A Local Listening Tour: One Freshman Class's First-Day Writing Samples

Kelly Blewett

> "Intensive listening opens a space or path for our own speaking and invention to emerge. Listening to the ecology means intuitively linking ourselves to the lines of flight that are emerging."
>
> – Byron Hawk

It's the first day of a new semester at the University of Cincinnati, and in 114 McMicken Hall twenty-three students are hard at work answering a prompt on a sheet of paper whose heading reads "First Day Writing Sample." The students are asked: "Of all the kinds of writing that you have done, either in a classroom setting or outside of class, what kind have you enjoyed the most? Why? What has this kind of writing taught you about writing in general?" Across the University of Cincinnati, *fifteen hundred* students will pen responses to this question.

Collecting a writing sample is a typical first-day activity. I've worked at three institutions, ranging from small liberal arts colleges to state universities, and all participated in the tradition. A perusal of the scholarship about the first-day sample, though, comes up surprisingly short. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* offers half a dozen articles about how to implement successful first-day activities, usually collected under the section "What Works for Me" (e.g., Levy, Minor, Pearce). As the name indicates, this section features highly individual, almost informal, teacher self-reports about pedagogical successes, rather than scholarly investigations into any of the aspects of the first-day sample that may warrant further thought, such as how first-day samples could be used

beyond the first-day, and the role that this first writing exchange plays in setting up a working relationship between the students and their teacher.

The students continue at their desks, scratching their pens to the paper. I keep my head down, trying not to be distracting. I've only briefly skimmed the prompt before issuing it to them. For me, it's just one more piece of bureaucratic business to hustle through on the first day of class. A first-year Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Composition, I'm just trying to do what I'm told to do, much like my first-years. Of course they don't know that I was issued this prompt by the Director of the Writing Program. They only know what the prompt tells them: that they are writing to me, and the stakes are high: if they respond poorly, they may be removed from the class. The prompt reads: "The purpose of this writing assignment is to confirm your placement in this class."

Although students are, in fact, rarely pulled from the course based on their writing sample, the explanation above the prompt makes such a possibility patently clear. While this writing situation is not a placement exam, the implicit threat of removal from the course is an important condition of the writing situation. Other conditions are also significant. For this particular class, the prompt was issued on a Tuesday of the students' first fall term of their first year, their second day enrolled in college. I handed out this prompt to my students for the last thirty minutes of the class with little fanfare or introduction. Aside from an introductory game intended to help everyone learn each other's names, this prompt was the students' first chance to participate all day. It was certainly their first chance to talk about their writing and to introduce themselves to me, their instructor, in any depth. In an important sense, this writing sample *is* the introduction of the student to the teacher.

As a combination of both presentation-of-self and reflection-on-writing, Kathleen Blake Yancey would call this type of sample a "reflection-in-presentation." The thing to remember about such reflections, she writes, is that they are "*prepared for an audience*" (71, emphasis hers). Thus the "self" that emerges in the text is "multiple, is *shaped*, is constructed; is necessarily contingent, transitory, filled

with tension" (73). Her words speak well to the sample of student work I will shortly analyze. Because students are performing their identity-as-writers for their future writing instructors, they are shaping their words and selves into positions in relation to their audience. To do that, students are likely trying, as best they are able, to imagine what their instructors want to hear. These samples are "necessarily social: audience-oriented in very specific ways" (93). Students work with—or against—perceived audience expectations.

I was also operating under the press of institutional expectation. I was expected not to worry over the content of the responses too closely, but rather to read them diagnostically in order to determine whether the student writer was capable of producing a comprehensible flow of language. I was told to read for outliers, for students who could not conceive of or execute an appropriate response to the prompt. "You'll know a problem essay when you see it," the Writing Program Director told my class of incoming graduate students in practicum. "It will be *far* too short or just make zero sense." Accordingly, that night, I read through the samples, spreading them across my dining room table and marking on them in blue pen. "Ok" I wrote next to Adam's first paragraph about not liking research papers; "True!" I wrote next to Jamal's comment about the complexity of composing. Similar short phatic comments line the margins of all twenty-three samples ("Interesting;" "Wow!"; "Thanks for sharing"). I intended my comments to indicate my reception of the students' words, to show students that I "heard" what they were saying about writing. I wanted to start the semester on a positive note, instructor-as-reader rather than instructor-as-grader. Even the color of my pen (purple) was chosen to convey non-evaluative ethos. I read quickly, and I read for competence. I did not report back to my Writing Program Director about anomalies. I did not find any outliers. But, as I look back on it now, I also did not really hear my students. This study is, in part, an effort to remedy that "not hearing" and to suggest that there was, after all, something valuable to be found in the content of the student samples. I suspect many other instructors may be as I was at the beginning of the term, skimming through a stack of rapidly

composed student writing and feeling as though they have done their due diligence. By showing what I missed in my initial reading, I aim to provide a rationale for instructors to use different reading practices when they approach these first-day samples—and a variety of potential uses for the samples following the first day.

I no longer see the issuance of the prompt as an irritating administrative task, but rather as a strategic first move that will introduce me to my students and assist me throughout the term. In the last section of this article, I'll offer five strategies for using the first-day samples throughout the term, all of which I have used in the intervening years between the present and the fall of 2014 when the initial content analysis was conducted. I perceive all five strategies as ways to listen to student voices. Listening has always been a paradox in composition studies, at once valued and marginalized as Krista Ratcliffe has described in *Rhetorical Listening*. Central to Ratcliffe's conception of listening, and as Byron Hawk describes in the epigraph to this essay, is what happens afterwards: invention. These pedagogical inventions are ways that I've found myself responding to the lines of flight that have emerged in my classroom in recent years. And content analysis provides a tangible and not terribly complex methodology for putting listening into action.

Methodology

> "And once we have a vocabulary for explaining what we do when we listen, it is easier to convince others to listen the way we do—and to change the way we listen ourselves."
> – Peter Rabinowitz (qtd. in Ratcliffe)

In order to understand what students were saying and how patterns emerged across the samples, I conducted an informal content analysis of the samples. Thomas Huckin describes the method: "Content analysis is the identifying, quantifying, and analyzing of specific words, phrases, concepts, or other observable semantic data in a text or body of texts with the aim of uncovering some underlying thematic or rhetorical pattern running through these texts" (14). He notes that such an approach is necessarily limited in

scope. Still, the method can "serve to provide empirical grounding" (14) that may lay the foundation for future study. So as I sought to trace certain patterns in the student responses—patterns of pleasure and displeasure, favorite genres and anxiety-producing ones, and what kinds of lessons about writing the students learned, I began by reading the samples several times and copying out certain kinds of information. Eventually, this information made its way onto an Excel grid. I listed the genres the students wrote about in response to the prompt, and indicated whether or not the student embraced a role of expert-writer. I put in biographical data, such as the sex of the writer and their proposed major. I copied in quotes that stood out to me, and made a note of the type of "lesson" the student claimed to have learned through their writing experience. After sifting through the data and transplanting the most interesting segments into the grid, I experimented with pulling out passages into Word documents and putting them next to each other in order to see how certain trends were repeated across several student samples. It was through this work that I realized the most interesting aspect about the data: the students frequently situated their response in relation to the research paper. In other words, the research paper played a role across several of the samples, even when other kinds of writing were the focus of the essay. I hadn't realized this pattern when I first read through the material in my home, or after the first close read a few weeks later. So, for this study, the method seemed to yield interesting and discussion-worthy results.

Still, the approach is certainly open to critique, beginning with the decision to explore the samples at all. Textual analysis of these kinds of rapidly composed student writing samples is rarely done anymore, although it was once taken up by leaders of the field like Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae. Shaughnessy and Bartholomae each studied thousands of student placement essays for various purposes, treating the student text as an artifact to be analyzed and evaluated. Their attraction to student samples may have been more for convenience than genuine usefulness. Both were criticized for the approach. The samples, critics claim, are not

appropriate for analysis because students produced them under significant time constraints and did not have the opportunity to revise. Shaughnessy responded by arguing that for a population of basic writers, there wasn't much difference between an essay produced in forced conditions and an essay where the writer had time to revise. Similar critiques could be made about the samples I reviewed.

But perhaps the quick turnaround and general messiness actually work in favor of finding out a certain kind of student perception. Rather than looking at these samples as formal, polished prose, I am looking at them for evidence of something more like an improvisational performance. How do my students position themselves as writers? What do they seem to expect from the class? What knowledge do they think is really important to show me they know? By looking at these samples impressionistically for content rather examining them for surface-level characteristics, my study may actually be assisted by the quick turnaround of the sample. Further, because my sample size is so small—only twenty-three to Shaughnessy's 4,000 (Shaughnessy 4)—I am able to explain the context of some of the more contentious passages. Huckin explains that the ability of the researcher to put textual information into its original context is a strength of the methodology.

A second critique would certainly be that I did not have a clear "guiding question" when I began my content analysis. Without a guiding question, some of the quotes that attracted my attention because they were "interesting" seem arbitrary and biased—not an example of content analysis as it is intended to be employed. I acknowledge this weakness to my study, and the study is to be at best an initial exploration of the kinds of information available in these student samples. It gestures toward some areas that could be picked up and explored further, much like the NCTE sponsored national "Listening Tour" to which my title alludes. This survey, administered to 2,200 incoming students in the fall of 2013 (coincidentally the same fall that my student samples were collected) provided, as Lorna Collier puts it, "a window into young people's attitudes and beliefs about writing" (10). One insight from the NCTE national survey was that "students believed college

writing would be … 10-page research papers, correctly MLA-formatted" (13). As will become evident in the next section, my class's responses were also fixated on the research paper assignment—some with confidence that they could tackle the paper successfully, others resenting the paper before the class even began. An underlying assumption of both listening tours is that paying attention to student voices is important. Student voices are saying things that we need to hear, and by paying attention to our students, by taking them seriously, we will improve ourselves as teachers.

What Are Students Saying?

Responses to timed writing situations are fairly predictable in the sense that they follow the prompt closely. The prompt is the choreography for the dance writers are trying to perform, and they move in relation to the instructions. Therefore, when the prompt asks students "Of all the kinds of writing that you have done, either in a classroom setting or outside of class, what kind have you enjoyed the most? Why? What has this kind of writing taught you about writing in general?", we can expect four moves: a list of the "kinds" of writing students have done, a discussion about what kind they prefer, an explanation as to why they prefer it, and a generalized lesson about the nature of writing. My analysis of the student samples demonstrates that these moves were closely followed (22/23 students, for instance, had a quotable "lesson"). More surprising are the patterns that emerged, particularly with regard to the research paper.

Notice that nowhere in the prompt does the phrase "research paper" appear. This is not, in fact, a prompt about research writing at all. Yet the prevalence of the research paper in the student responses is illustrated in Figure 1, which tracks the "kind" of writing that the students wrote that they "preferred."

Preferred Kind	Student Respondents (n 23)
Research	6

Opinion	3
Creative Writing	3
Poetry	3
Speech	2
Journalism	1
Informal Writing	1
None listed	3

Figure 1: Preferred Types of Student Writing

The research paper genre garnered twice the number of votes to any other "kind" of writing (unless one conflated poetry and creative writing, in which case it received an equal preference). Even the students who didn't write about the research paper explicitly still often situated their preference in relation to research writing. In other words, students responded to the prompt by either embracing or rejecting the "research paper" genre. For instance, Morgan created a binary between two types of writing, expository (which included research) and journalism (which was personal and conveyed the opinion of the writer). Her favorite was journalism. Zane contrasted research writing with creative writing, and said "everything doesn't have to be a boring research paper." Why is this significant? Simply put, as students situate themselves as either "for" or "against" the research paper, the tension between their desires for their writing and their perception of what the class will be comes into sharp relief. In the introduction to *Collision Course* Russel Durst writes, "students and teacher often have very different—and in many ways opposing—agendas in the composition class, that these differing agendas lead to significant conflict and negotiation throughout the course" (2). I want to suggest these writing samples are the beginning of that negotiation, on the first day of class, before students can remember each other's names.

Students are writing with a very specific audience (their instructor) and with a very specific exigency (they know they will be writing a researched argument for the class). And they *should* think this—the description of the course on the University of

Cincinnati course guide makes the research focus very clear. The course guide reads: "This course emphasizes critical reading, writing, and textual analysis with particular focus on argument and research-based writing." Even if they haven't read the description, students are likely prepared for the research component of English 1001 by high school teachers who emphasize that college writers do "research," or perhaps from their friends, campus tours, university literature, websites, or a host of other possible sources, including the course syllabus, which was distributed and reviewed in my class shortly before the prompt was issued.

After looking at the course description, though, certain lines of the student samples start to look awfully interesting. It is evident, I argue, that students are engaging with their perception of what the class *will be* and situating themselves as writers in relation to it. Consider these words:

- "*This is my favorite aspect of writing—the ability to express myself freely,* unhindered by the parameters of a project or assignment. *I have fun writing outside the classroom."* (Ned, emphasis in plain type mine)
- "*I loved that in journalism you can feel the passion and personality of the author* as opposed to the straight facts that come out more in research writing." (Morgan, emphasis mine)
- "*I like writing when* everything doesn't have to prove a point." (Natalie, emphasis mine)

While these students attempted to distance themselves from the conventions of research writing, a closer look at their samples suggests a deep ambivalence to what college writing requires. As a teacher reading these samples, I initially didn't see the way the students drew lines between "kinds" of writing that enabled them to distance themselves from the central assignment in the course. In this snippet that follows, Reggie differentiates between what he calls "opinion writing" and "research writing." He explains:

An opinion piece differs [from research writing] in letting your voice not just shape the words shown, it also allows you to mix in your thoughts more directly … Instead of only using the voices of established persons in literary fields, others can be vaunted in[to] the subject. This adds new depth contributing to the ability of the writer while, personally, making it much easier to write about. The new figures, that are otherwise unapproachable, become important.

For Reggie, "new figures, otherwise unapproachable, become important" when he is able to approach them by "vaunt[ing]" his own voice into conversation with theirs. He says that such writing is actually "easier" than research writing because it is "personal" and that by going through the process he can add "depth" to his writing. What I think Reggie ought to realize is that he is describing the ideal research experience. Keith Hjortshoj in *Transition to College Writing* says a student writer *must* personally engage with his research topic in order to take a position on it (189). Joseph Harris argues the student writer must "come to terms" with other writers, which for Ryan would mean "approaching them," and then differentiate himself from them. Even the University of Cincinnati's own *Student Guide* describes writing the research paper as "Entering the Conversation." Essentially Reggie is articulating what I, his instructor, perceive to be valuable about the research essay, but he doesn't see it that way. Reggie comes in with preconceptions that research writing does not allow the writer to "mix your thoughts" in directly with others and that research sources are likely to feel "unapproachable."

He wasn't the only skeptic. Slightly more than a quarter of the class (6) identified a form of creative writing as their favorite genre and did so by explaining that it taught them something about writing that wasn't accessible in critical writing, including that writing was enjoyable, that writing enabled them to explore their own emotions, that writing evoked a real response from the reader:

- *"Creative writing is a way to put my emotions behind the words."* (Natalie)

- *"[poetry] allows me to express myself by putting my deep thoughts and emotions onto a blank sheet of paper."* (Jamal)
- *"[poetry] has taught me that writing in general can be exciting and fun."* (Carrie)

An especially well-articulated response of this kind of comment came from Nathan, who said:

> *I saw that writing was a chance to express one's opinions, one's imagination, and, most importantly, oneself. From then on, writing went from being a hassle, to being my idea's way to freedom.*

For Nathan, creative writing was personal, and thus writing went from "being a hassle" to being imperative to "freeing" his ideas. The "lessons" emphasized that trend repeatedly. Further, students who described themselves as preferring creative writing tended to have more creative responses to the prompt; many told engaging stories about assignments they loved and what they learned. I suggest that students who chose to write about creative writing did so experiencing a certain degree of tension knowing that this course is not likely to cover similar material. Their words often indicated that critical writing (research-based argument writing) doesn't allow the self-expression of creative work. They do not see intersections between creative writing and composition, though Doug Hesse argues that overlap does exist: "To share, to learn, to feel valued. Here is where creative writing now intersects composition. For most writers, writing fulfills personal and social interests … many aspire simply for readers, however few" (42).

In contrast, other students (6) embraced the research paper as their favorite kind of writing. But the lessons they drew from it differed from those described above. Rather than being about personal revelation or pleasure, these lessons tended toward organization and focus, argument and logic:

- "Research papers have taught me that whenever I write *I need to have a plan*, and not just write whatever is on my mind in

unorganized fashion … I've also learned that it is *very important to write in chronological order and not jump around throughout the entire thing*." (Karen, emphasis in plain type mine)

• "The research part of the paper, arguably the most important in my opinion, has taught me the *value of organization* … Simply put, the information would be lost if one doesn't keep good track of it, so all the time spent on research would be wasted. *I noticed that as I learned to better organize my notes, the quality of my writing increased*." (Mark, emphasis mine)

• "One of the most important things I have learned about writing papers is *the thesis and how your paper revolves around it*. The next would be making sure to back up your thesis, the point you are trying to get across to the reader, with *well-cited* facts to develop the argument. Lastly, to *make sure your paper flows* smoothly from beginning to end." (Thad, emphasis mine)

These students are imagining a research assignment and telling us how they would go about doing it: they would have a plan, take careful notes, use "well-cited facts" to develop their argument, and so forth. Rather than telling us what they know about writing, these lessons are telling us how they write a good research paper.

Looking at the samples overall, a few trends are worth noting. First, students tend to associate *pleasure* and *personal investment* with non-research writing and *organization and argument* with research writing. The "lessons" yielded from non-research writing are, on the whole, more personal, more vibrant, and more engaging than the lessons yielded from research writing. Further, students who are attempting to situate themselves as anti-researchers often do so with the understanding that their reader will be later teaching and evaluating writing styles they tend not to enjoy. To do this, they must take on a sort of "underdog" position and challenge the authority of their composition instructor.

For me, realizing that students were creating such complex written responses to a fairly generic first-day writing sample was something of a revelation. By not reading the samples closely, I would have missed an opportunity to hear some very interesting,

ambivalent information from my students about what kinds of writing experiences they value, their perceptions of themselves as writers, and their nascent perceptions of my class.

Discussion

> "How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response?"
> – Jacqueline Jones Royster

As a new doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition, my reaction to the experience of listening was to turn to the literature in the field to see what others have said about the research assignment. In 1982, Richard L. Larson wrote a critique of the research assignment in *College English*, asserting that the research paper was a "concept without an identity" (185). He explained:

> I would argue that the so-called "research paper," as ordinarily taught by the kinds of texts I have reviewed, implicitly equates "research" with looking up books in the library and taking down information from those books. Even if there is going on in some departments of English instruction that gets beyond those narrow boundaries, the customary practices I have observed for guiding the "research paper" assume a procedural identity for that paper that is, I think, nonexistent. (182)

Actual research, Larson contended, uses far vaster methodology to arrive at argumentation, and English teachers who pretend otherwise "show our provincialism and degrade the research of many disciplines" (184). Further, the research paper makes a false binary between writing that requires research and writing that doesn't require research. *All* writing, Larson says, actually requires some kind of research.

Thirty years later, Geoffrey Sirc voiced his dissatisfaction with research writing: "Official composition has persisted as a bland, sanitized pedagogy, teaching clear, correct, citation-based essay

form to students, using a literarily thin corpus of nonfiction reading as prompts. This is so limited, it's unbearable" (514). For Sirc, there is no benefit to teaching research writing that outweighs the costs. Other genres could (and do) take their places in his classroom. He writes of their viability by connecting them to student pleasure:

> I see the gleam in students' eyes when they hear I want them to write an annotated mixtape setlist or a hip-hop top ten list or a manifesto. (All are easy, serial genres with rich possibilities; students love doing them, and why not? We've all got at least one manifesto in us, and music remains a passion.) These are genres that allow short, focused writing, but writing that lets us discuss rhetorical figures and how they lend sublimity and vibrancy to one's writing (so yes, of course, we read Longinus and Shklovsky). "I couldn't believe we got to do that kind of writing in class!" is a recurring comment I'm grateful to hear. (514)

I can imagine that my students, too, would love to leave the research paper behind, would welcome the chance to take up different genres that allow them to access subjects in an academic setting that they previously wouldn't have dreamed of. Jody Shipka's *Toward a Composition Made Whole* features half a dozen writing assignments, and none are the straightforward "research paper." For Sirc, Shipka's writing assignments are "dazzling occasions for writing," assignments that make him believe in the viability of teaching composition (514). Reading these samples seriously entails thinking through assignments that students are dreading and questioning, honestly, whether they should be retained in the curriculum.

What would happen if a primary goal of the composition classroom was that students continued writing after the course was over? To position writing as "a part of life"? I would suggest that we would see more assignments like the one described below:

> *In my sophomore year of high school, I took a class entitled "Effective Writing." My favorite assignment was one where we explored the*

school to find a place that we liked. We had to creatively describe that place to the class to see if they could guess where we'd gone. Although I only got a B- on my description of the school's art room, this project taught me so much more than what a B- is usually worth. Previous to this assignment, a great majority of my writing had only been timed, structured five-paragraph essays. Our small class project was the key that opened the door to the possibilities for writing I had never seen previously. (Nathan)

For Nathan it was in an assignment that required creative expression and audience participation that "opened the door to the possibilities for writing" as opposed to a "timed, structured five-paragraph essay." Notably, though, Nathan wrote about this experience in the context of a timed essay, ironically underscoring the difference between the "creative writing" he said he enjoyed and the work he was producing for the course. T.R. Johnson suggests that students don't expect to find pleasure in the composition classroom: "As far as authorial pleasure goes, many [students] likely assume, quite simply, that you can't-get-there-from-here and that writing in school essentially means chewing on a rock" (62).

At the same time, of course, resistance to writing assignments will always be part of the equation in a composition classroom—the very assignments that Sirc found "dazzling" in Shipka's book have prompted resistance from dozens of students. And there are many reasons that the research assignment has been a staple of composition—to do the paper well requires students to evaluate sources, arrange information, and balance their perspective with the perspectives of others. And, as the instructor, whatever my pedagogy, part of my job will be to see how the assignments connect to what the students want to get out of the class. The negotiation of curriculum will always be part of the process of teaching, especially for new graduate teaching assistants who are not necessarily in a position to design their own curriculum.

My job, with this class, was to persuade my students that when writing in this form, their readers could feel the *"passion and personality"* of the author (as Morgan wants), that they could be able

to *"relate everything back to me"* (as Gayle wants) and *"write about topics I am fond of or that I feel strongly about"* (as Craig wants). What I felt reading these samples, then, was a call to persuade. Such persuasion calls for building relationships with individual students, a topic Lad Tobin addresses in his book *Writing Relationships*. He argues, "writing students succeed when teachers establish productive relationships with—and between—their students" (6). A productive relationship is not conflict-free; on the contrary, Tobin suggests "a student and teacher can relate productively only if a certain amount of tension exists between them" (16). This tension existed in my classroom, as these samples make clear. My job was to turn these reflections-as-presentations into opportunities to deepen my professional relationships with my students and my reflexivity about the curriculum I was teaching. Reflexivity and listening lead, as Ratcliffe and Hawk remind us, to invention and intervention. Three years after this initial exercise in listening through content analysis, here are five ways I use the first-day samples when I teach today.

Using the Samples beyond the First Day

I've come to five ways that first-day samples can be used throughout the term: revision, reflection, reframing, right turns, and reaching out. These uses for the first-day samples are now so embedded in my practice that I cannot imagine teaching a class without them. I no longer read the samples to confirm students' placement in the class—and, in fact, in years of teaching I have never had a first-day sample that indicated a poor class placement—but to unlock information with rich pedagogical potential. I did not develop all five of these uses on my own. In fact, the first use for the samples emerged during the question-and-answer session following a conference presentation. A graduate student specializing in linguistics uses the samples from the first day to inspire a discussion of revision during the following class.

Revision

Rather than having the students turn in the first-day samples after they are completed, send them home. For homework, students must mark-up their first-day samples, noting what they would change about them if they were to write it again. A prompt for this exercise may read, "Now that you've had some time to consider your first-day writing sample, what do you think of it? How would you revise it?" Use this writing during the following class to discuss the role of time and revision in the writing process. Such a move usefully foregrounds the process model of composing that forms the backbone of many writing classes—and it uses student writing and impressions of revision rather than lectures or research to get the conversation going.

Reflection

While using the first-day samples to emphasize revision early in the term, using them to prompt reflection seems to happen best late in the term. I usually offer many ways to approach an end-of-term reflection, and one of them has always been to return to the first-day sample. I pose questions like, "Do you still stand by what you wrote on the first day now? How have your experiences in FYC confirmed, challenged, or expanded the notions of writing expressed in this piece?" I often have a few students that will return to the first-day sample as a point of departure for their last piece of writing in the course.

Reframing

My favorite way to use the samples is to reframe the curriculum in their words. One of my first impressions while doing the content analysis was, "Wow, these students already know so much about writing!" Several classes later, I continue to be impressed by the knowledge students bring to my class. I like to use their words throughout the course. For instance, when introducing a lesson about choosing a research topic, I might put a quote like this up on the screen to emphasize the relationship between motivation and investment in one's topic: *"English may not be my best subject, and I*

may not really want to come to class, but I know that I still get enjoyment from writing about my passions." Similarly, when teaching research writing, the following quotations might helpfully frame various lessons:

- *"There isn't just one way to write a paper, but so many. Having different writing styles is actually an advantage. Not only did it teach me of writing styles, but more so that you can make a paper more interesting by taking the same information and just putting your own spin on it."* (Becky)
- *"Persuasive writing has taught me a lot about writing in general. Along with strong words that keep a reader interested, a writer must use good evidence to persuade someone reading the essay."* (James)
- *"Research-styled writing teaches writers like me a lot about writing in general. The words on the paper must be as well written as possible, yet engaging. The audience must stay involved with the paper, from the introduction to the conclusion. This idea has taught me to make a research paper full of rhetoric, in order to cause the reader to ask more questions which will cause the reader to continue reading the paper."* (Karen)

These twenty-three samples, like most sets of first-day samples I receive, present lessons that address a wide range of topics, including: motivation, syntax, reader expectations, risk taking, persuasion, perseverance, creativity, organization, and grammar. Using student lessons to frame curriculum is fun, perhaps most fun because of its affective results. Students like to see their own words on a PowerPoint slide. I sometimes will not put the writer's name, and they all look around the room, as if to say, "Who said that?" or "Did I say that?" This is, for me, translating listening into action.

Reaching Out

Usually in a batch of first-day samples, even ones that explicitly ask students to reflect on writing they've enjoyed, some students disclose past struggles with writing, such as these:

- *"English has been, for the most part, my worst subject."*
- *"Writing has always been a sore topic for me."*
- *"I do not consider myself good at writing."*

These disclosures are, of course, purposeful. I've found that these students are likely the ones who will slowly disengage with the class, to show up late, or to fail to complete homework. Understanding these students as individuals with a history of difficulty with writing has helped me respond sensitively and enabled me to build more informed and thoughtful relationships with these students. I've also brought up quotations from samples to attempt to motivate a student to persist in the course. This usually happens after the withdraw date has passed and a student has started to disengage—a sure sign that we are headed toward a very low or failing grade. I use voice memos to respond to research steps midterm, and for struggling students I've occasionally "read back" their first day sample, saying something like, "I know you have had trouble with writing, as you mentioned on the first day that English has been, and I quote, 'my worst subject.' I really want to encourage you to stick with this class." While these kinds of interventions have had mixed results, I do feel as an instructor that demonstrating that I see the struggle and acknowledge its history is meaningful.

Right Turns

Another use for the samples is to "right turn" from the intended curriculum into a variation that responds to student interest, or as Byron Hawk would put it, aligns with "lines of flight that are emerging" (233). Occasionally a content analysis of a set of first-day samples will reveal unexpected clusters of students—like the cluster in this class that favored poetry, for example. When possible, I will look for ways to include the kinds of texts students have most enjoyed in the curriculum. I've played around with an assignment that explicitly asks students to bring in texts they admire to figure out what makes them work as a variation on this theme (see Laura Micchche's "A Case for Rhetorical Grammar" where she offers class activities similar to the ones I have tried). I find that

responding to student interests in explicit and transparent ways seems to engage the class. This is not a surprising finding, but it is a rather good use for a first-day sample that eluded me for many semesters.

Conclusion

Finding uses for first-day samples beyond the beginning of the class is beneficial. When I now read my first-day samples, I do so with some eagerness, wondering what lessons about writing the students will have foregrounded, what unexpected genres they might enjoy, and who in the class might be at risk for not completing the term. Understanding what I'm looking for has led to a more purposeful and engaged posture for reading.

In reflecting on this research story, I also see a rationale for teachers, especially new graduate teaching assistants, to spend time researching their own teaching practices, even (or especially) ones they have inherited from their institutions. Investigating what happens in the classroom assists new teachers in better understanding both their own teaching and the larger context of composition studies. There are many research methods, like videotaping and content analysis, that assist in such informal research endeavors. This project taught me how to move from my own classroom to the larger discussions that have taken place in the field over curriculum (Larson, Sirc), which is a useful way to encounter research in the field and to situate myself as a teacher in the broad disciplinary landscape of composition—an important task for any new graduate student.

Finally, I see in this work that listening is part of what keeps teaching and learning fresh for both teachers and students. Excellent instruction calls for engagement with student words. Composition Studies is a field predicated on valuing student voices. When NCTE leaders launched their national "Listening Tour," they explained why:

> National and state policies are being implemented based on a particular vision of what it means to be college and career ready. It appears that these policies haven't been informed by

important statements from our professional community (see the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing") or by the actual experiences and expectations of college students themselves. We need to change that … ("Listening Tour")

The "actual experiences and expectations" of students matters to our field, and leaders in the Conference on College Composition and Communicaiton believe that their perspective should influence the "vision." These first-day writing samples, or presentations-as-reflections, offer instructors the opportunity to do a local listening tour rather than a national one. The first-day samples, produced in many classrooms at the start of every term, give instructors the chance to hear student voices, and to let them impact instruction. To be passionate about both our students and our content is, as Peter Elbow has said, what it means to be complete as teachers ("Embracing the Contraries" 65).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Laura Micciche and two reviewers for thoughtful feedback throughout the writing process.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write*, edited by Mike Rose. Guilford Press, 1985, pp.134-65.

Collier, Lorna. "Listening to Students: New Insights on Their College-Writing Expectations." *The Council Chronicle*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2014, pp. 10-12.

Durst, Russel. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation and Learning in College Composition*. NCTE, 1999.

Elbow, Peter. "Embracing the Contraries in the Teaching Process." *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook,* edited by Edward P. J. Corbett, Nancy Myers, and Gary Tate, 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 65-76.

Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting*. Utah State UP, 2006.

Hawk, Byron. *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2007.

Hesse, Doug. "The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2010, pp. 31-52.

Hjortshoj, Keith. *Transition to College Writing*. 2nd ed., Bedford, 2009.

Huckin, Thomas. "Content Analysis: What Texts Talk About." *What Writing Does and How It Does It*, edited by Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004, pp.13-33.

Johnson, T.R. *A Rhetoric of Pleasure*. Heinnemann, 2003.

Larson, Richard L. "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing." *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook,* edited by Edward P. J. Corbett, Nancy Myers, and Gary Tate, 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 180-185.

Levy, Aaron. "Teaching: First Impressions First, or Choosing Atmosphere Over Method and Management." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College,* vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 412-20.

"Listening Tour." *Conference of College Composition and Communication*. NCTE, 1 October 2013. Web. 10 December 2013.

Malek, Joyce, Cynthia Ris, Catherine O'Shea, and Christina LaVecchia, editors. *Student Guide to English Composition 1001*, 2012-2014. Hayden-McNeil, 2012.

Micciche, Laura R. "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 716-37.

Minor, Dorothy. "Involving Students on the First Day." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 31, no 1, 2003, p. 84.

Pearce, Judy A. "What Works for Me: First-Day Class Activities." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, pp. 160-62.

Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness.* Southern Illinois UP, 2006.

Royster, Jacqueline Jones. "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1996, pp. 29-40.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations*. Oxford UP, 1977.

Sirc, Geoffrey. "Review Essay: Resisting Entropy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2012, pp. 507-19.

Tobin, Lad. *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in Composition Classes.* Heinneman, 1993.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Utah UP, 1998.