FINDING VOICE IN THE BORDER SPACE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF ACADEMIC LITERACY COURSE AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Composition and writing skills have been identified as a priority in most Canadian post-secondary institutions. Historically composition studies have been linked to English departments and the study of literature; however, as the student base becomes diverse and reasons for pursuing post-secondary education become more instrumental, there is a shift in the way writing instruction is delivered. Simon Fraser University is one of the first institutions in Canada to implement a first year required foundational course in academic literacy across disciplines. In this study I explore the implementation of the Foundations of Academic Literacy (FAL) course with the purpose of understanding the pedagogical strategies used to encourage the development of writer’s voice in students.

This study was informed by the unique historical context of Canadian composition education wherein writing has been taught in the bellettristic tradition through literature. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of both Vygotsky’s inner speech and Bakhtin’s utterance this study situates the development of writer’s voice at the intersect between internal thought, external speech and the sociocultural tradition.

This qualitative case study is informed by narrative inquiry and explores the lived experiences of both the instructors and the students. I asked the research question: How did the instructors encourage the development of voice in their
students’ writing? The participants in the study were the undergraduate students and the instructors who were involved with the Foundations of Academic Literacy program at Simon Fraser University.

Out of the analysis of my data emerged the themes of community building, personal narrative and student-centred curriculum. Through these themes a greater understanding of the development of voice and self-efficacy in first year students’ writing emerged.

An emphasis on building a safe space in the form of a classroom community offered the opportunities for students to take on leadership roles through the sharing of their own stories. Furthermore, using student’s writing as a source of curriculum led to an expressed sense of autonomy and an increase in self-efficacy for the students. This study clearly indicates that by honouring student voice within the classroom students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy increase.

**Keywords:** academic literacy; composition; writing; voice; self-efficacy

**Subject Terms:** Composition, First Year Writing, Academic Literacy
This work is dedicated to the memory of my sister and friend, 

**Dr. Nancy Shaw.**

A true scholar: her courage, strength and brilliance continue to be my inspiration.

*Figure i: Dr. Nancy Shaw*
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GLOSSARY

**L1 Learner**  Is a term used within the contexts of this study to refer to a student who speaks English as his/her first language.

**Generation 1.5 Learner**  Is a term used within the contexts of this study to refer to a student who has completed most or all of his/her K-12 education in English but whose mother tongue is not English (may speak solely another language at home or may only have partial fluency in the mother tongue). Note: there are great variations in language competency in this category.

**L2 Learner**  Is a term used within the contexts of this study to refer to a student for whom English is an additional language.

**ESL**  Is a term traditionally used to refer to English as a Second Language. Within the context the contexts of this study, I found this term not to be true to most of the learners who often learned English as a third, fourth or even fifth language.

**EAL**  English as an Additional Language is a term that has been widely used to replace the more traditional ESL label. Within the the contexts of this study I chose the L1, Generation 1.5 and L2 learner designations as there were a great number of students who fell into the Generation 1.5 category and did not fit within the EAL label.
PROLOGUE

Figure ii: Returning to the Beginning

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.

Nelson Mandela, (1994, p. 84)

When I came to Simon Fraser University in January of 1990, I was in my third year of undergraduate studies majoring in English and Psychology. I had completed my first two years of post-secondary education at a small community college. My college experience had hardly prepared me for the leap to a university setting. As I trekked through the grey Vancouver winter to the even greyer and colder Burnaby Mountain campus of Simon Fraser, I remember feeling very lost and alone.
Although I graduated with my Bachelor degree in 1993, in hindsight my undergraduate education seems fragmented and unconventional. It wasn’t until 1999, when I returned to university to pursue a post-baccalaureate diploma, that I truly felt like I belonged at SFU.

It was during this re-entry to academia that I, for the first time, found joy in my post-secondary studies. When I reflect on this time, I am struck by the fact that it was while I occupied this in/between space that I found my place at the university. As I wandered in the borderland between undergraduate studies and formal graduate work, I found a real sense of empowerment and fulfilment in my studies.

I can relate the satisfaction I felt to two factors: 1) I studied what I was interested in; and 2) I felt heard in the classroom. These two elements were what led me to the road of doctoral studies.

When I consider why this research project came to be, I admit that I was deeply influenced by my own experiences, good and bad, as an undergraduate student. In part it was through the revisiting of those experiences that this project began to make sense to me on a number of levels. As I learned more about the lived experiences of my participants, I became aware of the space of reflexivity within which my work existed. My own personal experiences were better understood in light of the stories of the participants of this study. Those stories have informed how I view myself as both a teacher and writer.
One voice singing
Softly and Clearly

Resonating with I

Reflecting Thou

A heteroglossiac melody

Weaving the depths of the Soul

Intelligent

Emotive

Real

Soon quashed by expectation

And a fear of FAILURE

Awake the Siren

Timidly Arise

Come forth once again

And shine in

Clarity
Reflection 1

One thing that has been illuminated through my experiences teaching first-year university writing has been the deep-seated belief I have carried with me for most of my academic life, a belief I often see reflected in my students. It is the secret belief that I don’t quite belong here.

I have no idea when this notion first occurred to me. I think it has always been with me related to schooling. I remember always being vaguely disappointed with my grades – even in elementary school.

I excelled at reading and writing, creative writing in particular, but everything else was a struggle that too often yielded disappointing results. Although, I was the recipient of a small scholarship upon graduating from secondary school, I accepted it with surprise and the suspicion that I would be quickly “found out.”
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Imagining

As an author, you are always an insider; not omnisciently removed from what you write, but caught up personally in every word, sentence, and paragraph; in every statistic and every interview; in every comma and period. Your writing, at some point, will always give your personal story away, even when you attempt to cloud it with the thick idiom of academese and objectivity.

The Purpose of Writing

Writing is the way I understand the world around me. From the time I was able to hold a crayon in my hand, I’ve worked out life’s mysteries through words on paper. Because writing has always held its own special place in my heart I take particular joy in sharing my love of writing with my students. However, many of my students do not express the same passion for writing and therefore they seemed to see it as a stale lifeless chore that must be completed in order to fulfil the requirements of a university education.

When I first began teaching at the university, I was often puzzled and discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm for the writing assignments I created. As I met more and more undergraduate students who embodied an instrumental view of post-secondary education, I harkened back to my own days as an undergraduate humanities student and tried to remember how I had viewed academic writing. With some consternation, I realized that there was a time in my life when I also held a very mechanical view of writing academic papers. Although I always loved certain kinds of writing, early on I rarely approached the writing I did at the Academy with the same kind of interest or love. However, later during my graduate courses I thrived –writing and speaking were ways to express my interpretation of the world.

From my own experiences as a student and my growing practice as a teacher, I began to wonder why there were such different flavours to my graduate and undergraduate educational experiences. After considerable reflection, I came to the conclusion that it wasn’t the depth of study that defined these two educational encounters; it was a different way of engaging in the classroom. As a graduate
student, I had a voice that I felt was valued and honoured. However, as an undergraduate student I had been silent. This was the paradox of my own lived experience with academic writing.

It wasn’t until I started teaching my first year university students that I began to reflect on the different ways of being and learning in the classroom. My teaching experiences up until 2006 had been with mature students. As a graduate student in a Faculty of Education, I had been fortunate to teach students who were near completion of their fourth year degree, some of who were student teachers. In this capacity, most of the courses I taught were for students who had completed their first undergraduate degree and were now preparing for the transition to their own classrooms – these students were confident and vocal. They had opinions and ideas and were not shy about sharing them.

I experienced something of a culture shock when I moved from teaching fourth year students to teaching first-year university students from a variety of disciplines. I was immediately struck by the silence in the classroom, by the attention focused on me (the “sage on the stage”) and by the desire these young students demonstrated to write for the instructor rather than to write to express their own opinions. Despite my encouragement and openness to their ideas, they appeared to have a common need for me to tell them what I wanted them to write. Most of these students were in their first year of university studies and they clearly had a different picture than I did of what being a student in the Academy encompassed.
The contrast between my interactions with students just starting their university experience and those who were finishing it was radical. But this distinction also suggested that at some time between their first year of study and their fifth year most of these students would, sooner or later, find their academic voice.

The notion of “academic voice” or any “voice” in writing is an interesting one. Although much has been written about the use of voice in all genres of written communication there is no universally recognized definition of the term. A number of theorists have offered definitions of writer’s voice: Donald Murray (2004b) argues that there is no one voice we use in writing. He notes that students arrive in the classroom with many voices and that they must learn which voice is appropriate for which situation (p. 205). Peter Elbow (1998), on the other hand, likens the development of writer’s voice as learning to sing in different pitches. Before we can become proficient with all notes we must first become comfortable with our own pitch (p. 282). Tom Romano (2004) calls voice “… the writer’s presence on the page” (p. 5).

I came to my own definition of the word through my observation that some students know precisely how to write and speak in the university setting that at once preserves their individuality and at the same time identifies them as members of the academic community. So written voice is actually a metaphorical term, it is that quality in a piece of writing that “sounds” like a person. Just as any one spoken voice is not the same as another so each example of written voice is different. And just as a spoken voice can mimic the voices of others, so, can written voice with
varying degrees of success. Students often attempt this mimicking behaviour when they are first trying to find their own academic voice. Very few students arrive at the university with a strong written voice. And so, especially as a writing teacher, my curiosity was piqued and I began to inquire into: how and why do some students discover that voice and what can writing teachers do to help them discover it?

As instructor of the FAL program, my concerns about lack of student voice in my classroom were what eventually led me to this present inquiry. Although in the beginning my students were reluctant to share their opinions and ideas, to take chances in the classroom and in their writing, by the end of the term many of them were taking those chances and arguing their views, whether I agreed with them or not! I wondered what happened over a 13-week semester to make these changes. It was then that I decided to take an in-depth look at how that process unfolded in a composition classroom with students who, perhaps more than others at the university, did not have an academic voice: the students who were required to enrol in the Foundations of Academic Literacy course at Simon Fraser University.

**Situating the Study**

Originally in Canada university education was for the elite students, those who excelled academically, but from the 1970s onward there has been a progressive trend toward post-secondary education for the general population. In recent years, post-secondary enrolment in Canada has increased at an unprecedented rate. As Roger Graves (1994) notes university enrolment in Canada grew from 100,000
students in 1956 to 500,000 in 1993 and it has continued to grow reaching 788,000 in 2006 (Stats Can, 2008). Between the years 2000 and 2006 full-time enrolment increased 30% and this trend is projected to continue into the foreseeable future (AUCC, 2007).

Part of the reason for such rapid growth has been the increasing demand for university-educated employees in the job market. While jobs for those without post-secondary training have declined in the past twenty years, careers for university graduates have doubled (AUCC, 2007). This has resulted in very instrumental and pragmatic motives for pursuing a university degree as more youth have been drawn to post-secondary education as a means of securing a job. This is a marked contrast to the more humanistic and educational reasons for attending university in years past.

The increasing commodification of post-secondary education has resulted in a growing number of universities being created across the country and more stakeholders outside the Academy giving attention to what is being taught in institutions of higher learning. As Henry Hubert (1995) notes “issues of curriculum have increasingly become the concerns of government and marketplace rather than the concerns of the professoriate” (p. 381).

In addition to the changing motives for enrolling in university are the shifting demographics of the country. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2007) states that not only are the number of visible minority students increasing across the country but that visible minority groups are more likely to
seek post-secondary education. British Columbia, where this study is based, is one of the most culturally diverse provinces in Canada. And while the cultural mosaic often results in a richer educational experience for all students, it also brings challenges to the existing system. One of the major challenges is in the area of written and spoken communication.

In British Columbia 26% of the population report a language other than English as their mother tongue and in Vancouver that number rises to 40% of the population (BC Stats, 2006). This percentage of L2 or Generation 1.5 learners\(^1\) remains constant over the traditional age cohort for undergraduate university students (20-24 years) (BC Stats, 2006). This means that for an increasing number of university students English is not their first language. This also means that composition instructors are facing more complex and challenging classroom situations.

**Changes in Writing Instruction**

Traditionally Canadian composition courses have focused on academic writing for the humanities (Graves, 2009) and those courses have not been required for all students (although they have sometimes been required by specific programs of study). In 1995, Henry Hubert predicted that “[w]ith the demand for rhetorical excellence within the student population, industry, and government, university administrators will increasingly search for means to meet expectations” (p. 388).

Now with increasing numbers of Generation 1.5 and L2 students entering

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\(^1\) See List of Definitions
university, the need for more supports in literacy and writing instruction has moved from an acknowledged weakness to becoming a requirement (BCCAT, 2009).

A solution to this growing concern over student literacy has been the creation of required composition courses. These courses take on a variety of forms depending upon the institution and department in which they are delivered. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the historical underpinnings of composition studies in Canada and the United States along with the Academic Literacy movement in the United Kingdom, which includes the debate between expressivist and new literacy theories in writing instruction.

As I delved deeper into the history and pedagogy of composition studies and academic literacy, I began to become cognisant of the fact that to address voice through personal narrative is a very rare pedagogical technique for introducing students to academic writing. Instead many first-year composition courses use the new literary approach of focussing on grammatical and structural issues in writing class to the exclusion of narrative and personal inquiry. This is particularly true for classes aimed at our weakest writers.

The Problem Statement

It was my experiences as an instructor in academic literacy courses that sparked my interest in this study. As I reflect on the initial silence in my classroom and the lack of scholarly discourse available about the development of writer’s voice in first year composition courses I began to wonder how Simon Fraser University’s
 Foundations of Academic Literacy course might contribute to understanding first year students’ experiences of university. My primary research question was: What are the steps taken in the Foundations of Academic Literacy course at Simon Fraser University to help students discover their voice in a first year academic literacy course? It was through this primary question that I began to view a multitude of pedagogical concerns related to writing instruction in the Academy.

**Context of the Study**

Successful strategies for teaching first year composition courses will have a direct impact on whether students are successful in attaining further competencies in academic writing.

Simon Fraser University is one of the first institutions in Canada to implement a first year required foundational course in academic literacy across disciplines. By taking an in-depth look at how the course was conceived and implemented along with the curricular tools that were used I hope to address my inquiry question into how a particular curriculum and pedagogy using personal narrative, story and voice transformed the composition classroom.

**Overview of Methodology**

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note: “Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests comes out of own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (p. 121). My own experiences in the Academy have also informed this inquiry. My experiences as a voiceless
undergraduate, as a confident and enthusiastic graduate student, and as an instructor in the composition classroom have all had their influences on my ongoing narrative.

As it was my intent to understand the research problem from the lived experiences of the students and instructors, I chose to use qualitative research methodology for this study (van Manen, 1997). I decided to conduct a case study of the first semester of the Foundations of Academic Literacy program at Simon Fraser University.

Combined with the phenomenological approach my focus was on the narrative experiences of both instructors and students involved in the study. Their stories were what resonated through the data and informed my meaning making process. In what Max van Manen (1997) might call a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry my first concern was to remain true to the lived experiences and personal practical knowledge of the participants in the FAL course. I hope I have done that in this dissertation.

**The In/Between Spaces**

The strongest reoccurring theme that emerged from this inquiry has been that of the in/between spaces. Living in the boundaries between the extremes is where the most powerful narratives have emerged. Each chapter of this dissertation can be viewed as an exploration of that in/between space. Chapter 2 explores the historical boundary between empiricism and idealism a space within which composition studies still exist. The actual disciplinary field to which writing
instruction belongs is not easily defined for the field is informed by both the humanities and the sciences. In the fringes of empiricism and idealism, composition is fluid and continually navigating border crossings as it is called into use in by both the sciences and the humanities.

In Chapter 3, I examine the idea of “voice” in student writing. The metaphorical concept of written voice also occupies an in/between space, most clearly informed by the theories of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. It lives in a straddling of the inner and outer self and the socio-cultural context within which we exist. In a pedagogical sense, voice emerges from the boundaries between expressivist and new literacy curricular traditions, a piece of both traditions but not wholly belonging to either.

In Chapter 4, I describe my research methodology and study design. In my inquiry I became aware of the overlapping layers from which my research emerged. My methodology lives in the intersection of qualitative, case study, informed by a phenomenological and narrative inquiry process that melds into my own pedagogical practice.

The significance of community is explored through the participants’ stories in Chapter 5. The stories recount the struggle to emerge from the in/between space of first year studies. As they navigate from their high school experience into the new land of post-secondary studies with new rules and languages, the importance of community emerges as a critical theme for both the students and the instructor.
In Chapter 6 the power of narrative in the FAL classroom is explored through the words of the students and the instructors. The importance of listening to each other’s stories and telling one’s own stories is revealed. Embedded within these powerful stories is the lingering concern that the voice they have uncovered in the FAL classroom will not find a place in other classrooms at the university.

Chapter 7 examines the challenges of the FAL pedagogy. As the instructors and students balance the boundaries between narrative and expository writing, student writing and voice emerge as powerful curricular tools.

At the boundary between theory and practice, Chapter 8 emerges informed and questioning. A final in/between space that ensures the qualitative process will continue beyond this study and into the future.

The reader is guided through this dissertation by a series of poems, reflections and photographs, which document my own poetic and narrative inquiry. As the researcher, I inhabit a kind of ever changing borderland between practice, study and re/search. My inquiry process is illustrated in the structural spaces in/between the chapters of this document.
The eyes
Penetrate my skin
Prickling
Searing
Searching

I AM TEACHER

I stand before expectation
All knowing
Powerful

Lost

They look on me
With judgment
I falter

Blankness
Vulnerability

Until the blankness
Melt into Experience Past

Fear bitter in my mouth

Not of teaching
But of sitting in their seats

Watching the instructor
With expectation and my own vulnerability

And suddenly I take a chance
Smile and show them my humanity

... this is a beginning
Reflection 2

I was the first child in my family to attend University. I struggled to find my place in the university setting. My initiation into the Academy began gently at a community college where I quickly found my place. Although I experienced a few months of loneliness – I had relocated far from my small hometown and none of my high school classmates attended the same college as I did - it did not take long for me to find my place at the college. Soon my instructors all knew my name and appeared to take an interest in my work. I became confident and comfortable finding the courses I excelled at and enjoyed most.

After completing the two-year university transfer program at the college I reluctantly made the leap to the big University on the hill. It was a difficult fit, easy to become lost and melt into the crowd of students. Looking back to those years of my undergraduate education I can see that I had no concept of how to interact in the Academy. At the university, vastly different from the college with large impersonal lecture classes, it was easy to be overlooked. I did manage to scrape through but much potential was left underdeveloped. Upon reflection, I wonder if I hadn’t had a natural interest and aptitude for writing, would I ever have finished my B.A. and returned to pursue graduate studies?

Now when I reflect on the importance of first-year composition, I think of it as one of the more important courses for a student to enrol in. I believe that learning how to find one’s place in the Academy and how to successfully communicate is of primary importance. However, as I delve
into the historical development of post-secondary writing instruction, I come to realize that not all academics feel the same way about composition.

I understand now that after more than 20 years of post-secondary education, much of it in the study of language arts, only now am I beginning to understand the undercurrents I have sensed throughout my studies. This is both illuminating and overpowering.

I wonder how I could have been so far along in the writing of this document before I realized the Great Debate in which I was a naïve participant. I feel as though blinders have been lifted. What was the hidden curriculum for 20 years has now become explicit and I am left to reflect on my extreme naïveté and ignorance with a sheepish embarrassment.

For years my desire to be part of the prestigious English department meant studying texts that were at once obscure and reflected my intense self-interest. To move to composition studies lifted my interests in the literary arts from reader/critic to write/teacher/student/creator and gave me a well-rounded and broader perspective on how these works could be relevant in my students’ lives and, yet, this shift from the study of Victorian literature to the art of writing instruction is not always valued in the Academy. A constant justification for what I do … as echoes of Taylor Mali’s words: “I make a God-damn difference! Now what about you?” float through my psyche (Mali, 2009).
CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF CANADIAN WRITING INSTRUCTION

Figure 2: The History of Canadian Composition Studies

*Only from viewing composition as part of the larger mission of universities and as part of the larger movement within society can we understand both our present situation and our possible futures.*

Roger Graves, (1994, p. 2)

The Canadian approach to writing instruction at the post-secondary level has a long history dating back to the birth of university education in this country. To begin to comprehend the nuances within the field today, it is vital to understand the historical underpinnings of composition studies.

Canadian composition is a broad field that encompasses a multitude of writing programs. As Graves & Graves (2006) note today's Canadian writing
programs tend to evolve from “the specific and local condition of the university and the students the university seeks to educate” (p. 1). As a result composition studies now includes all forms of writing instruction at the post-secondary level. Within this definition there are numerous subcategories such as: remedial writing courses, first-year English composition courses, communications courses, technical writing courses and rhetoric courses. The instruction can be delivered via any number of disciplines including (but not limited to): English, Communications, Engineering, Business, Continuing Studies, Education, and through interdisciplinary Writing Courses or Centres. In order to understand the fragmentation of post-secondary writing instruction in Canada a sketch of the historical development of English studies in Anglo-Canadian universities is useful. Although there exists a complimentary development of writing instruction in French Canadian universities, I will not explore this further because it is beyond the scope of this inquiry (for a historical sketching of this development see Graves, 1994).

**Intellectual Traditions in Canadian Post-Secondary Education**

As an undergraduate English major, I now recognize that I was educated in a manner traditional to English studies in Canada. The focus was on literature; writing skills were expected to develop implicitly rather than explicitly. As a strong writer, I moved with ease through my studies and didn’t give a thought to the lack of attention to writing instruction. Now in the role of instructor, I see there are many students who struggle with writing and are in desperate need of some help. Many of these students turn to the first year composition course (if there is one) offered by
the English department at their institution. Unfortunately, for most students this
course is not able to address their needs as it is understandably created for first-
year English students. In many institutions, the enrolment numbers in first year
composition classes have increased without any adjustment to the actual content of
the course. As a result, students from many disciplines are taking a first year
writing course which focuses on teaching them how to write papers in the
Humanities (and often even more narrowly in the discipline of English). Ironically
the need for a broader first year writing curriculum has been recognized at the post-
secondary level in Canada for more than 150 years; however, while the need was
acknowledged as early as the 1850s there has been a reluctance on the part of
universities to develop wide-reaching composition programs (Hubert, 1995).

This reluctance is better understood within the context of how post-
secondary education developed in Canada. The first institution in Canada to be
granted university charter by Britain was King’s College in Nova Scotia in 1790
(Harris, 1976). An Anglican-based institution, King’s curriculum included Arts and
Theology. Over the next 80 years, university education in Canada focussed upon
Liberal Arts, Theology, Law and Medicine. It wasn’t until 1860 that the study of
modern languages (including English) entered the curriculum as a discipline of its
own (Harris, 1976; Harris, 1988).

However, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, empiricism and idealism
battled within the Canadian intellectual tradition causing a split between the
humanities and sciences that continues to present day. Composition and literature
were taught together as English was introduced as an academic discipline. This
grew out of the liberal arts tradition of the medieval period in which Belles Lettres, Grammar and Logic made up the trivium and were taught in preparation for the quadrivium of Arithmetic, Astronomy, Geometry and Music (Harris, 1988). He also notes rhetoric was originally taught in Latin and later Greek but when these studies were applied to English a split occurred. In English studies in Canada, the Belles Lettres tradition with its focus on literature began to take precedence over the rhetorical tradition. Nan Johnson (1988) says that by the 1880s “[a] belleuristic interest in the acquisition of eloquence or a “good English style” and the development of “critical judgement” regarding the “masterpieces” of English literature became so popular in the Canadian academy that it dominated the pedagogical aspirations of Anglo-Canadian rhetoric” (p. 867). Hubert & Garrett-Petts (1991) add “the Anglo-Canadian English curriculum from 1890-1950 had an antirhetorical and anti-theoretical bias ...” (p. 3). Even though there was an acknowledgement of students’ poor writing skills, Hubert and Garrett-Petts note “nothing was done anywhere in the nation until well into the 1970s” (p. 16).

By the 1950s literature was so valued over composition that English studies exerted “an agonizingly extended effort to teach reading without writing” (Hubert and Garrett-Petts, 1991, p. 1). This focus on reading reflects the strong British influence in Canadian institutions, which gave great prestige to the study of literature and followed the pedagogical approach that good writing would naturally develop from exposure to great writing. This influence was so strong that A.S.P. Woodhouse of the University of Toronto refused to offer a course in writing on the
grounds that “discrete writing courses had no place in university instruction.”
(Hubert & Garrett-Petts, 1991, p. 2).

While writing instruction began to attract attention in Canada in 1970s, as
institutions began to add some composition courses to their curriculum, many in the
humanities continued to devalue writing theory. As Hubert & Garrett-Petts note:
“Many contemporary theorists still follow the example of the so-called New Critics
before them and continue to privilege one point of the rhetorical triangle in ignoring
the author and the audience to focus on the text alone” (p. 20). Brooks (2002) notes
that these arguments against composition studies in the Academy continue today by
“those who wish to abolish the teaching of composition, or wish to keep it out of
universities” (p. 683).

Graves (1995) uses the term “neo-colonial” in describing the Canadian
university attitude towards composition courses. According to Graves, unlike
American universities while Canadian institutions have largely shed their reliance
on British traditions, they have not moved into a “postcolonial” stance which would
be characterized by a focus on “identity, agency, resistance, provisionality and
situatedness” (p. 110).

Graves (1994) notes that writing proficiency tests for incoming students
were implemented in several Canadian universities in the 1970s but he argues that
these tests are redundant unless they are given both prior to the entry and upon
completion of a degree program along with a program that offered support for
improvement.
Students who arrive at the university from high school encounter “two kinds of writing cultures”: the professional school culture and the traditional academic culture – neither of which benefit from the emphasis on the literary essay which was of most use for the small percentage of student who go on to major in English (Graves, 1994, p. 8).

Writing in 1994, Graves said: “... the contemporary scene depicts isolated writing courses in a wide variety of settings” (p. 33). He also notes that “writing instruction occurs in numerous departments, such as continuing education, English, engineering and education.” Graves goes on to point out that while this approach may solve the immediate needs of each department, it does not address the broad needs of writing instruction campus-wide. Hubert (1995) argues that the years of emphasis on devaluing composition over literature in English departments having “led to a situation in which even if English faculties wanted to affirm the teaching of composition, many of them might not have the expertise to do so” (p. 393).

The Canadian versus American Approach to Composition

Brooks (2002) notes that the way Canadian composition studies and American composition studies have evolved have been very different. In the United States composition has come to be seen as “a part of the fabric of American culture” (p. 657). In contrast, he says “almost all Canadian universities taught writing through literature” (p. 678). As Roger Graves (1994) states “[t]he lack of large-scale freshman composition programs constitutes perhaps the single most obvious
difference that distinguishes writing instruction in Canadian universities from American universities” (p. 67).

**Academic Literacy**

In the United Kingdom, the focus on student writing in post-secondary education began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As noted above, although American universities have had first-year composition courses since the early 1900s (Ivanič & Lea, 2006) in the UK, as in Canada, the assumption had been that students would arrive at college or university with competency in the writing skills needed to succeed in the academic realm.

However, the late 1980s in the United Kingdom marked a radical shift in student demographics, as the universities began to open their doors to larger and more diverse numbers of students. This increase in the number of individuals pursuing post-secondary education was the impetus for the emergence of academic literacy courses in higher education as universities in the UK shifted from an elite system to a “mass higher educational system” with greater “cultural, linguistic and social diversity.” (Lillis, 2003; Ganobscik-Williams, 2006). Currently in the UK, it is estimated that approximately 50% of the population will engage in some form of higher education during their lifetime (Shaw, Cary & Mair, 2008).

These global changes in literacy education are not unique to the UK (Taylor, de Lourdes Machado & Peterson, 2008; Scott, McGuire & Shaw, 2003; Kgaphola, 1999). They are related to the changing worldwide demographic of university
students. More and more individuals from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are engaging in post-secondary education.

As the name “academic literacies” suggests, these newly created courses did not focus solely on composition skills; the courses aimed to address the student experience in university as well as their writing abilities.

In contrast to approaches that concentrated on the acquisition of decontextualised skills, Academic Literacies research points to the complexity of the codes and conventions that students need to negotiate to become accomplished players in the academy; in so doing it encourages exploration of the ways in which issues of meaning-making and identity are implicated, not just in student writing, but in teaching and learning more generally. (Ivaniç & Lea, 2006, p. 12)

As institutions began to recognize that many members of the growing student base would not have the skills to succeed in higher education, Academic Literacy courses strove to initiate students into the Academy. In so doing, the Academic Literacies pedagogical approach was not to view the students’ experiences through the lens of deficit learning but instead to focus on the students’ learning experiences and their acculturation to university life. Student writing was considered through a broader institutional lens (Ivaniç and Lea, 2006).

Although the term “Academic Literacies” was first coined in the United Kingdom, this shift in composition instruction, which embodies a more holistic style of teaching first-year writing, is not unique to the UK. John Heyda (2006) believes that the US colleges and universities have also changed the first-year writing course from merely a composition course into a “cultural rite of passage, a highly ritualized space in which students can try out new, more ‘open’ classrooms, and ‘experience'
the subjects they encounter by sharing and evaluating their feelings with peers in low-risk, low-enrolment settings” (p. 163). This focus on the community aspect of post-secondary education means a greater emphasis on the student as a contributing member of the academic community.

In Canada the field of composition studies is still evolving and too fragmented to clearly define. As Graves and Graves (2006) outline the approach to writing instruction is currently focused on the individual needs of each institution rather than forming a movement as we see in the UK and US. The FAL program, as its name suggests, bears a greater similarity to Academic Literacies curriculum than freshman composition.

**Academic Literacies Curriculum**

Academic Literacies curriculum focuses on three interconnected subjects: study skills, “academic socialization” and literacy (Lea & Street, 2006) and while the Academic Literacies approach emphasizes the whole student and places a greater emphasis on self-reflection than traditional writing courses have done (Andrews & Thomas, 2008) its focus is on the socialization of the student to university, concentrating on the student’s developing identity (Ivanić, 1994; Ivanić & Camp, 2001).

**Studies from the Academic Literacies Classroom**

Institutional and, correspondingly, instructional views of and interactions with the writing student have been shown to have a great impact on student success in post-secondary education (Lee & Schallert, 2008; Shaw, Carey & Mair, 2008).
Within the Academic Literacies context, Lea & Street (2000) interviewed both instructors and students at two universities in the United Kingdom. They observed three lenses through which both students and instructors view academic writing:

(a) the lens of remedial skills;

(b) the relational lens of student/tutor interaction as a way of negotiating the students’ identity as a writer; and

(c) the institutional lens of viewing student writing through assessment and procedure.

They concluded that the students saw their development most clearly through the relational lens.

The fact that these students viewed academic writing through a relational lens suggests that they saw the writing they completed in their Academic Literacies classroom as dialogical in the Bakhtinian sense; that the writing was not just by a student for a teacher but a means of engaging in an ongoing academic discourse.

Lillis (2003) also emphasized Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism in the Academic Literacies classroom. In a small study, she focused on writing samples from two students to illustrate the importance of dialogue in Academic Literacies pedagogy. She found that the form of instructor feedback was particularly important for these students. Evaluation that fell into the dialogic category of “talkback” rather than evaluative feedback in the Academic Literacies course was more useful and yielded better results for students. When instructors provided feedback in the form of a dialogue with the students, the students found the feedback more helpful.
Lea (2004) conducted a case study of a graduate course in an online environment as a means of illustrating the relationship between course design, pedagogy and Academic Literacies. She argues that the literacy practices from Academic Literacies classrooms should be adapted to other learning environments. Similarly, Crook (2005) argues that Academic Literacies pedagogy, which has focused on forms of writing, should be adapted to other communication technologies. Adapting a FAL-type course for graduate-level studies and incorporating information technologies literacies into the curriculum are both areas for future development.

More closely related to the current study, Mamchur and Apps (2008) looked specifically at the FAL course and found that teaching a more holistic curriculum in an Academic Literacies classroom was linked to an increase in student self-efficacy. A discussion of the role self-efficacy plays in the development of writer’s voice can be found in Chapter 3.

Influenced by a myriad of approaches, currently composition studies in Canada tend to be institution-specific and even discipline-specific. While all post-secondary institutions admit the need for action in addressing student writing ability, each one addresses writing proficiency in a different manner. Simon Fraser University, in British Columbia, is one institution that decided to address the writing skills of its graduates in an all encompassing and dramatic manner.
Focus: One University’s Response to University Writing

Simon Fraser University (SFU) dealt with the concerns of students’ writing ability by developing a university-wide program. As early as 1985, recommendations were made by an Ad Hoc Dean of Arts Committee to enhance literacy skills at SFU (Strachan, 2008, p. 18). In the late 1990’s SFU took action in responding to the demands for a more comprehensive educational package in post-secondary education. Critiques of students graduating from universities with poor communication skills (written communication, in particular) and poor numeracy skills had been heard (Smith, 2006). To address these deficiencies, SFU embarked on the monumental task of changing their graduation requirements so that all students would have to successfully complete certain courses addressing writing, mathematical and breadth subject areas in order to graduate. To fulfil the writing component of the graduation requirements, students had to complete six credit hours (3 lower division credit hours; 3 upper division credit hours) in writing intensive coursework.

These requirements were quite rigorous – the university had a number of conditions that a course had to meet before it could be certified writing intensive including:

1) students must use writing as a way of learning course content and in a manner that is specific to their discipline and distinct from foundational or remedial courses,
2) examples of discipline specific writing are used to illustrate structure, style, evidence, technical writing and cognitive thought within the discipline,

3) explicit feedback aimed at improving the quality of student writing is given,

4) assignments are subject to multiple revisions as part of the formal writing process, and

5) at least 50% of the final grade must be determined by written assignments for which students receive feedback (Simon Fraser University, Writing, ¶3).

In October of 2002 SFU’s Senate approved in principle the new undergraduate graduation requirements (Simon Fraser University, 2003). Only courses formally certified as a writing intensive course would be considered for these graduation requirements. Because of the rigor of these writing courses, the university recognized that not all students admitted to SFU would have the ability to successfully complete a writing intensive course thus a required Foundations of Academic Literacy course (“FAL”) was created for students with unsatisfactory scores in their high school English course or on their Language Proficiency Index (LPI) test.

There was a reluctance to turn away students who showed an exceptional talent in science and math but needed help in writing (Strachan, p. 47). In May of 2004, the Senate approved the development of the two foundational skills courses. One of the foundational courses was entitled “Foundations of Academic Numeracy” and, as suggested by the name, was aimed at students who demonstrated a low
proficiency in mathematics. The other foundational course is the focus of this study: The Foundations of Academic Literacy (Simon Fraser University, 2004).

The Original Proposal

It was decided that the FAL course would be designed and delivered through the Faculty of Education. The Faculty was much larger than the English department at SFU and had hundreds of graduate students, many of whom had both experience and skill teaching composition in a variety of settings. These graduate students would provide sessional instruction for multiple sections of the FAL course. Although the English department already provided several writing intensive courses (including English 199: University Writing) there was no collaboration between the two departments. As Graves (1994) notes this is not unusual in composition studies in Canada.

A committee from Faculty of Education put together a course proposal and outline that was approved by Senate in February of 2006. This original proposal contained the building blocks for creating a curriculum for the course.

Course Proposal: Administrative Components

Course enrolment for the FAL course was anticipated to be very large. It was assumed that the student-base would be comprised of 400 domestic students and 100 foreign students per year\(^2\). It was hoped that students would enrol in FAL in

\(^2\) The course has, in fact, exceed these expectations with just less than 2,000 students completing it in the first three years it has been offered.
their first or second semester at university or, at the very least, they were required to successfully complete the course within the first 60 credit hours of study.

Students would only be permitted to take FAL twice – if they were unable to successfully complete FAL after two attempts, they would not be able to take a writing intensive course and their studies at the university would effectively end.

In order to accommodate the expected large enrolment, it was proposed that the course run in all three semesters. It was also recommended that the course be scheduled to run twice weekly for two-hour blocks.

One of the most unique components of FAL was the class size. From the beginning it was recommended that class size be capped at 18 students per section, with the ideal class size as between 16 and 18 students. Small class size is particularly important in a writing course where students benefit most from individual feedback on multiple drafts. A smaller number of students also allows for a closer and more collaborative classroom environment.

**Curricular Components of the Course Proposal**

The original curriculum that was proposed for the course was a blueprint for what followed but lacked many of the practical aspects of subsequent versions of the FAL course. However, even at this early stage of development, the course outcomes were twofold. Rather than just focusing on the literacy skills of reading and writing, FAL was seen as a course that would also introduce students to the university environment and thereby affect their confidence and efficacy as learners and their capacities in academic literacy.
The learning outcomes were quite broad as students were expected to achieve academic literacy across disciplines, develop voice, write effectively in a variety of genres, master editing, learn to use secondary sources and become both confident and competent in a variety of academic tasks including exam questions, essay writing and short answer questions (Fettes et al., 2005).

The proposal for the course suggested that it follow “a diagnostic, discipline-centred process writing” (Fettes et al, 2005, p. 13). Latter renditions of the course were concerned that a diagnostic approach might lead to labelling and marginalizing the students.

Student categories were identified in the Senate course proposal as International ESL, Acculturated ESL and Native Speakers; however, the FAL course chose to move away from the negative connotations associated with the ESL label (for a detailed explanation of these terms, see the Glossary) due to the inability of these discrete terms to reflect the social and linguistic realities of the students. These descriptors are more commonly used in Academic Literacies research and more accurately describe the variations in the student population. However, within each of these categories there were large variations of need depending on individual learning styles and competencies.

Keeping with the writing intensive criteria and a Writing Across the Curriculum basis, it was suggested that students be exposed to writing styles from the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. Students would learn the
various aspects of the writing process including drafting, outlining, thesis
generation, editing and proofing.

Students would be required to attain at least a C grade in FAL in order to enrol in a W-course. If students were unable to attain a C grade, they were required to retake the course. The hope was that a student who passed FAL with a C or better grade would be ready to successfully enrol in the required lower level Writing Intensive courses.

From Idea to Vision: Creating a Curriculum

In 2006, Dr. Carolyn Mamchur, a senior faculty member in the Faculty of Education with expertise in both writing and literacy education, was asked to take the skeleton proposal and turn it into a detailed curriculum that would translate to practice.

While the original proposal focused almost solely on the literacy skills of incoming students, Mamchur’s curriculum shifted to consider the needs of the whole student as a successful participant in the University environment. Mamchur (2006) defined the goals of the course as follows:

The course is designed to welcome students to SFU and provide them with a variety of opportunities to explore the university, the support it offers; to develop the reading and writing skills that will be expected of them; to develop the attitudes and habits that will help to make their university experience both personally satisfying and academically successful. (p. 1)
While still focusing on the student literacy skills, the curriculum now took on the additional aspects of helping students to feel “safe and strong” in the university setting and to develop their study skills (Mamchar, 2006, p. 1).

**Pedagogical Principles for Success**

The course design was informed by the pedagogical belief that the key to success in during the first year of university was determined by three factors:

a) developing strong study skills,

b) finding one's place in the Academy, and

c) acquiring proficiency with Academic Literacy skills.

**Four Units to Success**

The structure of the course took the shape of four three-week thematic units of study, something that had been lacking in the original proposal as it focused on assignments rather than units. The topics of the units were:

1) Discovering a Subject,

2) Sensing an Audience,

3) Searching for Specifics, and

4) Creating a Design

No grading rubric or frameworks were provided, as the instructors were to rely on teaching the process of writing rather than formulaic assessment.
This course outline was much more detailed than the original proposal, which focused almost solely on improving writing by reading and studying writing skills. The inclusion of film and storytelling along with the large group community building activities gave the course a fullness.

Curriculum in Practice

The first offering of the FAL course took place in the fall semester of 2006. In the summer before the first offering a large group of sessional instructors were selected to become the “FAL Dream Team” (Mamchur, 2006). Each instructor for the program had been carefully chosen based on their individual expertise and it was understood that the syllabus and planning of the course would be interpreted and delivered in slightly different ways based on the individual style of the instructor.

The instructional team was provided with a detailed syllabus and course plan. They were also provided with PowerPoint slides and suggestions for each class. In this respect the course was carefully planned and highly structured. Although Dr. Mamchur had designed a specific and detailed course outline, she made it clear that deviations from the plan by individual instructors were welcome. It was suggested that all instructors stay with the general four units, but within that framework deviations were expected based on student need and instructor style.

The instructional team worked in a highly collaborative environment where they were encouraged to bring in ideas for instruction and to problem solve together. To this end, they met once per unit and were in contact via mailing lists
and through online conferencing software. In this way FAL was both structured and flexible. All the instructors taught the four units of study but there was space for individual difference in classroom practice.

The development and delivery of courses like SFU’s FAL course are heavily influenced by the way in which composition studies are viewed in Canada. As this chapter has noted Canada’s post-secondary approach to writing instruction is often based on local needs and is influenced by both the American freshman composition courses and the British Academic Literacies approach. However, these socio-historical factors are not the only influence on the development of foundational composition courses.

In the next Chapter, I will view the development of the FAL course through philosophical, theoretical and pedagogical lenses. Two Russian philosophers, Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin, offer a theoretical lens through which to view the development of writer’s voice. Expressivist literary theorists, Donald Murray and Peter Elbow offer a pedagogical interpretation of voice. As a theoretical construct of writer’s voice develops in this chapter, the role of self-efficacy is revealed as a strong influence on the development of writer’s voice in the academic setting.
Continuous babble pours from my mouth
To align neatly on the white page:

Words,
Sentences
Paragraphs

The Utterance remains elusive
Couched in the MYSTERIOUS recesses of SELF
Resisting emergence

A deep longing to break from this monologue
And leap into the dialogic
Remains smothered

Emergence in I-Thou affinity
Where the utterance shines with clarity

Feeble recognition that these empty words are not the utterance:

They are not mine/yours
They hang in ivory towers
And old misunderstandings
Doomed forever to the I-It
Rewarded for achieving monologic clarity

And into my own classroom
Enter young souls for whom the utterance has already been schooled out of

They resist the dialogic
Ignoring the polyphony of their souls
Refusing to risk entrance into the heteroglossic nuances the utterance demands

But how can they when FEAR motivates
Lurks beneath the surface
Where authoritative words rule

And I am bidden to reproduce such words
To run away from the zone of contact
Forever to dwell in the distance and safety of I-It

But losing the promise of I-Thou
Reflection 3

In the beginning of my doctoral program, I struggled to find some kind of connection between the philosophical readings we were completing in our courses and my classroom practice. I often failed to see the connection between the two and quickly became discouraged. I considered dropping out all together. And then I discovered Mikhail Bakhtin.

It was in the midst of a doctoral seminar on post-modernity when Bakhtin’s name first really captured my attention. Oh, I’d heard of his work before. People had been telling me for years to read Bakhtin but it wasn’t until I had to find a post-modern author for a course presentation that I actually sat down and read his work.

And it wasn’t simple from there on in. I struggled with Bakhtin for two years before his work truly began to resonate with my own. There were many pieces of his writing that appealed to me: the dialogic, the concept of carnival and so on. But it was his work on the Utterance that truly inspired me.

While writing my dissertation I agonized over my lack of philosophical and theoretical thought, struggling to create a conceptual framework from the research data I was analysing. And then one night I fell asleep while reading one of Peter Elbow’s texts. The next morning I awoke and suddenly the in-between spaces of Bakhtin’s Utterance resonated with Vygotsky’s Spoken Thought and the concept of voice in writing. I wrote all day that day. Inspiration flowed from my dreams.
CHAPTER 3: VOICE EMERGES FROM THE BORDER SPACES

Consciousness is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water.
Lev Vygotsky (1986, p. 256)

Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-own-ness,” varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework and re-accentuate.”
Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p. 89)

As I struggled to articulate my emerging understanding of writer’s voice,
Vygotsky’s theory of speech kept coming to mind. I kept pushing it aside, accusing
myself of becoming sidetracked in my research. I had encountered Vygotsky’s work years before in one of my Master’s level courses. He had been a child psychologist and his work was not about writing. It seemed to be an unrelated distraction in my thought processes.

One day, after immersing myself in Bakhtin and the expressionist pedagogical writings of Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, I experienced a rather dramatic epiphany. While Vygotsky’s work was focussed on verbal speech, I became convinced that speech was indeed related to writer’s voice – for voice itself is a metaphor for speech. The ideas of Vygotsky informed my understand of Bakhtin. In the following section I will explore how these ideas informed my research.

**The Development of Inner Voice: Lev Vygotsky**

Lev Vygotsky’s theory of verbal thought and inner speech has informed my understanding of writer’s voice significantly. While verbal speech differs considerably from the concept of written voice, there are a number of parallels between the two. This makes Vygotsky’s work particularly relevant to this study. Vygotsky’s verbal thought theory is characterized by the intersect of thought and speech which defines the beginnings of writer’s voice in composition.

**Thought and Voice**

Vygotsky (1986) speaks of the junction between thought and speech as two intersecting circles (See Figure 3.2). He calls the overlapping area between thought and speech “verbal thought” (p. 88). This intersecting area in/between thought and speech is integral to the development of voice in writing.
At first it is difficult to envision either thought or speech occurring without the other. But according to Vygotsky, verbal thought takes place in the intersecting area between thought and speech; it encompasses neither all thought nor all speech. He claims that both thought and speech each occur at times without the other.

This idea seems most reasonable when one thinks of thought without speech. We all have moments of thought that are not accompanied by speech; this seems to be an elementary notion. However, it becomes more difficult to envision speech without thought. How can speech happen without conscious thought?

Vygotsky provides several convincing examples of when speech occurs without thought: for example, when one recites something he/she has memorized without consciously thinking of what is being spoken (Vygotsky gives the example of a memorized poem or a sentence). He also suggests that “lyrical speech”, speech...

The example of lyrical speech is an important one for writing instruction, particularly when one employs personal narrative in the classroom. Personal narrative is often heavily imbued with something very similar to lyrical speech – it could be argued that, in certain kinds of discourse, the writer produces a piece that is purely emotional. As I shall discuss later in this chapter, this emphasis on a kind of lyrical speech in narrative writing can be identified as one of the contributing factors to the pedagogical debate about using narrative in the composition classroom.

However, while a kind of lyrical speech can dominate narrative writing, it is not necessarily what writing instructors are striving for when they use this pedagogical tool in the academic writing classroom. Instead, it is the kind of narrative composed from the place of verbal thought that writing instructors are striving to move their students toward. I am suggesting that verbal thought, the intersection between speech and thought where inner speech overlaps external speech, is the space from which we wish our students to produce the voice in their writing (See Figure 3.3). This voice reflects both the students’ inner speech and the thoughts they wish to express through their writing.
**Inner Speech and External Speech**

For Vygotsky (1986), inner speech could be defined on an elementary level as “speech for oneself” while “external speech is speech for others” (p. 225). However, one must go deeper than this. He argued that, in fact, inner speech and external speech are binary opposites.

External speech is the process of turning thoughts into words. We can see the relation to writing, as our students take their thoughts and turn them into words on paper. With external speech there is always the element of audience present.

On the other hand, Vygotsky (1986) saw inner speech as the reversal of external speech – “overt speech sublimates into thoughts” (p. 226). As a child psychologist, Vygotsky studied the nature of inner speech through children’s egocentric speech or the kind of verbal speech children engage in when they are
playing on their own. Egocentric speech usually sounds as gibberish to an onlooker; the child is typically not aware of an audience. His theory was that children’s egocentric speech is a predecessor to the development of internal speech, as egocentric speech disappears at school age. He concluded that this transition from egocentric speech to internal speech represented the child’s “gradual individualization” (p. 228).

Inner speech can only make meaning to the person who hears it (i.e., the individual for whom the inner speech is occurring). To all others, inner speech “appears disconnected and incomplete” (p. 235). In writing, inner speech can never translate to paper because the writer is always cognisant of his/her audience – even in private writing such as diary or journal entries there is a perceived audience. One is always writing for someone even if that someone is a future version of oneself. So inner speech can rarely be articulated in its pure form; nevertheless, it plays an important role in writing. According to Vygotsky, inner speech is particularly evident in the process of drafting a piece of writing. Even those students who do not write down a draft engage in an inner planning process – and this internal draft is inner speech.

Often one of the most difficult concepts to teach students is that writing a draft of their work is essential. The draft is the gateway to the final product. And if we focus on Vygotsky’s belief that inner speech equates the draft, student hesitation over the process is understandable. Attempting to write inner speech down or externalize it can be an uncomfortable process; the process of transforming our inner speech into something external is never going to result in a perfect product
because inner speech cannot be verbalized. Instead the goal should be to capture the essence of inner speech. Instead of working through this process, students often try to expropriate external authoritarian speech into their academic writing, leaving inner speech behind altogether. Vygotsky suggests this happens due to the dissatisfaction between the translation of thought into speech, or internal speech into external speech.

Perhaps the most pertinent point Vygotsky (1986) makes to the teaching of writing is the fact that “to understand another’s speech, it is not sufficient to understand his words – we must understand his thought. But even that is not enough – we must also know its motivation” (p. 253). It seems to me that the quintessence of this statement is that we need to come to see one another as human beings, with all our differences and commonalities. Successful communication requires an opening to the other, a willingness to listen and express in an effort to come to a space of understanding. This in/between space where our words meet the words of another is the key to understanding. Vygotsky (1986) describes this relationship between thought and words as a “living process” (p. 255). And as a living process it is constantly changing and evolving.

**The Bakhtian Utterance**

For another Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), speech is always a culmination of many voices. Each “utterance is individual”; however, each utterance is also influenced by the socio-historical voices that have both come before and that are yet to come (p. 63). The voices could be said to live within the language that we
use. I believe that Bakhtin’s utterance correlates to Vygotsky’s verbal thought and hence to writer’s voice; however, Bakhtin’s theory brings a socio-historical element that also made an important contribution to this discussion.

Bakhtin (1986) speaks of “primary” and “secondary speech genres” (p. 62), both of which can be defined as “typical forms of utterances” (p. 63). Primary speech genres are realized through “unmediated speech communion” (p. 62). Dialogue within the classroom or between students, for instance. Secondary speech genres are created out of primary speech genres; however, Bakhtin (1986) argues that as primary speech genres are transformed they “lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others” (p. 62). Academic written language would be an example of a secondary speech genre.

The utterance, according to Bakhtin (1986), is always “individual and therefore can reflect the individuality of the speaker (or writer)” (p. 63, emphasis added). I think that “can” in this quote is important because, as Bakhtin himself notes: speech genres have varying degrees of room for individuality (for example, an artistic utterance, such as a poem or novel, will have more room for individuality than a standardized form of writing, such as a business letter). Therefore, the best form of academic essay, I argue, falls between the artistic utterance and standardized writing or in the in/between space. For Bakhtin there is an irrevocable link between individual style and genre.

To restate Bakhtin’s terminology: we have primary and secondary speech genres, which are made up of different utterances. But the utterance should not be
equated to a word. The utterance is more than a word or sentence. It is the thought that is contained within the utterance. And here is the link between Vygotsky’s verbal thought and the utterance.

Bakhtin’s emphasis on the socio-historical influences of the utterance makes his concept of the utterance different than Vygotsky’s notion of verbal thought. Bakhtin decries the tendency to look at language solely from the view of the speaker. All language includes both a speaker and an audience, usually more than one. In composition studies, the speaker is the writer and as a writer she is engaging in a timeless dialogue with all those utterances that have come before her. The writer is not usually consciously aware of this fact. But Bakhtin insists that any utterance exists in a continuum of utterances – those that have come before and those that will come after. For writing students, it is important to understand that their inner speech is a kind of utterance and as such is related to all those utterances that have come before and also to those that will come after. Bakhtin called the dynamic fusion of languages within one language heteroglossia. This heteroglossia of voices exists wherever the utterance takes shape.

The idea that we are in a never-ending conversation with humanity can be both exciting and threatening. To acknowledge that the utterances that make up one’s written work are not as uniquely one’s own strains against the individualistic ideology that defines so much of our existence in the 21st century. And at the same time it can be oddly comforting to believe that we are not alone, we are just a single drop in the bottomless bucket, contributing but not in isolation.
Of particular use to the writing student, is Bakhtin’s (1986) observation that “a practical command of the generic forms in [a] given sphere” is needed to ensure successful communication (p. 80). Bakhtin says that competence in one sphere of writing does not necessarily translate to competence in another. So if we look at the example of academic literacy, students who are perfectly comfortable writing in narrative style may struggle with successful academic communication because they have yet to master the genres used in the academic realm.

As Bakhtin (1986) observes, it is in “the genre” that a word “acquires a particular typical expression” (p. 87). One of the struggles that weak academic writers encounter, particularly L2 learners, is that fact that utterances are not created based on “their neutral, dictionary form” – instead they are constructed from “other utterances” in that particular genre (p. 87, emphasis in original). Hence, a beginning academic writer will write an utterance that makes perfect sense by definition but has the incorrect expression in that particular speech genre.

It is important for writing students to understand that the words they chose are both “contextual” and “individual” in nature. That is, the word exists in three different forms, all at once: 1) in the dictionary sense: as a neutral word; 2) as someone else's word, filled with their utterance; 3) as “my word” – used in the context of my utterance (p. 88). These interconnected forms are difficult to conceptualize when one approaches language from a literal and linear stance.

The utterance is the basis for dialogue. Bakhtin said that absolutes do not exists – debate is necessary. Bakhtin believed there is no ultimate end or goal to
true dialogue. Dialogue, itself, is the goal. Writing is one form in which this ongoing dialogue takes place. This is particularly true for academic writing where the writer is engaging in a dialogic conversation with previous authors and with the future reader. So the writing itself lives in an in/between space. For example, in this dissertation my own writing is the gateway for an ongoing dialogue between myself, as the writer, yourself, as the reader and those who have come before: Bakhtin, Vygotsky and others. This spiral of ongoing dialogue can be illustrated even further when we consider that these writers who have come before were also in dialogue with both their audience and those who came before them. And you, the reader, may extend this dialogue even further. In this way, the heteroglossia of voices lives within our writing.

Carolyn Shields (2007) says that for Bakhtin “... living in openness to others is life in its fullness; it permits us to make choices; to take positions; to act - in the fullness of our (albeit temporary) understandings of who we are” (p. 78). Living dialogically is a never-ending process. You don’t ever finish - it is ongoing and dynamic. This philosophical approach is difficult to accept in our instrumental, goal oriented society where we are accustomed to valuing the end product of our endeavors. When we apply Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to writing, we are faced with the reality that there is no end product – the writing will continue to evolve as an utterance in communion with other, equally evolving utterances. But the concept of writing as a form of dialogue is often a difficult one for students to grasp. Beginning academic writers often see their writing as being generated “for”
someone else (usually the instructor) but they fail to see it as the beginning of a dialogue.

Returning to Vygotsky’s concept of verbal thought, I would like to suggest that Bakhtin’s utterance is another conceptualization of writers’ voice; however, Bakhtin moves away from the individual voice (although that is always present) and speaks of the utterances encompassing a heteroglossia of voices (See Figure 3.4).

In this way, writer’s voice in the Academy becomes a gateway to dialogue. So while verbal thought is characterized by the union of two individual concepts: speech and thought, the utterance brings in the third dynamic and ever-changing socio-historical element, which ensures that writer’s voice is a changing organic
phenomenon. With Bakhtin’s philosophy informing the conceptual framework of
writer’s voice above, it becomes richer and moves away from the individualistic
tendencies inherent in verbal thought alone.

**Dialogical Understanding: The Self in Academic Writing**

The pedagogical practice of using personal narrative in composition studies
has sparked much debate. Both Donald Murray and Peter Elbow have been labelled
as “expressionist composition theorists” because of their emphasis on the self in the
writing process (DeBlase, 2002). The argument against the student-centred
pedagogy employed by Murray and Elbow revolves around the position that
teaching students to write personal narrative does not prepare them for academic
discourse (Bishop, 1999).

In an article entitled “What is Voice in Writing?” Peter Elbow (2000)
contends that there is an either/or debate with respect to teaching beginning
writers, which focuses on “writing as the production of text” versus the emphasis of
the development of voice in writing. Rather than seeing these as dichotomous,
Elbow argues that they can take place simultaneously.

Text production and voice development can (and do) take place
concurrently. To achieve verbal speech, thought must intersect with inner speech
(narrative). Human thought is a systematic phenomenon; part of text production
naturally occurs from thought. However, text production is also influenced by socio-
historical elements – all those utterances that have been produced and are being
produced in society. And so text production takes place in the intersect between the spheres of Vygotsky’s thought and Bakhtin’s socio-historical space.

Inner speech also intersects with the socio-historical (albeit at times unconsciously); this is where meaning making takes place for the individual in inner speech (although it may not make meaning to others). The socio-historical perspective always informs our conceptualization of reality.

It is the overlapping areas between text production and meaning making where writers’ voice can emerge. (See Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5: Meaning-Making and Text Production = Writer’s Voice
Rather than seeing text-production and meaning making as dichotomous, they are complimentary and reliant upon one another. The academic writer’s voice that we are striving to encourage in our composition students is neither wholly focused on text-production nor narrative but is a blending of the two. From the space where speech, thought and the socio-historical intersect emerges the possibility for the development of a writer’s voice that is valued in academic settings. This voice cannot be developed by focussing on either narrative or text production alone. Pedagogically both text-production and narrative writing must be seen as part of the process of developing academic writer’s voice in our students.

The Link between Self-Efficacy and Writing

A Definition of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a term that was coined by psychologist Albert Bandura more than two decades ago. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is related to perceived capability. A number of factors are involved in determining one’s belief of self-efficacy in any given area. For instance, it is not unusual for a student to have high mathematical self-efficacy and low literacy self-efficacy (Jones, 2008). As with many psychological theories, the development of self-efficacy is not fully understood.

Bandura (1997, 1995) suggests that four different sources affect one’s self-efficacy beliefs:

1) Performance in a given area (or “mastery experience”). Successful mastery experiences increase efficacy beliefs while failures lower them.
2) Peer modelling also affects self-efficacy beliefs; if one sees a peer they can relate to succeed in a given task, then they are more likely to believe that they, too, can succeed.

3) Social persuasion: if one can be told one is successful at a given task, they are more likely to be successful.

4) Stress and anxiety

Bandura (1997) also found that self-efficacy has a stronger impact on academic performance than skills alone (p. 216). Likewise, motivation itself is strongly related to self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1995). Individuals are more motivated to put in time and effort if they believe they will succeed at a given task.

**Self-Efficacy and the Composition Classroom**

As Bandura (1993) notes, “[e]fficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave” (p. 118). Self-efficacy becomes a major pedagogical concern when we are talking about writing because the ability to write well affects all aspects of academic achievement (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

University aged students’ literacy performances appear to be more influenced by their efficacy beliefs than younger students (Shell, Murphy & Bruning, 1989). Remedial writers with low self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to fail in the first semester at university (Jones, 2008). Research has also shown that prior writing experiences have a strong impact on students’ self-efficacy beliefs towards writing (Wachholtz & Etheridge, 1996). Structural elements of the writing process (such as grammatical correctness) have also been shown to be positively related to
efficacy in that area (Collins & Bissell, 2004). These findings would suggest that the
development of voice in remedial writers is linked to their self-efficacy beliefs.

Students entering the Academy often do not have the skills or efficacy to
successfully participate in the speech genres required by the University. As Bakhtin
notes, the utterance is the gateway to dialogue and lack of utterance (or writer’s
voice) leaves the students with no access point into the academic dialogical spaces.
A first-year academic literacy course, then, must address the development of
academic self-efficacy through the vehicle of academic writer’s voice.

**Student Voice in University Discourse**

Hirvela and Belcher (2001) have argued that students do not arrive at the
university without a voice. They suggest that students already have a well-
developed inner voice but may need assistance in moulding that voice to the
academic setting. And other studies have shown that successful students tend to
conform to discourse that is valued in the university setting even if that means
surrendering their own voice in the process; this surrender usually happens within
the first year of study (Bangeni & Kapp, 2006). However, appropriation of an
acceptable voice, rather than learning to develop their own writer’s voice results in
students who are unable to articulate their own critical interpretation of the world
around them.

On the other hand, students who are given the space to tell their own stories
in the academic setting are more likely to feel they belong and have a place in the
Academy (Creme, 2000). From this place of belonging, students are then more likely to be contributing members of the academic community.
Re/Search

To Search Again

Looking for Meaning Hidden Elusive

Folded in/between Story and Experience

For/ever to Re/Search

Hoping to Make Meaning

And Grow into The Space Inhabited by Teacher/Inquirer
Reflection 4

Researching has always been a struggle. I experience extreme discomfort when I am asked to justify my means and methods. Too often I slide into apology; the pressure of having to prove myself without losing my voice.

Interestingly, after I had written several drafts of this document, I discovered the ultimate irony when it was pointed out to me that my own voice was missing. Although my entire thesis was anchored to the importance of voice in writing, I had effectively eradicated my own voice from this piece. Instead, I attempted to appropriate an academic voice. The result meant that my utterance was hollow and empty.

The pressure of trying too hard, resulting in appropriation of a kind of voice I thought should be found in a doctoral dissertation. And so I began again, looking at my narrative inquiry anew, looking for meaning in the words.

Is that not the true purpose of research?
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Figure 4: Knowledge Making

*Through language we discover our inner experiences, just as we can say that through experiences we discover the words to which they seem to belong.*

Max van Manen (1997, p. xiv)

... it’s always the story that frames, explains and justifies your claim to elusive truth.


Quantification of educational experiences results in a loss of the “richness and experience.”

Jean Clandinin & Michael Connelly (2000, p. xxvi)

My understanding of the world, as both a human being and an academic researcher is framed by story. I find it very difficult, if not impossible to come to an
understanding of anything without knowing the stories behind and within it. Combined with this storied understanding is my belief that each individual experience is unique. These intermingled ways of understanding the world mean that my approach to academic research is complex and multilayered.

When I began my graduate studies, I was reluctant to engage in educational research because I related it to statistical analysis of events held at an arm’s length, disconnected from the actual lived experience of the individuals involved in the study. When I discovered the world of qualitative research, I was thrilled. Gerson & Horowitz (2002) identify “the common ground on which qualitative approaches are built” (p. 199). There are a number of factors that identify a study as qualitative, including:

1) it “involves some kind of direct encounter with ‘the world;’”

2) it is concerned with “the ways in which people construct, interpret and give meaning to experiences;”

3) it pays attention to “dynamic processes;” and


As I searched for a qualitative methodology that resonated with my own worldview, I encountered narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The more I read about narrative inquiry, the more I became convinced that this use of story to both experience and interpret qualitative research fit with my worldview.
Clandinin & Connelly (2000) believe that all experience, particularly educational experience happens narratively. As I reflected on my own educational experiences, both as a student and as an instructor, I recalled almost all of them in story form.

Narrative inquiry also holds that all experiences are intertwined and connected. “Narrative inquiry has the compelling, sometimes confounding, quality of merging overall life experience with specific research experience, realms of experience often separated in inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 115). My life experience could not be separated by my research experience to do so created a tension and unauthentic, so finding narrative inquiry as a research methodology made my own research seem more real and true to my experiences as a human being honouring my personal and practical knowledge.

However, narrative inquiry requires one to begin to think narratively, which involves more than just recounting stories. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) define “learning to think narratively at the boundaries between narrative and other forms of inquiry is perhaps the single most important feature of successful narrative thinking” (p. 25). This in-between space has always intrigued me but it also complicates the research. There is no right answer or perfect angle from which to view any given situation. Instead the researcher is dancing in/between spaces, trying to make some kind of meaning from the nuances of the narrative.

As I struggled to define what narrative thinking meant to my research, I began to see a link between narrative inquiry and Max van Manen's (1997)
phenomenological approach to lived experience. According to van Manen (1997) “[l]ived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research” (p. 36). Research becomes a circular or, better yet, a spiral inquiry process. As I moved through this research process the in/between spaces took on varied meanings depending on which place in the spiral I stood: researcher, student, teacher. There was a timeless quality to my research, a weaving of my many experiences in the composition classroom.

As van Manen (1997) notes:

[to do a phenomenological study of any topic, therefore, it is not enough to simply recall experiences I or others may have had with respect to a particular phenomenon. Instead, I must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience as lived through, are brought back, as it were, and in such a way that we recognize this description as a possible experience, which means as a possible interpretation of that experience. (p. 41)

So this study was not only informed by my experiences as a writing instructor, the experiences of other instructors as well as the students’ experiences. It is also one possible experience of the complex reality in the composition classroom and my story in telling of these experiences is one possible interpretation of many. My interpretation is necessarily informed by my own experiences: as a researcher, as a student and as an interviewer. As a writer, another person may have interpreted the same data in a different way, focussing on other stories and narratives based on his or her own experiences. If I return to this data in the future my own interpretations may take on a different focus. This is one of the gifts of
qualitative research. This honours the evolving temporality and the cycles of meaning making alluded to by van Manen, above.

Irving Seidman (2006) says that he interviews because he is “interested in other people’s stories” (p. 7). Interviews allow for research participants to tell their stories, in response to the researcher’s questions. As someone who was interested in the development of voice through narrative, interviewing my subjects was the perfect fit.

My interest in this particular project was initially sparked by my classroom experiences as a FAL instructor. When Dr. Carolyn Mamchur, my doctoral supervisor, suggested that I might wish to look at documentary film data from the first offering of the course I jumped at the opportunity. I had taught my first section of FAL in the summer of 2007. Different in so many ways from any of the other courses I’d taught, I immediately recognized that this course was a unique creation. I was excited and eager to expand my knowledge of how this course had come into being and I wonder if my original query into how and why some students discover their writing voice and what can writing teachers do to help them discover it could be further explored through an examination of the FAL course.

**General Perspective**

As a qualitative study this project drew upon the lived experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1997). Because I had experienced teaching FAL, I also brought my own lived experiences to the project. For this study, I chose to focus on the initial offering of the course for several reasons:
1) I was not involved with the course during its first offering, 

2) As a former instructor of subsequent offerings of the course, I was curious as to how it had been implemented during the first offering, and 

3) Some of the data was available in the form of previously collected videotapes. This was both a gift and a frustration at times. Although there was a rich and varied segment of data available to me through the videotapes, I had no control over the design of the interviews or the kinds of classroom experiences that were documented. There were times when I wished for different questions or, even, different interview contexts and subjects. Because much of this data was collected for purposes differing from my own (i.e., the creation of a documentary film), I had to focus on the aspects that were most relevant to my project.

**Research Question**

Because the study grew out of my experiences in the composition classroom I wanted to explore an issue that would help me meet the needs of my future students. The reoccurring hesitation over expressing their own opinion or sharing their own lived experiences was one of the most disturbing problems in my classroom. Students were hesitant to write about what they thought on any given issue. They would ask me what I wanted them to write, not quite believing me when I said I wanted to know what they thought. For many, using narrative to write about a topic would free up their voice but for others this was a painful process. The question of how and why some students are able to discover their writing voice and what writing teachers do to help them discover it resurfaced and informed my
primary research question which was: What are the steps that were taken in FAL to encourage students to discover their voices in this first year academic literacy course? I hoped that by exploring the data with this focus, I would learn how to encourage my own students to develop efficacy in their voices.

The Research Design

Simon Fraser University (“SFU”) is a mid-sized university in the lower mainland of British Columbia. SFU has three campuses and sections of the Foundations of Academic Literacy (FAL) course were run on each of the three campuses. A documentary filmmaker collected the initial data between September and December of 2006 during the first offering of the FAL course. The original purpose of this data collection was twofold: a documentary film would be created from the tapes; and, the tapes would be used as a supplement to ongoing research of the FAL program. To date the film has not been edited nor completed. I gained access to the raw, unedited videotapes in August 2008. In total 14 hours of tape existed.

I collected subsequent data in the form of open-ended interviews with the FAL instructors during December 2008 and January 2009 (See Table 4.1). These interviews were conducted before I transcribed and coded the videotapes. I also had access to a variety of documents that informed my understanding of the course including: Senate documents, course proposals, and curriculum materials (course outlines, syllabi and course overviews from 2006-2009).
I also examined a sampling of student journals from a website created by one cohort of the 2006 students and online materials related to course philosophy and design found on the course website.

**Table 4.1: Videotape Data**

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<td>Documentary filmmaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videotaped Administrator Interview (1)</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
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<td>Videotaped Student Interviews (3)</td>
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**Table 4.2: Audiotape Data**

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<td>Myself as Researcher</td>
</tr>
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**Case Study**

For this project, I engaged in an instrumental case study of the FAL course. According to Stake (1995), an instrumental case study is used when a particular case is examined in order to develop an understanding of something else (p. 3). I
examined the first offering of the FAL course as a way of understanding how narrative can be used as a pedagogical tool for helping students to develop a strong writer’s voice in a composition classroom.

This case study explores the FAL course during its first offering at SFU. The course was offered in 12 sections, with each section capped at 18 students (although some sections had fewer students registered than 18, none had more than 18 students). Students enrolled in the course were from varied socio-cultural backgrounds and both genders were represented. Most of the students enrolled in the course were required to do so as a result of insufficient scores in Grade 12 English. There were a small number of International students enrolled but the majority of students were domestic students (L1 or Generation s1.5 learners).

The instructors consisted of 12 individuals all of whom had significant teaching experience, either in the K-12 system, the ESL classroom or at the university itself. Each instructor had gone through a rigorous interviewing process before being selected to teach FAL. All of the instructors had experience working with beginning writers. In this initial sample there were four men and eight women. All of the data from the initial offering of the course was obtained from video taped sessions, initially taken for documentary purposes by a documentary filmmaker from a respected post-secondary school for the arts.

The subsequent data, four audiotaped interviews, was obtained in open-ended, semi-structured interviews with four FAL instructors in December 2008 and January 2009. All of these instructors had been with the course in some capacity
since 2006. All had taught FAL a number of times at the time of my interviews. There were two women and two men. All of the instructors were currently teaching FAL. The interview questions were developed with my research question in mind (see Appendix A).

With exception of Dr. Carolyn Mamchur, who was the creator of the FAL course, in this dissertation I refer to the research participants by pseudonyms to insure privacy. I sought permission to use Dr. Mamchur’s name to ensure that she would be acknowledged for the copyrighted course materials that I refer to in this study. See Table 4.3 and Table 4.4, below.

**Table 4.3: The 2008/2009 Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Types of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 8</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 9</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 4</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 1</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Type of Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 1(^3)</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dean</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 2</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 3</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Director</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 4(^4)</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 1</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 5</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 6</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor 8</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Storyteller</td>
<td>The Storyteller</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student Focus Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student Focus Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student Focus Group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student Focus Group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student Focus Group 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) Note: Instructor 1 was interviewed 3 times: one individual interview in 2006, one focus group interview in 2006 and one instructor interview in 2009.

\(^4\) Note: Instructor 4 was interviewed twice: in the 2006 instructor meeting and in a 2009 instructor interview.
Data Sources

Both the documentary tapes and the audio taped interviews were transcribed resulting in transcriptions of: two instructor meetings, three transcriptions of students interviews, two transcriptions of classroom focus groups, one transcription of an administrator interview, two transcriptions of instructor interviews and six transcriptions of the 2008/9 instructor interviews (See Table 4.5).

Table 4.5: Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Mode of Recording</th>
<th># of Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Meetings</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Student Interviews</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Focus Groups</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Instructor Interviews</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator Interview</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Meetings</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Instructor Interviews</td>
<td>Dec 2008-Jan 2009</td>
<td>Audiotape</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding the Data

Using Carl Auerbach’s (2003) six-step method for coding qualitative data, I restated my research concern and theoretical framework before I engaged in the coding process. My concern was the use of narrative in an Academic Literacies classroom – as Auerbach notes, at this stage of analysis the research concern should be quite broad – broader than one’s research question.
The next step was to identify the relevant text from the many pages of transcription I had collected. The data was coded by hand.

As Auerbach notes “relevance is subjective” (p. 47). Another researcher may have chosen different relevant textual pieces for analysis; however, the research would very likely have had a different research concern and theoretical framework.

In selecting the relevant text from the transcriptions, I worked on each transcription individually, identifying each piece of relevant text in each transcription. During this process repeating ideas began to emerge. By the time I had finished with the transcriptions, I had grouped the relevant textual pieces into 64 repeating ideas.

It was from the repeating ideas that themes began to emerge. As I grouped the repeating ideas into themes, I named the themes. In all, 12 themes emerged from the repeating ideas:

- Institutional Influence on Course
- Value Judgments
- Transition to University
- Community Aspects of Course
- Student/Instructor Relationship
- Individual Gains
- Curricular Goals
- Temporality
- Storytelling & Narrative
- Pedagogical Concerns
- Diversity
- Academic Literacy
To ensure validity of my data, I engaged in a number of checking methods including: member-checking, triangulation, secondary coding, and feedback. I approached the four instructors I interviewed and requested that they engaged in structured member-checking of the data. Three of the four agreed; the fourth individual was unable to member-check due to personal circumstances but agreed to have one of the other three instructors member-check the data in his absence. I specifically asked them to read through the transcriptions of their interviews with me and compare those raw transcriptions with my coded data grouped into themes. I asked each instructor to note if they felt the data had not been coded appropriately or if they believed there were major themes missing based on the transcriptions.

I also asked the instructors to check that I had used a valid translation from oral to written language (Kvale, 1996) when transcribing their interviews, asking them to pay particular attention to whether their intended meaning had been altered in anyway.

Finally, because each instructor had taught FAL a number of times when I interviewed them, I asked them to go through the transcriptions and delete any data that was not relevant to the initial offering of the course.

The 2006 transcription data could not be member-checked, as most of the participants were unknown to me. I asked Dr. Mamchur to assist me in recoding the data as she had been involved in the interview process in 2006. I asked her to go through the 2006 transcriptions and compare the raw transcriptions with my coded data, identifying any major themes that were missing. She also checked the
transcriptions for intended meaning and valid transcription translation in addition to thematic organization.

**Emerging Theoretical Construct**

I was able to organize the 12 themes into three overarching themes: 1) Building of Community: The Significance of Relationship; 2) Personal Narrative and Academic Writer’s Voice; and 3) Challenges of an Untraditional Composition Classroom. From each of these theoretical constructs I was able to create a theoretical narrative, what Auerbach (2003) describes as a way to “organize people’s subjective experience into a coherent story” based on the theoretical frameworks that have emerged (p. 73).

The stories that emerged from the transcription and coding process make up the heart of this project. It is to these stories that I will now turn, as I retell the narratives that define the essence of FAL for me in this research project.
A reaching out

   Tentatively
  Shyly

The first steps
   Toward
  A connection

Carry the Risk of

REJECTION

But when Met with Recognition
   And Understanding

The Beginning
   of a
Place Called Home
Reflection 5

When I was an undergraduate student, I don’t recall ever feeling that I was a part of a community. I went to my classes most days, sat beside some of the same people for thirteen weeks and then the cycle started over again.

My graduate student experience could not have been more different. I was very active in the community beyond my cohort and program area. I joined committees and clubs. I made lifelong friends. When I felt upset or discouraged, I always found a colleague willing to lend an ear to the venting of my troubles and offer constructive suggestions.

Too often it is easy to fall into the cracks and become invisible in the university. For my students I want them to see the Academy as place where they belong, where they are valued and heard. I want it to become one of the important communities in their busy lives.
CHAPTER 5: FIND VOICE IN COMMUNITY

The Building of a Community

To be guided by Love is to live in community with all life. A culture of domination like ours does not strive to teach individuals how to live in community. As a consequence, this must become a core practice for all of us who desire to transform society in ways that will bring justice, enable peace and well being – learning to live in community. All too often, individuals think of community in terms of being with folks like themselves – same class, race, ethnicity, social standing, and the like. It is when we are able to empathize, feel with and for experiences that are not our own and may never be, that we come to know “how good and pleasant it is for brethren to come together in unity.” To make community we need to be able to know truth, to speak openly and honestly.

bell hooks (1999, p. 120)

From my analysis of the planning documentation, it quickly became apparent that one of the primary objectives of the FAL course was to help students feel that they were contributing members of the university community. The pedagogy behind this goal was grounded in the assumption that there was a positive correlation between a sense of belonging in the Academy and success in the
Academy (Mamchur, 2006). Beyond this pedagogical belief, however, there emerged a sense from students and instructors, alike, that the building of community in the FAL classroom translated to an expression of voice within the classroom and the academic community as a whole. This was a progression for the students from feeling undervalued in the institution to believing that they belonged and did have important contributions to make.

During the first instructors’ meeting, Dr. Mamchur expressed her concern that many of the students might arrive in the FAL classroom feeling disenfranchised and resentful. This was a legitimate concern because the FAL students were admitted to the university on the condition that they enrol in FAL and they were unable to progress in their studies until they had successfully completed the course. Rather than embarking on the monumental task of convincing the students of the value of the course, Dr. Mamchur chose to focus on making the course a positive experience for the students, a place where they could be heard and known at the university. The way she encouraged instructors to do this, was through language:

We are going to speak in the language of welcome, enrichment, joy, pleasure, success; it’s going to be positive. That’s one of the most important aspects of what we are doing is this notion of [enrichment]. Instead of thinking: here is a remedial thing, here is an intervention strategy, what we want is here is an enrichment opportunity for people to be welcomed to the university, to feel that they belong to the university, that they are comfortable at the university, and that when they are here working that there are a lot of people and agencies available to them; that they know where they are and that they feel that they’re part of the university environment. Not as outsiders. Not as people coming in and feeling frightened but as people feeling strong and bold with their own voice. (Mamchur, 2006)
Thus, development of a strong voice was identified as a key component of student success even in the planning stages of the course. And, as Mamchur notes, the key to enabling students to feel strong with their own voices is by helping them to see themselves as valued members of a community.

Peter Elbow (1998) distinguishes between a safe audience and a dangerous one. He says that a safe reader makes the writer “feel respected, taken seriously, and supported” and as a result the writer “end[s] up having more and better things to say ...” (p. 185).

Within the FAL classroom there was considerable energy expended toward making the students feel they were safe in a community of friends where they could take chances with their writing.

The creation of community was encouraged through careful use of language. Although it would have been easy to label the class as a remedial course, the instructional team went to great lengths to ensure that remedial talk was kept out of the classroom.

**Student Experience of Community**

One of the goals of FAL was that it would give the students an opportunity to ... start to build community and become acquainted with one other as they [move] into their first semesters at the university. So that it becomes a new home for them and a place for them to dig in, make friends, communicate with people and begin the process of getting to the next stage of their lives. (Mamchur, 2006)
The metaphor of home with respect to the university was inspired. As Nel Noddings (2002) points out, “[a]t home, sheltered, we can be ourselves” (p. 150). And it is when we feel that we can be ourselves, that we are most likely to use our own voices and express our own thoughts and ideas. The “shelter” Noddings speaks of is the safety and trust that develops in a community of learners, where everyone’s voice is valued and honoured. FAL was created as a space where first year students could practice using their voice in an academic setting without feeling they were taking a great risk.

**Comfort**

Those students enrolled in the course did express a sense of feeling at home in the classroom. They spoke of their comfort in the course and some made the connection between that feeling of comfort and an improvement in their studies. Student 1, who had struggled with writing in the past, attributed the welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere with improving her writing ability:

> I think the class altogether had a comfortable vibe to it so I was able to just tell my story how I wanted to. Before I’d be so nervous that I’d be rushing the story, skipping parts of the story so that it would not even make sense. Whereas I was comfortable [in this class] and it was better. (Student 1, 2006)

This student’s way of being in the classroom has been transformed. As she notes in the past she had felt that she was being judged in the class when she volunteered her interpretations. In contrast, she felt “comfortable” in FAL and thus was able to share her stories with ease. The FAL classroom had become a place of safety where she was comfortable taking risks.
Student 8 compared her experiences in FAL with what she had experienced in high school:

In high school when I used to write essays I wasn’t really comfortable – it took me an hour to come up with an introduction and see what I wanted to write but FAL helped me. I actually enjoy writing now. Now I notice that if I sit in a special place and feel comfortable things come to me. (Student 8, 2006)

Rather than a social space of comfort, this student talked about the importance of comfort in private places. As she notes, FAL helped her to recognize the importance of having a proper study space in which to do her work – she acknowledged that the presence of this space actually made her writing stronger.

The instructors also spoke about the actual work the students were asked to do in FAL being comfortable and enjoyable. Instructor 6 said that for her students the actual “reading and the writing” was “not comfortable and we all know we shy away from the things that are uncomfortable to do” (2006). So rather than just forcing students to do readings and assignments that they would find difficult, she tried to “mak[e] it more interesting and more acceptable for them to do. I tell them to watch TV in English [laugh] but I just thought that’s dialogue; the speed of the conversation” (Instructor 6, 2006).

Relationship

The sense of comfort or a place of home in the classroom is not always easy to achieve in the university setting where emphasis in first year studies is often on large lecture style classrooms. FAL was unique in that the classes were capped at 18 students. The small class size both allowed the students to develop a sense of
comfort in the classroom and allowed the instructors to develop a relationship with each of their students. The instructor in FAL was seen as someone the students could talk to rather than the “Sage on Stage” at the front of the lecture hall. The small environment encouraged student/instructor interaction and was something that students had not experienced in their other courses.

When you have a smaller setting - the professor can notice you and you feel like the professor sees improvement, too. Rather than, just [having] done another paper that, yes, it’s a better grade than last one but they don’t know what your last one was because they don’t remember your last one because they’ve read 600 other papers. Having a smaller setting is I think crucial to truly learning. (Student 2, 2006)

As Student 2’s words indicate, students are not fooled by the lack of impact they have on their professors in larger classes, she did not have the expectation that the professor would remember her or her work. But in the FAL course she felt seen and heard by her professor and this was very important to her and changed her perception of university.

Well, it’s interesting because you come to university and you’re not expected to get good grades and you are almost set up to fail. You’re expected to not do well. And with the FAL course you have a chance of doing well, of learning and actually improving and feeling that you’re improving. You know in a course you may have actually improved but you’re so frustrated with everything because you haven’t gotten the grade that you wanted, you don’t feel that you’ve had any success in the course. But if you have the smaller environment and you can see your improvement and the teacher sees your improvement and comments on your improvement and lets you know that they see that is key because then you grow because you’ve got a positive outlook on it and the positive feeling is biggest thing you can have to grow on. (Student 2, 2006)
As this student notes, how the instructor reacts to her as a student has a massive impact on how she sees herself as a learner in the academy. This relates back to one of the key components of self-efficacy in a given area: if an individual is told he/she is successful in a given area, then he/she is more likely to be successful (Bandura, 1997, 1995).

Student 2 also noted that her relationship with her FAL instructor and being heard in the classroom were primary reasons for staying enrolled in the class, even though her LPI score was high enough that she was not required to take FAL.

So class size was an integral component to developing a sense of community and comfort within the classroom. Instructor 4 felt the size of the class changed the role of the instructor within the course to that of “mentor. It feels more than being an instructor, you feel like you’re a bit of a mentor. Especially with people arriving from other countries. So you try to help them with the larger picture, larger things” (Instructor 4, 2009).

As a mentor, the instructor took on the responsibility for advising and modelling how to be, not just in the FAL classroom but also in the larger academic community. As a result, there was a shifting of how both the students and the instructors negotiated that classroom space, roles changed as the dialogic space opened up. Within this dialogic space relationships and roles are transformed. Justine Lloyd (2004), drawing on Bakhtin’s use of dialogic spaces, describes “… a momentary expansion of the horizon of possibility, in which neither subject nor object is fixed but relational, and each is potentially transformative of the other”
(p. 7). The teacher in such a classroom space must be open to transformation of roles and self; otherwise, the space would not exist. This means the role of both the instructor and the student shifted. But the power situation in the classroom can never completely disappear. Although the instructor may act as a guide or mentor some of the time, she is still responsible for evaluating and grading the student’s work. So while there is room for dialogue and mentoring there is also the traditional power structures in place that can never be completely eliminated in a traditional university classroom. However, even here students are learning an important lesson about Academy and the roles that are expected across the university setting.

**Dialogical Dis/comfort**

Not all of the instructors were comfortable with this dialogical space. Instructor 9 expressed his concern that the relationship could become artificially close. Becoming a student’s “friend” brings in issues of power relations. Parker Palmer (1999) says that these kind of guarded concerns have their basis in fear. The fear of judgment, on both the part of the student and the teacher, plays a role in the classroom but if teachers let that fear overtake them, they risk destroying the chance of having any kind of meaningful relationship in the classroom and meaningful relationships are essential to healthy classrooms.

The existence of dialogical classroom spaces in first-year courses is a rare phenomenon. Instructor 5 echoed Student 2’s recognition that FAL provided a unique experience in first year university studies. She was amazed that students
could experience “the importance of relationship between teacher and student and learning from each other” within the FAL classroom. Prior to teaching FAL she hadn’t thought it was possible for such a course to exist in first year studies.

Part of this dialogical space that developed was the reciprocity in learning experience. As the instructors shifted from a professor status into a mentor role, they became open to listening to the students’ stories and learning from them just as the students were learning from the instructors. This is not to say that reciprocity does not occur in the professor/student relationship in other classes but in FAL this was articulated as a defining feature of the course.

Instructors indicated that an integral element in creating a dialogical space within the classroom was through relationship. Instructor 8 told me that his approach was to “develop a relationship with the students [because] in the relationship the student can emerge as a person” (2008). He elaborated on how he did this:

What I try to pay particular attention to in the FAL classes and in all the encounters I have with the students is to confirm the students presence as a unique person, as someone valuable, as someone I value. And when you do that the student feels comfortable, relaxed, confirmed and begins to think: “Well, I am somebody valuable and I have something to say and I have a valuable message in my life.“ And I’ve had students come up to me, literally in tears at the end of a class, and say I’ve never had a class where someone has done this for me. You not only listened – and I think listening is a big part of this process – and they say, “Not only do you listen to me but you allow us to be present, and we feel heard, we feel recognized. (Instructor 8, 2008)

So the classroom spaces were wholly removed from the traditional academic spaces that are largely made up of lecture halls. Instead the FAL classroom became
dialogical with both instructor and student sharing stories and learning from one another.

**Instructor Experience of Community**

The FAL instructors were very carefully chosen based upon their experiences teaching writing and their teaching philosophy. By the start of the semester a “Dream Team” of instructors had been brought together to teach FAL.

An important goal was to have the “dream team” of instructors feel that they were supported and were part of a community of teachers dedicated to creating something that had never been done at this university before. They were united in their purpose, and committed to helping one another to be successful and feel valued. If teamwork can be defined as mutually trusting people working together for organizational achievement, sharing a unifying set of values and goals while communicating candidly, caringly, and openly, then this group were engaged in some pretty effective teamwork, based on what Fisher & Fisher (1998) describe as “a distributed mind,” achieving high performance through the collective intelligence of a knowledge work team. (Mamchur & Shaw, 2009)

As noted by Mamchur & Shaw (2009) in addition to heightening the sense of community within the classroom, the instructional team itself worked on building a community of fellow professionals. The FAL instructional team met on a regular basis and shared their struggles and triumphs from the class. This community building among the instructors was an integral part of FAL’s success.

In the first instructor’s meeting, Dr. Mamchur stressed that teamwork was essential to the delivery of the course. She urged the instructors to

... tell one another the story of our successes and if something’s not working we help one another out or if somebody has an ill child that day somebody says I’ll come in for you. That we work together as a team – that we are fluid, that we aren’t isolated that none of us feel
alone, that is my dream of how we will work together.” (Mamchur, 2006)

Parker Palmer (1998) identifies one of the two ways for instructors to grow in practice is by becoming involved in “a community of pedagogical discourse” for it is through this involvement that one can facilitate the growing of community within the classroom (p. 144). Because FAL was a large enrolment course with a pool of instructors that met on a regular basis to discuss the curricular and pedagogical issues that arose from the class, a unique professional community of practice was formed. The fact that all of the instructors were either faculty members or graduate students in a Faculty of Education, where such things as classroom practice and pedagogy were a vital part of the culture, can’t be overlooked. The FAL instructional team found themselves in the unique situation of discussing and problem-solving classroom dilemmas with a group of curriculum experts. Having a group of colleagues, particularly such knowledgeable ones, to discuss pedagogical issues with is a rare occurrence in the post-secondary setting where too often one finds oneself teaching in isolation. Each instructor had a forum for stretching his or her voice as a teacher in a collegial environment. For composition instructors, in particular, who are often isolated in faculties and schools as the only person delivering writing courses, this was a rare and treasured opportunity.

This idea of meeting to discuss classroom practice, difficulties and triumphs as well as teaching strategies, was the key to building a sense of community among the instructors. The instructional support system was an integral component of how the course was run, as was pointed out during the first instructor meeting:
It’s important that when we are together in this group that we feeling good about ourselves and how we operate. And we support one another in that and that nobody in this room for the next semester feels alone. We’ll have failed if we feel alone. So feel supported, feel that we are all there for one another. Let’s talk and dialogue ... And I think we’ll be getting little pieces of everybody’s expertise as we go. (Mamchur, 2006)

Within the instructor meetings, there was an open and honest space for instructor autonomy and dialogue. Each individual’s opinion and experience was heard and discussed in a helping, rather than judgemental, manner. All of the instructors spoke about the appreciation they had for the flexibility in the curriculum. Many of the instructors had prior experience in the public school system, which in British Columbia is heavily prescribed, and they responded to the constructivist and emergent approach to curriculum design with energy, enthusiasm and a sense of gratefulness.

The meetings were one of the ways the instructors were able to support one another. Although coordinating regular instructor meetings with such a large group of instructors, all with different teaching schedules, could have been a daunting task, there was no pressure put on the instructors to attend the meetings. As with other aspects of the FAL course, these meetings were not mandated. There was a great deal of respect for the instructors’ time and schedules. In all, four instructor meetings were scheduled – one for each unit of study. Those instructors who could not make the meetings were informed of what they had missed by instructors who did attend the meetings. The meetings were also scheduled around the large group events that were planned so that the majority of instructors were available in the same place at the same time.
Two of the four instructor meetings were videotaped. In these tapes, it appears that the instructors feel comfortable sharing their ideas and expressing any concerns they may have about the course. Almost all in attendance take a turn speaking and listening to one another. Questions are asked, answers suggested. The instructors seem to have a sense of the worth of their own voices in the meetings.

**The Concept of Community within the Classroom**

The instructors saw community building among students within the classroom as one of the pillars of the curriculum. Instructor 8, who was teaching a writing course for the first time, saw the community aspects of the course as vital. He said that he had been “really looking forward to [the course] because I think the conversations we’re talking about, building the spirit of community, is really a fundamental part of [the program] and that’s what really gets me excited.” (Instructor, 8, 2006)

Likewise, Instructor 4 also stressed the community aspects of the course and said that “the approach of building community [is] really, really key” (2009).

Instructor 4 said the success of the course

... really was because it was about letting them express themselves and working together in that completely open environment where everything was respected and everything was fair game so nobody felt that they were going to be ridiculed or anything for what they were writing. But that opportunity to share bits of themselves in that environment with their colleagues (Instructor 4, 2009).
She said that the students talked about “developing a sense that it’s okay to be freer with their writing and to just kind of get all their ideas out and then look at them later” (Instructor 4, 2009).

Students not only spoke about feeling comfortable in the course but also indicated that it was one of the few courses in which they made friends.

I’ve made friends in FAL. It’s very few courses do you actually get to learn, meet people, and make new friends because you have your friends in your courses, who usually you’ve known from another course or a friend of a friend. But there are a couple of girls in the class that I know I could keep in touch with if I wanted. And we could help each other out, sending each other our essays to critique and things like that. That I know. Because it was such a small setting you were able to get to know everybody in the course and get to know their personalities. I really like that about it (Student 2, 2006).

But the building of friendships did not happen for all students. In fact, Student 3 said he felt alone in the classroom. While he acknowledged that he did meet a few people, they were not in his section of the course and he met them in other venues (for example, in his dormitory) and discovered that they were taking the same course. He said that he had “met a few people, yeah, definitely. I met some people. It was minimal, though. It wasn’t anything big. I didn’t feel connected to the class. It was a class that I came to.” Student 3 went on to say that some of the sections of the course had been “very communal.” But his “class was more – you go to class and then you leave.”

While Student 3 did not feel he had made friends in the course, he acknowledged that the building of community is an importance aspect of succeeding in university
... because you need people to bounce off of. You need people to correspond with and you need other people to teach you. Because it’s not just a professor who is teaching you it’s everything, it’s daily life and we learnt through the course your experiences that you’ve had with other people and with yourself are the ones that make the best stories. (Student 3, 2006)

It appears that Student 3 did value the community building component of the course but he did not experience it directly himself. He attributed this lack of connection for him as a mismatch between himself and his classmates and his instructor. Student 3 suggested in his interview that he had unique needs as a learner – he was a creative writer and it was his use of narrative in high school that had led to low marks. He felt that he needed a course that was more focused on expository writing because he already had a strong sense of his voice as a writer.

Without the opportunity to further interview this student, I can only speculate on his feelings of isolation in the FAL course. The fact that he saw community as vital to his education would suggest that he was not a loner by nature and yet he clearly felt FAL did not meet his needs as a learner.

Student 3 was the only student in my sample that expressed discontent with the course. The other students, in interviews, focus groups and journal entries, spoke overwhelmingly of the community nature of the course as a positive experience in their first year at university.

**Personal Narrative and Community**

The instructors also saw a link between the sharing of personal narrative and the building of the classroom community. Not only did the student stories enhance
the community environment as students began to see one another as individuals with likes, dislikes and experiences they could relate to but the sense of telling the stories in a community of learners shaped how the students shared their narratives. Soon the audience for the story wasn't some faceless professor but a group of peers and a mentor, who had similar stories and experiences and knew a bit about who you were and what your experiences had been. Instructor 8 felt that the students naturally moved away from a strictly expressivist telling of their stories when they were conscious of the audience of peers:

I think this can be a problem if you just allow the students to write out of a narrative without giving them any kind of tools to shape and develop that narrative. What you can end up with is just this stream of consciousness writing that is wholly subjective, isolated from others and is, at times, frankly, narcissistic. It's just all about me. And me becomes divorced from us and it becomes divorced from the rest of the world and I think this is one of the important things of the FAL program. When I talk about literacy with the students, I say it's literacy not just confined to writing per se, it's literacy of the self and it's literacy of the self in relationship to others because out of narrative and giving the student the tools to use narrative in effective ways, you can then say to the students, well, you know, the themes that you're exploring here were explored by William Faulkner or William Shakespeare, Henry Thoreau, Plato, Socrates, the list goes on, Toni Morrison and other contemporary writers. I think you want to make sure that the narrative is not an isolated narrative. That it connects with the narrative of others. And then you can explore the techniques, the technologies that good writers use to make narrative powerful and effective. And one of the things that I think students realize is that what makes narrative very powerful is if it does connect with others people's experience. And to do that you have to be conscious of other people. You can't just be self-absorbed (Instructor 8, 2008).

The fact that the audience was not merely the instructor was an important distinction. As the students began to see the purpose of their writing shifting to tell a story to the audience, rather than as an academic exercise being judged, they
began to see similarities in their stories. As Instructor 8 notes the sharing of stories moved into a dialogue between stories – those of students, those of instructors and those of published writers.

As students shifted the reasons for writing, they moved from writing as an academic exercise in to writing and thinking that has the potential to make a different in the world.

This community building aspect of the FAL classroom was the beginning of the students becoming contributing citizens on the planet. It was described as becoming the world, they are starting to be part of the world and I think that is a really profound process and I think that that is something that is the responsibility we face as educators. [This] is an educational goal we should strive for and I think they have to make sense in a world that is ever more complex and ever more connected and ever developing – that sense of deep connection with the world is really, really important. The magic of this program that I’ve seen is that that kind of awareness begins to develop (Instructor 8, 2008).

It was through the listening and sharing of their stories with one another that a greater awareness of the importance of their individual places in the greater community were realized.

FAL placed a great deal of emphasis on the openness of the writing process. Students read one another’s work and learned how to give different types of feedback to one another. The benefit of peer reviews extended beyond improved writing into furthering the community building aspects of the course. This was one way the learning outcomes for the course were achieved at the same time as the community building aspects were developed. Dr. Mamchur noted that through reading and responding to one another’s work, they became more familiar with each
other and yet at the same time developed their reading and writing skills further (2006).

Instructor 1, an instructor with over 20 years of ESL teaching experience, believed that the sharing of their work was very important in the course because it allowed the students to “learn from each other” (2006).

Although, Instructor 9 made the same observation about the importance of the peer sharing, he noted that instructors need to model how to respond to one another’s work: “And I think having opportunities for students to read each others’ work is really important. Although I think that needs to be modelled and explained clearly” (2008). The small class size was one component of the course that allowed the instructors to model such practices as peer editing.

**Risk Taking**

Beyond modelling practical skills such as peer editing, many of the instructors talked about general risk-taking in the course and their own risk-taking in the way they approached the curriculum. They saw their own ability to take risks as a way of being “fair” to the students who were being asked to take risk in their writing.

... the kinds of relationships that this writing can develop requires vulnerability. And if you’re going to require vulnerability on the part of your students, you have to be vulnerable yourself. And so one of the things I always do in my classes is I show them a story, or a piece of writing, that I’ve done ... and it’s a story about my childhood and it is in some respects a piece of writing in which I expose myself. And I think when the students see this they appreciate it because it’s not something that you would normally – you wouldn’t expose this to anyone, and so I take a risk in doing that. And I think they see that
[and think] well, wow, if he’s willing to take a risk then maybe I can, too (Instructor 8, 2008).

The Director of Undergraduate Programs, who spoke to the instructors at their first meeting prior to the beginning of the course, also called the instructional team a group of “risk takers.” He spoke in terms of offering and care, urged them to “roll out something that’s an exciting program on which we can build our reputation as really success-oriented, caring educators that have something to offer beginning university students.” (Director, 2006)

The development of a community of learners in the classroom could not be achieved without the sharing of personal narrative. As students became comfortable with themselves and each other in the FAL classroom, they began to take more risks in their writing. In this risk taking, they began to develop their own recognizable writer’s voice as a member of the classroom and, it was hoped, of the greater academic community.
I am Writer

A Powerful Self Definition
Wholly Unshakable

But into the Classroom
Come Ghastly Stories

Students who are Survivors of Horrific Abuse
Their Writer’s Identity has been raped and beaten down

And I am charged with repairing the Damage

How can I expect them to Trust me
When Others with my name perpetrated the betrayal?
Reflection

I really became aware of narrative in the every day a few years ago. I’m not sure what happened to make me take notice – too often we simply do not see what is in front of our eyes. But one day I experienced an epiphany: We all tell stories – it’s how humans interact.

As a writer I have always been strong and confident. I believe much of my confidence in writing stems from the fact that I’ve been given positive affirmations since I was a small child. I was about nine or ten years old when my teachers first commented on my poetry. From that time onward I was praised for my written communication.

By the time I entered university, I already thought of myself as a writer. Any critiques of my writing were either taken as opportunities for improving a piece or as ill-informed opinions by instructors who had not read my work closely.

As an instructor, however, I was dismayed by some of my students’ attitudes toward writing. A number of them flatly told me they “could not write.” And yet I saw them regularly engaged in email, chat and text-messaging activities. I wondered why they thought they were inept in academic writing.

Through reading their personal narratives I soon discovered the reasons. Almost all of my students had suffered thoughtless and damaging feedback on their writing ability at a young age. The damage to their self-efficacy in the realm of writing was extreme. And I wondered how I could even hope to help them overcome these experiences; to see themselves as writers once again.
And yet I've had to “teach” students how to write stories. But they already know how to tell a story. They've been doing it their entire lives.
CHAPTER 6: PERSONAL NARRATIVE: THE DISCOVERY OF VOICE

![Figure 6: The Discovery of Voice](image)

Being personal, I want to show my students, does not mean being autobiographical. Being academic does not mean being remote, distant, imponderable. Being personal means bringing their judgments and interpretation to bear on what they read and write, learning that they never leave themselves behind even when they write academic essays.


Voice allows the reader to hear an individual human being speak from the page. Good writing always has a strong and appropriate voice. Voice is the quality, more than any other, that allows us to recognize exceptional potential in a beginning writer; voice is the quality, more than any other, that allows us to recognize excellent writing. We respond to voice when we hear it. Voice gives the text individuality, energy, concern.

Donald Murray, (2004, p. 21)
Too often the use of narrative in the composition classroom is seen as dangerous. Asking students to write about their own experiences can be risky. It can lead to confessional writing and ethical issues for instructors (Morgan, 1998; Miller, 1994). But story is how we bridge difference and how we build community. Bleich (1995) argues that a “pedagogy of disclosure” values what each individual member of the class (student and instructor, alike) can bring to a course and also can serve to illustrate how our meaning-making is influenced not just by our own individual experiences but by those of other members of the academic community (p. 47). It’s often how we teach best.

In many composition textbooks, the first unit covers some variation of personal narrative writing. It is taught and then such texts usually move on to more acceptable forms of academic writing such as the argument paper or the research paper. Typically, narrative is not mentioned again in such books. But in FAL personal narrative was taught as another genre of writing that students could use in an academic setting. It is important to note that personal narrative was not merely introduced as the first unit and then forgotten. Instead it was woven throughout the course. In this section I will discuss how instructors and students experienced personal narrative through the role of storytelling in the FAL classroom and how the use of narrative contributed to the development of voice in the students’ writing.

The first unit of the course did focus intently upon the use of narrative and storytelling and it was through writing their own stories that students first began to develop a writing voice. In FAL narrative writing was the gateway to academic writing. It was argued that it is a
much, much harder discipline actually to write narrative than it is to write exposition. Everyone thinks it’s easy but it actually is much more difficult and it teaches all of the skills of writing that we want students to have and it’s a new genre for them. So they’re not into exposition, they’re not into grammar, they’re not into spelling, they’re discovering what is important for them to say and what’s worth saying and what can they say in this little body. How can they frame it? So it’s about framing, it’s about choosing, it’s about going deep inside oneself. Finding out what it is that we care about, what it is that we know and how can we know more about it and then we present it. So it’s for us and to someone else. We give it to the professor but it’s for us. (Mamchur, 2006)

Choosing a subject is difficult for students. In FAL they were encouraged to find a topic they knew about or were interested in and write about it. Donald Murray (2004) notes that in school it is the norm for students to be assigned topics but he stresses, “[s]tudents need to know how to collect information and connect it so that they can develop their own ideas out of their own material in answer to their own needs” (p. 12). When students are writing from their own interests, they are more likely to use their own voice than to appropriate one.

**Confidence & Voice: Instructor’s View**

The instructors spoke overwhelmingly of students not having a voice as they entered the FAL classroom and they linked the development of voice clearly with the confidence the students demonstrated in their writing as the course progressed. Narrative writing was a gateway for developing voice because it was seen as the most accessible form of writing for most of the students. Narrative writing was also the form of writing that was most closely related to oral storytelling. All the students had experiences with storytelling, even if that experience was based in the
family home or in another language. Narrative was used to access that inner voice and translate it into a writer’s voice.

As Burk (2000) notes the use of personal narrative gives students voice in the classroom and this in turn shows respect for their “lived experiences and diverse cultural perspectives” (p. 3). And the mutual respect that is built among students and instructors through sharing our lived experiences leads to powerful community building (Davies-Gibson, 1994).

Storytelling was introduced to the FAL classroom is a technique for developing narrative writing. Students were encouraged both to write down personal narratives and to practice telling their stories orally. A professional storyteller was brought in to help the students learn the process of constructing a powerful story – a process that translated from oral storytelling into written word.

In addition to developing as writers through a developing awareness of their individual writing voices there was a strong sense among instructors that students had a better idea of who they were as people after taking the course. Instructor 8 thought the students’ “sense of self literally does increase and it becomes less, if you want to use the word, egoist, self-centred, narrowly centred. ... And so it becomes much more expanded and much larger” (2008). He linked this change directly to the writing process:

The process of writing is a vehicle for allowing this to happen because in the process of writing you are thinking of yourself and the audience. And so now there’s this relationship and the more the writing develops the more the thinking process can develop in and through the writing. This is part of the magic of writing as a technology and you now begin to see connections between yourself
and others and this leads to this expanse of the sense of self. So not only does the writing provide a vehicle for that expansion of self but the expansion of self enhances and develops the writing itself. (Instructor 8, 2008)

In the first semester at university, many students are engaging in a variety of forms of self-discovery; however, the type of self-discovery encouraged in the FAL classroom was different as it concentrated on the development of self as a writer. The students wrote their stories and through the narrative process began to recognize their own voice in writing. This recognition of writer’s voice in their own vignettes helped the students to see themselves as writers and develop a sense of writer’s identity. Instructor 3, an experienced high school English and Creative Writing teacher, noted: “I love what can happen when you interact with beginning writers and they start to think of themselves as writers and the way they can explore and grow through that process” (Instructor 3, 2006).

There was a sense among the instructors that this realization of themselves as writers would give the students confidence in their studies and, more broadly, their life. Instructor 6 said she found it

... really exciting just looking at talking to them as if they are [writers]. You know, saying to the student you are a writer, this your job, it is your job to do this and you are the author of your own life. What are you going to do with it?” (Instructor 6, 2006)

Shifting the students’ attitudes from seeing writing as an uncomfortable chore to a part of their daily life was considered empowering for the students. As Corkery (2005) notes: “Students become empowered when the lessons become personally useful” (p. 63).
Most of the FAL students had extremely low self-efficacy when it came to their writing. Dr. Mamchur responded to the students' low self-efficacy with encouragement and commented on how evaluation affects self-efficacy:

Until I feel that they won't feel defeated by that form of evaluation or criticism I won't go there because too often they say how stupid they are and they are still trying to guess what I want them to say even though I couldn't have been more open and more outrageous in what I accept and in what I do and say. ... But when they interpret sometimes they are still trying to guess what I would want them to say about it. Maybe that's 15% of them, the rest have got it and they are giving their own interpretation and they are giving wonderful reasons why they like it. (Mamchur, 2006)

At the second instructor's meeting, one of the instructors shared her surprise that one of her most talented students had no concept of himself as a writer:

... what overwhelmed me the most was he said I didn't realize I could write about things like this. I didn't realize I was a writer. ... You know he's a natural writer, I was just overwhelmed by his personality with his sensitivity and with the unbelievable impact when I left. Where else would he have a chance to tell that story and have a voice? And develop a voice and have a conversational voice? (Instructor 2, 2006)

It's important to note that not only weak writers lack a writer's identity. I have also had students who were brilliant writers come to me at the end of a course and say they had no idea they could write. One wonders where this lack of self-efficacy originated.

Another instructor observed that students came to a place where they felt they could write and that they hadn't felt that way before enrolling in the FAL course:
I’ve had quite a few students actually say that they feel like they can write now and they didn’t feel they could before and I think that’s huge. They feel that they can find their subjects, that they understand about audience, that they know how to map things out and organize ideas into patterns and write a thesis statement because for a lot of them that’s a really big thing. And then finding supporting details is another big thing for them. So just having time to look at those things and combined with freeing up their own writing voice I think, really that’s given them a feeling that they are able to go into other classes and when someone tells them to do a group presentation or write an essay on something they have some idea of what is meant by that and what they have to do. (Instructor 1, 2009)

The need for explicit instruction is scarcely recognized in traditional English curriculum. Historically it has been assumed that students will implicitly recognize the components of good writing; however, explicit instruction in the composition classroom can yield in surprising results. One instructor noted her

... focus is on encouraging the students to develop an identity as a writer and even just beginning to think of themselves as a writer and rather than it’s a chore that they have to get through. So I really focus on development, voice and process and the form – that’s one of the my biggest things that I emphasize is that it’s a practice, it’s a writing practice same as it’s your art practice. You know the only way to get better in any art form is to practice it – is to do it. And so it’s not you learn the equation and that’s it now I know. (Instructor 4, 2009)

Often students assume that a good writer just has a natural talent for writing. Although this may be true for a very small percentage of the population more talented writers improve through practice. As Donald Murray (2004b) notes “Revision is not the end of the writing process but the beginning” (p. 1). Making this transparent to students can be the first step in helping them improve as writers.
This sense of self as writer appeared to be closely related to the development of voice. If the students can recognize themselves in a piece of writing, they are more likely to believe they are writers.

... allowing the student to see that they have something to say that’s valuable. Allowing them to discover that they, indeed, have a voice. That their own experience is valuable. The voice may not be well developed initially, it may not have good form and structure, but at least there’s content there. And when you get the student to recognize, “Wow! I, just little me, I have something to say and I have something to say that might be valuable for others” – I think that’s a tremendous revelation and I’ve seen students eyes just light up literally when they realize they have something to say. (Instructor 8, 2008)

That students arrive at university believing that they don’t have anything worth saying is troubling. Being aware that many students feel this way allows for first year instructors, particularly in composition classes, to encourage students to take a risk and state their opinion. But in order to do that the student must feel safe in the classroom. Lack of previous opportunity to develop a writing voice was noted as one of the problems.

I think voice is a big part of it – finding your voice as a writer and giving students an opportunity to explore their voice. I think many of them have never had that opportunity to do the kinds of writing that we do. So I think the way that we begin with personal voice and then from there exploring different types of voice: your spoken presentation voice and your more formal academic writing voice. I think that’s a thread that’s woven throughout the course but I think that it’s a good strategic decision to begin with personal narrative because it will allow students to do a type of writing that they, perhaps, have never been asked to do before and it allows them that opportunity to find their voice in their writing. (Instructor 9, 2008)

When students realize that the instructor truly wants them to write from their own experiences there is a moment of disbelief. Too many students arrive in
the classroom wanting to write whatever the instructor wants to hear. They seem
to believe there is a right way to do things. When you are writing for someone else,
too often you take on a voice that is not your own. You, as the writer, become
absent. The development of voice was stressed as vital to student writing:

... whether you’re writing expository writing, whether you’re trying to
persuade somebody or you’re trying to describe – you, as the writer,
should be present. There should be a presence there that the reader
can make a connection with. I think that’s vitally important not only
in terms of writing as an effective tool but as writing as a means of
communicating and developing relationships with people. So I really
stress on keeping that sense of this is who I am in the writing and I say
to the students you should always be present in your writing and I
want to see you – I want to be able to say yes, I recognize you in this
writing. (Mamchur, 2006)

This sense that each person has her own subtle style of writing is another
way of defining voice.

The reader will be able to make a connection between your thesis and
who you are as a person and what you represent and so the reader
will not only at the end of the essay realize that they’ve read a thesis
they will also feel that they’ve made a connection to a person and they
will have an understanding of who that person is. I say this is one of
the challenges and the disciplines of really good writing that you
never lose yourself. That you’re always fully present in your writing
No matter, again, if it’s a persuasive type of essay, a descriptive type of
essay, whatever kind of essay it is, that there is always a person there
and that the reader can feel that I’ve made a connection with
someone. Not just an idea. (Mamchur, 2006)

As the course unfolded Dr. Mamchur described the eagerness for personal
narrative among her students as a form of hunger: “It’s almost as if they were
hungry for something real and they are moving it into the sharing and feeling that
they have something so worth telling and that they are worthy. It’s that
worthiness” (2006).
This is an example of self-efficacy in the student writing. The growing confidence in the students only could happen through the opportunities provided in the FAL classroom.

One of the things that I’ve noticed that I’ve been absolutely overwhelmed with is the unbelievable need for this course. I just was absolutely astounded in the first few weeks how little opportunity these young people have had to tell their stories; to just speak to another adult and talk about their stories. (Instructor 2, 2006)

**Meaning Making: Students’ Interpretation of Personal Narrative.**

The students talked about the use of narrative in the FAL classroom as a very unique and powerful experience in the university environment. In their interviews, the students expressed a comfort in sharing their past failures. Student 7 told of how he had stopped seeing himself as a writer during high school. He referred to a past experience when an instructor told him he could not write. “Well, I think I was destroyed. [It was] a beginning of ... doubt in myself. So in many ways now I’m beginning to get over that” (Student 7, 2006). And when asked how FAL had helped the student responded:

Well, it has because I’m revisiting that [experience]. So I’m writing about it whereas it’s always in your mind bugging you and not having an outlet to talk about it because we always pretend that we are courageous but bringing this out helps that more in a real way (Student 7, 2006).

Instructor 1, who was Student 7’s instructor, was very cognisant of the previous hurts many of the students had experienced. She took steps to help students come to a place of comfort with the FAL class, recognizing that for these
students there was a lot of repair work to be done before they could engage in
to write again.

And as soon as someone says something hurtful like that to you, the
reaction is to keep it a secret, don’t let anybody know and [to think
that] probably they’re right [about you]. And the self-image goes
down and you heard some of my students saying how they felt hurt
and traumatized by that.” (Instructor 1, 2006)

These past experiences that many of the FAL students shared were
incredibly painful and had a huge impact on the lack of self-efficacy these students
felt in their writing ability.

Many of the instructors noted that many of the students came to the class
with negative prior experience with writing and English. At the same time, they
were focussed on their futures. The instructors expressed a desire to have these
students focus on the present – rather than on the future or the past - and develop
as writers at the Academy. The instructors

... were trying to get the mode of here and now, in this moment in
time, together experiencing with pleasure and joy, experiencing with
tremendous skill and opportunity, and we are going to embrace the
moment to get people to let go of the past and the fears they’ve had
and any baggage they bring. “I wasn’t good in English.” “I didn’t know
how to write,” to right now we are going to experience this with the
greatest intention of enjoyment that we can have (Mamchur, 2006).

Tom Romano (2004) says that voice is irrevocably linked to passion. He says
that “[s]tudents need to learn to take advantage of burning new thought, to write
immediately upon the passion of seeing and feeling and thinking ...” (p. 51).
Sparking passion in academic writing can be difficult but I’ve found that one of the keys is to allow students some choice in what they are writing about.

Instructor 1 and her students also talked about passion in writing,

We talked about passion and I had them share passion with me. ... And then we talked about how that translates into academic work, that academic work, if it is just somebody writing what the teacher wants, that can be very boring. And I told them, what do you think it’s like to be the teacher reading all of those papers that nobody cares about. You have to put your passion into it so that when the teacher reads it they are feeling that (Instructor 1, 2006).

It was a revelation for many of the students when the instructors admitted that the reading a multitude of dry academic essays that students do not care about can be boring. The students assumed that because the instructors assigned such writing, they must enjoy reading it. By revealing to the student that the audience wants more than just a mechanical expository piece of writing, the audience wants to see the value in the piece of writing, students began to realize that perhaps the instructor was interested in what they had to say.

The students recognized the value of writing about their own personal experience, as can be seen in the following exchange between Student 6 and the documentary filmmaker:

Student 6 – [speaking of a personal story he had written for the class] I think it was one of my best writings.

Q – And why? What made it one of your best writings?

Student 6 – I thought about writing it and it’s something I enjoy and ...

Q – It makes a difference!
Student 6 - It makes a lot of difference. ... if you write your personal stories it gives you more knowledge to say this is how you want it to be. The teacher might be expecting it some different way. I think it helps a lot. (2006)

He went on to describe how narrative writing was different from what he had done before in university, which was “not what we want to write, it’s what the teacher wants us to write. While personal story is what we want to write. That’s the main difference” (Student 6, 2006).

Instructor 1 was “surprised by how much the students enjoyed narrative writing” and she “had a lot of students say that they loved that part of the course, they didn’t know they could write like that” (2009). But she also said that “some of them say, no, we don’t want to do narrative writing, we want to do something else, we want to do more academic [writing]” (2009).

For these students the relationship between narrative and improved writing ability across disciplines was not apparent. These students viewed their university studies in a very mechanical and instrumental manner.

In FAL many of the instructors felt strongly that the use of story in the classroom benefited the students:

They all have stories they can tell and being able to share their own stories that they obviously value because they are their stories with other people it really enriches the class. People get to know each other better. You know? And they do develop this freedom in writing that they didn’t know that they had. (Instructor 1, 2006)
Student 3, who was quoted earlier in reference to his dissatisfaction with the course, noted that he had taken something away from the class, something unexpected:

One thing that I have to bring away from this course is that I did grow in my ability to comprehend experiences. And how they impact my life and how I can use them to make a story more emotional or a piece emotional. (Student 3, 2006)

The writing of personal narrative and sharing that writing with peers appeared to take place initially in the realm of meaning making for students. As they listened to others’ stories, however, they entered a space of self-reflexivity as the stories they heard (and told) caused them to “think about their own thinking and reflect upon their own reflecting” (Greene, 1978, p. 61) as is illustrated by Student 2’s experience of hearing the other students’ stories and the effect that had on her own work:

To hear the other students’ stories was interesting. I think listening to the stories helped me think about how people read my stories. I started writing my stories as if I were telling my stories because it makes the stories more personal and more interesting to read (Student 2, 2006).

So the importance of the use of narrative in FAL did not just come from the telling or writing of the story, it extended to the listening of others’ stories as well. Both through listening to stories and constructing stories, we learn about the world around us. As Witherell, Tran & Othus (1995) note: “[w]hether narratives of history, present experience, or the imagination, stories call us to consider what we know, what we hope for, who we are, and what and whom we care about.” (p. 40).
As students heard their peers’ experiences they entered into a self-reflexivity that was evident in their writing. As Nichols (2004) suggests “autobiographical writing is capable of assisting students as they unwittingly discover ways to argue effectively, even passionately, in the context of their own interests, which are not prescribed” (p. 141). Instead of personal narrative being an end in itself, it is seen as a learning tool to help students write assignments with vigour and voice that express their own thoughts on global topics. They moved out of the mode of searching for the “right answer” into the realm of meaning making.

**Storytelling & Narrative**

In the first instructors’ meeting, the instructors were told the importance of using story and narrative in the class.

What we want to tell them is that everyone has a story to tell and everyone needs to be heard. Everyone needs to be valued and being able to tell your story is so important to understanding who you are. Where you are coming from and where you are going? It’s such a grounding thing. (Mamchur, 2006)

As a way of modelling storytelling and narrative, a professional storyteller (“The Storyteller”) was employed to work with the FAL classes in the art of storytelling. She said, “Storytelling is connected to community, is connected to your roots, is connected to everything in your life and also connected to literacy. And I have a very strong faith in that connection between literacy and knowing our own story” (Storyteller, 2006).

In the larger group, The Storyteller told the students a story about an uncomfortable moment she had experienced in her life. The students then wrote a
piece about their own uncomfortable moment. In the second instructors’ meeting, Instructor 4 said that her students “were so amazed that you could talk about something that personal and share it with everyone” (2006). She said the experience of listening to The Storyteller tell her story had affected the student writing in her classroom.

Their writing is so much deeper and the things they are sharing and the truths. And I’ve noticed this flow is happening and this is amazing because it has structure, it has flow, it has unity, it has all these things. (Instructor 4, 2006)

Dr. Mamchur was also amazed at the depth of the stories the students told. Speaking of one of her students, an L2 learner, she said, "She told stories that I didn’t think people would tell one another" (2006).

The storytelling aspect of the course encouraged the students to take risks. In one of the videotaped instructor’s meetings, the story of one of the L1 students, who had written a personal story of childhood abuse was shared, and the instructors were asked “Now do you think that girl would have told that story had we not had these experiences? Never in a million years. She would never.” (Mamchur, 2006)

The essence of the course was summed up by

... it’s what do you know about people and getting from this point to that point that they feel safe enough to even try to take a risk. To feel like they have something worth saying. To quit trying to outguess the professor. That’s where we need to get them. That’s the place. Once they are there all the rest can go very fast. (Mamchur, 2006)
Instructor 1 talked about how writing their own personal stories and sharing them with one another then transferred to their academic writing:

The reaction was fantastic. The students absolutely loved being able to share their work, write their own words down, find their own voice and just to write. We had set up the idea that everything they offered was a gift so there wasn't criticism about how it was delivered or anything like that and, I think, the exercise to be able to write freely like that to just write actually did help their mechanical writing, too. (Instructor 1, 2006)

When asked how it helped, she responded:

The flow in finding their voice and because most of them speak very well and the writing is a little bit different. Once they get the flow with their writing, so that they are going with an idea and they are trying to get that idea down instead of worrying about the product at the end. So it was very much process oriented working with how they were creating rather than what they were creating and I think that made a big difference (Instructor 1, 2006).

The Storyteller said that storytelling relates to Academic Literacies “because everything that we ever say is usually a story. So it’s a way of engaging the students in the process of learning how to write well or better. And learning to see what they’re reading in different ways” (Storyteller, 2006). This also takes the traditional idea of learning to write through reading and turns it on its head. Instead, it is suggested that in fact it is through writing that we learn to become more critically reflective readers.

The Dean of Education echoed The Storyteller:

Stories are more than just stories – stories are narratives that grip people emotionally and start a cycle of motivation for the students that isn’t easily achieved otherwise. Ultimately the commonest way probably that we understand life is through narrative, through stories
and by connecting that impulse we have to thread a narrative line though our experiences (Dean, 2006).

Bruner (1996) emphasizes the paradox of academic study when we view narrative as a “decorative” or add-on to the more serious studies of scientific significance. The irony, of course, is that the very fabric of our being as humans is formed by narrative and by disowning narrative in the classroom we make the classroom less a reflection of reality.

The telling of stories enveloped both the meaning making process and the development of voice. The Storyteller worked with one student to learn her story and share it with the larger group. She had a strong sense of respect for the students’ stories and their individual voices, which she felt was translated to the larger group through that experience.

I think it spoke to the power of our own voice. Our own words. Saying things with our own words. In learning [the student’s story] the way I did and presenting it the way I did, I was able to suggest to the students my respect for their stories. To suggest that their voice is as valid to me as my own. It’s on the same par, you know. There’s a same respect for that voice and that’s a very powerful lesson for me and very magical. (Storyteller, 2006)

In valuing story and voice the instructors were able to help the students to gradually move from the realm of Inner Speech into the space of Verbal Thought. By sharing the stories in group settings the students came to realize that their voice was not only influenced by their own lived experience but by the socio-historical context in which their stories were told. The stories of their instructors, peers and the Storyteller herself mingled together and helped the students make meaning from these narrative pieces.
Jackson (1995) says that stories

... are often credited with changing us in ways that have relatively little to do with knowledge per se. They leave us with altered states of consciousness, new perspectives, changed outlooks, and more. They help to create new appetites and interests. They gladden and sadden, inspire and instruct. They acquaint us with aspects of life that had been previously unknown. In short, they transform us, alter us as individuals.” (p. 9)

This kind of transformative learning encourages autonomy in our students (Mezirow, 1997). Bai (2006) argues:

The general context of today’s schooling is that we do not sufficiently encourage and enable students to do their own ‘experiment’ in the laboratory of their psyche. We are still by and large fixated on knowledge transmission and acquisition based on external authority. This is not merely harmless; it deprives human beings of their vitality and agency, and wastes their previous time. (p. 14)

Bai’s words suggest there is a deep connect between a student’s sense of agency and their self-efficacy. If students start to feel that they are not useful members of the academic environment then they are far less likely to become independent, critical thinkers in the Academy and beyond.

And yet, as we shall see in the next chapter, using personal narrative in the composition classroom requires a kind of a pedagogical balancing act. Instructors who teach with such unconventional curriculum are often stepping outside their comfort zone. This kind of teaching takes courage and faith.
Breaking from
The Comfort Zone
Of the Familiar

TAKES
Courage

It is easy to
Rely on the
Tried&True

Even at the Price of Mediocrity

To be open to
Curricular Change
Risks
Failure

But Carries the Possibility
Of Great Success
Reflection 7

Parker Palmer’s 1999 text, The Courage to Teach, is aptly named. To truly teach in the Academy does take courage. It involves exposing oneself to the students, learning to listen to what is being said (and sometimes to what is not being said) in the classroom. It means encouraging and empathizing with our students. At times it means putting one’s foot down and saying no.

It is a complex ever-changing, dynamic, relational practice. And, yes, it does indeed take courage to teach, especially when we are telling our stories.
CHAPTER 7: CHALLENGES OF AN UNTRADITIONAL COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Figure 7: Untraditional Learning Spaces

When we are willing to abandon our self-protective professional autonomy and make ourselves as dependent on our students as they are on us, we move closer to the interdependence that the community of truth requires. When we can say “please” because we need our students and “thank you” because we are genuinely grateful for them, obstacles to community will begin to fall away, teachers and students will meet at new depths of mutuality and meaning, and learning will happy for everyone in surprising and life-giving ways.

Parker Palmer (1998, p. 140)

There is a certain comfort for the instructor that comes from having a detailed syllabus and lesson plan prepared but the reality is that when one steps into a classroom, those planning documents are revealed as just that: planning
documents. This is perhaps even more valid in the composition classroom where the students are writing from their own experiences. While it is important to have a map that guides us in the classroom it is just as important to have the courage to follow a different path when unexpected details invariably emerge. As instructors it is impossible, even when we know our pupils well, to anticipate all the unexpected turns a given lesson can take particularly when we truly want our students to engage with the curriculum on their own terms. Being open to student-led curriculum is also part of good teaching.

Although the FAL curriculum was extremely structured, in the classroom curricular detours took on a unique quality. As was revealed in the videotape of the first instructors’ meeting, before the first offering of the course, there was no way to tell whom the students would be. Dr. Mamchur indicated that she was reluctant to become too rigid in the planning before she met her students and she urged the other instructors to be open to adjustment and changes in the planned curriculum she had provided for the course.

The instructors expressed a willingness and desire to approach the course from a student-centred, constructivist framework. However, there was also a sense of balancing the emerging curriculum against traditional practices in the writing classroom.

Because composition instruction is often so fragmented within the Canadian context, instructors tend to focus on the few overarching themes that have been used to judge student writing. Grammar and form are two of the most readily
apparent marks of good writing. While the FAL course did not neglect these aspects of student writing they were not the focus. This was a difficult adjustment for some instructors who were accustomed to viewing narrative as an add-on in the composition classroom.

**Merging Narrative and “Academic” Writing**

Although the course did rely heavily on narrative and storytelling techniques the instructors stressed that these were not used to the exclusion of teaching structure but in addition to traditional composition teaching theory. The instructors were navigating the rocky path of a variety of genres in academic writing: therefore, narrative and expository writing were both valued in the course neither to the exclusion of the other. But finding the balance between the two was an ongoing struggle.

Instructor 8 was very clear about the importance of teaching the structural aspects of writing, both for narrative and expository pieces:

[Recounting his conversation with a colleague who said there needed to be more structural writing instruction] And I said I agree completely but I don’t think the two are antagonistic to one another and I said one of the unique things that we do in this FAL program – and I think this comes directly out of Carolyn’s philosophy of writing is that we work on developing the voice of the student. … Voice can have both content and form. And I think the magic of the program is that it works with both of those in developing voice and so we work with the forms of writing and the different genres of writing. I think that’s critically important. However, equally if not more important is this developing the content of the voice. And so I think one of the prime focuses of the FAL program is in giving the students the tools to develop the content of the voice. That unique content that is uniquely the students’. And I think that is the fact that is sometimes missing from other writing classes and that needs to be there. And the
combination of both, the content and the form, is what makes for really effective writing. (Instructor 8, 2008)

This balancing of form and content in composition studies is not easy to achieve. Students often focus on one or the other but to guide them to the place where they can focus on developing both is not a simple task.

It’s not only confirming the student and allowing that voice then to emerge but it’s also about being able to shape that voice and giving the tools the student can use to shape his or her voice in ways that are appropriate to the subject at hand, to the audience. And so, both allowing the voice to emerge and then giving the students the tools to shape that voice in appropriate ways are the two real strengths, the most important things. (Instructor 8, 2008)

The twofold process of allowing voice to emerge and then giving it shape was often achieved through the use of narrative and an extensive drafting process. Students write many drafts before they are able to successfully achieve the balance between voice and structure. This is expressed in the following:

One without the other isn’t sufficient. It’s a wonderful thing to confirm the student’s presence and we can do that regardless of the subject matter, regardless of the curriculum. But in terms of writing, then giving the tools that the student can use to shape the voice is, I think, a really powerful and important part of the program. (Instructor 8, 2008)

It would be a huge disservice to our students if we merely focussed on just the development of voice to the exclusion of structure. In process-based writing the voice emerges and then students are encouraged to shape it into the appropriate structure through the writing of several drafts, and the editing process of peer review and instructor feedback.
The emphasis on student-centred approaches meant that traditional rhetorical topics were considered in a different light. The attitude toward grammar serves as a useful example. Drawing on her experience as an ESL teacher, Instructor 1 felt:

... that if there’s an ESL component at this point in the game where they have actually come into the university, they’ve probably had a lot of grammar and just letting them write a lot is going to help them more with their fluency than working on grammar because they’ve had a lot of grammar. (Instructor 1, 2006)

Grammar exercises do not help students improve their writing as readily as practice with the writing process does. Instead grammar was taught as part of the editing and proofreading process. Students’ own work was examined for grammatical issues. Particularly well-edited examples of their own writing were held up for the class see how a real piece of student work could progress through the writing process to be corrected for grammatical and structural issues. But it was taught as part of the writing process: all writing must be corrected for grammatical issues but those corrections come during the editing and proofing phase of writing not during the creative drafting stage. This use of student writing as an example of text was a particularly powerful pedagogical tool in the FAL classroom.

Many students expected FAL to be a grammar course. However, Dr. Mambour said that the focus on grammar sometimes worked as a means of stifling the students’ emerging voices. She told the students:

[I could] teach you all the grammar rules in the world but until you get that familiarity and that immersion you'll just be struggling, you’ll go too slowly. So your struggling so hard to get the words that you now forget what the subject is, all your work is in understanding the
words. It isn’t that you’re slow, it isn’t that you’re stupid, it’s that this is something so new to you. ... I have not corrected one grammatical error yet. Not one. Though there are many of them. When we study the importance of audience, then we’ll worry about grammar. (Mamchur, 2006)

In FAL students were not penalized for their grammatical errors. In fact those errors were disregarded in early drafts. For students this was a great boost to their confidence. Often they were so focussed on avoiding making grammatical errors that they were unable to concentrate on their subjects. In FAL they knew that every piece of writing required not just one or two drafts but many drafts. This is perhaps the most unique aspect of the course and the most valuable one. Student could take chances and make mistakes in early drafts because they focussed on different elements of the writing process in different drafts. In the early drafts, the goal was to capture their thoughts and ideas without censure. In this sense the students learned to approach their writing as a “real” published author might. The final product was only complete after it had gone through the drafting process. Students were encouraged to see their writing, even academic writing, as an artistic work in progress.

This was not to suggest grammar was never taught. It was taught as a tool for bringing clarity to the audience. Grammar is important because it is the job of the writer to help the reader make sense of the words, to understand the thoughts of the writer. Teaching grammar as a function of writing process, not as an end it itself, was the key. Correct grammar is highly valued in academic settings, not as an end in itself but because it makes the writer’s voice and the meaning clear. Grammar can
often act as a bridge between writer and reader. Thus grammar is a tool in achieving strong writing not an end in itself.

Revision was also given more emphasis than one might see in a traditional composition course. Instructor 4 saw the revision process as a unique feature of the course. She said

the editing and the revisions going back and forth - that’s probably the biggest difference [in this course] is that someone hands a piece of writing in and then they give it back, then it comes back, then they give back, then it comes back. (Instructor 4, 2009)

The multiple drafts and rewriting process in FAL are rarely seen in first year studies, even in composition courses. The time commitment for both student and instructor is immense. However, explicitly teaching students the drafting process is one of the most valuable lessons for writing students to learn. As Donald Murray (2004b) concludes revising is writing.

Instructor 8 spoke of the student’s narrative writing as also going through the revision process:

When we do that personal childhood story we will revisit it again and again and again. I get them to do 3 or 4 drafts of that piece of writing and each time, I’m sort of raising the bar so to speak both in content – getting them to explore the ideas and themes more deeply - really explore what the subject is and when you explore the subject more deeply then you begin to see the connections with others. But not only the subject but the form. What techniques of narrative can we use and work on developing to make this a more effective and powerful piece of writing. (Instructor 8, 2008)
The fact that narrative writing was also put through multiple drafts was surprising to the students. The writing process taught in FAL was transferable to any kind of writing the students might engage in.

In addition to structure and grammar is the elusive quality of written voice. Every piece of strong writing in every discipline has this quality but how it is developed depends upon the writing instructors. The process of helping a weak writer develop into a strong one is not generally recognized by disciplines outside composition. While almost all professors will recognize a strong piece of writing when they see it, the process of taking a weak writer and helping them to develop into a strong writer is not easy to negotiate.

To develop a strong voice students must engage in “learning through writing so they write in the class and at home every time we meet. I have them do a lot of writing but not things that I grade” (Mamchur, 2006). Not having their work immediately evaluated for marks can be a surprising and disconcerting experience for students. All the students in the FAL classroom arrived having been conditioned to create their work for the main purpose of gaining grades. To convince them that the purpose of the FAL course was primarily to help them develop skills as a writer through the multiple drafting process was challenge. This was paradoxical because in the end, to the instructors dissatisfaction, they did receive grades for their work.

It is difficult to convince faculty and students alike that just because the work is not graded does not mean it isn’t important. This idea of writing without grades is a foreign concept in post-secondary education. Evaluation is a large part of what
faculty members do. Students also expect to be evaluated. One of the most common comments in any university classroom is “How much is this worth?”

Another unique aspect of FAL was that it did not place emphasis on the final product. Instead the emphasis was on the process of writing, Dr. Mamchur explained:

... it’s not about the product so much as the process and so it’s not that we’re showing “look at what we’ve done.” It’s that we know deep inside of ourselves what we’ve done. (Mamchur, 2008)

FAL used the creation of student portfolios for the major assignment in which students chose their strongest pieces of writing and then included each phase of the writing process in the Portfolio. The Portfolio illustrated the process the students went through in creating each piece of writing.

**Student-Centred Approach**

In the development and enactment of the FAL program, Dr. Mamchur felt that the student centred approach should extend to lesson planning as well as the syllabus. She included student suggestions in her lesson planning and shared her PowerPoint slides and other materials with her students. Because student choice had been removed when they were mandated to enrol in the course, many instructors found that it was imperative to give student choice back to them within the classroom.

Instructor 1 did not force any of her students to do something they disliked in her classroom:
I would just say that students if they really hated a topic don’t have to do it. I never make anyone do anything. If they don’t want to share it if they don’t feel ready to share they don’t have to. (Instructor 1, 2006)

Instructor 9, drawing on his many years of experience as an ESL instructor, noted that it was important not only to give students choice in their assignments but, as instructors, to also be cognisant of when a given assignment might be uncomfortable for a student because “they may resent the stigma attached to being ESL. So I think we need to be careful on the types of things we ask our students to do and don’t assume that they’ll be comfortable” (2008).

When assigning topics for writing, Instructor 4 left the choice entirely up to the student but urged them to:

... choose something they care about because if you don’t have anything to say then how are you going to write? And so once you feel you have something to say then there’s a flow, then there’s ideas, and you can talk it out, you can figure it out. (Instructor 4, 2009)

Instructor 4 also noted that this did not mean that she didn’t give students any guidance when it came to topic selection for their assignments and added:

What I do is I’ll ask them to bring in three topics: look through the papers, watch the news, talk to friends, and [find] something that, actually, just bothers you. And bring those ideas in and then from there you can choose which ideas and then I do the writing forward thing where you just write and you don’t worry about grammar and you don’t go back and read it. (Instructor 4, 2009)

Instructor 4 indicated that her advice to an instructor teaching the course for the first time would be:

Just make sure that it’s meaningful to the students. So I guess that’s the thing that it’s got to have some kind of meaning for the students.
It really does because one of the biggest things is that so many of them believe that what they think doesn’t matter and that’s one of the biggest things: having something to say. And you’re joining in the conversation. You’re learning how to partake in the conversation.

I give them opportunities to choose something so they can still choose not to - that’s their choice, but I don’t tell them what’s meaningful. I’ll sort of encourage them to find something that’s meaningful and write about that or get an issue you actually care about it. And so they begin to get a little bit of the experience of what it feels like to actually care about what you’re writing about (Instructor 4, 2009).

The freedom the students were given in the course to choose topics would help them to develop the critical skill of topic selection in future courses. Although they may not encounter a course that gave them as much choice as FAL did, students almost always have some choice in essay topics. Being able to select and recognize topics that interest them, that are meaningful, was another important skill in developing their success as an academic.

Explaining to students why certain assignments were chosen and listening to students if they disagreed was also an important classroom practice.

Instructor 1 said that:

... if you explain what you’re doing with it that you’re opening up their voice. That some of the things that you do in narrative writing are transferable to academic writing and you point out what those things are. And then when you move into the academic you again say you remember when we did this, okay, well, this applies to here – that’s what I’m always doing, I’m always saying we are doing this in the narrative and when we come to do the academic we’ll also be using this (Instructor 1, 2006).

And Instructor 9 agreed:

... it’s important to explain to the students why we are doing this. Justify why we are going to write this way and explain that this is
perhaps something that you may not have done before and a lot of people may not think it’s an academic kind of writing. I think promoting it and explaining why is helpful and what the students will learn from it. So I think just explaining why. Not just personal narrative but the whole philosophy of the course I think that’s important at the beginning because it’s different (Instructor 9, 2008).

**Emergent Curriculum**

At the first instructors’ meeting, Dr. Mamchur advised the instructors to use the course materials “as they are useful for you and your students. Don’t feel that any of this has to be followed. It is there as a guideline, it’s there as a template, it’s there for your use as you feel you want to use it” (2006).

Later in the term, Dr. Mamchur explained how the curriculum had evolved in her FAL class:

What I’ve been doing that’s been so successful is I’ve been taking their stories and then passing them out to everybody (with no name on them) and saying paraphrase this. So instead of paraphrasing something foreign they are paraphrasing their own writing and that of their classmates. And then they can talk to the real author and say is that really the proper interpretation? And that seems to be really working because they are very interested in one another's stories and their stories are so remarkably beautiful and poignant that I couldn’t find anything on the face of the Earth that would be nicer. (Mamchur, 2006)

She further explained that she was

... gauging not by the course I wrote even though I was hoping to follow that quite closely. I’m just gauging by two things: their tempo but also as material emerges in the classroom. I use it because I believe that’s the best thing to use so I don’t use prefabricated materials very often. (Mamchur, 2006)

Instructor 6 also deviated from the provided materials and relied on student work instead. The student work she used was both from FAL and writing from their
other courses. She suggested that students bring in an assignment from another course:

... once they've received the assignment back. A lot of them have to be writing for midterms, so I have them bring in their own papers so that we can work with that. I take their name off of it and then I photocopy it and we all look at it together. This way we can look at different kinds of writing from across the different curriculums. (Instructor 6, 2006)

Dr. Mamchur found that the best examples grew from within the FAL classroom. I believe in that so much, the organic. When somebody has a paragraph that’s exquisite we put it up on the overhead. And then together we work with it and edit it. We might say is this exactly the right word to use here? Isn’t there another word that would be better in this gorgeous thing? And we might spend 20 minutes finding one word because it’s the right word. (Mamchur, 2006)

Dr. Mamchur shared the example of a lesson on letter writing that she had created out of a student bringing a letter from her father to class.

We learned that lesson through life rather a textbook that says this is how you write a letter. Those are the structural elements and they do come but the important knowledge in letter writing is that it has to be about relationship. Between the writer and the receiver. Between you and me. Those things are so organic and intimate and complex that it’s very hard to understand what they’re all about until you’re part of the whole intimate group. (Mamchur, 2006)

Dr. Mamchur talked about using the students’ narrative writing in this way was important because the stories were of interest to the other students and they were easily accessible. Using their own work, rather than textbook examples, helped the students to develop a sense of value in their writing.

To learn how to paraphrase we’d work together to paraphrase one of their own stories. If we were looking at how to do some condensing
we would look at one of the student’s stories. We used the work as work so it wasn't about reading a story just for the sake of telling a story. It was a piece of work that we were using as a part of our curriculum. When we had that objective purpose to it then it moved the narrative writing out of confessional writing. Instead it was written as material we would use to teach one another. And everybody was generous in that, everybody was just forthright in sharing their work. Even when it was extremely personal. When you see it as the work that you are doing, trying to get the work right it permits a bit of objectivity. The feeling of us as human beings is extremely intimate and personal but the work is work and both of those things have to be in existence for people to be comfortable with it. (Mamchur, 2006)

The students were very receptive to this approach to teaching. They were interesting in hearing one another’s stories and found it extremely valuable to be able to read each other’s work. Learning to give constructive feedback to peers, also informs one’s ability to see one’s own writing in a different light. Students recognized the value in this:

I liked how we used our own work because, as you said, the work part of it, it was work, but the intimacy, I like to hear someone’s story so you know something about [them]. I really like how we shared our work and how we helped each other. (Student 5, 2006)

**Learning to Write for Themselves: The Students**

Influenced by Donald Murray’s (2004) *Process Theory of Writing* the course was very much process-based. The assignments were interconnected. This is something that does not necessarily happen in most courses where the completion of unit reflects the end of using the skill or information from that portion of the course and moving onto something else. In FAL, the skills that were learned were built upon and referred to as the students progressed through the course.
Student writing that had been completed in an earlier part of the course was also used to teach skills that were needed such as paraphrasing and summarizing. So instead of paraphrasing something from a book, students started by learning to paraphrase one another’s writing and then checking with the author to make sure they had got the essence of the story. The instructors also used students’ own work when looking for examples in the classroom. The class became very collaborative and open. The students were very receptive to this approach to teaching.

Student 6, a student who felt his best piece of writing came from narrative, commented that it was not so easy to discard the expectations of instructors:

I think not all teachers are like [the FAL instructors] because in my high school we wrote a lot about what our teachers wanted us to write. So it’s basically they were telling you this is how I want you to write, it’s not the way that we want to write it. (Student 6, 2006)

Student 7 felt there was:

... an expectation that there is a level that you must think at even if you want an opinion or to write something in your own words. There’s a level of do you really understand it? So I think students get distracted with what does the teacher want me to think? And I think it starts early. I think it probably starts with kindergarten. If you want to get the stars and the points. As you get to university you’ve got to be an A-student, keep that GPA up and the only way you can do that is to make sure the teacher likes what you write, right? So that is almost like a Catch 22 because sometimes your opinions aren’t to that level that they are expecting. I think it’s something that’s learned over time. (Student 7, 2006)

Student 7’s perception of how student voice is often molded by the institution and the instructors is a telling one. If we truly wish for students to develop their own writing voice, we must be open to a classroom that is deeply influenced by the students who are members of that curricular community.
However, the students did not necessarily enter into the FAL classroom with an eagerness to engage in narrative and dialogue. As Instructor 9 said: “I think a lot of them came in expecting to find some very mechanical writing exercises and someone criticizing their writing and formal academic kind of theories about writing” (2008). Navigating the first few weeks of the course was challenging for instructors and students, alike.

As the course progressed students also questioned some of the pedagogical practices, particularly assessment. As mentioned assessment of the course was done on a portfolio basis. This meant that students received very little in the form of formal grading before the end of the course. This was difficult for some of the students. Instructor 9, called it a

... weird mentality because they write these papers and they’re not marked. [laugh] You know? Every essay they’ve written before they took this course has come back with a grade, this doesn’t. What’s up with that? But having said that the students found that that really took the pressure off and they were able to experiment and try things that they would be afraid to try under other circumstances. So I think having opportunities to do lots of low stakes writing is a way of developing student’s self-efficacy. (Instructor 9, 2008)

Even though the students did not receive graded assignments, they did receive plenty of feedback on their assignments. Dr. Mamchur indicated to the instructors that they were:

... not creating this as a hoop for people to jump through we really want them to succeed so we put all of our energy towards success. And when I say success driven I don’t mean that we don’t have uncomfortable moments – it’s process, it’s a process and we’ll all fall down but to help us I want the least amount of grading and assessment as is humanly possible. This is not a big thing. We will
evaluate, we will give feedback constantly; we will not give assessment constantly. (Mamchur, 2006)

Thus we see FAL was a unique class in many ways. The curriculum was a new way of approaching writing both for the students and instructors alike. Many students (but not all) embraced the use of narrative to encourage students to develop self-efficacy and writer’s voice positively. The lack of grading and the focus on feedback rather than assessment was difficult for some to accept. However, the student-centred pedagogy did allow many FAL students to grow as writers and budding academics.
A Land Cast in Shadows

And Shades of Grey

Lacking Permanency and Purpose

BELONGING
NOWHERE

Through Story and Voice
is
Transformed

Into a Gateway
Leading to Endless Possibilities
Where Written Voice Shines
With Self-Efficacy and Belonging
Reflection 8

The conclusion of my study requires me to critically reflect on what I’ve learned through the process of studying FAL in depth. It is difficult to articulate the many ways this inquiry has informed my classroom practice.

I have always believed in the value of story in the classroom. As I learned to teach, through my trials and errors it was those sharing moments with students when I would take a risk and let them see me as another human being – taking changes, making mistakes and trying again – that made for the most powerful moments in the classroom.

When I teach composition now, I tell students explicitly why they are being asked to write narrative. Yet at times, even with explanation for the practice, some of students do not see value in the narrative writing practice. And perhaps for some students narrative writing is not the answer. As with any curricular tool, not all students respond positively to all writing techniques. For students who are reluctant or uncomfortable with narrative writing perhaps we should explore other forms of writing that will allow them to find their writer’s voice.

I think that is one of the biggest gifts I have received from the study of the FAL program: the willingness to see each student as an individual with different learning needs and goals. This has inspired me to continue to search for pedagogical tools, like the use of narrative, that will help students feel strong and sure with their voices. Not just at the university but beyond their post-secondary studies and throughout their lives.
CHAPTER 8: THE STORIES FROM THE BORDER SPACE

... A story saves life a little at a time by making us see and hear and taste our lives and dreams more deeply. A story does not rescue life at the end, heroically, but all along the road, continually. I do not make the story; the story makes me.


Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

David Bartholomae, (1985, p.134)

Revisiting the Research Questions

I began this study with the intent of exploring techniques for helping students to develop voice in a composition classroom. My hope was that by
uncovering some of these techniques, I and other composition teachers would better understand how writer’s voice develops in our classrooms.

This study was strongly influenced by the overarching query: how and why do some students discover writer’s voice and what can writing teachers do to help them discover it?

Out of this larger question came my primary research question: What are the steps taken in the Foundations of Academic Literacy course at Simon Fraser University to help students discover their voice in a first year academic literacy course?

At the onset I thought this was a rather simple query. The journey itself and the answers I found were anything but simple. Through the storied experiences of the students and instructors in FAL, I learned much about voice and self-efficacy in the academic setting.

A Retracing of the Journey

Influences Embedded in History

I began my exploration in the historical context. Although I had been teaching writing in a university setting for more than 7 years, and I had completed my undergraduate degree almost 20 years before in an English department, I was unaware of the complex history behind the current composition studies in Canada.
As I became more aware of the positioning of composition studies within academia, many of my prior experiences began to make sense to me. This was the part of my study when I encountered many “ah-ha” moments.

There can be no doubt that I came to composition instruction unaware of the complex contradictions embedded within the discipline. I firmly believed in the value of writing instruction at the university for all students. And I believed that others in the Academy would also view composition in this way; however, this is not always the case.

Composition occupies a true borderland within the academic setting. While the various disciplines acknowledge that almost every student at the university needs writing instruction none of them wish to “own” the composition courses. Traditionally, these courses have held an uneasy relationship with English departments but, with a strong bias toward literary study, few composition programs have found a welcome home there.

The FAL program at Simon Fraser University was notably different. The large interdisciplinary Faculty of Education at SFU administered and delivered the program. A large group of gifted instructors were hired and the course was given a high profile both by Undergraduate Programs and by the Faculty of Education as a whole.

When I began teaching in the FAL program I was unaware of the marginal position most writing programs held in academic circles. After studying the program in depth, I believe I now understand why I was unaware of the isolation
writing instructors often face in post-secondary education. While the FAL program was rather typical in its assignment of instructional positions (the course relied heavily on sessional instructors with only one tenure-track member of the instructional team), the FAL program was different in that the instructors who teach in the program were honoured both within the team and within the Faculty of Education which hosts the program.

Often when one takes on a composition position, one finds oneself with a muted voice in the larger academic realm. In the FAL classroom, this did not happen. The instructors felt valued from the time they were chosen to teach FAL. Each successful candidate for the FAL positions was interviewed and selected based on their expertise. And their expertise was valued through the instructor meetings and lesson planning as they were asked to share their own views and pedagogical suggestions.

Writing instructors dwell at the boundaries between disciplines. FAL also lives in an interdisciplinary border space within the university. As I delved more deeply into my research I became convinced that this in/between space was the place from which voice could emerge. First-year students are also immersed in the boundary spaces between languages, cultures and identities and FAL students more so than others as they find themselves between high school and university courses, enrolled in a class that doesn’t count toward their degree in credit hours but is included in their cumulative GPA.
The Emergence of Voice

Lev Vygotsky’s work with speech and thought provided the beginning of a metaphorical way for me to see writer’s voice emerging in the classroom. The junction between verbal speech and non-verbal thought seemed to be the place from which writer’s voice emerged. However, it does not emerge in isolation. Writer’s voice is always deeply influenced by the socio-historical context in which it exists. Bakhtin’s utterance seemed to also indicate that border space from whence I saw writer’s voice emerging. And so it was in the border spaces between verbal speech, non-verbal thought and the socio-historical context that I envisioned writer’s voice emerging.

Because composition studies in the spaces in/between belong nowhere and everywhere in the academic realm defining what constitutes writing curriculum is contested. There is a need to categorize what writing pedagogy could be. The need to classify and file things and people in their correct spaces seems to be a unique activity of academic life. However, the FAL program did not try to classify itself nor its curriculum. I believe a large reason that FAL eluded classification was from its position in the Faculty of Education, which is an interdisciplinary unit at Simon Fraser University. It is a large and vibrant faculty that has resisted the departmentatization that characterize other faculties. The Faculty of Education offers interdisciplinary undergraduate, professional and graduate programs.

In composition studies the debate between student centred expressivist pedagogy and text-based instruction has long been contested. The need to see writing instruction as either teaching grammar or allowing for personal narrative is
an interesting one. Much of my own development and practice as a writing instructor has been influenced by my experiences in the FAL classroom. My practice has therefore developed to approach writing instruction in the space from which I believe voice emerges – the border spaces. So ultimately instead of focussing on either grammar or narrative, the writing classroom needs to incorporate both. FAL was able to successfully merge the two extremes. This complementary pedagogical approach is one of the most unique qualities of FAL.

Students can’t express their voice without correct style and grammar but if they only focus on the structural elements, they become lost in the administrative features of writing and aren’t able to find their own voices. Self-efficacy towards writing must be built. In FAL student voice was celebrated – student work provided much of the curriculum as examples emerged from students’ own writing.

**Qualitative Themes Emerge Through Narrative Inquiry**

When I first envisioned studying the FAL program, I knew I could not make meaning of the course through statistical or quantitative inquiry. Although quantitative inquiry has its own value, for me this study needed to focus on qualitative inquiry and lived experiences of the students and instructors.

I wanted to take a careful look at the spaces that one is not able to see in statistical analysis – the elusive in/between spaces. These spaces are both intriguing but also complicating in a research context. There can be no right answer or perfect angle from which to view any given situation. Instead the research
negotiates the in/between spaces, trying to find meaning in the nuances of the narrative.

The lived experiences of the participants were paramount to my interest in the study. Before I began formally researching FAL, my informal daily re/search as an instructor focused around experiences within the FAL classroom: experiences of my fellow instructors and my students. As I moved into the formal research role, this preoccupation with lived experience did not shift. It was through the storied experiences of the participants that I was able to make meaning of the re/search. As the study began to take on a shape and a structure, I saw a trilogy of core themes that related to the development of voice in the composition classroom emerge: 1) the importance of community; 2) the power of narrative; and 3) the development of voice through the unique approach to curriculum within the FAL classroom. Using student work as pieces of curriculum ensured that their voices were present in the classroom and increased the self-efficacy they felt towards their writing.

**Community, Story and Emergent Curriculum**

Even before the course began, the instructors expressed a belief that if the students felt like they belonged at the university, they would find success in their studies. They put great emphasis in their classrooms on having students feel welcomed and at home.

Nel Noddings (2003) says that an individual’s need for recognition is fulfilled by community and the recognition of students is essential in academic communities.
First-year students, as newcomers to the academic community, are in particular need of having a “sense of belonging” in the Academy (221-222).

Noddings goes further and posits that newcomers, particularly young people, need to be invited to participate in the community. The FAL instructors embodied this belief, seeing themselves as “mentors” helping students become familiar with the inner workings of this new community.

Students unanimously stated that the course did not fit into what they expected from a university course. Their expectations for university education were that it would be difficult and isolating. In the FAL course, they found themselves in an environment where the instructors knew their names and they recognized the other students in their course – this did not fit with the picture they had of a university education.

The instructors also recognized that the FAL course was unique in letting the students interact with one another and themselves on a different level than usually occurred in first year courses. A variety of factors contributed to this uniqueness: class size, the use of narrative, the storytelling sessions, and the use of students’ own writing as curriculum. There was a strong sense that this initial foray in the post-secondary education would have a lasting effect on the students in their future studies.

It was hoped that in the FAL classroom students would meet one another and start to make friends, making the transition to university life a bit easier. For many students this did happen, they felt they had made friends whom they could work
with as peer editors in the future. But for a few other students, this did not happen. How students who resented being in the course can find relevance in FAL is an ongoing struggle for instructors. In any situation, it is not easy to teach disengaged students and yet, it is inevitable that in a required and heavily mandated course, a few students will be dissatisfied with their experiences. Perhaps this is one of the many difficult truths of being a teacher.

A great part of the developing sense of community within the FAL class came from the storytelling element of the course. The personal narratives helped to strengthen the student bonds in the classroom but the presence of community also helped to put the student stories in a context. The stories seemed to take on more value and strength as they were shared, discussed and edited within the FAL community.

The use of students’ work, rather than textbook examples, as a way to illustrate success in writing was one of the most valuable elements of FAL. Students saw one another’s work held up and celebrated. For more difficult pieces, classes often worked together to edit the writing until it was just right. This was a radical shift in the teaching of writing; it moved the focus away from the final end product to the process of writing. Students learned how to edit and construct a successful piece through sharing their own work within the FAL community. And at the end of the course, they each chose their best piece of writing to showcase in a class publication.
As the students progressed through the course, they learned to move away from the concept that writing about oneself is egotistic and self-centred. Instead of writing about self for self, the students learned to write their personal stories to share with an audience (their classmates and instructors), to learn how to structure a piece of writing and to produce writing that could be used in the classroom as a curricular tool.

Students were given autonomy to discover what they were interested in and what they wanted to say. Although there were parameters to all the assigned writing for the course, students were also given the flexibility to chose the topic for each writing and they were encouraged to find something they were interested in and then share it with others through writing.

Ros Ivanic (1998) argues that “self as author” is a merging of two related perspectives of writer’s identity: the autobiographical self and the discoursal self (how the author conveys him/herself in a given text). The instructors in FAL strove toward helping students develop this sense of “self as author” in their writing. The ability of the students to see themselves as writers was a primary goal of most of the instructors. They felt that if the students viewed themselves as writers, they would be able to develop their writer’s voice.

The development of a writer’s identity was something that was missing from students’ prior experiences in writing instruction. Many of the students in the course had prior damaging experiences with writing resulting in low self-efficacy. At first these students were reluctant to take any kind of risk with their writing.
Both instructors and students told of how they were able to heal those past hurts and move toward developing a writer's identity.

Storytelling was modelled for the students by a professional storyteller. The Storyteller both came and worked with the individual classes and told stories in a large group setting with all sections of the FAL course. As students' confidence grew some of them also shared their stories in the large group setting. The connection of storytelling to every aspect of the student's life was a strong pedagogical thread that ran through this course.

Bruner (1996) emphasizes the paradox of academic study when we view narrative as a “decorative” or add-on to the more serious studies of scientific significance. The irony, of course, is that the very fabric of our being as humans is formed by narrative and by disowning narrative in the classroom we make the classroom less a reflection of reality. This is a paradox that continues to exist within the Academy.

The instructors noted that the students arrived in the FAL classroom with a very strong ingrained notion that the teacher was the audience for all writing. The instructors, focused on developing student voice, wanted students to write down their own thoughts and interpretations of subjects but students were not easily convinced that instructors truly wanted what they thought. Students believed that not all instructors will sincerely want to hear what a student thinks and some students expressed a concern that their critical thinking skills were not at the level that would be appreciated at the university. Students were not optimistic that
outside of the FAL classroom they would encounter instructors who would help them develop critical thinking skills. There was a strong belief that instructors expected students to already have this ability and those that had the ability to think deeply and articulate it clearly in a paper or in speech would be rewarded.

Student choice was also very important to the instructors, more so because they had been mandated into the course. The instructors, given autonomy in their teaching methods, were very open and encouraging to student input on the assignments. They felt that the best way for the students to care about their assignments was to give them choice in the assignments.

The students responded positively to this experience saying that the quality of their work and the enjoyment they took in completing those assignments were greatly influenced by their interest and prior knowledge about the subjects. The students saw FAL as one course where they were permitted to share the knowledge they already had acquired. However, the students also noted that not all instructors would value the kind of writing they were creating in FAL, indicating their belief that often when instructors say they want students to write from their own opinion, there was an underlying assumption that the student will conform to the opinions of the instructor or the expectations of the Academy.

The instructors also acknowledged that good writing was not necessarily found in a grammatically correct paper. Although all agreed that grammar is important, there was a general consensus that it is not the essence of good writing. A piece of writing can have perfect grammar and not be a strong sample. Conversely
a piece of writing can be full of grammatical errors and be a brilliant piece of writing. The instructors did not see how focusing on grammar, which was admittedly weak for these students, could be a useful strategy. In fact, there was the belief that most of these students would have had lots of grammar instruction in the past but for them to improve as writers they needed to focus on reading and writing rather than grammatical exercises. The process of writing was emphasized over the final end product.

The constant writing and revising in the course was also something that was new to both instructors and students. While this did make for a heavier load for instructors, none of them complained about it. They also used peer-reviewing strategies to lighten the load.

However, within FAL the emergent pedagogy was not a comfortable fit for all of the instructors. A few instructors felt uncomfortable without rubrics for grading the assignments in the course and by the fact that feedback was largely based on commentary rather than graded assignments. Some instructors exhibited an inability to see both expository skills and narrative processes as complimentary and had a hard time reconciling to the fact that the course could teach students to write while introducing them successfully to the university.

Students were initially surprised by the curricular approach of the course. Many of them expected the class to be a structural, basic writing course. Instead they found themselves in a course that asked them to write their own stories and make their own meanings out of the world around them and then use those stories
to learn the structural components of writing. This was a way of learning to write that was new to the students.

**Implications for Practice**

This study was not conceived as an evaluative overview of the FAL program nor was it created as a commentary on the state of composition studies in post-secondary education. I wanted to discover the ways instructors in the FAL program at Simon Fraser University encouraged the development of writer’s voice in their students.

There were a number of factors that contributed to development of voice, which I believe can be transferred to not only composition classrooms but to any course that emphasizes student writing within the Academy.

The use of the students’ own writing rather than external textbook examples was one of the greatest strengths of the course. By using the students’ own writing as curriculum, the classes were naturally saturated with student voice. This also had the effect of showing students how the writing process evolves from idea to narrative to draft to final copy. The writing process became much more transparent as students saw their own writing and that of their peers evolve through many, many drafts. Although reading examples of good writing from published authors is always of value and was also encouraged in FAL, the use of student writing to show great strengths and also errors in writing was one of the most valuable pedagogical tools identified in the course.
In addition to using their work to learn the process of writing, students were not taught as though they were writers separate from human beings. In other words, each student’s individuality, authentic voice, and complexity was honoured and celebrated through storytelling and narrative. Rather than focussing solely on expository writing, FAL included narrative writing and encouraged students to tell their own stories in oral and written form. The acknowledgement that students were multi-dimensional beings with a myriad of experiences that could be written about and learned from ensured that their individual voices would not be abandoned as they moved into the more expository academic realm.

The building of strong self-efficacy towards academic writing was stressed in FAL and was done largely because remediation was not part of the course. Even though the students who enrolled in FAL were required to do so due to lower marks in English 12, they were never treated by the instructors or fellow students as anything less than first year university students. By encouraging these students to share their expertise and knowledge in the FAL classroom the development of a sense of belonging and confidence was nurtured.

This study of FAL illustrates how use of personal narrative as a pedagogical strategy for students in remedial writing classes can provide a sense of empowerment. When students are allowed to become the experts in the classroom, through developing their personal writing, their concept of themselves as writers is altered. Writer’s identity is central to success in writing and success in writing is essential to student success in the Academy.
It is very rare for personal narrative to be used in a foundational writing classroom. I hope that this study will encourage other composition instructors to further experiment with the use of narrative writing as a tool for developing writer’s voice in their students.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Whether the effect of being in a student-centred course, like FAL, during the first year of university study did have a positive affect on the students’ continuing studies cannot be determined by this study. It would be interesting to follow students in a longitudinal study through their undergraduate education and into the workforce, to see if the developmental issues identified in FAL, carried through to further studies.

The data from this study has triggered many questions as to how students overcome obstacles that are placed in their paths. The mandating of a course such as FAL can have impacts not only on student self-efficacy but also on students’ relationships with one another. Students who already had a strong academic voice, found themselves in a course that did not challenge them and which they judged to be an ESL course.

This study was limited to the first offering of the FAL course and did not follow up with any of the students who had completed FAL. This fall marks the fourth year since FAL was implemented and the first large cohort of FAL students will be approaching graduation in 2010 (although some transfer students have already graduated). A follow-up study with the very first students to take the FAL
program to see how they now view those experiences in FAL, what they took away from the course and how the skill set they learned in FAL contributed to their performance in W-courses as they continued on the journey toward graduation would be very interesting further study.

It would also be interesting to explore ways the FAL curricular model could be beneficial at the graduate-level as students are making the transition between academic writing within the university to academic-writing for publication purposes.

**Marginalization and Language**

The lenses with which one views writing programs can have an impact on how students perceive themselves as writers. A conscious effort was made by the instructors of the FAL program to avoid the remedial lens and instead to view the program through the lens of empowerment.

The FAL course was created in response to the development of the Writing Intensive graduation requirements at Simon Fraser University and had to address the needs of a large and extremely diverse segment of the student population. Although many of the students enrolled in the course were not L1 Learners, the variation in skill set and disciplinary interest was immense and no one category could be used to identify the FAL students.

When students come to a course that addresses a lack of capacity, such as Academic Literacies, one is faced with a tendency to marginalize student issues. However, the needs addressed in the FAL course were much more complex and
overarching than merely literacy issues. The students learned how to participate with authentic voice in an academic setting and feel that they not only had a right to be there but also belonged at the university. This was a great gift of the course and one that any first-year student, regardless of writing skills, could benefit from.

**Final Comments**

At the time of this writing, it is three years since the original offering of the course. FAL has continued to grow and flourish at Simon Fraser. To date 1,908 students have enrolled in the FAL class. The course has evolved from the original framework outlined in this dissertation, as new instructors and faculty members have taken over the administration of the course. Despite the changes the core concept of the curriculum: the power of narrative in developing student voice has remained a strong feature of the course.

Now I stand at the end of this journey, looking back at all the twists and turns and wondering what I can take away from this experience. I have learned so much from this delving into the FAL program: the history of my area of education and practice, the philosophical underpinnings that define myself as teacher and writer, the ways in which I come to know the world around me.

But the most important lessons I have learned are the ones I will carry with me into the classroom. When I am reading a student’s first attempt at academic writing, when I am choosing a reading for my first-year class, when I am standing in front of the classroom and sharing what it means to be a writer – in each of these instances, the voices and stories of the FAL participants will play a role in my
ongoing pedagogy. They have become irrevocably a part of who I am as a teacher/writer and that alone assures me of the value of this study.
EPILOGUE

Figure 9: Looking Ahead

An oracle and a bringer of joy, the storyteller is the living memory of her time, her people. She-composes on life but does not lie, for composing is not imagining, fancying or inventing.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, (1989, p. 125)

I now stand at the end of my journal as a formal student in the post-secondary setting. At this point in time the road ahead is cast in shadows. I have left Simon Fraser University and am embarking on new adventures in other institutions in the role of instructor. While the setting and stories are different they will be informed by the many lessons I have learned from my experiences with FAL.
As I step into new classrooms with new students who are struggling to find their place in this world I hope I can share the gifts of community building and story to empower new students to find their voices and be heard in the Academy.
APPENDICES
Appendix A: Interview Questions

2008/9 Interview Questions for Instructors

1. How is FAL different from other writing courses you’ve taught (at SFU or elsewhere)? What do you feel are the unique qualities of the FAL course?
2. Describe what you believe to be the most important aspect(s) of the course for the students?
3. Describe any/all kinds of personal narrative that you use when you teach FAL. Why do you use these techniques? How do you feel they are beneficial to student learning?
4. Describe any personal narrative techniques that you believe are not beneficial to student learning? Why?
5. Are there any aspects of this course that you believe affect student self-efficacy?
6. If you were to give a new instructor of FAL one piece of advice about using personal narrative with the students, what would that be?
7. What evidence did you see that the narrative increased self-efficacy?
8. How did the student’s sense of self increase during the course?
## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

### Videotape Data

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<td>Storyteller Session</td>
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<td>October 2006</td>
<td>Instructor Meeting</td>
<td>90 minutes</td>
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<td>Student Story Sessions</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
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<td>Focus Group 1</td>
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