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Composing '*An Experience*': Experiential Aesthetics
in First-Year Writing

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Composing 'An Experience': Experiential Aesthetics in First-Year Writing

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Students often struggle to understand why the required writing course is important in their academic and non academic life. My project seeks to bring these two parts of students' lives together by urging writing teachers and students to consider a richer concept of the term "composition," one that includes the fundamental work of composing meaningful knowledge by assembling and reflecting on raw experiences. Dewey's term "*an* experience" clarifies how students constitute knowledge from their experiences, and Burke's methodological concept of form offers students a model for writing that accommodates that Deweyian sort of learning. Building off of these aesthetic theories, I suggest that significant learning experiences must be composed and organized through critical reflection.

Keywords: First-year composition, Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, Writing to Learn, experience, reflection,

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Many thanks to my mother who listened patiently as I dramatically and tearfully retold the struggles I encountered in graduate school. Along with my father and my three older sisters, she never doubted my abilities and encouraged me to chase my dreams. I also cannot neglect thanking my dear friends in the program and, of course, my penguin, David Little, for keeping my heart safe for the past 10 years.

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Introduction

“I have found that a key indicator that I have learned something from a course is when I am out of class and relate something that occurs in my life with something discussed in class. I have come across this multiple times throughout the time this course has progressed and feel that I am leaving a far more informed and developed writer. Greatest of all, I feel that this course developed my feelings toward writing and through highlighting the daily influences of rhetoric. I feel my feelings toward writing advanced through broadening my perspective of why people write: for someone to read what was written. I had never thought of it that way, and really have found excitement in trying to clearly communicate my voice and opinions in my writing. In addition, I feel that I am leaving this course more enlightened as I became more aware of the rhetorical strategies that are used to convince people to act in certain ways every day.”

As I read Jenny’s reflective essay at the end of the semester, I felt as excited as she did. Somehow she had realized that the concepts from our Writing and Rhetoric course had a place in her life; she had taught herself how to connect her ‘real’ life and her academic life. I wanted to understand how Jenny was able to make those connections, and I wanted all of my students to be able to see how their classroom learning can impact their lives. Over time, I came to the conclusion that the goal of first-year writing classes is not simply to ask students to produce research papers and turn them in; instead, the writing classroom should be a place where students are taught how to compose their learning experiences into knowledge that is useful to them. That is to say, first-year composition should teach students how to compose “*an* experience,” or how to organize and communicate insights derived from their classroom experiences and life experiences.

I’ll be using the term “*an* experience” in the sense that John Dewey does: experiences are the input received as we go about our day: we eat a meal, feel the breeze on our face, learn about writing thesis statements. “*An* experience” is a composition of knowledge made orderly and meaningful—it is set apart from the inchoate flow of daily experiences. While the idea of teaching first-year writing students to compose knowledge rather than to compose texts alone might seem to reach beyond the curricular purposes of the first-year writing course, I would

argue this course is especially suited to composing *an* experience. In the first-year course I teach, the learning outcomes for the course include the ability to compose arguments, to think critically, and to write coherent and unified texts. Teaching students to make sense of their experiences in FYW requires them to demonstrate all of those learning outcomes. In the process of composing *an* experience, students write reflective essays that help them to make sense of their learning experience and make some kind of claim about what it all means. As it is now, my students see FYW as class where they learn to produce texts. However when writing composes *an* experience, the product is meaningful knowledge. In place of a class where students simply turn in their portfolios and wait to receive their grades, I suggest that FYW is a course that should teach students how to make sense of what they've accomplished and why it matters to them. In other words, the goal of the first-year writing course would still be to teach composition, of course, but composition in an expanded sense that includes the composition of knowledge extracted from students' learning experiences.

This essay explores, first, how Dewey's conception of the aesthetic can provide a theoretical framework that allows us to better understand what "*an* experience" is. Then it draws from Kenneth Burke's concept of "form" in order to guide how we might teach the first-year writers how to compose and communicate such experiences effectively. I propose that the composition and communication of meaningful learning experiences are achieved through critical reflections like Jenny's. Jenny's writing provides an example of the sort of critical self-reflection that is essential for university students to learn: as she composes her learning experiences into a piece of writing, she makes her own sense of what she is learning inside the classroom and out, thereby creating her own knowledge. That creative act is fundamental to students' university experience where knowledge is encountered in fragments. The requirement

of the composition course offers us an opportunity to teach first year students how both to compose and communicate what they learn. This does not, however, require a complete revision of the FYW course. Rather we can simply consider a richer concept of the term “composition,” one that includes explicitly the fundamental work of composing meaningful knowledge by assembling and reflecting on raw experiences.

In the essay that follows, I will briefly establish the exigency of my project by situating it within current composition pedagogies, and particularly those in the category of writing to learn. I'll then define Dewey's term “experience” in greater detail to clarify how students constitute knowledge from their experiences, and use Burke's more methodological concept of the aesthetic to offer students a model for writing that accommodates that Deweyian sort of learning. Finally, I will suggest several practices for teaching students how to compose and communicate their own knowledge through critical reflection.

Rethinking Writing to Learn

My project of teaching first year writers how both to compose and communicate their learning experiences has its roots in the writing to learn approach to composition, but there are some differences as well. The writing to learn movement relies on the hypothesis that the process of “writing may help students to think critically and to construct new knowledge” (Klein 204). This supposition surfaced in the 1930s, inspired by Dewey's ideas of progressive education, and crested again in the 1970s with the emergence of writing across the curriculum. Janet Emig, one of WAC's central figures, insisted that writing synthesizes knowledge by virtue of the process itself: “Writing is also integrative in perhaps the most basic possible sense: the organic, the functional. Writing involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain which entails the active participation in the process of both the left and the right hemispheres” (125). In other words, the

act of writing makes use of the entire brain as it connects all of the ways we learn and make sense of things. To support her observation, Emig relied on A. R. Luria, a neuropsychologist credited at that time with formulating the most persuasive argument for writing as heuristic:

Written speech is bound up with the inhibition of immediate synpractical connections. It assumes a much slower, repeated mediating process of analysis and synthesis, which makes it possible not only to develop the required thought, but even to revert to its earlier stages, thus transforming the sequential chain of connections in a simultaneous, self-reviewing structure. Written speech thus represents a new and powerful instrument of thought. (Luria and Yudovich 118)

The concept that writing is a holistic process in the sense that it requires multiple senses, multiple parts of the brain, and both analysis and synthesis skills is a promising foundation for the argument that the writing process in general helps students to engage their minds in order to compose knowledge. However, my approach involves closer attention to what kind of writing students are engaged in.

Haneda and Wells explain that during the second wave in the writing to learn movement students were mostly engaged in writing “transactional” texts (430). These kinds of texts are the result of teachers asking students to reproduce material from their reading or coursework. Generally, students find transactional writing tasks easy to complete because it asks them to examine their understanding of the content and, as Haneda and Wells put it, “in order to make one’s meaning clear for others, one must first make it clear for oneself” (433). Students write to explore their ideas and make sense of them; writing therefore allows students to think through the material and reproduce it effectively. However, if writing is understood as a means of making and communicating meaning, simply asking students to reproduce knowledge is not making use

of all that the writing to learn perspective has to offer. John Ackerman warns that many teachers might see writing to learn only as a method to improve student “recall or comprehension” (355). However, this view of writing to learn is too reductive; it diminishes the knowledge-creating potential of writing to a mere memory aid (355). In this way, teachers are simply “equating learning with remembering” (355). Instead, my project treats learning as a transformational experience where the act of composing knowledge from experiences makes learning more meaningful; this kind of knowledge changes the way we think and ultimately who we are.

Nancy Nelson also comments on the potential for this kind of transformation in writing to learn. She observes that “most academic writing-to-learn tasks involve much reading as well as writing, since students are asked to read textual materials and transform them in some way to produce their own texts” (26). While Nelson’s suggestion that students transform their reading materials through summary and analysis is a step in the right direction, writing to compose knowledge encourages students to transform their life and learning experiences—not just the classroom content and reading materials. Nelson notes that “if teachers consider learning a constructive and transformative process, they probably seek to promote this process by assigning students knowledge transforming tasks, that is, tasks that do not allow them merely to reproduce knowledge from the textbooks, but instead require them to make their own inferences and comparisons, find their own applications and examples, and so on.” (13). This kind of writing is allows students to make sense of what they learn by composing it into knowledge. Rather than simply duplicating a text, students add to the course material by integrating examples and experiences from their lives and transforming that knowledge into something more meaningful. In other words, as Nelson states, “The act of writing itself is not the point. Writing is a tool for thinking and a tool for learning” (17).

If teachers see writing as a tool for thinking and learning, then it is possible for writing to help first-year students overcome the difficulty of compartmentalized learning that occurs in universities. I see my first-year students struggling to make sense of their university experience as they go from class to class learning concepts that are, to them, unrelated. Writing to learn can help students synthesize what they are learning in their various courses. Writing to learn and writing across the curriculum programs are centered on this kind of synthesis. Tynjälä, Mason, and Lonka insist that “writing should be a business of the whole school community, not only of writing teachers” (7). While this is a noble goal and an approach that has shown much promise, it requires support from all teachers and all classes which would prove difficult, if not impossible, in a university setting. Ackerman criticizes WAC models because they fail to “account for cultural diversity in a university community,” as it is an “illusion that the university...is homogeneous with regard to its discourse practices and core ideas and beliefs” (338). This diversity is embraced by the model I am proposing. When students are writing towards a goal of making connections and understanding what they learn in and out of school, they are able to incorporate their unique beliefs and cultures, what they have already learned in previous classes, the things they want to continue learning, and their life experiences.

Writing to compose knowledge allows students to combat the compartmentalization that takes place in the university where students memorize the material, take their exams, and go on to their next course. Boscolo and Mason lament the lack of “emphasis on cross disciplinary connections of even cross-course connections” (34). These kinds of connections are difficult to make because each student is taking different classes at different times. Although many first-year students are in the midst of their general education classes, there is no set path through these core classes. Some students will have already completed their introductory science classes, while

others are waiting until next year to take those and are enrolled in political science instead. So how can composition teachers refer to any shared learning experiences outside of the classroom? How can teachers help students make connections to their other courses? Ultimately, it is left up to students to make these connections on their own, and quite often students do not know how to do this without proper direction and self-reflection.

One of the shortcomings of the current educational system is that students are forced to compartmentalize their learning while in school, yet their future workplaces value originality and the ability to see how ideas relate to one another. Nelson also puzzles over this incongruity: “Originality, even within a particular discipline, often comes from seeing and creating connections across domains and connections with other disciplines and from importing ideas from another discipline into one’s own” (34). However this kind of “creative synthesis” between classes and disciplines is simply not being taught to college writers (35). Treating writing as a way of composing previous experiences and knowledge into meaningful learning experiences allows students to make the important connections between their various classes and even between their school life and real life. While writing to learn presents a solid pedagogical foundation for my theory, changes must be made. Students must first be taught that the goal of writing is synthesis: composing experiences in ways that make connections and new knowledge. Teachers must also leave behind the notions that writing as a kind of reproduction, or summary, of texts. In order for students to overcome the compartmentalization of their college experience, they must engage in the kind of writing where they “manipulate, integrate, and re-structure knowledge by using, and reflecting on, their existing conceptions and beliefs in a continuous process of developing meaningful understanding” (Nelson 85). This writing is the kind of

composition that allows students to frame and communicate their meaningful learning experiences.

What Dewey's and Burke's Theories of Aesthetics Teach Us About First-Year Writing

Because writing to learn considers the writing process as a tool for creating meaning, it is reasonable to locate my project within that larger framework; however, it might be more difficult to understand what John Dewey's and Kenneth Burke's aesthetic theories can offer the teacher of first-year composition. In order to bridge the gap between the composition classroom and aesthetic theory, my project requires a redefinition of the term "aesthetic": I rely on Dewey's conception of the aesthetic that sees art as "a process of doing or making" (*Art* 47). This definition makes each of us a sort of artist as we go about the ongoing project of composing our experiences into an understanding of what we know and value. Based on that definition of "aesthetic," I suggest that students at the university are artists as they compose from their learning what it is they have come to know. While the use of the term "artist" might bring to mind aesthetic crafts like painting and sculpting, it would not be extreme to consider academic writing, as university students practice it, as an aesthetic process since they are creating, or composing knowledge from the raw material of their learning experiences.

If teachers and students look at writing as an aesthetic act, a way of creating *an* experience, it seems logical to look to aesthetic theory for direction and inspiration. Burke's and Dewey's theories of aesthetics are especially suited to my project because they build upon the American Pragmatist proposition that our primary way of knowing is through experience. Nathan Crick, a supporter of experiential knowledge, validates the claim that writing is an aesthetic act because, as he puts it in "Composition as Experience," writing serves as a medium "whose purpose is not to transmit static ideas in language but to transform our lived experience

in time” (259). This transformation occurs during the writing process as students make sense of their experiences and compose them into knowledge. Writing is crucial to the formation of “*an* experience,” because Dewey suggests that “without external embodiment, an experience remains incomplete” (*Art* 51). That is to say, *an* experience must be communicated and reflected upon in order to have meaning—the medium of writing serves as that communication, that “external embodiment.”

Adding Dewey’s concept of *an* experience to my project suggests a reconceiving of “composition” in FYW. When students compose *an* experience they are synthesizing learning experiences and transforming them into knowledge. The differences between “experience” and “*an* experience” will be discussed at length in the paragraphs that follow. After students compose *an* experience, the next step in the process is for them to communicate it to others. Burke’s description of “form” suggests a method for doing that: a way to combine and articulate the individual elements of learning as naturally, as one thing leads to another. One definition of form is “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (*Counter-statement* 31). In this way, form is the process by which students are able to explain and communicate the knowledge they have composed as a result of having *an* experience. Burke’s aesthetic form understood in this experiential sense allows students to compose knowledge by recounting the process of linking, connecting, seeing a question or need, and finding a satisfying answer.

The creation of *an* experience is integral to understanding both my project as well as Dewey’s aesthetic; therefore, is it necessary to dissect how Dewey is defining and using the term “experience.” Dewey argues that “experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living” (*Art* 35). This makes

experience a recurring, natural process. Because experience is not a simple, one-time-only happening, some experiences are underdeveloped, or “inchoate” (35). In these cases, however, the experience is not yet considered “*an* experience.” Dewey clarifies that “things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience” (35). Simply put, *an* experience is framed.

Bertram Morris further explicates Dewey’s terms *experience* and *an* experience stating: “*Experience* refers to the actual connection in human encounters, whereas *an* experience is that limited, intense perception which has a beginning, a middle, and an end” (190). Morris’ insight supports the notion that *an experience* requires some kind of framework. By structuring an aesthetic experience, the auditor is prepared to receive, perceive, and take part in creating an experience; rather than simply enjoying or receiving the experience. However, Morris’ definition is slightly problematic in its wording. For him to suggest that *an* experience is limited or has a specific end is to suggest that an experience does not continue to deepen or develop over time. I would contend that *an* experience can be a process not limited by time—it may take years to develop a knowledge and understanding of life experiences. While Morris may not recognize the complete lifespan of an experience, his explanation of *an* experience’s “beginning” and “end” indicates the need to properly frame *an* experience with some kind of preparation and reflection.

Like Morris’, Dewey’s terminology and wording can seem inconsistent. *Art as Experience* often reveals a lack of precision with Dewey’s terms because he uses *an* experience and “primary phase of aesthetic experience” interchangeably. Philip Zeltner points out that this “primary phase” is not necessarily a full-fledged aesthetic experience (17). Instead, the primary phase is much like Dewey’s term “experience” because it “indicates the ongoing activities of human beings which, *apart* from the fine arts or *similar deliberative cultivations*, posses

aesthetic quality” (17). More simply, we may encounter experiences that are not fully framed, but still possess aesthetic quality without being “*an* experience.” Dewey is not emphasizing that *every* normal experience has an aesthetic phase, but rather that every normal experience *might* or *can* have an aesthetic phase. What Dewey felt was more important to emphasize, however, was that aesthetic experience could very well be a function of *any* normal experience when properly structured” (5). The concept of structuring the primary phases of a normal experience so that it might develop into *an* experience has practical applications because this suggests that through writing, students can make sense of this constant stream of experiences and compose them into a meaningful learning experience, or *an* experience.

While *an* experience is developed over time, proper structure and framing allow *an* experience to be completed in some kind of “consummation.” Dewey believes that consummation occurs “when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (*Art* 35). This fulfillment is what creates *an* experience; consummation sets these special experiences apart from the normal everyday experiences. Zeltner supports this view when he argues that the term “‘consummatory experience’ is used synonymously with ‘*an* experience’” in Dewey’s works (17). This consummatory phase indicates the development of experience to *an* experience, which suggests that *an* experience is cultivated and progressive. Dewey explains, “There can be no movement toward a consummating close unless there is a progressive massing of values, a cumulative effect. This result cannot exist without conservation of the import of what has gone before.” (*Art* 137). Consummation, then, requires careful and critical reflection of the experiences that make up *an* experience. In this way, *an* experience is nurtured over time and may not occur on command. Dewey remarks, “Consummation is relative;

instead of occurring once for all at a given point, it is recurrent” (137). In other words, *an* experience is not a conclusion or end in itself, but the fulfillment or fullness of aesthetic experience. Dewey suggests that consummative experiences can be encouraged through careful structuring and reflection, although such experiences must occur in their own time.

To sum up, *an* experience is a process; it begins with impressions from daily life that accumulate and are cultivated and framed into *an* experience over time. D. C. Mather neatly describes this process in further detail when he concludes:

This, then, is the basic rhythm of experience: (1) immediate qualitative experience of "doing and undergoing" in specific situations, giving rise to (2) reflective experience in which the organism not only "has" the experience but understands its meaning, or perceives the relation between its "doing" and "undergoing," and, as a result, (3) the final phase of experience, which incorporates the significance and meaning of the reflective phase and is thereby rendered more rich and deepened in its immediacy. This is *an* experience, or a consummatory experience. (226)

There is a kind of rhythm inherent in the creation of a consummatory experience that is reminiscent of other processes we encounter in life: “A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through...Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience” (*Art* 35).

Dewey’s notion of *an* experience having rhythm and following a sort of unfolding as it approaches consummation parallels Burke’s concept of form. Burke explains that there is a natural rhythm to the way we think because there is a rhythm, a “crescendo,” underlying all

things in nature—seasons, gravity, and sex. This crescendo is what Burke calls form: “an arousing and fulfillment of desires...it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (*Counter-statement* 124). Burke’s concept of sequential progression offers composition students a method for communicating their experiences to others, a way of showing how their separate learning experiences connect in ways that push their ideas to consummation, or “to the end of the line” (Burke, “Watchful” 48).

Like Dewey, communication is a key component of Burke’s aesthetics; Burke suggests that art becomes successful only when it becomes “a mechanism for arousing emotion in others” (*Counter-statement* 55). In the writing classroom, students are learning how to communicate as they attempt to convey ideas clearly to their audiences. However, getting an audience to react emotionally to a piece of writing can be a difficult task. Burke would argue that the main issue with communication lies in the fact that there are inherent barriers that prevent human beings from understanding one another perfectly. In his essay, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Burke suggests that the simple fact that we all inhabit separate minds and bodies is a physical barrier to perfect communication: “Although I as a *person* may sympathetically identify myself with other people’s pleasures and pains, in my nature as a sheer *body* the pleasures of *my* food and the pains of *my* toothache are experienced by me alone” (265-66). This means that when we try to convey an idea, emotion, or experience we are striving to communicate in such a way that other people in their separate bodies and minds can understand. Form offers us a method for transforming our experiences into communicable ideas.

Burke’s definition of form is rather complex, so Robert L. Heath’s essay “Kenneth Burke on Form,” is indispensable in navigating this multifaceted term. Heath defines form as “an act constituted by the discursive progression of an idea through various associations and stages to

the satisfaction of audience expectations” (392). Put another way, form is born from an idea that is framed, composed, and communicated to an audience in such a way that meets their needs and desires. This understanding of form is vital to the project of understanding how the first year classroom can provide the framework on how to compose learning into *an* experience. Burke’s theory of form combines “substance, idea, and audience appeal into a single, critical principle” (392). Therefore, form is a synthesis of many concepts that students in first year composition are expected to learn; it integrates content, purpose, audience awareness, and style.

Just as there is a process for the composition of *an* experience, there is a process inherent in Burke’s form. The first thing students need to do is have an idea; after all “form is an act of giving shape to an idea: knowing what goes with what and how ideas modify and transform one another through arrangement” (Heath 397). Burke and Dewey are linked in this way because our ideas are our experiences, and, as Burke observes, experiences emerge from “the relationship between an organism and its environment” (*Counter-statement* 150). This sounds similar to Dewey’s notion of experience where our lives are made up of a constant stream of experiences that need to be transformed and composed into *an* experience.

To achieve that kind of transformation, students must understand that their ideas should follow the progression of form which consists of “associations and modifications whereby each idea shapes, amplifies, or contradicts each previous one” (Heath 398). Through the creative process of writing, students should expect for their ideas to change and conflict with each other as they work through and make sense of their ideas. Burke himself writes that “a work of art is a *development* or *transformation* that proceeds *from* something, *through* something, *to* something.” (“Study” 15). This is why writing can be considered an aesthetic process: students are

developing their ideas as they think through them in order to give them form, to compose them into something with meaning.

After students have composed an understanding of the content (the ideas and experiences) they are writing about, the next step in Burke's process is to communicate it to others. One of the components of form "is the development of substance to complete an idea in a progression which meets the expectations of the audience" (Heath 398). The audience is crucial to the communication of a form because writers must take care that they are converting their ideas into symbols that the audience will find appealing. Burke writes, "A work deals with life for a great many people when it symbolizes such patterns of experience as characterize a great many people and ramifies the Symbol by such modes of experience as appeal to a great many people" (191). In simpler terms, writers convert their experiences into symbols that the audience will find appealing and accessible.

The ultimate goal of form, as outlined by Burke, is to "produce the sort of effects which certain people (presumably more or less like [the artist/writer] himself) will find appealing" (*Counter-statement* 190). Burke goes even further suggesting that "form would be the psychology of the audience," meaning that without an audience there is no form because form occurs in the mind of the audience when their desires are fulfilled. (31). It seems then, that form is not truly form unless the writer has the ability to communicate his or her experiences effectively to another person. With this in mind, form is also how knowledge is created because it is through articulation of the knowledge that students are able to understand that they have had *an* experience. That is to say, communication through reflective writing allows "the writer to examine, clarify, and crystallize thoughts and ideas that might otherwise be floating around the mind in disconnected fragments" (Jones and Shelton 85). Students might have ideas and

experiences, but until reflection, until the act of communication, these ideas and experiences are disconnected and meaningless. The act of communication is a way of making the unconscious conscious. Many times when we articulate thoughts and ideas to others we find ourselves refining and changing our response as we speak. This is the same when students articulate their ideas through writing. By giving the ideas form, students are refining ideas and making connections—for themselves and for others. In this way, students are not only making knowledge for themselves, but simultaneously making knowledge for their audience as well.

Burke's formal process can be summed up in this way: the writer comes to have some learning encounter (an emotion, an idea, a classroom lecture) which is composed into meaningful knowledge and articulated to the audience in a way that fulfills their needs or expectations, thus composing *an* experience (*Counter-statement* 55-56; 157). Form can be understood as a creative and transformative discursive process that occurs over time and requires thoughtful framing. Framing, in this sense, is how *an* experience is "demarcated [from] the general stream of experiences" (*Art* 35). Experiences must be set apart and ordered so that we can make sense of them. Dewey writes that order "is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to on another" (13). Form then requires both a structure and an explanation of the ways in which the experiences connect in order for the audience's needs to be fulfilled.

While form is sometimes reduced to arrangement or to formal elements of style, Heath suggests that "Form is more than conventional adornment; it is more than a means for attempting to satisfy a listener's expectations...indeed form is inseparable from concept, the mental configuration of ideas" (402). This is not to say that form does not require creative elements of style; form is not the retelling of facts—like listing the chronological happenings of the day in your diary. Rather form is a symbolic and creative process that helps us to understand

experiences and communicate them in effective ways so that these inchoate experiences and ideas can be composed and refined into *an* experience. Form can therefore be understood as the act of communication itself as it defines and reshapes the content, or knowledge, in ways that relate to others' understanding.

Now that Dewey's concept of "experience" and Burke's notion of form are clarified, it is important to understand how all of the elements of my project fit together. If writing is understood as an aesthetic act, then we can consider theories of aesthetics as adding something significant to the writing classroom. Dewey and Burke are important to this conversation about FYW because Dewey tells us what *an* experience is and how we can cultivate it and Burke shows us that writing needs a form in order for experiences to achieve consummation, or transform into *an* experience. Writing simply for the sake of completing an assignment will not be effective; we must teach students that knowledge is composed when you write for an audience, when you write to fulfill someone's desires. At times the only audience a student writes a reflective piece for is himself, writing in a journal, for example, but even in that case, writing is a way for him to refine his ideas and extract the knowledge out of the experiences.

Cultivating Reflective Learning in the Composition Classroom

There are many ways in which we can engage in this kind of smelting process that refines our ideas and experiences. Following Dewey's lead, I argue that the best way to create *an* experience is through critical reflection. Critical reflection can take many forms—meditation, for example. However, I find that reflective essays work particularly well for first-year writers because they supply enough structure for students to produce a piece of writing while also offering students the freedom they need to play with ideas and make sense of them. Reflective writing provides both the time and mental space for them to take a moment and compose the raw

material. The problem is, however, that reflective thinking is not necessarily an innate ability. Dewey suggests that people must be taught to engage in reflective activities: “While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn to think well, especially how to acquire the general habits of reflecting” (*How We Think* 35). As Dewey sees it, reflection must become a habit—not just an activity done a few times throughout the semester. Kathpalia and Heath support Dewey’s observation when they claim that “the capacity to reflect is not automatic and has to be consciously developed over time” (302). In other words, first year students must be deliberately taught how to reflect upon what they are learning in order for this skill to be developed in such a way that reflection becomes a composition of learning.

In addition to being a habitual and conscious activity, another important aspect of meaningful reflection is critical assessment—students need to be taught how to evaluate experiences. When students write thoughtlessly or without putting their “experience under critical scrutiny,” Christopher Kayes would say that they have simply written “experience absent reflection” (65). Instead, students must learn to assess their experiences through the process of reflection. Kayes elaborates by calling the reflective act itself “the critical evaluator of experience” (70). For, “without being subject to critical reflection, experience is likely to be taken for granted... Reflection serves to animate experience, ensures its freshness by digging deeper into the nature of experience” (70). Thus, critical reflection is not the same as journaling or absently jotting down what the lecture was about that day. It requires careful analysis—breaking down the individual experiences into parts, asking questions, making connections to other ideas and experiences. Even beyond taking learning experiences apart, critical reflection allows students the opportunity to put these experiences back together in order to compose knowledge, or *an* experience. “Experience absent reflection” reflection might look more like an

itemized list indicating what he or she did to complete the paper: “I went to the writing center and talked with a tutor. She said my thesis was confusing and I needed to clarify it more, so I did. I feel like my thesis is much stronger now.” Rather than that bland, lifeless laundry list, a critical reflection indicates that the student’s work on a paper has meant something to them. A sophomore student of mine, Jordan, wrote about his struggle to balance clarity and concision:

At the beginning of the semester, I mentioned that I am usually a succinct person; I say what I want to with only a few words. I realized this semester that this is a good thing; however, I also learned that I need to explain my ideas better. To me, I can just say my idea and it makes sense in my head. But people don’t think like I do. I need to help them think like I do and lead them through the same thought process that I used to arrive at that conclusion. It is more difficult to do, but it makes the writing so much more effective.

Here Jordan demonstrates that a clear purpose isn’t just important in his opinion paper; he is discovering character traits and connecting that with how clarity in thought, speaking, and writing will help him interact better with others outside the classroom.

In *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*, a student, Matt, remarks that reflection is often misunderstood: “people seem to think that we’re under a tree writing in our diary, whereas what we are doing is integrating all of our coursework, outside experiences, previous experiences, things we’ve read from different courses and so on” (qtd. in Thaiss and Zawacki 120). Hopefully, this kind of synthesis is occurring when students like Jordan critically reflect. When reflection is used as a critical evaluation of raw, unfulfilled, experiences it “helps students to combine experience and knowledge together to produce new learning, to apply theory to practice, encourage critical reflection, gain insight into personal development, and manage their

emotions throughout the learning process” (Kathpalia 301-02). Put another way, without critical reflection, students may not fully understand the inchoate learning experiences that they encounter in the classroom and these kinds of experiences will not be transformed into *an* experience.

Dee Fink goes so far as to suggest that without reflection no real learning occurs at all. In *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, Fink defines what constitutes a learning experience by claiming that a significant learning experience, or *an* experience, consists of the raw experiences from daily life combined with reflection. Fink explains that “after students have encountered new information and ideas and had new ‘doing’ or ‘observing’ experiences, they need time to reflect in order to decide what meaning to give these other learning activities. Without this reflection, they have learned something, but they have not made the learning fully meaningful to themselves” (110). Like aesthetic experiences, learning experiences must also be properly framed in order to become *an* experience for the student.

By now, reflection is a widely used and accepted teaching tool, so it is unnecessary to continue lauding the advantages of reflective writing in this paper. However, as Tom Russell points out, while “professional educators often advocate reflective practice, it is less clear that they model it and provide explicit instruction” (199). Put another way, even though teachers know that reflection is beneficial to student learning, many do not teach it effectively. The next section of this paper presents practices that cultivate meaningful reflection. After all, “fostering reflective practice requires far more than telling people to reflect and then simply hoping for the best” (Russell 203-04).

Rather than hoping for the best, experts like Kathleen Yancey suggest that effective reflection must be situated and contextualized “Through reflection [students] can assign

causality, they can see multiple perspectives, they can invoke multiple contexts. Such theorizing doesn't occur naturally: as a reflective social process, it requires structure, situatedness, reply, engagement...when practiced, it becomes a discipline, a habit of the mind" (19).

It is up to teachers to provide structures by showing students how experiences can be contextualized in a school setting. Rather than just telling students that they should reflect on a learning experience, teachers ought to help students see the contexts in which an experience might relate or connect. This idea of situating reflective activities brings to mind Thaiss and Zawacki's comments on transferability.

Although we would like to think that students are making meaningful connections between their coursework, their personal interests, their learning experiences and their career goals, the sad truth is that most "students assume no transferability from one course to another, or from the academy to the workplace or citizenship.... Students need to be convinced that what they learn in one context will be useful in another, and teachers have to show them how" (Thaiss and Zawacki 82). It really might be as simple as explicitly telling students to try and think of how experiences might relate to their lives during a reflective writing activity. In other cases, teachers will have to get to know their student's interests and needs so that teachers can offer more detailed suggestions. Thaiss and Zawacki support this student-centered approach when they suggest that teachers should "give students opportunities for reflecting on their own growth as writers, in the academy and as related to the workplaces they will enter" (152). I try to at least know and remember what my students are majoring in, so that I can help them to understand how certain skills and learning experiences will help them to achieve their future goals.

For example, my student, Rachel was pursuing a career in editorial photography. At the beginning of the semester, she had a hard time seeing how Aristotle and his three appeals would

help to take pictures for fashion magazines. To help her make this connection more apparent, I showed her advertisements and other modes of visual rhetoric so that she could experience what it was like to rhetorically “read” a visual image. In her final reflection she excitedly reported:

You were right when you said that I wouldn't be able to stop seeing [rhetoric] everywhere! Now, I can't help but criticize something when I see rhetoric [at] work. It helps me at least not to be sucked into a commercial and correctly analyze a product that is being sold. I can name whether commercials are using pathos, logos, or ethos, which makes me happy to apply what we've learned, even if it is subconsciously.

Like Rachel, many students need help finding the connections between their experiences in the classroom and their life experiences. Unless these connections can be highlighted by the teacher and developed through structured critical reflection, the student will not be able to use writing in a way that will synthesize their learning experiences.

While there is no one-size-fits all approach to reflection, in addition to contextualizing the reflective activities, it is important that teachers preface reflective writing with structured directions and expectations. Instead of simply assigning students to write a reflection, teachers should begin the semester by defining what makes a “good” reflection; this definition would vary depending on the instructor, the student’s needs, and perhaps even the subject. Kathpalia and Heah recommended that teachers model excellent reflections by showing students samples (313). Because getting started can be difficult for students, another best practice in reflective writing is providing students with explicit prompts that encourage deep thinking not just about the material, but also the students’ writing process and personal life (316).

Reflective writing might not even be limited to just print. Especially as new media studies takes center stage, teachers should remember that other modes of writing can be useful venues for reflection. Students might even be reflecting and not even know it—Twitter, Facebook, and personal blogs often serve as reflective outlets for students as they write out their feelings and experiences. Teachers can expand students' familiarity with online genres to include reflective activities in the form of e-portfolios, posts in online forums, and even websites. Almost any mode could be molded into an effective reflection activity as long as it has the right elements included. In *Developing Your Portfolio-Enhancing Learning*, Marianne Jones and Marilyn Shelton outline what they claim to be the four steps that are part of the reflective process: 1) observation and description of the experience, 2) analysis and interpretation, 3) insights and implications, 4) projections and planning for future learning. While these steps are descriptive enough to help instructors plan structured activities, they are also flexible enough to make room for students' creativity and individual needs.

In my classroom, I tried to balance structure and freedom by giving my students somewhat vague open-ended prompts. The very first assignment I give in my class is a diagnostic exercise in which students reflect on their personal experiences with writing up to this point. I asked them to respond to several of the following questions: Do you like or dislike writing? Why? Tell me about classes you've taken or other experiences that have shaped you as a writer. What challenges do you face as a writer? What strengths will you bring to the table? Later in the semester, as part of the final exam, I ask students to revisit these reflections and ask themselves if this class has changed any of their responses. I always make sure to tell them that it is fine if they still dislike writing, but I want them to tell me about why they still feel that way. Other reflective essay prompts are more focused on specific learning outcomes from the

assignments students complete. For example, after learning about the rhetorical situation and the appeals I ask my students to consider how these rhetorical concepts have changed how they write, think, and interpret various media (print, commercials, songs, etc.). Sometimes, my most effective prompts are overt in asking my students connect their classroom learning with other learning experiences. Following the rhetorical analysis assignment, I encouraged my students reflect on their experience with writing this difficult paper: Why do you think critical or analytical thinking is so difficult? When do you think you use or will use this kind of thinking in your life? There are many different ways to craft prompts that are thought provoking and encourage synthesis; I am simply offering a few examples. Crafting the prompts and teaching students how to engage in critical reflection is actually an easier task than grading the reflective essays.

Assessment can be an arduous task because it seems unfair to assign a grade to a student's learning experience. Of course we can't make judgments on whether a student's experience is meaningful or not, so one option is to assign completion or participation points. The danger in giving out "free" points is that students may not treat the reflection with the kind of seriousness it deserves. Jessica Green conducted a study in which student reflections were ranked and analyzed to see if effective reflection really did make a difference in student learning (9-11). In addition to providing insight on the value of reflective writing, her study includes the characteristics of critical reflection in a four-level rubric. Green's four levels of student reflection are as follows: Level 1 is responding. At this level of understanding, students are able to relate an experience and report their feelings about that experience. Level 2 reflections demonstrate the student's ability to connect aspects of the experience to his or her personal life or previous experiences. Students at this level may also be able to explain what they have learned from the

experience. The third level of reflection is when the student is able to analyze the experience. Green observes that in this level the “student asks questions, looks for answers, considers alternatives, or speculates about why something happened the way it did....The student explores the relationship between theory and practice or the connection between the assignment and the course objectives” (10). Level 4, the highest level of reflection, is where reconstructing ideas takes place.

At this highest level, students demonstrate the ability to make conclusions about the experience and apply what they have learned. Green calls this “formulat[ing] a personal theory” (11). Jones, Shelton, and Green’s research show us that the best student reflections follow their ideas “to the end of the line,” or, in other words, students think through the implications of their experiences in order to change the way they will think or act in the future. In this way, students’ reflections can help them think through difficult decisions they might have to make in their lives. I recall one of my students writing that her new found knowledge of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* is helping her analyze political speeches as she contemplates which candidate she will vote for in this year’s elections. Because reflection carries with it the potential to change thoughts and actions, it is important for instructors to continue searching for the most effective modes and methods of teaching reflection. While not every student may take the time and effort to create meaning in his or her reflection, it should still be taught in a way that makes it more significant than a convenient way to sum up a unit. Even with the potential for failure, reflection should be used in the classroom as a way to allow students’ learning experiences to take on a life of their own, to push through to the end of the line, to transcend into consummation. I have seen reflection allow students the time and space to give meaning and form to their experiences.

One student in particular found moments of profound growth within reflection. Michelle was a good student from the start; she was a strong writer and could have just coasted on autopilot the whole semester. And that was how she began—only invested enough to get by. That changed after I talked to her about her career goals during a one-on-one conference, and I saw how passionate she was about psychology and helping troubled teens. I told her to channel that passion for her papers, and she blossomed into an engaged writer but also, as she writes, a changed person:

The reflective essays written for each of the papers I turned in, for me personally, was where I realized my personal growth. Now, this growth wasn't just in writing, it was in understanding myself, and not even just understanding myself, but seeing changes in myself, and not even just realizing changes in the term, but truly realizing changes that have happened over long periods of my relatively short life.

Michelle hones in on some rather profound ideas in her final reflection: consummative learning experiences occur over long periods of time, and these experiences are inchoate until they are given form through reflective writing. It is important for teachers to understand that not every student will have the kind of experience that Michelle did; it would be disappointing to expect that. A Deweyian learning experience can take years, even a lifetime to shape—not just one short semester; however, small, everyday experiences are the foundation of *an* experience.

Conclusion

The first-year composition classroom should be a place where students learn how to form these meaningful learning experiences so they are able to develop the critical habits necessary to compose and communicate *an* experience. I am not calling for a complete overhaul of the first-

year composition course; I simply think it should offer students something more than the current process of completing and turning in the required assignments. Instead, FYW can teach students how to make meaning out of all of the classes they take in their university career. By understanding composition as a process of making knowledge, the composition classroom has the potential to be a place where students acquire the ability to think critically (and know what critical thinking actually is), to see how the concepts they learn in FYW transfer to other areas of their life and learning, and to realize personal growth and change. This kind of classroom not only helps students write research papers, but also to compose *an* experience that will last long after grades are posted.

I conclude with the final sentences of Michelle's reflection because she articulates the ultimate goal that both Dewey and I share for our students—that our courses might help them connect their learning with their “real” life and help them to create significant learning experiences that will shape them into better learners, better writers, better communicators, and better people:

I realized...I love writing; a spark has lit up something inside of me! I even blogged about it: “I am in love with how in love I've become with writing again... it's like... a relationship that is killer, because there is so much tension and problems, that you have to leave, but then come back to with so much knowledge of how to react to conflicts, as well as so much more personal growth, that a little spark of passion creates a forest fire of motivation to take yourself to the next level.”

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