CHAPTER SEVEN

GRACE

A CASE STUDY OF RESOURCEFULNESS AND RESILIENCE

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Grace, an honors student who will go on to graduate with a 3.97 GPA and a Fulbright grant to teach English in Germany, is an exemplary student and an avid reader. Grace’s reading practices are significant to her theorization of her own writing development: she believes that “reading helps writing . . . so if you read more, you write better.” Based on her academic success, her passion for reading, and her belief that habitual reading transfers to excellence in writing, one would assume, at first glance, that she would be an agile, capable, and confident writer.

However, almost immediately in her first interview for this study, Grace states that she “hate[s] writing,” because when she reads her own academic writing, it doesn’t “match up” to the novels that she spends so much time reading:

One of the reasons why I hate writing is because I’ll read [my writing], and I’m like, “This isn’t just like these masterpieces from all these books that I read.” Then I get really upset about it, because . . . it’s just a stylistic problem. It just doesn’t flow the way I want it to. It’s not perfect, and I think part of what makes me so frustrated about it is because I read these great books that I’m never gonna match up to when I write. I just get really disheartened.

In this instance, Grace is engaging in activities that instructors value highly: she is reading for pleasure, reading with the hope of improving her writing, and engaging in what could be construed as metacognitive reflection, or at least self-assessment, by reviewing her academic writing to evaluate her progress. However, these activities don’t seem to yield overwhelmingly positive results. As Sarah Swofford sug-
gests (chapter 9), to obtain a full portrait of students’ writing development, we must look at data beyond their projects and grades. The apparent (and curious) disconnect between Grace’s beliefs about herself as a writer and her success (in terms of grades, test scores, the quality of her upper-division writing, and her overall academic achievements) led me to explore her case in more depth. In doing so, I draw on Grace’s experiences in order to illuminate the relationship between self-efficacy, students’ beliefs about writing, and writing development.

Why Grace?

Before delving into Grace’s case study, I briefly describe how I selected her case and conducted my analysis. As I discuss shortly, Grace is an honors student who, at the start of this study, had declared an environmental science major, which she ultimately dropped due to the amount of argumentative writing the major required. By the time she graduated, Grace had changed her major to German with a minor in environmental science. Her choice to leave her first major due to writing anxiety reveals how central Grace’s beliefs and concerns about writing are to her development as a student and a writer.

Like many writing knowledge transfer researchers, I am interested in the relationship between self-efficacy, learning transfer, and writing development, especially in terms of how attempts at transfer that an instructor deems unsuccessful may affect students’ self-efficacy and development over time. Since I participated in data collection, first-round interview coding, and data management for this study, I knew upon starting this chapter that there were study participants whose experiences with self-efficacy and transfer might shed light on the relationship between the two phenomena and their role in writing development. When I began analyzing interview data, I had at first planned to conduct a cross-case analysis, exploring questions about the relationship between self-efficacy, transfer, and development as they played out in the experiences of multiple participants in the study. To locate these cases, I compiled all of the interview excerpts that had been coded simultaneously with the two following codes during our first round of coding: “learning transfer” and “writerly self-conception.” I chose to explore excerpts coded with both codes because I knew this would help me narrow the data set and locate the cases that could illuminate some aspects of the relationship between self-efficacy, transfer, and development. In doing so, I engaged in what Michael Patton terms “operational construct sampling,” a process that involves selecting “case manifestations of a theoretical construct of interest so as to examine and elaborate the con-


Operational construct sampling entails the purposeful selection of participants to illustrate a specific theoretical construct (or, in this case, the relationship between three constructs: self-efficacy, writing knowledge transfer, and writing development). After extracting excerpts coded with both “learning transfer” and “writerly self-conception” from our qualitative coding program, I was left with 104 excerpts from interviews with 46 study participants.

While conducting focused coding of this slice of data, I found an excerpt from Grace’s entry interview, the first quote discussed in the next section, that I found so provocative (and, quite frankly, troubling) that I was compelled to look more closely at Grace’s data. I combed through both of her interviews and her writing samples; after doing so, I knew that Grace’s data was rich enough to support a single-participant case study, and that only a case study would do her story justice. Joseph Maxwell suggests that case studies differ from sample studies insofar as sample studies explore general questions through data from a larger population, narrowing the sample according to a particular question. In contrast, a case study often starts with a particular case and then states the questions in specific terms, thus “justif[y]ing the selection of a particular case in terms of the goals of the study and existing theory and research” (78). My analysis straddled the line between these two approaches, as I began with a set of general questions about the relationship between self-efficacy, transfer, and development before beginning to narrow my sample; ultimately, due to the richness of Grace’s data, I ended up narrowing the sample as far as possible: to just one participant.

After I had determined that Grace’s data was strong enough to stand alone, I conducted focused coding of her two interviews before triangulating my analysis with her writing samples. In keeping with grounded theory coding, I let the data guide my analysis, allowing codes to emerge from the data before engaging in focused and theoretical coding to highlight salient aspects of the data and theorize relationships between mechanisms operating in the data (Charmaz). Through this process, the story that I will tell shortly began to emerge. At that stage, I realized that Grace could provide not only insight into one possible manifestation of the relationship between self-efficacy, transfer, and development, but also a compelling example of one student’s responses to a particular set of writing challenges. As I moved forward with the case study, I discovered that while I cannot claim that Grace’s experiences are representative of all college students, or even of the student participants in this particular study, she does provide a focused case study of a phenomenon well documented in writing studies research: the student who comes to college feeling overly prepared, only to learn that her prior writing knowledge...
no longer serves her, and who ultimately becomes disheartened with the whole enterprise of college writing. As I will discuss in more detail shortly, similar students have been discussed elsewhere in the literature, by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi; Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey; and Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz. While Grace provides a rich, detailed example of how these particular phenomena might interact to create roadblocks for developing student writers, her longitudinal data also reveals how students may overcome their struggles to adapt to writing; ultimately, Grace reveals a great deal of resourcefulness and resilience, which ultimately enable her to cobble together a writing curriculum that works for her. While the choice of “Grace” as a pseudonym was more or less random, and at first glance perhaps seems counterintuitive given her initial struggles to adapt to college writing, I ultimately discovered that the name I chose was consonant with the grace she displayed by overcoming her challenges and persevering through college writing.

Grace’s Approaches to Writing

In her entry interview, Grace is asked whether she would attribute her growth as a writer to anything besides reading. Grace’s response is saturated with fixed categorizations of types of writing that seem to have presented challenges as she moved from one domain of writing to the next:

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. . . . On ACTs they always test this stupid five-paragraph form—which I don’t think is good writing. I mean, it’s organized, but it’s just like every person’s essay is gonna end up just being . . . just all the same.

Writing is a kind of art and shouldn’t be so formulaic. . . . 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. My [AP] teacher . . . he got me away from the whole formulaic thing, because he was just like—he was really just an innovative sort of teacher. . . . If you wrote a perfectly fine paper but it wasn’t interesting, he would be like, “Eh.” And then I come to university. . . . they prefer you to be more conventional, and I found that really confusing, too. I guess maybe when you’re not conventional then you have trouble finding good research. . . . I’ve gone through some changes in my writing because of that.

Packed into this narrative are three main categorizations of writing:
1. Grace’s formulaic approach, learned in math, which she (at first) unsuccessfully applied in AP English.

2. The same formulaic thinking, learned in math, which she successfully applied in the ACT writing section (she scored in the 98th percentile), although she dismisses the type of writing encouraged and rewarded by this context as not being “good.”

3. Grace’s creativity in writing, learned in AP English, which she unsuccessfully applied in college writing.

In light of Grace’s perspective on her experiences with writing, her negative attitude toward writing becomes more understandable: she keeps expending time and energy learning what she seems to view as fixed, unchangeable approaches to writing, only to be met with resistance when she attempts to apply these approaches in new contexts. When describing the only instance where she successfully transfers a type of writing—the formulaic approach that she learned in math, which helped her succeed on the ACT essay exam—she neglects to mention the high score she received on this exam, instead critiquing the assignment itself, which she describes as a “stupid five-paragraph form,” which is not “good writing.” She ultimately attributes her success to the (flawed) type of writing promoted by the context, rather than to her own ability. In contrast, when she discusses the instances where she applied approaches to writing unsuccessfully in new contexts, when she adapts her “formulaic” approach to AP English, and when she struggles to adapt her creative approach to college writing assignments, she attributes her performance to her own individual failures, rather than to the context. Describing high school English, she mentions her “frustration” about her inability to “be right” consistently while writing. Similarly, in the context of college writing, she expresses her “confusion” about the preferences of college instructors for “conventional” writing. Grace’s views of her writing ability can be explored through what Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells term attribution, also known in psychology as “locus of control”: when Grace succeeds on the ACT, she attributes her success to the writing task; however, when she struggles to adapt prior knowledge to the new contexts of AP English and college writing, she attributes the failure to herself. This suggests low levels of self-efficacy: even when she does succeed, she doesn’t take credit for it, instead attributing her success to the context of writing, which she ultimately critiques.

The two instances where she unsuccessfully applies writing knowledge to new contexts—her application of formulaic thinking in AP English, and her application of creative approaches to writing in college—could be viewed as what Kathleen
Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak term “critical incidents,” conflicts between prior knowledge and the demands of a new context, which typically prompt learning. These instances vary dramatically: her description of attempting to adapt her “formulaic approach” from math to AP English is comparatively positive—although she experienced frustration, she was ultimately able to learn from her initial failed attempts to adapt her prior knowledge to this context. In contrast, her failed attempt to adapt her “creative” approach to college has less of a resolution; as I discuss in detail shortly, Grace’s views of writing seem to hinge on notions of “creativity,” as do those of many of the students discussed by Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson in this collection (chapter 3). Grace posits one possible explanation for the writing expectations that obstructed her attempts at “creativity”: more creative approaches to writing might prevent her from “finding good research.” However, it isn’t clear how creativity might realistically impose barriers to locating and integrating “good” research into one’s writing. Overall, Grace seems confused about what college writing is, what features it should emphasize, and how it relates to prior research. She does suggest that she has changed as a writer due to these experiences, but the lack of agency in her description of her writing is striking: she has “gone through some changes in [her] writing because of this.” This suggests development, of course, but it seems to be completely out of her hands, forced by the expectations (or “preferences”) of her instructors, who are framed, interestingly, as “they”; there is no single instructor identified in this excerpt, suggesting that she has a somewhat monolithic view of academic writing.

Grace ultimately does report signs of development in both instances marked by failure, in high school by learning to “match the creativity with the organization,” and in college by “go[ing] through some changes in [her] writing,” but these experiences seem unnecessarily difficult. Furthermore, they seem to lower her self-efficacy, which might make learning to write in future college classes even more challenging. Grace is not alone: for an example of another student who experienced initial discomfort transferring high school learning into college, see Sarah Swofford’s discussion of Natalie in chapter 9. Why, though, was it such a struggle for Grace to adapt her prior writing knowledge to new contexts, and what can her experiences show us about learning transfer and writing development?

The purpose of this chapter is not to diagnose or disparage Grace, or her instructors for that matter; furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that Grace’s experiences are universal: elsewhere in this collection, Ryan McCarty provides examples of students who, unlike Grace, integrated writing knowledge from different domains with more ease and success (chapter 4). Instead, I wish to shed light on Grace’s struggles with college writing and her responses to these challenges, with
the hope that we might learn more about students’ transitions into college writing and their subsequent development. As I suggest shortly, students like Grace aren’t new to writing studies research: students who struggle to adapt their prior knowledge to college writing have been documented elsewhere in the literature. Although we are familiar with these students, called “boundary guarders” by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi, we know less about whether and how they ultimately overcome their challenges and adapt to college writing. By presenting Grace’s longitudinal data as a case study, I provide a glimpse into one student’s strategies for overcoming these challenges. In the pages that follow, I explore Grace’s perceptions of and experiences with college writing before describing how she overcame her challenges, first by seeking extracurricular writing support, and eventually by pursuing a major in a context so different from her past writing experiences that she was forced to adopt a novice status and rethink her prior approaches to and beliefs about writing.

Grace’s Perceptions of Writing Instruction and Theorization of Writing

Grace believes that she has not received explicit writing instruction in college. When asked in her entry interview if her classroom experiences had affected her writing process, Grace states,

No, I don’t really think so—other than the research stuff. That’s part of the process. It doesn’t tell me how to do it, but it would give me resources . . . or an idea . . . a thesis to make, but it’s not actually about writing or how you should be writing. That’s where I’m getting my ideas, but . . . not helping with writing at all. It’s just that professors just expect you to be able to write. Except I can’t.

This response suggests that Grace has yet to become aware of the relationship between form and content: she seems to believe that the only writing support she might obtain from conducting research is “getting . . . ideas”; she seems less aware—at this point, anyway—that she could potentially use sources that she finds through research as a more appropriate model for academic writing than the novels she aspires to emulate.

Furthermore, her stated belief that she “can’t” write suggests that Grace seems to be enacting what Carol Dweck terms a “fixed mindset” when it comes to writing development. In contrast to a “growth mindset,” or “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts,” Dweck defines the fixed mindset as the belief “that your qualities are carved in stone” (7). Upon entering
the study, Grace seems quite certain that she just “can’t” write, which may explain not only some of her struggles, but also her perception that she has not received explicit writing support or instruction. Dweck notes that “it’s startling to see the degree to which people with the fixed mindset do not believe in putting in effort or getting help” (10). If you believe you “can’t” write and that nothing can change this, it follows that you would be resistant to seeking and engaging with help. Drawing on Emily Wilson and Justine Post’s framework (chapter 1), it seems as though Grace may espouse some views about writing and learning that have ultimately impeded her ability to “critically engage” not only with instructor feedback, but with writing instruction more generally.

Upon graduating, Grace still reports that she believes she hasn’t received explicit writing instruction in her undergraduate career: when asked the same question in her exit interview, whether her writing process has changed due to formal writing instruction, Grace states, “The classes don’t really teach you how to write.” She then adds,

A lot of the professors . . . don’t teach you how to write . . . they just expect you to already know how to do it . . . I don’t know if it’s just a personal problem that I just suck at writing . . . I think it might just be that other things come more naturally than writing does. Then, I think I automatically suck at it, even though it might just be I’m better at other things . . . . They just assume that you know how to write already . . . . Just tell me how you can even—I don’t even know how to start writing. I don’t know how people can even teach you how to write anyway.

Grace’s initial statement places the blame on faculty (“professors . . . don’t teach you how to write”); however, she quickly defaults to explanations that make visible some of the beliefs about writing and learning that may be at the root of her problems, including her fixed-mindset views of herself as an incompetent writer: that her struggles are “a personal problem,” that she “automatically suck[s] at [writing],” that writing doesn’t come “naturally” to her, and her puzzlement about the idea that writing can even be taught. Grace quickly retreats to a position of inherent inability, and her belief that writing can’t be taught—thus suggesting that you either “naturally” or “automatically” can, or you can’t. If she believes that writing can’t be taught, it is understandable that she perceives that she has not received explicit writing instruction: how can you engage with something that you don’t believe exists?

Perhaps unsurprisingly in light of her beliefs about writing, Grace reports experiencing a dearth of individualized writing feedback within her classes:
Sometimes I go to my professors, and I just tell them how much I hate writing. . . . I did tell my professor that it was probably the reason why I dropped her class. It was really embarrassing, too, because I wish I weren’t so bad at it. . . . Why does it have to be so hard? . . . [My professors] never give me . . . there’s nothing you can fix if you hate writing. You just hate it. . . . Well, they’re always telling me to go to [the] Sweetland [Center for Writing] actually. They’re like, “They’ll get you all sorts of help,” . . . I’ve just never gone there. . . . I don’t know if it will help.

It seems that Grace’s perception is that in lieu of individualized writing feedback from an instructor she knows, she is shunted to an unfamiliar place that she does not trust: she doesn’t “know if [the writing center] will help.” However, Grace’s following statement that “there’s nothing you can fix if you hate writing” suggests that she believes her problems are so deep, inherent, and in Dweck’s terms, fixed, that she believes that nothing can help her change or develop, which may explain why she has yet to seek out support through the writing center.

In contrast, as she described earlier in this chapter, it seems as though Grace does believe that she received explicit writing instruction in high school. Her “really good,” “innovative” high school English teacher made quite an impact on her. She was in his class for two years, which seems to have been a positive experience. Two years of AP English with the same instructor prepared her to succeed in at least two domains of writing: timed essay exams, such as the AP exam and the ACT exam, and his class, which seems to have had quite rigorous—and specific—standards for writing. Grace valued this learning, perhaps so much that it became entrenched, as Chris Anson describes:

When writers’ contexts are constrained and they are subjected to repeated practice of the same genres, using the same processes for the same rhetorical purposes and addressing the same audiences, their conceptual framework for writing may become entrenched, “solidified,” or “sedimented.” (77)

Anson suggests that the “misapplication of habituated practice” is typical among high school students who have become accustomed to particular types of writing; Grace may be one of these students.

Minor differences between her high school English classes and her college classes seem to genuinely rattle her, and even impede her attempts at invention. For example, describing an English-language paper she wrote in a German class on Faust, she states
There’s just such a difference between my high school teacher and my college professors. Whereas if we discussed something in class in our high school and then you wrote about it—that was just a no-no, because you should be thinking something new. . . . Then here [in college], it’s just like, “Oh, whatever.” . . . I was afraid to [write] about the stuff that we talked about in class. . . . When I asked [the instructor], “Is it okay if I do like what we were talking about?” He’s like, . . . “No, it’s totally fine.”

Grace’s understanding about writing in a range of academic contexts seems to be guided by the preferences and expectations of her high school teacher: indeed, she is concerned, even after two years of college, with the “difference” between him and the multiple college professors that she has since met. Her high school teacher’s (seemingly rigorously enforced) expectation that students not write about ideas discussed in class initially presents a roadblock to Grace’s attempts to write this paper. It is fitting that this “critical incident” that helped her reframe some of her entrenched knowledge pertained to invention (Yancey et al.); it seems as though many of the struggles she faced in college writing had to do with invention, particularly in terms of coming up with a “creative” idea and “organizing” her thoughts so that she can translate them into writing. As I will discuss shortly, Grace’s stance toward writing changes dramatically after she begins coursework for her German major. She seems better equipped to engage with instructor feedback in this German class: when her instructor, who she reports feeling comfortable approaching, corrects her overgeneralized perception that content discussed in class was off-limits for papers, she understands, accepts, and responds to this feedback, which allowed her to write about a topic that she found motivating.

As I have suggested, in addition to entrenched procedural writing knowledge (e.g., rules about writing such as the one described above—that one should never write about ideas from class discussion), Grace seems to have brought some beliefs about writing into college that had played a role in her struggles with writing. An exploration of Grace’s constructs of writing, or her sets of assumptions about the nature of writing, is critical to understanding her story of development. The construct of writing emphasized by a given curriculum, Dylan Dryer suggests, may inform “the construct of ‘legitimate’ or ‘standard’ writing that students will carry into their future classes, their workplaces, and their private and civic lives” (5). A concern about balancing creativity and organization seems to be central to Grace’s own personal theorization of writing, and this concern seems to be connected to her sense that writing ability is inherent, fixed, and reflective of one’s thinking, rather than one’s ability to communicate effectively in a given social context. When asked what it means “to write well,” Grace states:
You need to be organized. You need to have good ideas. You have to be a good thinker. . . . I feel like writing . . . really demonstrates how you think. If you’re a good thinker, then you’re a good writer. . . . Just think creatively. It’s what makes a good writer.

In this statement, Grace seems to posit writing as a window to the mind. Her fixation on balancing organization with creativity, which persists throughout her interviews, seems to be explained in part in this excerpt: she suggests that good writing relies on good thinking, and that organization and creativity in writing stem from an ability to be organized and creative in one’s thoughts. The sense that writing merely reflects good thinking suggests a lack of awareness of writing process, which helps explain her difficulty engaging with writing instruction: if you believe in fixed, inherent ability, it would be extremely difficult to seek help or to approach the situation from a new angle, which are two essential components of adopting a process-based view of writing.

In an excerpt discussed previously, Grace’s fixation on balancing creativity and organization is apparent: “Writing is a kind of art and shouldn’t be so formulaic. . . . 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.” Her concern with organization seems to be tied to her perception that she has “disorganized” thoughts: in her exit interview, she states that when writing in the English language, “Trying to organize all my thoughts . . . is difficult, for some reason.” Given her beliefs about the relationship between “good thinking” and “good writing,” her disparaging remarks about her own disorganized thinking come more sharply into focus as a possible obstacle to her development as a writer.

When reflecting on reading her peers’ writing, Grace seems similarly concerned with how her “erratic” thinking and her “complex brain” might prevent her from writing well:

I’ve spent more time . . . than [my peers] did, but their writing still sounds so much more beautiful . . . It just is automatically organized. It just came out of their head like that. They just thought, organized, and they could just write it out. For me, it’s just like, I’m just thinking, and then I try to think—thoughts are so hard to organize. They’re just . . . muddled in my head. . . . They probably just think in a more organized fashion than I do. I’m so erratic when I’m thinking.

Grace’s sense that her thinking is inherently more disorganized, or “erratic,” than that of her peers, which then leads to her inability to write efficiently and well, points again to a belief in inherent ability, as well as an under-conceptualized sense
of writing process. Her peers’ thoughts are “automatically organized”; they “just came out of their head like that.” In contrast, in Grace’s view, some people—like herself—just aren’t organized thinkers, and therefore can’t write quickly, or “beautiful[ly].” Instead of viewing her peers’ writing as the result of hard work and process, or as an opportunity to locate an appropriate genre model for writing in a specific academic context, Grace defaults to a view of inherent ability. However, as Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson note in chapter 3, the fact that she has spent a great deal of time (more time than her peers, as she suggests) on writing does suggest her investment in her own writing development.

Grace’s fixation on creativity and organization seems to suggest a very specific construct of writing—one that is perhaps unattainable, especially if she believes that writing ability is inherent and can’t be taught or learned. As a result of aspiring to these high standards, Grace’s writing process is hindered: due to her struggle to balance creativity with organization, she states, “It takes me forever to write.” In the exit interview, she discusses her efforts to write creatively as a hindrance to her process:

Because I want to be creative, . . . I don’t want this professor or this teacher to have to read the same kind of stuff over and over again. They probably get billions of papers that sound the same. . . . Trying to be creative also stumps me, makes me slow to start, ’cause I want it to be better than everyone’s.

This statement hints at Grace’s developing rhetorical awareness: she is concerned about her audience, the professor, “hav[ing] to read the same kind of stuff over and over again”; however, the benchmark to which she aspires, which in this excerpt seems extremely competitive, seems to prevent her from writing, and also serves as a barrier to invention.

However, due to her comfort with more formulaic approaches to writing, Grace’s sense that writing just “comes to” the writer seems to be reinforced by her ease with science writing: she states, “If it’s a science paper, the evidence will speak for itself. You just add it in as you go.” Elsewhere, Grace says,

[With] science writing you have less research; you just write it. It’s more straightforward, and the research will somehow . . . I feel like when I’m researching I’ll just feel the thesis coming to me . . . All the support will be coming to you, and then from there you can just find an easy way to just incorporate what they say. Also, ’cause each article was writing in itself, and you could see how they organized it . . . [with] headings. If you’re writing a book it’s like the same kind of—or an essay. You’re just writing a normal
school essay; to break it down to headings would be a bit weird. If it was like a literature essay, it'd be weird, but in science it's just like, “Yeah, it doesn't matter. You don't need a transition between this and that.” . . . If you label it you know what they're gonna talk about. . . . Science is more direct. . . . Not gonna be all flowery. I'm gonna be technical. I'm gonna be accurate, but I'm not gonna be flowery.

Again, Grace restates her belief that writing just happens: in this context, “you just write it,” and she’ll “just feel the thesis coming to [her],” suggesting once again that writing is inherent, rather than a product of learning and process. Interestingly enough, however, this example does hint—for the first and only time in her interview data—at Grace's awareness that academic research might serve as a genre model for undergraduate student writing: “cause each article was writing in itself, and you could see how they organized it . . . [with] headings.” However, she quickly reverts to a less sophisticated view of genre: while she acknowledges that it would be “weird” to use headings in a “normal school essay,” she slips seamlessly between discussing “writing a book” and “an essay,” almost as though she sees these two types of writing as the same genre. This hints at the same genre confusion that I discussed at the outset: she seems to view novels as being an appropriate genre model for academic writing, which may be one source of her frustration.

It is perplexing that Grace seems to be experiencing such genre confusion in terms of her expectations of her own academic writing, particularly when she expresses a desire to write like the novels she reads. In Grace's case, the decontextualized construct of writing against which she appears to measure herself seems to have not only impeded her attempts to adapt her prior knowledge to new contexts, but the unrealistic standards she has set for herself also seem to have diminished her levels of self-efficacy, resulting in what Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells term a “disruptive disposition.” This is particularly troubling given Grace's belief that that good writing is synonymous with good thinking: it seems as though she believes that if one is not a good writer (as she perceives herself), then they are not a good thinker. Grace's previously quoted statements that her “thoughts are so hard to organize,” that they are “muddled in her head,” and that she is “so erratic when [she's] thinking” suggest that she believes that she is not a good thinker, which implies that she has low levels of self-efficacy when it comes to her cognitive ability more generally in addition to her writing ability specifically.

As I have suggested, throughout her interviews, Grace reveals that she does not believe she is cognitively equipped to be creative and organized at the same time, and that she believes that writing ability is natural and inherent rather than the result of process, effort, and rhetorical efficacy in a given social context. She seems
to believe that writing just happens: when she is writing in science, the paper essentially just flows from her, and for her peers who excel in writing in humanities and social sciences, a similar process happens in those contexts; the writing just appears. This theorization of writing, which emphasizes inherent ability at the expense of process, seems to suggest that good thinking leads to good writing, and that if one is a creative and organized thinker, good writing just happens. Grace seems to view her struggles with creativity and organization as stemming from inherent disorganization in her own thinking, suggesting a fixed mindset about her own cognitive and writing abilities. Given that she seems to have entered college with entrenched writing knowledge that has not served her well, coupled with her belief that writing can’t be taught or learned, it is unsurprising that Grace struggled so much when adapting to college writing.

Forging Ahead: Resourcefulness and Resilience

Grace is not dissimilar from a group of students discussed elsewhere in the literature: students who come to college believing that they have mastered writing in high school only to face challenges adapting that prior knowledge to meet the demands of their new context. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi call these students “boundary guarders,” suggesting that they tend to transfer (perhaps entrenched) genre knowledge wholesale into new contexts, resulting in the misapplication of prior genre knowledge. Upon realizing that their writing knowledge no longer serves them in the new context, these students may, according to Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey, “look upon such a setback as a personal failure (and understandably so), which view can prompt not a re-thinking, but rather resistance.” Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz agree that these writers may become resistant:

. . . freshmen who cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing. . . . These students often select courses to “get their requirements out of the way,” blame their teachers for their low grades, and demonstrate an antagonistic attitude toward feedback. They feel as if there is a “secret code” to academic writing or that college itself is a kind of game whose rules—“what the teacher wants”—are kept secret to them, only glimpsed through the cryptic comments they receive on their papers. (134)
Through this lens, Grace’s bewildering beliefs about writing generally and her abilities as a writer more specifically begin to make more sense: it seems as though she has come into college feeling prepared as a writer, only to find out that the strategies for writing she spent so much time developing in high school no longer work. In response to her perceived failure, she adopts a resistant stance toward writing generally, believing that writing is, as she states, “just this mysterious process” that she is not equipped to tackle. Although Sommers and Saltz voice concerns about how these students develop over time, Grace reveals one student’s unique curricular (and extracurricular) response to these challenges, and eventually, some development.

In response to her struggles with invention, Grace turns to an extracurricular strategy that helps her approach new writing tasks:

I actually had [my roommate] look at my prompt, ‘cause I’m just so stuck . . . I think a lot of it has to do with I have trouble just starting. I find the middle paragraphs are easier to write than intros, and then the intro’s the first thing. I can’t just leave it missing, but I really feel like I should just start with just the bulk and go back to it. It’s weird because with the AP exam . . . you just have to write. It’s timed, it’s written. You have to do the intro first thing. You can’t just go back to it the same way you can on a computer . . . . I’ll spend time writing an intro that isn’t relevant . . . . then I’ll go back and switch it.

In this excerpt, Grace seems painfully aware of how her prior knowledge—writing strategies for a timed essay exam—is impeding her writing process in college. She recognizes that the conditions of the AP exam, which is timed and handwritten, are dramatically different from writing a paper for college. The extended timeline of college writing assignments and the composing power of word processors should allow Grace to engage in a less linear, more recursive process. However, her linear approach to writing, forged through her understanding of AP English exams, seems to prevent her from writing the sections of her papers out of order. This impedes her process of invention, and as a result, she seeks another perspective on the assignment: that of her roommate.

In her exit interview, Grace describes two similar instances where she asked her roommate to read her prompt as a means of seeing the assignment from another perspective. In the first example, she says,

When it’s a writing assignment, there’s preplanning that I have to do, research, and just even thinking about how I wanna go about with my argument. — I’ve tried to ask people, “What is your process?” . . . I think it helps . . . . Sometimes, I ask my roommate
to look at my prompt again, because I think I just overthink the prompt sometimes. I think too much.

Grace describes two types of extracurricular writing feedback in this excerpt: asking other people about their process, and asking her roommate to read her prompt to prevent her from “overthinking.” By seeking the perspective of another student—another thinker, another writer, another construct of writing—she is able to redirect her process, thus helping her generate writing that perhaps aligns more closely with the assignment. By seeking feedback from another student, Grace shows not only movement toward a more growth-oriented mindset, but also a developing awareness of the rhetorically situated nature of writing: she locates an audience beyond her instructor.

In addition to her extracurricular strategies, Grace enacts a curricular strategy (albeit an avoidant one) by dropping her declared major in environmental sciences and opting instead for a minor. Of the major, she states, “I hate that this major is full of writing and persuading people and arguments. I can’t write well enough, and so I just—I dropped the class, and then I dropped my major.” She goes on to say,

I just feel like I can’t take another two, three classes that will have to have me write, because I have better strengths in science things. I find it easier to write science papers for some reason than it is for an argument paper. . . . I’m not even persuasive in person. How am I supposed to sound persuasive in writing?

Her views of writing in this major still suggest a fixed view of writing development: she is just not persuasive, in person or in writing, thus suggesting that she believes her problems with writing stem from her problems as a person.

However, the shroud of insecurity, low self-efficacy, and fixed-mindset beliefs about writing that had previously enveloped Grace’s writing experiences seems to be at least partially lifted when she finds a major that is so different that it forces her to adopt (and embrace) a novice status as a learner: German. Her success in adapting to writing in German can be seen not only through self-reports of her experiences in interviews, but also through the two English-language writing samples that she offered from her German courses, which are much more sophisticated than her writing samples from courses outside of the German department.

Grace’s struggles with writing in English-language courses were closely tied to issues with “overthinking” as an impediment to invention; this seems to be somewhat alleviated when she is writing in German:
In English you’re thinking about all the nuances and trying to choose a word, and I just get so indecisive. It’s like, “Should I use this word or this word?” There are so many options. Then with the German, it’s just like, “Oh, I only know this word for that idea, so I’m gonna go with that word.” You’re just done with it. You’re not overthinking anything.

In her German classes, Grace’s self-described “erratic” and “disorganized” thinking seems to be less of a hindrance to her writing process. Writing in a foreign language seems to have forced Grace to adopt a novice status: because she has fewer linguistic resources to choose from, she has to accept her novice status, thus allowing her to move into the assignment without the burden of “overthinking” that impeded her process of invention in her classes outside of German.

In addition to the freedom to fail built into this writing environment, her German classes also allowed for the creativity that she values in writing:

The German department . . . they like to be really fun about it . . . . They’re trying to convert people into becoming majors and minors, which they do very well . . . . They always stress creativity. Just have fun with the language . . . . and if you’re having fun, and you have everything grammatically correct, and you’re learning at the same time, that’s totally great. My first essay—I’m really proud of it, but I think [the assignment was] just find a German website and write about it—whatever. I mean, any way that you want. There was something probably more creative to it. I would write it . . . . from the perspective of a Gummy Bear. I think our prompt was, “What do you think about the website? Would you recommend it? What else about it?” I was like, “Well, I’m a Gummy Bear, and I like this website ’cause it talks all about me. I’m kinda sad though that it’s not long enough ’cause there should really be more written about me, ’cause I’m a Gummy Bear, and I’m awesome, and I’m cute and whatever.” Stuff like that—it’s just really creative, and then you’re excited about writing it. You’re just like, “I’m just gonna write this. It’s gonna be so hilarious. Everyone’s gonna laugh. I’m laughing. I’m having fun.”

The novice status imposed by writing in a foreign language seems to free Grace from her anxieties about word choice, style, and subjective judgments of her writing, and the writing curriculum in this context still allows for creativity. By encouraging creativity in terms of content, this environment supports the creativity that Grace values so much while simultaneously obviating her concerns about organization and precision in terms of language.

In stark contrast to her previous statements that suggested a product-oriented version of writing, her description of her writing in German suggests more engage-
ment with process. In German, she is more comfortable taking a longer, process-based approach:

I think I just know English so much better, that I also notice the flaws when I write. Then I can’t continue writing until it sounds just right. . . Then I get discouraged and I don't want to write anymore. Whereas [in] German, it’s just, “Well, I’ll fix all the grammar stuff later. Right now, it’s just important . . . to just even convey the idea that I want to convey.” . . . It’s easier to get my ideas when I think about it that way. . . . I go in with this mindset that there will be errors, because I know there will be. It's not my native tongue . . . it frees me to think about what I want to talk about instead of how I’m saying it, or how I’m structuring it, or whether it makes any sense.

Grace finds it easier to “get” her ideas when she isn’t concerned about grammar. Although her use of this verb still implies a theorization of writing as a direct communication of one’s thinking (she is “getting” or accessing her ideas so that they can then be made visible through writing), she does ultimately enact a mindset that is more comfortable with errors in initial drafts, suggesting a more recursive, nonlinear writing process: she knows that she can circle back and edit later, after she writes through her ideas and revises her draft by attending to “structure.” Her knowledge that she is writing in a second language provides her with some freedom to fail when it comes to grammatical perfection, which enables her to focus more on ideas than on mechanics and structure, thus helping her forge a writing process, especially when her instructors support her in doing so. In her exit interview, Grace says,

All [the instructors] want you to do is use the language and not worry about how perfect you’re being. Because . . . language isn’t even perfect, in general, when you talk and stuff. They don’t expect that of you. They just want you to use it, to feel comfortable with it, and to like it. . . . It’s not really about how perfect you are. Just use your language. I enjoy doing that. I’ll write in German randomly, or I seek out German videos, or whatever, because I like to.

In Grace’s view, the instruction in her German major prioritizes scaffolded learning over perfection, which helps her overcome the internalized beliefs about writing and learning that had seemed to hinder her writing in other environments. Here, Grace provides a view of language that emphasizes learning, rather than perfection or a view of language or writing as a direct, transparent communication of one’s thoughts. This environment and its effects on her theorization of writing result in
increased levels of self-efficacy, as well as her engagement with the subject matter: the fact that Grace seeks out experiences to use her German “randomly” suggests that she is truly motivated to learn this subject, even beyond the curricular environment.

Overall, her acceptance of and subsequent critical engagement with instructor feedback seem to play a major role in Grace’s ability to develop as a writer in her German major. When describing her feedback in her German classes, Grace imitates her instructors, perhaps signaling a more personal identification with them as compared to her remarks lumping all university instructors into the unspecified pronoun, “they,” as she did when describing her English-language college instructors in an earlier excerpt. She repeats her German instructors’ feedback as follows: “’Wow, you’re such an amazing—you just did all the grammar right, and you didn’t spell anything wrong, and you looked up this vocab, and you used it right.’” In her exit interview, when she states, “I get a lot of encouragement from the professors . . . they’re just like, ‘Yeah, it was almost . . . perfect grammar-wise.’ I’ve gotten notes saying that, ‘This is the best draft that I’ve ever gotten in this course before,’ or whatever.” At this point, Grace does not seem to engage, borrowing Wilson and Post’s term, “critically,” with instructor feedback (chapter 1); however, she is at least more receptive to it: she recognizes that it exists, and she repeats the comments that she remembers, which are all encouraging and supportive.

Grace states in both interviews that she has not engaged with reflection, which is troubling: reflection supported by curriculum may increase self-efficacy. As Kathleen Blake Yancey suggests, “such reflecting contributes to self-efficacy precisely because it helps us understand that we have learned (even if not always successfully); how we have learned; and how we might continue to learn” (“Introduction” 8). Furthermore, curricular reflection may offer writers guided, structured opportunities to theorize their own writing alongside principles espoused by writing research (Taczak; Taczak and Robertson; Yancey, Reflection; Yancey et al.), which might have been particularly helpful in terms of prompting Grace to rethink some of her beliefs about writing.

However, despite her statements in both interviews that she has not engaged with reflective writing, it appears that she has: not only does she upload one of her writing samples to our study archive with a note remarking that she had also been required to write a reflective component when submitting it, but her writing samples from her German classes, especially the preface she wrote for her translation of a German’s children’s story, demonstrate that she ultimately was able to engage in some curricular reflection. The fact that she does not report having engaged in reflection is also indicative of her previous resistance toward writing curriculum:
the reflective assignment that she uploaded seems to have escaped her memory, suggesting that she didn't engage critically with this exercise.

In the translator’s preface, Grace adopts an engaging and sophisticated tone while walking her reader through the processes that informed the decisions she made while translating this short story. Despite her statements about reflection, the preface to her translation suggests that she can be a highly reflective writer and thinker when given an opportunity to make her thought processes visible through reflective prose. In reading Grace’s description of writing the translator’ preface, it becomes clear that instructor feedback was central to this process:

With my advisor for this translation, this introduction thing, we went through just to see what kind of things I should include. . . . He just let me talk, then he wrote down what I said . . . I think he was [like], . . . “All this stuff that you’re telling me can be put into this preface. Just start writing and go from there.” I found that to be . . . helpful . . . I knew that he was gonna look over it afterwards, too. This continued coaching . . . it made me reliable.

This instructor provided Grace individualized writing support consisting of three meetings: brainstorming, a review of a first draft, and a review of a revised draft. Throughout this process, Grace felt supported, and she was receptive to feedback, suggesting that she had become more “accepting” (in Wilson and Post’s terms, chapter 1, this collection) of instructor feedback. Furthermore, in this instance, the ongoing feedback that resulted in the translator’s preface seemed to have prompted Grace to reflect on her writing and thinking: as I have previously suggested, the preface itself is quite reflective. Since subsequent reflection suggests critical engagement with feedback, this instance seems to reveal that Grace has ultimately critically engaged with instructor feedback in this instance, which Wilson and Post suggest is a sign of development.

Overall, it seems that in their feedback, the German faculty emphasized ideas over perfection. Of another paper, Grace says,

Once I finished [a draft of a research paper], [my instructor] gave it back and said it was great. . . . He wasn't grading on grammar at that point, because it was just—it’s like a checkpoint to make sure you’re not going in the wrong direction and being full of errors and whatever. At least you’ve progressed somewhere. He said it was good, and I’m consistently doing well with that writing. It makes me feel better about writing, like, “Now I wanna write, because I’ll do great. If I put the effort in.”
Clearly, her motivation and self-efficacy toward writing in this environment are encouraged by this curricular structure: she recognizes that if she “put[s] the effort in,” she will be rewarded. Supported by this curricular environment, Grace seems to finally begin to adopt a growth mindset: if she tries, she will learn.

She discusses the role of instructor feedback in more detail when describing her process drafting another English-language paper, which she was “really proud of,” in a German class. She notes that

My professor . . . graded it on ideas. You could always go to him at any time through the whole semester . . . however finished your essay was . . . He was just, “Whatever.” He was just so—ideas—this is what matters obviously.

Feedback is clearly a central part of this story: of the same instructor, Grace says,

I would be comfortable going up to talk to him, ’cause he was so passionate about [the content of the course]. It’s okay to talk to this person, ’cause . . . he’ll want to talk . . . to me about this. Some of my other papers, I just feel that I can’t talk to anyone about it, and I just kinda go through it.

Grace did take advantage of this instructor’s availability for feedback, which helped her change her “five-paragraph mindset” and encouraged her to experiment with novel organizational approaches. Of the paper, she stated,

It was fun. . . . I went to his office hours. . . . The first thing I said was, “How do I write a ten-page paper? I’ve never done it before.” Then he was like, “Well, you just do it like any other paper. It’s just really long.” . . . The longest I’ve ever done was six pages, and it’s different if you’re into that five-paragraph mindset obviously that’s not gonna fill ten pages. . . . It helped me think that there are other organizational styles. Mine ended up being broken into two parts, two arguments.

The feedback in this class emphasized the importance of ideas over perfection, and process over product; this approach seemed to resonate with Grace. It seems as though Grace felt supported, encouraged, and self-efficacious in this environment, which helped her challenge her entrenched writing knowledge: by remarking on her ability to change her “five-paragraph mindset” and experiment with new organizational structures, Grace reveals that she is developing as a writer.

The experience of learning to write in a new language seems to have been desta-
bilizing enough that Grace was forced to dislodge some of her entrenched writing knowledge and approach writing anew, as a novice. Her lack of linguistic resources allowed her to approach writing without “overthinking” it, and the scaffolded nature of assignments and emphasis on growth over perfection allow her to rethink her approaches to learning. Furthermore, the supportive nature of the instructor feedback in this context seems to enable Grace to accept feedback, and eventually to engage critically with instructor feedback and new approaches to writing. The approach to writing that she ultimately adopts seems to be less stilted and linear, emphasizing process over product.

By the time she graduates, Grace ultimately demonstrates more nuanced perspectives about how her self-efficacy shifts when writing for different domains, such as German classes and blogs, which she also points to in her interviews as a freeing form of writing. This is in stark contrast to her earlier decontextualized views of writing as universally “good” or “bad,” which suggest that its quality is determined by the quality of the writer’s thoughts. Additionally, Grace’s self-efficacy seems to improve over time: she says she “hates” writing eight times in her entry interview; in contrast, in her exit interview, she only uses this word once. Perhaps most importantly, it seems as though her counterproductive beliefs about writing and learning shift over time; one of her writing samples from German class, which argues that US perceptions of Freud as a pseudoscientist originate from translation issues, suggests a challenge to her view of writing as an unproblematic container of thought or ideas, and implies instead a more rhetorically informed, socially constructed view of language and writing. Despite the challenges that Grace faced when entering the study, through her extracurricular writing strategies and locating the right major, she ultimately managed to reframe her counterproductive beliefs about writing and learning, unearth her entrenched writing knowledge, and increase her levels of self-efficacy. In the face of adversity, Grace found a way to triumph.

**Conclusion**

In response to her challenges, Grace demonstrates resourcefulness and resilience: in many ways, she manages to overcome her struggles with college writing by pursuing feedback in extracurricular contexts and seeking refuge in a major where she receives encouragement and individualized writing support from faculty. When she feels unsupported by instructors in her writing process, she, like the participants discussed by Benjamin Keating in chapter 2, seeks feedback in extracurricu-
lar contexts, specifically from her roommate. Additionally, she strategically maneuvers within her writing curriculum by dropping a major (environmental science) in which she felt she “[couldn't] write,” instead pursuing a major so different from her past writing experiences that she was forced to adopt a novice status: German.

Grace’s narrative reinforces findings in chapter 2 (Benjamin Keating) and chapter 4 (Ryan McCarty) that suggest that students can be quite strategic and resourceful, and that they are at times capable of forging their own customized curricular pathways—aided by tools such as extracurricular writing supports and strategic choice of major—in order to help them circumvent some of the barriers they encounter in terms of writing development.

Over time, Grace does demonstrate development as a writer, through her self-reports and in the quality of her writing. In her exit interview, she displays increased levels of rhetorical agility and a growing awareness of how her levels of self-efficacy might differ across contexts, which suggests a developmental arc in terms of rhetorical awareness. Indeed, as Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson discuss in chapter 3, Grace eventually employs an “academic-creative hybrid” approach to writing, which ultimately signals more confidence, agency, flexibility, and awareness of development. By the time she graduates, instead of framing writing simply as a “necessary” evil, as she does in her entry interview, she recognizes that she has higher levels of self-efficacy for writing in specific domains, such as online writing, as well as academic writing in science and in German classes. This suggests that her view of herself as a writer becomes more rhetorically situated over time: she begins to see the difference between domains of writing, at least in terms of her stance toward them. Although she still claims that she “hates writing,” she finds herself better equipped to nuance that claim, specifying that she only hates a specific kind of academic writing, and that she actually enjoys and feels more confident when writing online, and when writing for her German and science classes. By providing an example of one student’s strategies for adapting to college writing, Grace reveals how procedural writing knowledge and students’ personally held beliefs about writing and learning may interact to facilitate or impede transfer and writing development. Furthermore, her experiences suggest that students who fit Reiff and Bawarshi’s description of “boundary guarders” may struggle, at first, to adapt to the context of college writing, but in some cases they may enact extracurricular and curricular strategies to overcome their challenges and ultimately develop as writers.

NOTES

1. Although there was a “writing development” code applied during the first round of interview coding, I did not include this code in my search terms. Due to the overlap between the code and the
purpose of the study, most interview excerpts could ostensibly have been coded “writing development.” Furthermore, because I, like other researchers in this collection, chose to analyze longitudinal data in order to track development over time, I knew that writing development would be captured in my analysis regardless of whether I used this specific code to locate cases.

2. Grace’s discussion of applying her “formulaic approach” from math to her AP English class is discussed in further detail by Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson in chapter 3; for an example of another student who discussed transfer between her mathematical learning and her writing development, see Anne Ruggles Gere’s discussion of Stephanie in chapter 10.

WORKS CITED


