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# Reimagining Reflection: Gender, Student Perception, and Reflective Writing in the Composition Classroom

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

REIMAGINING REFLECTION: GENDER, STUDENT PERCEPTION, AND  
REFLECTIVE WRITING IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Cayce Wicks

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Cayce Wicks, and entitled Reimagining Reflection: Gender, Student Perception, and Reflective Writing in the Composition Classroom, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Andrew Strycharski

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Vanessa Sohan

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Kimberly Harrison, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 5, 2015

The thesis of Cayce Wicks is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother who inspired my love for teaching and learning...

And to my father, who taught me to always search for more.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Florida International University for giving me the opportunity to grow as a thinker and writer and for accepting me as part of this community. FIU has always been my home. I am particularly grateful for the Teaching Assistantship that allowed me to gain teaching experience and to fully immerse myself in this experience.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
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by

Cayce Wicks

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Kimberly Harrison, Major Professor

The purpose of this thesis is to discover any existing correlation between gender and student perceptions of reflective writing in the composition classroom. Seventy-five students at Florida International University participated in a survey that explored their approaches to and understanding of reflective writing. In order to connect the specific results of this study to the larger context of composition theory, this thesis includes an examination of the theoretical background of gender and reflective writing. The results of the survey indicate that the only identifiable difference between male and female student responses resulted from their definitions of reflective writing. Beyond this difference, however, there were no significant variances in student perceptions of reflective writing. The response of these students at FIU indicates a shift in expected gender norms and suggests a reconsideration of what it means to be a gendered writer in the composition classroom.

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## INTRODUCTION

While sitting in a graduate literature course, I was instantly struck when I heard the professor casually remark, “You know, little girls and their diaries.” This comment was generally absorbed by the class and initiated no discussion. We moved on. The comment that “little girls” keep diaries seemed to be accepted as undeniable reality. The comment caused me to reflect on my own experience. And for the most part, I realized it was true. I have very clear memories of owning (and occasionally writing in) a small pink diary with gold trim safely guarded with lock and key. My brother owned no such diary. While my individual childhood cannot stand in for universal truth, there is something to be said about the idea that young girls seem to be taught that private, personal writing is a rhetorical space that is safe and perhaps even reserved for them.

As I thought about how it may be true that young girls are encouraged to write personally and privately when (and if) they write, I wondered if this gendered framing extends into the composition classroom. As a Teaching Assistant for the English Department at Florida International University (FIU), I began to think of the different writing situations in which our students are engaged. Writing instructors task their students with many different rhetorical situations, one of which is reflective writing. While not necessarily so, reflective writing is often personal and can be private. Even though reflective writing is not synonymous with diary writing, perhaps some students may draw parallels between the two forms. Even if students do not draw these particular parallels, I wondered in what ways students’ past experiences shape their interactions with reflective writing in the classroom. Does gendered discourse influence the classroom environment? And if so, could the student’s gender interact with and complicate the ways

that different students engage with personally inflected genres such as reflective writing? Would female-identified students be more receptive to and comfortable with reflective writing than their male-identified counterparts?

These questions led me to pursue this project about reflective writing and gender for my thesis research. First, I want to arrive at a firm understanding of how Western constructs of gender may come into play with a particular genre of writing and composition—reflective writing—in the context of the classroom. Second, I am interested in connecting what scholars and writing instructors have said—and not said—about reflective writing to student perceptions of reflective writing. My interest centers on the students’ perceptions and relations to this particular genre within the context of composition and gender studies. Through this project, I hope to present new insights concerning how gendered individuals perceive reflective writing in various nuanced ways as a result of their unique gender experiences. While I wondered if gender influences the way that students perceive reflective writing, my overall aim for this project was to listen to what a sample of FIU’s students are saying about reflective writing to implement this style of writing more effectively in the classroom.

With these questions in mind, I first considered the nature of reflective writing. Reflection, as a metacognitive thought process, occupies a central position in learning and the classroom (Dewey, Yancey). Existing as a continual process, reflection is a way of thinking about the world and how the self interacts in that world. John Dewey, a pioneer in the study of reflection, describes reflection as “the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration” (3). According to Dewey, reflection is not a single act but exists as a habit

that allows one to delve into the multifaceted aspects of a subject and situation. Lev Vygotsky also remarks on the continuous movement associated with reflection, placing language as foundational to reflection. He argues that, “The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought” (Vygotsky 218). In this definition, the concepts of “thought” and “word” reflect and refract back onto each other continuously in a process that allows new pathways of understanding and knowledge to emerge.

Reflection for Dewey is the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (9). In other words, reflection allows one to carefully consider beliefs as well as the origins of those beliefs. Furthermore, reflection enables one to extend beyond the situation at hand and potentially broaden ideas and make connections. Reflection, then, is a thought process that requires a looking back on one’s own way of thinking (recursion) in order to make changes—and hopefully improvements (revision)—in future thought processes and expression. Building on the definitions of these scholars, for the purposes of my thesis I define reflection and reflective writing in particular as writing that explores, negotiates, and seeks connections between past experiences and future possibilities.

Reflective writing is a central component of the composition classroom. As such, many scholars have studied and written about various aspects of reflective writing. While there are many definitions of reflective writing, it can be considered as any writing that engages personal beliefs and experiences. Furthermore, it may require writers to think about how they should broaden their understanding or improve their rhetorical or

analytical practices. In addition to its use in the writing classroom, reflective writing is implemented in a range of contexts including science and engineering (Huang and Kalman; King), the social sciences (Fisher), professional and teacher education (McGuire, Lay, and Peters; Schon; Greiman and Covington; Maarof; Hume; Samuels and Betts), second language learning (Lee; Orem), and medicine (Shapiro, Kasman, and Shafer). In addition to promoting learning in the writing classroom, reflective writing is also used to help students grapple with social issues (Kaufka; Bleakley). Scholars have also investigated how reflective writing is best implemented in the classroom, and they have analyzed and compared the nuanced ways in which reflection is assessed.

Scholars have approached and examined the act of reflection from many different disciplines, but my intention for this project is to focus specifically on reflection presented through writing. Many different sources have influenced my definition and approach to reflective writing, particularly Kathleen Blake Yancey's term "reflection-in-presentation." This term, established in her book concerning reflective writing in the composition classroom, is the most relevant to my own project. Yancey's term reflection-in-presentation, which refers to the public appearance of a formal reflective text, will serve as my guiding framework when referring to reflective writing. She argues that reflection-in-presentation is a rhetorical act that presents previously private writing as public, often for assessment by an other (71). Yancey presents a variety of options for reflection-in-presentation such as the introductory letter to a writing portfolio, annotations alongside a specific text, and end-of-term reflective letters. Other scholars have advocated for reflective journals, writers' memos, process journals, freewriting diaries, and even online blogs to enhance reflection in the classroom (Amicucci; Boud;

Cisero; Mills; Sommers; Mair; Elbow; Gannett). Regardless of the form that reflective writing takes, Yancey claims that the uniting factor within this category is that this form of reflection is prepared for an audience.

Since reflective writing seems to occupy the minds—and lesson plans—of many instructors in a variety of disciplines, I believe that it is important to explore and examine the social contexts in which our students and their writing are currently embedded and to pay particular attention to how these different contexts interact with students' views and performance of various writing genres. While a variety of sociocultural factors such as race, class, educational background, language, and gender can work together to shape a student's approach to a particular rhetorical situation, my project focuses on the ways that gender may come into play concerning reflective writing. However, I understand that it may be difficult to separate these entwined identity factors. My examination of gender and writing works primarily from the Western construct of the dichotomous rhetorical spaces traditionally reserved for men and women: the public and the private respectively. Broadly speaking, the world of public life—and public writing—is the world of the masculine, and the world of private life—and private writing—is the world of the feminine. In her work *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition* Miriam Brody examines how metaphors of masculinity and manliness dominate definitions of good and virtuous writing beginning as early as Aristotle and continuing into current composition theory. Brody argues that metaphors of gender have been used in order to give value to writing, with clear, effective, and healthy writing associated with masculinity and with overly ornate, deceitful, and sickly writing associated with femininity. Brody suggests that even though such gendered metaphors

may be very subtle in current composition theory and rhetoric, these metaphors are continuously transmitted into the minds of writers.

Other scholars, such as Cinthia Gannett, have explored the nuanced connections between diary/journal writing and gender. In her work *Gender and the Journal*, Gannett argues that diaries have been traditionally associated with women while journals have been associated with men. These different associations are problematic because of the differing values assigned to these rhetorical situations. Gannett asserts that diaries have been devalued and discredited because of their connection with the personal, the confessional, the emotional, and ultimately, the feminine. Gannett chronicles the ways in which Western constructions of feminine writing have been devalued, and uses the diary as the example *par excellence*.

However, while conceptions of academic, abstract, and argumentative writing have traditionally been associated with the masculine and have been generally valued in Western society (Brody), some scholars explore the ways in which “writing like a woman” may actually benefit students. It is important to note here that these scholars do not rely on an essentialist, biological binary construction of men/women, but rather respond to and work with the ways in which our culture has actively constructed the notions of gender and gender assumptions. While many texts have been published examining different aspects of reflection, the explicit connection between reflective writing and gender remains largely unexplored. Though there are many studies about gender and writing, only a few studies explore some of the correlations between gender, gendered writing, and reflection (Black et al.; Haswell and Haswell), but these studies

focus on the reader's perception of gendered writing rather than on students' perceptions and reflective writing as a particular genre.

Rather than focusing on students' lived experiences with gender and reflective writing, previous studies center on how readers/raters of reflective texts draw on traditionally Western notions of gender stereotypes and characteristics in writing. In other words, the existing literature writes Western notions of gender onto reflective texts and by extension, the authors of these texts. Although many scholars (Royster; Brodkey; Pratt; Lu; Kaufka; Lillis) do look at the intersections of gender, class, language, and race in writing and the writing classroom, there is not a specific emphasis on student perceptions of these intersections in terms of reflective writing.

Taking this gap in research into consideration, this project was largely conceived as an exploratory study of the sociocultural impact of gender on reflective writing. In addition to sections devoted to examining the notion of gendered writing and aspects of reflective writing in the classroom, this project includes the results of a student survey that asks students about their experiences with reflective writing. The goal of this project was not to discover or define any actual differences in discourse and reflective practices based on gender. Rather, the main goal was to understand student perceptions of reflective writing in the classroom and to learn if the gender of the student influences the particular way that reflective writing is perceived and described. Furthermore, the student voices represented in the survey can provide insight into how instructors can more effectively integrate reflective writing in the classroom. While existent scholarship indirectly suggests that female students should have a greater affinity for reflective writing as a result of the personal, and a possibly affective, characteristics of the genre,

the results of the student survey at FIU suggest otherwise. The responses of these students indicate a shift in expected gender norms and suggests a reconsideration of what it means to be a gendered individual in the composition classroom. Because FIU is a diverse, Hispanic-serving institution with many different social backgrounds intersecting, I realized that these students may not necessarily understand and perform gender in terms of reflective writing in ways that align smoothly with certain assumptions about gender. Furthermore, the students in this survey described a range of benefits and approaches to reflective writing outside of gender differences that instructors can learn from in order to refine their reflective writing pedagogy.

## CHAPTER I: GENDER AND REFLECTIVE WRITING

While many scholars have scrutinized reflective writing, there is little mention of how social and cultural contexts may specifically shape student perceptions of the genre of reflective writing. Furthermore, scholars have not yet explicitly examined the possibility that the gender or culture of the student or the instructor could influence how reflective writing is approached and performed as a genre by the students composing these texts. However, like any text, reflective writing does not exist in a vacuum. All writing stems from a particular context and is situated in a specific confluence of social, psychological, historical, and political contexts (Brodkey 80). Reflective writing, then, resides within an intricate cultural framework that is at work in the background.

In this chapter, I will primarily foreground one aspect of the myriad discourses that shape the writer-selves of students: gender. I would like to establish early that when I use the term “gender,” I do not mean to imply an essentialist, biological notion of rigid, fixed identity. Rather, by gender I hope to signify the range of constructs that have been created by society in order to create the dichotomy male/female and the resultant social hierarchies such binaries create. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles aptly states in her article, “Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing Within the Academy,” “I do not want to promote the idea that women, left to their own devices, would all write in a certain way and that this writing would always be different from all men's writing, but neither do I exclude the possibility that there might be significant, socially inherited and constructed contrasts between many women's and men's ways of thinking, their experiences, and their language” (353). I, too, am hesitant to exclude the possibility of difference as a result of

social discourses. Particularly, I see two major strands of gender discourse possibly at play in terms of shaping students' perceptions of the genre of reflective writing.

First, students are writing from within the largely Western ideology of Enlightenment discourse. While there have been many movements (see, for example, postmodernism) that attempt to overturn the ideological structures of the Enlightenment, by and large, Western society is still chiefly predicated on the humanist principles that emerged from the Enlightenment. This metaphysical Enlightenment tradition which so much of our current Western thought is grounded in seeks to eventually reach the essential form of any object or idea. Metaphysics asserts that self-same identity, that is, an identity that is undivided and whole, exists. Furthermore, metaphysics pits these clear, undivided, and unquestionable identities or ideas against each other. For example, metaphysics creates binary oppositions out of ideas such as white/black, subject/object, truth/error, presence/absence, speech/writing, reason/emotion, and man/woman (Lillis). These binary constructs are not neutral. Historically, metaphysical societies have given preference to the first idea of each of these pairs. Thus, metaphysics asserts both the notion of intact identity and a valuation of these constructed identities.

Theresa Lillis, in her book about essayist literature, claims that these hierarchical binaries are still at play, even in the writing classroom, and argues how such binaries as “logic over emotion; academic truth (published theory and research) over personal experience; linearity over circularity; explicitness (a form of) over evocation; closing down of possible meanings rather than open-endedness; certainty over uncertainty; formality over informality; competitiveness over collaboration” still influence the value system of assessment and instruction (115). The presentation and assessment of reflective

writing, then, should also be influenced by these marked binaries that may influence how students perceive reflective writing in the classroom. Elizabeth Flynn, in her influential article “Composing as a Woman,” makes explicit connections between these binaries. Flynn argues, “The mental processes that are involved in considering the abstract and the impersonal have been labeled ‘thinking’ are attributed primarily to men, while those that deal with the personal and interpersonal fall under the rubric of ‘emotions’ and are largely relegated to women” (427). In other words, the world of reason and thinking has largely been associated with the masculine while the world of emotion and the personal has been associated with the feminine. According to this logic, reflective writing as a genre inflected with personal and exploratory elements should be more closely associated with feminine writing, and by extension, female students.

Miriam Brody traces these associations back to classical rhetoric and advice literature. Writing about how classical advice literature utilizes gendered metaphors, Brody ultimately argues, “If modes of discourse—the separation of argumentation from exposition, the identification of psychological operations of comparison and analysis—have had a stranglehold over the representation of writing since the late Enlightenment, no less so has the advice that writing be manly” (5). In other words, classical advice literature, leading into the Enlightenment, sought to inform writing students that “masculine” writing—writing that was “wholesome, healthy, productive”—was the sort of writing that was valued (Brody 22). Importantly, Brody explicitly connects the idea that a developing writing subject emerges from a particular social discourse (7). Thus, while classical rhetoric and Enlightenment principles may seem like ancient history for modern students, the ideas and philosophies that emerged during the past are still active

in shaping students' notions of gender and the ways that gender is "supposed" to interact—particularly in a writing subject—in the present.

In addition to the metaphysical thinking that associates men with reason, argument, and structure, and women with emotion, exploration, and recursion, many writing scholars also examine the ways that psychological development could influence students' approach to writing and writing styles. Flynn draws largely on studies (Chodorow; Gilligan; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule) concerning the social and psychological development of males and females in order to chart the ways in which early childhood development could influence a person's sense of self and identity and thus shape the ways that a person views and performs acts of writing. Flynn argues that these studies claim that men and women do indeed differ in their psychological (moral and intellectual) development as a result of their subject position in relation to the primary caregiver—the mother (Flynn 424-427). Shelley Peterson summarizes the differences described in these studies and argues that these studies "differentiated between feminine characteristics of relationship and connectedness, and masculine characteristics of autonomy and independence" (Peterson 312). Flynn connects the claims from these feminist psychological studies to the writing classroom, claiming that the different psychological developments of males and females could potentially manifest in the ways that students approach composition (Flynn 427-428). While Flynn was not specifically speaking about reflective writing in her work, the notion that differences in psychological development could influence composition styles does not exclude reflective writing, and in theory, perceptions of reflective writing should also be susceptible to the gender discourses that influence students.

Interestingly, the expectation that students approach and perform gender, and thus writing, differently is demonstrated by instructor response and evaluation of writing. Early feminists interrogated the ways in which interpretations of language—speaking, reading, and writing—reflected gender assumptions and bias. In their article, “Gendered Textuality: Assigning Gender to Portfolios,” Stygall, Black, Daiker, and Sommers argue that in the past “women students fair[ed] less well in academic writing,” academic writing as a genre seemed to display masculine characteristics, and female students’ troubles with academic writing could be related to gender differences (“Gendered Textuality” 249). In other words, these scholars attest to the way in which rigid notions of gender, such as a clear divide between masculine and feminine traits, excluded alternative discourses—and ultimately women students—from wide-reaching academic success. Mary P. Hiatt, in her study “The Feminine Style: Theory and Fact,” examines style in men’s and women’s writing in order to discover if there was any credence to the notion of a flowery and ornate feminine style in an attempt to overturn negative associations with women’s writing. Ultimately Hiatt concludes that the only real difference in men’s and women’s writing styles stems from how others perceive the notion of gendered writing. Furthermore, Patricia Sullivan argues that those in composition studies need to reexamine research methodologies that have favored an androcentric position and thus excluded alternative (feminist) perspectives. In order to adequately merge the work of feminist and composition scholars, Sullivan argues, scholars need to expose androcentrism in texts, include feminist readings along existing perspectives, include gender as an aspect in existing studies, or replace an existing interpretation with a feminist one (Sullivan 127). “In each case,” Sullivan argues, “the scholar challenges or

problematizes traditional assumptions and theories to help us gain a fuller understanding of the cultural contexts of written communication” (Sullivan 127). The need to simultaneously undermine androcentric assumptions concerning language, argumentation, and writing while recuperating women’s writing and alternative methods of expression is grounded in years of exclusion and oppression. By actually listening to what students have to say about reflective writing rather than relying on generally accepted gender norms, instructors can hopefully improve their understanding of the classroom environment and how students relate to different genres as well as reflect the growing diversity in the classroom.

One study in particular illustrates how perceptions of gender influence the ways that teachers approach student writing and assessment. Janis and Richard Haswell’s “Gendership and the Miswriting of Students” chronicles the ways in which “gendership”—the “reader's sense of the author's sex”—affects teacher assessment of student writing. Even though teachers often claim that “their own potential gender biases [do] not influence their evaluation of student writing, because they consciously distanced themselves from the content of the writing by attending to the objective criteria in the rubric,” Haswell and Haswell’s study illustrates the contrary (Peterson 315). First, when asked to read a student essay, forty out of sixty-four readers constructed a gender for the student author from seeming “gender markers” in the text. While this study notes that this sense of gendership was incorrect half of the time, this spontaneous gender marking of student texts is particularly disturbing because of the specific ways in which teachers admitted to “see” gender in the text. Haswell and Haswell report that the instructors involved in the study revealed stereotypical ways in reading gender into a text (Haswell

and Haswell 233). Furthermore, “Their use [of gender markers] tended to be highly traditional and highly polarized. They described males as independent, confident, and egotistical, and females as dependent, insecure, and connected with what other people think. They assumed males would be detached and devoid of emotion, and females emotional and eager for dialogue, more willing to listen to advice and to revise and edit their texts” (Haswell and Haswell 233). In other words, even writing instructors who insisted that they were neutral in regards to gender were influenced by social constructs concerning gender and performance, reaffirming the need for critical awareness of gender influence on writing and assessment.

Particularly interesting is how teachers in this study responded to student writing through advice for revision. According to Haswell and Haswell, the perceived gendership of the student author in conjunction with the gender of the instructor shaped the directions for revision that were given to the students (Haswell and Haswell 242). In other words, instances of future writing that would potentially stem from the gendered directions for revision were shaped by assumed gender identity, potentially contributing to the continued notions of stereotyped gendered writing practices. Haswell and Haswell’s study illustrates that regardless of a teacher’s assumed gender neutrality, gender and assumptions surrounding gendered writing are continually at play in the writing classroom and contribute to students’ sense of their writer-selves.

It is interesting to note here that contrary to the logic presented by classical advice literature and the Enlightenment, along with years of exclusion, marginalization, and oppression of women’s voices, modern studies (like Haswell and Haswell’s) show that at times—particularly in modern writing for meant for assessment—stereotypes of women’s

writing seem to be rewarded. However, this valuation of “women’s writing” seems to be a fairly new phenomenon. Shelley Peterson outlines student and teacher perceptions of writing competency as a function of gender and argues that this interest largely stems from “the gender disparity favoring girls in scores on large-scale writing tests” (Peterson 314). For example, “Students in grades 2, 4, 6, and 8 in Pottoroff, Phelps-Zientarski, and Skovera’s (1996) study, and teachers and students in grades 4 and 8 in Peterson’s (2000) study, perceived girls to be better writers than boys” (Peterson 314). Furthermore, this disparity in assessment is not limited to grade school writing but extends into higher education assessment.

While in their article “Gendered Textuality: Assigning Gender to Portfolios” Stygall, Black, Daiker, and Sommers initially argue that women’s writings have been devalued in academic settings, in a later article—“Writing Like a Woman and Being Rewarded for It: Gender, Assessment, and Reflective Letters from Miami University’s Student Portfolios”—these authors claim that the program seemed to be more attractive to female students and that female students fared better in terms of placement than their male counterparts (“Writing Like a Woman” 235). The authors of this article speculate that perhaps one reason why female writers were favored over male writers in terms of their class placement stems from process-oriented writing. The authors remark that Elizabeth Flynn argues that, at times, process-based writing seems to be feminized (“Writing Like a Woman” 244), and that “women’s descriptions of writing in journals, collaborating with one another, of discussing books with a parent, or of comparing the process of writing their own poetry with the poetry they read in class, all provide something important to the reader” (“Writing Like a Woman” 245). However, the authors

are careful to indicate that the trend of favoring female writers is not necessarily a fixed one and is greatly influenced by the approach to writing taken by the writing faculty and administration as well as gendered assumptions about writing traits.

It is also possible that feminist rhetoric and theory paradoxically shape the ways in which students view and perform gender. While one of the major projects of early feminist scholarship was to undo the essentialist notions of metaphysical thought (Ritchie; Flynn; Butler), it is possible that in their attempts to recuperate women's writing and alternative discourse, feminist theorists may have unknowingly reified many of the claims of Enlightenment thinking. In other words, it is possible that feminist (composition) theorists may have re-entrenched the same ideologies that they had hoped to eradicate.

A common feature in many feminist composition thinkers' works is the idea of embracing both women's writing and alternative discourse, generally together. For example, in her article "Confronting the 'Essential' Problem: Reconnecting Feminist Theory and Pedagogy," Joy Ritchie deconstructs the notion of an "essential woman." For this article, Ritchie observed a "feminist teacher" who taught an "undergraduate women's literature class" to have students engage in critical dialogues concerning the representation of women in literature (Ritchie 80). The student responses that Ritchie records in her article—all of which are female—celebrate alternative forms of art such as "women's letters, journals, and quilts" as well as the oral tradition of storytelling (Ritchie 83). While I agree with expanding the canon and re-evaluating art forms that have been denigrated for far too long, I am curious if such associations of alternative discourse (such as personal writing and the oral tradition) with women unknowingly continue the

tradition that the realm of the female is the realm of the personal and interrelational. If so, then feminist discourse about writing—a discourse familiar to many writing instructors—could also influence the perception of gender and writing in the classroom along with Enlightenment discourse and psychological development. In this way, when students are tasked with reflective writing, they necessarily approach reflective writing along with a host of conversations about what it means to be a writer in a gendered world.

## CHAPTER II: REFLECTIVE WRITING IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

At this point, it is helpful to ask specifically how the history and understanding of gender and writing relate to reflective writing. Reflective writing has been associated with personal, exploratory, and recursive thought and writing. As such, reflective writing may be one genre that not only includes but also encourages diverse discourses such as personal experience, questioning, and exploration. At times, these diverse discourses have been associated with the feminine and other subordinated groups (Bizzell). Thus, reflective writing represents a rhetorical space that may encourage forms of discourse that have been associated with women and generally excluded from traditional academic Western thought and writing and embrace alternative modes of thought and expression. As such, it is important to understand the theoretical underpinnings of reflective writing in order to understand how different students perceive it and how instructors can best implement it in a critically-aware classroom environment.

While reflective writing can be implemented in a variety of situations, when it is used to dwell on one's own processes of writing and thinking, it becomes metacognition (Yancey). By thinking about thinking while writing about thinking, reflective writing becomes the manifestation of metacognition and allows a writer to view the results of thinking. As a method to make the internal external, reflective writing can help integrate theory and practice. The integration of theory and practice, advocated by Donald Schon, allows students to re-envision the ways that their own unique experiences can be connected with academic content. McGuire, Lay, and Peters assert that explicitly writing about the possible connections between experience and academic content allows students to make links between writing and critical thinking, arguing that, "reflective writing

provides opportunities to integrate student thoughts and experiences with academic content. Thus writing and critical thinking may become linked in the teaching-learning process” (McGuire, et al 96). In other words, writing, particularly reflective writing, is not just something that is submitted to a teacher for a grade but an act that is central to thinking itself. Reflective writing can provide students with the opportunity to understand how writing and thinking are not separate processes but rather are always enmeshed together in an unfolding process of recursion and revision.

As a result of the many fluid definitions of reflection and reflective writing, it can at times be difficult for both students and instructors to discern what exactly reflective writing looks like. Many instructors focus on using a reflective journal in their classrooms because the personal journal may be a more familiar format for students and thus more accessible. In her article, “Using Reflection to Promote Students' Writing Process Awareness,” Ann Amicucci advocates for a process journal in which students consistently engage throughout the course of the semester in order to better understand and grapple with their developing notion of the writing process. Along with Amicucci, David Boud, Jeffrey Sommers, and many other scholars also support the consistent use of a journal in order to enhance reflective practice. However, not all scholars insist that reflective writing must come in the form of a journal. In her article “The Shadows Within: Internalized Racism and Reflective Writing,” Beth Kaufka outlines this issue and claims “any written process of self-reflection can and *should* be included in this discourse. Other forms such as personal/academic essays, creative writing (novels, short stories, poetry), letters or songs may be used [as] reflective writing” (Kaufka 15). While Kaufka ultimately seems to view this open definition as a positive aspect of reflective

writing, it does create a situation in which any and every form of writing could, in theory, be viewed as reflective. While I understand the theoretical framework behind Kaufka's inclusive definition, I am more interested in the forms of reflective writing that explicitly task students/writers to think metacognitively about their rhetorical and analytical practices in order to revise their initial positions and processes. The format that this engagement may take can vary—it may include journals, portfolios, letters, essays, memos, and perhaps even songs—but ultimately the stated purpose of such writing is to engage with personal beliefs and experiences particularly with thinking and writing in order to improve on those rhetorical practices.

Reflective writing, produced in the context of the classroom environment, exists as a performative act. It is a particular genre, created with a purpose, usually for a specific audience. In this context, then, the reflective writing that I examine is rhetorical in nature. For Kathleen Blake Yancey, the creation of reflective writing for others shapes the ways in which reflection can affect thinking because it requires writers to constantly be aware of an audience outside of the self (Yancey 11). Reflection-in-presentation, or reflective writing as a product for others, is inherently social and thus rhetorical. Julie Jung echoes the notion that reflective writing is rhetorical and can be used when thinking about growth. Jung claims, “I have extolled reflective writing as a rhetorical strategy necessary for the development of a revisionary consciousness” (Jung 628-629). In other words, engaging in reflective writing allows students to understand the need for developing fluid ways of thinking that allow room for revision and growth.

Understanding that reflective writing in the classroom is a rhetorical act, it is also important to note that reflective writing does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather,

students are writing from very specific social and historical positions that shape the ways in which they view, approach, and perform reflective writing. Sondra Perl brings attention to this idea of writing from a particular context when she relates that studies in composition have resulted in “arriving at an understanding of the complex relationship between writers and the contexts that shape their lives” (Perl xvii). Students are enmeshed in already-occurring conversations that constantly surround them and construct the ideas that ultimately contribute to the creation of their writer-selves. These conversations—conversations about gender roles and performance, race, class, language, and identity—come into the classroom with the students and influence how these students see themselves as writers performing for an audience (their instructors and peers). Furthermore, Mary Ryan, citing Ovens and Tinning, suggests, “the discursive context of the reflection will influence the types of reflections that students produce” (Ryan 101). In other words, the ways that reflective writing is presented to the students and the type of reflection expected—the discursive context—will inform and influence the manner in which reflective writing is perceived and created. The outside world and the classroom environment are therefore constantly shaping how students perceive reflective writing. As such, understanding how social context influences students’ perceptions of reflective writing can hopefully lead to better pedagogical practices.

By discussing the rhetorical nature of reflective writing in the classroom with students, they can better understand different genres and the notion of intertextuality. According to Ryan, “Understanding that different social purposes and contexts require different forms of writing is the first step in developing a shared language to teach academic genres to students” (Ryan 102). Not only is reflective writing a rhetorical act in

and of itself, but also it can be used to explicitly teach the idea of rhetorical situations to students. By situating reflective writing in the realm of the rhetorical, students can gain a greater understanding of the notion that they are writing from a particular set of conversations and conventions that surround them. Joseph Harris explains the importance of urging students to view their writing intertextually: “To really change the teaching of writing, then, it seems to me that a view of process must go *beyond* the text to include a sense of the ongoing conversations that texts enter into—a sense, that is, of how writers draw on, respond to, and rework both their own previous writings and those of others” (Harris 68). Like all writing, reflective writing is intertextual, and students are always already working from within this intertextual framework. It is only fair that they become actively involved in this conversation.

Scholars have written about the best way(s) to implement reflective writing in the classroom in order to reap the greatest benefits from the activity. In response to Kathleen Yancey’s work on reflection, Jeffrey Sommers argues that instructors need to take reflective practice in the classroom further. "Reflection Revisited: The Class Collage" looks at the definition of reflection-in-presentation and posits a better way to approach reflective writing in the classroom: having students examine their beliefs about writing and those of their classmates instead of reflecting on their cognitive development. Sommers suggests that by integrating reflective activities throughout the course of the semester, the students are less likely to present superficial reflections. Sommers provides instructors with advice for integrating reflection in the writing classroom. He claims that in order to be effective, reflective writing cannot be an isolated activity and that it should focus on the students’ beliefs about the activities and work of

the writing course.

However, while reflective writing has taken center stage in many classrooms, there are some who are hesitant about reflective writing and the ways in which it is implemented and assessed. Scholars have explored the potential pitfalls of reflective writing. As a result of its public nature, reflection-in-presentation may be particularly problematic because of framing and evaluative issues. Boud elaborates on the ways in which context and audience play a large role in how writers may approach reflection, particularly reflection that may be construed as personal such as in the context of a journal. Other scholars focus on the ways that students simply write in their reflections what they believe their teachers want them to write (Conway; Smith and Yancey; Bower). Furthermore, Laurel Bower and Peggy O'Neill have both illustrated how student reflections are often vague and underdeveloped. Student perceptions of their own abilities and of their rhetorical situations can greatly influence their writing outcomes (Palmquist and Young; Charney, Newman, and Palmquist; Miller Cleary; Villalon, Mateos, and Cuevas). Reflective writing is no exception. Even though an increasing number of educators are advocating for reflective writing in the classroom and continually praising its benefits, studies show that student perceptions of the reflective journal do not necessarily parallel the enthusiasm of the instructors (Cisero). Thus, engaging with students consistently and explicitly concerning their understanding of the purpose and value of reflective writing will help instructors refine the inclusion of reflective writing in the classroom.

The classroom environment is crucial in determining the kind of reflective writing that occurs, and instructor presentation and assessment of reflective writing is particularly

important in this framing. Reflective writing is assessed by another person (usually an instructor) who is empowered to make claims about what kinds of reflective writing are valuable. Julie Jung pays particular attention to what kinds of reflective writing are promoted and valued by instructors in her article “Reflective Writing’s Synecdochic Imperative: Process Descriptions Redescribed.” She claims that instructors promote particular kinds of process descriptions as the “good” form of reflective writing, “descriptions wherein student-writers satisfactorily describe their purposes, their experiences participating in activities designed to help them better understand how they were being understood...and the insights and revisions those activities motivated, tend to legitimate writing teachers’ assumptions regarding how ‘real’ writers write” (Jung 634). Jung emphasizes the ways in which instructor framing of reflective writing and the subsequent valuing of synecdochic process descriptions limits the scope of acceptable student experiences in terms of the writing process. In this way, it is possible that by privileging a certain form of reflective writing, instructors are consequently privileging students who come from certain backgrounds that may have better prepared them to write in ways traditionally associated with academic discourse conventions. In other words, presentations of reflective writing can at times normalize and standardize what constitutes the “authentic” writing process, so it is important that instructors remain critically aware of the ways in which discourse surrounding reflective writing influences how students perceive and participate in it.

Ryan succinctly summarizes the conversation about the difficulties behind reflective writing by positing that:

Critical/transformatory reflective writing as a form of academic writing is

difficult for students to master (Rodgers 2002). It is not intuitive, and it requires more than descriptions of events and feelings, which are features of personal reflections that students may have experienced through diary or journal writing at school and in their life worlds. Hence, these more complex purposes, high rhetorical demands (Goodfellow and Lea 2005) and linguistically demanding features of the genre, require explicit teaching and scaffolded development over time (Bain et al. 2002) for students to achieve success. (Ryan 101)

In other words, all students simply cannot be expected just to know how to engage fully in reflective writing. It must be taught. In order for students to reap the benefits of reflective writing, instructors must consistently implement and explain the process, purpose, and value of reflective writing as a recursive and revisionary event.

Furthermore, instructors need to remain critical of the ways in which they present and assess reflective writing as well as the social context that surrounds and permeates the classroom and be willing to consider alternative perspectives of what constitutes “authentic” student writing experiences. One way in which to include diverse conceptions of what constitutes the student writing experience is simply to ask the students. While reflective writing has been thoroughly dissected, examined, and reassembled in the scholarly world, student voices can also contribute to the body of knowledge about reflective writing and can provide new insight into how reflective writing is implemented, perceived, performed, and can be refined.

### CHAPTER III: STUDENT VOICES

After exploring the body of knowledge about reflective writing, I conducted a survey at Florida International University, a Hispanic-serving university in Miami, Florida, to see specifically how FIU students perceive reflective writing in the classroom and if current scholarship concerning reflective writing speaks to what FIU's students are actually doing. My approach to analyzing this survey is twofold. First, I am interested to see if there are any connections or patterns between student responses and gender. Second, I am interested to see what instructors can learn from the student voices represented here to present reflective writing in the most effective way in the classroom. To get a better understand how students approached this particular kind of writing, my survey primarily focused on three areas: how students perceive their instructors using and valuing reflective writing, how students positively or negatively approach reflective writing, and how students describe and value reflective writing in the classroom. I organize my analysis of the survey results around these three areas, beginning with patterns in relation to gender.

#### Methods:

Student surveys are a valuable tool for determining student perception in the classroom. Other scholars have used student surveys to research such varied notions as students' perception of giftedness and its relation to writing apprehension (Palmquist and Young) to preferred modalities of journal writing for pre-service teachers (Greiman and Covington). The goal of my project was not to discover or define any actual differences in discourse and reflective practices determined by gender but rather to understand student perceptions of reflective writing in the classroom. Since exploring student

perception was the aim of this project, surveys are suited for such an undertaking because they focus on students' perceived response to classroom activities.

Anonymous Qualtrics survey links were emailed to seventy-two Writing and Rhetoric faculty at Florida International University with instructions to distribute the survey link to their students. While the instructors that received the link primarily taught Writing and Rhetoric I and II, it is possible that students in other writing classes could have responded to the survey. The survey opened on October 20, 2014 and closed on November 19, 2014. Students were surveyed using a combination of Likert scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. In total, there were sixteen questions on the survey, and seventy-five students completed the survey.

Since this study attempts to examine how social history and culture influence students' perception of reflective writing, retrieving demographic information from the students was an important step in evaluating the results. Working with Smagorinsky's notion that "people from different backgrounds (e.g., from different cultural groups, genders, socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, religions, and other categories) will not necessarily act in the same way under the same conditions," I believe it appropriate to include some basic information about Florida International University. Florida International University's student population is 61% Hispanic, 15% White Non-Hispanic, 13% Black, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 7% other minority groups (FIU's "About" Page). It is impossible not to acknowledge the unique ways in which culture will inevitably collide with and complicate notions of gender in such a diverse setting, especially in a minority-majority setting, which can upend expectations and results.

While FIU is a unique and specific context, I see this research as an opportunity to look closely at a particular population and examine the ways that discourse plays with gender in order to influence a student's response to a particular rhetorical situation, in this case, reflective writing. Thus, I analyzed student responses to a variety of questions and statements concerning reflective writing in conjunction with each respondent's demographic information, particularly gender. The results of this survey were examined in light of the preceding sections concerning reflective writing and the gendered history of writing; however, pedagogical concerns also factor into how the survey results are presented. The complete survey is included in the Appendix of this thesis.

#### The Survey Population:

A total of seventy-five survey responses were completed. Of the seventy-five surveys, seventy-three responded to the question concerning gender. Forty (or 55%) of the respondents indicated that they were female, and thirty-three (or 45%) indicated that they were male. No student who responded indicated that they were transgender. Because FIU is a Hispanic serving institution, it is no surprise that of the students who responded to a question about race/ethnicity, 68% choose Hispanic or Latino. The remaining population consisted of 17% White, 8% Black or African-American, 3% Asian, and 3% other. Over eight different linguistic groups are represented in the survey. When asked which language they considered their first language, 54% indicated American English, 39% indicated a variety of Spanish, 3% indicated an Asian language (Urdu and Korean), 1% indicated another variety of English, 1% indicated a variety of French, and 1% indicated a variety of Portuguese. Eight percent of the students who responded were international students. The vast majority of the student responses came from First-year

students (92%) with the other 6% consisting of Sophomores and 3% Seniors. Even though the survey was distributed to writing instructors who taught both ENC 1101 and 1102, 100% of the responses came from students enrolled in ENC 1101. Sixty-one percent of the students indicated that they had a male instructor, while 39% had female instructors. The student responses to the Likert scale questions concerning reflective writing were generally positive, as indicated by the high mean response for each question. For every question, the mean response was at least three out of five, and all but two questions had a mean above four out of five. The student responses that are included in this thesis are restated directly; no corrections have been made in terms of spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.

#### How the Students Responded in Relation to Gender:

While overall the mean results concerning student perception of instructor use of reflective writing were high, gender did seem to slightly affect the degree to which students indicated a response. For the statements concerning the student's perception of instructor interaction with reflective writing (My instructor commonly assigns reflective writing; My instructor explains the rationale for reflective writing; My instructor seems to value reflective writing), female students consistently averaged a slightly higher mean to these questions than their male counterparts did. Furthermore, female students were very slightly more likely (a mean response of 4.10 out of 5 for female students to 3.97 out of 5 for male students) to perceive that their instructors assign grades for reflective writing, regardless of the gender of the instructor. There are different possible reasons for this average higher response. First, there were more female respondents to the survey, so the higher mean could just serve as a more representative sample. However, it is also

possible that female students are marginally more responsive to reflective writing and thus both recognize reflective writing more easily and are more willing to indicate so in a survey.

The gender of the student also seemed to influence slightly how the students perceived their own interaction with reflective writing. When asked about their own interactions with reflective writing, the female students again were more likely to indicate a higher response. For this question, there were four statements used to assess students' interaction with and perception of reflective writing (see Appendix). For three of the four statements, female students averaged higher responses than the male respondents. The only statement of all of the scaled responses in which the male students had a higher average dealt with participation with reflective writing. For the statement, "I actively participate in reflective writing," male students had a mean response of 4.00 out of 5 while female students had a mean response of 3.86 out of 5. This one deviation from the general pattern in the Likert items is interesting because it speaks to the notion that because of social context and the potential oppression of female agency, these female students perhaps have a diminished sense of their own activity and participation in the classroom as writers. While the differences in the mean responses for male and female students in response to the Likert items generally only differ by a few decimal places, the consistency with which female students were more likely to have a higher mean in response to the statements illustrates that perhaps female students are somewhat more likely to perceive a more positive relationship to reflective writing.

Not only do female students potentially have a more positive perception of reflective writing, but also the ways in which female students define reflective writing

illustrate patterns of difference between male and female students. One of the open-ended questions towards the end of the survey asked students to define reflective writing. Even though a working definition was provided for the students at the beginning of the survey (“writing that asks you to engage with your beliefs and experiences and may ask you to think about ways that you can broaden your understanding and improve your rhetorical or analytical practices”), the question asked the students to create a definition of reflective writing “in their own words.” A total of sixty students responded to this question, thirty-three of which were female and twenty-seven of which were male. After analyzing the definitions provided by the female students, I observed that nine of the definitions included an explicit reference to “feelings” or “emotions.” In other words, approximately 27% of the definitions provided by female students included a direct reference using the words “feelings” or “emotions.” In contrast, only one definition from the male students (or approximately 3%) included a reference to how a text may affect one “emotionally.” No other definition from a male student included an explicit reference to feelings or emotions.

For example, one female student defined reflective writing as, “Discussing or writing about your own feelings or thoughts about something.” Another female student claimed simply that reflective writing is, “Writing about how you feel about a topic.” “Reflective writing to me,” another female student writes, “means being able to write your own ideas and feelings on paper in order to clarify a thought, or express a thought process.” One female student responded, “Reflective writing discusses a person's views or feelings on a subject.” Another female student made connections between emotions, thoughts, and ideas, and how they relate to a particular position: “Reflective writing is

verbalizing any emotions, thoughts, ideas, etc., that are brought about by a medium. It's becoming aware of your positions, opinions, or even exploration of points of view.”

In contrast, the definitions provided by the male students seemed to focus on “thinking” and “thought process.” For example, one male student wrote, “Reflective writing is writing out your own thoughts and to be able to write your own ideas and what your thinking. It helps the writing process as well as allows for progress within the class.” Another male student commented that reflective writing is, “Writing that gets you to think of how and why you wrote something a specific way, using certain words and how you can change that and it can easily mean something else.” A third male student defined reflective writing as, “It is writing in a way in which you are thinking critically and evaluating a certain topic.”

However, while the definitions of reflective writing that included specific references to feelings and emotions were not exclusive to a particular race or ethnicity, they were largely specific to a linguistic group. The vast majority of the responses (all but one) from students that directly referenced feelings or emotions in their definitions of reflective writing came from students who identified American English as their first language. This pattern is particularly interesting because the one male student who referenced emotions in his definition also identified American English as his first language. Even though one student who directly referenced feeling or emotions in her response identified Spanish as her primary language, because all of the other respondents who displayed this pattern of response choose American English as their primary language, it seems that there may be some connections between American English as the primary language with certain perceptions and descriptions of reflective writing. This

confluence of gender and language speaks to the difficulty of completely separating any identity factor. Furthermore, since Florida International University is located in Miami, a city with complex language politics, it is possible that students who identified American English as their home language may also be multilingual. As Lillian Bridwell-Bowles states, “If we are to invent a truly pluralistic society, we must envision a socially and politically situated view of language and the creation of texts—one that takes into account gender, race, class, sexual preference, and a host of issues that are implied by these and other cultural differences” (Bridwell-Bowles 349).

While there were some questions, such as the definition of reflective writing, that illustrate how gender can influence the ways in which students perceive reflective writing, there were also questions that demonstrate deviations from stereotyped gender norms. For example, when asked to describe the format of the reflective writing that their instructors assign, one male student stated, “The format is almost like a journal. After ever reading, he assigns a ‘Reading Response.’ It's pretty much anything you feel about the text that you read.” Unlike the majority of the definitions of reflective writing provided by the male students that avoided explicitly using the words “feelings” or “emotions,” this male student includes “feelings” as part of his description of the format of reflective writing. Furthermore, when describing the purpose or value of reflective writing, another male student responded by claiming, “The purpose is to be able to write freely to get things off your chest by just thinking on the paper.” While the words “feelings” or “emotions” are not included in this response and the student views reflective writing as “thinking on the paper,” the image evoked by being able to “write freely” in order “to get things off your chest” is more similar to an affective response to

reflective writing that is reminiscent of feelings and emotions. Furthermore, this response can also be construed as reflecting almost a confessional relationship with reflective writing.

One question in particular demonstrated a reversal of the expected outcome in terms of gender norms. When asked to describe any writing that they did outside of required classwork, more male students described writing that they do on their own. Of the thirty female students that responded to this question, twelve students (or 40%) claimed that they write outside of class. Four of these female students (or approximately 13%) claimed that they write in a journal or diary. Surprisingly, the male students had much higher percentages than the female students. Of the twenty-six male students who responded to this question, seventeen (or approximately 65%) claimed that they do writing outside of required classwork. Furthermore, six of these male students (or approximately 23%) also claimed that they wrote in a journal or diary. One male student made a specific reference to keeping a diary (“emails, studyguides and diary”) which is particularly interesting because this reference conflicts with the notion that the word “diary” is generally associated with women while journal is more commonly associated with men (Gannett). Moreover, another male student was particularly detailed in his answer to this question: “Usually I try and express feelings through journals/ poems usually when I have love issues or just grief coping, I just think writing helps you take that weight off your shoulders and lets you express the problem to the paper, through out this process you learn things about yourself you would have never would if not writing them down and thinking them for the journals/ poems.” This response contains many of the stereotypical markers of feminine writing. It makes direct references to using writing

to work through feelings through the context of a journal or poems, and it also references the possible therapeutic characteristics of such writing as well self-discovery through writing. Furthermore, it is a fairly personal response to an anonymous survey question. Responses such as these scattered throughout the survey complicate the simple stereotypes concerning gender and gender markings in a text. In other words, while gender may still come in to play in nuanced ways, it is very difficult to make claims concerning how female or male (or those students who do not use these gender labels) students will perform in a specific rhetorical situation.

#### How the Students Responded as a Group:

Overall, both male and female students expressed that their instructors have a high level of engagement with reflective writing. To assess student perception of instructor interaction with reflective writing, students were asked to respond to four items in a Likert scale that directly related to their instructors. I find it important to note again here that 61% of students reported that they had a male instructor and 39% reported they had a female instructor. While more students represented in this survey had a male instructor, the gender of the instructor did not seem to affect the ways in which students responded to the questions in the survey. When responding to one Likert item, 82% of students agree or strongly agree that their instructor commonly assigns reflective writing. 86% of students agree or strongly agree that their instructor explains the rationale for and seems to value reflective writing. Interestingly, the statement that received the lowest mean response from students concerned grading. When asked if their instructors assigned grades for reflective writing, only nineteen out of sixty-nine students strongly agree. It

seems that even though instructors do not always assign grades for reflective writing assignments, students still seem to engage with and respond positively to reflective writing.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the students (above 80% in all cases) claimed that their instructors commonly engage with, explain, and value reflective writing. From a pedagogical perspective, it is encouraging not only that instructors are engaging with reflective writing with such consistency, but also that students recognize that their instructors are integrating reflective writing in the classroom. To reap the benefits of reflective writing, broad integration and consistency—like the kind indicated through the surveys—are crucial factors (Sommers; Ryan; Bower).

Students also had fairly consistent responses when describing the format of reflective writing their instructors use. Consistent with the scholarship concerning the varied forms that reflective writing can take (Kaufa), Florida International University's students described a range of different formats including journals, freewrites, writer's memos, lists of questions, essays, letters, and reading response. Journals, lists of questions, and freewrites were the three most common formats mentioned in the student responses. Within the fifty-seven responses, journals were mentioned fourteen times, lists of questions were mentioned twelve times, and freewrites were mentioned eleven times. Some students mentioned that their instructor uses a blend of different formats. For example, one student claimed, "The format is kind of like a journal where we do free writes in class." In this case, the student has seamlessly blended the concept of a journal and a freewrite. This example is a reminder of the ways that reflective writing can be used to teach students about the inevitable blurring of different forms of writing.

Not only did students list the various formats that their instructors used for reflective writing, but also many of the students included a description of how the instructor has presumably presented a particular format of reflective writing to them in class:

- “Brainstorming. Basically start writing whatever comes to my head.”
- “My instructor’s writing is more like a journal where we write how we feel on what we read and our thoughts about it as well.”
- “The format is almost like a journal. After ever reading, he assigns a ‘Reading Response.’ It’s pretty much anything you feel about the text that you read.”
- “My instructor assigned me reflective writing and to me that means to articulate my point of view on the assigned reading. It is a variety of all of the things listed in the parenthetical because in reflective writing you are asked to jot down everything in your thought process and that includes, questions, things you wish to remember, and what you take from it all.”
- “I would describe the format as informative and basically almost personal just so we, the students, can get a feel of what we are actually reading while we are also analyzing the text”

Furthermore, some students also included a valuation of the format and presentation. One student claimed that his instructor used, “A freewrite that has no rules only to get the ideas in mind, very helpful. spelling doesnt count and writing is constant.” It is clear that this student’s instructor has taken the time to explain the purpose and method of freewriting, and potentially as a result of this, the student is able to view freewriting as a

“helpful” activity. “It all varies,” another student states. She continues by exclaiming, “Sometimes we have to answer some questions, paragraphs, opinions, and more. Is the first time in my life that i really enjoy writing. I love the strategies implemented!” Such positive responses that refer to multiple strategies are encouraging and a reminder that using multiple teaching strategies in order to respond to a variety of learning styles in the classroom can enhance the learning experience for students.

When the students were asked to describe what they were asked to write about when they were asked to write reflectively, writing about their own writing or writing about a text were the most common responses. Many students described how they were asked to write about their own writing. One student wrote, “We are asked to write or reflect on our own writing and sometimes about our progress in the class.” Another student commented that his instructor asked the students to write about “How we wrote a certain part of our essay(s) and how we could have written it better depending on if we incorporate certain tactics.” “Varieties of common errors found in our own essays and how we can improve them,” states one student, “And things to help review what we spoke in the previous class or homework.” Some students explicitly pointed out how they were asked to reflect on their writing process. For example, one student claimed, “From my recollection, the reflective writing I have been assigned has been concerned [sic] with my writing processes and the strengths or weaknesses of my writing.”

The other major pattern in student responses to this question demonstrated reflective writing viewed as reader response to a text or assignment. For example, one student described, “You are asked to write about how the text has affected you.” Another student also commented on reflective writing in relation to a text: “In class we are

typically asked to write about things that are related to what we're discussing in class. Normally about chapters from the text book and articles discussing various things about writing.” “We are usually asked to write about the text from the book or a certain article that was assigned for homework on that day,” claims another student as she further elaborates on how the reflection is presented, “Sometimes there is a prompt, sentence, or description on the board, and we are asked to write our ideas, thoughts, and/or reflections on that also.”

Corresponding to a high level of instructor engagement with reflective writing, the students as a group also seem to feel positively about reflective writing. The students were asked to respond to four Likert items about their own interaction with reflective writing (I actively participate in reflective writing; I understand the purpose of reflective writing; I agree that reflective writing should be included in the classroom; I agree that reflective writing helps me improve my own writing and thinking), and for each statement, the students had a positive response. “I actively participate in reflective writing” was the only statement that received a mean of less than at least four out of five (3.93 out of 5). In addition to statements about their own relationship with reflective writing, students were also asked how comfortable they are sharing their reflective writing with others. Interestingly, the students responded to the statement “I am comfortable sharing my reflective writing with my classmates” with the lowest average score of the entire survey. While overall this statement still had a fairly positive response from the students (the mean was 3.64 out of 5), it is telling that even though students in general have a very positive perspective of reflective writing, they may not be as comfortable sharing their writing with their peers. Furthermore, this reticence to share

their reflective writing with their peers also implies that students may still view reflective writing as a personal genre, one that is not necessarily meant to be shared with others. In other words, students may perceive reflective writing as more closely related to private, rather than public, writing. A willingness to share writing with peers is essential to collaboration in the classroom, and this lower response from the students signifies that instructors can do more to acclimate students to working with and sharing potentially personal writing with their peers.

When asked to describe the value or purpose of reflective writing in the classroom, the students also seemed to indicate a positive response. Specifically, many students expressed that they appreciate the opportunity to take time to write about their own writing. For example, one student claimed, “The value or purpose of reflective writing is to think about what you like and what you don't like about your essay. Also, it should give you some ideas on what to improve on in your writing.” Another student echoes this idea when she writes, “I believe the value and purpose of reflective writing is very important and has helped me understand how to write more descriptive and broadened essays.” One student focused on the ways in which reflective writing can actually help in the mechanics of writing: “Reflective writing in the classroom trains the hand and brain in consistent writing builds ideas, vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall better writing quality.”

While many students focused on the ways that reflective writing can help with a specific writing assignment or their own writing process, other students concentrated on how reflective writing allows them to move away from a specific essay structure and

move into the realm of open brainstorming and ideas. In other words, many students expressed how reflective writing helped with invention. For example:

- “In the classroom, reflective writing can help students organize their thoughts and even brainstorm on their ideas.”
- “It gets your brain thinking on a different level. Reflecting on the past gets your brain pumping.”
- “The value and purpose of reflective writing is making students feel more comfortable with what they are implemented and thinking in their minds. Students tend to pay more attention if they follow an idea giving their opinion than implementing an idea that is not theirs. It is better because they are more interested in what they write.”
- “Very important. It helps me think of ideas and things I may have not thought of before.”
- “The purpose is to be able to write freely to get things off your chest by just thinking on the paper.”
- “It is valuable as it is easier to write and encourages writing. It allows writing without restriction and shifts the focus from the need to follow format to generating thoughts and ideas.”
- “It allows the student to gather all their thoughts about a topic into one paper.”

These references to brainstorming, ideas, and invention more closely associate reflective writing with critical thinking. Furthermore, by using reflective writing to encourage

invention in the classroom, instructors are promoting more in-depth analysis and development of ideas.

While most student responses explicitly referred to the writing classroom and how reflective writing can help with free writing or generating ideas for a paper, a few students understood reflective writing as a mode that can be extended beyond the particular classroom environment in which reflective writing was being implemented. In other words, some students identified the benefits of reflective writing for transfer. For example, one student claimed, “Not only does it allow free and critical thinking, but it incites discussion and opens new pathways of thinking which is something rarely allowed or valued in most schools. It can be an amazing outlet and a very effective brain exercise that makes you go deeper than the surface of your own thoughts.” Another student similarly argued, “By reflecting upon our beliefs, we can assess whether they are accurate.” One student explicitly stated how reflective writing is a way of approaching the world and focused on the recursion and revision that is necessary to in-depth reflection: “The entire purpose is for you to reflect/ learn from a particular self-experience. Through reflection we understand how we did something, for example a writing project, or an essay. How we did it and why we did it the way we did and learn how to do it better next time around. This applies to any experience in my opinion, you can always reflect/ learn and apply for a better self/ person.” While only a few students explicitly made the connection of reflective writing with recursion and revision in a broader context, the seeds of this strand of thought are present which should encourage instructors to continue to develop their implementation of reflective writing in the classroom.

In general, the students expressed that they value and appreciate that instructors include reflective writing in the classroom. However, of the sixty-two responses to the open-ended question about the value or purpose of reflective writing in the classroom, one student did indicate a negative response. This student claimed, "I complete reflective writing because I have to, not because I want to." Interestingly, this response came from a Hispanic female student, which, for me, complicates the notion that female students in general are more receptive to reflective writing. My initial surprise at this anomaly illustrates how I, too, had certain gendered assumptions about how the students would respond to the survey questions. However, deviations from this general pattern of logic illustrate how stereotypes concerning gender cannot and should not be relied on in the classroom. Furthermore, with FIU's diverse student population, simple gender binaries defined exclusively by Western thinking may not necessarily apply. While some students will continue to be resistant to reflective writing (and writing in general for that matter), it is important that instructors continue to explicitly explain the rationale, purpose, and value of reflective writing so that students do not feel coerced into writing that they don't understand. Furthermore, if students understand the value of reflective writing, they are potentially more likely to continue to use reflective writing beyond the composition classroom.

The intersection of gender and language demonstrated by the student responses in this survey illustrates on a small scale the great variety of social factors that combine to create the fluid identities of students/writers. While gender does seem to be a factor for determining some patterns in student responses, the entire picture of a student cannot be encapsulated by just one aspect of identity. Thus, while it is important to understand how

social contexts continue to shape gender performance in the classroom, the investigation of the creation of students' writer-selves cannot stop here. I hope that this inclusion of student voices in the discussion about reflective writing is a step towards broadening the conversation about the shaping of students' writer identities as well as reimagining approaches to reflective writing in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION: CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS

Consistent with the feminist scholarship available, female students did, in general, demonstrate slightly more emotional language in their definitions of reflective writing. This greater receptivity to integrating explicit references to emotions or feelings could stem from the social contexts that shape female students as more aware of and willing to engage in alternative discourses (Bizzell). The slight differences in male and female students' definitions of reflective writing also correspond with the stereotypes surrounding how men and women perform their respective genders. The general omission of feelings and emotions from the male student definitions of reflective writing and the inclusion of these terms in the female student definitions gesture towards reifying the binary notion that women are more commonly associated with and attuned to emotion while men are connected with thinking.

Yet, the students who responded in this specific context do not always stick to these simple gender binaries. While there were small differences in the Likert items responses, these differences were definitely slight. Furthermore, in other questions in the survey, some male respondents demonstrated an affective and personal response to reflective writing, and the only student who confidently asserted that she did not voluntarily engage with reflective writing was female. The results of gender differences in terms of writing outside of class are particularly interesting in relation to composition and writing scholarship. Male students in this survey expressed a higher percentage of participation in writing during their free time than female students did, with a greater number and percentage of male students participating in journal or diary writing than their female counterparts even though there were a greater number of female respondents.

This outcome contradicts earlier research concerning the same question (Gannett). In “Writing Like a Woman,” Black et al claim that they observed through their study that, “more women than men indicate in their reflective letters that they keep journals and diaries. These forms of private writing generally involve reflection. Thus the reflective letter...is a genre that is more familiar to women” (“Writing Like a Woman” 246). However, the student responses to this survey indicate otherwise, gesturing towards new frameworks and understandings of gender performance in the classroom.

These divergences from the simple binary logic of Western gender norms align with scholarship such as Haswell and Haswell’s study that demonstrate the unpredictability of gendership and gender performance. The patterns of gendered responses and the breaking of these patterns demonstrate that there is still room for critical discussion of what it means to be a writer who is constantly embedded in a social context and perpetually responding to and shaping the discourses that exist. In other words, the notion that the writer-selves of students are indeed affected by the social contexts and conversations around them provides an opportunity for instructors to present all writing as intertextual and to encourage students to critically examine the discourses of their lives.

The variances from the expected patterns of gendered responses also highlight the diverse social context at FIU. As Min-Zhan Lu states in her article, “Redefining the Literate Self,” “All experiences which do not fit directly and neatly within simplistic notions of race, sex, class, and gender identity are then dismissed as private, non-political, and therefore irrelevant. Such critical attention disembodies the personal by privileging theory over lived experience” (Lu 175). Thus, while it may be easier to

dismiss disruptions in the expected pattern concerning gender as simply individual anomalies, these disruptions represent how lived experience and difference are not uniform, and that the unique situations of students influence the way they understand the composition classroom. The diverse survey population in this study is representative of the diversity of FIU, and as a minority majority institution, it makes sense that FIU's students may not necessarily respond in the ways expected by Western scholarship. As diversity in colleges and universities around the United States continues to grow, listening to and examining student voices in a variety of areas is vital to the health of composition studies and necessary to an inclusive classroom environment.

In honor of listening to student voices about reflective writing, I want to share some pedagogical suggestions based on the student voices in the survey. According to the survey results, it seems that instructors are consistently integrating reflective writing in the classroom and expressing to students its importance and purpose. The students recognize this value and importance and when asked to describe reflective writing, they focus on the free, unrestrained nature and invention that reflective writing allows. This unpressured (or low-stakes) exploratory writing is important for students to generate self-efficacy and identity as writers. With more opportunities to write to explore without the pressure of saying the "right" thing, students will be able to think by writing and think through their writing. Because the students are receptive to the form of exploratory, low-stakes writing that reflective writing provides, instructors should be encouraged to continue implementing such reflective writing in their curriculum.

Many of the student responses describing reflective writing focused on how they view reflective writing as a way of responding to a text or piece of writing (whether their

own or someone else's). Students seemed to focus on exploration, personal writing, and reader response in their descriptions of reflective writing. While these elements of reflective writing are beneficial to the students, more can be done with reflective writing. For example, based on the student responses, many instructors at FIU integrate reflective writing in their classes in order to ensure that students are doing the assigned reading. The students described how their instructors charge them to respond to the views or opinions in assigned texts with their own responses. However, as instructors, we would do well by our students to remain critically aware of best practices and consider moving beyond the concept of reflective writing as only critical response to an assigned text. For example, instructors can ask students to reflect on past writing and learning experiences as well as textual response to demonstrate the versatility of reflective writing. Instructors can ask students to make metacognitive connections between the ideas in a text and their own understanding and experiences in order to heighten the critical thinking and transfer associated with reflective writing tasks.

Reflective writing, at its best, is also recursive, and it is important that students understand what it means to write recursively and how recursive writing is connected to revision and growth. These characteristics are what make reflective writing actually reflective in the sense of "looking back" or "looking again." Reflective writing could have more of an impact on students' future approach to rhetorical situations and genres if instructors could extricate the concept of reflective writing from a particular format or a specific rhetorical situation and treat it as critical revisionary thinking explored by writing. Many students in the survey began making connections between critical thinking and reflective writing, so if instructors could build on this work and more consistently

present reflective writing as recursive critical thinking/writing, it would help foreground the recursion and revision that are essential to the full expression of reflective writing. For example, instructors could have students return to previous writing assignments or learning experiences, reflective or otherwise, and ask the students to think back over their thought processes and reconsider their approaches. In this way, reflection is not a one-time thing. Students will return to their past experiences or writing and critically examine their practices in order to make improvements in the future. In this negotiation of past experiences and knowledge with present and future thinking and writing tasks, students will improve the possibility of transfer through these metacognitive acts.

In order to ensure that students are actually understanding what it means to write reflectively, it is important that instructors (continue to) take time to explicitly teach reflective writing as recursive, revisionary thinking through writing. It was apparent from many of the responses in the survey that students arrive at a firmer understanding of reflective writing when they are able to articulate what reflective writing means in their own words. The benefits of explicitly teaching reflective writing are twofold. First, explicit teaching of reflective writing with a focus on recursion and revision enables students across a writing program that embraces reflective writing to gain the shared discourse that will be helpful as they continue developing as writers. Second, by continuing to take time to explicitly teach reflective writing, instructors will be able to gain a better sense of if students are actually learning what it means to write reflectively. It is clear from the survey responses that many instructors are devoting time to explain the value and purpose of reflective writing, and the students echoed the benefits of this explicit teaching in their own responses. It can be difficult to assess if students are

actually “getting” what instructors are saying, so listening to student voices is vital to explicit teaching. For example, instructors can engage in both verbal and written discussion with students about reflective writing, and in this way, instructors can use student responses to gauge the success of learning and make any necessary adjustments.

While reflective writing is often a personal form of writing, it is important for students to be comfortable sharing their own writing with each other in order to foster the collaboration that is often necessary for growth and reflection. Students in the survey generally had a positive reaction to reflective writing but indicated that they may be more hesitant to share that writing with their peers. Through the act of engaging in reflective writing that is then shared with peers, students may perhaps be more willing and able to engage in revision of their ideas and positions. Ideally, reflective writing would lead to sharing of their ideas with their peers which would then lead back to revision, more reflective writing, and so on. In this way, reflective writing is recursive in that it requires the students to come back to their own ideas, and it is revisionary because it requires students to think through multiple perspectives that would hopefully lead to change and growth.

Because only a few students described in their survey responses how reflective writing could be integrated in other rhetorical situations than in their writing course, instructors might consider providing different rhetorical situations as part of the reflective writing process. Making reflective writing a fluid mode that can work within the context of many different rhetorical situations can free reflective writing from the bonds of a specific format and help students write reflectively in a variety of contexts. For example, instructors could present reflective writing as any writing that purposefully induces a

change of mind by exploring past ideas, and writing to arrive at new ideas. In FIU's Writing and Rhetoric I curriculum, the capstone project is an Analysis and Synthesis writing project in which students are asked to analyze the ideas of two texts and synthesize their own new perspective on the issue of the texts in order to contribute to the conversation. Revisionary thinking is at the core of this rhetorical situation, and as such, it is a prime opportunity to explicitly integrate reflective writing. This writing project is a great teaching moment to really capture what it means to be a reflective writer. As part of the scaffolding for this project, instructors can explicitly teach recursive/revisionist reflective writing by integrating an exploratory writing assignment that asks students to describe their changing views towards their topic and stance on that topic. After the students craft their own exploration of their changing perspectives, they can collaborate with each other to provide feedback and examine different perspectives on the issue and then return to their own writing to make revisions. In this way, the students are writing to understand their own shifting positions and then collaborating with each other to revise their existing ideas. In order to connect this rhetorical situation to reflective writing, it is important for instructors to explicitly work with the students to explain how this revisiting and revising of ideas through writing is at the heart of reflective writing.

The explicit teaching of this type of reflection is important because it frees reflective writing from a particular comfortable, easily-recognizable format (journals, lists of questions, and freewrites) and resituates reflective writing with critical thinking, recursion, and revision. While these familiar formats such as journals or freewrites are valuable ways through which reflective writing can be integrated into the classroom, learning about the variety of ways that reflective writing can work and appear is a key

component to teaching about reflective writing. Furthermore, taking time to teach students that engaging in reflective thought by writing (such as the reflective exploratory writing assignment mentioned) is an essential part of revision and may help students see how reflective writing is not simply an activity in a writing class, but a way of thinking/writing that they can habitually inhabit as they continue to develop their writer-selves.

Based on the survey results and the diversity of approaches to reflective writing represented by the students regardless of gender, it seems that these students might have chuckled or even smirked a little at the quaint trope, "little girls and their diaries." For the students interviewed in this survey, reflective writing goes beyond little girls and diaries. It is a valuable form of expression and verbal processing, and it is embraced by both male and female students. The responses of the students at FIU indicate a shift in expected gender norms and suggest a reconsideration of what it means to be a gendered individual in the composition classroom. No longer will inflexible categories of "female" or "male" writing styles and genres hold true in diverse classroom environments with shifting notions of gender identity. As such, educators who teach composition courses or who require writing assignments in different disciplines would benefit from listening to what students are saying and doing in real time and should readjust their understanding of composition theory in order to reflect the diverse lives of our students. Additionally, it would be interesting to extend the scope of this study to other universities throughout the United States to get a pulse on the perceptions of reflective writing among other students in different contexts. By better understanding the students in composition classrooms,

educators can shape a curriculum to challenge and inspire a future generation of writers who express themselves with understanding and excellence.

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## APPENDIX

### Reflection in the Composition Classroom

There are many different definitions for reflective writing. As you take this survey, think of reflective writing as writing that asks you to engage with your beliefs and experiences and may ask you to think about ways that you can broaden your understanding and improve your rhetorical or analytical practices.

1. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Other

2. Please describe your race/ethnicity.

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African-American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. What do you consider your first language (The one in which you first learned to communicate with your family)

- American English
- Another variety of English -- British, South African, Australian, East Indian, Jamaican, etc.
- A variety of Spanish -- Castilian, Cuban, Mexican, Philippine, Costa Rican, etc.
- A variety of French -- Parisian, Haitian, Creole, Louisiana Creole, African French, etc.
- A variety of Portuguese
- Another European language \_\_\_\_\_
- An Asian language \_\_\_\_\_
- Something else not mentioned here \_\_\_\_\_

4. Are you an international student?

- Yes
- No

5. What year are you?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

6. In what writing class are you currently enrolled?

- ENC 1101
- ENC 1102
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. My instructor is

- Female
- Male

8. Describe your instructor's interaction with reflective writing.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
My instructor commonly assigns reflective writing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My instructor explains the rationale for reflective writing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My instructor seems to value reflective writing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Describe your instructor's interaction with reflective writing.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
My instructor assigns grades for reflective writing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. If your instructor assigns reflective writing, how would you describe the format? (journal, writer's memo, letter, list of questions, etc.)

11. When you are asked to write reflectively, what are you asked to write about?

12. Describe your interaction with reflective writing.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I actively participate in reflective writing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand the purpose of reflective writing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I agree that reflective writing should be included in the classroom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I agree that reflective writing helps me improve my own writing and thinking.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. Describe your interaction with reflective writing.

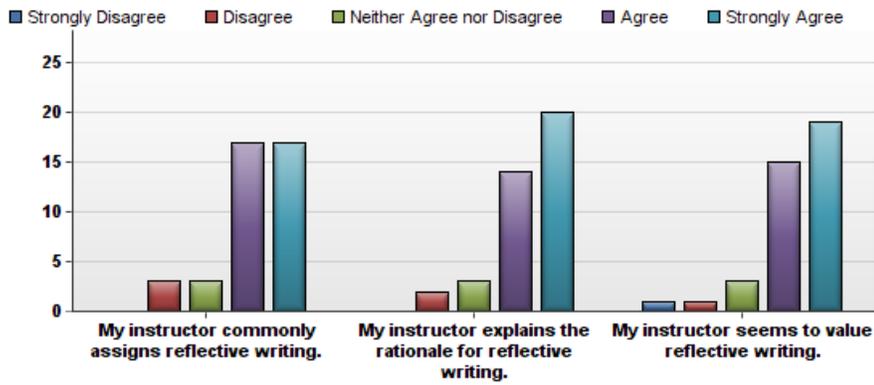
	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I am comfortable sharing my reflective writing with my classmates.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am comfortable sharing my reflective writing with my instructor.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. Your definition of reflective writing may be different from the one provided at the beginning of the survey. In your own words, how would you define reflective writing?

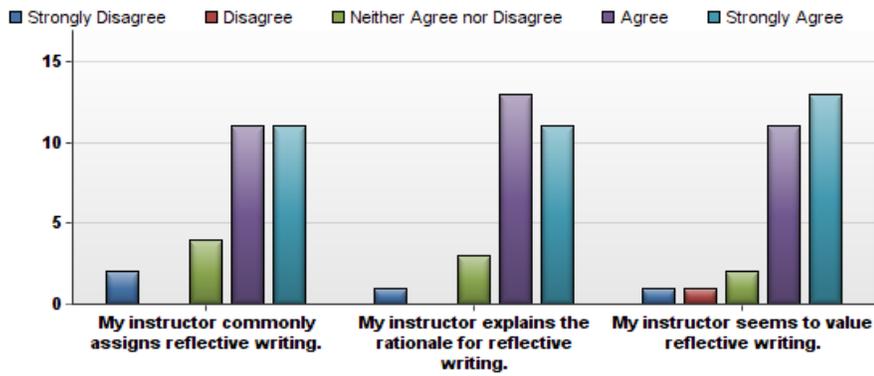
15. How would you describe the value or purpose of reflective writing in the classroom?

16. Please describe any writing that you do outside of required classwork.

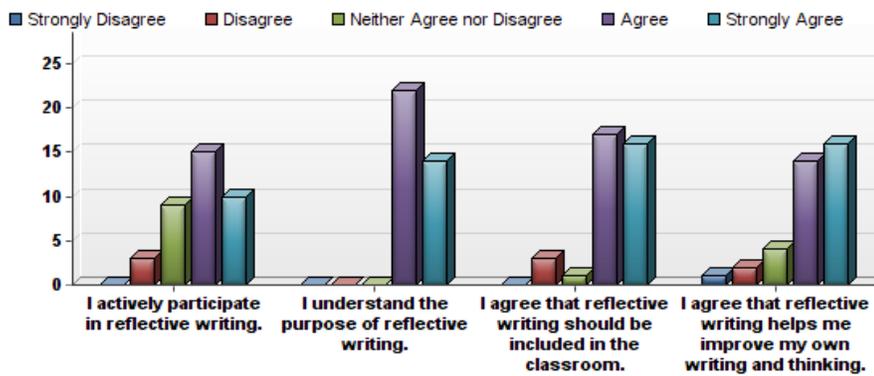
### Student Responses (Female)



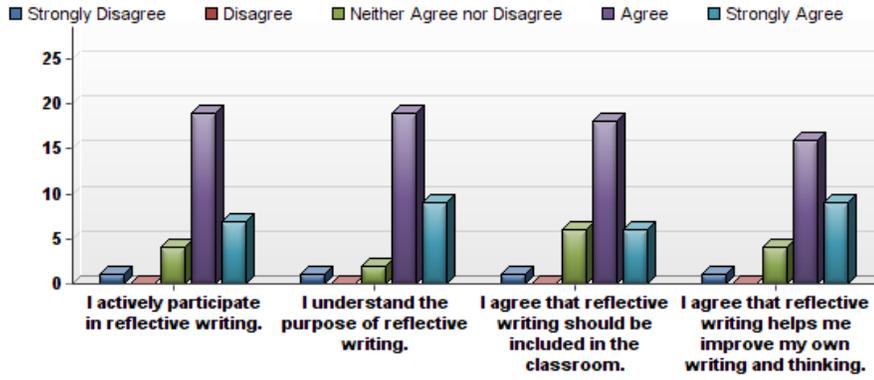
### Student Responses (Male)



### Student Responses (Female)



### Student Responses (Male)



### Student Responses (Female)



### Student Responses (Male)

