. Most of the time, of course, their stance is somewhere in the middle.
To give you an idea of how I coded instructor stances in text, I’ve include a paragraph from Karen’s final self-assessment handout. The words in italics represent my notes; the underlined abbreviations correspond to the instructor stances on the chart above. The “|” markings represent my divisions between episodic units (these are not present in the original text).

*Praise: PR; also Gatekeeper; IA*

Congratulations! You are done with 2 out of 3 major paper assignments for
Polite/I-centered: IA
our class! | I’d like us to take another look at the paper we are handing in

PR/fellow learner
today. | This is the first semester I’m doing these self-assessments in class,

Polite/IA; also EA
and so I’d like to try a few new things this time. | Since I’d like you to work

“We“: PR trans. to “you“: IA.
closely with your drafts, | we’re going to start this in class today. | You will

finish this self-assessment for homework over the weekend, but you will

EA/IA as DA
hand in your folders today. | So, think ahead and make any notes you may

need while we are in class today.

My “within-case analyses” charted the transitions among these stances linearly to produce instructor narratives in Chapter 5. I paid close attention to “mixed” stances that attempted to accomplish multiple rhetorical goals at once: for example, the final sentence of the excerpt above uses an imperative verb (a direct assertion of authority) while concluding an explanation of why note taking is useful (a less authoritative explanation/ instructor-as-ally stance). I also noted patterns of sustained or repeated stances that indicated the instructor’s increased reliance on a particular stance when a chunk of her text was performing a specific function – for example, both instructors tended to assert their authority more directly in sections of their handouts that discussed grading. And I refer to these more general stances toward teacher-as-authority when discussing students’ responsive stances.

In my analysis, I contend that students adopt the six stances on the right of the map (and again, there are possible gradations between these). Note that the student stances are multi-dimensional: not only are they responding to their traditional student-as-subordinate role – the vertical axis – but they’re also responding to the instructor’s stances – the horizontal axis. The three columns indicate different groupings of responsive stances, as

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outlined in the preceding chapter: "bought-in" stances, apathetic stances and resistant stances. I'll define these stances in some detail:

- **The "obedient response":** This stance is signaled by concepts and phrasings in student responses that appear to agree with and/or mimic an instructor's appropriation of her teacher-as-authority role or institutional language that confers that role – see for example, "Cole's" second essay in Chapter 6, which seems to agree with Karen's views on peer review. Students might take this stance when they genuinely agree with (or have "bought in" to) the traditional teacher-student hierarchy and their duty to comply with their instructor. But – moving to the middle column – they could also use this language falsely (or perfunctorily) while performing a merely compliant role. There are a number of reasons why they might do this: to maintain social harmony, as Goffman phrases it; as a form of passive-aggressive resistance (cynically and transparently telling a teacher what he or she wants to hear); or simply as an act of "studenticity" or lack of caring, to use Rice's term. While it might be difficult to know the specific motive by looking at the writing, my student interviews reveal additional information to this end.

- **Authorized rebellion:** This stance is signaled by phrasings and concepts in student self-assessments that appear to counter institutional ideals but are championed by the instructor in his or her self-assessment discussions or handouts. For example, "Max's" comment "I played with my paper a lot" (from his final self-assessment) echoes of his instructor's arguments for a nontraditional writing process. Again, this stance could be "bought-in" (a stance that, Miller argues, could be its own form of "obedient response," 14-5) or it could be cynical or perfunctory.
- **Unauthorized rebellion**: A conservative unauthorized rebellion stance indicates a student's attempt to "pull back" from an instructor's stance of resistance toward the traditional teacher-student grading relationship in the assignment of self-assessment projects. Such a stance might include an unsolicited deferment to the instructor's judgment ("I prefer to let you decide"). It's a refusal to play the game of resistance, as described by Shor. A subversive unauthorized rebellion stance consists of rhetorical moves that venture beyond the limits sanctioned by the instructor - for instance, this might include an open questioning of the course for which a self-assessment essay is being written (or some aspect of it) or an admission of laziness/lack of interest. I classify much of Cole's first essay, described in Chapter 6, under this stance because of its open resistance to peer review. This could be seen as exploitation of the instructor's decentering of authority. Perhaps more accurately, it's often an attempt to maintain a resistant stance at a point in the self-assessment process when the instructor has drawn a compliance boundary. By either definition, these stances constitute a form of rebellion not against the terms of resistance established by the instructor.

As I do with the instructor data, I report on this data "within case" - that is, as selected case studies in Chapters 6 and 7. But I also report across cases - that is, by common themes and patterns in all of the essays - in those chapters.

I was particularly interested in noting the shifts that take place in close proximity to the self-grading portion of these self-assessments. Students might seem to shift into an "obedient response" stance when faced with the immediate prospect of a grade - but in these cases, it might be the case that other stances simply become more veiled, rather than disappear. At any rate, this mapping of stances will provide a more complex but realistic picture of the "meta-awareness," independent learning, increased motivation and
"internalized criteria" for good writing that are cited as advantages of self-assessment by its advocates.

**Non-written data as context and stance clarification.** The coding system I've just described applies primarily to the "core" written data in this study: the student self-assessment essays and the instructor handouts that set them up. I also coded these stances more roughly in the transcriptions from the student and instructor interviews and in direct quotes from the classroom observations. But the primary purpose of this non-written data is to contextualize the written data. Classroom observations helped me to understand more about how the instructor generally performed her role (i.e. the overall tone of the course), which I report on in Chapter 5. Instructor interviews helped me understand the motivations behind the stances they took at various points in the course. And student interviews provided me with much-needed background information for their self-assessment essays. Additionally, student interviews helped me distinguish between "bought-in" and "apathetic" stances in student essays, since these aren't often distinguishable in the writing alone. For example, my interview with Cole (see Chapter 6) helped me to determine that his seemingly changed attitude toward peer review wasn't entirely genuine, but was rather acquiescence toward his teacher's desires.

**Dividing the report.** Chapter 5 reviews the bulk of instructor data collected prior to the first self-assessment: initial instructor interviews, early handouts and the first class discussion of the activity. It's a picture of the instructor/student negotiation of the task prior to the appearance of a written product. The second half of each instructor's narrative describes (through instructor interviews, follow-up handouts and class discussions) instructor renegotiations of identity, authority and the self-assessment task in response to the self-assessments they receive. Chapters 6 and 7 capture student responses to the task of
self-assessment through the student self-assessments themselves and the end-of-semester student interviews, as well as instructor perceptions of individual students' writing. Both of these chapters contain within-case analysis (data organized and analyzed within a longitudinal course, instructor or student narrative) and cross-case analysis (data analyzed across the students and courses).

**Coding disclaimers**

"[D]ivision and classification are interpretive acts," Grant-Davie writes in his chapter on the coding of data in composition. "That is to say, they involve reader-researchers in the creation of meaning, rather than simply in the extraction and conveyance of meaning that already exists in the data" (273). Our coding systems reflect how we see the world, how we organize information, and how we have decided to negotiate the data after finding things we didn't anticipate. The scope of our data is already partially defined and partially encoded via the research questions we establish at the beginning of our work (274). We also must decide on "the plane of abstraction [upon which] to float the coding system" – that is, the largeness or smallness of each category, which depends more on our concerns for manageability than any intrinsic category size (278).

Grant-Davie also raises common concerns regarding the validity of coding categories – What happens when a piece of data overlaps two or more categories, or when it almost fits a particular category, but not quite? Because coding systems are by nature reductive, any real-life data is likely to test the boundaries of the system. But at some point, Grant-Davie argues, we must abandon the ideal of absolute correctness and simply provide "elaborated definitions" of the categories we do have "and ample examples to illustrate them" (280-81).
For example, to code my data within the categories listed in Figure 3.1, I read all student and teacher work through the lenses of compliance and resistance, as suggested by Identity Negotiations Theory. Of course, it would be foolish to suggest that all rhetorical decisions a student makes are borne of an attitude of compliance or resistance. There are a multitude of other axes to consider. I simply chose this one because, in my opinion, it best fit the student-teacher-institution relationships I wanted to talk about. I acknowledge that my focus on compliance and resistance (even given the flexibility provided by the "continuum") probably blinds me to some interesting data and compels me to categorize other data in ways that others might not categorize it.

"Blind spots" in the data. The constraints inherent in coding are necessary and valuable. A study can't focus on everything. But there were significant gaps at the collection stage, though they too were necessary to keep the study manageable. While the range of my collected data is broader than almost any other study on student self-assessment, I acknowledge the following uncollected data and the limitations it places on the claims I can make in this study.

- Students' and teachers' real-time decision-making process. Like Goffman, Ivanič, Brooke, Newkirk, etc., I'm limited to inferring student and teacher mindsets via the visible evidence. This isn't a cognitive study and didn't employ "think-aloud" protocols as students composed their essays or instructors designed their handouts (though this method has its limits too, as we know); I can't verify which roles they saw themselves playing or how they felt about institutional authority at any moment, if anything.

- Conferences and other teacher-student interactions. Though both instructors informed me that they didn't respond to their student self-assessment essays using
draft feedback, I do know that they occasionally gave informal feedback on the drafts in person. Occasionally snippets of these conversations were revealed in an interview. Some interactions I'll never know about might have influenced participants’ attitudes toward self-assessment (or toward each other). Obviously, student-teacher interactions helped to construct their perceptions of each other, and of the course, in ways I'll never know.

- **Course essays and teacher comments on essays.** The most significant “blind spot” in my data is my lack of access to the other course essays written by students (again, these were not collected due to a need to keep the study manageable). Students referred fairly frequently to these essays in their self-assessments. The most tangible disadvantage here is my inability to compare students’ descriptions of their decision-making processes with the actual changes they made in their drafts. For example, I’d have no way of knowing if a student claimed a more substantial revision than actually existed in her draft – a bit of information that could deepen my description of that student’s performance. I also refer relatively frequently to the reflective “writer’s memos” assigned in Karen’s classroom, which, due to their close association with the self-assessment essays, would have been useful to examine.

- **Data on “dialogic” stances.** This study claims that the stances and rhetorical moves taken by students are responses to those of their instructor. It makes sense that this responsiveness works in both directions: teachers are also influenced in their practice by the conversations they have with students and the writing they receive from them. My instructor interviews provide some evidence of this, but my primary focus is on student response. While I could “reuse” my collected data differently to fit a study on a different topic (e.g. the grammatical patterns in self-assessment essays), I’d have to redesign the study completely in order to focus primarily on a
“teacher-centered” topic (e.g. the way an instructor changes self-assessment prompts later in the semester based on what she sees in early self-assessments). As in the opening to this section, I acknowledge these limits without concluding that they “invalidate” my findings in any way. I feel that my collected data is a good match for the scope of my investigation and the limited claims I venture to make. However, I list these additional potential data sources here as a way of suggesting other possible directions for a study on student self-assessment. I’ll elaborate on some of these directions in Chapter 8.
CHAPTER 5

SETTING AND RESETTING THE STAGE

When an individual . . . obtains a new part to perform, he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself, nor will the facts of his new situation press sufficiently on him from the start to determine his conduct without his giving further thought to it. Ordinarily he will be given only a few cues, hints and stage directions, and it will be assumed that he already has in his repertoire a large number of bits and pieces of performances that will be required in the new setting. (Goffman 63)

When I was a Masters student working on the topic of alternatives to traditional grading, I remember being intrigued and amused by an *English Journal* article I ran across called "Students Like Corrections." This 1956 article details the results of a survey that author Katherine Keene handed out to her high school students. What sort of corrections did they prefer? the survey asked. Keene reports; "First and most important, without exception students want their themes corrected." She gives a student response: "I don't like to receive a paper all marked up, but it's better to learn and you can see what you did wrong that way" (212). Later in the article, Keene expresses her "surprise and pleasure" that students wanted to be marked for logic and organization as well. "The reason for my pleasure in this favorable response to criticism," she says, "is that this represents the fruit of much effort on my part to convince the students that logic and organization are important" (212). Keene's other "findings" included students' unanimously stated preferences that each paper be graded A-F that teachers find and correct all of their mistakes (214).

It seemed obvious to me, even as a reader 50 years removed from Keene's article, that Keene had set the stage on which her students would perform roles that had already been written. Of course the students wanted teachers to respond to their role as the corrected novices whose primary concern was what they did wrong. And of course they
wanted to be marked for logic and organization. This orientation toward authority, control and responsibility for their own writing was no doubt built into the repertoire of student experiences they had accumulated to that point. This is what being a student meant to them.

"While we have come to see writing as socially constructed," Tobin writes, "we have failed to understand the teacher's role in the construction of that meaning" (26). This chapter discusses how the instructors rhetorically set the stage – the attitude, the mindset, the classroom climate – for their students' work in the course. These teachers' experiences, their biases and their views of teaching and learning shaped how they constructed the classroom and, as we'll see in the next chapter, had many influences on what students ended up writing. It will then describe how they renegotiated and re-framed self-assessment throughout the rest of the semester. Of course, both of the teachers I'm describing here were considerably more self-conscious about their influence on students than the example I describe above; nevertheless, this brief narrative will point out a few unacknowledged expectations they had for students – the "bits and pieces of performances" they assumed they would bring to the classroom.

Note: For the rest of this dissertation, the students and instructors involved in this study are referred to by pseudonyms. Chapter 4, Figure 3.1 lists these pseudonyms. Please note that they are used in the following text without the use of brackets, quotation marks or other signifiers; this is due to the frequency of their occurrence in the data. This is standard practice in research reports, but is slightly unconventional in direct quotes – for example, I might quote a student referring to her instructor as Karen even though the student obviously referred to her by her real name in person.

Karen: Cooperation, Authority and Purposeful Grading
Karen had worked with self-assessment once before, and she'd been burned. "I tried the 'grade yourselves,'" she told me. "It was a very different place – it was north of New York
City – and I'd have students [write], 'I get an A. I deserve an A. I'm an A person. I'm just – I'm just an A. I'm spectacular.' And I'm like, 'These aren't even full sentences.' She laughed. "And I put [their failure to evaluate themselves well] on me, 'cause I just said, 'What is the grade you deserve?' without any leading or training or anything." She continued: "So, um, I'm jaded by that, and I've never done it again." Still, self-assessment represented something to her that was missing in her course: a chance for a clear picture of what students were learning, which would benefit both her and them. She wanted them to "reflect on the content, the 'takeaways' of the course" – what they had gained, why they'd been required to take English 401, why it was a college-level course. She wanted them to understand why it was important. So she was excited about the possibilities of trying self-assessment again.

Karen's general approach to classroom assessment suggested that she was keenly aware of student anxiety. When I asked if she used rubrics, she responded: "I find them, maybe – like, I think our students are too grade conscious, like [a rubric] gives them more anxiety than freedom to write." Several times during our interview, she claimed that students had "been tested to death" or had grown up in a "culture of testing." But she felt that "students need grades" – that they feel uncomfortable without frequent grade checkpoints throughout the semester. Her approach was to take the emphasis off grades whenever possible, grading only the major essays and participation. The smaller homework and in-class essays were ungraded, which she felt gave her students more "room to try something new" without the pressure of the grade. When I asked if students were ever unmotivated to do this ungraded writing, she responded: "No, because, if they have one of their homeworks [sic] that was an A ... to them, I would comment, 'This would be perfect for your autobiographical essay' ... so that work isn't wasted work." In other words, she tried to provide students with other forms of motivation, such as future value of homework – and trusted that students would accept this value-for-value exchange.
Here are a few more notes about Karen's attitude toward grading:

- **She felt she was an “easy grader.”** In the fall, her first semester of teaching at UNH, she was “too easy on them,” she said, but this was to make up for her uneven teaching performance – she hadn’t been clear with some expectations and she’d "brought down the hammer on other things." She acknowledged and accepted that these contextual factors affected her grading. “I’ll be harder on them this semester,” she said.

- **She was aware of grade inflation, but she didn’t see it as affecting her practice.** Though she said she had “no idea what UNH as an institution thinks about grade inflation,” she figured they assumed “grades are totally inflated.” But she acknowledged that teachers who teach a drafting process will end up with higher grades and has made peace with that fact. “I said [to myself] I’ve been teaching for 10 years, and these are my grades. I have everything that I need to back them up.”

- **She was conscious of her students’ grade expectations.** “We have a really frank discussion [about] what they’ve been rewarded for in the past” – i.e., in high school – and how things were different in college.

- **She recognized the motivational power of grades.** She said she often used phrases such as “This is a C but it could be an A” to motivate students in the drafting process. “If I didn’t put a grade on that [their papers], they wouldn’t work so hard. It wouldn’t be as good.” She matter-of-factly acknowledges their exchange value for hard work as well: “If you take a fresh look at your paper, she tells students, I’ll take a fresh look at your grade.”

Karen regularly assigned a reflective essay called a “writer’s memo” with each major project. Like the smaller pieces of writing in her course, this was ungraded. She didn’t ask for evaluation, just a description of their writing process. She expected students to see this
“evaluation-free zone” as an space for honesty: “I always explain this isn’t a place [for
students] to hide their faults, but rather to foreground them . . . so if you tell me that you had
a lot of trouble with your conclusion, then I won’t just think, ‘This person just . . . didn’t care
about the conclusion, just stopped writing.’ I’ll know you had trouble with it and I can direct
my focus to help you fix that.” The writers’ memo was thus framed as a way of helping the
teacher out – a cooperative perspective that I’ll elaborate on in a moment. Generally, these
writer’s memos “get better throughout the semester,” but for some students, she said, “it
never sinks in” what they could do with the writer’s memo. Many never make the move of
“zooming out” to broader discussions of their strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless,
Karen chose to keep the writer’s memo and assign it along with the self-assessment in this
course: a writer’s memo was due before each essay, while the self-assessments were due at
the same time as or after each essay.

The performance of a “teacherly self.” On the day of my first visit to Karen’s classroom in
February, she began her class by asking her Question of the Day: “What’s your favorite thing
to read?” Students gave a variety of answers: magazines, Harry Potter, sci-fi, John Grisham.
When a student made a reference that was familiar to her, Karen would jump in: “Oh, I’ve
read that!” or “I love that! Have you read . . .” She had short on-the-spot conversations with
each of these students as they took turns answering. The students’ take on this interaction –
that is, whether they saw it as a “real conversation” – was unclear, but Karen was evidently
trying to use this conversation time (a regular class routine) as a way to connect with them.
She was establishing herself as a fellow reader – and, by extension, as a partner in discovery
and learning. She later began the business of the class with a general criticism for the group:
she had read their reading responses, she said, and she was “underwhelmed.” “I swear to
God,” she said, “I didn’t make you buy the book for nothing!” In the hands of another
teacher, this change in topic might have seemed like an abrupt role shift from peer/friend/ally to authority figure, but with Karen, the tone hadn't changed. She could have been communicating: Hey, we're all in this together. We both have jobs to do. Come on, help me out.

It was interesting to see how this language shifted in her syllabus. She started out with we-centered language in her syllabus introduction – positioning herself as a peer learner within the context of an appeal to cooperation: “We will work together as a class to think critically about the texts we experience and create. As we define ourselves as writers, I hope we will be proud of the work we do together this semester...” But the rest of the syllabus was a more direct assertion of her authority. There were I-centered statements, such as “I expect that you will be prepared” and “I reserve the right to give quizzes.” And there were passive or agent-less assertions of “fact” that nonetheless affirmed her authority in the classroom: “Conferences with me will be required” and “There is no distinction between excused and unexcused absences.” When I asked in our interview, “How would you characterize the teacher/student relationship in your classroom?” Karen acknowledged that her syllabus was “very strict,” but that she was “less strict” in her face-to-face interaction with students. In my class visit, she repeated this distinction to her students. It was then that I began to see the nuance in her performance. She was a partner or peer in the service of setting the overall tone of the course. When it came to articulating and enforcing specific policies, however, she adopted a more traditional teacher-as-authority persona. This balance was essential to the way Karen conducted the business of the classroom. Her classroom routine established her as someone who matter-of-factly acknowledged the power imbalance in the classroom and distinction between teacher and student roles, asked students to accept them, and promised to perform her role in good faith if they’d do so as well.

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For example, Karen asked students to put extra effort into their first drafts because "I can't just keep giving feedback," assuming that they'd sympathize with her workload and understand that receiving good feedback was the reward for the "favor" of putting effort into the draft. Also, as an alternative to handing out rubrics, she "made them write down" a list of her pet peeves in writing: "I'm giving you a grade so you should know what bothers me. I know it's unfair, but it drives me crazy." Her efforts to relieve student anxiety and help them understand the value of the course could likewise be seen as good faith efforts that she hoped students would reciprocate; her disappointment with her "New York" students was not that they were overconfident but that they had broken the terms of this exchange.

As I mentioned earlier, Karen acknowledged that her grade sheet would look suspicious on first glance, but if asked, she could present the material of the course to support her grades. She was aware, in other words, of the different performances required for different audiences looking in on a course. But it seemed important to me that, whenever she indirectly invoked the traditional roles of teacher and student, she regarded them with a level of ironic detachment in her students' presence.

See, for example, this example of the beginning of a writer's memo taken from Karen's handout for that project. It's intended simultaneously to be a serious format guide and a parody of student performance:
Suzie Smith  
Karen X  
English 401  
January 20, 2009  

Writing Class Fun  

English 401 is my favorite class. It is the only class I am taking where I know everyone's name. From the first invention exercise to my final proofread, my paper has improved greatly. I got really great comments at my peer response session, so my paper is really jazzy and perfect now.  

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Goffman describes a type of meta-awareness participants have toward their reciprocal performances – an acknowledgement of their status as performances. But Karen acknowledges it more explicitly than the participants in Goffman's examples do. Allowing her students to be "in on the joke" was a subtle yet purposeful redefinition of the teacher-student relationship.  

Setting the stage. What kind of "self" did Karen set the stage for? Based on my observations, here are some of the implicit role definitions:  

- **Learning partner role:** Karen assumed that students would "buy into" a reciprocal teacher/student relationship – that they would be motivated to help each other in the classroom and act in good faith in accomplishing the work of the course.
• **Writer role:** Karen assumed that students would be motivated by ungraded work if it benefited their future writing, and that they'd feel comfortable with taking risks within the "evaluation-free zone" of ungraded writing. Both of these assumptions suggest that students occasionally break out of their student roles to see themselves as *writers*. Writers (that is, people with developed writerly habits) would care about generating text on the chance that they could use later. And Elbow suggests that one of the primary advantages of evaluation-free zones is that he sees students "investing and risking more, writing more fluently, and using livelier, more interesting voices" (199) – all markers of the type of *writerly* development that takes place both in and out of a classroom.

• **Student/rule-follower role:** As I've just discussed, Karen's ironic detachment from her role assumed that students would see their role with a similar detachment while still recognizing the importance of continuing to perform that role.

One additional role that might Karen might not have directly discussed in her classroom was that of **student as learner**. Through self-assessment, Karen hoped that students would learn more about why the course was important – that is, to connect it to their personal goals for learning. One argument for student self-assessment, Latta and Lauer write, is that "students can begin to be more of their learning experience, making learning an intrinsic motivation rather than an extrinsic one" (25). Extending Brooke's argument\(^\text{17}\), in developing such a stance toward a learner role, self-assessment could benefit a student's overall development. Though Karen didn't say so directly, I inferred that she wanted to see acknowledgement of the course's importance in their self-assessments.

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\(^{17}\) See page 34 of this dissertation: "Learning is influenced more by the roles offered in school than by any particular content or material being taught, because it is in negotiating a response to these roles that individuals work out their future stances towards knowledge, towards authority and towards academic learning" (Brooke *Writing* 11)
The first assignment. The following is the opening paragraph of the brief assignment handout for Karen's classroom's first self-assessment. This self-assessment covered the autobiographical essay project.

Now that you've handed in your first essay for our class, and BEFORE I return your essays to you, I'd like you to evaluate your own essays. . . Given the increased expectations of college courses, how would you grade yourself? Did you put enough time into your essay? Did you hand in your best, complete work?

Other questions included the following: “Did you meet the goals of the assignment?”; “How did you respond to the peer response process? What advice did you take? What did you ignore? Why?”; and “Did you (how I hate the cliché) show rather than tell?” Students were asked to respond to these questions to the best of their ability while referring to their essay drafts. These were the handout questions directly related to arriving at a “self-grade”:

- What grade do you feel that your effort, writing process, and finished product deserve? Please fully explain why you come to this grade. Remember that this is an assessment of your essay as it is right now – see the syllabus for revision guidelines.
- Is this the grade you expect? If not, why?

In class a week before the essay was due, Karen helped students brainstorm how to arrive at this grade. “What else [beyond what was mentioned in the autobiographical essay assignment] would you get credit for?” “What would you get taken off for?” she asked. Ideas were sparse, but the class came up a few possibilities of things that points could be “taken off for,” including clichés and a failure to explain oneself fully.

Although the discussion and the handout seemed helpful (certainly better than asking "What is the grade you deserve?") there was a potential problem with situating this type of project in Karen's class. To that point, the classroom hadn't encouraged students to adopt the role of evaluator/grader. As I've explained, Karen's approach to teacher/student roles was mostly traditional when it came to grading (it placed her in the evaluator role). Asking students to step outside of their repertoire of performances was a new move.
After the first self-assessment: Resetting the stage. As mentioned earlier, I didn’t collect enough data on instructors to make definitive claims about how they adjusted and represented their identities throughout the semester; my focus remained on the students and their texts. At the same time, I found it useful to use my classroom visits, handout collections and instructor interviews to determine what changed about the self-assessment assignments throughout the semester, if only to help us understand why students wrote what they did.

Karen, as I’ve described, set herself up as a “learning partner” in what she considered a good-faith reciprocal relationship with her students. And she at times encouraged students to see themselves as writers and develop writerly habits. After receiving the first self-assessment, though, she felt the need to balance this teacherly identity with the “need to be a little more directive,” as she put it – to assert a little more control over the content of the self-assessments. “I want them to take a really hard look at what they wrote [in their essays],” she said to me. “You know what I mean? To really say – to really assess it.” This is an excerpt from her second self-assessment handout:

Congratulations! You are done with 2 out of 3 major paper assignments for our class! I’d like us to take another look at the paper we are handing in today. This is the first semester I’m doing these self-assessments in class, and so I’d like to try a few new things this time. Since I’d like you to work closely with your drafts, we’re going to start this in class today. You will finish this self-assessment for homework over the weekend, but you will hand in your folders today. So, think ahead and make any notes you may need while we are in class today.

Karen proposed this in-class essay while the students still had drafts in hand in order to ensure that they were able to include specific details in their work. But she begins her handout with praise ("Congratulations!") and an I-centered but indirect assertion of her authority ("I’d like us to take another look") framed in terms of her own inexperience and experimentation ("This is the first semester . . ."). By describing her own work as in process, she possibly encourages her students again to see themselves as co-learners. This framing
sets up the relatively direct language of the rest of the handout – the you-centered language at the end of the excerpt.

As I’ll discuss in the next chapter, Karen noticed what she considered dishonesty in some of the self-assessments. She included the following paragraph in her second self-assessment handout:

Beyond the process, what did you do well or not so well? In other words, evaluate your work, and strive for honesty in your evaluative comments. This is not an evaluation of you or even you as a writer. Your evaluation is simply of this paper right now (before you revise again).

In our interview, Karen mentioned that she reinforced that the evaluation reflected the writing only, and that it couldn’t affect the grade due to its timing, which “may have lowered the commitment level for some and raised the honesty level for others,” she said. Throughout the semester, Karen only mentioned a couple of students she felt were dishonest (see the example of Daniel in the next chapter), but she might also have been referring to students who focused on “effort” rather than on the specifics of their drafts.

Karen’s second self-assessment assignment also asked students to discuss two new topics:

- **“Transferable skills.”** Karen asked students to talk about “transferable skills” in their second self-assessment, which she defined in the handout as things “you did in the paper that you could see yourself doing in others – for example, in the first paper perhaps you worked very hard on description.” From her brief explanation to me, Karen’s intent with this prompt was to have students achieve some “distance” from their work in order to benefit from the self-assessment – i.e. to carry what they’d learned forward “to other classes,” thereby connecting more deeply to their student as learner role. For comparison, see the discussion of distance in my summary of Richard Beach’s study in Chapter 2.
• **Audience.** "Show examples!" Karen wrote in her second handout. "Instead of saying that your reworked your first paragraph, I'd like you to quote directly from your drafts. SHOW what you've changed instead of TELLING about changes." Karen explained this addition to students as being for my benefit (since my research permissions didn't allow me to read their essays), perhaps setting me up as another good-faith learning partner; however, she described this requirement to me as another way of getting them to dig deeper into their process and to be honest about their strengths and weaknesses.

Karen's third and final self-assessment handout made similar moves, from a congratulatory gesture ("Congratulations on completing your first year of college!") to a celebration of their accomplishments ("We've done a lot of great work over the semester. We've written a personal essay...") to a set of instructions (I'd like you to consider the whole class and **give yourself a grade for the final paper and the course**. You may want to look back at our syllabus to see my grading policy . . .") (emphasis Karen's).

I visited class as Karen discussed this round of self-assessments and set up the final essay. In response to student's anxieties about grading, she once again assured them that they should feel free to describe their strengths and weaknesses. "Don't simply state your process," she said. It's good to do so, she added, but it was important also to "make an honest assessment." She instructed them to step back from their emotions and evaluate their work "as if it were someone else's paper." She reminded them of the timing of the self-assessment: while the writer's memo "isn't always the most honest, right?" they could be "more honest in [their] self-assessment because it's over" and the grades for the project would already be assigned. "I don't look at these before I grade your papers," she said. "Don't feel like you have to persuade me."
Karen’s final self-assessment handout also reiterated the relationship she had developed with students: “Congratulations on completing your first year of college!” she wrote. “As you know, it was my first year at UNH as well. So, that means you hold a special place in my heart, and I will always remember our time here together.”

**Marina: Decentering, Independence and Delayed Grading**

Unlike Karen, Marina didn’t have any experiences with self-grading specifically, traumatic or otherwise. She had experimented with self-assessment and teacher-student collaborative grading in high school speech courses, and this had gone remarkably well, she said. Marina attributed this success to the shortness of the speeches and the fact that she met with each student right after his or her speech. The performance was fresh in their memories. “That’s harder to do with writing,” she speculated. She said she signed up for my self-assessment project because she was interested in seeing “more risk-taking” from her students.

While Marina also acknowledged student anxiety about grading (“[UNH students] seem pretty touchy – like, once grades become an issue, students who otherwise might be interested in, like, exploring, sort of become different people.”), she was much more concerned about her own anxiety. “I hate grades,” she stated. “I try to get them out of the way as much as possible – and get them out of the way until the last possible minute. I hate that dynamic. I don’t want to be caught in a quid pro quo relationship with grades and writing.” She described to me how some of her assignments would make it to a fourth draft before students would see a grade – and after that, she felt pressured to allow more revisions for students who had received a low grade. “The truth is, I hate giving low grades, so I’d much rather work with students for a better paper than give a low grade,” she said. “I feel personally responsible.” When I asked her what she would do if a student disliked this system, she said she would “try to convince them that my way was better.” She laughed.
“And, um, and to do that by pointing out sort of the deficit of feedback that they're getting with a number. And how it's actually, if they want specifics, I'll give them specifics . . . if that's what they're looking for, then I'm gonna give them that my way.”

This seemed to indicate problems for our project – specifically with our agreement that students rationalize a grade for themselves. “It feels like pushing off the dirty work on them,” she said. “Like, if I hate it so much, I'm just gonna make them do it?” She suggested that the practice was “slightly manipulative”: “[It's as though I'm saying] 'I don't want you to be unhappy about your grade, so as long as you give it, you have no cause for complaint,' and I'm just uncomfortable with that." She also wondered if students would feel the absence of the “comparative” aspect of grading, as she phrased it – they didn't have access to the other students’ drafts. After we discussed possible approaches to discussing self-grading, Marina still didn't ask students to do so in her midterm self-assessment handout. This was still within the scope of the study: I had only asked for a minimum of one rationalized course grade during the semester. As I'll describe in a few pages, Marina did ask students to self-grade in their final essay.

Considering her problems with grading, Marina had a relatively good relationship with reflection, and preferred to see the self-assessment project as an extension of that work. She started the reflection process at the beginning of the course by asking students to describe “an instance of their own writing process” in writing. She often asked them to attach reflections to revised drafts, reflecting “on the revisions they did, what worked, what didn't.” She assigned a total of eight reflections per student per course, according to her estimate. I asked her if it was possible to see differences in quality in these, and she pointed out that some students simply “parrot back things they've heard before, like 'It doesn't flow well.'” A better reflection, she said, is more specifically tied to the unique details of the
writer's process and decision-making. Good process-based reflection, she said, is "just being descriptive."

Here are a few more observations on how Marina's stance toward her grader role impacted her course:

- **She never used rubrics.** She said that she refused to provide a rationale for "what kind of work qualifies as what kind of grade." Rubrics, to her, unnecessarily constrained the writing process. When I asked, "How do you communicate the way you're going to grade before it happens?" she answered that students receive plenty of individual direction from her during the drafting process. "And, I hate this," she said, "but [if I need] to justify a grade lower than an A, I might refer back to something we talked about that they didn't end up doing. Um, so it becomes a conversation."

- **She made it a point to make grading a topic in the class.** Her goals were to explain why she responded the way she did, to assure them they could always revise, and to have a larger discussion about the role of assessment. She attempted to reinforce this conversation in conferences, in which she provided evaluative feedback outside the discussion of a grade. To date, "nobody has complained," she said, so she believed her methods have worked. And when I asked her if her feedback was ever misunderstood, she replied, "No, I work hard to make sure they understand it."

- **She was also aware of institutional concerns of grade inflation.** She described a composition program meeting she attended on the topic; people joked about it, but there was discomfort mixed in as well. She acknowledged that she "feels that pressure," but like Karen, it had not caused her to change her practice in any way.

Marina felt that she set the tone for her approach to grading and writing by performing her role as authority figure unconventionally. "I think for me – and I think I've worked very hard
for years to develop this sort of persona, but – on the one hand, I think I’m very laid back and I don’t care if there’s like staples,” she said. “On the other hand, I think that, because of my experience both teaching and writing that there’s a kind of – this is gonna sound really cheesy – but some kind of driving force behind this laid back persona that I think these students can sense.” She said she was comfortable with students questioning her; she tried to “see behind” rebellious or confrontational students. “I try to call them on that. . . . [It’s] usually just a conversation. Sometimes I make them redo stuff.”

**Performance as teacher and expert.** I observed the class in which Marina introduced the midterm self-assessment. The class began with a group activity: small-group reviews of research project introductions. Two students I observed were attempting to write papers about dreams; unfortunately, these were not going well. Apparently, they’d had a class in which they talked about dreams and what they meant, which interested students in the topic. One of the students missed that class – the student said that “was probably a good thing,” since her topic, domestic violence, seemed a bit more fruitful for research than those of her peers. The group complained about the wide-open nature of their assignment.

Marina attempted no casual conversations and made no cooperative appeals to students, as Karen did. She seemed to hold students’ attention best in a scholar/researcher role, as an expert on writing and assessment. Her notes were neatly arranged on the overhead: *Different Purposes for Interviews. Group Discussion Questions. Assessment.* Eventually the conversation led to the final topic: a setup for the self-assessment project.

Marina asked students to tell her what came to mind when they heard the word *assessment.* Answers included *SAT, time limit, angry, annoyed, students as a number, comparison, bad feelings, quantitative, worrying,* and many more. She wrote each of these on the board. She occasionally made comments such as “I feel that way too,” or “I felt that way
as a student," possibly revealing the origins or her unease with grading to her students. She asked them to think of activities outside of school in which assessment was involved. One student suggested his golf swing, another the violin. She informed them that the Latin root of “assessment” is *assidere*, which means “to sit beside.” “In a musical lesson, a teacher is sitting beside you and listening . . . describing what’s going on, not necessarily comparing.” She suggested that assessment need not be “tied to numbers.” She asked students to describe how it feels to assess themselves (“Different”; “Nicer”; “I’m harder on myself”). “Why do a self-assessment?” she asked, then answered: “To take responsibility for your own learning – to own the process, get better on your own, take what you do here to other classes.” Her approach to introducing self-assessment was wide-ranging: personal, analytical, scholarly. The variety seemed to keep students interested.

Her self-assessment handouts were also analytical and multimodal. One handout asked students to chart their research process for their group essay, which they had finished earlier in the semester. This was to be turned into a visual map that “showed relationships between activities.” And a third handout gave steps for how to incorporate this map into the midterm self-assessment essay:

Based on the visualization of the research or writing process generated through your process map, write a self-assessment that accomplishes the following:

- Describe what you did to produce the research and arguments presented in your group projects.
- Discuss strengths in your process; what parts of the process worked well for you and why? What parts of the process did you “do best” and why? How will you be able to make use of these strengths in your current or future research projects?
- Discuss weaknesses in your process; what do you think you should have done differently and why? How will you approach this part of the process differently in your current or future research projects?

Be as specific as possible; avoid vague statements such as, “I’ll just try a lot harder next time.” You should write at least 2 double spaced pages, though you may find you need to write a bit more.
The assignment sequence leading to this essay was quite specific, and it demanded a fair amount of work from the students. It had clearly been carefully planned to integrate with the course discussion and seemed more like an outgrowth of the day's discussion than the brief remarks Karen made to introduce her handout.

**The stage and the backstage.** From my conversations with Marina and my examination of her handouts, it seemed clear that her performance as a teacher was meant to elicit a certain range of student performances:

- **Writer role:** It seemed clear that Marina wanted to encourage the writerly habits of exploration, experimentation, revision and recursiveness. I saw her approach as similar to that of Elbow: trusting the process and holding back the urge to overplan or preemptively edit. She might have been subject to the same kind of counterargument as well: that a wide-open process works better for a professional writer than for an experienced student who is preoccupied with grades. I didn't have a chance to see how the approach translated to the students' essays, but my primary interest was in whether students would rebel against the role.

- **Independent learner role:** Marina struck an interesting balance between openness and structure. Compared to the classroom, Marina's performance on paper was rigorous. She asserted her authority indirectly (through passive phrases: "The concept at the heart of this course is participation"; "Remember that passing the course requires **timely completion** of all the assignments") (emphasis hers); occasionally she used "I"-centered language, but usually to describe her role in a process ("I will comment extensively on the second draft"), not to communicate expectations. But most often, the language was "you"-centered ("You should be able
to do the following"), placing the responsibility for learning squarely on the student's shoulders.

- **Scholar role:** As described above, Marina took an analytical approach to her course discussions and modeled this behavior for her students. She didn't hesitate to use composition theory or to give her scholarly perspective on assessment. Similarly, she asked students to apply a deliberate, analytical approach to each assignment and lay out their intellectual process on paper.

- **Student role:** By deliberately questioning grading, Marina implicitly issued what I refer to on my chart as a "qualified encouragement to rebellion" against traditional teacher-student roles. This was territory into which Karen arguably never ventured. Yet as mentioned, Marina did this against the backdrop of highly structured assignment handouts that mostly reinforced a traditional teacher-student relationship, so I was interested to see which direction students went as they decided how to respond. Would they buy in to the spirit of the classroom discussion, or would they simply file it away as a temporary diversion from business as usual?

Just briefly, I'd like to refer back to my remarks on the occasionally significant schedule shifts and delays in this course, which pushed the course essays and both self-assessments later in the semester than originally planned (see pages 66 and 74). This changing schedule seemed to be coupled with some confusion and irritation among students in the "backstage" of classroom discussion, most evident in small-group conversations. These are some overheard remarks:

"I don't even remember the group project."

"We're writing an essay about writing an essay?"

[Looking at the syllabus] "Oh, 'midterm self-assessment.' Whoa, that's due Monday."

"Wait, what are we handing in today?"
“How did I not know this was due?”

It was difficult to tell whether the remarks represented any genuine irritation toward the instructor or were exaggerated/performed because, as I mentioned, the whole-class discussions on assessment generated a fair amount of participation and the students seemed engaged. I mention the swing between this sort classroom underlife and full engagement not to denigrate the instructor, but to contextualize the self-assessment data from the course I report on in the next chapter, as well as the modifications to Marina’s course described later in this chapter. Whereas Karen’s classroom and handouts balanced authority and friendliness/openness within a rhetoric of cooperation, Marina’s classroom exhibited more pronounced swings between centering and decentering of authority as well as looseness and tightness of structure. As I’ll show in the next chapter, the student self-assessments from each classroom were very much products of their respective environments.

**Marina’s adjustments after the first self-assessment.** By Marina’s own admission, the self-assessment essays her students produced were brief and for the most part not particularly notable or revelatory. Marina placed the blame on herself. When I asked, “How well do you think they understood what they were doing?” she answered, “I’m not sure I understood what we were doing.” She had given them clear instructions to trace their process in designing their group projects, but “is that assessment?” she asked. “I’m not sure... [and] it’s probably gonna be even less clear for them.” She felt that the process was useful because “it ask[ed] them to be conscious of what they did... and that’s the only [skill] they can take with them to other contexts.” As we talked through the essays, she revealed that she found it difficult to give a rating of “high” to any of them. “They all felt like the
middle," she said. "Low" essays were easier to pick – they included more clichés and self-congratulatory moments. But even these were few.

Marina had been hesitant to ask students to do any sort of self-grading in these essays, for reasons I've described – a move that might have aided in the uniform quality of the pieces. As I've argued, the act of self-evaluation (especially during self-grading) raises the stakes and often heightens rhetorical performances. Marina wanted to see more grappling with the ideas of "good" and "bad" writing and attention to criteria from her students, so she decided to ask explicitly for self-grading in the second and final self-assessments. This represented a compromise with her usual teaching philosophy – taking the focus off grades whenever possible – so her compromise was to find "grade-free" zones in the essays themselves. She would ask her students to focus only on their process and decision-making in the first half of the essay, and then treat self-evaluation and self-grading in a separate section. She would also give them a formula – "some basic math" – that would, in her view, alleviate some of the anxiety she associated with the grading process. She'd make it nearly automatic, if possible.

Given this plan, it's interesting that the language she ultimately chose for the final self-assessment essay not only asked for more evaluation than the first, but also more directly asked for a grading **negotiation** than Karen's did:

**Part 1: Assessing the Text** (2 pages)
Choose either the research paper or the persuasive essay as evidence of your strongest writing. In detail, describe what works well about this paper. You must provide abundant textual evidence for your assertion about what works. Invoke the descriptions of good writing we discussed in class ... Choose a passage (at least 2-3 paragraphs) from either paper that doesn't work so well....

**Part 2: Revision** (1 page)
Choose a major revision you made from any draft. Paste the original version that changed. ... Discuss what didn't work about that passage, and discuss HOW you came to realize that the passage didn't work. Paste the revision. In detail, discuss what changes you made and why. Discuss how the revision works differently (hopefully, BETTER!) than the original....
Part 3: Grade (half-1 page)
Give yourself letter grades for Process, Revisions, and Quality of Papers and justify these grades. Use the "formula" (30% each for Process and Revisions, 40% for Quality of Papers) and then calculate your grade for the course. These grades are negotiable: if you grade yourself far lower than I would grade you, I will, of course, use the higher grade! If you grade yourself far higher than I would grade you, I will consider your arguments very carefully (perhaps you can show me something I didn't see before) and adjust my own impression if you convince me. (emphasis mine)

Marina's handout went on to define each of the terms the students were grading themselves on for each assignment. "Process" meant "making use of all resources available," such as the writing center, early drafting and conferencing; revisions meant "soliciting feedback, trying out . . . suggestions," and so on; and "quality of papers" implied a holistic grading of the literacy autobiography, the research paper and the persuasive letter assigned in the course.

This handout placed a higher level of responsibility on the student than the midterm handout. While the midterm primarily asked, "What went well in your process and what would you change about it?" this handout asks the student several times to pinpoint specific parts of the draft and evaluate them using criteria discussed in class. Of particular interest is the grading section – although the grade is described as negotiable, the responsibility of grading is not. Students are directly instructed to assign themselves grades, and unlike Karen, Marina suggests that the suggested grades could affect the final grades they receive. There seems to be an advantage to underestimating one's grade as opposed to overestimating it – underestimation is risk-free, whereas overestimation would ostensibly require a very persuasive argument.

I visited the class in which Marina assigned this essay – as with the first essay, she designed her day's discussion around the assignment handout. Marina asked students to create lists of the "six things that make good writing" in each of the three major genres/assignments in the course, which she wrote on the blackboard (for example, attributes for the persuasive letter included common ground, taking a stance, persuasive
words, "non-preachy" opinion, and so on), as well as attributes that "make good writing" in any situation. Many of these attributes were discussed and complicated, with Marina playing devil's advocate.

These were explained to students as the criteria they should refer to when self-grading. But in addition to these rhetorical/genre criteria, Marina let students know they could factor in course-specific criteria, such as participation during the process of a particular assignment. In other words, in contrast to her stated goal of making the grading process as straightforward and mathematical as possible, there was actually a fair amount of room for students to make arguments and construct narratives within their grading process.

In short, unlike Karen's second and third self-assessments, which were basically extensions of the self-assessments that had come before, Marina's self-assessment was a very different approach. In the next chapter, which summarizes the rhetorical moves in student essays, you'll notice many more excerpts from Marina's second self-assessment than the first - these significant changes made the essays much more remarkable both for Marina and for the purposes of this study.
NEGOTIATING SELF-ASSESSMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

In his chapter in *Student Self-Evaluation: Fostering Reflective Learning*, Richard Haswell describes successful student self-assessment as a "learning experience in which students reflect on and evaluate, make sense of, their own learning in their own voice." (90). Haswell states that the act of taking on a new voice and perspective on one's own work is a genuine act of "conceptual reorganization," which in his view is almost always developmentally beneficial, even when "coerced," as it often is in the classroom (90-1). Haswell's chapter focuses on the "language of frame restructuring":

[In student self-assessments] old frames meet the unassimilable ("The most startling event"), old frames prove inadequate ("I felt something was missing"), frame conflict creates unpleasant vacillation ("I had the most trouble with"), frame reorganization sets in unannounced ("it seemed to click") and new frames take on the guise of solvers ("at first I was puzzled") or the guise of saviors ("at last I have found"). There are also deeper, structural signatures, implying that writers are interpreting their whole participation in a course of study developmentally. (91)

Haswell continues listing phrases that signal cognitive leaps and bridges - dialogues between competing frameworks in students' minds. But that last sentence is particularly provocative: do successful self-assessments really enable students to take a new perspective on their overall course of study?

The answer would seem to depend on how an instructor chooses to frame and implement self-assessment. The "self-evaluations" Haswell studies are primarily reflective pieces, heavy with process description, that from time to time ask students to "zoom out" and consider how the course referenced in their reflection fits in with their learning over a
broader span of time. In chapter 5, I described how Karen and Marina, the two teachers involved in my study, asked for this type of writing. Karen's "writer's memo" assignment, a longtime fixture of her courses, was intended to be a student's description of the process he or she underwent in the composition of an essay as well as a request for instructor feedback in specific areas or aspects of the essay. Much of the content from the writer's memos, which were due before the essay draft, carried over into students' self-assessments, which came after the draft. However, Karen's self-assessment assignments differed from Haswell's in that her students were also asked to evaluate their work and suggest a grade for themselves. The same is true for Marina's self-assessment sequence: although her midterm assignment was similar to one of Karen's writer's memos, the final self-assessment asked students to evaluate and grade their process, revision and quality of papers.

Here I'd like to return to Robert Brooke's distinction between writer and student roles (see Chapter 3). Reflective writing arguably encourages students to see themselves as writers and to talk about their writerly habits, strengths and weaknesses, but they're often compelled to shift focus to their student roles when the topic shifts to evaluation - and here I'm defining a student as a person whose primary goal is to make progress through a program of study, and whose progress depends primarily on how his or her work is evaluated. Students might feel the need to mitigate the possible risk their discussions of writerly strengths and weaknesses pose toward their status as evaluated individuals within an educational hierarchy. While the reflective prompts in Karen's and Marina's self-assessment assignments were similar to Haswell's and provided a similar opportunity for frame restructuring, learning and development, they also explicitly served the construction of a grade that would follow these students long after the course had faded into distant memory. Therefore, it would make sense that students' discussions of their own development were at least somewhat consciously selected and narrated with that inevitable
purpose in mind. This was undoubtedly true in Haswell's courses as well, since students were writing for grades there, but as I argued in Chapter 4, the explicit request for self-evaluation - and especially self-grading - "raises the stakes" of performance and creates a space on the page for such performance to take place.

Ellen Schendel and Peggy O'Neill ask, "Do students view self-assessment as genuine inquiry into their writing and writing processes, or do they believe that it is a means to an end - a way to get a grade? Do teachers and students distinguish between accurate self-assessments and those that are savvy?" (208). If the conventions of reflective writing are established enough in educational settings to be known to students with access to that culture (who arguably make up much of the student body at Karen and Marina's university), then narratives of conceptual reframing, rethinking and growth might be "savvy" performances as much as they're "accurate" descriptions of a student writer's experience. And as I suggested in Chapter 3, students might be unaware of the extent to which they're performing a particular student role even as they sincerely attempt to self-assess.

To provide examples of these claims in action, I'll use this chapter to show how students balanced the request for process description with a discussion of their performance. I'll use overviews of patterns in self-assessment essays and case studies to consider the larger narratives in which Haswell's developmental phrases are embedded - many of which seem to draw from stock narratives of educational growth. Some students resist these narratives, though this resistance is usually subtle. From the instructors' perspectives, the most remarkable stances toward self-assessment are represented in the "case studies" throughout the chapter; these students received a rating of low, middle or high primarily because their rhetorical choices stood out in some way. By contrast, most of the students I mention in the overview sections flew beneath their instructors' radars. Often they take what appears to be an "apathetic" or "bought-in" stance toward their student role
and/or classroom tasks, including self-assessment. However, even in this group, snippets and paragraphs from the self-assessments belie complex negotiations of student identity underneath the surface. The goals of this chapter are to comment on the various approaches to describing the writing process against the backdrop of self-evaluation, and to show how each fits within the scope of this study – that is, how each approach demonstrates a student’s attempts to negotiate his or her role within a graded context.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I explained that Marina’s students figure into the data to a lesser extent than Karen’s because the former’s first self-assessment (out of two) was brief and she had a difficult time choosing high/middle/low examples. But her classroom yielded interesting writing, especially in the final self-assessment, which will provide additional depth to the ideas that I often use Karen’s students to introduce.

**Patterns in student self-assessments**

The following section will catalog the following patterns in student self-assessments (and the case studies will elaborate on them):

- **Intertextuality**: I’ll discuss the intertextual nature of student self-assessments with a few examples of students’ attempts to take on the instructor’s or institution’s language. Sometimes these ventured into the use of educational or writerly clichés.

- **From word to narrative: Process and the “writer’s struggle.”** After my brief examination of words and phrases, I move to the narratives students pieced together. For example, many students commented on their problematic or “messy” writing processes, aligning themselves with the role of a “struggling writer” – a role constructed in classroom discussions and handouts. Others described challenges they deliberately took on. However, many students limited this type of narrative when it threatened to expose their weaknesses or lingering problems with their
writing. This section leads into a case study of Sydney, who took on a significant writing challenge in her first self-assessment and was given a “high” self-assessment rating by her instructor.

- **Effort: A substitute for a writer’s process.** Effort was the most common topic in these self-assessments – and the most common justification for a grade. Many students used effort or time spent as a stand-in for a substantial discussion of process (and, again, to justify a grade). Some simply highlighted the number of steps they took in the process.

- **Reflection on weaknesses and strengths.** Students often broadened from a discussion of their process to a larger discussion of their writing strengths and weaknesses. However, many of these discussions seemed constrained or qualified, possibly due to the presence of the grade in the background: students hedged in their discussions of weakness, limited themselves to discussing nominal weaknesses, and reframed weaknesses as strengths. In this section, I suggest that student’s discoursal construction of self could bring to mind particular student “archetypes” – in Jacob’s case, the archetype of the humble, self-deprecating student.

- **Narratives of personal growth.** Some students constructed narratives of personal growth across the progression of the course: a transformation of work ethic or their views on writing.

- **Discussion of evaluation/standards.** Students employed a variety of approaches when negotiating grades or finding standards against which to judge their work. They referred to outside standards, peer feedback and other courses. When discussing grades, they often stated their attitude toward a past or future grade (contentment or dissatisfaction). I use low-rated Daniel as an example of unsuccessful grade rationalizing.
• **“Risky” discussions.** Some students made risky moves, especially in the proximity of the discussion of their grade. Some gave the instructor, her assignments or the course unsolicited compliments. Others gave negative comments on course or an assignment. And some revealed flaws in their work or work ethic. Low-rated Cole is a striking example of a student who seemed to misjudge his teacher’s perceptions of his risky discussions.

**Intertextuality.** Ivanič uses Goffman’s metaphor of “cues, hints and stage directions”\(^\text{18}\) to describe how the adults she studied took on student roles. “They [are not] given precise instructions on how to play this role, specifically on how to produce the written ‘performances’ known as ‘assignments,’” she says. “They . . . have to piece together what they know about writing from other roles – knowledge which will not necessarily be adequate to the situation” (104). Although the students in my study were for the most part recently graduated from high school, and were therefore accustomed to playing a student role, the expectations for college-level writing were new to all of them. Many had to combine their previous experiences with careful attention to course cues to “piece together” new academic genres such as self-assessment essays.

As I discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, I was interested in seeing to what extent students attempted to conform to an unarticulated yet implied set of rhetorical expectations for a self-assessment essay – i.e., the template for the genre that had been assembled in their minds through their previous exposure to academic and reflective texts. In other words, I was interested in the intertextual nature of their work. In one of his later essays,

\(^{18}\) See the block quotation with which I began Chapter 5.
Mikhail Bakhtin describes the intertextuality of all texts produced in the "human sciences and philosophy":

Behind each text stands a language system. Everything in the text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible, everything that can be given outside a given text (the given) conforms to this language system. . . . Each text presupposes a generally understood (that is, conventional within a given collective) system of signs. (105)

Bakhtin applies this principle both on a linguistic scale (to conventional words and phrases that circulate within a discourse community) and on a larger scale outside the normal scope of linguistic analysis (to types of content and methods of argument that are valued within that community). Bakhtin points out that every text other than a copy or reprinting is unique, despite its relationship to other texts: it assembles and uses these texts as means to its own end (105). While each text is indebted to the texts in its network for its content, the author of the text also asserts authorship by the choices he or she makes in responding to those texts.

In Chapter 3, I noted Bourdieu and Passeron's argument that texts produced by writers on the relatively powerless end of an asymmetrical power relationship concede much of the control over their content to the institution overseeing their writing. Agency and authorship are less evident in their texts. Bourdieu and Passeron examine "magisterial discourse," the academic language of the dominant class that students often feel compelled to approximate without questioning or fully understanding it. But in my review of their work, I also noted that there are times when academic institutions and individual instructors encourage students to break from the "passwords and sacramental phrases" (Bourdieu's phrase) of academic discourse, if only partially, temporarily, and often in service of the institution's goals. Student self-assessment seems to be one of those situations. So when I examined Karen's and Marina's courses, I asked myself, how did
students position their self-assessment texts as responses to the expectations surrounding them, given the ambiguous constraints and freedoms under which they operated?

My first inclination was to examine students' appropriation of common academic phrases as well as commonplaces/clichés of educational development and growth, as I did in my examples in Chapter 1. On the word and phrase level, most of the imitation in these courses was inconspicuous: some of Karen's students referred to "the reader" as the audience for their papers (a phrase Karen had used and they had probably seen before). Others briefly alluded to the course's catch phrases when they evaluated the effectiveness of an essay – Karen's students wrote about paying attention to "the 'Who cares?' question," for example, or "showing versus telling." Marina's students (perhaps unintentionally) echoed some of her most commonly used phrases as well, such as "the use of available resources." More broadly, I noticed that the structure and order of the self-assessment handout prompts often mapped directly onto the structure of the self-assessments – many students wrote one paragraph for every grouping of questions in a handout. But these patterns seemed more automatic than intentional or rhetorical. Students were clearly making their way through the handouts as they wrote, and their phrasing reflected where they were in that process. I might use Rice's term "studenticity" for this habit; the easy adoption of supplied structures and keywords for such an essay seems primarily to be a form of "getting by" as a student, especially when the task is to write within a classroom-only genre.

However, students sometimes treated phrases in this automatic manner even when the instructor intended for the phrases to take on more significance. For example, I described in Chapter 5 how Karen asked her students to add a section on "transferable skills" to their second self-assessment. This was part of a larger effort to get students to see themselves within a learner role: to see connections among their assignments and courses. The "transferable skills" prompt seemed to be Karen's most explicit attempt to prompt the
thinking Haswell describes – to get students to “interpret their participation . . . developmentally.” Students dutifully obliged her request, often using a variation on the phrase _transferable skills_: 

Writing an essay is a transferable skill in itself because one has to write essays in whatever they do. (Amelia 2)

Referencing quotes is not my strong point, but I thought I did well considering I’m new at this. I could see myself “transferring” my new skill of integrating the text into any other paper I do in college. (Callie 2)

Even among the essays that used a creative synonym for “transferable skill,” most of the students’ discussions discussed only one “skill” before moving on to the next topic. In other words, Karen’s attempt to use this prompt to help students take a broad view on their learning was a limited success because students seemed only to engage with the phrase as an obstacle to overcome or a box to check off as they wrote – a compliant or perfunctory “obedient response” to the learner role suggested for them.19 Only two or three students from the entire group made transferable skills a major topic in their self-assessments; Karen highlighted these in our interviews, pointing out for example how thrilled she was that her student Daniel connected his ENGL 401 research to what he was studying in his African American Studies course. “That’s always, like, your dream as a teacher,” she said. But she acknowledged that most students “didn’t take the hint.”

**Academic clichés.** Students’ uses of academic truisms and clichés seemed to be less perfunctory and more intentionally rhetorical: students often seemed to invoke them in order to establish themselves as having learned about the processes of writing and learning (and thus as being in a position to evaluate their own writing and learning credibly) – a

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19 Also, some might not have fully understood the request (see Amelia’s essay excerpted above, as well as Lily’s second essay: “I also think that for future papers, I will remember all the things that I needed to work on for this paper and hopefully won’t make the same mistakes.”).
“bought in” response to a developing writer role. In “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae describes passages like these as admirable attempts to approximate the discourse of higher education, the “set of conventional discourses and gestures” (404). Amelia’s first self-assessment begins: “As you know, one must write many unsatisfactory drafts to create the final master piece. In my final master piece [her autobiographical essay] there are some things that I am really proud of. . . .” Amelia’s introduction isn’t quite an appropriation of a conventional reflective essay move or even of academic language (“masterpiece” might have been a motivational term used by one of Amelia’s former teachers), but it’s definitely a brief attempt at an explanation of the writing process and a nod to the idea that she shared a definition of that process with the instructor. I should note that Amelia appeared to require language like this in order to establish her authority: her second self-assessment reuses the “As you know . . .” sentence, word for word.

Isobel uses clichéd language in nearly every paragraph of her first self-assessment:

We did indeed discuss the topic before getting started to really see the differences and similarities we each had on the topic so we could better put approach the research. Diving into research was not easy because finding reliable and quality research is a challenge. . . . Learning how to work in groups in general is a great lesson to learn because in the work field working in groups will be a part of some people’s everyday lives and it will only be beneficial to already have this positive experience. (Isobel 1)

Isobel takes on a task usually reserved for her institution and her instructor: the task of arguing for a purpose for her education. Again, this might have been her effort to establish the authoritative persona she needed to evaluate her work. It could be that Isobel was attempting to connect with Marina’s dominant performed classroom role, which I discussed in Chapter 5: that of expert educator/researcher. However, I’m also inclined to see it as a “misperformance” – a failure to pick up on Marina’s distaste for many of the truisms of higher education. In our interview, Marina told me she was unimpressed by Isobel’s essay (and this paragraph in particular) because “it was very Hallmark.” She noted how the final
sentence of the excerpt is so caught up in maintaining several clichés that the syntax suffers as a result. Isobel’s self-assessment was the lowest rated in Marina’s class.

Yet, as Bartholomae suggests in “Inventing the University” (404-6), it might be the case that a simple struggle for content in the absence of background knowledge compels students to seek out relatively empty academic or writerly clichés as “filler.” In Chapter 5, I noted that Marina’s students had only a small group project to discuss in their first self-assessments and weren’t asked to rationalize a grade. I found a higher concentration of clichés in this batch of essays (Claire: “A research process should provide large amounts of relevant information in an efficient way”; Eva: “A successful process is one that is done in an orderly fashion and benefits the person in many ways”; Noah: “Transitions are important because they help the paper flow from one idea to the next”) than in Marina’s second self-assessment, and almost none in the self-assessments written by Karen’s students.

From word to narrative: Process and the “writer’s struggle.” The use of clichés seemed to echo my previous experience with self-assessment, which I discussed in Chapter 1. But the most remarkable examples of intertextuality I noticed were broader and more subtle: some students seemed to be clued in to the larger narratives surrounding their writing classroom and found ways to incorporate such narratives into their own process descriptions. In a few pages, I’ll discuss students’ narratives of progress and personal growth, but first I’ll spend some time on the most common type of narrative (no doubt because of its connection to process): the “writer’s struggle.” As I’ve mentioned, both Karen and Marina assigned writings by authors such as Peter Elbow and Anne Lamott arguably to persuade their students that writers expect their writing to go through multiple drafts, and that “messy” drafts often lead to the most satisfactory finished products. Perhaps taking this
cue, a number of students constructed small narratives that spoke of their writing process as a struggle.

I chopped the paper in half so to speak, and to be honest I was a bit upset. I ever started to resent the paper because it was not portraying the message I had intended for it, but I continued to write and develop the remaining stories, and my faith in the paper became renewed. . . . When I received my paper back from my [peer review] classmate I breathed a sigh of relief. (Julia 1)

While seeing the last page pass through the printer, I let a sigh of relief out. . . . My memory made me seem to believe there would be more quotes to support my [autobiographical essay] then there actually were. However, I made due with the quotations that I found and was not going to let this problem stop me from writing an excellent paper. (Amelia 1)

I find it interesting that both Julia and Amelia personify aspects of their struggles (Amelia has a memory problem that stands in her way; Julia’s paper refuses to portray her message), as Lamott does in Bird by Bird. Even if we consciously avoid the impulse to read these excerpts cynically – the frustrating moments in these students’ processes could very well be accurately portrayed – the “sigh of relief” moments seem to demonstrate that Julia and Amelia are subconsciously invoking existing writerly narratives with conventions (or in Goffman’s terms, the struggling writer is a “character” against which these students are gauging their own performances).

But I should take this opportunity to point out a simultaneous pattern: in both situations – and in many others I won’t mention here due to lack of space – the students’ narrative resolves their struggles at the moment they finalize their drafts, as though all of the “rough” aspects of their essays were fortunately smoothed over just in time for the final draft. They seem to realize that playing the struggling writer role is a good strategy when doing so communicates a writerly disposition or work ethic, but not when it exposes an imperfect draft at the grading stage. There seems to be a point in self-assessment where the stakes are too high for a student to continue playing such a role and the impulse to “shield” the grade overrides the narrative.
Embracing challenges. Although I didn’t visit enough of their class sessions to get a full sense of how they characterized successful writers to their students, both Karen and Marina seemed to communicate that writers not only encounter struggles but also embrace new challenges and are willing to seek them out. In our second interview, Karen suggested that a narrative of challenging oneself would be an effective strategy for a student to take in a self-assessment, especially when talking about the autobiographical essay:

Mike: As you were reading these over, was there anything else that . . . surprised you in what you read?

Karen: Well, it was a personal essay and a lot of them wrote on really personal topics – really, really personal topics. So when they were discussing grading [in their self-assessments], they were focusing on, like, the mechanics of grading and stuff. And I was like, "Well, maybe you should get more points for doing something that was, like, hard for you to work through."

In other words, although Karen didn’t explicitly state it in her handout, she acknowledged that she was looking for a particular type of narrative and that savvy students (or students who were already inclined to write about their challenges) would benefit from constructing one. This helps to explain why Karen valued Sydney’s self-assessment so highly (see the case study at the end of this section): because it described in detail the struggle with putting the right version of her story on the page – a story she had intentionally chosen because it was difficult.

To me, Karen’s remarks are important because they reveal her awareness that students would take on self-assessment both as writers and as students. I saw evidence that students addressed the topic of challenge from both of these role perspectives – and sometimes used one to serve the other:

I think that one of the things that I did very well in my essay was to step outside my normal technique of writing and use some braided lyrics. The overall writing process was unique for me because I thought more about how I was writing. Normally I produce a 5-page essay just by sitting down, listening to music, and typing constantly until it is finished. This time, I tried
to think more about what I wanted to accomplish in the paper and tie in my writing style, with the need to meet the requirements as well. (Cameron 1)

I feel I deserve a B- for my first major assignment grade. I tried something new for me by using different snapshots of my life to create one essay. I braided in music quotes which I've never done before. (Callie 1)

In both of these excerpts, challenge consists of a resolution to step outside of one’s comfort zone and/or typical work habits. Callie’s use of challenge is transactional, as Karen suggested it should be: the extra challenge, the “above and beyond” intellectual work, takes on exchange value in Callie’s grading schema. Cameron’s comments are focused more on personal development, and in the self-grading section of his essay, he doesn’t refer to challenging himself. But the excerpt above was his opening paragraph, and he might have intended for that paragraph to linger in his reader’s memory as he moved on to discuss his grade.

Not all challenge narratives were considered successful. Karen spoke with me about the number of students who didn’t have an immediately interesting story to tell in their autobiographical essay or found no easy way to make their argumentative paper topic “matter” (a problem they discussed at length in class), and used this fact alone as justification for a higher grade. “It was all about pathos,” Karen said. “It was like, ‘I found it really hard to write,’ you know.” While she acknowledged her need to treat these students fairly, she admitted that too much vague allusion to difficulty wore on her quickly; she saw it as the one of the most transparent ways of arguing for a high grade without cause. Ultimately, a narrative focused on the difficulties of a writing process would only succeed if Karen found the “challenge” legitimate (i.e. based in ambitious writerly decisions, not in a simple lack of something to say) and felt that there was a genuine effort to overcome it.

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Case study: Sydney – A writer’s challenge within a student role. In What We Really Value, Bob Broad talks about his experiences meeting with composition faculty and mapping out the criteria they used when assessing student writing. He found that, contrary to their claims that they judged the writing on its content alone, faculty incorporated contextual factors – background information about the student that they knew or believed to be true. This was the case even when the faculty reader didn’t know a student: as they discussed the student’s essay, they would characterize him or her as a certain type of student with a particular attitude toward schoolwork, based on what they saw in the text. Broad takes the opportunity to argue that we must consider contextual factors and not try to convince ourselves that a truly “blind” and “objective” reading is possible. A number of studies support Broad’s findings – for example, Anson’s “Response and the Social Construction of error” (referenced briefly in Chapter 2) demonstrates how faculty readers of student portfolios constructed “writer’s personas” for each student as they read.

When Karen singled out Sydney’s essay as the highest rated of the first round (and as a clear standout, considerably better than the second-rated essay), context was obviously influential in how the self-assessment was read. Looking at Sydney’s first self-assessment on its own before my interview with Karen, I had some difficulty seeing why she held it in such high esteem. Sydney begins by describing her choice to use a “braided essay” format for her autobiographical essay – a genre Karen introduced in class and that about half a dozen of the 20 students ended up choosing. Sydney chose the format primarily because she anticipated jumping back and forth in time in her essay. Sydney progresses through her self-assessment, making a few relatively casual yet specific observations on the quality of her draft: “I narrate the story from the perspective of a ten-year-old and an eighteen-year-old very well”; “I could improve upon the end of my essay”; “My essay is well developed because I start with a background of the town and ease the reader into the story as if they are in my
place.” Most of these sentences fit the form I’d been seeing over and over in these essays: a modest evaluative comment followed by a few supporting sentences on what the student writer was attempting to do in the essay – very much in the student-as-developing-writer role.

The fourth paragraph, however, was striking:

For this assignment, my goals were to re-tell a significant part of my past that affected my entire life, convey how I felt while the day went on, and to have the reader feel like he or she was the one experiencing the event. This was hard for me because the event was so traumatic. Even though I am comfortable talking about the murders, it is harder when I have to remember the details of that day and re-read them again and again while editing. It was almost like I was reliving that day. Also, since the event was traumatic I only remember certain things that happened, but of those things, I can remember every detail . . . I met the goals of the assignment because I followed the guidelines and wrote about something that mattered to me.

Upon seeing the word murders buried in this paragraph, I realized that I was missing out on a large piece of Sydney’s story by not having access to her essay. In my first instructor interview, Karen revealed that Sydney wrote about the murder of her mother, sister and brother while she was away from home. Sydney’s essay narrates the experience of coming home to the crime scene. Perhaps not surprisingly, Karen found this essay difficult to read and grade. In her first conference with Sydney, Karen said, she expressed her sympathy, asked her if there was anything she could do, and then talked through a plan for the essay. Karen considered Sydney’s work on this project to be an example of “commitment,” a “very personal essay.”

While reading Sydney’s self-assessment, Karen was filling in contextual details that I had no access to, and these were affecting her perception of the essay, the self-assessment, and ultimately Sydney herself. Karen’s personal connection to Sydney’s process helped her to understand the claims that Sydney made in her self-assessment, although most of them involved “telling” rather than “showing.” Sydney wrote, “I tried to give many specifics without being over the top or making the story gory.” Karen picked this sentence out in our
interview: “I thought that was really aware of tone and audience in ways – that was really sophisticated,” she said. But only because she’d had extensive conversation with Sydney about the essay’s subject matter was she fully aware of the length and difficulty of Sydney’s attempts to strike the right tone in her “story.”

In short, while I saw a typical stance of complying with a developing writer role, Karen saw Sydney as a writer at work on a challenging piece of writing. As I discussed in Chapter 5, this was the type of writerly role Karen was trying to cultivate in ENGL 401, and she was no doubt pleasantly surprised that one of her students took it this far. Earlier I discussed Karen’s hints that a narrative of challenging oneself, of stretching beyond one’s comfort zone, would go a long way in making a self-assessment possible. Sydney’s essay topic couldn’t have been more challenging. “In a way, her [personal] essay was her self-assessment,” Karen said.

Sydney’s self-assessment (the actual text) is intriguing, given this background information – from my perspective, it indicates a lack of awareness on Sydney’s part that Karen valued her writerly role more than her compliance with a traditional student role. The self-assessment focuses primarily on format, assignment parameters, effort and steps in the process, while the emotionally charged struggle with the topic occupies very little space on the page. Even the paragraph I excerpted earlier, which best describes the inner conflict, wraps up with a fairly ordinary self-evaluative statement – “I met the goals of the assignment because I followed the guidelines and wrote about something that mattered to me.” Sydney’s self-grading paragraph at the end of the essay lists several justifications for an A that will become more familiar as we proceed through this chapter: the “many hours” she spent on the paper; the “many times” she edited it; the great distance between the first and final draft; and the fact that she “even challenged [her]self with the braided essay format.” Sydney didn’t appear to see how the difficulty of a life story would have a bearing
on how a student, in a student role, would be assessed – perhaps like the writing teachers in Broad’s study, she was accustomed to the notion that the judgment of an essay must be objective and context-blind.

Later in the semester. Further evidence from the rest of the semester seemed to confirm that Sydney was never fully aware of the writerly role that Karen saw her taking on in the autobiographical essay. Her subsequent course essays, which were solid but very much in step with the rest of the class, suggested that she saw very little worth replicating about the way she approached her first essay. In her second self-assessment, she makes minimal references to her revision process (“I had originally said, ‘Sherwood had kept a pigeon in his cell and the day before he was to leave . . .’ but then I went back and changed had to has and was to is.”); she talks about running out of time to work on her essay; she complains about the scant feedback she received from her peers; and she resigns herself to the fact that her paper is not very good (“I am too close to the paper to be able to make any changes on it to make it better”) – all common defensive or “grade-shielding” stances I discuss in this chapter. Sydney’s final self-assessment is even more brief; she spends most of the time summarizing the content for her final paper, and then puts together a fairly predictable rationale for her final grade:

Mike: She said on the paper that she felt she deserved a B+/A-.

Karen: Yeah. Yeah. Even in her evaluation of the class: “I felt like I gave it my all. I only missed one class, etc....” [paragraph] And so she kind of, ‘I came to your office and I put in a lot of time,’ you know, a lot of it is about effort and time.

In fact, Karen considered Sydney’s final paper relatively poor: she wrote an argument in favor of allowing tattoo parlors in prisons, but gave “very short shrift to the other side of the argument,” Karen said. Sydney also ended up being a poor judge of her own work, in Karen’s view: “Her self-assessment seems specific, but I don’t know if it’s right. She thought
her problem was research, and it wasn't." Sydney's proposed course grade was off from Karen's by a full point.

My interview with Sydney was the shortest one I had – she gave very brief responses to my questions and I had to ask several over in a different way in order to get a more substantial response. She told me that she enjoyed writing the self-assessments because they were "easier" and "more informal" than the course essays. She admitted to struggling over what to put in the self-assessment: "I tried to think of what Karen would look for. Um, we'd gone over in class . . . things like uniqueness and, not only punctuation, spelling and stuff, but things that most people don't look for, effort maybe, so I just tried to look at myself from her point of view when I gave a grade." Throughout our interview, she never mentioned her first essay, except to say it was the one that "turned out the best" and that she struggled with tense consistency. The questions that interested her the most generally had to do with the implementation of the self-assessment essays and their impact on course grades:

Mike: What do you think would have changed for you if she would've said, um, "I'm gonna read these [self-assessments] before I give grades?"

Sydney: I definitely would've put a lot more thought into how I graded myself – because, I don't know, because even just doing these and knowing that she didn't read them until after they were graded and our papers were handed back, it was still difficult not to take into consideration the fact that she sees us giving ourselves a grade.

Mike: Yeah

Sydney: And one of my fears was that I was gonna give myself a lower grade than she'd give me, and she would like rethink it or see that I didn't put in as much effort as she thought, and change it.

Our interview didn't reveal how preoccupied Sydney was with these concerns when writing her first essay, but it seemed clear, at least, that she'd never reached the point where her personal goals for a piece of writing were a more important measure of its success than the grade it received. Her focus was on success from a student perspective, and on possible
threats to that success. Although Sydney succeeded in the course, she might have lost her status as a "standout" in Karen's mind once it became clear that she no longer appeared to approach the course as a writer with something to say.

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Effort: A substitute for a writer's process. Both Karen and Marina valued detailed process descriptions with specific examples of revisions – if not a narrative of struggle or challenge, at least a linear process narrative of some type that showed the writer consciously making decisions and improving an essay. To describe her expectations, Karen used the same language she'd used in essay handouts: she asked students to "show" how they'd revised instead of merely "telling" her that they had. Both she and Marina also asked students to walk them through representative revised passages from their drafts. But many students were either unwilling to tie their self-evaluations to such a narrative or were unaware that they weren't doing so. Some didn't discuss their process at all. Instead, they made allusions to "effort" in the evaluation of their work. For example, the following end-of-course evaluations focused on effort rather than revision details:

Everything in my paper worked towards a better understanding of schizophrenia, what needs to be done to treat it, and how prisons need to improve their treatments . . .
I think that I didn't present the other side well at all to make counterpoints against it. I didn't really know how to do it, exactly . . .
I think I deserve an A- for the class, not just because I loathe B's but because I think I put in the honest effort this semester and my papers reflect on that. (Grace 3)

Process:
I think an appropriate grade for me on the process of writing my papers is a B+. This is an important part of writing and sometimes takes a long time, but in my opinion, I did a good job doing it. . . .
The overall grade I would give myself for the quality of my three papers would be an A-. Each of the papers met the specified guidelines and I put a lot of effort and time into each one to make it as interesting as I could. (Noah 2)
Neither of these self-assessments attempts to avoid evaluation – both students mention strengths and weaknesses in the essays they wrote in some detail – but these strengths and weaknesses are static throughout the process, not shown to have changed from draft to draft. And although the problems in these essays don’t resolve themselves as they progress toward the graded draft (as with the “struggle” narratives examined earlier), they’re sent to the background when the students evaluate themselves. Both make effort the primary basis for evaluation. The fact that problems remained unresolved doesn’t appear to be a major factor in the students’ evaluations.

Some students used the reflective/process description section of their self-assessments to quantify their effort. A few narrated a list of steps in their process:

For me, there were six steps altogether for writing the paper. The first step was to brainstorm different ideas . . . (Nathan 1)

I have never been more prepared to write any of my papers so far in my experience of college than I was for writing my Shawshank analytical paper. At the end of it all, I had a thorough outline, two rough drafts, and a final draft. Of course, nothing written is ever “final” so I cannot say it was the best paper I have ever completed, but it is definitely the most planned out essay I have done. [spends a full page of her three-page essay excerpting her outline] (Bella 2)

Others attempted to quantify time spent on a project:

Basically every day I would make at least a couple changes throughout my paper. I believe I went about and beyond on the process. I used every resource I could possible think of. This is why I believe I deserve an A on the process grade . . .

Even if I didn’t not like people’s feedback, I would try to incorporate them into my papers because I believe that every suggestion helps. Every day I would make revisions on my papers. (CJ 3)

Karen and Marina generally interpreted these extended descriptions of effort/time spent as attempts to bolster a grade without talking about the quality of the drafts – and using evidence that couldn’t be corroborated by the instructor. “The one downfall as I was reading these was . . . they’re like, ‘Look, I spent a lot of time – I should get an A,’” Karen said. Without specifics on what they did with their time and how their efforts changed the essay
for the better, this sort of narrative seemed like a cheap version of the extended decision-making and writing process (or of the "writer's struggle") detailed by some of the other students.

The pervasiveness of this pattern compelled me to examine it more closely. Effort, in some form, was by far the most common evaluative criterion in the self-assessments I studied: of the 36 end-of-semester self-assessments I read, 23 invoked the word *effort* somewhere in their calculation of final grades. The word made frequent appearances in midterm self-assessments as well. All of this was despite the fact that neither instructor had asked students to discuss effort in any of her self-assessment handouts.

A few possible explanations came to mind. First, this pattern could've been the most significant example of "conservative unauthorized rebellion" against the evaluator role suggested by these self-assessment assignments – that is, a broad student refusal to take on the unusual (and mostly unenforceable) duty of evaluating the quality of their work. Certainly, the shift toward effort (a "safe" assessment metric inasmuch as effort is rarely if ever seen as a negative) could be read as a grade-shielding technique, as Karen argued. Was effort simply the best way to steer self-assessments out of risky territory? Second, in "Underlife and Writing Instruction," when Brooke discusses students' strategies for "getting by" in a classroom, he includes overstating effort in reflective writing and building steps and drafts into the process that were relatively insubstantial or didn't actually occur. When these techniques are secretly shared among students, Brooke describes the activity as "role recognition" – i.e. "showing that the [student] is aware of and different from the roles assigned in the situation" (234-5).

I wondered whether this many students would use effort to resist the instruction to discuss their writing process (especially given the possible consequences of ignoring handout instructions) or to choose effort because it was the easiest path to a good grade.
Instead, effort seemed to be the default *quantifiable factor* in self-grading for students who had limited experience in discussing their revisions from draft to draft or discriminating among levels of performance ("A-level" organization, "C-level" argument, etc.). Effort, as unverifiable as it was by me or the instructor, was tangible enough for them to use it to fulfill the instructor’s request for a detailed rationale for their grade. Perhaps for Nathan or Bella, laying out each individual step in the process was process description, despite its lack of attention to revision. Here I’m tempted to characterize the high school writing experiences that were most likely still fresh in many of these students’ minds (though of course I know little about these experiences). Perhaps their high school teachers placed more emphasis on effort and time spent than writing quality – i.e. being a good student versus taking on writerly concerns. If this were the case, students might have simply been performing the student role to which they had grown accustomed (and mimicking the formula by which their teachers had evaluated them), and had failed to see how expectations for that role had changed.

**Reflection on weaknesses and strengths.** In an article in *The Writing Instructor*, Peggy O’Neill uses Foucault’s description of the Catholic confessional to describe reflective essays. "Foucault describes confession as a ritual discourse . . . that unfolds in a power relationship,” she says. “One does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, prescribe and reconcile.” Foucault’s description caused O’Neill to remember her own childhood, in which she and her friends would attend required confessional and, in order to avoid the risk of “exposing [their] inner-most selves” would confess to “predictable – and [they] thought acceptable – transgressions: talking back to parents, lying, fighting with siblings, etc.” O’Neill sees
required reflective writing as subject to the same tendency; in order to “construct
themselves in order to be judged,” students also confess to minor weaknesses, fulfilling
their duty to talk about negatives while mitigating the risk of doing so.

The conventional expectations of the self-assessments in this study evoked similar
responses. Although both Karen and Marina encouraged their students to be honest about
their strengths and weaknesses (and Karen intensified her discussion of honesty after
receiving the first round of self-assessments), there are practical limits to a discussion of
weakness in a graded context, and students used a variety of techniques to “soften the
blow” of their own self-critique. A number of students picked a *nominal weakness* to focus
on:

Because I am such a perfectionist, the first [draft] takes me so long that I
don’t spend a whole lot of time revising and editing. Instead, I should pay
more attention to these steps in order to develop my essay, and learn to just
write a “really shitty first draft”. (Anna 1)

One major point that I improved on was my MLA formatting. . . . I used a
comma between “King” and the page numbers in my next draft with my
parenthetical citations. It is important to know and I honestly have no
excuse for not knowing this . . .
Word choice is also very important to look at. I had to go through my essay
and fix all of my tense inconsistencies. I slipped into “was” a shameful
amount of times. (Grace 2)

Both Anna and Grace perform the ritual of conceding to (and feeling guilty about) these
minor transgressions, knowing that they pose no significant threat to their grades. Julia’s
first essay refuses to go even this far: she suggests a weakness and then *reframes it as a
possible strength*. She describes her decision to scrap parts of her essay (three stories from
her childhood). This leads to a low-stakes admission of “weakness” in her essay:

I would love to give myself an A but something stops me. Knowing what the
paper is and what those extra three stories could make it forces me to view
it as incomplete. Therefore I am giving myself the grade of a B. (Julia 1)

Julia had just finished implying that she would have produced a lower-quality draft if she
had burdened it with these extra stories, so this nominal concession to the
developing/struggling writer role (the only weakness she mentions in her self-assessment) is extremely low-stakes. Similarly, Ruby's first essay describes her tendency to put off work until the last minute, but asserts that this weakness is really a strength because "I have this tendency of working better under pressure."

Nathan *hedges* extensively in the evaluative portions of his essay:

I mean, [the paper is] about family, and me and my dad getting closer, but looking back at it, I am not sure if I made that fact clear enough... I thought that I was pretty creative in this essay. I tried to do the introduction differently. I usually have a very straightforward intro, but this time I tried to use a little suspense and mystery to help keep the reader interested. Since it was my first time trying to accomplish this, I am not sure if I did it as well as I could have. (Nathan 1)

In all, Nathan uses "I don't know" and "I'm not sure" a total of five times in this essay, but then goes on to give his paper an A. Nathan appears to be taking on the responsibility of grading his own work, but qualifies his evaluation by referencing his novice status – his possible inability to see flaws in his work – a move he is entitled to make when aligning with the role of student-as-subordinate. In other words, he’s ultimately able to shrug off the duty of evaluating himself – an act of resistance against the expected classroom role, whether conscious or not.

If Nathan is engaging in a “ritual performance” here, perhaps it's a performance of the *humility* associated with being a developing writer. Humility – a compliant performance of the role of a student at the bottom of the educational hierarchy – manifested itself across both courses in my study, as we’ll see in the case study of Jacob at the end of this section and the overview of student approaches to self-grading later in the chapter. Humility was more of an implied value than a mandate in these classrooms; for example, we could read Karen's encouragement of "honesty" in her second round of self-assessments as a coded reference to humility – but it was clear from interviews that both instructors expected to see at least a ritual performance of it. For example, Karen’s negative perception of Cole’s attitude toward
self-assessment (see the end of this chapter) was rooted in his lack of "humility needed to take criticism."

Additional qualifying moves across the student sample included the following:

- **Describing problems as inevitable under the circumstances.** Some students narrated what they considered exceptional circumstances in order to imply that they might fall outside the normal standards for evaluation. Avery's second essay discusses how "it was hard to edit" her paper "because the girl who edited mine didn't really give me much advice." Eva describes her group's inability to find books in the library and how "We asked someone who worked there for assistance but she wasn't much help" (1). And Amelia claimed a cognitive malfunction: "My descriptive meter is not calibrated correctly, and therefore I do not know when I have to much detail and when I have to little" (1). Similarly, Violet wrote, "I need to use better vocabulary, but I'm not exactly sure how incorporate more advanced words into a comparison paper."

- **Promise to improve.** Scarlett wrote, "In my future research projects, like the one most recently assigned, I plan to take more time in my research and to try to do my research thoroughly and efficiently" (1). Violet describes a lesson she learned: "I know now to get a range for the types of sources I will use, to give myself a full view of all the ways information maybe presented about a topic I choose. In the future I plan on researching several topics instead of picking a topic and try to make the research fit." (1)

- **Discussing revision as needless.** A considerable number of students wrote about how they could have continued revising their essay but only if forced to go through the motions of process, thus reframing their inclination to stop working as writerly
awareness. Cameron stated: “there was nothing to gain from me putting [more quotes] in besides just to meet an imaginary quota of quotes” (1)

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**Case study: Jacob – Archetypes and “ritual performances.”** As I'll describe in the next section, taking an ambivalent stance toward grading seemed to be one of the most common performances of humility and acceptance of the developing writer role. Such was the case with Jacob, a student whose first self-assessment was rated a “middle” by Karen, but who won praise from her for his humility. Jacob, in fact, seemed to fit a “student archetype” – that of the student who always underestimates the quality of his work.

Before I talk about Jacob, I'll explore this “archetype” idea a little more closely. In *Writing Relationships*, Lad Tobin reveals that his interactions with students – and ultimately the success both he and they had in accomplishing the work of the course – were inevitably tied to how they characterize each other early on. As he introduces Steve (the student with whom he had an embarrassing in-class discussion about a troubling essay, discussed in Chapter 3), Tobin admits that by midterm he'd already had Steve “pegged” as the type of student who “was going to get by in . . . class – no doubt about that, but [who] wouldn't put himself out too much.” Tobin goes a little further, using his observations to associate Steve with the “minimalist style that some teenagers adopt when they are forced against their will and mental health to spend time with adults, especially adults in authority” (7). Tobin admits that this characterization predisposes him not to give Steve the benefit of the doubt in situations where other students might receive that benefit. And he guesses that Steve has “sized him up” and associated him with a teacher archetype as well. Thus the conflict becomes as much about identity as about the details of an assignment.

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I argued earlier that students perform "discoursal selves" (Ivanič's phrase) through their classroom behavior and writing, and that their sense of academic identity is formed over the long term through "patterns of affiliation and rejection" (Brooke's phrase) with the various roles presented to them in the classroom. These performances are powerful and worth studying, I feel, not just because they resist or conform to teachers' expectations at a given moment, but also because they invoke established characterizations or archetypes. For example, in a College English article ("Car Wrecks, Baseball Caps, and Man-to-Man Defense"), Tobin associates the "minimal style" mentioned above with the small group of male students with baseball caps who always seem to populate the back row in each of his courses. So when Tobin worked with Steve, it seems, he saw him not only as a resistant student but as an example of this male, baseball-cap-wearing, quietly defiant student archetype. I feel it's important here to distinguish archetypes from "performances" and "identities" (and even the "writer's personas" I mentioned while discussing Sydney) because the characteristics of archetypes transcend time, space and individual cases, and they span aspects of the subject's life far beyond his or her classroom performance. By associating him with a specific variety of male student, Tobin likely attached attributes to Steve's identity that he had never actually witnessed.

For Karen, personality seemed to be the code word for student archetypes. As I discussed in chapter 5, Karen was concerned by the handful of students who seemed "way off" in their first self-assessments and decided that a discussion of honesty was important in preparation for the second self-assessment. Throughout the semester, we would return frequently to the conflict between honesty and personality:

Karen: A lot of [the grading discussion in self-assessments] was personality driven rather than actually – you know, [they said] "I think I should get an A." Sort of personality driven rather than, "Okay, take a really hard look at what you wrote." (Interview 1)
Karen: I said, "I've graded your papers first, so this won't affect your grade," which may have lowered the commitment level for some and raise the honesty level for others... I think personality has a lot to do with that." (Interview 2)

Mike: You've said that throughout the semester they generally seemed to be okay at assessing their individual essays.

Karen: Yeah.

Mike: Um, with some exceptions -

Karen: Yeah, but a lot of those exceptions were personality too. (Interview 3)

For Karen, certain "personalities" would be more likely to connect with the course on a personal level - for awhile, Sydney seemed to be that type of student. Others might be inclined to overestimate their grades - see the discussion of low-rated Daniel later in this chapter, as an example. And others might come across as happy-go-lucky and unconcerned with the finer points of grading, such as Natalie, whom I'll discuss in the next chapter. These weren't simply student attributes to Karen; they were indicators of a broader personality type, belief system and personal history. Karen constructed a backstory for each student, complete with suppositions about what they'd read and written in the past, how they'd been evaluated in high school and how those factors had shaped their stances toward education (her own archetype-based construction of their "academic selves"). Associating a student with a particular archetype helped Karen rationalize why that student approached self-assessment/self-evaluation in the way he or she did.

Jacob's first self-assessment was in the midrange of Karen's rankings because he often wrote with a lack of detail. More specifically, he wrote extensively about how important his topic was to him, but not much about the "finished product." For example, Jacob's autobiographical essay narrated his experiences with the Appalachian Service Project. It was a well-done essay that received one of only two As Karen gave while grading that set of drafts. But the content of Jacob's self-assessment was more about the memorable
time he had with the ASP and his desire that his reader would understand the value of his experience. He said very little about the draft itself, and didn’t even bother to use the non-abbreviated term “Appalachian Service Project” until the end of the essay.

But Karen was more interested in talking about the grade he gave himself at the end of the self-assessment: a B+. Karen had categorized Jacob as the type of student who was “really self-deprecatng” and whom she constantly felt the need to convince of his writing talent. "I was like, 'Jacob, it's a really beautiful paper,' you know... I was like, 'Read it again. Have you read it?'" I ventured a question:

Mike: Do you think his lack of detail about the writing process in his self-assessment was a reason he didn’t arrive at a "correct" grade?

Karen: That could be. I think that [Jacob] really thought it was an A paper and didn’t want to say it.

Mike: Okay.

Karen: I think that – he’s a good guy. You know what I mean? Tends to undersell everything he does.

A few pages ago, when I discussed Nathan’s “ritual performance” of humility (his tendency to insert an expression of self-doubt into each of his evaluative statements), I pointed out that Karen and Marina both valued ritual expressions of humility in self-assessments, and seemed to be indirectly asking for them when they asked for "honesty." Karen seemed to link the two attributes through archetype: a humble student was more likely to be an honest student. I see evidence for such a claim in the case of Daniel (the next case study I’ll discuss), who chronically overestimated his grade. The fact of the matter is that both Jacob and Daniel were “off” from Karen’s grade by roughly the same amount, but Jacob happened to be off in the “correct” direction. Jacob was seen as exemplifying the honesty Karen was looking for, while with Daniel the opposite was the case. Now, there might have been other evidence that compelled Karen to see Daniel as dishonest, but in our discussions, the only evidence
we discussed (and seemingly needed) was his high self-grading. Meanwhile, Jacob’s honesty was never called into question.

Interestingly, this was even the case when Jacob seemed to overestimate the grade on his analytical paper in his second self-assessment – he argued for an A- and Karen gave him a B. Karen and I discussed this essay, which again seemed rushed and relatively scant on details.

Karen: Yeah, it’s funny. So this paper wasn’t as good. His last paper was fantastic, [and] I felt like he walked into this thinking, ‘I got an A on the last paper, so I’m gonna get an A on this one.’ But it wasn’t very – it really wasn’t very insightful.

Mike: Hmm.

Karen: Not hugely off, but he’s a good writer, you know, and I think he was surprised by the first grade and I think he’ll be surprised by this one.

Perhaps because Jacob was already established as an “honest” student, his reputation for honesty remained intact here. Karen theorized that he had been thrown off in his evaluation because he was still getting accustomed to how writing was evaluated at the college level. His first grade was unexpectedly high and this result had confused him. Our conversation continued:

Mike: Do you think he’s the kind of student that, based on the [the lower grade] is –

Karen: – gonna be harder on himself next time or more evaluative [next time]?

Mike: Yeah, well you’re saying that he expects to get an A.

Karen: Yep.

Mike: But if you say something different, would he no longer be expecting an A?

Karen: Right, I think he would no longer expect to get an A.

Mike: And would change his expectations?
Karen: Yeah, I think he would work really hard on [the next] one. He’s a good student, a good kid, has good ideas… sets high standards for himself.

The third self-assessment was more like the first: Jacob suggested an A- for his researched essay grade and for the course as a whole. He wrote: “All through high school I was never able to do better than a B- in English, but this course has really helped me develop and hone my writing skills. . . I am more confident in my writing and feel that I can really express my ideas . . .” Karen gave him an A for the essay and course. When I asked her, “Where do you think the ‘minus’ came from” in his final self-assessment, she answered: “See, that’s personality, that’s Jacob. Jacob always gives himself a little ding, you know.” The third self-assessment, which narrates personal growth from a student who has a tendency to undervalue his work, fits Jacob back into his archetype, causing the overestimated grade in the second self-assessment to become a distant memory – a momentary blip. For Karen, “Jacob” – that is, the generic Jacob archetype – “always gives himself a little ding.”

This is not to say that Jacob had insincerely given a ritual performance of humility in an attempt to garner his instructor’s sympathy. In our interview, he continued to express his surprise at his grades: “The B+ grade [I gave myself on my first essay] was, for me, pushing it – I was really surprised [by the A] and though, “Whoa, my writing is really this good? . . . I see an A as, like, perfect, flawless.” He called himself a “harsh critiquer” of his own writing. Still, when I asked him whether he would’ve written his self-assessment differently if it were timed in such a way that it could influence the grade, he said, “I think it would probably have more influence on trying to say what you did well – and, um, it might not make you as honest in saying what you didn’t do well, because she’d definitely see those faults more, and faults seem to be very predominant over qualities. It definitely would’ve affected what I wrote.”

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Narratives of personal growth. In Chapter 1, I pointed out the use of transformation narratives in self-assessment essays ("I never used to do X; now I always do"). Such narratives were fairly common in the courses I studied, though usually on a smaller scale such as a change in attitude toward a particular writing practice. For example, Violet describes how she was unwilling at first to seek help from others but gradually ventured into the writing center and the library – and eventually rethought the value of these resources (3).

Karen's student Brody provides an extended example of such a narrative - constructed at the end of the semester in response to lower-than-expected grades. Brody's first self-assessment describes the role of peer review in the writing of his autobiographical essay. In response to the feedback, Brody claims that his paper could have been drastically rethought, but he chose to disregard the feedback because he considered the paper fine as it was. He suggests a grade of A- for his paper. "I put so much time and emotion into my autobiography," he adds, "that if I got a low grade I would probably feel like I wasted my time." But when the time came, he received a considerably lower grade on this paper than he'd suggested. This cycle repeated itself in the second paper – little attention to peer review, a high suggested grade, and a lower actual grade. His third and final essay suggests a new attitude toward peer review:

During my first essay, I really didn't participate in the peer review process the way I should of. I just shrugged off the constructive criticism because I thought my paper was written well. I didn't listen to my peers, and this affected the outcome of my paper. During the second essay, I began to take advice, but my paper still had a bias attitude. I listened to my peer's corrections, but I didn't implement all of them. When I finally wrote the last essay, I put a lot of effort into heeding the advice of my fellow classmates. I tried to look at my paper from an entirely new perspective....

I have become a lot more open with my writing. In the beginning of the semester, I didn't like to share my work. But now, I have seen how participating in the review process helps my paper immensely....
My writing has evolved from a one-sided view into an entirely new perspective. I look at my writing in a totally different way now. I actually try to dissect my rough drafts and tackle them from a different angle. (Brody 3)

This seems like a savvy use of a narrative opportunity: Brody has little use for peer review or a deep consideration of his writing process until it becomes useful as a frame for his transformation as a writer and collaborator. He adopts the values and situation definition of his instructor. This isn't to say his perception of peer review didn't change at all over the course of the semester, but it seems clear that grade considerations at least initially prompted his change in attitude. Additionally, Brody indicates an increased willingness to take on the role of a developing writer, and to adopt the humility that comes along with that role, like many of the students I've mentioned in this chapter.

**Discussion of evaluation/standards.** As I examined these self-assessments, I was interested in knowing how students engaged with the “nuts and bolts” of self-evaluation – after constructing process narratives and discussing their growth as a writer over the process of an essay or the course, what criteria did they ultimately end up using in their evaluations, where did these criteria come from, and how connected were they to the rest of their self-assessment narratives? As I've already shown, many students shifted abruptly into a discussion of effort when self-evaluating. But overall, I saw a lack of a clear pattern in the criteria they used: students were clearly not accustomed to evaluating their own writing, and despite the fact that they'd had in-class conversations on writing criteria, they often drew on a variety of other measures to argue for their grades.

Possibly in the same way both students and instructors related the level of “personal challenge” in an essay to the level of investment in it, a number of students made the *effects or results of the paper* into a grading criterion:

I feel that my research paper on family pattern addiction was the strongest piece of writing I wrote in this English class. I feel that aside from solid
research and concrete facts, this paper was good because I relate it directly to my family. (Drew 2)

I believe I should receive at least a B for the work I put into this essay. I am so proud of it that I plan to send my Dad a copy to read, and I am sure that it will make him cry, for I teared up when writing it. I tried a new way of writing, weaving the advice into the essay, and I am really happy with the way it turned out. Because of my poor revising skills, I fear that I may have missed grammatical errors, which is why I don't expect an A. (Anna 1)

The persuasive letter I wrote to my Grandmother is a good example of my strongest writing, mainly because she listened to what I was saying in the letter, and is now giving exercise and healthy eating a fair shot. (Catherine 2)

These short statements on the intrinsic value of a piece of writing might have, in part, been a result of Karen's and Marina's efforts to get students to connect their learning to their other educational and life experiences. I did notice, however, that no one used his or her personal views on a piece of writing as the core basis for a specific grade. Instead, students mostly discussed them as reasons why they liked the essay or considered it fundamentally "good." Like Sydney, who separated the deeply personal nature of her autobiographical essay from its evaluative criteria, Anna cites her emotional attachment to her essay as a reason it should receive a B. But a more traditional criterion – grammar – overrides this value and keeps the essay from being an A.

A frequent identity-based move in self-evaluation was to reference high-school-level writing and to contrast it with college-level writing. By differentiating between these standards, students were able to demonstrate their growing expertise in writing and their awareness of the differences between these two student roles.

I could improve upon my writing skills. I believe I still am writing at a high school level. I didn't have much preparation in writing in the past. Other professors have told me I need to work on my writing skills. (Callie 1, in the argument for a B grade)

20 Peter Elbow makes similar distinctions (and defends them, arguing that they should never be conflated in the evaluation process) in his article "Ranking, Evaluating and Liking: Sorting out Three Forms of Judgment."
Since I worked so hard on the process and revision of my papers, I believe the quality was overall changed. The quality of my papers was not good before the revision and without all the processes I did. With the revision and processes, I feel that I have moved up into college level writing instead of high school level writing. That is why I believe with my progress, I should receive an A on the quality of my papers (CJ 3).

I revised this essay numerous times and I feel like the finished product is something I'm proud to say I wrote. I would not be surprised if I get a little lower than [a B+] because I'm used to high school English, and I'm sure the grading will be harder. I hope that I can get above a "B", and if not I will definitely try to re-submit it for a higher grade. (Owen 1)

High school might have been an intentional target for students as they attempted to identify with their teachers. Marina had extensive high school experience and often spoke in class about how the possibilities for writing were constrained there – her student CJ might have been alluding to those conversations in his differentiation of “levels.” And as I mentioned in Chapter 5, Karen had a “frank discussion” with her students explaining that the reward system in high school didn’t carry over into college. Additionally, her first self-assessment handout referred asked students to give themselves a grade after considering “the increased expectations of college courses.” But she pointed out that some of her students seemed unsure of how to define the differences between high school and college writing other than by pointing out they existed. “High school seemed to be some sort of baseline,” she said, adding in the voice of her students, “But now that we’re in college, I don’t know what you’re going to give.”

A few students compared themselves with their peers. Karen complained to me that some drew comparisons between their course and other sections of ENGL 401:

Karen: Yeah, I think that they thought that um, that [effort] would be a miracle cure: “I've written a lot.” It was on one of the assessments, actually, and it [read] “my roommate, they didn’t have to do nearly as much, and I had to read a book, and I had…” you know –

Mike: The roommate took 401?
Karen: Yeah, and I always get that kind of stuff, but... so I think they felt like mine was the more, mine took a lot more of their time.

However, although this complaint resonated with my self-assessment experiences, I didn't actually see this particular comparison in any of Karen's students' essays, and wondered whether Karen was referring to a student outside of the study or in her past experience. I did find a few students comparing themselves to others in their section:

Overall, I thought our group presented our material well. Although it was repetitive we included another interview and survey results that the other group did not present. (Alexis 1)

These students primarily came from Marina's course, which included a group project and presentation. Because this project was somewhat standardized (all students were presenting on a similar topic and had been referred to the same person for their core interview), students might have felt more comfortable using this project as a basis for comparison.

Negotiating the specifics of grades. As seems to be the case with instructors when they attempt to explain the "fine-tuning" of their grades to students (such as the difference between a B+ and A-, or the awarding of a specific percentage value), the few students who tried to rationalize the specific grades they chose had to engage in creative rhetorical maneuvering to do so. I'll reserve comment here until I've given a full overview of the range of approaches.

Cameron alluded directly to the difficulty of struggling with a number of criteria and balancing them with his personal goals for the essay:

I find it incredibly difficult to grade myself on this piece because it is so foreign to me. I'm used to sitting and making what I usually consider to be works of literary genius in only a few minutes. Obviously, there's some exaggeration here, but what I mean is that I usually am very impressed once I come out of my trance-like state in which I spit out a 5-page paper. Because this one didn't happen at all like that, I am viewing it as less than what it potentially is. I can't tell if its good or not, but I do know that I have very mixed feelings. Sometimes I read it through and feel as though it's a C+ paper that is getting there but isn't quite a good explanation, only because I don't
show so much about my life that I want to show. Other times, I feel that, if people don’t know everything there is to know about me, than the paper shows a pretty good example of who I am, and is structured pretty well to do so. I literally have read the paper and thought poorly of it, and then read the same paper later and thought highly of it. I honestly can’t decide on a grade, but I don’t think I deserve one that I would be overly joyous about because I couldn’t get my points across the way I wanted. . . . The bottom line is that on a bad read through, I think I deserve a C+ and on a good read through, a B+. (Cameron, Karen’s class, 1)

A few students were similarly ambivalent about their overall assessment because they felt compelled to give different grades to various attributes of their work:

However I do wish that I hadn’t edited so much because it hurt the length of the paper and once that information as gone I couldn’t seem to add that last page. However my editing did allow me to simplify the systems so that my readers and I would better understand what each was all about. For this assignment in terms of effort I would give myself an A because I researched more for this paper than any other paper that I have ever written. But for final product I would give myself a B because I was not able to meet the length requirement. (Julia, Karen’s class, 3)

I feel that I deserve a B for this and all of my other papers, and the class for that matter. I don’t feel that any of my papers stood out and were excellent so I don’t think I am deserving of an A. At the same time there weren’t many, if any, issues or problems so a C is not fitting either. . . . Because of the amount of revising I did and how much I used my resources my papers also came out in the B range. Nothing above and beyond, but not settling for the bare minimum. (Blake, Marina’s class, 3)

Some students made the gesture of “settling” for a grade, implying that they had the standing to do so. Others implied that they would be “happy” or “content” with a certain grade, even if it was slightly lower than they’d award themselves:

I know that my essays still need work, but I believe I have improved a lot. I think I deserve an A- in the class, but if I don’t get that grade I will still be happy because I have become much more confident in my writing. If I don’t get an A-, it will still be an opportunity to learn more about improving my writing skills. I think my third essay was written fairly well, but I won’t know until I get feedback from the professor. If I don’t get a high enough grade to get me an A- for the class, I know it will be for a good reason and it will only help me improve my writing. (Brody, Karen’s class, 3, emphasis mine)

Again, overall, I feel I did a sufficient job in this course and that’s why I feel a B- or a C+ would be what I get or I deserve to get. If I get anything lower, I will know why, and if I get anything higher, I would be very happy and also
surprised. But I know you are the teacher and it is up to you, so I know I will deserve what I happen to get. (Avery, Karen’s class, 3, emphasis mine)

Some students saw effort as a “grade pusher” – that is, they felt that it qualified them for a higher grade than they might otherwise have earned:

I am not completely unhappy with the essay. I believe that I put legitimate effort into the assignment. However I am slightly unsatisfied with the end result. . . . If I were to give myself a grade on this paper based on content I would give myself a C+. If I were to give myself a grade on this paper based on thought and effort I would give myself a B. (Julia, Karen’s class, 2)

I think that my final grade in the course will reflect the effort and hard work I put into this semester. My first two papers were A/B work. Also, I attended every class and did all of the homework that was assigned to us. I participated in the discussions, and used the outside readings to help further my writing skills. Because of the work and effort I put into this class, I think that my final grade in this course should be an A. (Nathan, Karen’s class, 3)

And two students seemed to have little trouble arriving at a very specific grade:

With these efforts, I would give myself 26% for the process part. I made many big revisions in my papers, especially the research and persuasive ones. I considered all feedback, and I was proud with the finished results, so I would say 30% for the revision aspect. I put a lot of time and effort into each of my papers, along with other assignments that we handed in weekly. I struggled most with the research paper . . . Still, I thought the quality of each paper showed that I tried my best in the process and revision aspects, so I would say 36%. (Catherine, Marina’s class, 2)

In regards to what I feel I should receive for a letter grade factoring in all my papers I would say a B+/A (89%). (Ruby, Marina’s class, 2, emphasis hers)

At the outset of this study, I argued that the instruction to self-grade leads to some of the more complicated performances of student identity in student self-assessments. The “stage” set by such an instruction is an ambiguous space: it asks students to perform the role of an authority on writing without necessarily defining what that performance entails or what the consequences are. I might compare it to the feeling most writing instructors get when they first grade a stack of papers, except that these students had far less training. And most of the students in this study made it clear that, even if they were qualified to evaluate writing, they wouldn’t know it. When I asked them what knowledge, experience or skill Karen and
Marina had that qualified them, most simply said something like "They've written a lot of papers themselves" or "They went to school for this." Not a single student suggested that their instructors' expertise was a result of discussing criteria in small and large groups, comparing model "A" essays to "C" essays or constructing rubrics. So when Karen and Marina led them through similar exercises in class, students didn't necessarily believe these exercises were bringing them any closer to expertise.

They had, however, gained some expertise in their instructors' "situation definitions" for a writing course throughout the semester, and there's some evidence that these expectations shaped their performance as self-assessors, whether they realized it or not. In Chapter 5, I described how Karen's teacher persona encouraged openness and teacher-student collaboration toward the common goals of the course. When it came to course policies as articulated in her syllabus (the "business" of course), Karen's authority was firm and unambiguous. In other words, there was no reason to believe that assessment would be as open to negotiation as the day-to-day classroom conversation was. Marina's classroom was quite different: her classroom discussions and handouts were highly structured, but her relationship to grading was troubled and she often let students revise until they had a high grade. She encouraged students to negotiate their grades in their final self-assessments and left open the possibility that these negotiations could convince her to change her opinion for the better.

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that only in Marina's class did students make the seemingly bold move of articulating not only grades but also exact percentages. Catherine's casual usage of specific values such as "26% for process" might have been connected in some way to Marina's oft-stated belief that numbers seemed like an odd and arbitrary way to talk about the value of a piece of writing. Karen's students took more passive approaches, suggesting grades but performing the ritual of deferring to the teacher's final authority (a
true ritual, since Karen's grades were already decided). For example, both Brody and Avery argue for a grade that they unambiguously feel they deserve, but at the same time take the contradictory stance that a lower grade would still be fair – both say they would "know" that the instructor would have not only the final say, but also the correct evaluation.

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Case study: Daniel - On the perils of conceding authority. From her previous experiences with self-assessment and grading in general, Karen had constructed a student archetype that was motivated first and foremost by grades and that wouldn't hesitate to exploit a self-grading opportunity. They'd attempt to "muscle through" a high grade despite obviously underperforming in class.

Within the first two minutes of our first interview, she had steered the conversation toward Daniel's self-assessment, which was one of her two lowest rated. Here's an excerpt:

As for the development of the paper it was developed with care. There were enough specifics to envision the dance party at the Champion Ship and enough details to know what I was feeling during the days of my seclusion. The paper is obviously developed with authority because it is my autobiography so it is my voice. The audience should have understood the paper because the paper was written specifics that were presented with enough clarity as to not confuse the reader. Also, because they were presented with clarity and creativity they gave meaning to the text.

This self-assessment essay consists of seven such paragraphs, each of which sets up a goal and quickly tells how the goal was met. The negotiation that we saw from students in the last section – the weighing of different criteria, the split grading – appears to be unnecessary to Daniel. Karen pointed out the superficiality of his narrative: "Developed with care,' whatever that means," she said. "'Obviously developed with authority.'" She saw Daniel giving a minimal nod to each point from their classroom discussions in his self-assessment. "He's sort of going through the [rhetorical] triangle here," she said. "Just very 'check, check, check, I did it, I did it, I did it.'" She also remembered telling the class, "This is
your autobiography. You’re the expert on your life,” and she saw Daniel’s sentence on “develop[ing] with authority” as “kind of parroting back without really having any sort of awareness of his paper.” In other words, by conceding credibility (and thus authority) to students over their topic, Karen felt she had given them an opportunity to make “closed” evaluative statements that offered little space for disagreement.

Karen took issue in particular with Daniel’s grade rationale, which also seemed to display a lack of self-awareness:

I feel I deserve an A as a grade. I went through around five revision sessions and I feel that the paper flows and gives details that place you into the action. Also, the conclusion is insightful and well written. I expect this grade and maybe a little lower, but not much lower than an A minus.

Though we didn’t spend much time on this paragraph, I noticed a couple of rhetorical moves that might have caused Karen to see her “New York student” archetype written into this text. First of all, Daniel makes strong evaluative claims without any “hedging,” qualification, or any other ritual gesture to indicate his role as a student in a first-year writing course. “The paper flows,” he states flatly. “The conclusion is insightful.” Daniel also communicates a sense of entitlement to a particular grade, suggesting that he would only “allow” a grade within a certain range. He wasn’t the only student to do so – earlier I quoted Brody, who claimed he would feel as though he “wasted his time” if he received a lower grade than A- (but who changed his opinion after receiving a B). Still, something about Daniel suggested to Karen that he’d be more likely to fight back. “I knew that he’d be surprised with the grade he actually got,” Karen said. She decided to strike first, calling Daniel into her office in order to return his essay and self-assessment.

Karen: [With people like Daniel], I put in the grade I had originally and went back to my end comment and amended them: “Let me be clear about where you are. You know where you fell off here. You know why you think it’s an A and why I think it’s a B-,” you know –

Mike: Yeah.
Karen: So I kind of gave them more feedback as a result. Karen explained that with students like Daniel, she found it important “not to lose them, not to get them angry. I wanted to sort of keep them working, you know, so I wanted to keep that relationship good.” But although she used plural pronouns here, she never mentioned any other student who “knew” he or she deserved a certain grade but intentionally argued for a different one, or who was likely to be angry about his or her grade. And the A/B-grades she mentions are Daniel’s grades. Her one-on-one conversation and her note on honesty in the subsequent self-assessment assignment were designed with Daniel in mind.

Karen’s meeting with Daniel was uneventful – he wasn’t angry about his grade, and at the end of the meeting, they seemed to have reached some sort of agreement. But Karen suggested that the entire meeting might have been a ritual performance:

Karen: By the end we, like, agreed. I think we sort of knew that’s why we were talking about it.

Mike: Do you think he’s gonna do a better job next time? Do you think he learned from that?

Karen: From the self-assessment? No, I don’t think he learned from the self-assessment. Hopefully when I have the discussion in class about being honest about your evaluation . . . maybe that will help somehow.

Daniel hadn’t learned, and wouldn’t learn, from one-on-one discussion. So the classroom discussion would “help” him not because it would teach him the value of honesty, but because it would affirm to him that Karen would continue to look out for (and possibly enforce) a performance of honesty – it would establish honesty as a bare-minimum requirement, which was the level at which Daniel seemed to operate.

This perception of Daniel’s motivations would continue throughout the semester. His second self-assessment appeared to have moments of engagement: he was one of the few students to take the idea of “transferable skills” seriously, discussing in his self-assessment the connections between his writing for ENGL 401 and his African American
Studies course. Karen attributed this engagement to a rare moment of genuine motivation: “In his research he talks about the problem of inherent racism, and so he’s going off on it. He’s getting jazzed about that paper,” she said. But the rest of the self-assessment sounded much like the first. Karen commented on its “defensive tone” and ritual nature, channeling Daniel: “Like, ‘I don’t need to tell you the good things, I’ll just tell you, like, I checked this, so, like, I heard you last time, okay?’” We focused on this brief section:

The proofreading I did for the most part were small grammar mistakes and fixing the link between paragraphs together so they flowing seamlessly. I added more quotes to the final draft in areas that were necessary; however I will not give an example because they would be too large fit within this paper.

The errors in this excerpt suggest that this self-assessment was written in a hurry. In fact, Daniel does less than the bare minimum here: although Karen asked students to quote essay revisions, he makes a brief excuse for why he chose not to do so. And Karen suggested that his evaluative criteria throughout the essay came from high school rather than ENGL 401: “He says, ‘Every sentence links to the next,’” which I never talk about ever,” she said – something somebody else has told him is good. That’s so Daniel. I think he [was seen as] a very good student in high school, and he’s still living that.”

In the end, Karen saw Daniel as her biggest disappointment, her most unreachable student, of the semester. He was also the best argument against classroom projects that shift the balance of authority. After a semester of dealing with Daniel, Karen was glad she could always fall back on her traditional authority:

Karen: When they write to you “I know I deserve an A on this paper” and you’re like you couldn't be more wrong, then you’re sort of, now you’re having um, now you’re having a confrontation

Mike: Yeah

Karen: And so, I really tried with my relationship with Daniel to be like “Come on, you get it now, right? You see that –like, come to my side.” I felt rather pitted against Daniel.
Mike: Is it easier or harder for you at the end [since he’s no longer around to give an opinion on his grade?]

Karen: I mean, I don’t know – I guess I kind of feel like, I have the final say, so what are you gonna do. And like I said, I don’t think he likes me much, but what are you gonna do. When I first started teaching that would kill me, but [now,] you know, that’s the way the cookie crumbles – I don’t really like you and I’m a lot older and a lot wiser.

Resistance to self-grading. In my interview with Daniel, we discussed math. Daniel had suggested a final grade of A in his self-assessment, giving this brief rationale:

I received a B plus on my first paper after corrections and an A on my second paper. I expect around a B on my final paper so my paper grades will be around a B plus. So counting my homework assignments and class participation, preparation and attendance which together amount to twenty-five percent of my grade I expect an A in the class.

This formula didn’t quite seem to make sense to me, but without saying so, I asked Daniel to explain how he arrived at his grade. He gave me the same numbers, mumbled something about how he didn’t know how Karen would weigh each paper, but never really explained himself. He didn’t seem to want to discuss the topic. This was his rationale, and he was sticking to it.

The rest of our interview revealed why Daniel was uninterested in discussing the particulars of his grade: he saw no reason why a student would argue for anything other than an A. “Every kid should hand in a paper and expect an A,” he said. “You shouldn’t hand it in if you won’t say, ‘This is a solid paper. I should get an A.’” More remarkably, Daniel didn’t appear to see such a statement as potentially dishonest; several times throughout the interview, he said something along the lines of “Every paper I hand in is an A. If it weren’t an A, I wouldn’t hand it in.” When I finally tried to get him to parse his logic, he explained: “I’m not qualified to evaluate my paper. I’m a freshman in college, and I’m handing in my paper to a woman who has gone to school for several, several more years than I have, so, like – why should I be the one to grade my paper when I’m not qualified?”
I came away feeling that Daniel might have been trying to define two different types of grades, each associated with a different role. First, there was the authorized grade that came from someone with the authority to grant it. Second, there was a rhetorical grade—always an A—that he would suggest purely in service to his role as evaluated student. He wanted an A and he'd never turn one down if it were offered, regardless of his performance, so he'd simply argue for one every time and maybe even succeed from time to time. If he didn't deserve the A, the authority figure's grade would serve as a corrective—an arrangement he had no problem with and in fact preferred—but in the long view, going for the A every time was the strategy with the smallest downside. Daniel had developed a results-oriented academic self, and it came through in his self-assessments.

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"Risky" discussions. I'll close this section with a number of comments that could be classified as "misperformances" or unexpected responses to the rhetorical situation of self-assessment. Although this chapter has pointed out a number of ways that students were "savvy" performers (to use Schendel and O'Neill's term) in this setting, almost every student had one or two moments in which it was clear that the opportunity for self-disclosure was too great to pass up.

Some students admitted to a less-than-perfect work ethic:

I still struggle with the writing process. Rather than do many drafts, I write the whole thing in one sitting the night before it is do, with usually only a poorly developed outline to guide me. This has seemed to work out okay in the end, but makes the assignment much more stressful than it should be. (Anna 3)

I know I won't really get a good grade on this paper. I could've put more effort into it than I did. I feel over the semester I got kind of lazy. Not only on this paper, and this class, but all my classes. I know I will deserve any grade I get. When I got the Shawshank Analysis back, it hurt to see I got a C+, because I am not usually a C student, but I knew that that was what I deserved to get on it because I could've done more work on that also. On this
paper I feel I will and deserve to get around the same grade as that one, a C or C+. I didn't really edit it a lot, and should have more since the first draft was not so great in the first place. (Avery, who wrote similar comments in each of her three self-assessments – this is from her third)

Others critiqued an assignment or the course. The most obvious pattern was the response to the "prison" theme of Karen's course:

The problem wasn't that I had too many choices and I couldn't pick one, it was more that I was tired of the topic and was unable to find an aspect of prison that I would enjoy writing my final paper on. (Cameron 3)

This essay I found particularly difficult to write. I think that it was because I find the topic of prison so depressing that it made me extremely unmotivated to write about it. (Emma 2)

And some students directly referenced their dissatisfaction with a past or future grade.

Therefore, the grade I would give myself for the whole course is an "A-." I have given myself this grade because I received a "B" on my autobiography essay, and even though I believe the essay should have received a higher grade, it did not, and I know a "B" will bring my grade down for the course. I am delighted with everything that I have accomplished my freshman year of college, and in English 401, and feel that I have worked very hard. (Amelia 3)

I think that as far as grading goes, I will receive something around a B+. I feel like I should get an A-, just because I go through so many drafts and my paper completely changes. My effort placed in these papers is evident but I understand that this is a may be a tougher graded course. I worked harder on this paper than my last two just because it was our last one, and I hope its reflected in my grade. Considering how this was not an easy topic by any means, I feel that should be reflected in my grade. (Owen 3)

As I read over these statements, I attempted to place them within the context of role performance. As I've shown earlier in this chapter, the usual pattern in a self-assessment is to begin a narrative with an admission like one of these, but then to resolve it: "I didn't work very hard, but I changed my habits in this course and reaped the rewards." Or "I was apprehensive about the topic, but I kept at it and found the right angle." But many of these statements had no such resolution.

Students' perception of how these self-assessments seemed to play a part. In Chapter 3, I described Richard Miller's distinction between "public" and "hidden
transcripts." The public transcript is any form of "shorthand" that describes the interaction between authority and subordinate, while the hidden transcript is a reference to offstage behavior "beyond direct observation by powerholders" (15). As I mentioned in that chapter, self-assessment could be seen as either type of transcript: a public transcript if it reaffirms the traditional teacher-student hierarchy (as many of the examples in this chapter do), but a hidden transcript if students at least temporarily see themselves in an equal partner relationship with their instructor – that is, if the self-assessment is a place for both instructor and student to background their institutional roles and speak honestly.

All of the risky statements above are from Karen's students. It might have been the case that, by combining a discussion of honesty with a promise that self-assessment had no bearing on the essay grades, Karen occasionally created what Howard calls "lacunae" or "spaces ... in which the hegemonic forces described by Bourdieu and Passeron ... subside" (41). Students might have seen an opportunity – a rare and brief opportunity – to give unfiltered views on their educational experience. I should note that out of the 20 final self-assessments I read from Karen's course, I noted unsolicited positive evaluations of the course in eight. I don't know to what extent these were conscious performances, but I certainly entertain the possibility that a few students were taking the opportunity to speak from the heart. If this is the case, Karen's students give us a clue as to how self-assessment could be a productive endeavor even in a relatively traditional writing classroom.

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Case study: Cole – a "risky" performance of self. To introduce her study on the social production of writing ability in university placement testing, Francis J. Sullivan discusses how "student roles" are encoded into teachers' readings of student essays. She summarizes a study by Sarah Warshauer Freedman in which professionals' academic essays were mixed
into a group of undergraduate placement essays and submitted to instructors for a blind reading. Many of the professional essays were given low ratings because they failed to show the "deference" expected in the placement situation. Freedman writes, "The professionals violated their expected student roles: they were threateningly familiar. . . . If a reader does not perceive the writer to have authority, and if the writer takes authority, much of the writer's language can be misinterpreted and misevaluated" (qtd. in Sullivan 72). Sullivan adds that a student writer is expected to "go out of his way to identify himself as [a] kind of apprentice" (72). Her study demonstrated the inverse of Freedman's: she showed how placement essays were rated poorly when they included too much background information – in other words, when they appeared to underestimate the educational level of the teacher-reader (87). These studies echo the claim in this dissertation that a developing writer sometimes benefits from knowing and performing the difference or gap between him/herself and an experienced writer – but more generally, they serve as cautionary tales about tone and its connection to identity.

The instructors in this study tended to give low ratings to self-assessments not because they gave themselves inaccurate grades (although this factor did seem to separate the "highs" from the "middles") but because they seemed to misjudge the tone – the "deference" or humility – of reflective writing. Cole was the most extreme example. He was one of Karen's two choices for the lowest self-assessment essay of the first round, and she was eager to discuss him in our first-round interview. "Oh yeah, you gotta see Cole's self-assessment," she said. Here are some excerpts:

I think my essay reflected some of my better qualities, namely humor and wit. I would say my writing style was a tribute to my true character and for this I applaud myself.... My voice in the paper was authentic and in my view clear throughout the work. The reader should never be in question as to who is speaking.... Answering the "so what" question was in my view something I did clearly and adequately. I would be hard pressed to find a reader that did not grasp my pervading message to love laughter and in turn love life....
Only a person without a pulse could not chuckle at least once while reading my autobiography. I chose to show the reader I was humorous through interjection of jokes, quotes, or life experiences rather than just state the obvious. I am effing hilarious.

I think that my feedback from my peer editor was constructive and very useful. Another set of eyes and another perspective is always helpful when I am writing.

[but two paragraphs later] My peer editor was not shy about expressing his views. He found my piece "not that funny". I chose to ignore this because he was being grumpy that day and I laughed and my girlfriend laughed so I need no other approval than that.

Do I expect to receive an A? To say I think I won't receive what I previously stated I deserve would be an insult to you the professor. That would be a suggestion that you were not capable of understanding and recognizing what I consider insightful writing. I do not however hold this opinion. From what I gather from you as a person, you enjoy a laugh yourself and are not short on clever wit. Therefore, I expect to receive the grade I think I deserve from you.

This essay was unique in the class in a number of ways. In the last chapter, I mentioned a couple of students who made "closed" evaluative statements that left little space for disagreement – an unusual approach to take for a first-year student – but Cole made far more of those statements than anyone else. He seemed not only firm in his self-evaluation but also openly defensive, perhaps hostile, toward anyone who might offer an alternate evaluation. Only a rare reader – a "reader without a pulse" – would be unable to engage with his paper on a personal level, he said. "I just ughed out when I read this," Karen said, "I just got the feeling that he's the arbiter of this paper, um, 'I've decided it's good and so it's good.'" And the end of the self-assessment seems to attempt to manipulate his instructor into giving a grade of A: Cole characterizes Karen as good-natured and witty, then turns this compliment into a reason why he would expect to receive nothing other than an A.

Karen might not have reacted so strongly to this self-assessment had it come from Daniel, whom she'd characterized early on as a chronic overestimator of his own work. By contrast, Cole's self-assessment caught her off guard because it contradicted what she thought she knew about him. "His [self-assessment] was just so, really, kind of – 'If you don't laugh you're effing crazy' – and I was like, 'What is this all of a sudden out of nowhere?'"
to this point, he had demonstrated an awareness of where he stood both as a writer and as a student. Karen went on to characterize Cole for me. When she first talked to him in a conference, she said, she discovered that he was the rookie of the year on his high school soccer team. She expected him to be "one of those students" who had little time for his work. Also, he was quiet and that worried Karen: "[I thought,] 'He's gonna be the guy I'm gonna have to yank out of the chair,' you know." But in their first conference, Cole seemed committed to working hard on his first essay. "He came in and he was so thoughtful about his paper and really articulate, and his essay was very good . . . and we had another conference about it, revised - [he was] just really careful about it, really wanted to work hard. So the self-assessment, which discussed this essay, was out of character: "It was just so . . . flip. That was very surprising to me." Whereas Cole in real life had displayed an awareness of his imperfect essay, Cole on paper seemed to lack "the humility to take criticism," as Karen phrased it. I should emphasize, however, that he was not significantly "off" in his self-evaluation: he proposed an A on his essay and received an A-.

So, what exactly was going on with Cole? I could think of two possibilities: either Karen had misjudged how humble he was in the first place, or he had miscalculated the effect of his performance. Four weeks later, as Karen and I reviewed the second round of self-assessments, the latter seemed to be confirmed. Karen told me that Cole had used a similar tone in his second writer's memo, so she set up a meeting with him in her office. "The writer's memo had a couple moments of [being] flip, but then he commented, 'I'm being flip here.' Like, 'Karen, you're in on the joke with me'...? So I said to him, 'Why do you do that? If you know that it puts the audience off, why are you doing that?'" Cole seemed surprised and embarrassed when confronted in this way, she said, and in her view, he'd taken her words to heart and improved his tone in the second self-assessment. "It didn't seem so bad - was it? The last one was really disrespectful, and this one was not, I don't
think." While Cole's self-assessment continued to focus on evaluative statements at the expense of process details, Karen didn't read arrogance into it. There were definitely fewer attempts at humor, which might have played a part in her reading. Also, she drew my attention to his paragraphs on peer review, which for her revealed a changed attitude:

I think that my feedback from my peer editor was constructive and very useful. Another set of eyes and another perspective is always helpful when I am writing. I liked the [in-person feedback] process better because it required less written feedback which can be misunderstood . . . My peer editor was not shy about expressing her views. I chose to heed her advice and delete or rewrite some of the sentences that made me appear awkwardly worded. I put in a good effort and I wrote multiple drafts of this paper.

Although there was little detail about what Cole had actually revised as a result of peer review, Karen pointed out that at least he claimed to get something out of it rather than simply laughing off the exercise, as he did in the first self-assessment.

By the third self-assessment, however, Karen had begun to form another impression of Cole: that, in some ways, he was that student portrayed in the first essay, but that he'd simply toned it down a little. "Cole thinks Cole is very smart," she said. "He's the kind of student who'd put in Kierkegaard, like draw it out of nowhere . . . and I'm sure that was very rewarded in high school. He thinks he's very smart and I'm sure he's not wrong." His performance of self in writer's memos and self-assessments continued to be so different from that of his course essays (and from his behavior in person) that Karen felt he was unconsciously switching voices. "He's got this other Cole he puts on [in reflective writing]," she said. "And it's clunky, it's really clunky. I feel like he keeps a journal for posterity, you know? This is his journaling voice." Still, Karen considered him "more confident than arrogant" in his third self-assessment - "very clear about what he thinks his strengths are," she said, but more self-aware about his tone and more interested in listening to others' perspectives on his writing.
Deconstructing Cole's stance(s). In my interview with Cole, I attempted to make sense of his approach to self-assessment. He admitted that he was aware of his “arrogant tone,” and claimed to have worked on fixing it throughout the semester. He said that arrogance in writing was a known issue for him, and it had proven difficult to eradicate. Whenever he’d asked his father to read his drafts both in high school and in college, his father’s feedback had been directed toward changing the tone.

But although we talked briefly about his first self-assessment, Cole actually saw few issues there. He was more interested in talking about the second, which Karen saw as an improvement but which had failed to earn the grade Cole had argued for.

Cole: So when I wrote my essay, I was a genius. I made these claims about prison and society.

Mike: Right

Cole: So it was not the right place to do that.

Mike: So would you say that you agreed with that? With her [grade]?

Cole: I agree with the assignment - she did assign an analysis essay.

Mike: Yeah

Cole: But I disagree with assigning analysis essays. It’s kind of like, where do we go once we reach the thesis? And the book doesn’t really help anyone, unless you apply it. Like Huck Finn, helping the slave. The runaway slave. It’s like, well, if you just wrote about that, how would you learn anything about moral dilemmas in the outside world? So I think it’s more important to apply things once you kind of claim something.

Mike: Yeah

Cole: But that’s just me being a freshman.

Throughout our interview, Cole continued to alternate between these two stances: questioning the fundamental assumptions of the course and then inserting a qualifying remark, an acknowledgement that he might not have the expertise to know what he was talking about (his ironic “genius” and “freshman” labels suggested he might have been
aware that his struggle with arrogance was ongoing). Generally speaking, he seemed to be trying to understand the underlying reasons behind each task he was being asked to do in college, and he was skeptical about most of them.

After listening to Cole question various aspects of the course, I decided to focus on peer feedback, the one idea that he seemed to have warmed up to over the course of the semester and that Karen had cited as evidence for a tone shift in his self-assessments. I asked him how his attitude had changed.

Mike: On the third page of this [self-assessment], you say, "I think my feedback from my peer editor was constructive and very useful," and then toward the, um, second-to-last paragraph: "My peer editor was not shy about expressing her views; I chose to heed her advice..." Um, so, sounds like - was it the case that you used the peer feedback more on this project than on some of the others?

Cole: Uh, no. You caught me. That was a bit of a fib. I mean, I listened to what they say, but I know that Karen was really excited about the peer editing idea, so – I went about bashing the peer editing process, and I was afraid I might cross into the realm of criticizing her strategy. Because she thinks – as least she told us that it's great for the writing process. I'd be taking direct opposition to the person who is grading my paper.

Mike: Yeah.

Cole: So, I'm not afraid to battle, but I didn't want to pick that one, because it seemed like she had a strong sentiment towards peer feedback.

Though some of the students I interviewed had suggested that their anxiety about grading might have affected their decisions about what to include in their self-assessments, Cole was the only one who admitted to lying and taking a compliant stance. Peer review was yet another element of the course that he disagreed with, but because Karen seemed to believe in it so strongly, he felt compelled to make this gesture.

I recognized that Cole's decisions were guided in part by the way he perceived the student-teacher relationship. Throughout our interview, he characterized Karen as a "great teacher" who made much more of an effort to connect with her students than his other professors did. Though he complained often about the ENGL 401 curriculum, he rarely
seemed to blame Karen for it. Possibly, his recent high school experience had led him to believe that she had less control of the curriculum than she actually did – that she was a mutual “victim” of it. Viewed through this lens, Cole’s overall performance might make sense: his high opinion of himself was genuine, and he would make an ironic comment on the course when he felt she was “in on the joke” (i.e. his self-assessment was a private transcript in these places), but he would switch to a face-saving gesture for Karen when he felt she was invested in some aspect of the course.

But there’s some evidence against that view. After our interview, I took another look at Cole’s self-assessments and I noticed something unusual: he’d repeated himself, often word for word, in multiple places across all three essays, as though he’d used the first as a template and simply changed a couple of words. You might have noticed, in the two essay excerpts I’ve posted, identical introductory language (“I think that my feedback from my peer editor was constructive and very useful. Another set of eyes...” etc.) and a sentence that had only been changed to reflect the gender of the peer (“My peer reviewer was not shy in expressing his views” became “...her views.”). The number of additional repeated sentences, or slight variants, is too extensive to list here. The first sentence of the self-assessment was the same (“I think my essay reflected some of my effort at integrating quotes and analyzing the text.”) in all three self-assessments; chunks of passages on authentic voice, on answering the “so what question,” and on integrating quotes carried into all three essays; and Cole’s grade rationale for the last two papers was identical (“I think I integrated quotes well, supported my thesis with strong textual evidence and had a clear message and relevant topic. So having done all these things I believe I deserve an A on this paper.”). I was surprised that I hadn’t noticed the repetition – but to be fair, neither had Karen. Perhaps the only reason she saw a changed tone in Cole’s self-assessments was because her in-person conversations with him had influenced her reading (and apparently
mine). Cole must have been aware of the risk that Karen would see his repetition and interpret it as an expression of contempt for the course. Why would he take that risk?

What can we learn from Cole? As I described in Chapter 5, Karen seemed to portray her authority as necessary to accomplish the work of the course, but took on a mentor/co-learner/friend role in her day-to-day interactions with students. I speculated earlier that Karen’s teacher persona, combined with her insistence on honesty and her promise that self-assessments would have no effect on students’ grades, might have opened up a small space for students to offer “risky revelations” about their writing. Karen said, “I wanted to give them space to write sort of free of English paper concerns — you know, a space of expression that’s less formal than a paper. For [Cole], maybe it backfired.”

This might seem like a case of teacherly self-blame, but it’s worth exploring. In Chapter 5, I excerpted Karen’s first writer’s memo handout, the parodic tone of which could almost be seen as a model for Cole’s self-assessments. And Karen’s first self-assessment prompt asked students to summarize the peer feedback they’d used and ignored, possibly leaving an opening for Cole to make a remark about ignoring his peer reviewer completely. If Cole took these cues at face value, we could characterize his problem as poor rhetorical awareness: he simply failed to see how seriously Karen wanted her students to take the activity of self-assessment.

But this isn’t the only possible reading of Cole’s work. During my recent time on the job market, I gave a couple of presentations on the research summarized in this dissertation, and I often used excerpts from Cole’s essays. More than once, my audience raised an interesting point: Cole was an interesting case because, at some level, he was right. His skepticism toward college-level essay assignments was healthy, and his resistance to self-assessment might have been perceptive. He might have realized that self-assessment is often a rhetorical game, and he might have been intentionally testing the boundaries of
that game. From that perspective, he was taking his learning seriously – he took a resistant stance because he saw the ritual of self-assessment as one of many rituals that threatened to trivialize his education. When all was said and done, he probably had cause to question the advice he’d received from his peer as well. After all, Cole was one of the best assessors of his writing: the grades he gave himself were generally close to Karen’s grades. His peer, who happened to be Daniel, was one of the worst. One of my audience members said he’d like to have a student like Cole in his class – that he would be a welcome break from the classrooms full of students who never seem to question anything they encounter over their college careers.

In Chapter 3, I defined a student’s academic self as the felt sense of student identity that results from his or her history of stance taking; this academic self is usually selectively presented in an academic situation. Cole was an interesting case because the in-process nature of his identity negotiation was more open to view than the other students’ processes were. It might very well be the case that, as Cole was attempting to understand the point of his college-level assignments, he was also “trying on” a number of different role performances or personae. How we read Cole’s writing, then, would ultimately depend on which of these performances we believe to be closest to his felt sense of academic self. This isn’t a simple judgment call, however. His instructor was unable to link him to a single archetype: he was one student in person and another on paper. And while Cole was clearly self-aware – he chose when to “battle” over certain elements of the course, and he understood when he had made a wrong choice – he also seemed unable to characterize himself consistently. He was intelligent one moment, ignorant the next, interested in the course one moment, dismissive of it the next. The same is most likely true for a number of his peers – privately, they were probably taking a number of stances toward their assignments, toward peer feedback, and so on. But we were usually unable to see these
stances behind the ritual performances catalogued in this chapter – performances that Cole, for whatever reason, mostly declined to incorporate into his self-assessment repertoire. If there’s something to learn to Cole, perhaps it’s that we take comfort in students’ use of tidy narratives and compliant gestures, even when we recognize them as somewhat fictional. We definitely notice when they’re absent.
CHAPTER 7

NOTES ON THE ‘GRAMMAR’ OF SELF-ASSESSMENT ESSAYS

My selection of excerpts and case study narratives in the preceding chapter was intended to highlight patterns of role-based performance. But it’d be inaccurate to say that the moves I’ve catalogued there are fully representative of what happens in a self-assessment essay. And although we spent most of our interviews discussing these moves, they weren’t always what students and instructors found most interesting about self-assessment. So, to close my discussion of findings, I’d like to balance the patterns I’ve examined so far with students’ and instructors’ statements on what they valued about the project, as well as a closer look at moves in self-assessment essays somewhat beyond the immediate scope of identity negotiations. This brief look, I hope, will lay the groundwork for classroom discussions (and perhaps future study) on the “grammar” of self-assessments.

First, I’ll explain the “grammar” metaphor. In Chapter 3, I referenced the “grammar of schooling,” Tyack and Cuban’s phrase for the rituals, conventions and behaviors of education that have been reified and institutionalized over the centuries. I find this metaphor useful because it applies on a smaller scale to a number of activities and processes within educational settings. My study seems to confirm that self-assessment essays have their own descriptive grammar, a form and set of rhetorical moves that students produce without much instructor prompting. A number of students who had never had any previous experience with the genre of self-assessment (according to my interviews) still managed to write essays that fit these patterns. At the beginning of this dissertation, I
claimed that students had assembled an internal template for the genre and that this template was intertextual in nature. But what are the texts in that template? What influences contribute to this unarticulated yet shared grammar for self-assessment writing? This study, I feel, has only begun to answer that question.

The grammar of self-assessment assumed by the instructors in this study, however, seems clearer. In Chapter 5, I described how Karen and Marina wanted students to give details about their process in their self-assessments: that is, to describe their major decisions while composing a draft, to compare old versions of revised paragraphs with new ones, and to talk about where they had successes and failures and learned about themselves as writers. When I asked them how they decided on their “high” self-assessments, both instructors focused on these sorts of details:

She talked about a lot of the parts of the process, like what it was like to develop a thesis and what went into it, her experiences and the discussion [her group] had around the project, where they went for research, how they – how they tried to use different search phrases, and then just the experience of not knowing if they had enough research. Having to simplify their topic. (Marina, discussing Paige’s first self-assessment)

He talks about how he used evidence to support his thesis and how that was useful and he wants to try it again. He talks about how they should’ve found more research – [our group] got it to this point, but we could’ve gotten it to this point. And basically enumerating the things they could’ve done – so not just “This is kind of good,” but “I understand where it could’ve gone.” (Marina, discussing Max’s first self-assessment)

She talked about her topic more [than most of the other students], how she tried to build in more description and it seemed to pay off. Her awareness with – difficulty with personal description, the level of description. ... a lot about the early process. It was useful to see that, you know? I don’t know how [it was useful], I guess, but [it was] useful. (Karen, discussing Lily’s first self-assessment)

In short, instructors didn’t only value process description when it rationalized the student’s evaluation or grade. The descriptions they found the most useful showed students engaging in the intellectual processes of writing (see Haswell’s discussion, referenced at the beginning of this chapter): Paige questions her “frame” for defining the scope of a project;
Max rethinks the role of research and the possibilities of collaborative work; and Lily learns more about a personal obstacle she often faces when trying to write descriptively. Karen found that, as she was selecting self-assessments for our discussion, she gravitated toward "the ones that were ... the most self-aware, most in tune with their process." She added, "I don't think [my selections] had to do with the evaluative part, really – I think [they] had to do with their level of commitment to this project as a whole."

The "weak spots" in self-assessments were usually defined using the same terms. Karen and Marina would describe a moment where a student had an opportunity to describe a moment of learning or realization in his or her process, but would fail to follow through with it. Marina and Karen used phrases such as "I really wanted to hear more here." These instructors saw self-assessment as a chance to get to know their students better – often to give them more individualized help with their writing (both instructors said this), but just as often as an end in itself. They were personally interested in knowing more about how their students took on a task, negotiated the challenges associated with it, and ultimately learned about themselves as writers.

For their part, the students who valued self-assessment also saw it as a way to find patterns in their writing process. Natalie, one of Karen's students, said, "She always wants us to, like, become a better student, and by writing self-assessments, we had to go back and look at our paper and analyze our writing – something I'd never done before. So I got to learn more about myself as a writer, like, see what I was good at, and look at my growth as a writer." Emily, Marina's student, talked about the general habit of writer's introspection regular self-assessment writing encouraged: "You take into consideration, 'Oh, I did this badly on this other paper – I need to focus on that more when writing this [next] paper. I kept thinking about that whereas I don't know if I'd really tried to carry those things forward [before], you know."
Examining two types of self-assessments

In order to understand more about what instructors valued and attempted to reinforce in these projects, first I'll examine Lily's high-rated first self-assessment essay:

In this essay I wrote about a topic that was difficult and new for me to write about. I wrote about my grandmothers' death and how she wasn't just "my grandmother" but my role model. I talked about how she set a standard for me to strive for in my own life....

When I started writing this essay I didn't have an outline for how I was going to organize all my thoughts about my grandmother and her influence on my life. I just sat down and began writing about the day she died and from there I wrote about the wake and how I dealt with this loss. I knew that this was an autobiography and that I needed to talk more about my life and not all about my grandmother so I decided I would experiment with a new technique in my writing. I began using asterisks to separate the parts of my essay about my grandmother and then parts about my life and her influence. I have never written an essay in this format. I liked the final product of my new technique work because it made my transitions in my essay easier to follow....

The experience of loosing my role model, my rock and my grandmother all in one day was extremely hard and heart wrenching. In my essay my goal was to make my reader feel the pain I experienced. By explaining this story to my readers I was trying to show them how my grandmother's life and death had a huge influence on my life....

I not only used almost everything that my peer editor suggested to me, but I also had two of my friends edit my essay and I had each of my parents read my essay and give me their advice on it. By having five people edit and critique my essay allowed me to get an outside view on my own work. By seeing their edits and talking through my essay with them allowed me to see that although I thought my essay was great after the second draft, my editors didn't agree and thus led me to have 6 total drafts before my final essay was finished....

Looking back at my editors' feedback I realize that I should have put more about me into my "autobiography." I did talk about myself and how my grandmother influenced me, but the bulk of my essay is my experience in loosing her and her many accomplishments. I used my loss and her accomplishments to help explain her influence on me, but I could have used more stories/anecdotes about my life and my accomplishments and her influence in those. In addition to this, I should have focused more on my tense use because there are moments that are clearly confusing due to my quick change in tense. I've always had difficulty figuring out which tense to write in and then sticking with it....

In my mind I think I should receive a B+. The reason for the B+ is that this was an autobiography and as I mentioned earlier I could have talked more about myself. I think that I did a great job "showing, rather then telling" my readers about my life and I think that I met almost all the goals for this assignment. I think that if this essay could have been however long I wanted it to be I would have been able to add more about my life into it,
which was one of the major goals of this paper. Overall I believe I did the best I could with the time that I had and I hope that my readers enjoy it and learn from my story.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of Lily's self-assessment is the strong narrative element: there's a chronology, a series of decisions that got her paper to the point she describes and evaluates at the end of the self-assessment. In fact, this narrative provides the framework for the whole self-assessment; at no point does she step out of it. From the beginning, Lily sets up a central tension: knowing that she was essentially writing a biographical essay to fulfill an autobiographical essay assignment, while at the same time wanting to tell the story and believing that she could somehow make it biographical. The first and third paragraphs, written from an end-of-process perspective, list the goals she developed for telling her own story through her grandmother's - goals that weren't evident when she began writing. Yet she admits that her attempt to meet these goals never quite succeeded - the grandmother's story remained dominant - and uses this fact as a rationale for her B+ grade. Her imperfect grade is a way of specifically acknowledging her lack of success with the genre. In other words, she demonstrates a balance between her personal/writerly goals for the project and her awareness of the genre expectations she wasn't meeting (i.e. her student role). If she'd had an opportunity to revise, the assignment/genre-related goals would've likely occupied her next set of revisions.

Evidence of working through these difficulties (Haswell's “frame restructuring”) is frequent in Lily's essay. She describes beginning with freewriting and using asterisks as a way of inventorying the material she had both on her grandmother and on herself. These writerly experiments eventually led her to a balanced approach in the essay. But her perspective on shifted as a result of peer review and again while rereading her essay - these stages made her focus more on her obligations to the assignment. There's a sense of accomplishment in the final paragraph, but also awareness that the essay remained
imperfect and in process (that is, it would need more work if it were to continue functioning as a piece of writing after the course).

For comparison, let’s examine Natalie’s first self-assessment, also from Karen’s course – it was rated a “middle” essay, and it was more typical of the self-assessments I read for this study.

I enjoyed writing this essay about my Bat Mitzvah because I’d never had a chance to explore it so deeply. It was one of the most important, inspirational days of my entire life, and being able to take a long hard look at it brought back a lot of the same emotions. I’m glad I got it all down on paper before too much time went by, and I forgot a lot of the details that added to the greatness of the day.

I think my strong points in this essay were the fact that was I able to show the reader just how much this day meant to me. I think that I showed a lot of the emotions I was feeling, whether they were times that I was stressed or times that I was completely happy. My weaknesses for my paper were probably my transitions because I have a hard time making a paper flow without it seeming choppy. I try to make one paragraph lead in to the next but I feel like it’s obvious that I’m trying to do so, and it still ends up with too abrupt of a shift.

My goal for this essay was mainly a personal goal. I never gave much thought to my Bat Mitzvah after it happened, and in writing this essay I hoped to resurface all the feelings I felt that day…

I provided specifics when I explained what a Bar or Bat Mitzvah meant in the Jewish religion and how important it is to the child and their family. I also was able to persuade the audience with personal evidence about how inspirational of an event a Bat Mitzvah is. Not many people understand the countless hours of work it takes to prepare for a Bat Mitzvah, so I hope after reading my essay the reader fully understands all the preparation it takes…

A new technique that I tried in my paper that I don’t often do in others was to write in a “laid-back” sense of style. I wrote sentences how I would say them, slang included. I felt like my Bat Mitzvah was a real experience, and I didn’t want to cover it up with big vocabulary…

[some comments on peer review]

I’m very proud of this paper. Even if I don’t receive as high of a grade as I want, it still is a paper I will always keep because I feel like it perfectly explains my Bat Mitzvah from beginning to end. Because of all the work and time I put into this paper, I think I deserve a B+. I followed the syllabus and tried to go above and beyond at some points. This wasn’t a paper I dreaded writing either. I actually enjoyed writing it, and when I have an interest in what I’m writing, the overall product usually comes out better.

Natalie’s self-assessment is a good example of the typical grammar of a self-assessment essay, at least in these two courses. There’s plenty of self-evaluation – it’s essentially in
every paragraph – but there’s very little insight into the decisions Natalie made and the problems she faced as she wrote. Certainly, the “deep structure” of narrative in Lily’s essay – in which process description framed all other topics – is completely absent. Despite her lack of description, however, Natalie uses “work” and “time” (i.e. effort) as her justifications for her grade – seemingly implying that she believes she has discussed her effort in her self-assessment essay. This is typical of well over half of the self-assessments I read.

Here I’d like to echo my hypothesis Chapter 6 – that students are generally so unrehearsed in this type of writing that they might be genuinely unaware that they’re not giving adequate attention to their process. I mentioned earlier how Natalie said she valued self-assessment writing because she could “learn more about [her]self as a writer, . . . see what [she] was good at, and look at [her] growth as a writer.” In other words, Natalie saw herself as doing these things in her self-assessment essays. It might in fact be true that she constructed narratives in her mind about her development, strengths and weaknesses, and that she was filling in those details as she wrote her self-assessment – that is, her self-assessment was “writer-centered prose,” seemingly unaware of what a reader wouldn’t know.

What does Natalie discuss? She describes her motivations for taking on the topic in the first place, as well as the overall sense of what she wanted to communicate to readers. She also reveals a personal motivation to write the piece – to record the events before she forgot them. These are very similar considerations to those Lily placed into tension with genre expectations – the same tension that troubled her throughout her essay and ultimately defined the grade she gave herself. But Natalie’s descriptions of writing challenges are unproblematically resolved – each time she describes a goal, she describes it as met. As a result, whereas there seems to be a logic to Lily’s self-grading process, Natalie’s
is difficult to discern. Were transitions the only factor bringing her down to a B+? Or were there other factors that she was leaving unconsidered?

It could have been the case that Natalie hadn’t gone through a real process of rationalizing her grade – either privately or on paper – but had simply defaulted to the grade to which she was accustomed to receiving when putting forth similar effort. Karen guessed as much in our interview:

Karen: There’s not too much to say about this.

Mike: She’s mostly talking about her experience.

Karen: Yeah, I think she just had fun [laughs].

Mike: Yeah.

Karen: That’s totally Allie to me, she’s just – happy, kind of – doesn’t really care about the specifics of the grade. Okay with getting a B.

Mike: Used to it?

Karen: Yeah.

The “typical” self-assessment essay in this study might be described in the same way. Many of them seemed to begin with an implicit grade in mind (based on previous experiences), and most made a relatively brief case for the grade without tying it to process. One possible explanation, which I also offered in Chapter 6, was that students might have had little practice at the secondary level with evaluating the results of their process other than discussing their effort. As in college, most assessments were likely tied to their product regardless of the steps they took to get there. So while Lily’s “deep structure” was her process narrative, for most others it was a point-by-point analysis/evaluation of their product relative to the expectations for it. Even the teachers in this course foregrounded a discussion of the product’s quality in their self-assessment handouts. This is the introduction to Karen’s handout, which I first excerpted in Chapter 5:
Now that you've handed in your first essay for our class, and BEFORE I return your essays to you, I'd like you to evaluate your own essays... Given the increased expectations of college courses, how would you grade yourself? Did you put enough time into your essay? Did you hand in your best, complete work?...

What grade do you feel that your effort, writing process, and finished product deserve? Please fully explain why you come to this grade.

I've shown that the last sentence describes what Karen was really after - the "full explanation" of the links between effort, process and product. But this instruction could very well have been misread as a cue for students to revert to high-school-level discussions of effort in service of a final grade.

The data I've presented on student self-assessment in this dissertation provides sufficient evidence that, when we talk about student self-assessment in any given course, we're actually talking about four different iterations of the idea. First, we're talking about what students really think about themselves as writers and the work they've done in the course - that internal sense of developing writerly identity that we rarely see on paper. Second, we're talking about performance of writerly identity that appears in their self-assessments (which we might call the "descriptive grammar") - the focus of Chapter 6. Third, we're talking about the self-assessment that their instructors would prefer to see, which I've discussed in this chapter. And fourth, we're talking about the type of self-assessment that instructors ask for in their assignments (the "prescriptive grammar"), which doesn't always appear to be the same thing. Because the genre of self-assessment is so new to most students, I believe they often fail to see the differences among these, and simply produce a form that is strongly influenced by the academic texts they've already encountered. An ethical implementation of self-assessment, which I'll describe in the next chapter, would educate students in the differences among these grammars and help them add to their repertoire of self-assessment moves. It would show them how writers reflect and how teachers tie reflection to evaluation.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE TEACHER’S STANCE

The last three chapters have laid out a basic pattern. In their students’ self-assessments, instructors expected (and to an extent asked for) honesty, detailed reflection and specific, rationalized, revision-oriented self-evaluation. But most students ended up resorting to academic clichés, “safe” evaluative criteria such as effort, alternative/out-of-class standards, personal opinion and emotion, and relatively brief narratives of their process. The central tension, it seemed, was between the instructors’ desires for their students to develop writerly habits and the tendency of most of their students to remain focused on their success in the classroom. In other words, students seemed to perceive a significant role shift from student/writer to “student self-assessor” when switching over from their regular coursework to self-assessment, and because the latter role was largely undefined, they had to construct it from “bits and pieces” of their student repertoire, to use Goffman’s terms. This tendency shouldn’t be surprising; it demonstrates students’ awareness that “they are not under the same kind of pressure [in the classroom] to relate to the presented roles for writers as they are to the role of student or initiate” (Brooke, Self 24). And the problem transcends self-assessment – it’s a major consideration in writing instruction in general. We could define good teaching as the constant effort to help students break out of the ritual performance of student identity (characterized by the constant effort to mitigate risk) that seems to carry them through most of their coursework. For their part, both of the instructors in my study were friendly, eager to engage with students, well versed in the fundamentals of teaching and learning and interested in talking about grading and
assessment frankly and openly – yet, despite their efforts, they rarely saw their students engaging in “writerly” self-assessment.

My findings might seem like an argument for teachers to give up on self-assessment and stick with traditional classroom grading. But I think they also provide several glimmers of potential. Most students in this study did engage in some meaningful reflection on their process, and they did talk much more about genre features and evaluative criteria for writing assignments than they probably would have in a different section of ENGL 401. What would happen if these positive opportunities were given room to grow? Even if self-assessment can never quite be a student’s unfettered exploration of his or her writerly identity, could it be something different – and possibly even more useful? In this conclusion, I’ll use the results of my research to suggest a few principles for a more ethical implementation of self-assessment – one that gives them more direction and equips them to write self-assessments that are more meaningful. I’ll show how I’m implementing many of these principles with in a first-year composition classroom. And I’ll discuss the implications of this study for research into self-assessment.

**Principles for an ethical implementation of student self-assessment**

1. **The instructor should consider his or her purpose for assigning self-assessment and self-evaluation.** As with any assignment, considering the overall fit of self-assessment with the learning goals of the course is crucial in determining how it should be designed. What does the instructor hope to get out of the activity? What does the instructor want his or her students to get out of it? Both Karen and Marina were interested in learning more about the reasoning behind the decisions students made during their writing process, and in having their students see connections between ENGL 401 and other writing they would do in the future. Both instructors had to make adjustments throughout the semester when
they realized their students weren’t engaging in this type of examination. They gave more explicit instructions on how to do a close reading of one’s own essays: they asked for a paragraph-by-paragraph comparison between penultimate and final drafts, for example, or prompted students to incorporate notes from small reflective pieces they wrote between major self-assessments. If they were to teach with self-assessment in the future, they would probably introduce these strategies and others like them earlier in the semester.

On the other hand, both instructors assigned self-evaluation and self-grading without having a strong purpose for either. Although students' rhetorical negotiations while self-evaluating were useful to analyze and often seemed to confirm Marina and Karen’s constructions of their personalities, both instructors concluded the project with mixed feelings about its role in self-assessment because it seemed to interfere with the process narratives they wanted to see. Marina said, “I don’t know if they gave me anything [in the self-grading portion of the essay] that I didn’t get in the other parts of the essay... I don’t know that it was useful for me to read – it was hard to know what kind of games they were playing.” On the other hand, she said, “I think they did break it down a little more [in that section]. I got to know their thinking, their values – or the values they thought they had.” Both instructors agreed that, if they were to do self-assessment along with self-grading in the future, the latter would need to be more intentionally integrated into the course; both suggested they might have conferences with their students about the grades they gave and more discussion about the act and process of grading in class. This would suggest a distinct purpose for assigning self-assessment – asking students to critically examine how writing is valued – that they had not previously considered or built into their course.

There are a number of other possible purposes for using self-assessment, many of which I’ve discussed here: helping students to connect their course learning to the work they’ll be doing in other courses and their overall learning/development; giving them the
tools to develop assessment criteria and terminology similarly to how a teacher would develop them – and then using them to evaluate others' writing as well as their own; helping them gain a sense of independence over their own writing to the point that they no longer rely so heavily on a teacher's evaluation; and so on. In each of these cases, the desired skill should be “scaffolded” throughout an assignment sequence.

2. Self-assessment should be guided by specific prompts. This term scaffolding suggests a series of increasingly complex “rehearsals” with the goal of bringing students closer to specific expectations. Early in the semester, both Karen and Marina seemed to be wary of the possibility of “overprescribing” their students’ approaches to self-assessment by directing them in this way. I think both anticipated the problem I described at the beginning of the dissertation: that students would follow their instructions to the letter and produce predictable self-assessments. But this study demonstrates how students often resort to a narrow repertoire of moves in self-assessment essays due to their lack of familiarity with and rehearsal in the genre. In their guidelines for effective self-assessment, Thomas L. Hilgers et al. suggest that writing instructors should “use self-assessment to interrupt” these “well learned but less than optimally effective writing behavior chains” or “stereotypic strategies” (7). Like the series of heuristics that teachers assign to enable students to narrow their analytical and research paper topics, a guided approach to self-assessment could ultimately expand students’ viable options rather than constrain them.

For example, a question that seemingly calls for a prescriptive answer – “What does good reflection look like?” – could be answered through analyzing and experimenting with a variety of approaches. A teacher could examine an essay like Lily's with her course, discussing how her essay defines a writing problem (Lily's was her difficulty fitting her story into the autobiographical essay) and uses that problem to structure the narrative. By
being asked to “try on” this type of narrative, a student might realize that he or she was also dealing with a core problem but simply hadn’t recognized it. The student could still choose whether to use this specific approach or a different one, but would at least be aware of its usefulness. This could lead the student to a genuine moment of learning about her writing.

3. Instructors should understand as much as they can about their students’ background in reflective writing. Given the narrow scope of student data I collected in this study, it’s difficult to know which academic texts and experiences might have shaped their internalized grammar of self-assessment writing. Knowing the answer to this question would certainly have helped Karen and Marina anticipate the problems their students would have with the genre. For example, an early writing assignment might have asked, Have you ever been asked to do reflective writing or self-assessment? If you have, what were the instructions you were given? What did you write about in response to the request to reflect on your writing? If you were asked to evaluate your work, what was your process for doing that? If you’ve never done reflective writing, what would be your approach to these topics – what would you talk about?

4. Instructors should see self-assessment as a pedagogy in itself. As I argued in the opening pages of this dissertation, in order to make self-assessment a meaningful activity, instructors must find ways to incorporate it throughout their pedagogy. I’m not the first to suggest that single-shot reflective or portfolio cover essays often fail when they’re seemingly disconnected from the rest of the course, but Karen and Marina definitely affirmed that suggestion. Incorporating the activity more frequently encourages students to see self-assessment as a part of a writer’s process rather than as a separate stage for performance. Both instructors said that, if they were to assign self-assessment again, they would at least comment on their students’ first self-assessments and review the
patterns they saw in a follow-up course discussion, similar to how teachers discuss common patterns of strengths and weaknesses in a batch of course essays with their students. With self-assessment and writing instruction in general, this sort of post-draft analysis seems to work best when it echoes discussions that have already taken place prior to the drafting process. Specifically, an extended discussion of grading criteria appeared to be necessary for the students in this study, as many seemed to struggle in their attempts to apply specific criteria to their own essays (which led to their use of other criteria with which they were more familiar).

Hilgers et al. argue that a successful approach to self-assessment should “break up the rhetorical situation into parts that allow the application of relatively clear and discrete evaluation standards for different situations” (7). At the same time, Susan Miller warns, “we should not encourage or engage in self-evaluation prematurely” – doing so would cause students to see their writing “as a product to be judged while it remains open to the possibility of revision” (181). So while it seems necessary to give students the ability to develop their own criteria, they should have a chance to do so outside the context of their own work; later, they can incorporate these criteria into their pieces that involve self-evaluation or self-grading.

A pedagogy of self-assessment requires a particular orientation toward the teaching of writing. It rejects the notion that self-assessment is merely a check on whether a student can cobble together evaluations that resemble the teacher’s. Instead, it implies that the teacher’s role is to provide students with the tools to assess their own work. It asks students and teachers to consider the task of self-assessment deliberately and collaboratively. As they develop their own sense of writing criteria, students might have been asked to reflect on their self-assessment/self-evaluation process (What confuses us or perplexes us when we try to evaluate our work? What are our criteria? How do we weigh them? How do they
conflict with each other? Are there ways that we value writing that can’t be explained by “criteria”? These reflections should accompany an ongoing discussion of what it means to assess oneself in a writing course – that is, what a teacher is asking for when he or she asks students to reflect, self-assess, self-evaluate and grade.

A course framework
I undertook this study in part for personal reasons: I wanted to understand why my students’ self-assessment projects had often yielded unsatisfactory results, and I wanted to improve my own teaching using self-assessment. So, as my research has suggested teaching principles such as those outlined above, I’ve been inclined first and foremost to consider how I could apply them within my own classroom.

Based on what I’ve learned from this study, I’ve designed my own implementation of student self-assessment in my ENGL 1101 (College Composition I) courses in Fall 2010. As I’ve considered the role I want self-assessment to play in these courses (the first principle), I’ve found that my goals differ from Karen’s or Marina’s. Although they each questioned the usefulness of self-grading, I want that aspect of self-assessment to play at least as important of a role as reflection because I hope to use self-assessment primarily as an entry point into a discussion of what writers, readers, educators and institutions value in writing. My goal is for students to define and understand their role within this network of competing values – which, in my opinion, is a key outcome of a required writing course. In the past, I’ve found that some of the most concrete and vivid class discussions on this topic take place when we’re comparing a sample “A” essay with a “C” essay, trying to articulate our own standards on the whiteboard, arguing over whether certain criteria are generic or specific to a situation, using our discussions to create guidelines for peer review, and so on. For a while, it seems, students stop looking to me as the only source of knowledge on writing and
attempt to understand it for themselves. Sure, there's a bit of performance, a bit of telling me what I want to hear, but a lot of the discussion seems more genuine, like real Haswellian "frame restructuring." So, as I scaffold self-assessment activities and plan pre- and post-draft conversations, I find myself gravitating toward these topics.

Setting the stage. At my institution, ENGL 1101 is a "themed" course – the readings follow a theme chosen by the instructor, and the major essay assignments often build from those readings. My chosen theme for the upcoming is essentially students' undergraduate experience and the social forces that have defined it – the same broad context I've established for self-assessment in this dissertation. My goal is to help students examine the roles that have been written for them (and toward which they each adopt personal stances) as well as their education in academic discourse and their personal goals for education. We'll treat these topics as course matter first; my hope is that students will gain a level of expertise and comfort with discussing them from multiple perspectives, so that when they do apply them within a narrower context such as self-assessment, their work will be less forced and less immediately focused on the transactional goal of pleasing the teacher.

To help students understand where expectations for student selves come from, I'll analyze the "texts" of higher education along with them; these will include student handbooks, codes of conduct and other official representations of student roles and responsibilities, as well representations of students, teachers and universities in media and popular culture. We'll talk about how these roles have become more conflicted over time as social and cultural perceptions of the role of education have shifted. As we build this knowledge, we'll also have conversations on how people construct versions of their selves in order to fit into social groups and discourse communities – essentially a brief study in performance. We'll discuss how students, teachers and institutions perform their expected
roles through the writing they produce and distribute in academic settings. The theoretical groundwork we will have laid will enable us to analyze rhetorical moves as social constructions rather than as immutable “rules” – but they'll also help us understand how institutional authority is conferred through language.

**Transitioning into self-assessment.** If this inquiry into the nature of academic roles and expectations is successful, it could lead us into a discussion of criteria for the course-specific writing, including our own. For this discussion, I'll adapt Asao B. Inoue's methods of collaborative in-class rubric creation (see “Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy,” especially 214-18). This pedagogy entails the collaborative construction of rubrics for increasingly complex projects (aided by instructor feedback), which students then use in peer feedback and self-assessment. Throughout this process, students must keep local context in mind: Although they might start with default academic terms such as “organization,” “clarity and conciseness,” and so on, when we look at specific pieces of writing, we can understand how those terms are contextually applied. We might ask, how does the *organization* of this writer's particular argument show that he understands his situation and his audience? And how does this writer find the balance between *conciseness* and detail appropriate to her writing situation? By providing students with examples of how evaluative terms are used in context, I hope to encourage them to see the terms as useful terms rather than obstacles to overcome.

Similarly, I'd like to frame self-evaluation/self-grading in a way that emphasizes the reflective nature of applying criteria and prompts a dialogue rather than a justification. For example, a prompt for a peer or model evaluation might read as follows: “What grade would you assign this draft? Please give detail about the classroom conversations on self-assessment that informed you as well as the decision-making, criteria-weighing process you
went through as you evaluated this work. How was this process different from the other pieces you've evaluated?" After this rationale and the resulting grade receive feedback from me, students can attempt to apply the same questions to their own writing. We can then discuss what new considerations come into play when the piece they evaluate is their own. By encouraging students to make this process visible, rather than to conceal it, perhaps I can help them consider grading in the same way the course considers academic writing: as a rhetorical act that is context specific and contingent but that can also function as a piece of their broader development as learners and writers.

By the end of the course, I hope that my students and I will be able to construct thoughtful, thorough responses to these questions:

• What is academic writing? What does it mean to write well in an academic environment? Where do standards come from? What do words like “good,” “bad,” “better” and “improved” mean when we describe college-level essays? When we talk about strengths and weaknesses in a piece of writing, where are we getting those ideas? What's influencing us?

• What's good argument? What's good research? What's good analysis? What's good exposition? Can I figure out when some things are going well in my writing and others aren't? Can I help others evaluate their writing?

• How do expectations shift in different writing situations? How do readers differ? How can I learn for myself how to write well for my situation and for my reader(s)? How do I anticipate these things on my own? How can I develop a self-awareness of my own writing?

In my opinion, this is the core content of a college-level composition course. These questions frame an inquiry into the specific sites in which my students will practice rhetoric for four years, and many of them will continue to apply beyond that timeframe.
**Continuing the conversation on self-assessment**

Ethical teaching practice in self-assessment will also underlie ongoing research on the topic. I feel that this study suggests a number of possible directions for research:

- **Studies on self-grading.** This study strikes an ambivalent note in regard to self-grading. Both instructors were more interested in the moves students made in their self-assessments when self-grading was involved, but neither was convinced that those moves were always productive. Given the findings of this study, which confirmed my claim that self-grading changes the nature of student performance in a self-assessment, research that isolates and analyzes the effect of self-grading might prove useful in shaping future practice. I hope to conduct some of that research myself as I implement the course plan described above. Additional studies in self-grading could examine the technical aspect of the practice – i.e. the “nuts and bolts.” For example, Marina attempted to make self-grading as straightforward (i.e. mathematical) as possible, but in the process lost much of the opportunity to discuss ambiguities surrounding the judgment of writing – one of her favorite topics. Is this a necessary trade-off? Or can self-grading involve a complex discussion and be clear enough for students to implement without resorting to default criteria?

- **Research into the “pedagogy of self-assessment.”** When instructors take up the challenge to revise their pedagogy with self-assessment at the center, as I suggest in this chapter, what are the results? How do the patterns in student self-assessments change? Which roles do they feel most comfortable performing? Which do they feel pressure to perform? Is my argument in this conclusion (that students will be better equipped to engage in meaningful self-assessment if rehearsal and contextual discussion are built into the practice) borne out by research?
• **Self-assessment from an instructor's perspective.** As I mentioned in Chapter 4, this study lacked the necessary data to examine the political situatedness of self-assessment from the teacher's and institution's perspectives and how these factors constrain the practice. Mitigation of risk is a concern here as well – broader concerns such as grade inflation come into play, especially when instructors incorporate their students' self-assessments into their grading. I look forward to research studies that link instructors' grading obligations to the student pressures highlighted in studies such as this one.

• **Nonpolitical aspects of self-assessment.** Identity Negotiations Theory focuses on student identity formation through stances of resistance and compliance. But my study revealed interesting responses to self-assessment that would be best explored outside of this lens. For example, Marina's student Miles approached all of his coursework from an intense need to exert control and a strict sense of order over all of his academic work. Because it didn't quite tie in with identity negotiations, my discussion of Miles' work was limited. But personality is part of a person's autobiographical self, and it definitely influenced how Miles and many other students in this study approached their self-assessment work. I feel that research on this topic would be able to explore students' assertion of their own agency to an extent that a role- and authority-based study such as mine could not.

• **Directed self-placement.** Self-assessment as typically practiced is a relatively low-stakes course assignment: the essay, usually singular, brief, and attached to a portfolio, has little to no impact on the grade or integration into the course. Even if students write formulaic and overly obsequious self-assessments, they are quickly forgotten. Of course, I've argued that teachers who want to make the assignment more meaningful and educative will need to be more deliberate in their assignment
design and attentive to the available research. But even if classroom-based self-assessments remain afterthoughts in many classrooms, the practice extends beyond the genre of the reflective course essay into higher-stakes territory that requires our attention. The recent emergence of directed self-placement (i.e. the process whereby entering college students place themselves into writing courses) has initiated a scholarly conversation on performances of self by college-level writers. The articles by Howard and Latta and Lauer described in this dissertation, for example, end on discussions of DSP. The collection edited by DSP designers Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles deals with similar topics: the matchup between the selves constructed in placement essays and the selves readers want to see; the role of self-efficacy and adoption of a “writerly persona” in the ratings given to placement essays; and the attachment of identities or personas to students by readers based on the textual evidence. As Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Jeffrey Sommers and John Paul Tassoni point out, students writing placement exams “become rhetors in the strong meaning of that term, engaging in a dialectical transaction with their audience (writing teachers), in a specific situation, for a specific purposes, in order to produce a practical action” (172). This rhetorical situation strongly mirrors that of the student self-assessment within a writing course – in fact, students who place themselves via DSP might use many of the same rhetorical moves and constructions of identity in their self-assessments. But the consequences are even greater if they fail to construct an “appropriate” self in their writing. As research into DSP develops, I hope that many of its research questions and methods will carry over into studies of in-class student self-assessment, and vice versa.

Generally speaking, the broader political implications of self-assessment warrant further examination – and not just from a student’s perspective. Future studies of self-assessment
will need to balance local and field-wide inquiry and incorporate the viewpoints of everyone who has a stake in the evaluation of student writing.

**Acknowledging the conflict in student self-assessment**

After comparing writers' and readers' perspectives on self-assessment using Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (as described in Chapter 2) and concluding that some students' instinctive approaches fail to match readers' implicit values expectations, Susan Callahan makes specific recommendations for practice:

> When I do ask for this kind of writing, I have learned to provide more models and explanations than I would like to think students need. ... I continue to redesign and vary my reflective writing prompts, to monitor my responses to these prompts, to limit the number of written reflections I require, and to be more intentional about the way I discuss reflective writing in my classroom. I also now spend more time teaching students how to write reflectively instead of simply asking them to do it. (73-4).

I feel that the implications of this dissertation complement those of Callahan's study. This dissertation similarly suggests that students and teachers bring biases to the writing and reading of self-assessments, and that these biases are inextricably bound up with their identities. My study focuses on the political situatedness of self-assessment rather than on students' psychological background, but it's similarly concerned with the moments when two different identity-based interpretations of the task of self-assessment come into conflict. And in the end, its implications are similar: it demonstrates that teachers must be mindful of how they use their authority and communicate expectations, and that they must be considerate of students who haven't walked into the classroom with the rhetorical awareness necessary to succeed at self-assessment.

In the shift from product to process, Lad Tobin argues, "one thing remains the same: We still have written ourselves minor and relatively unfulfilling parts to play in the writing process" (19). He points out that even in the process-based classroom, authority-based
issues remain: the teacher still grades, and the inclusion of personal writing means “the stakes are higher” (20). Tobin continues:

The synthesis or solution is to move beyond either/or thinking – either we have authority or they do; either we own the text or they do; either the meaning is in the writer or in the reader – toward a more dialectical definition. Rather than dichotomizing the teacher’s and the student’s roles, we need to see how they are inseparably related (20).

Tobin argues for the centrality of relationships in the study of writing: like Brooke, he suggests that power, authority, identity, resistance, negotiation and compromise are always front and center in a writing course, whether they’re acknowledged or not (7).

It might be the case that some teachers steer clear of self-assessment because they see it as a potential site of conflict. But this study suggests that self-assessment primarily exposes conflicts that already exist in the classroom. So we could see self-assessment as an opportunity. Instead of attempting to avoid, ignore or quickly resolve conflicts, teachers should be willing to see them as teachable: to put them all “on the table” and incorporate them into the rhetorical education we give our students. As Faigley argues, “We can ... teach our students to analyze cultural definitions of the self, to understand how historically these definitions are created in discourse, and to recognize how definitions of the self are involved in the configuration of relations of power” (411).

In order to do so, we might need to adjust our expectations for self-assessment and learn to value the peculiar rhetorical moves we see our students making when attempting to evaluate themselves. According to Identity Negotiations Theory, each of these acts is a small step in a student’s ongoing self-definition. These awkward performances might at times be our windows into understanding who our students really are.
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**Background sources**


APPENDIX

HUMAN SUBJECTS/INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) DOCUMENTATION

The classroom study underlying this dissertation (which, like the dissertation, was entitled *Politics and Ethics of Student Self-Assessment in the Composition Classroom*) received approval from the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) in December of 2008. Please see the next page for the letter documenting this approval, which is on file with the Office of Sponsored Research.

IRB# 4448
11-Dec-2008

Garcia, Mike
English, Hamilton Smith Hall
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IRB #: 4448
Study: Politics and Ethics of Student Self-Assessment in the Composition Classroom
Approval Date: 09-Dec-2008

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has
reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of
Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your
study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in
the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human
Subjects. (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.)
Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form
and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact
me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all
correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
Newkirk, Thomas