Putting Pedagogical Compositional Theory in Action: A Case Study of Process Based Approaches to Exploring Unfamiliar Writing Tasks

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by

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how employing process theory can aid eleventh grade AP English Language and Composition students in adjusting their writing to an unfamiliar composing task: the AP exam’s argument essay. I also investigate how to assist developing writers in adapting their composing to the unknown through their use of prewriting, drafting, and revising, and in their use of these reflective writing strategies that Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2011) call “discursive resources”: accessing prior knowledge, possessing genre awareness, crossing boundaries, developing problem solving dispositions, and identifying as novice writers. Furthermore, I examine how to implement these practices into classroom instruction through Nancie Atwell’s writer’s workshop, where the teacher models how an expert composer converts her writing to an unfamiliar assignment, and confers individually with her learners and provides them feedback on their composing performances. In my attempt to evaluate the students’ employment of these writing practices, I gather data from surveying and interviewing the participants in the study, and by reading their reflective journal responses. I end this paper discussing the results of these data and share observations about how educators can teach writing and how students can perceive it.

Keywords: writing process theory, unfamiliar writing tasks, discursive resources
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Introduction

One of my most distinct memories of college is writing my first paper. Fresh out of my AP English Literature and Composition course, I felt that I could take on the world when I arrived on campus – yet there I was, sitting at my desk in my dorm room, struggling to devise a way to connect Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* for my freshman multicultural literature course. All my confidence, my self-assuredness drained away as I felt uncertain, trying to grope my way through the dark, asking myself: would my past methods work? Would my professor want a completely different style of writing? Eventually, I learned to overcome these anxieties and develop strategies that adapted my compositions to the demands of my multicultural literature class and those of my other courses. For the past six years, I have been teaching eleventh and twelfth grade English. As I look at my students, I think back to college and those early days of slaving over my laptop as I sought to perfect my writing. Now, my goal is to aid my teenagers in cultivating composing strategies of their own. I acknowledge that I cannot fully prepare my students for the exact assignments they will write following graduation, but I want to instill some confidence in their composing abilities when they have to write unknown and unfamiliar compositional tasks. In the past, I have endeavored to guide my developing composers by introducing them to process theory. I had believed that by familiarizing them with prewriting, drafting, and revising, then they would be able to construct texts with less difficulty. My assumption was that by conceptualizing the writing process, my students would automatically be able to perform its stages and apply them to any context. While process theory does aid individuals to evolve their
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composing to meet new demands, as the years have passed, I have come to recognize the limitations of solely applying process theory to students’ writing practices. In this study, I strove to specify my approach to writing instruction by including specific strategies that Mary Jo Reiff & Anis Bawarshi (2011) refer to as discursive resources. The methods that I endeavored to explore in my research were: accessing prior knowledge, possessing genre awareness, crossing boundaries, problem solving, and identifying as novices.

It is my aim in this study to explore how using both process theory and discursive resources can aid high school upperclassmen to adapt their writing to an unfamiliar writing task. I attempted to answer the questions below by observing an eleventh grade AP English Language and Composition class’ endeavor to compose, for the first time, the exam’s argument essay. It is important to note that this study occurred at a suburban, upper-middle class high school and that the class itself only consisted of eight female students. Their teacher’s name was Ms. Whalen and the girls’ pseudonyms were: Camilla, Dolores, Eva, Francine, Jacqueline, Lana, Lilly, and Sandra. I promised them and the institutional review board that I would keep their identities a secret since they were minors. These students responded to interviews and surveys, and reflected in journals about how they applied process theory and the discursive resources to composing an assignment that previously they had never performed. Through the data arising from these sources, I explored these three research questions: How can English teachers design lessons and curricula centered around process theory that enable students to develop a rhetorical awareness of their writing situations? How can students use discursive resources in connection
with process theory to cultivate self-reflective attitudes for composing unfamiliar writing tasks? How can students perceive writing as a form of problem solving, and employ process theory and discursive resources to more effectively generate solutions to complex and challenging tasks?

The primary purpose of my research was to explore how high school English teachers can help high school students to adjust their writing to unfamiliar composing situations. Through specific instructional strategies, I attempted to synthesize process theory with reflective compositional strategies that prompted students to think reflectively and contextually in order to adapt to unfamiliar writing tasks. I wanted to explore whether or not these motivated students to perceive composing as a form of problem solving. I encountered what Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2011) refer to as “discursive resources”: compositional strategies actively prompting individuals to reflect on the purpose and conventions of their writing task, while at the same time considering how to convey meaning to their text’s intended audience. The authors wrote: “there has been less attention to incomes, or the “discursive resources”...the often complex and sometimes conflicting templates of languages, Englishes, discourses, senses of self, visions of life, and notions of one’s relations with others and the world” (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p.313). Specific approaches Reiff and Bawarshi advocated for were: accessing prior knowledge, identifying genre, crossing boundaries, adopting problem-solving dispositions, and accepting statuses as novices. My research intended to determine how helpful adopting these dispositions was for students and how willing they were to enact these tactics while adhering to the writing process.
In this paper, I will share the scholarship that encouraged me to combine process theory with the discursive resources. Specifically in regards to process theory, I will make reference to Donald Murray, Janet Emig, and Anne E. Berthoff, while for the discursive resources, I will discuss the work of Angela Rounsaville, Elizabeth Wardle, and Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi. I will also provide research from Nancie Atwell, Mary Ehrenworth, and Vicki Vinton that shaped the instructional practices of modeling conferencing that I employed throughout the study. This document will continue by discussing how Ms. Whalen and I designed the unit’s lessons in order to incorporate these researchers’ pedagogical practices. Following this description, I will explain the results of the study and the themes I observed from data collected from the interviews, journals, and self-efficacy surveys. In my exploration, I found that: more emphasis needs to be placed upon the writing process’ recursive nature, more students need to perceive composing as a form of problem solving, and more use of modeling and conferencing needs to occur if we are to aid students in adapting their writing to unfamiliar composing tasks. This paper will conclude with suggestions for further research and my discussion of the importance of providing students reflective practices for when they write an assignment for the first time.

**Literature Review**

In this section of the paper, I will address the impact research on both the writing process and, more specifically, revision had upon my study. I will then continue on to discuss the scholarship on self-efficacy and the various instructional
strategies I employed throughout the argument essay unit. I will complete the literature review by introducing the theory behind the discursive resources.

Process theory originated in 1972 as Donald Murray, one of its most influential proponents, divided composition into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Murray identified writing as the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world. (p.4)

By shifting the focus from product to process, Murray set the groundwork for teachers to guide their novice writers by aiding them in exploring their thoughts and feelings through composing. In *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, Janet Emig further elaborated on Murray’s conceptions and how to connect the writing process to high school education. She emphasized the need for instructors to take into consideration the skills their learners bring to the classroom before implementing strategies to teach their students to follow the writing process. Emig motivated her readers to consider not only their perceptions of their students’ writing abilities, but how pupils view their own compositional knowledge. Emig asked, “What are the resources students bring to the act of writing?” and “What psychological factors affect or accompany portions of the writing process? What effects do they have?” (1971, p.229). Both questions were important as they prompted composition teachers to weigh and to value the experiences and judgments that developing writers brought to the classroom.
Following the widespread acceptance of teaching writing as a process during the 1970s and the 1980s, many researchers, like Emig, delved deeper into how the process was taught. Nancy Sommers contributed to these understandings, particularly in regards to revision. In “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers”, Sommers stressed the need for compositional instructors to increase the importance of revision during their students’ writing process. She defined revision as: “a sequence of changes in a composition - changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work” (1980, p.380). Her emphasis on viewing revision as a series of continuous alterations indicated that revision occurred throughout the entire composing of a text – not only at the end of the writing process. Too often students were perceiving revision as rewording, limiting their ability to fully improve their compositions. Their limited grasp of revision also lessened their motivation to revise: if revision was only changing some key words, then how important could it be?

Anne E. Berthoff shared Murray’s views on composition and Sommers’ concerns about how the writing process was taught to students. Berthoff stated that process theory can, “find out what can be done about teaching composition and to define what it is we think we are doing” (1980, p.647). Berthoff viewed process theory as a way for teachers to unite in how they pedagogically perceived composing and in how they delivered their classroom instruction. Despite her support for teaching writing as a process, Berthoff feared that process theory was becoming too doctrinaire as an instructional philosophy: “The idea that there is not just composition but composing is becoming dogma, an idea being handed on to teachers and students alike, before the
implications it might have for pedagogy and course design have been explored or understood" (p.647). She called for educators to recognize the recursive nature of composing and that writers when revising could return to any stage of writing again and again.

Mina Shaughnessy's scholarship indicated the importance in preparing students to revise through the writing process. She claimed, "academic writing is a trap...writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p.391). Shaughnessy's words expressed the anxiety students can experience after composing an unfamiliar writing assignment and then having an audience read their writing. The opportunity to revise can quell their unease and help developing writers to adapt their writing to the demands of their assignment and their reader. Considering students' perception of their writing can also increase their confidence when composing an assignment for the first time.

In order for teachers to aid their students to follow the writing process, they must take their learners' self-perceptions of their writing skills into account. In their article, "Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Motivation in Writing Development", Frank Pajares and Gio Valiante relate the importance of both educators and students recognizing how confidently the members of the composition classroom view their abilities to write. Pajares and Valiante argue: "students' beliefs about their own writing processes and competence are instrumental to their ultimate success as writers...[because] students'
confidence in their writing capabilities influences their writing motivation, as well as various writing outcomes in school" (2006, p.158-59).

Nancie Atwell’s 1980 text, *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*, addressed this challenge that all compositional instructors face. In cohesion with Murray and Berthoff’s ideas, Nancie Atwell developed her writer’s workshop theory by using instructional strategies, modeling and conferencing, for teaching writing as a process. Atwell identified her role in the classroom: “I could serve my students as a *mentor* of writing, a *mediator* of writing strategies, and a *model* of a writer at work” (20-21). Atwell, as Pajares and Valiante stressed, the difficulties her learners encountered when composing an assignment for the first time. Often, teachers neglect the students’ needs because instructors cannot conceive the difficulties that learners will encounter in composing an assignment for the first time. Through modeling, Atwell acted as a guide for her students when they initially faced a composing assignment with which they had no familiarity. In order to further aid students in composing and revising, Atwell employed conferences where she interacts with students on one-to-one level:

When student writers aren’t sure what to do next...or are just plain stuck, I draw on my knowledge of writing and help them. In addition to listening hard, asking open-ended questions, and reflecting back what I hear, I give advice, make suggestions, tell them what I think is working or needs more work, show them how something might work, and collaborate with them on pieces of their writing. (1980, p.25)
Conferencing works in cohesion with modeling because it allows an educator to provide feedback on an individual level. Through this instructional strategy, developing writers can converse with an expert writer about their attempts to follow his or her guidance. Students also can learn how reflect on their compositions and can become more motivated to revisit their writing on their own, particularly when they know that they will have the opportunity to discuss it one on one. These conversations allow students to engage more closely in the stages of the writing process as they verbalize how they try to follow its steps. Conferences serve as opportunities for developing writers to grow in their craft and can help ready them for acclimatizing their composing for new situations.

In 2005, Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton devised their own instructional activities in adherence with Atwell’s model of the writer’s workshop. In their text, *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language*, they emphasized the benefits of direct instruction and of apprenticeship when showing students how to compose an unfamiliar writing assignment. Ehrenworth and Vinton explained the positives of direct instruction when stating, “in direct instruction, students see us make choices about conventions in our own writing, and they learn that the ability to make these choices is linked to one’s power over language and fluency as a writer” (2005, p.37). Like modeling, direct instruction offers the educator the opportunity to share his or her thought process with their developing writers. Furthermore, it empowers the students by demonstrating to them that writing is making a series of decisions – choices over which they have control. Direct instruction then leads into apprenticeship where “students emulate the styles
forms of writers who manipulate language in powerful ways” (2005, p.37). After witnessing how their teachers approach an unknown composing task, the students can then imitate the strategies they learned through direct instruction and begin to develop methods of their own to effectively complete the composition.

Like Atwell and Ehrenworth & Vinton, Angela Rounsaville sought to determine specific strategies for students to adapt their writing to unfamiliar contexts. In “Selecting Genres for Transfer: The Role of Uptake in Students’ Antecedent Genre Knowledge,” Rounsaville writes, “as writers travel across literacy domains and encounter new rhetorical situations, they not only carry generic conventions but also the attendant field of practices, ideologies and activities that they have come to associate with that genre over time” (2012, p.4). When composing an assignment for the first time, novice writers look to apply the rules of previous genres that they have performed. They tend to attach themselves to strategies that previously worked. The problem with this practice is that previous assignments cannot exactly simulate new writing tasks individuals will face. Rounsaville warned, “as writers travel through school, work, and community life with their prior genre knowledge, the domains with which those genres are most closely associated for the writer travel with her and can inhibit that writer from seeing and acting on...genred exigencies” (p.6). Writing instructors need to demonstrate to students how to use genre as a starting point for composing an unknown task: the novice writers can find similarities between the new assignment’s requirements and those of past texts. This recognition provides the students a place to start writing rather than becoming overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of the task. The only danger with this approach is that developing
composers may cling too much to the genres of past writing and not successfully conceive the rules of their new writing assignment. Educators must share with students how once using genre awareness to abandon it when it inhibits them from adapting to the new writing task.

Elizabeth Wardle shared in Rounsaville’s concerns about developing strategies for students to adapt their writing to new composing assignments. In “Creative Repurposing for Expansive Learning: Considering ‘Problem-Exploring’ and ‘Answer-Getting’ Dispositions in Individuals and Fields”, Wardle advocated for educators to help young learners in cultivating problem-exploring dispositions that “incline a person toward curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error, and toward a recognition that more than one solution can ‘work’” (2012, p.4). Rather than adhere dogmatically to a singular technique to composition that standardized testing champions, students need to actively experiment when writing unfamiliar assignments. Wardle stressed how they needed to explore the recursivity of the writing process and use revision to evaluate their approaches to an unfamiliar composing assignment. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi also shared this recognition of the importance of reflective practices.

In their article, “Tracing Discursive Resources: How Students Use Prior Genre Knowledge to Negotiate New Writing Contexts in First-Year Composition,” Reiff and Bawarshi explained how compositional instructors can implement the reflection necessary for individuals’ professional writing success. They acknowledge that “each new writing task, each new rhetorical situation, is a problem that writers
face and that writers can only solve the problems that they define for themselves” (2011, Reiff & Bawarshi, p.3). When individuals take ownership of the challenges that are posed to them by unfamiliar writing tasks, they can begin to solve these problems. Students need to view difficulties offered by new compositional assignments as opportunities. These frustrations are occurrences for them to enact techniques that meet the demands of the writing task while liberating them to devise their own meanings. Like Rounsaville, Reiff and Bawarshi advocated helping students to face these dilemmas by urging them to consider the genre of their composition assignments. The researchers define genre as “a broad schema for academic discourse . . . that has itself been inferred in the course of [students’] previous performances, their previous creations of such discourse” (Freedman qtd. in p.322). Examining writing tasks by genre provides novice composers a framework by which to interpret the demands of the project. Individuals can recall their academic writing and the rules associated with performing this category of writing. These standards associated with the genre of the composition determine how the writer fulfills its purpose and engages with the audience. As a result, genre can help guide the composer to perform the unfamiliar assignment – he or she can select from previous writing experiences and apply formerly successful endeavors to the new text.

Another strategy that Reiff and Bawarshi advocated was convincing students of their beginner statuses when it came to writing. The researchers believed that students were better prepared for adapting to new compositional tasks if they viewed themselves as novice writers. This self-perception better enabled developing writers
those student writers who identify themselves as experts early on tend to develop less as writers in the long term than those who are willing to accept a temporary novice status. A strong sense of an expert status can leave students more strictly attached to prior habits and strategies and less willing to try new conventions. Those willing to accept a productive novice role, however, are more open to adapting prior habits and strategies which, in the long term, can allow them to develop more as expert writers in various disciplines. (2011, p.313-14)

Those composers who cling too tightly to their past writing experiences in high school lack the flexibility to adapt their writing to new contexts and purposes. A writer embarking on composing a new task must accept that he or she will initially have to experiment prior to gaining the experience necessary to complete the assignment effectively. In order to succeed, the individual must reflect on his or her past writing experiences objectively and refer to the previous assignments that can somewhat aid in the creation of the unfamiliar writing task. Reiff and Bawarshi labeled this ability – to recall formerly written texts and apply their purposes and conventions to a new compositional undertaking – as boundary crossing. Reiff & Bawarshi defined boundary crossers as “students who were more likely to question their genre knowledge and to break this knowledge down into useful strategies and repurpose it” (2011, p.314). Individuals encountering new writing tasks need to critically examine their preceding writing performances. They must evaluate the positive aspects of these former texts in relation to the new compositions that they
are asked to generate. By passing judgment, students identify what worked and can begin to reconfigure the formerly successful approaches to their new writing assignment. Through trial and error, individuals can determine which strategies are effective and ultimately design a text that adheres appropriately to the demands of the previously unfamiliar assignment.

Methods/Methodology

I sought to investigate how to aid students in adjusting their writing to unknown composing assignments by evaluating pedagogical practices and self-reflective strategies. I also attempted to examine how students perceived composing and whether or not they related their understanding to problem solving. The following are the questions that guided my methods and methodology:

1. How can English teachers design lessons and curricula centered around process theory that enable students to develop a rhetorical awareness of their writing situations?

2. How can students use discursive resources in connection with process theory to cultivate self-reflective attitudes for composing unfamiliar writing tasks?

3. How can students perceive writing as a form of problem solving, and employ process theory and discursive resources to more effectively generate solutions to complex and challenging tasks?

This study focused on how to help all eight female eleventh grade students in the AP English Language and Composition course to adapt their composing to unfamiliar writing tasks. I wanted to conduct the study with this population of students because they already possessed a basic knowledge of rhetoric due to the
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nature of the course and Ms. Whalen's classroom instruction. Working with Ms. Whalen, we designed the unit together. We chose to use the argument essay for the study because the participants had never encountered this assignment before and because we needed to help prepare them for the AP exam. In this study, we specifically explored how the students develop approaches to writing a new composing task through the writing process and the use of discursive resources such as: accessing prior knowledge, possessing genre awareness, crossing boundaries, adopting problem solving dispositions, and identifying as novice writers.

This summer I requested permission to perform my research at Westwood Regional Junior/Senior High School from the English Department Supervisor and the high school's principal. I also submitted a formal letter to the Board of Education for their approval as well. The Board of Education approved my study and I distributed a form requesting assent and consent from Ms. Whalen's AP English Language and Composition students and their guardians in order for the students to participate in my study. Once their consent and assent had been collected, I gave all eight of the female participants in the class pseudonyms: Camilla, Dolores, Eva, Francine, Jacqueline, Lana, Lilly, and Sandra. Their female teacher was also given a pseudonym: Ms. Whalen. The study occurred over the course of two weeks. I never directly observed the class, but I met with each of the participants after each lesson. In each class, the students completed self-efficacy surveys sharing their perceptions of their writing abilities and of the composing process. Outside of Ms. Whalen's class, the participants and I set up a schedule so that I could meet with each person privately in my classroom where I interviewed them five times.
The Assignment

The argument essay on the AP English Language & Composition exam asks that students take a stance on a position and then use appropriate evidence from their reading, experience, or observations to support their argument. The topic of the paper can be about almost anything and prior to the exam, students have no idea what the focus of their essay will be. According to The College Board, in order for students to be able to accomplish this writing task, they must “possess fundamental skills in inquiry (research), analysis, and informed argument” (2014, p.10). The execution of these abilities then allows students to become familiar with discourses on a variety of subjects. I chose to use this essay assignment in the study because The College Board attests that “familiarity with these conversations will help students become informed and rhetorically competent writers who not only consider the views of others but use writing as a way to formulate and convey their own responses” (2014, p.10). This writing assignment was useful for the study not only because of its unfamiliarity to the students, but because it asked them to create individualized interpretations about an issue that could be expressed in a variety of ways. The argument essay offered the students the opportunity to generate their own meanings while calling upon past writing experiences to help them do so.

The Plan of the Study

Ms. Whalen introduced the assignment by providing the participants a sample argument essay prompt for them to analyze and to respond its requirements. After the
students interpreted the prompt and generated some prewriting, then the class discussed how they brainstormed ideas for the prompt. The students shared what information and circumstances that they needed to consider before writing the essay. Their conversation specifically focused on the purpose of the argument paper and on who their audience was. Following this class discussion the students then formed individual plans for writing the paper and then worked in partners comparing their approaches. The lesson closed with the participants performing an “exit note” in their journals where they explained whether or not they actively reflected on the purpose of an assignment and the task’s intended audience. I employed “exit notes” throughout the study in order to motivate the participants to evaluate the strategies exhibited in class and to provide them the opportunity to reflect at the end of class.

In the next lesson, the students began class by performing a “do now” in their journals explaining how they defined the writing process. A “do now” is activity that occurs at the beginning five minutes of every class; its purpose to mentally prepare the students for the activities for the day’s lesson. Ms. Whalen and I decided to use this instructional practice because they helped us to gather students’ preconceptions of how to compose and of the phases of the writing process. Beginning our lessons with “do now’s” was a standard practice for us as high school English teachers. Prior to discussing the “do now’s” as a class, the students independently filled out their first self-efficacy survey. After the surveys were collected, the class shared their notions of the writing process and together they designed a visual representation of each stage. As they visualized the writing process, Ms. Whalen stressed its recursive nature and how it does not occur in a step-by-step order. After creating a graphic organizer, the
class discussed how to compose by engaging in prewriting, drafting, and revising simultaneously rather than performing them in a set order. Then, Ms. Whalen modeled how to perform the discursive resources by developing an argument and by clearly conveying it. She showed the participants how to refer back to their previous assignments and to identify the types of composing tasks they were asked to perform in the past. As she demonstrated these techniques, Ms. Whalen encouraged the students to feel free to take chances in their composing. The students needed to understand that they were novice writers and, as such, they should not get locked into one mindset in approaching this writing task. Rather, they should cross the boundaries of different assignments and use the demands of the project to guide, not dictate, how they composed. The lesson ended as the students reflected on these approaches in their “exit notes” and indicated if they felt comfortable employing these strategies or not.

During the following class, the participants began prewriting responses to the argument essay that Ms. Whalen assigned them. The prompt that Ms. Whalen selected for the unit asked the students to take a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. They were told to support their argument with appropriate evidence and examples. These AP Language and Composition argument essay topics were deliberately vague in order to free students to establish their unique positions without offering them much guidance. To prepare the participants for this assignment, Ms. Whalen had them generate prewriting strategies for argument essays in their journals as a “do now” activity. After they shared their methods as a class, Ms. Whalen demonstrated how to connect the dispositions modeled in the previous class
to prewriting activities. The students began prewriting for the argument essay in their journals as they considered Ms. Whalen’s presentation. While the students were composing, Ms. Whalen moved around the room and conferred with them about their plans to prewrite. At the end of class, the participants composed an “exit note” explaining how and why they did or did not incorporate the discursive resources Ms. Whalen had provided them.

Ms. Whalen waited a few days to continue the study. She wanted to give the students enough time to prewrite for the prompt outside of class. Once the participants had identified their stance in regards to the argument essay, they moved onto drafting. Similarly to the prewriting lesson, the students began the class by performing a “do now” that developed drafting strategies for the assignment in their journals. The participants shared their responses to the “do now” question and class evaluated the approaches as a whole. After the students had finished imparting their ideas, they began drafting in their journals. As in the prewriting lesson, Ms. Whalen met with the participants as they worked and offered suggestions for how they could enact their designs for the paper. The students closed the lesson by addressing an “exit note” where they detailed how they conveyed meaning in their texts through their use of argument and organization.

As before, Ms. Whalen provided her students a few days to draft at home before proceeding on to the next lesson. In their “do now’s”, the participants defined revision and differentiated between revising and editing. Ms. Whalen divided the board into revising and editing, and the students explained which activities belonged in each category. Students were able to ascertain that editing consisted of correcting
small errors, while revising coincided with weighing the effectiveness of composing decisions. The class followed this activity by concluding how to adopt the reflective and problem-exploring dispositions for each stage. Upon determining how to use the discursive resources for each stage, the participants then began revising their drafts in their journals. Ms. Whalen provided assistance as she conferred with them and provided guidance for performing revision and editing. To conclude the class, the students composed an “exit note” illustrating their use of discursive resources. After the students were given a few days to revise their essays at home, they submitted their final drafts to Ms. Whalen. I was not present for any of these activities; I only planned them out with Ms. Whalen when we designed the unit.

Sources of Data

Self-efficacy surveys were the initial mode of collecting data employed in the study. I chose to use self-efficacy surveys because I wanted to understand how the students perceived themselves as writers. Pajares and Valiante contend that a “student’s beliefs about their own writing processes and competence are instrumental to their ultimate success as writers” (2006, p.158). Therefore, I needed to recognize how each participant viewed his or her writing abilities in order to gain a sense of how confident the students would be when encountering an unfamiliar writing task.

The questions on the surveys centered on how confident the participants felt when analyzing an AP Language and Composition prompt for meaning, and how confident they felt about prewriting, drafting, and revising. I devised the questions so that they were centered around the word “can”. Some of the questions I asked were: “how comfortable do you feel that you can read an AP argument prompt and
understand what it is asking you?” and “how confident do you feel in your ability to revise your writing and to make your decisions as a writer more effective?” The word “can” has positive connotations and I did not want to promote a defeatist mindset while conducting this study. Through these queries, I wanted the participants to connect their perceptions of their self-efficacy to their essay writing. Understanding of the students’ self-efficacy was important because:

A strong sense of confidence, for example, may serve students well when writing an essay because it engenders greater interest in and attention to writing, stronger effort, and greater perseverance and resiliency in the face of adversity. Confident students are also likely to feel less apprehensive and have stronger feelings of self-worth about their writing. (Pajares & Valiante, 2006, p.140)

In my attempt to use process theory as an approach for students to successfully respond to unfamiliar composing tasks, I wanted to immediately obtain insight into how resilient the participants would be when facing the unknown. I needed to know how significant their apprehensions were and whether or not the students would succumb to their frustrations if they initially struggled on the writing assignment. Pajares and Valiante indicated how decreased confidence can negatively impact a student’s first encounter with a compositional assignment: “students with low self-efficacy may believe that things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters anxiety, stress, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem” (2006, p.159). Assessing student confidence was important because it determined how capable they were at facing challenges and adapting their writing to new demands. If students feel insecure about their composing abilities, then it can reduce their capacity for meeting
the requirements of unaccustomed texts. Their self-regulation becomes more restricted leaving them with fewer options and fewer methods by which to accomplish their goals. As a result, these initial self-efficacy surveys helped me to determine the participants' immediate reactions to writing an argument essay for the first time when preparing for the AP exam. I was given a sense of whether students would possess boundary-crossing and problem-solving dispositions, or boundary-guarding and answer-getting dispositions.

Along with filling out self-efficacy surveys, students also responded to interview questions. The interview questions acted as another datum point that allowed to me to obtain a broader perception of how students viewed writing. After each lesson where students filled out self-efficacy surveys, I made sure to interview them privately in my classroom. We set up a schedule for all eight of the participants to meet with me individually. Each interview consisted of five to seven questions. Some of the questions I asked were “What is a “good” writer? Do you believe that you are a “good” writer?” and “When given a new or unfamiliar writing assignment, how do you perform it? What strategies do you use?” My goal was to determine if their responses aligned with the self-efficacy surveys. I wanted to use both surveys and interviews because I did not want the one-on-one interviews to pressure the participants into providing me the answers they thought I wanted to hear. I was also interested in determining if the time between answering the survey and interviews questions had altered the students’ perceptions. It is important to note that the survey questions and the interview questions were different.
The interviews began after the first lesson in the unit once the students had already responded to the initial set of survey questions. I chose to interview the participants prior to them writing the argument essay because:

for students to critically examine their sources and motivations as well as for students to consider what is permitted and what excluded by these uptakes. For example, when we assign a writing task, rather than begin with some kind of traditional invention activity, including asking students to do primary or secondary research on a topic, we might first ask students to tell us what they think the task is asking them to do, what it is reminding them of, and what prior resources they feel inclined to draw on in completing the task. (Rounsaville, 2012, p.332)

In the interviews, I wanted to offer another opportunity for the students to reflect on their writing process. They needed the chance to vocalize their impressions of the assignment and how they can call upon their previous composing experiences. The beginning interview questions focused on what the participants considered to be good writing and whether or not they considered themselves to be good writers. I also sought to discover what the students knew of the writing process and whether or not they enacted strategies to handle unfamiliar composing tasks. I was interested in how prepared they felt to write in college and what they hoped to gain from participating in this study. By the time we reached the final interview, the questions focused on if the students’ writing processes had changed and if there had been any alterations to their confidence when composing a writing task for the first time. I coded the data from these interviews and then compared the data to the information gained from the
surveys and the journals that the participants detailed during the course of the unit. I specifically investigated students' confidence and how willing they were to follow the writing process and to enact the discursive resources.

As the students progressed through the writing unit, I wanted to offer them a space for them to individually reflect apart from the surveys and the interviews. Participants were asked to record in a journal their reflections on their development as writers as well as their emotional states. During each lesson the students were asked to respond in their journals to “do now” and “exit note” questions at the beginning and end of the class respectively. My use of journals followed Dawn Latta’s concept of the in-process journal. She defined this category of journal as “a type of written reflection in action. While working on a particular piece of writing, students use the in-process journal as a tool to talk back to themselves about rough spots and to brainstorm techniques that might help” (1991, p.60). By entering into dialogue with the journal, students more actively reflect on their writing. Participants kept all of their prewriting, drafting, and revising in their journals. These journals served as a location where I could enter into the students’ minds and investigate how they were or were not enacting the discursive resources.

The participants were asked to journal throughout the entirety of the study. In the beginning and end of each lesson, the students responded to their “do now’s” and “exit notes” in their journals. All stages of writing the argument essays were also kept in the journals: prewriting, drafting, and revising. When composing each phase, the students shared their emotional states and evaluated their performance on the argument essay.
In the beginning of composing in the journals, the questions I asked initially motivated students consider how they approached a writing assignment that was unfamiliar to them. I chose to start with these types of questions in the journals because developing composers can:

use [journals] to explore ideas, to begin solving their problems in writing a particular piece, to speculate about what they can do next, and to consider the writing they have already done. The journal helps students form connections among their experiences, their readings, and their efforts to express meaning in writing. Because of this concentration on connections and on active involvement from the students, the journal provides a foundation for development in writing.

(Latta, 1991, p.62)

In an attempt to relate their previous composing experiences to the argument essay, participants were asked to consider if they consciously developed strategies to ascertain how to respond to the writing task. Students were asked to share their perceptions of the writing process as well. As the unit progressed and the students explored the different discursive resources modeled in class, they began to evaluate how they felt about employing these dispositions when writing the AP argument essay.

The participants also wrote in their journals outside of the class. Each time that they worked on their argument essay, they related the emotions they experienced while writing the paper - the frustrations, the victories, and everything in between. As Latta (1991) explained, the journal was a “visible trail of our interactions, of the problems with writing that students have tackled, and of the strategies that they have
used either successfully or unsuccessfully becomes a personalized log of a student’s writing, reading, thinking, and learning processes” (p.62). By sharing all of these impressions, the students provided me another source from which I could derive data. I investigated the journals to determine if the participants’ responses in school to the surveys and interviews correlated with the information obtained in the journals when the students were at home. Having this third data point, allowed me to discover whether the students’ felt pressured, consciously or not, to respond to questions in a way that they believed that their teachers wanted to hear. As a result, the journals served as more of an authentic source. At home, the participants could reveal their confidence in their writing abilities and their willingness to employ the discursive resources demonstrated in class.

**Modeling**

Prior to each activity performed throughout the study, the participants’ teachers, Ms. Whalen, modeled how to accomplish each task. Her direct instruction followed Atwell and Graves’ conceptions of the most efficient ways an experienced writer can share his or her thinking process with developing writers. Graves posited, “I’ve long advocated that teachers write with their students, and I’ve seen good results when they do...Showing through your own writing, during minilessons, is teaching that lasts” (qtd. in Atwell, 1980, p.ix). By composing alongside her students, Ms. Whalen shared in their struggles and demonstrated how an expert writer contends with these challenges. She validated their frustrations and offered hope for them to overcome the obstacles set in their path.
At each stage of the writing process, Ms. Whalen modeled how to enact the discursive resources. When the participants began to prewrite, Ms. Whalen demonstrated how to produce ideas by calling on previous prewriting experiences and by identifying exactly how the prompt required the students to respond. After the students had determined their positions on the issue, then Ms. Whalen illuminated how to support their stances by inventing examples from their personal lives or finding examples from their readings. She revealed how to cross boundaries by incorporating knowledge from other academic subjects into the argument in their essays. Other discursive resources were demonstrated as participants recognized how to take aspects of their former writing performances and apply them to the argument essay. Towards the end of the unit, Ms. Whalen showed how these strategies needed to be evaluated when the students revised. Throughout the entirety of the study, the participants were encouraged to revise at every stage and to reconsider their choices. However once the students were reaching the end of their papers, Ms. Whalen stressed to them the need to pass judgment one final time on their decisions. In order for these papers to be successful, the students had to reconsider the genre and conventions of the assignment and whether or not they had appropriately adhered to them. Participants also were shown how to edit their compositions and to remove any mistakes in regards to mechanics or grammar.

Conferencing

As the unit unfolded, Ms. Whalen designed her lessons to create opportunities for her to confer with her students individually as they attempted to compose the argument essay for the first time. In the composition classroom, the teacher should
serve as "a mentor of writing, a mediator of writing strategies, and a model of a writer at work" (Ehrenworth and Vinton, 2005, p.20-1). Instead of only addressing the class as a group, conferences take this mentorship role to the individual level. While modeling can help novice writers to determine how to perform a strategy and how to experiment with techniques, conferencing is what reinforces these abilities. In these meetings, students can directly ask an expert writer for assistance, whether it is having that person explain a rule or evaluate a risk. Conferences help students get through the more difficult aspects of writing and aid them in their decision making. They allow educators to ask developing composers: "how does it change your meaning if you put it this way?" (Berthoff, 1980, p.650). Questions that provoke reflexive thought can help improve revision and help learners to recognize that there is more than one approach to composing an assignment.

Throughout the study, Ms. Whalen met with the participants during every lesson. When the students began prewriting, she sat down with them and asked questions about how they were going to formulate their position. Ms. Whalen also helped guide them in developing strategies for cultivating ideas for their essays. As the participants moved into the drafting phase of their argument papers, Ms. Whalen conferred with them about how they would implement support for their essays, while organizing their argument in a clear and coherent manner. The students considered whether or not they would use evidence from their readings or from their personal experiences. Once the drafts were completed, the participants then met with Ms. Whalen about their revisions. As an expert writer, she helped her students judge the effectiveness of their decision making. They discussed not only the participants’
arguments, but how they made them – how they made their positions more efficient by incorporating style through syntax and diction. In addition, editing was addressed and how students could use techniques to correct the conventional errors that all writers make, experts or not.

**Results**

**Data**

Listed below is all of the data I collected throughout the study from the participants’ surveys, journals, and interviews. The data are organized by research questions that directed my study.

1. *How can English teachers design lessons and curricula centered on process theory that enable students to develop a rhetorical awareness of their writing situations?*

   In this section of my data, I explain the growth of students’ confidence in regards to how effective they found their prewriting, drafting, and revising to be when writing the argument essay. Many of the questions on the surveys, journals, and interviews asked the students directly about how they prewrote, drafted, and revised. Ms. Whalen and I divided the unit by these stages and it allowed students to share specifically about each stage of the writing process. The participants began the study by prewriting for the argument essay. In all three sources of data, the students indicated that they liked to prewrite, especially for a timed writing assignment like the argument essay on the AP English Language and Composition Exam. When writing the argument essay, the participants felt that prewriting was absolutely required. In Dolores’ first interview, she explained the benefits of prewriting for the argument essay because prewriting equated with: “identifying what you’re trying to
address...it's the way you go about answer a question or proposing a solution” (March 3, 2015). The ambiguous nature of the argument essay and its demands as a writing task left the participants struggling to form coherent arguments. Even so, the participants felt fairly confident in their ability to comprehend the argument essay prompt. As a class when filling out their prewriting self-efficacy surveys, the students on average indicated that their confidence in regards to understanding the argument essay prompt was a 4.5 out of 7 (64%). The scale on the surveys ran from one to seven, where a score of seven signaled the most confidence and a score of one signaled the least. Students felt even more secure in their ability to use prewriting strategies like listing and webbing to form an argument; the class averaged a 5 out of 7 (71%) on their responses.

As the unit progressed into the drafting phase, the participants’ confidence dipped when it came to devising a thesis statement from their prewriting. Prewriting was supposed to provide them the opportunity to form a thesis appropriate to this type of composing; however, the typical three point thesis statement establishing the five paragraph essay would not work for this assignment. Instead, they had to employ prewriting to craft a more general thesis statement that flowed into their examples, which were derived from their personal experiences or their prior knowledge that they accessed from past compositions. Due to their unfamiliarity with designing this type of thesis, the students struggled in their attempt. Initially, the participants’ confidence in their thesis writing ability was high as the class’ average response to the question, “how confident do you feel about your ability to write a clear thesis statement?”, was a 5.5 out of 7 (79%). However, as the students spent more time working the paper,
their confidence in regards to their thesis writing declined. When asked, “How confident do you feel in your ability to use a thesis statement to structure your argument essay in terms of its paragraphs and organization? the students’ selected a 4.5 out 7 (64%) dropping fourteen percentage points from their responses earlier in the unit. Their loss of confidence was a result of the uniqueness of the argument essay; in the participants’ past academic experiences, they had never written an assignment with such nebulous demands in terms of its argument. Even at the end of the study, when asked one final time about how confident they felt in designing a thesis statement that organized their body paragraphs, the students selected a 5.5 out of 7 (79%) on their surveys. Throughout the entire length of this study, their confidence never exceeded this mark.

The participants’ limited confidence when it came to thesis writing connected to how secure they felt in constructing drafts. On the surveys, when asked, “how confident do you feel in using your past writing experiences to create support for your argument?”, the students on average chose 5 out of 7 (71%). Their struggles with the thesis left them unsure of how to develop appropriate support for the demands of the argument essay. Dolores explained the challenge of creating a thesis that dictated her position on the argument essay:

For an argument essay maybe not because you don’t really have like a concrete thesis, whereas for other types of writing you have like a three point, like you know, structure. But for an argument essay you really don’t have anything to go off of except like what they give you. So I think you could use it as a guideline,
but I wouldn’t rely on it. I’d use my other information, my other ideas like to help myself. (third interview, March 29, 2015)

The argument essay prompt’s lack of a formulaic structure frustrated the participants because they could not establish the typical cause and effect positions they employed in writing for other classes. As Dolores indicated, all they could use was what the prompt offered them, which outside of two quotes from two famous authors, was not much to use to develop a line of reasoning. Despite these difficulties, the students responded more positively about drafting their paper’s paragraphs at the end of the study than at its beginning. On the surveys, the participants were asked, “How confident do you feel in your ability to organize your essay into an introduction, body, and conclusion?” Initially their responses averaged a 5.5 out of 7 (79%), but once they had submitted their final drafts of the essay, the class’ average selection rose to a 6 out of 7 (86%) elevating seven percentage points.

In regards to revision, Ms. Whalen’s students were already confident in their evaluation skills and were already willing to revise. On their initial surveys they were asked, “How confident do you feel in your ability to revise your writing and to make your decisions as a writer more effective?” The average selection was a 5 out of 7 (71%) in how secure the participants felt in their revising competency. Even when asked about an area in which they had struggled, the constructing of the thesis and the body paragraphs, the students remained confident in their revising abilities. When asked, “How confident do you feel in your ability to revise a thesis statement and/ or your paragraph structure in your argument essay?”, the class chose 5.5 out of 7 (79%). Despite their difficulties with formulating the thesis and examples to support it, the
participants still felt that they had the skills to improve their positions. As the unit ended, the students once again shared how confident they felt in reworking their composing decisions. This time the number they selected jumped from a 5 out of 7 (71%) initially, to a 6 out of 7 (86%). The participants’ confidence was more pronounced as it rose fifteen percentage points. As with prewriting, drafting, & revising, students also experienced an upswing in confidence in regards to using some of the discursive resources. In the next section, I discuss how willing the participants were to be self reflective and how it impacted their confidence in composing the argument essay.

2. How can students use discursive resources in connection with process theory to cultivate self-reflective attitudes for composing unfamiliar writing tasks?

Before Ms. Whalen and I shared the discursive resources with the participants, we investigated what strategies the students were already using to adapt their composing to the new requirements of the argument essay. We realized that the students recognized that they needed more techniques in order to be successful in creating an effective composition for the AP English Language and Composition Exam. In fact, when interacting with Ms. Whalen one on one through individual conferencing at the beginning of the unit, the participants asked for help in determining strategies for developing their writing to the unfamiliar assignment. The students’ requests for coaching revealed that many of the participants had trouble recognizing that they had already been employing their own methods for designing a response to an unfamiliar writing task. Eva noted in her journal: “using discursive resources is still a little confusing. I generally understand what I should be doing for each
of them but it seems like it's just giving a name to what I've been doing before" (first journal entry, March 3, 2015). Like Eva, many of the participants struggled with placing labels on the different methods they used to navigate the argument essay's challenges. They possessed some strategies, but the writers were not sure what to call them.

As the unit continued, I measured the students' willingness to use the discursive resources through their surveys. When we arrived at the prewriting lesson, I inquired how confident the participants felt in using their past writing experiences and their genre awareness to write the argument essay. The average response to these questions was a 4.5 out of 7 (64%). The students had just learned the discursive resources and were still unsure of what to make of them. As we entered the drafting stage, I asked more specific questions on the survey about how they confident they felt in designing a thesis and establishing support for the argument essay. I framed these questions around using their previous writing experiences and accessing prior knowledge. When answering these questions, the class' average response elevated to an average of 5 out of 7 (71%). The seven percentage point increase could be attributed to their developing comfort in using the discursive resources to shape their thinking and approach to composing the argument essay. As the students started revising, their inclination to employ the discursive resources grew. In the four questions on the revision survey that addressed the discursive resources, the class averaged a 5.5 out of 7 (79%). From prewriting to revising, the participants' willingness to use the discursive resources rose by fifteen percentage points, illustrating their growing familiarity with these strategies. Despite the continuous increase in confidence, the students only felt comfortable using some of the discursive resources, not all of them.
When the students were introduced to the discursive resources, their clear favorite became accessing prior knowledge in their attempt to adjust their composing for the essay. They were more inclined to reflect back on their previous composing performances and compare them to the writing that they were performing for the argument essay. Francine indicated her preference for this approach, writing in her journal: "Accessing prior knowledge...will be the easiest to incorporate into my writing because we’ve been taught to connect our writing to other things in the past" (first journal entry, March 3, 2015). The participants took to this strategy because it was grounded in their academic experience and because it offered them more options to draw from whether it was their writing in English, history, or other classes.

Sandra shared in Francine’s inclination to access prior knowledge. At the beginning of the study, Sandra related her approaches to unfamiliar writing tasks, “well, first I would like highlight the important parts of the prompt. And then I would kind of...I ‘d use my prior knowledge mostly. That’s like the only thing I could think of. And then...I don’t know...maybe some research or examples stuff like that” (first interview, March 3, 2015). Sandra demonstrated that she had industriously dissected the demands of the composing assignment and had sought to connect them with her past encounters with essay writing. Her inclusion of research indicated her awareness of how outside contexts can impact the creation of a text and whether or not pulling from other sources is appropriate for the composition. Lilly displayed the same self-reflections as she too weighed how to relate the argument essay to her past papers in terms of their designs and demands. She shared,
I reread the prompt like a good seven times. And then in my head, I like to always think of something that I wrote that maybe would be similar, whether it would be in structure, in like the task itself, in the purpose, in whatever and then sort of reflect back on what I’ve done that’s remotely similar. If it’s something that I haven’t done before, I just try I think of like personal experiences... I think of... I don’t know... previous things that I’ve seen and kind of relate it to that and take it from there and hope for the best. (first interview, March 14, 2015)

Like Sandra, Lilly sought to clarify the task through her previous academic experiences; however, Lilly explored her prior knowledge further by establishing a relationship between composing for school and her life experiences. As she described her process, she exhibited the same uncertainty as Sandra in defining how she would adapt her composing to an unfamiliar writing situation. Both girls lacked the precise language to solidify their approaches and to confidently plan the paper by applying the composing process.

Unlike the universal embracing of accessing prior knowledge, the rest of the discursive resources were met with a more mixed response by Ms. Whalen’s class. After accessing prior knowledge, genre awareness was the second most adopted strategy because the participants were able to situate their thinking within the framework of the AP English Language and Composition course. As she taught, Ms. Whalen directed her students to consider the requirements of the argument essay: its purpose, its audience, and its contexts. Knowing the hard and fast rules of the argument essay, and the phases of the composing process, gave the participants understandings of the boundaries that encompassed their writing in terms of argument, organization, and style. In her journal, Lilly espoused her preference for the guidance genre awareness provided. She wrote,
“Genre awareness is really straightforward as well. Practicing prompts for this test has made this second nature when considering my audience” (first journal entry, March 3, 2015). By considering the format of the task, Lilly was able to shape her argument around the context of the essay’s prompt and intended audience. She knew the rules to follow and how the structure of the argument essay could aid in her in persuasively impacting her audience.

The participants experienced much more difficulties when attempting to cross boundaries while performing the writing process. In order to successfully to bend the rules of a writing assignment, a student must first understand its conventions. Some students took enthusiastically to boundary crossing due to their confidence in their writing skills, while others were stymied by the abstract thinking that crossing boundaries requires. As Camilla explained, their fear of the unknown dampened the students’ eagerness to explore boundary crossing’s place in their writing process: “The most difficult discursive resource to adopt is the boundary crossing disposition because there’s a big chance that my risk won’t work well with the prompt and my reader won’t understand the purpose of the essay” (first journal entry, March 3, 2015). Despite her status as a novice writer, Camilla demonstrated that she was acutely aware of the need to clearly impart her position. At the same time, she wanted to capture her audience’s interest through stylistic techniques. Camilla prioritized efficiently conveying her argument over impressing her reader with compositional risks. Not all of the participants shared with Camilla’s concerns. Lana wrote, “I identify with boundary-crossing dispositions, because in my opinion it is the most straightforward discursive resource...I think I understand how to do it” (first journal entry March 3, 2015). In Lana’s writings,
she exhibited an ability to recognize the rules of the argument essay and then incorporate some stylistic moves from other compositions she had constructed. By determining where to blur the boundaries between writing tasks, Lana was able to create a more dynamic and attention-grabbing paper.

The two final approaches, adopting problem solving dispositions and identifying as a novice writer, were the most neglected by the students throughout the study. Ms. Whalen modeled both early on, but the participants struggled to perceive essay writing as a form of problem-solving and they could not recognize the benefit in identifying themselves as novices. Lana related her difficulty with problem solving dispositions stating that it was “more of an abstract idea” and she “did not understand how to do it as well [because] she hadn’t had the most practice with it” (first journal entry, March 3, 2015). Lana’s difficulties, and those of the class, were dictated by how they envisioned the argument essay. The participants did not recognize that an essay is much an activity in thinking as it is in writing. As a result, they mentioned problem solving dispositions less in their interviews and in their journal entries. As little enthusiasm as the participants expressed for adopting problem solving dispositions, they were even more resistant to label themselves as novices. In their journals and their interviews, they never make mention of this specific discursive resource. As my paper continues, I will indicate how the students endeavored to solve the difficulties they faced when composing the argument essay for the first time.

3. How can students perceive writing as a form of problem solving, and employ process theory and discursive resources to more effectively generate solutions to complex and challenging tasks?
This section was the hardest to derive data from due to the students’ reluctance to perceive writing as a means of problem solving like Elizabeth Wardle espoused. Instead, they gravitated more to Angela Rounsaville’s practice of accessing prior knowledge and to Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi’s concept of genre awareness. Despite their limited performance of some of the discursive resources, the participants’ surveys and responses to peer feedback indicated that students felt more positively about their writing skills in relation to the argument essay once they had completed all of the stages of the writing process.

The participants believed that they could successfully compose the argument essay for the AP English Language and Composition Exam; however, they recognized the challenges inherent in composing a text like this one. Sandra shared her cautious optimism: “I’m not that confident but I feel like if practiced a lot and saw various different types of prompts then I could definitely understand the process” (second interview, March 14th, 2015). The students recognized that they could improve their performances on the argument essay if they were provided example prompts and example papers. As a result, students expressed how much they appreciated peer review. Camilla wrote in her journal after sharing her paper with another classmate: “I also enjoyed reading her essay and seeing how she used the discursive resources and what examples she chose to support her reasoning. I also took a look at her thesis, specifically to see how she structured it” (final journal entry, March 24, 2015). Examining another composer’s essay eased many of the tensions that Camilla and the rest of her peers were experiencing. Camilla took the opportunity to identify areas of concern such as thesis
design, organization of evidence, and enacting of discursive resources, and then to use what she discovered to evaluate her own writing.

Sandra shared in Camilla’s perspective as she reflected:

I liked [reading another person’s paper] because I got to see how someone else structured this essay and the approach she took with this abstract prompt. I additionally got to read an essay from the perspective of the grader and saw what worked well and what didn’t. It gave me an idea of what compositional risks I should take as well to enhance my own essay. (final journal entry, March 24, 2015)

Like her classmates, Sandra was concerned about how to organize her essay – the indefinite nature of the argument frustrated all of the students in their attempt to construct a position. Unlike Camilla, Sandra investigated her partner’s paper to ascertain how she created style and voice when composing this type of essay. These two students were not alone in appreciating feedback from their classmates. After peer editing, the students filled out the final self-efficacy survey. Their confidence in their ability to organize their ideas and arguments increased from 5.5 out of 7 (79%) on the first survey in the unit to a 6 out of 7 (86%) rising seven percentage points.

The students’ responses to other questions on the self-efficacy surveys demonstrated that they felt better about their ability to meet the demands of the argument essay at the end of the unit compared to its beginning. When asked on the initial survey, “how comfortable do you feel reading an AP argument prompt and understanding what it is asking you?”, the participants averaged a score of 5 out of 7 (71%). As the students practiced interpreting the prompts, they became more and more comfortable with identifying their demands and the challenges associated with
fulfilling the requirements of the paper. Once they could recognize the unique problems inherent in composing the argument essay, then the participants could begin to solve them. The class enacted the stages of the writing process and began to use prewriting, drafting, and revising to adhere to the requirements of the unfamiliar writing task. As a result, their confidence rose on the final surveys in the study. When responding to the same question about comprehending the demands of the argument essay, students selected a 6 out of 7 (86%) raising their initial confidence fifteen percentage points. The students also shared on an individual level how they experienced success on the argument essay.

As the study drew to a close, Camilla best summarized how she benefitted from synthesizing the writing process with the discursive resources. She explained:

the first time I saw an argument essay I thought this is like very abstract. I didn’t really know how to tackle it or how to even...answer the question, but with...[Ms. Whalen’s] help, you can have an intro that’s very informal. Your thesis doesn’t have to have...point A, B, & C. It could...express the relationship between these two things...and then you have an example or two as your body paragraphs and then you really explain your ideas. (final interview, March 28, 2015).

Ms. Whalen, in her interviews, acknowledged that the growth that Camilla exhibited was also demonstrated by all of her students. After the participants wrote the final argument essay in class for a test grade, she stated, “they said the in class essay wasn’t as bad as they thought it would...they seemed the most confident they had after writing an in class essay” (final interview, March 28, 2015). Ms. Whalen recognized that her students had walked away from the timed essay knowing that they
had enacted the writing process and the discursive resources to the best of their abilities. They sensed that their performances were somewhat successful and that they could adapt their writing to this formerly unknown composing assignment. Their scores on their in-class essays served to validate the participants' self-evaluations. The timed essays were scored on a one to nine scale where nine is the best score a student could possibly achieve. Test scores are not complete indicators of a student's writing growth, but in their first timed attempt on the essay, Lilly, Jacqueline, Dolores, Eva, Francine, and Camilla all scored in the six to seven range. Even more impressively, Lana earned a score between an eight and nine and Sandra earned a nine outright.

**Discussion**

Once all the sources of data (the interviews, surveys, and journals) had been considered, the strengths and limitations of employing process theory to aid students in adapting to unfamiliar writing contexts became clearer. In this section, I share themes that arose from my data in regards to how the participants' writing abilities developed and how the growth of their composing skills could have been improved.

*Theme 1: We need more explicit focus on enacting the specific stages of the writing process and we need to emphasize the writing process' recursivity.*

It became apparent, as I interviewed the participants and examined their journals and surveys, that the students overwhelmingly perceived the writing process as linear. They conceived the composing process as commencing in prewriting, transitioning to drafting, and then concluding in revising. Only a few students
remarked about enacting the phases in a recursive or simultaneous manner. Part of their perception may have been due to the design of the unit, which took them through the writing process in a sequential order. The timed nature of the AP English Language and Composition Exam’s argument essay also necessitated a more successive procedure and may have colored their appraisal of how to perform the composing process. Despite these limitations dictated by classroom instruction and standardized testing, students must be empowered to freely undertake a writing assignment and to generate methods through the composing process that allow them to both meet the demands of the task and needs of the audience. In order to aid students in developing this perception of how to compose unfamiliar writing tasks, Donald Murray explained how educators, “instead of teaching finished writing...should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness” (1971, p.4). Developing writers need to acknowledge that imperfection is acceptable: it frees them from pressuring themselves to reach perfection on their first attempt on writing a draft. As long as they enact the writing process and take the necessary steps to complete the draft, then they can feel self-assured in that they can meet the demands of composing assignment no matter how foreign it is to their past writing experiences. Ms. Whalen and I should have taken more time to stress how prewriting, drafting, and revising are imperfect processes that require more than a single performance when writing a paper. We should have spent more time in the unit exploring how to perform each stage and then how to unite all of the phases through revision. The students expressed their willingness to perform each phase of the writing process when we asked them to share their views, yet we did not demonstrate the benefits of
returning to each phase of composing. Had our unit design attended more closely attended to Anne E. Berthoff’s notion of revision, then our students could have found more success when writing thesis statements.

Sharing in Murray’s vision of writing’s incomplete nature, Berthoff emphasized how educators need to aid their developing composers: “when we teach pre-writing as a phase of the composing process, what we should be teaching is not how to get a thesis statement but the generation and uses of chaos; when we teach revision as a phases of the composing process, we are teaching just that – re-seeing ways out of chaos.” (1981, p.648) Berthoff viewed revision as a critical way of making meaning through writing. Her research revealed that writing was a recursive process where the composer is free to return to any stage of writing again and again. It is this observation that supported Murray’s conception of writing’s unfinished essence: writers can always return to their compositions and improve them. Berthoff argued that educators should demonstrate how to prewrite and revise simultaneously – that way students can find their way through the “chaos” that is composing an unfamiliar writing task. If their teachers emphasized too much the need to craft a thesis statement to form an argument, then the students could become trapped in a linear perception of the writing process. Again, this is where Ms. Whalen and I failed the students. By tying their prewriting to the construction of a thesis statement, we forced them into a singular vision of how to construct their claims. The argument essay was not a type of text that was appropriate for the use of a thesis. Examples in the paper needed to be broader and less restricted by the limitations of a thesis. Many of the students were unable to offer a full array of support for their positions because they
were stuck trying to connect their evidence together through the thesis statement. The participants professed these difficulties with thesis writing throughout their interviews, surveys, and journal entries. As educators, we should have listened to them and made our novice composers more aware of this demand of the argument essay – it was the only way that they could have successfully navigated these complicated encounters. Another benefit to the participants in this study would have been if Ms. Whalen and I emphasized how writing is the act of making decisions, deepening their understanding of how to adapt their composing to the argument essay.

Part of the reason why the students envisioned the writing process as a step-by-step activity is because their options for designing the essay were too limited. We only offered them one way to compose the argument essay. In their journals, the students all determined that prewriting was their starting place and from there, they proceeded to draft and then to revise. Ms. Whalen and I tried to encourage more revision in this unit by having the participants write an initial draft of the argument essay in their journals and then to revise their paper on their own and with their peers. What we neglected was to provide them multiple approaches for crafting the essay. By having the students compose the argument essay by first prewriting, then drafting, and finally revising, Ms. Whalen and I presented drafting as a linear activity instead of encouraging them to revise while they wrote the essay. We failed to follow what Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton wrote “we serve students best when we empower them to make purposeful choices and decisions based on a complex, nuanced understanding of the effects of those...choices will have on both our minds and our
hearts and the way they can affect and reinforce meaning” (2005, p.4). By emphasizing composing as decision making, we could have motivated the students to consider a variety of approaches to drafting. They could have written their first body paragraphs and then revised them according to whether their positions supported their thesis statements; or they could have begun with their final body paragraphs and then worked backwards to establish their arguments. Either strategy could have been effective. When educators provide alternating methods like these to writing unfamiliar assignments, then as Ehrenworth and Vinton contend, “we can teach writing and its processes as a subject and that writing consists of different stages that the writer circles through” (2005, p.17). When students recognize that they can revise at any part of the composing process, then their stress decreases. They do not have to hope that their draft is headed in right direction – then upon completing the paper, scramble frantically to meet all of the demands of their composing task. The students finished the unit feeling better about their performances of the argument essay, but their teachers could have further eased their frustrations if the participants had comprehended the recursivity of the writing process. The students could have improved their conception of composing by enacting a less linear process and as a result, made their revisions more effective by continuously reworking their writing rather than fixing it once their drafts were completed. Composing the argument in a sequential order restrained the students’ chances to grow as writers, particularly because it lessened the scope by which the students revised.

By establishing revision at the end of composing process, Ms. Whalen and I made it seem like an afterthought. As evidenced by the data from the surveys,
interviews, and journals, the participants believed in the value of revision. However, their reworking of their texts was limited to smaller changes because Ms. Whalen and I placed revision towards the end of the unit. Had we demonstrated how to revise prewriting and not only entire drafts, we could have increased the worth of revising to the students. To further develop her novice writers’ understanding of the merits of revision, Nancy Sommers advocated for providing them strategies to make improvements on a more significant level than just rewording. She wrote,

The students have strategies for handling words and phrases and their strategies helped them on a word or sentence level. What they lack, however, is a set of strategies for to help them identify the “something larger” that they sensed was wrong and work from there. The students do not have strategies for handling the whole essay. They lack procedures or heuristics to help them reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and readers. The students view their compositions in a linear way or as a series of parts. Even such potentially useful concepts as ‘unity’ or ‘form’ are reduced to the rule that a composition, if it is to have form, must have an introduction, body, and a conclusion, or the sum total of the necessary parts. (1980, p.383)

According to Sommers, educators must apprehend that their developing writers can sense when parts of their composition, whether it is their use of argument or of style, are not functioning correctly. The students’ struggle is that they cannot put what is wrong with their writings into words. Sommers advocated for providing students skills that allowed them to view their writing as their readers would and to supply them with the concepts to communicate their dissatisfaction with their compositions.
Furthermore, if novice writers conceived the writing process as linear, then they could not develop these strategies that could transform them into experienced composers.

Ms. Whalen's students, without making changes to argument and organization, could not entirely successfully improve their compositions to meet their audiences' demands on the exam. The participants made smaller edits and changes to their syntax and diction, but wholesale alterations of their uses of support or of their organization of body paragraphs were not evident in their revisions at the end of the unit. Their constricted perception of revision confined the growth of the participants of this study and, while they were left feeling more confident about their revision skills, they did not adapt their writing to the argument essay as much as they could have. Their limited progress was evidenced by most of the class scoring in the six and seven range on their final essays in the unit. These were solid scores, but not the eight and nines that signaled that the participants had fully grasped how to effectively write an argument essay for the exam. Another way in which Ms. Whalen and I could have emphasized the significant and reflexive nature of the writing process would have been to accentuate the importance of a writer considering his or her audience.

When students compose the essays on the AP English Language & Composition Exam, their readers are distant audiences composed of high school AP English Language teachers or English professors. During this unit, the participants were never made aware of whom these individuals reading their papers were. Ms. Whalen and I should have explained to the students' audience was: acknowledging that the participants were writing for people with a specialized knowledge could have motivated them more to revise more. The students could have reconsidered how they
structured their sentences and used diction to meet the demands of the argument essay and whether or not these decisions were appropriate or not. Understandings of their readers could have also provided them an approach by which to rework their composition. Janet Emig explained how recognizing his or her audience could inspire a writer to revise,

an audience other than oneself must be acknowledged. Consequently, amenities aiding an audience are observed: accounts are more formal in diction and in organization, and more elaborated. These accounts tend to be retrospective affairs, and consequently reportorial in approach. (1971, p.230)

When novice composers consider their audience, they can become more reflective. They can contemplate the tone of their texts and consider how other readers, instead of only their peers or their teacher, will interpret their writing. When they picture their readers, students can strive for more clarity so that their audiences comprehend their positions and find their claims more convincing. Visualizing their readers could have made adjusting to their writing to the argument essay easier for Ms. Whalen’s students because they could have been more focused on clearly conveying their ideas. Prioritizing clarity could have made their arguments more effective because the ambiguous nature of argument essay prompts made it extremely difficult for the students to generate examples for their claims. An emphasis on clearness could have helped their audience connect to their position more thoroughly.

Ultimately, the participants did score well on their final essays in the unit; all of them earned scores that would help them to earn fours and fives on the AP English Language & Composition Exam. Despite this success, the students could have
developed more in their writing. Composing an AP exam essay will not be the end-all, be-all of their writing experiences. When Ms. Whalen and I recognized their straightforward performance of the composing process and the value they associated with revision, we should have strove to explain how to perform each distinctive stage of the writing process and then to connect all of the phases through the act of revision. Had Ms. Whalen and I had done this, the students could have been less frustrated with thesis writing and could have generated arguments more appropriate for the demands of the argument essay. The participants could have also improved the breadth of their revisions by not only altering their use of language, but also reworking how they organized their claims and employed examples to support them. Our implementation of the writing process was not the only way we attempted to aid the students to adjust their composing to an unfamiliar writing assignment: we also sought to change their perceptions of themselves as writers and how they initially approach a composing task.

Theme 2: Educators need to encourage developing writers to view themselves as novices and to be willing to adopt problem solving dispositions when composing an unfamiliar text.

One of the goals of this study was to explore how to provide the students a theoretical framework by which to view the argument essay. Ms. Whalen and I wanted to investigate how willing the students were to adopt strategies like the discursive resources and whether or not these methods impacted how confidently the participants could adapt their writing to an unknown composing assignment.

According to Donald Murray, the writer's most basic responsibility is: "to produce
whatever product his subject and his audience demand” (1971, p.6). Ms. Whalen and I sought to examine whether or not the discursive resources aided the students in executing this duty. What we found was that the students enthusiastically accessed their prior knowledge by referring to their past compositions. The students were also willing to consider the rules of the argument essay and use its genre to assist them in crafting compositions that adhered to the paper’s demands. More mixed responses from the participants involved boundary crossing. Some students were able to shift between following the regulations of composing the argument essay and taking risks that made their writing to stand out, but most played it safe and stuck to less risky approaches like accessing prior knowledge and possessing genre awareness. Despite the students’ difficulty with boundary crossing, their greatest struggles occurred with perceiving composing as a form of problem solving and perceiving themselves as novice writers.

**Boundary Crossing**

In order promote more problem solving, Ms. Whalen and I should have encouraged the flexible thinking that Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi championed. Reiff and Bawarshi deemed the ability to synthesize different approaches to be incredibly immensely important when composing any assignment. They felt that the best way to aide students was to “intervene at the very beginning of the course in order to make possibilities and processes of domain crossing explicit and clear” (2011, p.331). As individuals are learning to write, it is crucial that they not only learn the rules of writing associated with each compositional genre, but how to bend or break those rules. Developing writers must be aware that they can and should
transition their composing knowledge from task to task in order to create some
familiarity. Teachers need to offer opportunities for students to explore multifarious
compositional activities that invite them to establish their own plans of action. When
novice writers establish their own strategies, they engage in critical thinking; they
problem solve by synthesizing previously successful methods with the current
demands of their writing assignments. Reiff and Bawarshi explained: “comfort with
reformulating and transforming existing resources may serve students well in
accessing and adapting to...writing contexts. In other words, ‘crossing’ may be a key
element of transforming knowledge and learning” (2011, p.330). In order for novice
writers to successfully develop and grow from each new composing task, educators
must equip students with both the knowledge of different types of writing and how to
repurpose their previous writing experiences. A new composing assignment is bound
to have unfamiliar requirements. Novice writers must be able to refer back to
previously successful strategies and modify them in order to engage in problem
solving. While some students were able to grasp how to remodel past procedures in
order to compose the argument, most found this approach to be too confusing. They
could not recognize how transitioning former methods could help on a new
assignment. Their inability to adapt their writing plans was a result of how they
perceived writing: not as a problem that could be solved in a variety of ways, but as a
singular challenge that had to be overcome by determining the singular “right”
answer. This line of thinking stymied most of the participants and made the
adjustment of their composing to the argument paper harder than it had to be.
Problem Solving

Throughout the study, Ms. Whalen and I witnessed the participants grow frequently frustrated, whether it was creating a thesis statement or cultivating examples in order to support their positions. These frustrations were detrimental to the students’ growth as writers. This is not to say expert composers never become frustrated when writing, but to acknowledge that experienced writers understand how to employ strategies that can liberate them from writer’s block and the various other maladies that plague all writers from time to time. Seasoned composers know that they have solutions to these challenges that inevitably occur when writing. This same knowledge needed to be shared with the students in Ms. Whalen’s class. The initial step in aiding them to develop solutions was to enlighten them about writing’s nature – that composing is a problem waiting to be solved. This view of composing can empower students because it offers them hope. A blank page can be a daunting opponent. Knowing that multiple paths exist that can lead them to success reassures novice writers and helps them to release the tension keeping them from starting to meet the demands of an unfamiliar writing assignment. If students believe that they do not possess the necessary skills or strategies to succeed on an unknown writing tasks, then they will never be able to adapt their composing to new writing tasks. Frank Pajares and Gio Valiante detailed the dangers of these negative self-perceptions: “students with low self-efficacy may believe that things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters anxiety, stress, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem” (2006, p.159). It is the teacher’s responsibility to widen their students’ understanding of how to face challenging compositional tasks. Developing
writers must be empowered to discern both their strengths and their weaknesses. Fortunately, as evidenced by their surveys, all of Ms. Whalen’s learners exhibited strong self-efficacy when composing the argument essay for the first time. Despite their confidence, we could have facilitated their performance of the argument essay by reformatting their knowledge of writing. Had the students viewed the argument paper as a problem that needed to be solved they could have been more likely to enact all of the discursive resources. They could have more easily recognized that there were multiple approaches to meeting the demands of the argument essay. If they employed this perception in coordination with writing as a process, then they could have used revision to refine and to improve their use of the discursive resources. Part of the reason that the students did not envision writing as a problem waiting to be solved is due to the nature of high school composing instruction.

Elizabeth Wardle blamed young composers’ incapacity for adaptation upon the instruction they receive in high school. Her comments did not disparage these students’ instructors, but rather the educational terrain adolescents are forced to survive. Wardle described high school as a place where teachers are being forced to prepare students for months to take simple, formulaic tests. They are not allowed to give homework, and they must accept assignments no matter how late they are because when students fail, teachers and schools are considered failing, and they are financially punished. They are, in essence, being forced to participate in a school system that embodies answer getting and eschews critical thinking and exploration at all costs. Such a system seems intended to reproduce
in its student participants passive thinking and acceptance without question of whatever is presented. (2012, p.10)

The mind numbing instruction that students are forced to endure limits the growth of their critical thinking skills. Thus, students are ill prepared to compose unfamiliar assignments because they are trained to seek out the sole “correct” answer or approach that formulaic standardized teaching dictates. Developing writers can be overwhelmed when faced with tasks that necessitate multiple or hybrid approaches. In our misguided attempt to help the participants, Ms. Whalen and I attempted to simplify the act of writing the argument essay for the first time by explaining one simple and straightforward way for writing the paper. We failed to take into account that not all students learn the same way. We committed the same sin that Wardle mentions: we provided the students the single answer to adapting their writing to an unfamiliar writing task. Instead Ms. Whalen and I should have offered multiple approaches to the composing of the argument essay. These instructional practices could have assisted more learners in the class and further engaged their critical thinking abilities. In their use of problem solving, they could have evaluated different methods by which to design the argument essay and then selected the best technique for them. Even if their attempted techniques did not succeed, then the students could have employed more critical thinking by revising their approaches to the argument essay.

In our current climate of increasing standardized testing, there are less opportunities for teachers to aid their students in developing their own strategies to solving the dilemmas that composing unknown tasks presents. Even this research
centered on preparing students to write a paper for a standardized test: the AP English Language & Composition Exam. The lack of time for encouraging critical thinking was part of the reason why Ms. Whalen and I sought to employ higher-level and recursive reflections in this unit. We did not want this type of cognition to be lost in the pressures put upon us to ready our students for a test. Wardle explained why this extended compositional instruction is vital to prepare adolescents for unfamiliar writing situations:

the steady movement toward standardized testing and tight control of education activities by legislators is producing and reproducing answer-getting dispositions in educational systems and individuals and that this movement is more than a dislike for the messiness of deep learning; rather, it can be understood as an attempt to limit the kind of thinking that students and citizens have the right to do. (2012, p.3)

The truth is that in our current age of high stakes testing, teachers must seek out the chaos of deeper learning. Students must plunge into the havoc that is composing various unknown texts. If young learners are not offered the opportunity to explore different tactics for writing unfamiliar texts, then as Wardle warned, they will drown when composing a paper that is new to them or attempting to problem solve in other areas of their lives. Students must perceive writing as a form of problem solving where they can devise a variety of tactics, like the discursive resources, to establish their own answers to the challenges posed by writing unfamiliar assignments. While this study was somewhat successful in exposing students to deeper learning through the use of the writing process and the discursive resources, unfortunately it did not
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delve richly enough into how students conceptualize the act of composing. More emphasis should have been placed on theoretically conceiving writing’s purpose and how by recognizing composing intent, the students could then use that knowledge to help them in meeting the demands of any unknown writing task. The participants also could have benefitted from identifying as novices and using their self-perceptions to liberate them to take chances.

Identifying as a Novice Writer

Another limitation of performing this study in cohesion with composing the argument essay for the AP English Language & Composition Exam was that it put a lot of pressure on the students to achieve perfection immediately. The students in Ms. Whalen’s class wanted to perform well on their essays because their scores on the AP exam could determine which colleges they could get accepted to and how many credits they would earn for their English graduation requirement. As a result of these concerns, students were less willing to embrace their novice roles. A beginner has the luxury of experimentation; this individual can take chances with little consequences. In their preparation for the AP exam, the participants in Ms. Whalen’s class felt less carefree as they considered the potential impact their scores had upon their futures. Despite these pressures, students must be liberated to take chances with their writing. They need to recognize that as developing composers, some of their attempts to problem solve for unfamiliar writing situations will fail. Mina Shaughnessy shared in this perspective. She argued that students must embrace their statuses as novices “not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by
making mistakes” (1977, p. 390). Shaughnessy’s contention centers on how students perceive writing and themselves as writers. As established earlier, developing composers must recognize that writing is a problem solving activity; however, novice writers must also acknowledge that they cannot grow as composers unless they fail to adhere to the requirements of the new writing assignment. In regards to this study, failure was not an attractive option for individuals who were striving to obtain passing scores on the AP exam. Despite this, Ms. Whalen and I should have encouraged them to take more risks and to accept failure. We should have tied their performances more to process theory. In doing so, we could have enabled students to reflect and identify which aspects of their composing give them the most difficulty. Then, the participants could have returned to their compositions and changed the elements of their writing strategies that were causing their papers to fail to meet the demands of the argument essay. With the knowledge that they could revise their methods, the students would have been more secure in taking risks and been more willing to identify as novices, regardless of the pressures of the AP exam. Through more experimentation, the students could have been better motivated to problem solve by determining for themselves the most effective procedure for writing the argument essay.

In their endeavor to problem solve for an unfamiliar writing task, Ms. Whalen’s students needed to be more unrestricted in their exploration of different approaches. Nancie Atwell stressed the importance of motivating students to experiment with different strategies. She wrote: “freedom of choice does not undercut structure. Instead, students become accountable for learning about and using the
structures available to writers to serve their purposes" (1998, p.15). If students are to grow as writers, then they must be able to deconstruct an unfamiliar writing task by recognizing the assignment’s audience and purpose. They must be cognizant of how they can use the assignment’s format and how they can use their previous compositional experiences to achieve their goal. An English instructor can marshal students through this process by sharing how to uncover common structures in composing tasks and how to use these structures to make sense of the assignment.

Ms. Whalen and I were a little misguided in the design of our unit: too much of our effort focused on preparing the participants to compose an effective argument essay for the AP exam, when we should have had them play with various different strategies. Writing this type of text may have not been the best choice in terms of how to motivate students to experiment with the writing process and the discursive resources. Our goals were well intentioned, but too much attention was paid to helping the participants earn strong scores instead of developing flexibility and recursivity as composers.

Reflecting back on the participant’s performance it becomes clear how much room they had left to grow from this experience. The participants’ uncertainty in boundary crossing, inability to perceive writing as a form of problem solving, and reluctance to identify as novice writers all proved the flaws in our plan of the unit. Too much time was spent preparing them for the AP English Language & Composition Exam, while there were not enough opportunities for students to embrace the writing process and the discursive resources as they experimented with different approaches to composing the argument essay. This unit was not a complete
failure as the students were able to score reasonably well on their final essays for the argument paper. Another way this study succeeded pedagogically is its emphasis on the effectiveness of modeling, conferencing, and peer review.

Theme 3: Modeling, conferencing, and peer review are valuable when aiding students in adapting their writing to previously inexperienced demands and contexts.

When encountering the unfamiliar, developing composers cannot be imprisoned by a serial approach; without flexibility and adaptability, they will labor inefficiently to shape their compositions to adhere to their desired outlooks. Educators must aid their novice writers in developing problem-solving skills to contend with the complex challenges of composing for the unaccustomed. Therefore, teachers must model and provide feedback on how to move from one composing stage to another and how these transactions can offer the solutions to the dilemmas inherent in executing any written assignment.

Modeling

As we designed the unit for showing the students how to write the argument essay, Ms. Whalen and I decided that modeling would be one of our top instructional strategies. We knew that the students had no previous experience with composing this type of essay, so we knew we had to use Ms. Whalen’s expertise, as a teacher of AP English Language & Composition for the past four years, to assist the students in understanding the distinctions between the argument essay and the other writings that they had composed in high school. We decided to follow Nancie Atwell’s model of the writer’s workshop. In her pedagogical practices, Atwell attempted to assist her developing composers, Atwell used modeling to let:
[The students] know I write because I bring in drafts of my writing for students to respond to...I participate with them in collaborative writing ventures...I take off the top of my head and write out loud in front of them...I show them how I plan, change my mind, confront problems, weigh options, make decisions, use conventions to make my writing sound and look the way I want it to” (1998, p.25)

A benefit of modeling is that it validates the teacher as a writer for the students. They witness their instructor wrestle with the same problems they face when they compose an assignment for the first time. As an expert writer, the teacher can demonstrate his or her problem solving skills and how he or she make decisions in order to enact the writing process when meeting the demands of the composing tasks.

Without guidance from their educators, adolescents cannot transition from their novice writing statuses to the positions of experts. According to Elizabeth Wardle, compositional instructors must “help students bring what they already know to bear in our classrooms and to take what they have learned to other classrooms and varied rhetorical situations” (2012, p.1). It is up to teachers to arm their learners with the strategies to carry their writing knowledge from composing assignment to composing assignment. Students must consciously recall their past compositional experiences, while feeling secure enough to abandon their previous writing practices in the face of new demands. In order to achieve this lofty, yet imperative goal, educators must expose their developing writers to methods like the writing process and the discursive resources that can improve students’ recursivity and flexibility.
Specifically in our study, Ms. Whalen and I wanted the participants to observe how she not only performed the writing process, but how she generated strategies for the argument essay using the discursive resources. Beholding the discursive resources in practice validated these methods for the students: they comprehended that Ms. Whalen was an expert composer and, therefore, her techniques for writing the argument essay had merit. The students responded well to modeling and sought to imitate Ms. Whalen’s ways of employing the discursive resources. What we needed to emphasize more through Ms. Whalen’s modeling was how the writing process is a recursive act; we should have spent more time showing her returning to her prewriting and drafting to revise. This focus could have deepened the participants’ understanding of composing by challenging their linear views of how they should write. It also could have inspired them to take more risks with their composing; Ms. Whalen could have demonstrated using unsuccessful strategies at first, but then how to improve them through her revising and critical thinking skills.

**Conferencing/Peer Review**

Our other significant concern as we planned out the unit was how to provide the students with immediate feedback as the performed each phase of the writing process. Ms. Whalen and I decided to use conferences and peer reviews to provide the participants individual guidance on how to adapt their composing to the argument essay. We continued to follow Atwell’s writer’s workshop and to use her conception of conferences:

When student writers aren’t sure what to do next, can’t figure out how to achieve an effect, or are just plain stuck, I draw on my knowledge of writing and help
them. In addition to listening hard, asking open-ended questions, and reflecting back what I hear, I give advice, make suggestions, tell them what I think is working or needs more work, show them how something might work, and collaborate them on pieces of their writing. (1998, p.25)

Conferences provide students the opportunity to vocalize their concerns and how they are attempting to adjust their composing to an unknown writing task. The teacher acts as sounding board and can assist the students by evaluating their strategies and offering possible directions that developing writers can travel in order to meet the goal of their composition. This feedback can also inspire the students to experiment more as the risks they take can be validated through this conversations.

Some educators fear the too much conversation between the pupil and teacher will detract from the student’s individuality and voice. Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton dispelled this fear by contending: “the language of power does not necessarily mean asking them to conform to it. It means giving them the knowledge they will need to make informed language choices” (2005, p.6). Through conferencing, novice composers can regard their writing as a series of decisions and then they can be empowered. No longer is composing a random activity wrought with anxiety and confusion; rather, it is a methodological journey with multiple pathways guiding writers to its finish. Ehrenworth and Vinton echoed the necessity of novices identifying writing as collection of various decisions: “we serve students best when we empower them to make purposeful choices and decisions based on a complex, nuanced understanding of the effects of those...choices will have on both our minds and our hearts and the way they can affect and reinforce meaning” (2005, p.4).
Conferencing allows developing writers to become experts in composition and to adopt a greater attention to the subtle requirements that a composing assignment requires in terms of its genre. One-on-one conversations with their writing instructor can aid individuals in noticing the nuanced uses of language and how to incorporate this knowledge to improve their voices and style. As with modeling, the participants took to conferencing. In their journals and their interviews, they consistently craved counseling on how to construct their arguments or to develop their support. I also observed in the data how much that they had enjoyed peer review. They strongly indicated how helpful it was for them to talk with another person who was sharing in the same struggle that they were. Initial conferences with Ms. Whalen served as the models for how the students interacted with one another as they helped each other revise. They had a better sense of what questions to ask and how to evaluate strategies that were employed on the argument essay. As evidenced by their self-efficacy surveys, these conversations with their classmates increased their confidence and by the time they wrote their final argument essay for the unit, the felt predominantly confident in their performances.

Exposure to modeling and conferencing can aid developing writers in recognizing their successes and their failures when adapting their composing to a new writing assignment. The participants in the study eventually achieved success through these instructional practices. Modeling gave them a starting point from which to prewrite their arguments as they attempted to follow how Ms. Whalen employed the discursive resources to generate positions for the argument essay. As the students communicated individually with their educator and peers, they grew more confident
because their planning was validated by other writer, both novice and expert. The participants recognized that they could effectively compose this type of paper and by the end of the unit, felt reasonably secure in their performances. Our use of modeling and conferencing could have been improved had we focused more on the recursive nature of the writing process and how revision allowed for more risk taking. Unfortunately, the students did not grow as much as they could have because we presented the writing process in a linear fashion and failed to demonstrate revisions presence at every point of composing. Despite not achieving all of goals, we did appreciate how modeling and feedback could help these students to reach their full potential in the future.

Implications

Through this unit, students were able, to a certain degree, reflect on their approaches to composing an unknown writing task and use their knowledge of the writing process and of the discursive resources to aid them in their endeavors. Camilla best summarized how she benefitted from synthesizing the writing process with the discursive resources. She explained:

the first time I saw an argument essay I thought this is like very abstract. I didn’t really know how to tackle it or how to even...answer the question, but with...[Ms. Whalen’s] help, you can have an intro that’s very informal. Your thesis doesn’t have to have...point A, B, & C. It could...express the relationship between these two things...and then you have an example or two as your body paragraphs and then you really explain your ideas. (final interview, March 28, 2015).
In her entry, Camilla succinctly describes how to generate an argument for this essay on the AP English Language and Composition Exam. She was no longer concerned with how to formulate her introduction and her thesis because Ms. Whalen had shown her how to fabricate these parts to the paper using parts of the writing process. Despite the argument essay’s abstract nature, Camilla understood how to use prewriting to plan her paper and she was able to develop a thesis statement that established her support. Camilla’s discussion of the body paragraphs demonstrated that she now had a system in place for establishing her support and organizing it in an effective manner. By enacting the writing process, Camilla was able to both access her prior knowledge and apply her genre awareness; she referred back to previous thesis statements that she had composed and determined how the format of the argument essay impacted her argument differently than past assignments.

In her interviews, Ms. Whalen acknowledged that the growth that Camilla exhibited was also demonstrated by all of her students. After the participants wrote the final argument essay in class for a test grade, she stated, “they said the in class essay wasn’t as bad as they thought it would...they seemed the most confident they had after writing an in class essay” (final interview, March 28, 2015). Ms. Whalen recognized that her students had walked away from the timed essay knowing that they had created an argument essay to the best of their abilities. The participants had more confidence at this point in the unit than any other because they had enough practice of adopting some of the composing process to the argument essay that eventually the assignment became more familiar.

Limitations
My research had some significant limitations that need to be taken into account. Obviously, this study did not focus on a broad and diverse population of students. My research only involved eight eleventh-grade, mostly white, female students from an upper-middle class suburb in northern New Jersey. All of the participants were honors students who were striving to earn passing grades on the AP English Language & Composition Exam. This small population of students was intrinsically motivated and as a result, Ms. Whalen was freed to work with the students on a more individual level. One-on-one conferences would have been much more difficult to execute in a typical class size of twenty-five students. The participants' academic aspirations kept them focused on attempting to improve their writing; in a non-honors class, there would be no guarantee that all of the students would share this dedicated approach. Compiling data from the journals, interviews, and surveys would have been much more challenging with a larger class.

The design of this study also limited the growth the students could achieve in adapting their composing to a new writing assignment. By selecting AP English students, I inadvertently linked my standards of effective writing to those of the AP exam. While the AP exam does have some strong insights into how students can compose efficient essays, it is not the ultimate arbiter in determining what is "good" writing. Too much emphasis was placed on assisting students to earn higher scores on the argument essay, when Ms. Whalen and I should have spent more time encouraging them to experiment. Had we reconceived our values, then the students may have been more inclined to perceive themselves as novice writers and to problem solve as they composed the paper.
An additional problem with the structure of this unit was how linear our plans were for teaching the writing process. By starting at prewriting, moving to drafting, and concluding at revising, we only provided the participants a singular way to interpret the writing process and to write the argument essay. Ms. Whalen and I should have stressed the writing process' recursivity and demonstrated that revision can link all of the phases of the composing process. The knowledge that they could return and rework their strategies could have lessened the students' stress and further motivated them to experiment with different approaches to adjusting their writing to the argument essay. Unfortunately by placing revision towards the end of the unit, the participants valued revision less and restricted their use of revision. The changes the students made to their compositions were smaller than they would have been had we emphasized revision and prewriting as occurring simultaneously. Equating all of the stages of the writing process could have eased the participants' struggles with crafting arguments because they would not have felt trapped in a singular approach to writing this paper.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should be broader by including participants of all socioeconomic standings and of all different academic levels within high schools. Researchers should also converse with students outside of northern New Jersey's suburban neighborhoods. These conversations could yield different perspectives on using the writing process to compose an unknown text. It would be beneficial to investigate whether or not a linear perception of the composing process is a regional concern or if it is widespread throughout the United States. Research could be
performed on whether geography and/or culture alter perceptions of writing and its connection to problem solving. Do educators in other states employ different instructional strategies to enable their students to learn how to perform the different stages of the writing process? Would teenagers in other locations share in the struggle to problem solve and to identify as novices, or would they be challenged by the other discursive resources? More investigation needs to go into how to emphasize the writing process's recursivity to high school students. I know that this is a relatively old problem spanning three decades, but I believe new light can be shed upon it with the inclusion of the discursive resources. Too much emphasis is placed on the writing task and not the thought that goes into it. If teachers motivated their students to be more reflective and provided them concepts by which to verbalize their reflections, who knows how much the students' writing abilities could grow?

Conclusions

For me, this thesis stands as the beginning of a change in my writing instructional practices. In the future, I am going to devote more time to exploring how my students perceive writing assignments and their own writing abilities. I want to examine whether or not they attempt to form strategies when composing an assignment for the first time – or do they just draft and hope for the best? In our day and age of ever increasing standardized testing, it is important to encourage reflection in our students and to make them aware of how they use critical thinking. It is my hope that by having these conversations as a class and on an individual level with my students that I can empower them to take charge of their composing. One day my
students could find themselves at the same moment of frustration and anxiety that I experienced when writing during my freshman year of college. Will they sit there, muted by the overwhelming unfamiliarity of their assignment, or will they take a breath and then begin to reflect and to strategize? I hope for the latter because it was those actions that enabled me to succeed those many years ago.


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