CHAPTER THREE

“KINDS OF WRITING”

STUDENT CONCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC AND
CREATIVE FORMS OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson

Asked about her writing development, Joy tells a narrative that illustrates the circuitous and networked nature of her learning. She draws on extracurricular and professional experiences as much as academic ones; she shows writing facility and interests that range across fields, goals, and identities. She speaks of entering the university to study engineering, then switching to communications. She describes writing both for the school newspaper—the “serious side of writing”—and for an online campus magazine, focused more on what she calls “girly things, fashion.” She takes a summer internship in “corporate America,” a marketing and communications position where she writes for the company’s internal newsletter and social media platforms. In her spare time, she also works on a “young adult teen type novel about romance,” which by her senior year she speaks of hoping to self-publish. In both her entry and exit interviews for our study, Joy talks fluently of argumentative credibility, of connecting with her audience, of differences and similarities across genres. Yet when she is asked in the exit interview about the effect a particular political science class had on her as a writer, Joy’s usual enthusiasm and rhetorical broadmindedness take a sharp turn:

Honestly, that was a terrible experience. The one assignment that I’ll tell you about was the policy brief. It was a very structured assignment, where we had to just analyze a piece of legislation in a state, and just go through the process of what we would do differently, recommendations and things like that. The biggest problem I had with that [was] the professor did not let us explore this from a creative angle at all. I remember one girl . . . in the same class with me. She started her brief off with a little background
They did not like that at all. They suppressed any form of creativity. That just made me unhappy with the class. It had to be very structured. It was just not so good.

We begin with this example not to defend Joy’s perspective on her instructor’s insistence on rhetorical conventions, but because of how vividly Joy’s comment illustrates larger patterns that emerged across our study: when asked to discuss their own development as writers, students commonly turned to talk about specific “kinds of writing” that divided writing—as activity and as product—into the categories of “academic” and “creative.” While on their surface, these classifications may seem unsurprising, we show that, examined more closely, these terms function as a kind of shorthand for much larger questions and struggles, and thus offer an instructive window onto students’ emerging beliefs about writing development and their identities as writers. In this chapter, we explore how these categories point to different constructs of development—growth in an “academic” domain or in a “creative” domain—and how these categories thus structure two distinctive ways for students to explore rhetorical awareness, to think about transfer and genre, and to conceptualize a writerly self in both school contexts and other spaces.

As we argue, the students who align their writing development with the “academic” tend to see writing as constituting the communication of thought; they thus define writing development as the provable, product-based, context-sensitive mastery of specific and often static disciplinary forms, as illustrated by their ability to reproduce these forms (similar to what Ryan McCarty discusses in chapter 4 of this volume). Meanwhile, students who talked about their growth as writers as more closely tied to the “creative” tend to understand writing instead as constituting the generation of thought; these students thus define writing development through their increased ability to produce new, relatively original, and often personally relevant ideas and texts.

Moreover, students’ talk also implies that students see these two concepts of writing and writing development as weighted with different educational value. For some students, the academic is the premiere construct of writing forwarded by their college course work, which school has allowed them to develop into. In this framework, communication through reproducible and often discipline-specific forms is the main mark of the kind of development their college career has encouraged. For others, however, the academic represents the construct that the more “creative” work of their college education in writing has allowed them, fruitfully, to develop out of. By this process, students’ “creative” growth beyond the academic stands as the main mark of this alternate strand of development, even as such development continues to take place in a college context. That said, students’ talk also
reveals a number of these two constructs’ shortcomings and blind spots, perhaps most significantly in the strict binary through which a number of students discuss these two views of writing and the apparently mutually exclusive kinds of writing development they appear to entail. For most students interviewed, the academic and the creative seemed to represent approaches to writing and constructs of development that were not only separable but irreconcilable. Only among a small number of students did a third construct emerge, which we will explore in the final section of this chapter: an integrative vision of how these paradigms of writing and of writing development might work more in tandem, signaling the self-conscious negotiations these students saw themselves as staging between the generative forces of invention and the pressures of communicative norms.

Of course, such patterns in student talk might be interpreted in some alternate ways. One might understand “creative” and “academic” most transparently as only representing large-scale genre divisions: between the scholarly and school-based genres of traditional disciplinary fields, on the one hand, and varieties of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction on the other. Indeed, these are the very genre-based categories maintained by our own university’s English department, which—like many English departments across the United States—presumes a clear and bright line between its first-year writing program, which centers on “academic” writing and inquiry, and its creative-writing program, which centers on literary and essayistic productions. However, given the capacious way our study participants were sorting their writing into these categories—and connecting these categories to their development as writers—this analysis does not quite satisfy; students did not use these terms only to signify specific fields or contexts and the genres these contexts typically espouse. Nor do students’ use of “academic” and “creative” seem to indicate what Michael Carter has identified as “meta-genres,” which he aligns with larger metadisciplinary “ways of doing” (385) (such as “performance” or “empirical inquiry,” e.g., 394). Though many students’ use of “creative” and “academic” descriptors includes gestures toward genres, and especially toward those textual features and forms that, by Amy Devitt’s description, “trace” the existence of genre (575), such taxonomies of genres and metagenres do not fully capture the way these categories of “academic” and “creative” seem to function for our study participants.

Another explanation of these creative and academic paradigms might draw on Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick’s 2007 study of students’ perceptions of first-year writing. Unlike the genre-based distinctions outlined above, these researchers found students distinguishing all English course work, including for first-year writing, as “creative” (130), and found students placing this kind of writing work in sharp contrast to “the important work of professional socialization that occurs
in their ‘content-area’ courses” (138) (and which our participants might classify as “academic”). Even more striking, Bergmann and Zepernick found that these distinctions indicated students’ perceptions of these writing types’ different levels of transferability—with “creative” and process-focused constructs of writing and instruction transferring little across fields, and the more academic, discipline-specific kinds carrying over productively into new contexts. Yet this framework does not fully explain the patterns we found in our study participants’ talk, either. To be sure, Bergmann and Zepernick found students relying on dichotomous language notably similar to what we observed, yet our participants did not align these terms so categorically with negative or positive instances of transfer. Further, many students, like Joy, did not see the “creative” as confined only to English or first-year writing (or, indeed, to its particular “genres”); instead, many presented the “creative” as a larger, context-transcending construct of writing itself that was applicable across a variety of fields—as with Joy’s suggestion that her political science instructor should have allowed a fellow student’s “creative” tweaking of certain disciplinary norms. Indeed, when Joy promotes the “creative,” she also acknowledges the importance of what she calls “training” in academic forms: as she says, “I’m not saying [instructors] should dismiss the structured writing because students do need to learn that.” Unlike Bergmann and Zepernick’s findings, we argue that for many of our study participants, even though they do not always have clear and concise language at hand to discuss these patterns and distinctions, these different constructs of writing and development enable different types of transfer—one reliant on recurrent written forms, the other on a durable writerly self.

In many ways, Jean Anyon’s foundational 1981 study of students’ perceptions of knowledge and its sources provides perhaps the best precedent for our findings. Anyon’s investigation of students from three very different US school systems leads her to distinguish two main paradigms within which these students operate: “reproductive” constructs of knowledge (31), which reinforce existing practices and norms, and more “transformative” constructs of knowledge, which, as she writes, instead cultivate the “creative” and learners’ abilities to “think for themselves” (36). We do not here pursue the crucial issue of social class that Anyon also analyzes through this framework; but her larger categories are still germane. Like the constructs that Anyon identifies in her students’ talk, the constructs we identify are often implicit or still emerging. Indeed, we read our participants’ talk about “creative” and “academic” kinds of writing and development as placeholders for larger concepts for which these students have little vocabulary—and little opportunity—to otherwise explain and explore. Even so, the concepts we find these students grappling toward show a significant similarity to the two school-based
frameworks of knowledge production that Anyon also identifies, and our study showcases the more specific implications these frameworks have for students’ varied understanding of writing and of their own writing development, across their college experience.

As such, the classifications of writing development we explore in this chapter emerged not from our own predetermined categories, but from students’ own talk when they were asked about kinds of writing and their development as writers while in college. In this, we follow recent research that has begun to explore issues of transfer, genre, and development from students’ points of view (e.g., Fraizer; Reiff and Bawarshi; Lindeman). Further, and although we open here with the specific instance of Joy, our discussion draws from broader patterns observed across our study participants’ varied taxonomies of their own writing and the kinds of writing development they espouse. Through their talk about kinds of writing, and about “creative” and “academic” kinds more specifically, we strove to capture the larger tendencies implicit in students’ suggested or stated constructs of writing and writing development.

Finally, a note on our methodological approach to these study participants. The patterns we describe in this chapter—which we found through an analysis of all entry and exit interviews with students who completed the interview portion of our study—do not split tidily between students enrolled in the Sweetland Minor in Writing Program and those who were nonminors. In the interest of drawing larger conclusions about the relations between constructs of writing and constructs of development common across both populations, we deliberately resisted analyzing our data by those divisions. That is not to say, however, that we found no signs that different curricula had affected these trends. A greater number of students in the first, “academic” category—who saw writing and writing development as entailing mainly learned competence in the genre-specific communication of thought—tended to be nonminors, whose writing-intensive course work involved mainly writing-in-the-disciplines courses. A greater number of the students in the second, “creative” category—who saw writing development as entailing competence in the generation of thought, and who emphasized the development of a highly personal writerly identity—tended (including Joy) to be writing minors, whose course work also included writing classes detached from a specific disciplinary affiliation beyond writing studies itself.

Moreover, the students falling into our third category—who were beginning to describe their development as the integration of both these domains of writing—also tended to be writing minors, and they often praised the space that the minor courses provided for processing these different constructs. Nonetheless, these pop-
ulation patterns were not hard and fast. The fact that these patterns do not entirely align with minor/nonminor distinctions, combined with the fact that minors were themselves split between championing a more exclusively “creative” construct and a more integrative construct, suggests that these tendencies are not merely a by-product of the disciplinary training that the writing minor provides; instead, these may be larger cultural patterns of thought that writing instructors of all kinds could more effectively acknowledge and harness.

“You Have to Write Like That”:
The “Academic” Construct of Writing Development

For many of our study participants, the most common way to classify and discuss their development as writers was to talk about writing within specific courses or disciplines and writing that closely followed distinct school-based structures. Across interviews for this study, students commonly spoke about their comfort with writing a “research paper,” for instance, or with experiences writing lab reports for science courses. Consider, for instance, Courtney’s assessment of her own writing growth to begin to examine this view of writing development, one in which students describe writing not as an opportunity to generate new ideas, but as the necessity to replicate existing ideas and information—what we describe here as writing that functions for the genre-specific communication of thought.

During her exit interview, conducted as she approached graduation, Courtney discusses her experiences with writing as almost exclusively following highly prescriptive and standardized approaches to “academic” forms of writing. In contrast to Joy, Courtney framed writing development as adherence to perceived rules and formats, and she significantly set issues of exploration, or the “creative,” in stark opposition to this work:

Every class I’ve essentially taken, I’ve never been asked to do creative writing, necessarily. Every paper I’ve always had to write for any class has always been for a specific purpose. Like, “Argue this.” Very structured-type things . . . I’m like, “I have probably written 100 papers since I’ve come here.” They’re all so similar, that it’s like, once you get the hang of it, they—it’s so easy.

In Courtney’s reflection on her growth as a writer during college, this kind of “structured-type” writing serves as evidence for her writing development, and she attributes that development to repeated practice, or the idea that “once you get
the hang of it . . . it’s so easy.” In this view, writing development is closely linked to knowledge of, and historical experience with, various types of school-based assignments and their attendant audience expectations.

Indeed, this can describe one distinct strand of writing development as entailing students’ mastery—often through the kind of repeated practice that Courtney recounts—of what Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle have referred to as the “recognizable forms” of school-based writing (35–47). This understanding of writing and writing development can contribute to a clear sense of self-efficacy in student writers as they begin to see themselves taking on writerly identities tied to their fields of academic and professional interest and begin to show ownership over the kinds of writing most often practiced and valued in those fields. Importantly, this view of writing development also points to distinct kinds of rhetorical knowledge, as students come to recognize specific audiences and purposes for the writing that they commonly describe as academic. For many students, this implies a kind of transfer tightly tied to the knowledge of conventions—as when Courtney expresses self-assurance in her ability to successfully reprise structured academic forms, which she sees as easy to duplicate.

Yet as students themselves identify in some instances, this form of writing development also can be weighted by certain constraints. For students who viewed writing development primarily as the successful reproduction of specific academic forms of writing, a clear binary existed between writing that allowed for expression of new ideas and the generation of new knowledge, on the one hand, and on the other, writing that we came to identify as existing primarily to record or communicate highly localized and genre-specific thoughts or information. Indeed, these students often saw themselves as highly capable students and thinkers, but they generally did not see their skill as writers as traveling across strictly drawn boundaries.

Rather, students who tracked their growth as writers primarily around “academic” kinds of writing reflected surprisingly narrow beliefs about the possibilities and power of writing. They commonly saw themselves as “writers” only in the sense that they were able to successfully write for school assignments, and they commonly located evidence of success in writing externally—in an instructor, a grade, or in comparison to other students’ work. These restrictions also reflected the scant freedom, and scant sense of coherent writerly identity, that these students felt, as discussed by Dana in an exit interview conversation near graduation:

I would say that as a writer my main focus has been academically. I’m not a free writer. I don’t know. I’m still in the period of deciding if I call myself a writer or not. Most of my experience with writing has been purely academic, but for internships or stuff like
that I have done some other types of writing. I guess I would just call myself a student writer, if that makes sense.

Dana explicitly connects her growth to academic forms of writing and aligns it with her tendency to bar other forms of writerly identity. She not only rejects the idea of herself as a “free” writer, she even hesitates to call herself a writer more generally. Indeed, Dana shows little understanding of the ways that her strengths as a “student writer” may have transferred to professional spaces (“for internships”) or to other extracurricular contexts.

Talk such as Dana’s suggests that students who approach writing primarily as the communication of thought also commonly show intense concern with form and structure, and such students saw little possibility that these forms or structures might be applicable to other purposes or contexts—not just outside of school, but even in other academic contexts. Chassi, for example, states with confidence in her exit interview that “sociology requires you to analyze. I don’t really see much of that in psychology.” In this way, some students suggest that the apparently autonomous nature of these disciplinary categories implies a rigid exclusivity, in which any specific “kind of writing” appears applicable only to a specific academic field; and in which their writerly growth, in turn, is restricted to that same space. Ashley, for instance, in her exit interview, describes the writing requirements for a movement science class as helping her perfect the kinds of writing required distinctly for that discipline and its typical requirements, but as good for little else, especially any affective or personal sense of accomplishment:

I didn’t enjoy that class very much actually. It’s just a little dry because it was the same thing over and over again. The style is just very—it’s so straightforward and so—you have to do it the same way every time. I just got a little bored with it. I can see the value in it because if you ever wanna do research or write scientific papers, you have to write like that.

For Ashley, development as a writer has involved mastery largely through reproduction, and she ties this reproductive quality implicitly to academic writing, in which forms are seen as static, predetermined, and uncontested (“you have to write like that”), rather than being shaped by potentially shifting exigencies or values.

Also suggestive of the link (or absence of a link) students seemed to feel between genres and transfer is the trend among students to fail to see that the writing they do in courses even counts as “writing.” When asked in her entry interview about the “opportunity to do writing in your field,” Eva responds,
I’ve done—okay, so for Econ this semester, I’ve done some article responses, so those are small pieces of writing that refer back to what we’ve learned, so I wouldn’t call them really writing not much, just getting the concepts across that we learned more.

For this student, the textual productions required in her course work stand less as a constructive activity she would call “writing” than as the transparent communication of discipline-specific knowledge (“just getting across the concepts”). This suggests that, in this student’s mind, these assignments do not draw on one or another set of generalizable conventions but represent the pure transmission of information. Moreover, some students aligning themselves with this construct of development voiced explicit discomfort about writing assignments that strayed beyond the familiar boundaries of the academic. Asked in her exit interview about how confident she felt as a writer as she neared graduation, Teresa holds tightly to beliefs about herself as a writer within the framework of her academic concentration:

My major is business, so I think in professional writing or academic writing, I’m a little more confident because it’s not so much about my opinion as just, “Oh, this is the argument that I’m trying to prove.” Here is my hypothesis, my thesis. These are my supporting evidence. Maybe have a counterargument and the wrap-up.

For this student, a sense of writing development and sense of self-efficacy seems achieved less through the expression of her own perspective or “opinion” and more through the mastery of argumentative forms and conventions.

Further, we found that this adherence to disciplinary boundaries and belief in writing development as the communication of genre-specific thoughts was often linked to related moments of uncertainty for student writers, especially when they anticipate how the writing will be evaluated by an external reader. The belief that writing should be crafted for a singular reader—the professor, for instance, or the employer—arose commonly among students who understood their writing development through this academic construct. These students could be seen using largely reproductive strategies to meet the perceived demands of those external audiences, a move that further restricts the purpose of writing only to the communication of information. Consider, for instance, Jake, who—identifying in his entry interview “writing that I do work on and spend time with” as “just mainly an academic thing”—spoke about some of his early experiences writing within his major area as well as upcoming deadlines to produce professional letters. Jake says that, “I feel confident that I can write effectively for the things I’m interested in. Within the classes, it depends, just ’cause the thing that frustrates me the most about writ-
ing in college: it’s different professors want different things. Sometimes it’s hard to anticipate that.”

Jake’s response is compelling both for the rhetorical understanding he demonstrates—here, awareness of audience—and for how it still stops short of recognizing the rhetorical principle of invention. Students who describe growth in writing as primarily growth in academic writing give nods to notions of purpose (responding to the prompt), of arrangement (addressing specific page requirements, for instance, or following standard formats), and of audience (most commonly, the instructor who has assigned the writing). Yet there is less explicit acknowledgement that writing, as an activity or product, might also persuade readers to adopt new perspectives, speak to multiple audiences, or help to shape the writer’s own ideas.

When students measure their writing development by its success in meeting a purely academic end—that is, to pass a specific course or achieve a specific grade—they also view their own identities as writers as restricted to the defined spaces of school. Just as Dana calls herself a “student writer,” other study participants also do not see space for themselves as professional writers, or more broadly as writers conveying ideas to a wider audience or in order to develop new knowledge. To be a strong academic writer, as expressed across many student interviews, is to master distinct formulas and the expectations of external reviewers. Consequently, writing development as framed by the academic also meant, for many students, that they needed to expressly set aside the creative—that is, the kinds of writing that they described as “free” or “personal.” Indeed, many students frame their growth as writers in college and in college courses as expressly apart from creative forms of writing. Dariella, describing in her exit interview her experiences in an anthropology-biology course, talked about the class as requiring “just a giant research paper”—and she linked the formulaic nature of the assignments and expectations as explicitly disallowing the “creative,” even as she acknowledged that the topic was left up to students to choose:

I didn’t [laughter] have to be super creative with how I wrote things. It was just divided into sections. It was, “Tell us about your species.” “Tell us the feeding habits of your species.” Like, “What are their mating habits?” . . . [T]he most creative liberty I had with it was like, “Talk about something that’s interesting about your species that you chose.”

Like Teresa saying “here is my hypothesis” and “these are my supporting evidence,” this graduating senior tidily categorizes her past writing experience as the fulfillment of highly specific writing conventions. But significantly, this also proves to be a practice that to her was not particularly memorable or meaningful, at either a
disciplinary or personal level. As we explore next, some students see more opportunity for personal exploration and meaningful development of ideas as involving a paradigm quite different from the academic. Building from a more “creative” construct of writing development, students suggest that they have found newly authentic ways to express themselves and to claim clearer authority over their own writing and ideas. Nonetheless, as we explore, this second construct of writing development carries its own constraints.

“The Chance to Make Up Your Own Everything”: The “Creative” Construct of Writing Development

For many students, the alternate construct of writing development that they align with the “creative” entails seeing themselves as writers newly capable of producing original ideas that transcend what they frequently see as the rigidly disciplinary categories they understood an “academic” framework to require. Writing in and for this “creative” framework is therefore a distinctively epistemic construct, where writing serves as a thought-generating activity in its own right. As Olivia describes it in her exit interview, the “creative” means that you can “kind of give yourself permission to be kind of a crappy writer at times and follow these really interesting ideas.” Such creative work is thus valuable not for its written products—laughing, she describes her creative work as the “kind that you try to bury under a stack of paper”—but because it allows for a process that is “more liberated and free” than other notions she holds of “how I should be writing academically.” As this comment exemplifies, students sharing Olivia’s view often position the “creative” as a liberating alternative to both the genre-bound “academic” domain and the specific kind of development this construct appeared to promote.

Unlike the writers of the previous section, who understand writing as the appropriate response to highly local and explicit readerly demands, a creative construct of writing and development implies a new attitude toward the sources of authority and the writer’s construction of knowledge. In her exit interview during her senior year, Lauren describes creative exploration as writing that “causes you to get outside of the rigorous academic sometimes dry writing and get into something way more creative where you actually have to give a voice to someone that you have never met, someone that actually doesn’t exist.” For Lauren, this marks a dramatic break from past habits: “It’s definitely a new way of thinking.” The imaginative demands of such work result for many students in a newly constructivist view of evidence and a novel turn to internal rather than purely external criteria for a sense
of validity. In the domain of the creative, writing is seen to be generative in and of itself, and as such, a healthy relief from more typically “academic” approaches: “It kinda is like a break,” Lauren says. Indeed, the emphasis on invention seems, for Lauren, to create a propagative momentum of its own: as she argues, work within this domain feels like “I stepped out, got a creative breath of fresh air, which allowed me to continue writing.”

Moreover, these students who talk about writing development as the ability to invent and explore also report more “personal” investment in their writing and the development of more durable identities as writers. For many, this is both freeing and enables transfer across new contexts; however, as we will also explore below, this construct appears for many students to also preclude more nuanced understandings of genre, especially through students’ overemphasis on voice and independence from structure, and underemphasis on the shaping power of rhetorical exigency. In both freeing and limiting ways, then, the “creative” seems to suggest a form of development that students link most tightly to their writerly selves, and to writerly products and processes seen exclusively—and sometimes narrowly—through the lens of individual convictions. When Raquel, for example, describes herself in her exit interview writing “more personal reflection, personal narrative, creative non-fiction, and re-purposing essays,” she offers as her sole example “an argumentative essay without any research, like you weren’t allowed to do anything so you had to just really develop your own ideas” (emphasis added). For Raquel, this work is developmental not for enabling a new level of expertise in some preexistent knowledge domain, but for enabling more personal connections to the making of knowledge, and an attendant theory of invention:

Obviously having evidence helps, but just helping develop your own tone and your style like that was really beneficial in just opening my eyes. Like if I view this topic and this is my opinion, I need to be able to explain why I view that before I even start backing it up, like how does that apply to my life, how do I relate to it.

As Raquel seems to understand it, this “creative” approach encourages her to explore how the writer and her topic interrelate, especially by emphasizing the writer’s own experiences and beliefs. As such, the writing and developmental construct underlying this approach involves more than just communication through rhetorically effective (in this case, evidence-based) forms, but the realization and cultivation of one’s own more personal perspective. In this way, this construct of development also seems to encourage a more cohesive concept of the writerly self than their more “academic” experiences, with
their apparent over-focus on formulaic concepts of genre. For these students—as echoed by many writers from the previous section—the academic construct of writing requires obedience to the outside prescriptions that Olivia describes as the internalized “mental picture of how I should be writing academically.” In contrast to that construct, Olivia and Raquel suggest that certain more writer-centered concerns—personal relevance, associative processes, comfort with speculation—are an alternate means of achieving writerly development. Many students even saw their newly “creative” construct as a progressive development away from academic writing: developing away from the construct that Leo, for instance, implies in his exit interview is a kind of academic rule-following, and developing into a newly generative independence.

Indeed, Leo argues that before turning to the “creative,” he was overly reliant on external criteria and formulas, to the detriment—as he sees it—of his own writerly self-conception: “I realized that I was taking inspiration from other writers and using their styles. Ultimately, I didn’t know who I was as a writer.” Subsequently, as he then explains, “I did a lot of creative non-fiction because I was thinking that that would help me figure out who I was as a writer.” In short, the generative construct of writing that students align with the creative seems to enable a turn away from identifying only as what Dana called a “student writer” and toward a new ability to connect their writing to a highly individualized but newly coherent sense of writerly self.

Yet while a secure and durable sense of writerly identity can be a boon to writerly self-efficacy, many students’ comments also illustrate how this epistemic construct of writing is often imagined to exist entirely independently of outside influence. In this way, it is a construct that verges close to an outright rejection of a social-rhetorical view of writing and the writer. For, in addition to positioning a new relationship to evidence and the writerly self, the “creative” also seems to posit a new skepticism about the “recognizable forms” that also shape written knowledge. For many students, writing activity that operates within this “creative” sphere rejects the academic sphere’s apparent propensity for reproducing norms that already exist, so that, as Lauren puts it, “I’m not just strictly getting drawn out with the same academic jargon over and over and over again.” Ashley, for example, who describes her senior year creative writing class as encouraging her to “explore a little bit more,” presents this exploratory function as unbound by the kinds of generic knowledge her other academic experiences promoted. As she explains in an exit interview, “before this semester, I . . . wrote to a form, and, again, very straight forward”; however, “now I’m delving into more of a creative field, and I don’t need a form as much as I did anymore.”
In this way, the rigid mutual exclusion by which many students seem to understand these two writing constructs suggests that for many, these two strands of development impinge little on one another. Dan offers a powerful example in his entry interview of a student unaware of the extent to which his “creative” construct of writing and development may be affected by audience demands or by the reproduction of forms that he disavows because they entail overly “academic” modes of writing. Indeed, Dan understands his generative construct of writing and voice to require abandoning the “academic” formalism that many students see previous school experiences as having overemphasized. As Dan describes his first-year writing course, he draws hard distinctions between that formalism, on the one hand, and his teacher’s apparent focus on fostering a more personal voice and more personal sources of authority, on the other:

Well, I had a teacher my freshman year . . . and he’s in the creative writing department. . . . He kicked my butt on one of my first papers, and I was like, “Oh, crap. This is gonna be a bad year already.” . . . I did really poorly on that, and I talked with him, and I said, “Well, what have I gotta do?” He said, “I feel like you’re trying to write this, and you are reinforced to write this. Just write it for me as you would say it.” That was what helped make the differences, that I stopped realizing that I need to write something formal, and I can just write what I would say, or whatever I wanted, and it would be easier like that.

Dan understands his teacher as promoting an expressivist writing construct wherein “I can just write what I would say, or whatever I wanted” to achieve a new writerly fluency. And this approach, by Dan’s telling, helps him foster a newly authentic and self-assured sense of himself as a writer. Further, Dan implies that this has a significant impact on his development and on his transfer of writing knowledge across contexts. For, as Dan argues, internalizing his teacher’s advice means that

[that] papers were easier to write. I could get them done quicker or I would be less stressed because I knew that I wasn’t being forced, and that [the] professor wasn’t looking for some strict style, he was just looking for you to make your point.

In Dan’s understanding, his development involved moving beyond concerns with what he calls “strict style” and has meant instead embracing an idea-driven (or “point-driven”) model of writing—similar to Raquel’s claim that the “creative” forced her to attend less to outside evidence and more to the internal coherence of her own claims and beliefs. This construct of writing development thus has a
crucial practical function for Dan, establishing a strong sense of self-efficacy that seems to encourage learning transfer across genres and fields. For just as Lauren explained that the creative provided a “breath of fresh air, allowed me to continue writing,” Dan seems to understand this new focus on the discovery and expression of “what I would say” to promote the continuing cultivation of an authentic and confident writerly self. And this is a construct, Dan suggests, that affects all the work he produces for “professors,” indicating that he views the construct as useful across school circumstances, even those that don’t operate within the generically “creative” domain he affiliated with this particular teacher.¹

Even so, and to return to Dan’s original description of the influence of this teacher, Dan seems to understand such expressivism, and its implied construct of writing and development, in absolutist terms: as freeing him of any of the conventions he was previously taught, especially the prescriptive formalism his teacher seems to presume was encouraged by his past and even present schooling (“He said, ‘I feel like you’re trying to write this, and you are reinforced to write this. Just write it for me as you would say it’”). Indeed, Dan does not seem aware of the extent to which writing what I would say, or whatever I wanted” still remains, in this course-specific case, just as shaped by audience expectation as was his more “formal” prior work. After all, and by his own description, Dan’s first-year writing stays focused toward the particular demands of a teacher. Nor is this somewhat narrow view of audience complicated by this teacher; instead, at least by Dan’s telling, this view is explicitly confirmed, as when he reports that his teacher has told him to “just write it for me as you would say it.” Indeed, this small narrative reveals the unresolved tensions inside many students’ understanding of this “creative” construct of writing in which Dan continues to define his writerly purpose by one reader’s preferences, even while he imagines that its “creative” nature engenders total freedom from such fetters. As such, it remains significant that Dan continues to present this construct as entirely separable from the academic formalism of his previous educational experiences: it does not provide fresh nuance to his understanding of rhetorical exigency, but instead encourages an apparently outright rejection of his previously “forced” and “stressful” attention to readers’ formal expectations.

Indeed, one wonders what Dan might do with a curriculum such as that in Ashley’s movement science class (“you have to [write it] the same way over and over”)—and whether his freedom from “forced” and “stressful” writing constructs would survive when confronted with more stringently convention-bound course work or future professional demands. One possibility is that students like Dan are self-selecting courses that allow these “creative” constructs of writing and development to flourish unchallenged. The exit interview comments of another study
participant, Tim, suggest that, for other students, this notion of highly personal and autonomous invention might actually prove inapplicable to all other college course work. What Tim understands as the creative domain’s “chance to make up your own everything” represents an option, in his description, that “I never really applied . . . to anything else.” For Tim, then, this “aspect of making everything”—which he here aligns with a fiction-writing course—did not transfer. While he nods vaguely to the notion that such writing “made it more well-rounded, I guess,” he also argues that the kind of writing it promoted did not travel to other contexts. Instead, “it was kind of just a unique experience in itself.”

What remains consistent among Dan and Tim, and among the students such as Ashley who are more inclined to identify purely with an academic construct of development, is that the academic and the creative constructs of writing and writerly development appear for them entirely incompatible. For Tim and Ashley, they do not travel or transfer usefully across contexts; for Dan, transfer only occurs when one (the “creative”) completely subsumes the other. Again, this incompatibility may be attributed to students’ understanding of the differences between genres and disciplines themselves, as when Shannon explains that “I guess I can mold my style to any different venue or audience and purpose for what I’m writing,” and that, if she is writing a “creative, non-fiction piece, I can put my voice into more and have my personality show through”; in contrast, “If it’s a research academic paper, I know to be more formal in tone and to cite studies.” At one level, comments like this merely illustrate a commonsensical kind of genre-sensitive rhetorical savvy—writing knowledge that is a mark of development in and of itself. But it remains significant that these constructs continue to be understood by many students in such tidily binary terms, requiring the student to simply swap out an “academic” emphasis on “form” and outside evidence for a “creative” emphasis on “voice” and “personality.” By hewing to such a neat equation, students such as Shannon also leave unexplored the formal, audience-sensitive elements that help shape invention and creative expression, and the sense of personal investment and genuine inquiry that gives disciplinary work its argumentative traction.

To be sure, the experiences and ideas these students relate show the real constraints that many students understand genre-based academic work to impose on their writerly selves. Moreover, their comments reflect the hunger many students seem to feel for the alternate construct of writing and the writer that this creative domain can promote: a constructive, epistemic view of knowledge, and the self-discovery project implicit in the activity of putting personally significant words on a page. Nonetheless, interview data also show how difficult it appears to be for many students to reconcile these two constructs of the creative and the academic, or to
see them as dialogically related. Whether discussing transfer, or genre, or voice, students show a stubborn propensity to entirely replace the features implicit in one for the features implicit in the other, instead of understanding these constructs of writing and strands of development as possibly intertwined and even mutually constitutive. In the next section, we consider the experiences of students who are beginning to put these two domains of writing development into conversation—and into action.

Integrating the Academic and the Creative: A Third Construct of Writing Development

Across the study, many students could be seen classifying themselves, more or less neatly, within the two domains—the academic or the creative—that we have operationalized in this chapter to frame constructs of writing development. Yet the study data also point to a third, more integrative construct of writing development, one that appears to allow students to move beyond some of the constraints that either of the two spheres we have discussed here presents. Within this third construct, we saw students who were able to recognize and draw from both creative and academic forms and experiences in the ways they conceptualized writing assignments and themselves as writers.

Indeed, this finding adds a new dimension to Rebecca Nowacek's concept of "agents of integration." Nowacek's work sees students as integrating knowledge of different genres to enable transfer across writing contexts and to develop new abilities and writing identities. Here, we find students doing integrative work at an even more conceptual level: integrating different constructs of writing and development themselves, the one defined by its knowledge of disciplinary norms, the other defined by a more self-reliant form of invention. In this third, blended construct of writing development, students negotiate between views of writing and their writerly growth as entailing both generative activity and adherence to communicative norms, instead of viewing these approaches as requiring an either-or choice. We thus conclude with a discussion of students who appeared to operate in what we call an academic-creative hybrid. These students appear to understand writing and their development in more capacious ways than their peers—even, as we note, when they struggle to describe and discuss this work with the same ease that others display through their neat taxonomies of the academic and the creative.

We see three distinct strengths of this more integrative approach for student writers. First, students discuss writing tasks and opportunities in ways that display
greater confidence and agentive power than students who framed writing development within the domain of either the academic or the creative. Next, these students display greater flexibility within given contexts and, as important, they appear able to more easily navigate the transfer of writing skills across different spaces and among different forms. Finally, these students are able to reflect on writing as both a topic and a tool and can discuss development in terms of both their conceptions of themselves as writers and the varied roles that writing might play in their lives.

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, students who fit in this more expansive category of writing development also tend to be those who minor in writing. This pattern probably reflects the influence of the these students’ course work, including projects (described in appendix 2) that explicitly require students to think across disciplinary boundaries regarding how they conceive of and present writing, and to be open to broad reconceptualizations of their own writing and their approach to writing. Students in the writing minor, for instance, are asked in one assignment to repurpose a piece of writing into a different form or medium; they also are asked to transfer written work into digital formats through online portfolios and Capstone projects. This course work also includes frequent self-reflection assignments, encouraging students to gain more meta-awareness of their own writing processes, the forms in which they write, and their sense of writerly self-efficacy. Still, it is relevant to note that this construct of development was something also forwarded by some students who were not writing minors. Indeed, a number of exceptions existed in which students from a range of disciplines could be seen working to find ways to bridge their understanding—and their use—of academic and creative forms in their writing practice.

Students operating within this hybrid construct of writing development were more likely to indicate that they see various “kinds of writing” not as repetitive practice in one or another narrowly conceived skill set or form, but as an open-ended exploration of rhetorical features and generative strategies. These students discussed writing as an opportunity for growth that transcended the narrow confines of course requirements, or even the larger academic setting, and they thus framed their own development neither as bound by specific disciplinary conventions nor as tied to absolute creative freedom. This more expansive view of how we grow as writers indicates that these students imagine their own development as a kind of movement across and beyond the categories that other students’ taxonomies of “kinds of writing” might suggest are sealed off.

The way these students talk about writing is especially instructive regarding the forms of respectful and relative independence they see themselves as having achieved as writers. They can acknowledge the powers of local audience awareness
or a situation’s “recognizable forms” while also showing a new willingness to navigate among, rather than entirely capitulate to, these forces or reject them altogether. Moreover, and as a mark of development, students suggest that this new construct supports their growth into newly “confident” and agentic writers, able to respond to discrete assignments yet also able to restructure some formats or preconceived notions of what successful writing looks like in a range of contexts and categories. Near graduation, in her exit interview, Stephanie discusses writing development in terms of her ability to form arguments that deviate, at points, from expected responses, and she explains this as resulting in a newfound confidence:

I think just, yeah, being able to shape my ideas independently—that’s really how they affected me. As far as, as I practiced and as I became more confident as a writer, I was also becoming more independent, especially in the ideas, where I’m not afraid to take a different stance than a professor, and say, “Hey, maybe you are wrong in this.” I’m not gonna change your opinion, but, hey, let’s pretend that you would for a second. That independence has really helped.

Stephanie’s willingness to imagine that she might “change” her professor’s opinion is a sign of her faith in writing as a means of generating new ideas that have possibly transformative consequences in the world. Yet she does not understand this generative power as existing in a vacuum; such “independence” is shaped, instead, by a deep familiarity with her professor’s own “stance,” and an understanding of how she might position herself accordingly. For her, then, this “independence” is not absolute, but contingent; it functions as a belief that she can intervene in known opinions and may be able to reshape existing ideas. Likewise, Grace, in her entry interview, draws together expertise in math with exploration in English to rethink the ways that writing is shaped but not rigidly bound by the “recognizable forms” through which it communicates, as Anna Knutson (chapter 9) also explores. Grace’s cheerful analysis admits the complications of this understanding and of carrying it out in practice, as can be seen in her detailed parsing of the terms “system,” “formula,” and “organization”—the two former terms functioning as markers of the conceptual rules in the discipline of math, and the latter describing the notion of a structure that is legible yet unfettered by strict formulas and that she aligns with the “art” of writing:

With math you’re just like, “Well, I have to put this variable on this side of the equation first,” and then there’s a system. When you’re writing there is no system. As a writer, my writing had always been really formulaic . . . [But] writing is a kind of art and shouldn’t
be so formulaic. It’s something that has to be creative—but also can’t be all over the place. It has to be organized, and then I’m always trying to figure out how to match the creativity with the organization. It takes me forever to write!

In their comments, each of these students demonstrates an approach to writing that reflects confidence not only in their own skills and preparation as writers, but in their ability to rethink what others might see as constraining forms of writing in order to explore new ideas or generate new knowledge. These students recognize the value of form and organization in this exploration, but they draw from a mix of disciplinary experiences and broader ways of conceiving writing. And when Grace closes with the quip that “It takes me forever to write,” we also see students’ recognition that this hybrid approach to writing development is not easier or faster; nonetheless, they show themselves to be remarkably invested in the work of writing and in the power it holds for them.

Students whose talk about writing development puts the domains of the academic and the creative in conversation also show greater flexibility in their ability to transfer skills and approaches to writing across courses and disciplines, and between academic and nonacademic contexts. Stephanie, for instance, pointed in an exit interview to an insurance course as allowing her to recognize the broad potential reach of writing:

I think that the class really—it taught me that there is more to math than just math. That really is where it bridged my math and my English majors. . . . Saying that the skills that I was learning in the English classes weren’t going to be tossed on the wayside in the math world. That knowing how to analyze and explain situations through writing is definitely necessary, especially in the insurance business.

As they make sense of new kinds of writing and in various school, personal, and professional settings, students who view the academic and the creative in tandem also display awareness of the ways that that their development as writers reaches across boundaries that may seem more restrictive to other emerging writers. In many ways, this is achieved through developing a more durable sense of writerly self whose skills and sense of self-efficacy remain relatively consistent across contexts. Ayanna explained in her exit interview her gradual move away from thinking about writing in exclusively school-based terms in this way:

Most of the writing I did when I started at Michigan was very much for school, and it was very much driven by the classes I took and the topics I encountered that way. Now,
I think, coming out of Michigan I’ve developed writing more as a personal hobby as well, alongside the class stuff, and I think I’ve broadened my view of writing a bit more. I think before, writing for me was mostly, like, five-paragraph essays and a lotta papers, and now there’s much more of a reflective component about it. It’s less about writing about other people, which I still do, but finding myself within the writing, too, I think, I’ve realized more now than I did before.

This expanded construct of writing development reflects connection to personal purpose and exploration. For Ayanna, thinking of “writing as writing” allows a construct of writing development that makes space for reflection and allows a personal sense of purpose to interact with rhetorical demands. Naomi Silver’s chapter in this volume further explores Ayanna’s emerging sense of writerly identity and its connections to the explicit work of reflecting on writing that Ayanna engages through the eportfolio process.

In these reflective comments, students who can discuss their own writing as drawing from both academic and creative constructs point, finally, to an understanding of a wider role for writing in their lives and to stronger self-conceptualizations as writers. More broadly, their comments highlight the ways that the exploration and integration of different constructs of writing allow students to use writing for broader purposes and to see themselves more fully as writers. Another study participant, Mike, echoes this idea in his exit interview, discussing the importance of helping students to recognize that “what they’re doing everyday, whether they realize it or not, is valuable writing—so how we talk with our friend and text, and how we write little notes or how we organize our thoughts.” As students bridge writing experiences that they sense are more academic or more creative, their development can be defined by their new ability to operate across contexts in more flexible and confident ways. This same pattern extends as well to how students integrate disciplinary with extracurricular knowledge in their upper-level college writing, as explored in more detail in McCarty’s chapter in this volume.

Finally, Mike’s comment—however unwittingly—also points to the complexity of this hybrid approach to considering student writing development. When Mike suggests that students are gaining rhetorical flexibility “whether they realize it or not,” he indicates how enormously difficult it can be for students to envision themselves in this integrated space, one in which they cannot rely on reductive notions of themselves as strong “academic” writers or free and expansive “creative” writers. For instance, even as Jonah discussed “overlaps” between various kinds of writing in his entry interview—and hinted at his own growth within that blended space—he also voiced his own uncertainty:
There’s more than overlap between different English types of writing than there is between science writing. The lab report versus, I don’t know what exactly it was, but it was like a report on a society. There’s a lot of difference between those, cause one you’re citing sources, you’re still trying to make an argument, but it’s a concise argument. The lab report is just a write-up of facts, whereas English writing kind of spans. I mean, I’m getting more confident at it, but I’m not 100 percent there.

While not “100 percent there,” Jonah is working hard to articulate the ways that clearly distinct kinds of writing—“English types” and “science writing”—are both characterized as types of “report,” in both of which “you’re still trying to make an argument.” The difference is one he seems to intuitively sense, and we can see him beginning to discern the push-and-pull between discipline-specific writing approaches and the fact that these approaches may be drawn from more generalizable rhetorical moves and goals. Ultimately, this gray space—and the more complex negotiation it requires of students (and of their instructors across disciplines)—may point toward richer and more lasting growth in college student writing.

And it is perhaps most important to remember how difficult it seems to be for many of our articulate and enthusiastic participants to recognize and embrace this gray space as a productive integration of these academic and creative constructs. One of our core arguments is that many of these students’ taxonomies are not attributable to the writing minor curriculum alone, although that curriculum may well have helped to crystallize certain patterns of thought. Instead, we would suggest that these categorizing tendencies emerge from a larger lack of available constructs with which students can conceptualize in a genuinely dialogic way both the generative and the reproductive kinds of activity entailed in writing. The student who opened our chapter, Joy, also provides an apt coda for this argument; like many of her peers, she seems to be groping toward a new construct of writing that could help her transcend the polarizing categories through which she currently understands her own work and development. For her, in fact, like many of the students quoted here, these overarching domains of the “academic” and the “creative” appear to emerge from a base-level frustration with how academic writing, consciously or not, is most broadly presented in school contexts—as a inflexible construct determined exclusively by static formulas and an overly local sense of audience (the instructor). For these students, this construct fails to engage notions of invention or the writerly self, and thus creates a vacuum that only a radically defined “creative” domain, focused instead on epistemic activity alone, can fill. Or so Joy forcefully argues when asked what researchers into undergraduate writing development ought to consider when designing curricula:
I guess they could learn that there is a student dissatisfaction with the very structured academic writing. I remember in the class [in the minor] . . . I brought up the point that, for example, in my poli sci class, the teacher really suppressed creativity. Everyone seemed to agree with that. . . . It's just, I guess they could learn that students need freedom to develop as a writer. It's great to train them in professional writing. I'm not saying they should dismiss the structured writing because students need to learn that. . . . It just seems like there's not many opportunities for creative thinking throughout the Michigan curriculum in general.

Significantly, Joy's statement, by its end, moves from the realm of writing to the realm of thought, and to the need to teach a kind of "creative thinking" that many students believe an over-focus on "academic writing" has somehow edged out. That said, and as these students' talk also illustrates, an overly extreme shift to the "creative" construct of writing and development risks, in its turn, students' discounting the rich rhetorical knowledge that an "academic" focus on genre and audience has also provided. The challenge for writing studies, as we see it, is therefore to provide students with more integrative language and constructs for students' own sense of their writing and their development as writers, in which the generation and the communication of thought through writing can be experienced and understood to always be working in tandem.

NOTES

1. Anne Ruggles Gere's discussion, in chapter 10, of Dan's postgraduate musings on the significance of peer feedback—and his regret about having disregarded peer feedback for much of his college career—suggests that Dan's postgraduate experiences as a workplace writer have given him new insight into the social nature of writing. In his new professional context, Dan's sense of the creative may likewise have developed from the individualism implied here to a more situation-sensitive acknowledgment of the shaping powers of genre and form.

2. Ayanna's ability to think through "writing as writing"—and her attempts to disentangle "writing writing" from multimodal communications, as glossed in Silver's chapter (chap. 8, this vol.)—can be attributed to the self-reflective realm the writing minor provides. In many ways, this realm is similar to the "third space' environment" that Fraizer recommends for developing college-level writers: "where writers can reflect across disciplinary boundaries and generalize about what they're learning outside of the activity system of their work in progress" (52).

WORKS CITED


