IN-BETWEEN SPACES:
A STUDY OF THE INFLUENCES OF GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY ON THE
WRITING PROCESS IN ONLINE COMPOSITION COURSES

By
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the intersections of gender, technology, and composition pedagogy. The purpose of this study was to explore how female students and diverse instructors incorporated personal experiences in writing and teaching practices in an asynchronous online composition course. Life experiences allow students to reflect on past knowledge to generate ideas, topics, and evidence in academic essays. Such knowledge situates authors as rhetorical agents and adds to critically reflective thinking and writing, particularly for female students who choose narratives that challenge mainstream narratives. In an asynchronous online course, time, space, and technology change the quantity and quality of interpersonal communication. The results of this study show that the separation of the participants from other individuals offers benefits and challenges. Three online instructors were interviewed and fourteen in-depth interviews were collected from a diverse group of female participants enrolled in online composition courses in a rural public college. The findings of the study indicate that personal narratives contribute to knowledge-building when the participants establish a strong social presence with other learners and when instructors create positive online contexts that promote a community of inquiry. Various forces influenced how and why these participants incorporated autobiographical experiences into their writing. These forces include the participants’ writing goals, online communication, audience awareness, and the participants’ assumptions about academic writing contexts. The results of this study offer new insights on how to incorporate narratives in online writing courses in meaningful ways.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages and our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of war, of violence.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, p. 102)

Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word.

Walter Ong (1982, p. 92)

Gloria Anzaldúa, a feminist writer, explores how her own identity as a female of mixed ancestry and a lesbian compete against the more dominant Anglo norms of her culture. In her book Borderlands, she describes how her language of Chicano Spanish, a hybrid mix of Spanish and English, reflects her image of a racially complex woman living in a culture that automatically assumes she is inadequate linguistically and ethnically. She argues that writing is one way to make sense of the world in which we live. For Anzaldúa, writing poetry or essays derived from the intersections of her lived experience helps her to learn more about her own life and offers an alternative view for readers about what it means to speak/write from the margins. Tara Lockhart (2006) reveals how Anzaldúa “also shows that the act of writing itself assists individuals in coming to know and express the complexities of identity” (para.2). Writing based on personal experiences is one way writers explore how their identities can complicate more standardized themes, narratives, and knowledge. Writers like Anzaldúa, who reflect non-English and non-white voices, are not prevalent in academic contexts. Rather, through the
ongoing historical reproduction of selected texts and systems of privilege, female voices like hers are largely marginalized in higher education. As an educator, I am often
frustrated by how few academic essays model personal connections between the writer
and her subject. In a mainstream Western academic culture that often disregards students’
lived realities, essays allow students, particularly female students, an opportunity for self-
expression and possible social transformation.

The academic essay is one venue where writers can explore their own lives and
offer new meanings for a wider audience. The term “essay” is derived from the French
“essai” which is the author’s “attempt” to convince the reader to see the world from his or
her perspective. Since ancient times and through today, spoken and written rhetoric has
communicated arguable positions. Yet compared to the vast canon of white, middle-class,
male rhetorical examples, essays written by women about personal experiences have been
largely ignored, marginalized, or stereotyped (Bruner, 1996; Royster & Kirsch, 2012). In
North America, many writing instructors encourage students to make connections
between their lived experiences and the essays they write. This practice, however, falls
short when applied to female writers who want to explore complex ideas during the
writing process. Rather than using gender to engage students in academic conversations
that complicate preconceived ideas about female identity, race, and culture, students and
instructors often resort to traditional assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and
good writing.

In North American colleges and universities, technology influences how students
and teachers experience the writing process. From the earliest cave paintings to the pencil
and now to computers and the Internet, technology changes how individuals
communicate. Walter Ong (1982) claims that writing is an external expression of an internal phenomenon using technology. Writing has its roots in the spoken word as an utterance or expression of an idea but unlike the natural flow of spoken language, written communication is restricted to widely accepted conventions of grammar. Ong argues that writing is a conscious arrangement of symbols that represent an idea using the conventional tools, symbols, or technology available to the writer. Ong continues, writing is “utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials” (p. 82). Computers and the Internet have made brainstorming, thinking, drafting and revising an essay quicker than ever before. In teaching composition online and using all forms of technology, I ask students to link personal experiences to their rhetorical arguments, but many underlying problems remain. How do students relate complex experiences to unknown readers? How can female students write about their own values and beliefs as a way to leverage their authority? How can students use technology to write about their own diverse personal experiences? In my years of teaching composition online, I continue to struggle with these overlapping constraints of writing pedagogy, communication, gender, and technology. I encourage students to write about meaningful topics and take risks with their writing. Yet, by doing so, I am also asking students to introduce their personal experiences into an academic context that has disciplinary hierarchies and binaries of knowledge that continue to challenge female rhetorical agency. In this study I explore these complex questions related to gender, composition, and technology as they apply to a first-year online composition course.
Digital Divide and Post-secondary Learning

As an educator, I understand that individuals pursue higher education for complex reasons. Some students pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake as a means of self-fulfillment. Other students enroll in degree programs when faced with a job change or planning future careers. Education has traditionally held the promise of a better, more financially secure future, and students understand that an educated person is a cultural ideal. Yet post-secondary learning is expensive. From submitting an online application to purchasing a computer, students must invest time and money in their academic journey. With the increase of distance learning and the need for a computer and Internet access, students can easily plan to spend a small fortune for a degree.

Online learning has become more common at the post-secondary level as a way to generate income for colleges and universities. In the last decade, the number of online courses offered at post-secondary schools has increased exponentially. In the United States, according to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey, nearly three-quarters of college presidents (77%) report that they offer online courses, with 89% of courses being offered in four-year public colleges and 60% offered in four-year private colleges. These same college presidents predict significant growth in online learning. Moreover, 46% of student who have graduated from college in the past ten years have taken at least one online course (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). Distance learning makes the cultural ideal of a post-secondary degree more feasible. Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley (2011) define distance learning as students and teachers using technology to interact with each other when they are located in different times and different places. Rather than communicating in real-time, students and teachers consume bits and pieces of
information on their own time and thereby shift traditional expectations of classroom
dynamics (Paloff & Pratt, 2005). In an increasingly busy, consumer-oriented culture, the
flexibility of online courses appeals to adults pursuing post-secondary credentials.
Online courses also appeal to administrators who see online instruction as a cost effective
way to teach courses. Adjuncts are hired to teach online courses and since adjuncts
require no pensions or benefits, administrators can save significant costs. In response to
these cultural, social, and economic shifts, college and university administrators now
offer more courses online.

Technology has also become increasingly accessible to most North American
adults, allowing diverse students greater choices in course and degree options. This
accessibility has widened the social mobility of students who previously had few post-
secondary options. However, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and adult
learners with competing financial and life priorities may not have full or easy access to
technology. This division in economic opportunities and access creates a digital divide,
where only certain students have access to information and communication technology
and some do not (Corak, 2013; Rogers, 2001). The digital divide impacts student
retention and completion rates because earning a post-secondary degree requires some
degree of economic ability. Students who have economic resources can purchase the
latest, fastest technology, whereas poorer students may need to increase their debt load in
order to purchase technology that allows them access to a basic online course.
Furthermore, higher education duplicates a class system by making access easier for
children raised in a culture of socioeconomic stability. For instance, students who have
parents who hold university degrees are more than twice as likely to attend post-
secondary schools (Finnie & Mueller, 2008; Finnie, Mueller, & Wismer, 2013) and come from more economically stable contexts (Frempong, Ma, & Mensah, 2012). As well, a double digital divide occurs when students from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds have parents who teach their children to use technology frequently and early (Ching, Basham, & Jang, 2005). Parents who help students decipher computer problems and navigate Web links help their children become digitally literate and in so doing, duplicate socioeconomic class structures. I see this socioeconomic privilege in my online courses as students who have cultural and economic resources often feel more comfortable with technology, thus complicating the language of expanded access used by administrators. Even though most incoming students have grown up with technology, there are some students who are new to technology and who may not have the economic privilege of full access. As an educator, I wonder how these technology gaps affect students’ writing process and if gender plays a role in a student’s technology use and writing goals.

Technology and Student Demographics

Academic writing is a core skill at the post-secondary level. Adult learners come to the online classroom with years of previous education, life experience, and writing skills. Realizing the commitment of time and money involved in online learning, adult students are ready to learn and are intrinsically motivated. Citing the work of Malcolm Knowles (1978), Michael Moore and Greg Kearsely (2011) highlight how adult learners are likely to appreciate self-directed learning and autonomy in their education. Adult learners also use personal experiences as a resource and see learning as relevant to current life situations. As an online instructor, I believe linking personal experiences to
essay writing encourages deep thinking because this practice requires writers to reflect on their existing values and beliefs in light of new readings and knowledge. I often wonder why writing about personal experiences seems easier for the adult learners in my online class, and I always appreciate how women provide unique insights to online discussions. I also firmly believe that sharing personal experiences empowers adult learners in online settings because it helps to overcome the conceptual distance between them and other learners.

Adult women who manage multiple life and school responsibilities are drawn to online learning because it fits into their busy lives. Within the past decade, more women than men have been enrolling in online courses (Price, 2006). Women learners often assume the burden of child and view online learning as a way to gain credentials or advance their career while still managing their personal responsibilities (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007). As primary caregivers, women must often parcel their time caring for children, spouses, and aging parents. Adult female learners are also active in the workforce, and as a result, the flexibility of online learning is an appealing way to combine work and school (Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006). Corey Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, and Lei (2010) explain that women have deep intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for pursuing post-secondary education. Internal factors may relate to the social currency that associates education with more career opportunities. External reasons are often more regulatory, with women weighing work, home, and financial responsibilities when deciding on how to accommodate their learning. For women who are spouses, providers, and students, online learning enables them to function in their complex social roles (Kramarae, 2001). Given these social constraints, online courses are often the only
option for adult women who must juggle family, work, and social obligations and who are fiercely determined to secure a better future for themselves and their families.

While technology has created more opportunities for women desiring a post-secondary education, women still face challenges in higher education. In North America technology is largely designed by male computer programmers and culturally, more boys are encouraged to appreciate technology than girls and women (Abbiss, 2011; Huffman, Whetten & Huffman, 2013; Kelan, 2009). Nevertheless, women are avid users of technology and view it as a tool to pursue career options and higher learning. Many women access online learning for convenience, but they go on to form strong online learning communities and social groups that ultimately produce positive educational experiences (Rovai & Baker, 2005; Sullivan, 2001). Feminist theorists exploring the post-secondary opportunities available to women emphasize freedom of choice associated with higher education, particularly when women form social connections. In The Feminist Classroom, Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault (2001) explore several themes related to female agency in the post-secondary classroom such as knowledge construction, voice, authority, shifting identities, and positionality based on one’s social, racial, ethnic, or sexual identity. These complex intersections of female identity can be explored in academic writing and complicate our understanding of the world. In online settings, however, time and space separate spoken and written communication—a separation of mind and body that is reified in higher education. In colleges and universities that are historically rooted in male, middle-class, and Western practices, objective, neutral, and empirical knowledge is more highly valued than subjective, personal knowledge. In online courses, female learners can share ideas and experiences.
that can potentially resist dominant academic values that privilege mostly male, middle-class knowledge. These complex tensions inform this study. I understand that academic writing is both a personal and public activity, and the challenges associated with critical reflection are even more complicated in online settings. It is my hope that this study will uncover ways in which female narratives can offer more positive online learning outcomes and contribute to a more decentred view of human problems.

**Technology and Composition Pedagogy**

While composition and rhetoric have their roots in ancient Greece, the field of composition pedagogy has changed the most in the past four decades. During the 1960s social and civil rights movement, more students entered post-secondary colleges and some students needed remediation. As a way to make academic writing more engaging, teachers tried to emphasize the connection between personal experience and secondary knowledge (Boegeman, 1980; Britton, 1978; Lunsford, 1980). Social activists like Paulo Freire (1970) also championed the importance of literacy and education as a tool for liberation from oppressive economic and social circumstances. In his landmark book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued against a banking educational model that viewed learners as passive recipients rather than active participants in their own learning. Freire claimed that literacy and life experience could raise Brazilian workers’ critical consciousness to the abuses of systemic silence and oppression. Drawing upon such socially progressive ideas, composition teachers urged students to use life experiences in their essay writing and to be actively engaged in their learning. Critically reflective educators encouraged students to write about experiences as a way to challenge and analyze dominant themes and writings. Connecting the writer to her topic seemed like
common sense, and many composition teachers embraced this core pedagogical principle. Key composition theorists like Ann Berthoff (1981), who argued that the pre-writing process helps students reflect on larger “relationships, for assertions and questions” (p. 38) and Janet Emig (1977), who claimed that writing links authors to a larger conceptual understanding of the world, viewed writing as a way to complicate knowledge. Patricia Bizzell (1978) also saw personal writing as a way to engage in a responsible, social dialogue. These leading composition authors understood how writing that relied on personal experience encouraged deeper meanings and engaged the writer and reader in critical inquiry.

Another significant shift in composition pedagogy came in the 1990s as increased computer technology coupled with a more accessible Internet transformed post-secondary institutions. Technology enabled teachers and students to use different tools for writing such as audio, video, graphics, and other media. Unlike older literacy models where students would read and write an essay in solitude, new digital literacies opened opportunities for collaboration, discussion, and live engagement. Open access Web 2.0 technologies such as Google depended on users to shape the body of knowledge. Wikis allowed groups to collaborate and make changes to a document, unlike traditional, fixed publications. Similar to Marilyn Cooper’s (1986; 2011) ecological view of composition where the writer is influenced by his or her unique physiology, cultural, and historical context, technology also influenced writers to produce texts using fluid and overlapping technological innovations that incorporate sound, media, hyperlinks and other Web-based resources. These technologies are now available to students on Web-based learning management systems like Blackboard and Moodle. This new era of technology and Web-
based online learning is the context for this study. This study will explore the phenomenon of composition pedagogy in an asynchronous online course in terms of how female students use personal narratives in the writing process and how instructors situate personal knowledge in online courses.

While technologies are rapidly changing how writing instruction is delivered, the actual teaching of academic writing has been slow to change. Even with access to new technologies, many composition teachers continue to teach writing the way they were taught to write—promoting the current-traditional view of the academic essay that focuses on an objective, thesis-driven argument based on empirical evidence, without imagining other rhetorical possibilities (Berlin, 1987; Crowley, 2010). Online writing instructors rely heavily on the written word to post lectures, shape assignments, facilitate discussions, and engage with students through email or other postings. Students respond in kind, but they largely focus on textual communication rather than using digital media to its fullest potential. As Michael Moore and Greg Kearsely (2011) point out, “nearly all instruction online is dependent on text” (p. 149). Students learning in this context must be able to read and write clearly. The time delays associated with asynchronous online learning may grant students more time to shape their written responses, but other students who have weaker literacy skills or who dislike time delays may not perform well. Time, self-directed learning, and motivation all play a role in online learning. Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt (2005) insist, “The benefits of taking or teaching an online class—being able to connect any time and any place….also can be a detriment of sorts given that, for the most part, the people with whom one is interacting are represented by words on a screen” (p. 7). This disconnect between the potential value of online learning and a positive,
engaged learning experience raises questions about the effectiveness of the medium. As a result, more research is needed that explores how students think and write in this context. In the United States, online course offerings will continue to expand and English composition courses will remain a prerequisite for first and second year college or university students. Given this complex context, I will consider the intersections between online learning and writing pedagogy. By focusing on female learners in a first-year composition course, I hope that this study will provide greater understanding about how some female learners share their narratives online and how to improve online learning for all students.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between the online medium and the writing process for female learners. As colleges and universities move forward with online learning, many administrators and policy makers seek ways to improve the technical elements of online instruction rather than considering the larger ethical implications of teaching students online. As well, composition pedagogy intersects with technology in complex ways, especially in college and university cultures that continue to marginalize female narratives, evidence, and voice (Lewis, 1993). Exploring personal narratives in a college writing course is one way to understand these larger cultural forces and historical contexts. Students who introduce life experiences into this context can complicate traditional views of gender, identity, class, and location. Conflicts can occur when ideas are communicated in online discussions, informal group work, and in formal essays that directly contradict mainstream narratives. Disciplinary hierarchies are duplicated when instructors separate personal narratives from more
traditional rhetorical goals. Technology attempts to duplicate human interaction, but often the conceptual distance between students and the teacher becomes insurmountable. How female learners engage with the medium and produce essays must be weighed against the complex technology and digital choices that shape online courses and that can detract from deeper, more critical online conversations and writings. This study examines the phenomenon of online learning to see if there is any connection between how female students experience the writing process and the online learning experience. The goal of this research is to find better ways to teach writing online with the aim to promote female students’ voice and agency.

This study examines the feedback of 14 female online students and 3 online instructors regarding how they situate personal experience in an online writing course. In Chapter One, I introduce the problem and research question, consider the theoretical and analytical frameworks, and define key terms. In Chapter Two, the literature about online learning and gender is reviewed. In Chapter Three, I discuss my research approach including the site of the study, my methodology, and my bias. Chapters Four, Five, and Six provide the results and analysis of the emergent themes. Chapter Seven offers a discussion of the data, recommendations for future study, and a conclusion.

**Research Questions**

This study examines the intersections of technology, gender, and the writing process for adult female learners. By analyzing the perceptions of adult women in an online writing course, I attempt to answer three related research questions: (1) How/why do these women use personal experiences to invent, draft, and write essays in an online environment where human interactions and relationships are different in terms of quantity
and quality than in a live classroom? (2) What factors influence how these female students share/introduce personal experiences with students and instructors in an online writing course? (3) How do these three educators situate personal experiences in online composition courses? These guiding questions will inform this study and show the possible relationship between the complex, internal, cognitive writing process with the external writing female students produce for an instructor and other students in an online writing course.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the social construction of language. Five key theorists inform the conceptual framework for this study: Lev Vygotsky, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jerome Bruner. These authors explore how language and communication do not occur in isolation, but are products of our daily social interactions. In his research with children, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986) demonstrates how language is constructed in our minds and in our social interactions. He observed that when children share problems with other children, the degree to which their ideas were verified or rejected determined the “outcome of the argument” (p. 48). For Vygotsky, ideas or thoughts contain inner speech that differs depending on the context or meaning. An individual’s inner speech or internal dialogue fluctuates. In order for such inner speech to develop, people must interact with other individuals. Vygotsky (1986) argues, “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….Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them” (p. 218). Thought and language are not independent variables; instead, ideas,
words and language are realized through social interactions. Vygotsky relates to this study because online learning depends on a different kind of social interaction. Words shared online are created in an online space where meanings or ideas may be separated from the author’s intentions. With an unknown audience, the connections between words and meanings may become less clear. As social interactions change as they invariably do in online settings, so do individual thought processes, language development, and interpersonal communication. As with physical interactions, some online voices are legitimized and used to construct knowledge, whereas other voices are dismissed.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) argue that language is influenced by cultural contexts and daily life encounters. Individuals engage with other individuals in the real world in familiar and novel ways. In instances where someone must address a real problem, that person finds new words to make sense of the experience. Lived experience, for Berger and Luckmann, is not only physical and immediate, but experiences are historically situated, resulting in each experience being unique. People depend on repeated and commonly accepted face-to-face interactions, body language, and social cues to understand the world. When individuals are physically separated from one another, interpersonal communication becomes more dependent on previously held assumptions about social roles and institutionalized customs. Social structures, symbolic meanings, and social markers provide objective and subjective meanings to words/signs. Berger and Luckmann (1966) insist, “The capacity of language to crystallize and stabilize for me my own subjectivity is retained (albeit with modifications) as language is detached from the face-to-face situation” (p. 38). Thus, while face-to-face interactions and dialogue are the highest forms of communication, individuals can still communicate
across time, space, and geography, as in online contexts. Berger and Luckmann are important to this study because online communication is different from live conversation. Technology creates its own “modifications” and alters the physical time and space of interpersonal communication. Online, individuals are separated from other learners; as a result, they may rely more heavily on self-identified social, cultural, and racial cues to communicate or share ideas with other learners. Thus, this interrupted online space can create new thinking, brainstorming, and writing patterns than what would otherwise occur in a live class.

Russian literary critic Mikail Bakhtin’s (1981) theory about heteroglossia reflects the diversity of voices and ideas evident in online settings. In online settings, learners and teachers typically see words before they see a face or images. Learners convey social cues or markers through their online expressions, and students use different types of language in discussion boards, pre-writing, and formal submissions. Bakhtin claims that in order for any language to thrive, it must incorporate other meanings and dialects. He describes language as highly relative and shaped by social, historical, and cultural forces, creating hybrid forms and nuanced meanings. A mono-language or culture that attempts to normalize language and meanings by resisting change to new meanings is inferior to richer, more diverse communications. In contrast, a multi-lingual dialect is superior because it connects other languages, cultures, and ideas. Individuals who navigate the competing voices, dialects, and languages are intellectually challenged when deciding how to speak, write, or think. Language, he argues, is a product of different social roles, classes, group dynamics, culture, and history that shape how language is used. These differences create healthy tensions in literature. Bakhtin (1981) describes this multi-
voiced language as *heteroglossia*. In literature, prose writers use different dialects to introduce their own opinions and develop characters in a plot. These different points of view “…express the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his speech” (p. 300). Diverse speech, dialects, and points of view produce a richer, more subtle text. Through *heteroglossia*, Bakhtin (1981) reminds us of how language depends on the interplay of multiple socio-cultural meanings. In online contexts, this rich exchange of different voices can contribute to a deeper understanding of one’s cultural identity and offer new insights for critical reflection. Bakhtin relates to this study because English composition adheres to dominant forms of rhetoric and traditional writing conventions. Often, English instructors value writing that follows recognizable styles and uses more empirical evidence; as a result, they reinscribe these values to students who will, presumably, write for this singular academic culture.

Finally, Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner offers important insights about how personal narratives can be life affirming. Personal experiences hinge on narratives—the repeated experiences, encounters, and exchanges of daily life. Narratives are not whimsical tales or enchanting fables. In *The Process of Education*, Jerome Bruner (1960) claims that good pedagogy draws out the child’s intuitive knowledge and helps him or her learn new meanings. Using a math and science curriculum, Bruner illustrates how children learn incrementally and hierarchically when they learn fundamental principles within a discipline and use these core principles to advance their own learning. Bruner (1997) highlights a process-based education that increases students’ self-discovery and intellect by shifting students’ external rewards to internal satisfaction by having students physically do something. This process view of learning is important to this study because
writing requires students to do something. Writing an essay requires students to think deeply about their personal life experiences as a way to scaffold to more complex thinking and writing. Writing is a process of deep reflection and analysis that requires the author to use long-term memory to organize and generate ideas and goals for her writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). When instructors encourage students to “write about what they know,” they are asking students to explore ideas, events, and problems from a personal perspective. The bridge between personal experience and knowledge acquisition requires students to examine a topic from many different angles and as Ann Berthoff (1981) argues, the pre-writing process helps students reflect on their subjects because the resulting texts are pre-texts for larger “relationships, for assertions and questions” (p. 38). Meaning making is a personal activity, and students who write about personal experiences generate new knowledge and different “construals of reality” (Bruner, 1990, p. 95). Bruner’s theories relate to this study because writing is an exercise in deep thinking and critical reflection. Narratives emerge from the vignettes of everyday life. The history, politics, and context of any given moment inform how individuals respond to the world. Women writing about personal experiences in online courses must carefully weigh their narrative meanings and find ways to articulate their ideas for a largely unknown audience. Bruner’s narrative theory is an important framework for understanding the participants’ online writing experiences and frames the research questions of this study.

These theorists remind us that language does not occur in isolation. Race, class, gender, identity, history, geography as well as countless other variables influence how women use language to argue a position. Online, where words and texts are often the first
means of communication, instructors and students must decipher language carefully.
Teaching writing means that educators and students understand the social context of language. Technology attempts to recreate the social dynamics of a live classroom, yet time and space can fragment the meanings, contexts, and understandings of words. Thus, understanding how an author’s gender and complex identity influences her writing process in online spaces requires a deeper understanding of how she uses language and why she writes. Essays that rely on personal experience and offer commentary can complicate social issues. Such complex social commentary is often devalued by a dominant academic culture, especially in online contexts where thoughts and written expressions become fragmented in discussion forums. It is my hope that this study will add to the research on how female students experience the writing process, particularly in online settings.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study explores composition pedagogy through a critical, feminist lens. This feminist approach to writing emerged from decades of earlier feminist movements. The “first wave” feminist movement peaked in the 20th century as women in primarily Western and northern European countries fought for women’s rights, particularly the right to vote. The “second wave” feminist movement continued to expand equality for women and began with the civil rights movement and social unrest of the 1960s. From the 1960s to the 1980s, this “second wave” sought for greater female equity in the workplace, in marriage rights, property, and reproductive rights. Of notable interest is the psychological work of writers like Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule (1986) who explored the differences in how men and women
view the world. In their groundbreaking book *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, these authors argue that women create knowledge from their social roles and communities, and their rational decisions are influenced by their interpersonal relationships and connections with other women. One concern with *Women’s Ways of Knowing* is that many women of race and color did not see their unique problems reflected in this research. Similarly, Carol Gilligan’s (1982) research *In a Different Voice* reveals how women rely more on situated social relations when making moral choices, unlike men who rely more on reasoning when making moral choices. Yet Gilligan’s work also contributed to a binary of gender differences, positioning female knowledge against male experience and knowledge within primarily Western social contexts. This “second wave” of feminist research spurred the “third wave” that explored the complex intersections of gender and identity.

The “third wave” feminist movement took hold in the 1990s and continues today with the idea that female identity is positional and shifting. Women are socially positioned not only by their gender, but also by their race, culture, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, nationality, and other social constructions. Earlier, the writings of the “second wave” movement were penned by mostly white, middle-class women who had socioeconomic means to write. Rather than relying on an “essential” definition of womanhood, this new movement views gender through multiple lenses. Female knowledge and identity denies an “essential” idea of gender that is in opposition to male identity. Rather, individuals create their own knowledge under unique circumstances and experiences, reflective of the intersections of their social locations (Alcoff, 1988) and how they perform their gendered identities (Butler, 1990). Moreover, gender is not restricted to North American class and racial privilege, as demonstrated by writers such
as Gloria Anzaldúa and Trinh T. Minh, who explore how their own cultural and social dynamics influence their meanings and identity-construction. The “third wave” feminist movement focuses on how individual identity shifts depending on the writer’s context.

Related to this complex view of gender is the work of Paulo Freire (1970) who emphasizes personal experience as one way to critique larger and predominantly unjust social forces. Understanding and acknowledging one’s unique culture and language in thinking, writing, and communicating recreates knowledge. When personal experiences become the focal point of discourse, students begin to challenge mainstream knowledge. Only through such personal reflection and expression, Freire argues, can change occur. Freire’s work on critical literacy coupled with a feminist approach to composition studies is important to this study. Writing, as a personal and public activity, relies on feedback from other students and the teacher. In online contexts, students may never meet the teacher or other students. From the perspective of critical feminist theory, issues of voice, legitimacy, dialogue, and participation all contribute to how women write for themselves and for other readers online. These complex dynamics call into question the larger forces that influence how women use their life experiences to challenge cultural assumptions in online spaces.

This analytical framework guides the analysis of my data because I consider female experience an important lens to explore composition studies. Gender is one axis of other factors such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality that influence how one’s language and identity are shaped. In face-to-face daily interactions, we see biology, skin color, mannerisms, and accents immediately, in a physical form, but online, these identifying markers are largely unseen. The anonymity that online courses offer may be
comforting and even liberating for some learners, yet this anonymity can also reinforce preexisting social norms. Gender is an important lens through which to examine the data because female narratives are largely devalued in academic settings. In North American colleges and universities, certain classes, narratives, language uses, and cultures are privileged and reflect mainstream power relations that many individuals will aspire to or possibly reject (hooks, 2000; Royster & Kirsch, 2012). How students communicate their personal narratives reveals varying degrees of power. Even in online classrooms, power, knowledge, and privilege can be nuanced and subtle. Language use can reflect the ingrained power relations that maintain racist, sexist, or homophobic views. These communication patterns must be challenged, and writing allows students and teachers a way to confront these subtle power relations. It is my hope that this research will offer insights on how to encourage more female students to engage in online critical reflection by sharing their ideas and personal narratives.

**Definition of Terms**

In this section I provide definitions for the words used throughout this research project. First, *neoliberalism* is defined as the economic philosophy developed after WWII that privileges an open, free, and competitive market economy. A free market prioritizes competition so larger social and cultural activities like education, work, and even individual choices become subject to economic pressures. Neoliberalism creates an ideology of consumption, so gains made through feminism such as the development of identity and difference become largely suppressed when the individual-as-consumer can distance herself from past experiences and learn/gain new skills in order to become more marketable (Chun, 2009; Jones & Calafell, 2012). For the purposes of this study, *online*
learning is defined as post-secondary, credit-bearing coursework where the course content is delivered through a learning management system (LMS) such as Moodle or Blackboard. Online courses are defined as asynchronous learning environments. Online courses are delivered through a LMS that organizes the content of an online course into a Web-based site. This study examines the use of Blackboard for its LMS in a small rural college. Students enrolled in a Blackboard course have access to other online courses, and within a specific course, they are able to communicate with the instructor and other students through a private message folder and discussion boards. The online courses in this study are purely asynchronous, meaning students and teachers can log on any time, all day, every day, seven days a week. Students who work on Blackboard have access to Skype and private emails that encourage communication.

Technology is a broad term and forms the context of this study. Students write and communicate on a computer using a variety of tools. For the purposes of this study, technology will be defined as any computer-based tool that aids in the writing process. Computers are the primary tool that transfers ideas from our minds to words through the use of a keyboard. In addition to a pen, paper, a computer keyboard and a screen, technology can refer to the use of interactive software or multi-media tools. Multi-media tools found in many desktop computer programs can allow students to add images, color, and even sound to their writing. Technology will refer broadly to the computer-based tools students have available to create any kind of essay or text online, including any new digital literacy available in the LMS.

The term digital literacies refers to writing that uses new digital tools for communication. New digital literacies, like Web 2.0 technologies, are open access tools
that allow users to shape content, such as Wikipedia. Web 2.0 literacies allow users to shape the content of the information and encourage users to collaborate or edit content or documents such as wikis. Within a LMS, online students can also participate in wikis. Online instructors can use digital literacies such as You Tube, Google tools or sites, or hyperlinks to relate information to students in the course, and students can draw from these resources to engage in individual and collaborative writing exercises. These digital literacies allow writers a vast array of resources to shape a written text well beyond the written word.

In this study I explore the larger impact of online learning on female students and their writing practices. Although online learning has made post-secondary education more accessible and convenient for learners, it is possible that the medium reproduces dominant forms of learning and thereby impacts the exploration of themes that may contribute to reflective, rhetorical practices. By describing how women write in online settings, this study can contribute to the ongoing discourse related to online teaching strategies and composition practices.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

In this chapter I review the important literature related to my research questions. Specifically, I look at the neoliberal context for online learning and teaching at the post-secondary level. I focus on whether and how composition pedagogy perpetuates binaries and hierarchies of knowledge in the field. I discuss the relationship between composition pedagogy in terms of the online interactivity and I consider the possible connections between gender and writing. Finally, I consider how personal narratives can be leveraged for critically reflective writing practices in online spaces.

Evolution of Online Learning in a Neoliberal Culture

Online learning enables students of all abilities to take courses in the comfort of their own homes. Improved bandwidth and more economical technology make brick-and-mortar classrooms optional. Students taking an online course can submit an assignment and anticipate a response within hours, rather than the traditional days it took the mail carrier to deliver marked papers. Online learning and distance learning are distinct contexts, with distance learning providing students with some synchronous learning experiences whereas online learning is predominantly asynchronous. Desmond Keegan (1996) defines distance learning as teaching that is “characterized by the separation of teacher and learner and of the learner from the learning group, with the interpersonal face-to-face communication of conventional education being replaced by an a-personal mode of communication mediated by technology” (p. 8). Keegan (1996) describes key traits of distance education that make it appealing for educational contexts, namely the technology that allows students and teachers continuous access, the ability to learn
outside of the constraints of physical classrooms, the economic merits of distance learning in increasingly stringent economic times, online lectures or learning skills that mirror traditional learning practices, and market forces that seek the greatest cost-benefit outcome of course delivery. Distance learning can take the form of flipped classrooms or hybrid courses where students need to be physically present for only a portion of the course. Unlike various forms of distance learning, online learning refers to asynchronous, credit-bearing courses where students are physically separated from other students and the instructor. Here, technology mediates learning between students and instructors.

Rapid advances in technology have revolutionized learning with the speed, versatility, and options available to learners on the Web. Understanding the economic and cultural context of online learning is important to this study because it allows educators to critique the system. The goal of this research is not about changing a phenomenon but offering recommendations that will make educators and students more responsive to online learning challenges.

Distance learning began during the 19th century when more adults enrolled in correspondence courses as a way to gain college credits without disrupting their busy adult lives. Since then, distance and online learning has grown within a higher education system that has seen radical changes. As more women began entering colleges and universities in the 19th century and as more immigrants began seeking admission to colleges in the 1960s, higher education changed to serve a wider clientele. Stanley Aronowitz (2000) argues that higher education continues to help students consume cultural capitalism. As he notes, “the degree to which schools enable students and faculty to explore the many dimensions of the dominant culture depend on whether their clientele
is the elite or the plebes, whether they are educating an intellectual leadership, the
business class, the political class, or those destined to function in technical categories” (p. 5).
As the clientele in higher education changed, the curriculum and the aims of colleges
and universities also changed. Janice Newson and Howard Buchbinder contend that,
“universities would in future years be shaped by conceptions of higher education as a
competitive moneymaking enterprise in which operations are rationalized for economic
efficiency; vested faculty act as ‘entrepreneurs’; and knowledge is created, marketed, and
sold as a commodity” (cited in Scott, 2009 p. 5). In our current culture, online learning
thrives within a market-driven context, as seen in the increase of massively open online
courses (MOOCs). As I will discuss, this market-driven, neoliberal worldview supports
online learning as a way to access higher education and its related personal, professional,
and economic benefits.

Online learning thrives in a capitalist culture and economy. Acquiring an
advanced degree is important in many developed countries because a degree
demonstrates that an individual accepts the neoliberal values of discipline, self-
improvement, and determination. These personal values are linked to success as more
individuals associate pursuing coursework and degrees with a market-driven economic
philosophy. Earning a costly college degree requires students to accept values that link
education to wage earnings and work stability. Many studies indicate that a college
degree is one way to secure higher wage earnings (Hout, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini,
2005). In a neoliberal sense, where market-driven decisions often infuse personal
decisions, earning a college degree is less about becoming a critical thinker, reader, and
writer and more about becoming a skilled, computer savvy worker in our fast-paced
global society. A college degree offers students preparing to enter the workforce a competitive edge. Technology and skills training helps students to become more employable, and students become free agents in selecting colleges that meet their educational goals. College administrators are eager to offer courses to students paying top dollar, creating a subtle consumer-based educational model. Daniel Saunders (2010) acknowledges that students have always attended college to gain marketable skills and neoliberal forces are not new to higher education. What is new, he argues, is how colleges identify the student as a consumer. Neoliberal values replace governance structures and require faculty to become more entrepreneurial, resulting in colleges and universities changing curricula to meet revenue-generating goals. Administrators, who face reduced state support and restricted funding, find online learning to be the most cost-effective way to generate income. As well, administrators now market their courses globally as a way to increase student enrollment. International students are ideal post-secondary candidates because these students can pay extra international student fees for college courses. Expanding courses beyond a local community to a larger pool of students generates revenue. This revenue generation is especially true in this study, where many out-of-state students enroll in online composition courses.

Neoliberalism is grounded in an economy that affects how individuals make decisions. In The Birth of Biopolitics, Michel Foucault (2004) traces the rise of capitalism in Western society and argues that neoliberalism, or the hyper-individualization of society, reflects a cultural value that prioritizes individual choices based on economic freedom and stability. As he describes it, “The economy produces legitimacy for the state that is its guarantor. In other words the economy creates public law, and this is an
absolutely important phenomenon, which is not entirely unique in history to be sure, but is nonetheless a quite singular phenomenon in our times” (p. 84). In our North American capitalist culture, the economy influences the decisions people make from the most intimate and personal relationships such as marriage to the larger decisions about how we educate our children. Capitalism promises economic security and gain for societies that adopt a free-market ideology. In the free market, profit is linked to productivity. Both the central government and social institutions accept this profit model as being beneficial. Foucault describes how a neoliberal ideology places economic prosperity not in the hands of the larger governmental forces, but rather it allows the individual to make decisions related to consumption, competition, goods, and resources that will create the most profit. For Foucault, the individual becomes the *homo economicus*, someone who is not “the man of change or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production” (p. 147). In this society, individuals must innovate in order to be productive. He argues, “It involves, on the contrary, obtaining a society that is not orientated towards the commodity and the uniformity of commodity, but towards the multiplicity and differentiation of enterprises” (p. 149). Choices in products, consumption, how courses are delivered or how careers advance create an economic space where individuals are free to make decisions, as long as these decisions occur within the space of economic costs and benefits. In this neoliberal context, the hyper-individualized *homo economicus* must decide among different, competing choices what will benefit him or her most. Economic freedom is a choice guaranteed by the state, but the individual is a free agent in a culture where such choices govern all facets of life, both private and public. Neoliberalism is the
culture and context of online learning in today’s post-secondary North American college classroom.

Higher education has been shaped by neoliberal forces in how it embraces online learning for its economical delivery of credit-bearing courses. In the United States in the last two decades, more large and mostly public colleges and universities and smaller private colleges have been turning to online courses as a means to reduce costs and increase student enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Harasim, 2000). Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman (2007) note that in 2004, 52.6% of administrators considered online courses as crucial to their institution. More recently, Allen and Seaman (2013) also claim that 61% of higher education administrators use online courses and degree programs as part of their strategic plan. Online courses do not require brick-and-mortar classrooms that require heat and electricity, so colleges and universities save money when students bear the cost of delivery using their own technology. Online courses are transferred from semester to semester, requiring minimal labor and technical support. By eliminating the physical classroom and downloading related costs to students, the total costs associated with live instruction are significantly reduced. Online courses at the site of this study have increased in the last decade, with more core courses like ENG 101 being offered online. Since the college of this study is a commuter college, students want online courses that fit into their lifestyles and busy schedules.

Community colleges, as the one in this study, represent an enormous sector of post-secondary education. In 2012, 12.8 million students were enrolled in 1, 132 two-year community colleges in the United States, representing approximately 40% of undergraduate post-secondary enrollment (American Association of Community
Colleges, 2014). In publicly funded institutions, two-year colleges rely on local and state budgets for funding. Increasingly, state budgets are limited for post-secondary education. Under economic pressure to cut costs and increase efficiency, community colleges offer online courses to eager students. A demand for online learning and increased enrollment at two-year colleges serves everyone. Students enroll in community colleges to save money and to conveniently fit school into their work and family schedules. Increased student enrollment and limited funding require administrators to hire more adjuncts. As cited in Hara Charlier and Mitchell Williams (2011), over the past three decades, adjunct hiring in post-secondary schools has increased by 100%, and in community colleges in 2007, 68% of faculty were employed on a part-time bases. Adjunct teachers make economic sense for community college administrators because adjuncts do not require insurance, retirement packages, or compensation compared to full-time faculty (Adams, 2010; Sammons & Ruth, 2007). Adjunct online instructors offer even more cost-savings and community college administrators have come to depend on this part-time labor pool, thus advancing a costs-benefits neoliberal value.

Busy adult women in pursuit of credentials and degrees are drawn to online courses because they are convenient. Online English courses allow women greater access to higher education, and personal choices about how, when, and where to learn become internalized. Thomas Lemke (2001) suggests, “By encoding the social domain as a form of the economic domain, cost-benefit calculations and market criteria can be applied to decision-making processes within the family, married life, professional life, etc.” (p. 200). Through online learning, women can make more cost-efficient educational choices that do not interfere with their own social roles as caregivers. Online courses provide
women with more post-secondary choices than ever before. Like men, women pursue a college degree to improve their earning potential, despite the continued gender wage gap in all fields of study (Gemici & Wiswall, 2014). This pay inequity does not deter women from pursuing higher education because a college degree still promises the possibility of upward economic mobility. The transfer of knowledge, skills, and cultural capital creates a market for online learning that appeals to busy adult learners.

Finally, the separation of time and physical space influences how learners respond to other individuals in online spaces. Many online courses are text-heavy, and students read lectures and finish assignments in isolation. Even when online groups form in discussion boards, chat rooms, or collaborative wiki assignments, learners are still separated by a computer screen, and time. The immediate exchanges that occur between a teacher and students in a live classroom where individuals occupy a space and time together are different in asynchronous online courses where time or space are irrelevant. Separating individuals from other individuals reflects a neoliberal value. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault (2004) describes a capitalistic culture that replaces interpersonal knowledge with disembodied learning:

> They have produced a society in which individuals have been torn from their natural community and brought together in the flat, anonymous form of the mass. Capitalism produces the mass. Capitalism consequently produces what Sombart does not exactly call one-dimensionality, but this is precisely what he defines. Capitalism and bourgeois society have deprived individuals of direct and immediate communication with each other and they are forced to communicate through the intermediary of a centralized administrative apparatus. [They have] therefore reduced individuals to the state of atoms subject to an abstract authority in which they do not recognize themselves. Capitalist society has also forced individuals into a type of mass consumption with the functions of standardization and normalization. Finally, this bourgeois and capitalist economy has doomed individuals to communicate with each other only through the play of signs and spectacles. (p. 113)
In this excerpt, Foucault’s accurate description parallels a typical online writing course. Drafts, ideas, or texts are fragmented and students communicate with each other for a “centralized administrative apparatus”—typically the teacher—who must measure each student’s online participation. The instructor uses technology to track how often students post ideas or participate, a time-consuming task that may detract from more meaningful, deeper online exchanges. Technology has made the “space” of learning available all day, every day, and students expect immediate feedback. These unrealistic work expectations can overwhelm an instructor who may already seem to be a remote and abstract authority to her students. This literature demonstrates how neoliberal values have made time an economic value. Internalizing learning experiences means that there is less time for instructors and students to pursue ongoing collaborative learning.

While online learning saves money, the technology can hinder deep learning when the technology replaces the human connection between students and teachers. Understanding this gap in human connection is important to this study because writing about personal experiences can contribute to deep learning. Henry Giroux (2002) warns against a higher education system where technology is the means to economic stability and where “true learning is sacrificed” (p. 446). He claims, “… the culture of instrumental rationality shapes intellectual practices in ways that undermine the free exchange of ideas, mediate relations in ways that do not require the physical relations of either students or other faculty, and support a form of hyper-individualism that downplays forms of collegiality and social relations amenable to public service” (p. 448). Self-directed learning may be appealing to some learners, but instructors also struggle to create safe online spaces so that students can learn to write meaningful, articulate
academic essays. Online education saves money, but in some cases as the literature shows, the cost savings come at questionable educational, social, and political costs to the teachers and students enrolled in these courses.

**Hierarchies and Binaries of Composition and Rhetoric**

While technology continues to change learning experiences, each discipline’s literary traditions, canons of knowledge, and practical norms are slow to change. This is especially true in Western academia which paradoxically values creativity but duplicates traditional fixed canons of literacy and knowledge (Shor, 2012; Zamel & Spack, 2012). Academic writing is entrenched in traditional pedagogical approaches to rhetoric where an objective writing style and voice is considered superior to subjective writing. While English composition instructors have been early adopters of technology to improve their discipline (Yancey, 2009), they are also restricted by traditional expectations and practices of academic essay writing, resulting in distinct hierarchical views of composition and rhetoric that perpetuate binaries of superior/inferior knowledge.

Composition and rhetoric are steeped in historical and cultural hierarchies that emphasize depersonalized writing themes and styles. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault (1972) emphasizes that language precedes a cultural context. The linguistic practice of signs, symbols, semantics, and social practices create a web of meaning for a specific culture and language. Combined, these semantic tools create larger cultural narratives that become established in history and reproduced in discipline specific readings and publications. History creates its own logic. Every discipline has its distinct rules that are applied internally and cannot be transplanted to other disciplines. This continuity creates an historical body of knowledge, or an “episteme.” In order to see
history in a context, we must understand this “episteme” in the evolution of composition pedagogy in order to search for breaks or departures from the norm.

Rhetoric involves using oral or written language to persuasively communicate with listeners/readers. Rhetoric began in ancient Greece where city-states emerged as sites of art, poetry, and literature. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero explored principles about life, art, philosophy, science, and rhetoric or public debate. Aristotle’s prolific writings emphasized that all knowledge was observable, or empirical, and his theories formed a foundation for centuries of Western thought. Similarly, Socrates felt that knowledge and education improved the individual. Plato, Socrates’ student, penned *The Dialogues* that imagined a space where individuals could gather for thinking, scholarship, and learning—a space that was to be known as the Academy. The Academy, founded in 387 B.C in Athens, became a centre of teaching and learning where individuals, mostly male and mostly wealthy, would gather to explore scientific problems and exercise thinking using the Platonic question-and-answer method. This traditional view of the Academy reflects our current post-secondary institutions—also called “the academy”—in honor of this ancient space of learning and debate.

Rhetoric as a literary form originated with Greek scholars who used the phrase “rhetorica” to describe learning focusing on debate and persuasion. Politicians, philosophers, and civil leaders used both spoken and written arguments to persuade listeners to adopt their cause. Erica Lindemann (1987) notes how Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* provided professionals with the skills required for their trade. Social leaders such as lawyers and statesmen were taught how to argue, speak, and write in defense of an idea. The classical rhetorician was taught how to arrange thoughts,
use evidence, shape language, and deliver persuasive arguments for varied audiences. Classical rhetorical practices continue to shape writing instruction today. Rhetorical devices such as the argumentative thesis, inductive and deductive reasoning, audience awareness, and the five-part essay emerged during this formative period (Lindemann, 1987; Elbow, 1990). While argument and persuasion used different rhetorical devices and patterns, the “episteme” of writing emerged as a way to convey one’s opinion or argue a position for a wider, generally unknown audience.

The “academy” of our Western higher educational system reproduces and duplicates historical knowledge, canons, and learning practices. As Michel Foucault (1972) reminds us, a discourse can be defined as concepts, rules, practices, and knowledge that a specific group determines at any given cultural, historical moment. Historically in the United States, English departments and professors have decided what subjects will be studied and which ones will be excluded. According to James Berlin (1987) and Philip Altbach (2011), a North American higher education system has largely consisted of white, heterosexual, middle-class, male professors. By extension then, the “texts” that emerge from this academic culture reflect these male authors, narratives, experiences, power relations, and curriculum. Women have not had a significant role in this hierarchical and historically male culture of composition and rhetoric. As such, women’s experiences are often viewed as inferior to male authors and themes. In recent decades, women have made significant gains in research, writing, and rhetoric on a global scale. More female, foreign writers are now included in composition course readers, allowing students to critique the impact of race, culture, and identity on both men and women around the world. As Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) argue,
“As might be expected with an intersection of feminism(s) and rhetoric(s) to gather data, what stands out dramatically is the opportunity to use gender, race, ethnicity, status, geographical sites, rhetorical domains, genres, and modes of expression as critical leverage points for adding yet another dimension to critical interrogations” (p. 142). The shifting intersections of female knowledge and experience are sites of potential meaning-making in this study. While male-dominated knowledge and writing practices continue to be valued in the academy, female knowledge, texts, histories, and reflections are emerging within this narrowed historical perspective as worthy for academic inquiry.

Not only have women not been part of the rhetoric and composition culture, but the teaching of writing is often considered as marginal or lower-level work in English Departments (Ede, 2004). This disciplinary attitude creates a hierarchy of knowledge that is meaningful to this study. In the United States, composition courses are pre-requisite courses offered through English Departments. Many English Departments pride themselves on producing literary theory and publishing articles devoted to textual analysis. Writing courses, however, are not part of this noble activity and are often viewed by English faculty as mundane, subordinate courses. Marking the many essays assigned in a writing course is time-consuming, tedious work, and many full-time instructors will balance teaching one labor-intensive ENG 101 course with more literature courses that require fewer essays. In Canadian universities, composition is interdisciplinary and students learn to research and write within different disciplines. At Queen’s, the academic writing course WRIT 125: Fundamentals of Academic Writing is an elective offered through Distance and Continuing Studies. In contrast, in the United States, most colleges and universities require a first-year composition (ENG 101) for all
degree programs. In an ENG 101 course, students learn strategies and techniques for successful academic essay and research writing. Undergraduate students must take a composition course and full-time instructors are required to teach these courses, making composition courses seem utilitarian. Lisa Ede (2004) comments on how composition pedagogy, already a ghetto of a dominant English Literature discourse, struggles to find legitimacy in academia that remains male dominated in its teaching practices, attitudes, theories, and curricular content. Composition pedagogy remains entrenched in an academic culture that views writing in narrow terms. In terms of this study, ENG 101 instructors can inadvertently reinforce these dominant academic values when shaping their online courses. Often, traditional teaching practices that emphasize reading and writing in isolation transfer expert teacher-knowledge into passive learners without taking into consideration new ways to teach composition in online contexts.

Composition studies function in an academic culture that creates binaries of knowledge that separate intellectual thought from the physical author’s values or beliefs. Thinking occurs in the mind and is based on logic, deduction, and empirical evidence, whereas the body is considered changeable, mysterious, and flawed. This dualism separates knowledge into mutually exclusive categories. Based on the works of Aristotle and Rene Descartes, dualism separates knowledge and divides the body from the mind, the intellect from feeling, the known from the unknown. In academic contexts, dominant male discourses view the male body, knowledge, texts, and writings as superior to the mysterious, unpredictable, and constantly changing female body/knowledge/text (Jaggar & Bordo, 1989). Related to this dualistic view of knowledge is an emphasis on rhetorical practices that value objective and neutral writing and that separates the writer and her
experiences from her text (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). Academic practices that separate the
author’s lived experience from the actual writing process create online dilemmas for
female students.

Rhetoric at the post-secondary level is generally defined as academic writing that
is framed around a thesis, is supported by empirical evidence, and reflects the Aristotelian
concepts of logos, pathos, and ethos. James Berlin (1987) claims the most common form
of teaching writing emerged in the 20th century as the *current-traditional* view of
composition pedagogy and reflects this classical rhetorical model. The *current-traditional*
model of rhetoric emphasizes a linear writing process, with a single author
drafting, outlining, writing, and editing an essay alone, in isolation and written for a
single reader—the instructor. Berlin (1987) notes this linear model reflects a Western
emphasis on scientific, positivist knowledge based on logic and empirical evidence. The
logical positivism of the 20th century classified unprovable claims to knowledge such as
religion, metaphysics, ethics, or experience as meaningless compared to rational
principles based on reason, logical thinking, and empirical evidence—principles that can
be validated. Like a scientist, a student would begin an essay with a clear argumentative
thesis in which she developed logical claims linking back to the thesis. Arguments
advanced knowledge based on science, evidence, and reality, not subjective experience.
The current-traditional model of writing continues to be emphasized in post-secondary
classrooms, with instructors emphasizing the essay as a product that is based on an
arguable thesis and supported with secondary evidence. As Robin Goodfellow (2011)
argues, “Institutional and disciplinary values shaping digital practice in the university, for
example, continue to promote orientations to knowledge that rest on critical analysis
rather than creative design, even whilst criteria for evaluating critique in students’ work remain very general” (p. 138). Personal reflections, themes of difference or subjective knowledge are largely subordinated in academic writing. In many ways, the online composition course reinforces an objective, neutral writing product. By separating learnings from the instructor and other learners, rhetorical debates and conversations become “flattened” and instructors rely on traditional writing habits when instructing online (DePew, Fishman, Romberger, & Ruetenik, 2006, p. 52). Understanding how students create rhetorical writing habits that resist binary meaning-making is an important outcome of this study and may contribute to the ongoing discourse related to online learning practices.

Separating the mind from the body also influences how scholars write articles, with academics preferring a writing style that removes all personal references in favor of a more neutral or absent writing voice/tone. Like the positive and scientific era that formed research methods and emphasized knowledge that can be reduced, hypothesized, and tested, academic writing also favors a neutral, objective writing style reminiscent of historical scientific writings. Whether writing a blind journal submission or a formal essay, post-secondary instructors generally expect the written word to be objective, logical, neutral in tone, and thesis-driven (Berlin, 1987). In her book *Stylish Academic Writing* Helen Sword (2012) examines thousands of publications from different disciplines in higher education. She observes that most academic writers use writing voice and style that is impersonal, abstract, monotonous, and distant. Furthermore, in her study, the use of first person “I” is limited or discouraged. When she asked her social science colleagues why they avoid the first person “I”, they replied, “it’s because we’re
supposed to sound objective, like scientists,” even though most recent style manuals recommend using the first person perspective (p. 39). By de-emphasizing personal meaning making, the author’s complex identity is relegated to private writings not intended for public critique. This dualism perpetuates an historical view of academic writing that dismisses female identities, experiences, and knowledge as contingent upon shifting cultural, sexual, racial, and other forces. Because female knowledge shifts and changes, it is considered unreliable. Such shifting knowledge challenges more dualistic knowledge schemes, especially when writers use multimodal literacies that break free from traditional text-based narratives.

**New Perspectives of Composition Pedagogy**

In the past three decades, new theories about the writing process acknowledge that writing is a complex social and cognitive activity. Writing teachers like Linda Flower and John Hayes (1981) formed a socially constructed model of the writing process that reflects a recursive, spontaneous cognitive process (Appendix A). These authors describe a writer who is constantly shifting back and forth between her prior knowledge, her audience, and her individual writing goals. Their model of the writing process reveals a recursive, internally reflective writer trying to create a text. Peter Elbow’s (1973) work in *Writing without Teachers* adds significantly to Flower and Hayes’ model. Elbow argues that writing does not happen in isolation, but is enriched by group work and self-directed writing goals. Collaboration is integral to a writing group and spurs the individual writer to achieve his or her writing goals. A third important progression in the writing process came with Marilyn Cooper’s (1986, 2011) ecological view of composition. An ecological view of writing considers the writer, her historical
and cultural context, and her collaboration with other writers as fundamental to the writing process. Unlike the Flower and Hayes’ (1981) cognitive model that describes an isolated writer making individual decisions about tone, style, language, and content alone and producing a text for a single reader, Cooper’s ecological view of writing engages the writer with other writers and inevitably, links the writer to the larger history, social, and cultural power relations inherent in language and in social groups. The ecological writing process is organic and links the writer to the larger psychological, social, and environmental circumstances that influence her ideas and her text. As Cooper (1986) insists, “An ecologist explores how writers interact to form systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems” (p. 368). This interconnectedness of the writer with her text is particularly relevant to this study because technology shapes the environment of the online learner. The participants in this study both use and interact with technology in ways that suit their personal writing goals and their online communication styles.

New technologies allow online learners to think and write in interactive ways that are different from using technology for writing purposes. In the 1990s the New London Group (NL Group) defined “multiliteracies” as the multiple language and communication patterns currently available that required a new approach to teaching literacy through computer-based technologies (Cazden et al., 1996). The NL Group argued that language was socially constructed and educators should include four key features in teaching literacy: situated learning, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Situated practice requires teachers and students to become avid users of the technology.
found in everyday practices. Overt instruction takes students’ preexisting knowledge and expands it to introduce new activities and practices using technology. Critical framing helps students to articulate the knowledge-power dynamics that inform their learning and social practice. Transformed practice means creating new meanings by applying what students have learned in overt instruction and critical framing to their real-world experiences. The NL Group realized that diverse technologies, digital practices, and meanings required a new language—a metalanguage—that could enable students to learn and work in a diverse contemporary culture. This metalanguage is evident in how students can now think, write, and communicate using mobile devices and different platforms and in their general ease with web-based online learning. Such a multimodal metalanguage allows for rich narratives to emerge online, as indicated in a recent study that explored visual essays among pre-service teachers and adolescents (Hughes & Robertson, 2010). This study shows that allowing students to use narratives and digital media in literacy activities can help students understand their place in society. The educators in this study indicate that students found such tasks challenging not in terms of using the technology, but because”…the medium forced them to think about what they wanted to say before they could really start—it focused their attention and minds on the task at hand” (p. 27). Included in this interactive learning journey is the inherent risk involved when largely anonymous online students face possible exclusion and silencing. In sum, these distinct points can use technology as a platform for learning and can engage students in thinking and writing practices linked to personal experiences.

**Technology in online composition courses**
Today’s online composition classroom connects learners through interactive experiences. Technology facilitates online learning by including images, sound, and multi-media into lectures and course content. Technology also changes students’ values and beliefs about how they make and share meanings digitally within online communities. Colin Lankshear and Michelle Knobel (2011) define this social learning as a “new literacy” (p. 27). Literacy is defined as a broad term that incorporates reading, writing, images, sounds, multi-media, and other texts. Along with a shift in how students communicate, there is a change in what is produced and valued. Digital and web-based open access resources shape how students think, write, and share ideas. Blogs, wikis, videos, social media like Facebook and Twitter link the message to the messenger.

Technology compresses time making communication almost instantaneous, reducing the gaps in communication and physical space. All these tools open dialogue between learners and allow students to create complex online responses. However, transferring these digital literacies to academic contexts is cumbersome because instructors who have succeeded in traditional pedagogy and learning experiences are slow to adapt new online teaching methods or may have fears related to the technology (Johnson et al., 2012).

Teaching composition online means that some faculty who are new to digital literacies must find ways to teach the academic essay in a way that uses more technology. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2009) argue that literacy education must consider how students experience knowledge, conceptualize meanings, and become more critical when analyzing content and hegemony. Realizing the seismic shift of technology on literacy and learning, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) President Kathleen B. Yancey (2009) urged English teachers to redefine writing instruction so that new
technologies could be used to build community and collaboration in classrooms and beyond. English teachers are now expected to use innovative technology to help students draft, collaborate, and write online. Gunther Kress (2004) and others (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Whithaus, 2005) agree that a single, overarching composition theory cannot meet the needs of diverse learners and teach them how to write. Instead, as J. E. Clark (2010) urges, teaching writing with technology must help students meet the demands of our new culture, and composition pedagogy needs a new paradigm. For Clark, technology creates a different digital divide. No longer is the digital divide a socioeconomic separation; instead, “the new, emergent digital divide we will negotiate as teachers will be between those with and without access to the education and means to make use of multimodal civic rhetorics” (Clark, 2010, p.32). This new conceptualization of composition pedagogy informs this study because depending on how it is used, technology can shape learning and connect students with other learners beyond their physical or cultural boundaries.

A connected, interactive and digital online learning space means that writers enter a contact zone of rich ideas. Mary Louise Pratt (1991) first described a space where students engage with different cultures, ideas, identities, and contexts as a “contact zone.” She writes, “I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). Pratt’s contact zone focused on how Peruvian texts interacted with Spanish texts in colonial times and how these texts reflected the struggles of the native culture against the occupying culture. Pratt claims that rather than focusing on a single,
colonial text, one must examine all available texts in order to make sense of power
dynamics. In Pratt’s view, the richest speech exchanges involved individuals who spoke
more than two or three different dialects or languages. Diversity is critical to meaning-
making and critique because different voices introduce rich ideas, experiences, and
stories that can be valuable to all readers. Patricia Bizzell (1994) uses Pratt’s “contact
zone” within the context of first-year writing courses to argue against a separation of
composition studies into genres that reduce texts to historical, cultural, gender, or ethnic
categories. Instead, she argues that texts be viewed “in terms of historically defined
contact zones, moments when different groups in society contend for the power to
interpret what is going on” (p. 167). With improved access to multicultural readings in
composition textbooks and technology that allows for diverse cultural connections,
student writers can now respond to historical readings and offer competing interpretations
of texts that reflect their identity within a dominant culture.

A contact zone also describes the technology of the online composition course.
By incorporating diverse print and technology materials into writing spaces, students
create new meanings. In her dissertation, Jessica Blackburn (2010) uses the concept of a
“contact zone” to show how technology, specifically the Web, is a complex space that
has its own power relations and contradictions. She also recognizes the institutional
hierarchies that dismiss using multi-modal and digital media in writing practices. She
argues that a feminist approach to teaching writing requires the inclusion of digital media
as a way to empower and create a more inclusive, critically reflective writing space.
These three authors highlight how inclusivity, diversity, and digital literacy can unmask
hidden power relations for first-year students, particularly in the context of the writing
classroom. This literature contextualizes my study because issues of technology and power inform students’ lives. In particular, this literature demonstrates how female students must constantly reevaluate their own thinking and writing habits in a constantly changing online environment.

Michel Foucault (1972) comments on how knowledge and practices are formed in disciplines. He stresses that the gaps, breaks, or fragments of knowledge construction are noteworthy in understanding how historical academic practices evolved. Given the hierarchical and binary divisions ingrained in academic writing, technology can represent a break in historical literacy patterns. Robin Goodfellow (2011) reminds us that emerging technologies often focus on related academic communities in higher education, such as “IT, library, study skills and academic disciplinary communities” rather than on focused pedagogical practices that use digital literacies in critical analysis and knowledge production, particularly in the traditional academic essay (p. 140). Writing using digital literacies can create fissures in academic discourse. Such fissures are even more profound when women share their personal experiences in online spaces, especially when these experiences are used to critique existing power relations and reexamine social norms. Who writes, what is shared, and how words and ideas are presented on a computer screen are significant in understanding how power is shaped and used by first-year female students. In online composition courses, students can choose when and how to incorporate videos, visuals, and hyperlinks in their online communications and writing practices. Students can potentially create complex texts in online courses that result in greater clarification, some resistance, and even some misunderstandings.
Community in online composition studies

Online interaction attempts to overcome an environment that separates the student’s body from a physical community of learners. Online courses can seem solitary and disjointed spaces that “pour” lectures, assignments, and activities into passive learners—a quality that directly contradicts a feminist perspective of dialogue, community, and revision. A review of the literature since 2009 using key words such as composition, narrative, feminist pedagogy and online learning indicates that most articles separate narrative inquiry in composition courses from feminist pedagogy in online learning. Many authors address ways to embrace feminist approaches to online learning. Nancy Chick and Holly Hassel (2009) indicate that the principles of feminist pedagogy can build online knowledge by incorporating participatory tools such as student-led discussion forums, personal home pages, and exercises that draw out personal experience.

A number of studies reveal mixed results related to gender differences and online community building. For instance, Erman Yukselturk and Safure Bulut (2009) explain that aside from test anxiety, there are no significant gender differences between men and women in terms of motivation, self-regulation, and achievement in online learning. However, other studies (Ke, 2010; Shen, Cho, Tsai, & Marra, 2013) suggest that male and female students desire online learning relationships that are engaging, interactive, and reflective. Online learning is largely self-directed, yet interactive technologies and opportunities to engage with other learners attract students who want greater control of their learning outcomes. Women and men value the interpersonal opportunities and community building available online. Belonging to a group, solving problems together, and creating strong online relations improves outcomes and motivates students to
continue learning (Reio & Crim, 2013). Technology has the potential to bridge the geographical space that separates teachers from their students, especially in online courses where students are required to think and write collaboratively. As these studies show, students generally have richer online experiences when they work with other students. It is possible that the participants in this study may find similar value in interpersonal online exchanges and interactive content when making writing choices.

Discussions, blogs and wikis offer students the opportunity to build community, an integral part of online satisfaction. In this context, female communication differs from male communication patterns primarily in how women create, build, and maintain online social ties, as indicated in a number of studies (Astleitner & Steinberg, 2005, Savicki & Kelley, 2000). Elizabeth Tomlinson (2009), in her research on the role of gender in small online group work, highlights that women provide significantly more nurturing, positive, and prolific feedback than all-male and mixed gender groups. Hill, Song, and West (2009) describe how women use language online and argue that female learners use more dismissive, humble, and inquisitive language cues to strengthen online communities compared to men who use phrases such as “very” or “only” and which offer limited interpretations (p. 93-94). More recently, Cheng, Chen, Shih, and Chang (2012) show that men ask more factual question compared to women who post and respond to all questions more frequently and consistently. These studies suggest gender differences in how men and women communicate online. These findings also consider how some students choose silence. While online silence may be subtle and indicate confusion or even a lack of time to post a response, some silence can imply resistance. Intentional silence may suggest the student’s resistance to the values and beliefs expressed online. As
Bill Anderson (2006) claims, students express their views in online groups in relation to other voices and as a result of power dynamics. Both students and instructors create an online context that will determine how learners choose to participate in group work. The outcome of this co-created online space may influence how learners express themselves and the degree to which online communication promotes unequal power relations, constraint, and self-monitoring, particularly when sharing personal narratives. This literature supports this study by suggesting that women have different online communication patterns that emphasize community-building. Since there is limited literature specifically related to the intersections of narratives, gender, technology, and writing pedagogy, this study will further the discussion about how women use narratives in online settings.

**Gender and Agency**

Gender is an integral part of one’s identity. As will be seen in this study, gender influences one’s sense of self, writing goals, and communication patterns in academic conversations. Gender is not an essential human quality; rather, it is a spectrum of complex and shifting responses to various competing forces. Social identities are always shifting and overlap in terms of our race, sexual identity, ethnicity, class, religion, age, and nationality. Linda Alcoff (1988) introduced the concept of “positionality” as identifying markers such as gender, race, class that locate women’s social positions. She writes, “We are constructs—our experience of our very subjectivity is a construct mediated by and/or grounded on a social discourse beyond (way beyond) individual control” (p. 416). This intersection of female identity and social location can draw some women together in how they may collectively experience global oppression, yet each
woman’s interpretation of that oppression will be unique. Positionality allows for more diverse definitions of female identity to emerge. Definitions of gender and identity provide a plurality of identity spectrums. New definitions of gender identity emerge that are not limited to physical bodies, sex, social or political patterns that reproduce and reinforce binary male/female social norms. Definitions of gender cannot be limited to only feminist, masculinity studies, or queer theory. Other definitions exist such as cisgender or transgender. As Surya Monro (2005) explains, “a gender pluralist theory would develop notions of sex and gender as a spectrum, with standpoints which would include female and male as well as a range of (probably) less common, but socially viable, other-gendered positions” (p.19). In this study, identity and the expression of gender form the context for understanding how women use language to self-identify in online spaces.

A review of the literature related to gender and identity results in the often used phrase that defines the feminist movement, namely, that “the personal is political.” Carol Hanish (1970) describes this phrase as a consciousness raising agenda by the feminist movement to highlight gender oppression. As Hanish argues, female oppression is not based on myths, biology, psychological posture, or cultural training. Instead, the idea that the “personal is political” highlights larger political and economic forces that reproduce, preserve, and perpetuate male dominance and female marginalization. Women’s experiences cannot be reduced to an essential group with core qualities. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler (1990) offers a complicated view of female identity and language use. She claims that as a social construct, language emerges in response to one’s gender, not because of gender. That is, gender is not a fixed identity, but a series of repeated
performative acts based on social, cultural, and historical norms. Rather than language owning the individual, the individual chooses language within the context of time and place. Language repeats or conforms to social norms and sometimes, it complicates, resists, and rejects normative language use. The phrase “the personal is political” highlights that women are not an essential, separate group, but their voices/experiences can resist social norms—a clearly political act. A spectrum of gender identities relates to this study because in the online classroom, gender may be hidden or obscured. Anonymity can benefit those who want to resist societal assumptions, but it can also negatively influence how students express their values and beliefs online. Furthermore, expressing one’s identity online can be highly politicized and risky. Writing about oneself is dangerous work. Students may not feel safe in online spaces and can begin to self-regulate their words and ideas, thus limiting the deep thinking associated with controversial topics.

Gender influences the power relations in any kind of communication. Foucault (1980) describes gender as a continuous formation of practices that reinforce dominant power relations, practices, values, and beliefs. Who speaks and who remains silent is important in this power dynamic, particularly in the academy which has historically favored male voices, thinkers, theorists, and writers. Citing Foucault, Gayatri Spivak (1988) explores how repeated colonial practices in the Orient left little room for marginal voices such as the voices of women or indigenous groups. The “ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant” leaving women no opportunity to speak or relegating their voices to the “shadows” (p. 28). Like Foucault and Spivak, James Paul Gee (2007) describes how social and historical discourses reproduce dominant and subordinate power
dynamics. He separates these discourses into two categories. He refers to “Discourses” with a capital “D” as language, expressions, values, beliefs, and practices that resemble ideological associations and inform power relations. Discourses also involve people “using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network,” to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful “role,” or to signal that one is filling a social niche in a distinctively recognizable fashion” (p. 161). The Discourse determines what is acceptable, such as the metaphors, images, and connotations that are understood by everyone belonging to that community. Any critique of a Discourse undermines the larger Discourse and can make that person an outsider. Those who have voice and agency in a Discourse use the language, behaviors, and tools of the Discourse to speak against opposing viewpoints. Discourse with a small “d” refers to everyday language such as “conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays, and so forth” (p. 154). The smaller “discourse” is always part of a larger, stronger Discourse. Smaller discourse, such as female narratives and experiences that represent diverse cultures, ethnicities, and identities, are a break or a fissure within the larger Discourses that shape English composition. Understanding that female voice is contested in academic Discourse provides a framework for understanding how the participants in this study explored personal experiences in their writing and in an online composition course and why, in some cases, they remained silent.

This study considers how women share personal narratives in a mixed-gender online classroom where genders and identities may be obscured. Writing about personal experiences is one perspective that challenges larger Discourse narratives. While all
classrooms are potentially political spaces, a feminist view of writing pedagogy views the intersections of students’ identity as a starting point for deep learning. A review of the literature resulted in articles published in the 1980s, well before the emergence of online composition courses. Two key authors reflect this era of feminist approaches to composition pedagogy. Pamela Annas (1985) in “Style as Politics: A Feminist Approach to the Teaching of Writing” explores the conflicts associated with teaching women to write about personal themes in a way that is accepted for academic audiences. Elizabeth Flynn (1988) in “Composing as a Woman” examines how female students explore themes about community and interpersonal relationships whereas male narratives focus on conquering nature, achieving victories, or enduring personal failures. Flynn argues that in order for women to continue in their personal growth and identity construction, women must nurture critical rhetorical positions when writing about life experiences. More recent scholarship about feminist approaches to composition pedagogy reveals different tensions. In their book Feminist Rhetorical Practices, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) outline three decades of feminist rhetorical inquiry in the composition classroom. They note that despite the historical foundation that values academic writing from the narrowed perspective of a dominant gender, class, culture, and race, newer models of writing must be refocused to allow for more culturally diverse and interactive writing agendas. Royster and Kirsch argue that a feminist view of rhetoric requires teachers and students to conceive of writing as a fluid enterprise, dependent on the shifting boundaries of private, public, and institutional contexts that enable writers to express themselves with multi-media and technology. They also emphasize that writing is embedded in social contexts that “connect women not just across sociopolitical and
cultural contexts, settings, and communities—locally and globally—but also across
generations, across time, and across space” (p. 101). Rhetorical approaches that consider
gendered perspectives on global, social, and technological contexts are also mentioned in
the work of Gill Kirkup (2005) and Laura Gray-Rosendale and Gil Harutoonian (2012).
Kirkup, Gray-Rosendale, and Harutoonian highlight that women must purposely explore
decisions about what and how they write in the academy. These feminist authors argue
that writing activates a feminist agenda because personal experiences can be redeemed in
academia and offer newer, richer understandings that resist hegemonic assumptions.

**Feminist perspectives in online composition courses**

For the purposes of this research, I emphasize two key feminist perspectives about
writing, namely, that writing about personal experience is relevant and that personal
experience provides the basis for critical reflection and revision. First, I consider the
power of personal experience. One recurring theme in feminist readings is that personal
experience is valuable. Gender is a social construct and affects every linguistic and
interpersonal encounter. Authors like Madeleine Grumet (1988), Adrienne Rich (1971),
Kristeva (1980) explore how female voice, physical self, identity, and language are
socially and culturally located. Through language and thought, female writers can
confront and resist a dominant academic Discourse. Although identities are never static,
identities that originate from one’s gender can be used to reexamine commonly held
assumptions about authors and their texts. Language and gender give voice to the
personal and often unjust experiences that women face on a daily basis. Penelope Eckert
and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003) assert that language consists of the interactions that
people share from their communities of practice. Language reflects a highly complex social order and gender is ingrained in the signs and symbols of this community of practice. Although the authors mostly address face-to-face communication, they show how language can be used to “project an attitude or a stance; to affect the flow of talk and ideas” so that words can potentially reinforce and challenge mainstream discourse patterns (p. 60). Words form an expressive mode for exploring individual behavior, responses, and experiences. Barbara Ann Cole (2009) describes how narratives that explore gender identities in a complex culture contribute to a greater understanding of female marginalization and raise new questions. Encouraging female students to use writing as a vehicle for exploration and consciousness-raising is an important consideration for educators moving to the online medium.

The literature also shows that women draw upon their own gendered identity when sharing values, creating interpersonal connections, and building community in educational settings (Rao & Sweetman, 2014; Tarabashkina & Lietz, 2011). Feeling safe is important in online spaces, and women must feel that their ideas are valued and their narratives are included in academic conversations. According to “Gender Inclusive Schools: Thinking Critically about Difference” (2014), providing spaces for conversations and inclusion promote critical reflection:

> Coming to recognize gender in all of its complexity allows students to see concepts in more realistic terms. Helping them understand the idea of a spectrum—a range of possibilities and not simply the “opposite ends” of a binary—builds their capacity to critically examine concepts in other areas of learning as well as building their appreciation for gender and other forms of diversity. (para. 10)

Feeling safe online is important if women are to express complex issues and continue participating in online activities. Writing about female narratives in online courses allows
women to focus on gender as a subject, and frees them to explore important and complicated issues in their lives. Shari Stenberg (2013) also points out that writing allows women to explore their differences and find ways to complicate dominant assumptions. In terms of the academic essay, Stenberg argues against the male-centred dominant view of writing as a both a monologue and an argument that must be defended with empirical evidence. Instead, Stenberg claims that rhetorical writing can rely on dialogue, listening, mediation, and negotiation as a way to persuade someone to accept a point of view. Using different rhetorical tools online gives women more options about how to build a safer online learning community. Sharing one’s gender is a process-based approach to writing that encourages women to use their contexts and circumstances to invite other learners into an academic conversation.

Second, I argue that personal experiences can lead to critical refection that challenges dominant assumptions about female experiences. In his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) describes how the daily problems of poor Brazilian workers should inform their education and literacy practices. Not only does he argue that life experience is fundamental to the workers’ literacy education, but he argues against teaching practices where educators “bank” knowledge into passive learners without allowing learners the opportunity to dialogue, share, and critique ideas. For Freire, “the word” makes dialogue transformative, because it combines both “reflection and action” or a praxis—a combination of theory and practice—that can raise consciousness and potentially change the world (p. 87). This praxis is important for teaching students to link personal narratives to their writing practices. Asking students to write about personal experience is a teaching tool that can link the personal to the political, and valuing
personal experience contributes to a larger public discourse. The stories of race, sexual identity, class, and culture are stories of struggle, and as bell hooks (2000) reminds us, women must engage in these struggles to articulate their life experiences as worthy in cultures that continually dismiss or demean women, particularly in the academic culture. In a study exploring how race and gender are introduced to college students, Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault (2001) explain that students struggle to find their voice and suppress many of their questions in light of the teacher’s authority, race, male voices, and predominantly white, middle-class perspectives. These authors explore how white, middle-class feminist teachers who encourage students to write about race and gender issues also struggle against the complex dynamics of their institutional and disciplinary expectations and their own race and class privilege. Asking students to write about social inequity is an act of resistance by the teacher. Teachers who link personal experiences with rhetorical writing goals realize that writing is a complex process that promotes critical reflection about social inequities. Personal narratives offer rich sources of knowledge that may challenge societal norms. Educators who set the tone of critical reflection in an online classroom create contexts of inquiry, care, and respect that allow for different gender perspectives. This tone is especially important in online settings where instructors struggle against passively transmitting knowledge and overcoming a conceptual distance between learners (Moore, 2011). A critical and feminist approach to composition pedagogy is important to this study because such theories invite all students to listen carefully to individual experiences and analyze the core values that inform these experiences. Instructors who value critical literacy can intentionally teach students to
interpret their personal experiences using a critical lens and to explore oppressive societal norms and meanings.

**The centrality of trouble**

Finally, personal experiences highlight important troubles that influence a writer’s learning goals. Like any good story in literature, narratives depend on conflict. A heroine must fight nature, other antagonists, or even herself in order to resolve a conflict. In *The Culture of Education*, Bruner (1996) refers to conflict or “Trouble” as the impetus for telling a story (p. 142). The trouble characters find themselves in is multidimensional. First, these troubles may involve how an individual comes into existence in a complex world, how she makes sense of her setting, and how she struggles to gain perspective on her location within that setting. Second, as the setting changes, the individual’s trouble must also change because it involves reconfiguring her behavior, values, and beliefs in order to meet the demands of a new setting, yet always referring back to a previous societal norm. Although the narrator may attempt an objective, neutral stance, narratives suggest to the reader that the author has a real “voice” (p.138). Reading a narrative is as complex as writing a narrative. Constructing a narrative requires the author to depend on cultural and historical contexts to create a meaningful story, and these unique contexts can be quite different from the final product or text. Because all narratives are unique, each one represents a unique interpretation of life that can lead to critical reflection.

For Jerome Bruner (1997; 1986; 2004), narratives help individuals to interpret their cultures and themselves. Any story expresses a “lived time” (Bruner 2004, p. 692). “Lived time” is not a clock or a calendar time scheme—only the narrator determines how time unfolds. Time is an important element in narratives because it positions the author
within the chronological and historical narrative in order to make a point. In *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner (1990) claims narratives are never neutral. Instead, “they have rhetorical aims or illocutionary intentions that are not merely expository but rather partisan, designed to put the case if not adversarially then at least convincingly in behalf of a particular interpretation” (p. 85). Narratives are important in conveying a point of view because they contain four key elements: they involve human action or outcomes, they focus on unusual events, they are structured and sequential, and they reflect the author’s voice or point of view (Bruner, 1990, p. 78-79). Writing about life experiences has the potential to help students to reframe their “troubling” experiences and in so doing, make sense of the world. Narratives are constantly being re-told and narratives unfold according to the author’s priorities. As such, narratives are “highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences” (Bruner, 2004, p. 694). Subjective interpretations of narratives might encourage readers to ask the author questions about the narrative in order to make sense of the experience. This takes time. Online, however, time fragments or delays a narrative sequence. Students may not receive instant feedback that clarifies a posted idea. Without the author’s full and timely interpretive commentary on the words, themes, or images for any narrative, readers are left with an isolated fragment—a vignette that is left unexplored within the context of time, culture, and history.

Because narratives take shape in social and cultural contexts, readers must understand the narrative within cultural contexts. Online, drafts or discussions may appear separated from larger narrative contexts. The traditional conventions of narratives that suggest a clear beginning, middle, and end may not appear online, allowing readers to interpret narratives in multiple ways. Students who are physically separated from an
author experience a conceptual distance that may diminish the author’s initial aim. Technology interrupts this communicative process and can potentially build barriers between people. Moore and Kearsley (2011) describe this transactional distance as a gap in communication that occurs between the student-teacher and student-student relationship. In this gap, miscommunication or misunderstandings arise. Moore argues that transactional distance is not only physical, but conceptual as well, influencing the teacher’s pedagogical practices, dialogue and course structure. These variables may affect students’ learning outcomes. While technology can potentially bridge the geographical distance between teachers and students, this process remains complicated. In a recent study by Robb Lindgren and Rudy McDaniel (2012), the authors explore how new digital technologies can help students create powerful digital narratives that build strong collaborative communities. Here, the authors highlight Bruner’s narrative theory and link it to student agency in web-based learning platforms. In order to understand how and why female students share narratives online, students and teachers must spend time writing, exploring, and thinking—practices that may be more difficult to achieve in online courses where time-stressed students want convenience and flexibility.

Related to this study is literature that explores social and academic power dynamics as it relates to women. Women who write about personal narratives introduce evidence, values, and beliefs that may challenge mainstream social norms. The idea of a larger social norm is espoused by Foucault’s (1972, 1980) “epistemes” and Gee’s (2007) “master myths” to identify widely accepted patterns of cultural thought, actions, and language use that purposely seek to maintain power among those who adhere to societal norms while disempowering those who deviate from these norms. In Acts of Meaning,
Jerome Bruner (1990) describes this cultural norm as a “folk psychology” and describes it as the common sense response in language use, thinking, and action of what is expected in life. For Bruner, a writer must first understand how a folk psychology arranges life and narrative expectations before she can deviate from this expectation. He writes, “The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a cultural pattern” (p. 50). This deviancy is important for female writers. Writing from a female perspective in an academic culture can unhinge educators and other students who adhere to cultural norms. The academy’s emphasis on objective, empirical knowledge written primarily from a white, middle-class, male perspective devalues personal female narratives and considers their stories as “anecdotal, illegitimate” data at best (Lewis, 1993). Composition educators teach students to perform in the academy, and while writing based on racial, gender, class, ethnicity, and identity can challenge this academic culture in positive ways, too often personal writing is dismissed in favor of academic writing where the self and identity is hidden or neutralized. In online composition courses, students can experiment with different writing forms and styles more freely. Multimodal online resources allow writers to engage in rhetorical acts that attempt to bridge geographical and generational divides, such as through video clips or graphic reflections. Too often however, female narratives are left unexplored in favor of more traditional rhetorical practices that focus on academic reflection, and not necessarily critical reflection.

Personal narratives that uncover the social inequities that women face can be disruptive in online discussions and pre-writing activities. Readers may need clarification about the words, metaphors, or images that represent lived experience. Asking students to
find new rhetorical responses to new contexts is also unnerving. Jen Ross (2011) discovered that when her students were asked to explore thoughts and experiences in online contexts where socially constructed identities and differences were recognized and valued, the resulting critical reflection was ignored, dismissed, or normalized. Similarly, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2011) found that first-year students in a writing course generally produced essays that reflected their preconceived ideas about academic writing within disciplinary genres and compartmentalized knowledge into functional writing tasks, even when the students knew many different discursive modes. These studies show that writing always consists of an author and a sub-text, and students tend to resort to prior knowledge about genres and writing practices rather than experiment with new themes, digital tools, or writing approaches. My study adds to the conversation about how students can become more intentional writers who draw upon their own preexisting knowledge to shape rhetorical spaces in online learning contexts.

Summary

This chapter explores the literature relevant to this study. Within our current neoliberal context, online learning has changed higher education in profound ways, yet traditional views of composition pedagogy continue to be duplicated in online courses. The literature also shows that writing is a complex cognitive and social activity. Texts are never static but change over time. From the moment a student receives an assignment to brainstorming, drafting, and revising an essay, a student generates complex writings that are subject to a reader’s interpretation. Online, students are writing for a teacher and other classmates about whom they know little, and while technology offers the writer multimodal means of expression, how that text will be read is never fixed. The studies
mentioned in this literature review indicate that female narratives can offer new insights for readers and online, women focus on different communicative priorities. Female narratives that focus on the intersections of race, class, and multiple identities can challenge assumptions about our world and the struggles women face every day. Few studies link narratives to online learning and writing pedagogy. The gaps in the literature demonstrate a need to explore how the “storying” of lived experience can provide rich learning opportunities in online writing courses. Despite narratives being devalued in academic contexts, female narratives underscore how master narratives work because they offer an alternative view of the future. This study fills this research gap by examining how and why female students introduce personal experiences into an online writing course. The conformity and the transgressions these participants experience are important in understanding this unique phenomenon, and this study can offer recommendations for educators who want to incorporate narratives into online writing practices.
Chapter III

Methodology

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.

Adrienne Rich (1971, p. 35)

In this chapter I review the methodology and methods used in this study. First, I review the purpose of this study. I then describe the context of this study and the role of community colleges in the United States. I introduce the participants and the place of this study. I then discuss the research design of this qualitative study and I describe my background and bias. I describe the procedures I used to enter the online classroom, how I invited student and instructor participants into the study, and the arrangements for the final in-depth interviews. Finally, I discuss how the data were analyzed using a qualitative methodology.

Research Questions

This study explores the relationship between women’s online learning experiences and the writing process. The intersections of technology, gender, and writing create unique online experiences, and understanding these experiences from diverse female participants will provide a detailed description of the phenomenon. In this study I ask the following questions: (1) How/why do women use personal experiences to invent, draft, and write in an online environment where human interactions and relationships are different in terms of quantity and quality than in a live classroom? (2) What factors
influence how female students introduce personal experiences with students and instructors in an online writing course? (3) How do educators situate personal experiences in online composition courses? To answer these questions, I draw from the rich experiences of 14 adult women enrolled in online composition courses at a small, rural community college. I also draw from the experiences of three online instructors. Through deep conversations with these women and instructors, I hope to gain insights about how technology influences their writing decisions in an online setting and thereby offer recommendations to educators hoping to effect change in this environment.

**Context of Study**

The context of this study is the community college system in the United States. Community colleges emerged in the United States as a response to social and demographic changes in the 1960s. As George Vaughan (2006) writes in the 1960s, more individuals began pursuing post-secondary education because life-long success was directly linked to education. The GI Bill also paved the way for many children of WWII veterans to receive federal assistance in pursuing higher education. In an effort to democratize education by making it more affordable and accessible, the U.S. Government enacted the Higher Education Act in 1965. State-sponsored community colleges provided an affordable and open access post-secondary education. Community colleges typically offer associate’s degrees (AA), certificate programs, job training, economic and business training, seminars, and continuing adult education programs as well as core courses that transfer to four-year universities. With increasing post-secondary tuitions, local students find community colleges economical because they can take basic science and humanities courses that will transfer to other state and private colleges. In 2011, community colleges
in the United States enrolled over 6 million students (Schneider & Yin, 2011), which
demonstrates that community colleges continue to offer affordable, accessible higher
education to local communities.

Students enter community colleges with varying degrees of knowledge, study
skills, and perceptions about what is required for academic success. As Christopher
Mullin (2012) notes community college students are often older students who take
courses part-time and are financially independent. Some students may seek college
entrance without a high school diploma and require remediation in literacy and numeracy
(Barbatis, 2010). Female students and students from minority populations such as
African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics consistently enroll in community
colleges. Female and ethnic minority percentages at two-year institutions (59% and 37%,
respectively) are greater than those at both public (56% and 28%, respectively) and
private four-year institutions (58% and 27%, respectively) (cited in Porchea, Allen,
Robbins, & Phelps, 2010, p. 691). Students tend to be working class and face complex
social situations that require balancing school with other responsibilities. Single-parent
students or students who are returning to school after starting their families attend
community colleges. Women have consistently represented a large sector of community
college students (Mullin, 2012; St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Many community college
students are also intellectually curious, challenged by college professors, and are
motivated to succeed. Traditional students who have passed core English and Math
courses and have excellent written, verbal, and mathematical skills enroll in community
colleges. The percentage of traditional students who choose community colleges has risen
in the past decades (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). These
academically skilled students enroll in their local community college because of the low cost, small class size, community feel, and transferability of course credits. In sum, the student body of the typical two-year colleges reflects the varied population of the participants in this study and contributes to the rich diversity and complexities associated with the online composition classroom.

Professors at community colleges typically enjoy the smaller campus and class sizes that allow them to support students in their intellectual, social, and cultural journey. Yet often the professors are as varied as the students they teach and may come from diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. Many professors have doctorates, but many have entered the college system through other means such as through their secondary education or work experience. Adjuncts play a major role in community-colleges, with 68.5% of the faculty teaching at community colleges per year (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Spaniel & Scott, 2013). As post-secondary institutions are increasingly subject to economic priorities, part-time instructors are considered cheap labor since they do not have compensation packages, retirement plans or any other extra costs associated with full-time employment (Adams, 2010; Mitchell, Yildiz, & Batie, 2011; Sammons & Ruth, 2007). Part-time instructors, many with similar credentials as full-time faculty, struggle to find tenure-track work and resort to term or contract teaching at much lower rates than full time faculty (Feldman & Turnley, 2004). Women make up a large part of the contractual, contingent academic work force, particularly at the post-secondary level. In Canada, the 2011 CAUT Almanac indicates that in 2010, women made up approximately 60 percent of the temporary full time and permanent part-time workforce in universities and more than 50 percent in colleges and vocational
schools, and similar trends can be seen in the United States (Chapman, 2011; Gardner, 2013).

**Place and participants in the study**

The site selected for this data collection is a small rural community college in northern New York where I have taught both physically located and online English composition courses for over a decade. This college is part of a larger state-wide university system and offers several fully online programs. The small college serves about 4,120 full and part-time students (Table 3). The region is a rural culture with agriculture and tourism being the largest industries. The demographics of this region are predominantly white and low to middle-class. Increasingly, Mennonite families have settled in the region seeking farmland and space. In the late 1980s, a federal military institution was built near the college. This military base draws many diverse students from different ethnicities and cultures to the college. In fact, the military encourages its soldiers and their dependents to take courses at the college, adding to the ethnic diversity of the college campus. The campus consists of a library, seven permanent buildings, one dormitory, athletic fields, an on-site child care facility, and parking for a largely commuter population. There are a limited number of mass lectures, and students benefit from a high teacher-to-student ratio. All online courses are capped for enrollment to reflect the same cap as in the live course, which is 25 students per course. Courses are taught by both full-time faculty and by adjuncts. The college’s emphasis on quality teaching ensures a close working relationship between teachers and students.

The participants in this study consist of 14 adult female students enrolled in various terminal and transfer degree programs (Table 1). The majority of participants are
low to middle-class, Caucasian, and mothers of young children. The average age of the participants is 31. Many of the female participants in this study are the spouses of military personnel, and since these participants are often posted to various military bases, they take advantage of online courses as a way to earn transferable college credits. Most participants have previous experience with online learning. The participants in this study reflect the larger demographic of primarily Caucasian, middle-class college students typical of the site of this study (Table 2).

The online educators in this study consist of 3 instructors (Table 3). Two of these instructors are full-time faculty and one instructor is an adjunct. At the college, instructors in the Humanities Department are mainly white and middle-class. In this group many faculty are middle-aged and tenured. At the time of this study, the English Department consisted of 8 female and 4 male full-time instructors, along with 22 adjuncts who were primarily female instructors. Online courses are first offered to full-time faculty and then to part-time instructors who receive Blackboard training.

**Research Design**

In this section I discuss the research that best answered the question of how technology influences the writing habits of female learners online. A qualitative approach allowed for the richest findings to explore how the participants find meanings through their writings. Because meanings and experiences cannot be measured solely by numbers, they must be understood as unique experiences and in conversation with others. The complex social phenomenon of an online writing course coupled with the multiple realities of the writing process experienced by the women in this study informed my decision to use phenomenology. Given the complex identities of the participants and
instructors, phenomenology prepared me to consider their narratives in variation.

Moreover, this study derived data from participants associated with a small, rural state college that supported students and instructors from diverse backgrounds. By focusing on one small college, I recognized that the rural and demographic context offered unique cultural and social problems, and with a military base nearby, political insights as well. These complex sociocultural contexts influenced how the participants shared ideas with me during the in-depth interviews.

Phenomenology

The methodology for this study is a phenomenological inquiry. As McMillan & Schumacher (1997) point out “phenomenology is an analysis of qualitative data to provide an understanding of a concept from participants’ perspectives and views of social realities” (p. 101-102). This method is particularly important in identifying the many social inequities that influence learning. Sociology, as a scientific community of inquiry, requires that we examine the greater community as a whole including variables such as gender, sexuality, disability, race, history, class, and culture. Methodologies that focus on measurable data prevent a full understanding of the complexities associated with shifting and complex interpersonal relationships, so a different methodology is needed. Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (2007) remind us that “Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 25). Phenomenology responds to this new understanding of a lived reality because it allows for various interpretations.

Language, as an expression of reality, is one way that we understand events in variation. A phenomenological methodology emphasizes the different perceptions of
social realities from different participants. In this context, the participants’ point-of-view is imperative to forming a collective picture. As Berger and Luckmann argue (1966), daily life experiences form a phenomenology of experience. The event, the context, and the surroundings of an event influence the causes and effects of daily interactions. Language can be objectified because individuals attach meanings to words through language that is understood by others. Thus, language is a useful tool in conducting research because the words we use are the signs and symbols that are universally understood by single-language speakers and contain shared meanings. Subjectivities arise when individuals use language in a certain way. From this perspective, Max van Manen (1990) suggests that “the phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive—to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak” (p. 111). From a feminist perspective, the idea that subjective realities inform women’s lives suggests that gender is a meaning that attaches itself to a word. For feminists, the emphasis on “the personal is political” requires a different reading of female experience that allows for a richer theory of difference based on identity, race, age, and culture—differences that influence the power relations that inform women’s lives. Personal experience is a pillar of feminist critical inquiry, and an understanding of insider-knowledge enables researchers to focus on language as a reflection of one’s identity and community.

How women use language and derive meanings influences how they write for various discourse communities. Judith Butler (1988) maintains that phenomenology offers a glimpse into how gender and cultural identity are enacted. She claims that “The formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to
understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted” (p. 525). In this research, I assumed that the words writers use in online spaces reflect their cultural values. Individual female experiences are complex. These experiences are nuanced and involve multiple perspectives from competing and intersecting communities such as one’s race, ethnicity, sexual identity, class, geography, ability, and culture. Patricia Bizzell (1982) argues that if cognition is grounded in intersecting learning communities and precedes language, then gender and sexuality are deep wells of meaning-making. Researching how women represent their complex and shifting social identities in online courses expanded my understanding of how thinking, reading, and writing occur simultaneously. Phenomenology allowed me to consider the subtleties associated with the female participants’ online writing experiences as well as the instructors’ positioning of such writing.

Gender and sexuality contribute to how people think and write. Individuals associate words, ideas, metaphors, and images to their identity and personal expression is one form of thinking and identity-expression. Julia Kristeva (1981) notes that the female subject is situated in historical time and space that often limit narratives to a “universal woman.” She argues that either through art or writing, women intersect larger time-space narratives and refuse sociocultural definitions of female-identity through the “dynamic of signs.” She maintains, “…women seek to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experience left mute by culture in the past” (p. 19). Gender and identity are in constant flux, and writing about one’s unique identity is an internal, slow process of meaning making that required participants to perform both within a learning community and with individual students and a teacher. Regarding personal understanding, Stake
(2010) claims, “Writing is a form of thinking” (p. 48). Exploring how women write/think is best observed using “qualitative research methods [because these methods] emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives, recognizing that there are other ways of seeing things, other ways of explaining things, and alternative ways of changing things” (Stake, 2010, p.203). In order to understand the personal, narrative, and reflective insights associated with writing, a phenomenological lens was needed.

Phenomenology allowed me to explore how the participants expressed their values and beliefs. The in-depth description of how female students use their personal experiences to make sense of the world enabled me to explore the subjective meanings of different learners and how they make connections through writing with other online learners. In this study I describe the phenomena of the online composition course in a small college in order to understand how the medium influenced the interactions, discussions, and writings of female students and their instructors. Composition instructors may use personal writing to engage students in self-discovery. Writing, particularly writing about one’s life, is “a disruptive” form of self-awareness that challenges institutional expectations and replaces them with different understandings (Brooke, 2002, p. 49). Composition theory suggests that educators approach writing with an awareness that students construct knowledge both in their minds and in larger social contexts (Bizzell, 1978; 1994; Cooper, 2011; Gee, 2007; Gillam & Wooden, 2013). These social contexts are laden with values and beliefs about dominant and marginal knowledge. Language and knowledge, according to Foucault (1972; 1980) are powerful tools of class, culture, gender and ethnicity for membership in, maintenance of, and exclusion from certain communities. A discourse community determines what anonymous rules for
language use, values, knowledge, and practices will be allowed or silenced. The asynchronous online context results in delayed, fragmented, or optional texts; as such, learners may be unable to identify social markers such as gender, culture, and race that may influence how female learners use language and share life experiences (Keegan, 1996; Marshall, 2008). Technology also changes the text itself, and an online narrative may be quite different than traditional expectations of a formal, prose narrative (Dobson, 2006). How the participants incorporate their personal experiences online and use these experiences in their writings is a complex problem that can be best explored through personal interviews, not objective scientific methods. By interviewing female participants, I was able to explore the complicated female writer who expresses her identity in multiple ways, “rather than on the supposedly homogeneous, coherent, patterned, and…timeless nature of the supposed ‘group’” (Angrosino, 2005, p. 741). This approach enabled me to investigate the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that female participants have about their online writing experiences.

The important research question of how online courses influence female writers was best explored using a method that analyzed and articulated how these experiences were understood by participants experiencing online learning. Narratives based on identity were written within the context of race, language, sexuality and culture and sharing these narratives in an online context required a comprehensive method that considered all unique perspectives. Understanding this phenomenon through multiple participants, both students and instructors, provided me with various, rich meanings. Interviewing the participants allowed me to “[explore] and [gather] experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of
a human phenomenon and...may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner about the meaning of an experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 66).

Furthermore, a phenomenological approach was reciprocal, affecting both the participant and the researcher. The in-depth interviews not only guided discussions about gender, online learning, and writing, but also allowed me to steer the discussion and probe for clarification. It is possible that these reciprocal research methods elicited an openness and inclusivity during the interview stages and yielded the widest variety of insights about the research questions. In order to gain the broadest understanding of this online experience, a phenomenological approach enabled me to select diverse participants. The attitudes and understandings of this wide participant pool were suited for a research method that allowed for reciprocity, flexibility, and openness. Using the pooled reflections of students and teachers provided the deepest understandings of the possible relationship between gender, online learning, and writing.

**Challenges of phenomenology**

Research has as its aim to advance knowledge, not duplicate it. Historically, how knowledge is reproduced has been fraught with difficulties, especially in academic settings that emphasize a Cartesian separation between the mind and the body. A qualitative approach to research acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher as part of the research inquiry. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert, “While the idea that researchers can transcend some of their own biases may be difficult to accept at the beginning, the methods researchers use aid this process” (p. 33). The qualitative methods used in this study allow for a rich data pool and divergent perspectives to emerge. Moreover, gender is an important factor in garnering information from female
participants. Feminist and critical inquiry seeks to revise sociocultural paradigms and challenge mainstream practices associated with the individual’s position in society and in this context, subjectivity and gender are important dimensions of social reality. Gender is its own discourse community. As Sandra Harding (1991) reminds us:

All thought and language both shapes and is shaped by the social order, its projects, and attempts to resolve conflicts within it….The issue for the feminist epistemological critiques is a different one: “woman the knower” (like “woman scientist”) appears to be a contradiction in terms. By “woman the knower” I mean women as agents of knowledge, as actors on the stage of history, as humans whose lives provide a grounding for knowledge claims that are different from and in some respects preferable to knowledge claims grounded in the lives of men in the dominant groups. (pp. 46-47)

Here, Harding argues that the values and beliefs of scientific inquiry are directly linked to those who have been historically privileged to define a problem and conduct research. Dominant values determine the kind of research that gets funded and approved. The researcher cannot separate values and beliefs from the actual testing process. My own words are grounded in my gender and identity. My writing cannot be separated from the method of inquiry. A feminist research approach seeks knowledge that will benefit those individuals who are marginalized due to their gender, sexual identity, ability, race, or class. How a problem is defined, how language is used, and who benefits from the study are important considerations in this study, and as with any scientific inquiry, the findings of the study are never neutral. Since I cannot write and conduct research without viewing the world through my own gendered lens, I will share my own background, values, and beliefs as part of this inquiry.

I am a hybrid woman on many levels. I am a Caucasian, first-generation, American and newly minted Canadian citizen. I am also a heterosexual female in a
committed marriage, a mother of two sons, a daughter, and a sister. My parents were of European descent and immigrated to Canada after WWII; however, they ultimately settled in the United States. My parents spoke German and French at home and raised my sister and me with a strong Protestant work ethic. My immigrant parents took us to Europe many times and it was here where I learned to appreciate European culture, arts, and social values. Living in New York City also gave me a rich cultural heritage that allowed me to develop Latin, Pilipino, African-American, and Asian friendships. After university, I taught English in Japan and upon my return, worked at the United Nations. My experiences continue to shape me as a new Canadian citizen and as a cross-border worker. Living and working in a hybrid context has shown me that although cultural values, language use, and advanced technology change how we learn and think, some cultural forces are slow to change like the continued underrepresented role of women and visible minorities in post-secondary education. These rich and diverse spaces of language, community, and meaning-making inform my inquiry and compel me to ask the participants to reflect on the same hybrid nature of writing for ones’ self and/or for the academic community.

My motives for this research are situated within my relatively affluent middle-class and white female position. I am conscious of the choices associated with this dominant middle-class and racial privilege. While conducting my M.Ed. on female writing practices, I became more aware of the challenges women face as they negotiate their life decisions. When I became a parent, I made decisions based on my view of motherhood as reinforced by my privileged class and economic freedom. For me, this meant resigning from a tenured faculty position in order to become a full-time caregiver
for my growing family. As an educated, Caucasian female with a Master’s degree and teaching experience, I received training in online learning that afforded me more work flexibility. This flexibility, coupled with the fact that my partner made a generous income, allowed me to make choices concerning parenting and working full-time, part-time, or not at all. Many women do not have this luxury. My middle-class location also reinforced a concept of motherhood that is overtly and subtly reinforced in Western culture, and one which I embraced. Images of mother-infant bonding, the moral superiority of stay-at-home mothers, and female parenting skills support the cultural assumption of a good-mother/bad-mother binary, as evidenced in the many mommy blogs that find value in the position and community of the stay-at-home mother (Crosby, 2011; Lopez, 2009; Lövheim, 2011). For me, the decision to become a primary caregiver and an online English instructor was an easy choice, as I was able to work at home and raise my children.

Finally, my motive for this research rests on the skepticism I have about teaching writing online in a setting that both accommodates and resists self-expression, hybridity, and community. I believe that critically reflective reading, thinking, and writing occur best in live settings where students can see facial expressions, verbally spar with one another, and have a sustained, real-time conversation about complex topics without the interruptions associated with online learning. Human interaction and community are integral to deep thinking and learning. Having taught writing in a live classroom and now online, I am skeptical of the message that online learning is the salvation of post-secondary education. I question how technology influences the thinking and writing choices women make in online courses where communication patterns vary in style,
form, and frequency. In a culture where technology makes communication quick and easy, I question how students and teachers use technology and time to explore deep, complex topics.

Research advances knowledge by conducting studies that add new insights or perspectives on our world. As a researcher, I know that my own biases may shape the questions I ask in the interviews and what questions are left out. As an online instructor, I consider my own biases as I gather the data. By explaining my attitudes and experiences with online education in this section, I acknowledge my inherent limitations as a researcher. These limitations made me self-check for bias throughout the study. I also learned to “rely on experience, advice, and [my] own biases, to weigh the subjective information available to [me]” (Stake, 2010, p. 166). My gender is one lens that helps me understand the online phenomenon and motivates me to create a more socially just future. Other distinctions such as my culture, my language use, my background, my values and beliefs cannot be separated from the research process. It would be impossible to explore my research from an objective lens; however, my expressed values and beliefs will help decipher the online phenomenon within the context of this study.

Data Collection

I invited individual students to participate in this study in the fall 2014 term. Only students who were currently enrolled in ENG 101: Research and Composition II were selected. ENG 101 is a required writing course for all degree programs in the Liberal Arts, the Sciences, and the Business departments. ENG 101 courses are offered mostly live, averaging approximately 10-15 in-seat sections per term, along with approximately 3-5 online sections. Entrance into ENG 101 is based upon students passing the Composition Placement Test (CPT) with a minimum of 68 percent. Students may also
enter ENG 101 if they have passed ENG 100: Research and Composition I, with a grade of C or higher. The ENG 100 course is both an elective and a pre-requisite to ENG 101 for students who have not passed the CPT test. In ENG 101, students must write four to five thesis driven essays and a final eight to ten page research paper based on an arguable assertion. By selecting the ENG 101 composition course, I was able to work with individuals who have more evenly distributed writing abilities rather than focusing on students with weaker writing skills. This college uses Blackboard as the learning managing system for its online courses. Blackboard courses are primarily text-based, so taking an online course requires strong reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. Students who do not have good literacy skills or who do not have past success in academics may not be prepared for the hidden, offline work required in online courses such as self-discipline, time management, reading and study skills. Information and computer technologies (ICT) consist of cell phones, computer hardware, and other services and devices associated with technology, and students taking online courses must be confident using these technologies as well, especially since Blackboard uses scanning barcodes that students can access using their smart phones. All students participating in online courses must take the Blackboard orientation module, which highlights the ICT skills and general work expectations required for distance learning. As well, there is a student help line and live assistance available for online students. As such, the students enrolled in this online English Composition course were able to write essays and use technology with some degree of consistency. This English Composition course was the starting point of the first phase of my research.
Participant selection

Immediately after receiving GREB approval for my study (Appendix B) in May 2014, I invited three of my former ENG 101 students who I suspected would be rich informants to participate in this study. Specifically, my former students wrote about personal themes and were willing to share their experiences, values, and beliefs about writing in an online class. These students were invited directly to the in-depth interview stage. These former students would not have future contact with me as an English instructor, so they were not at risk for preferential treatment or subject to potential power relations. During this time I also asked my English colleagues to recommend any students who they believed may be rich participants. By asking my colleagues to identify potential students who were rich informants, I was able to garner more participants who were nominated by a trustworthy third party (Salmons, 2010). Colleagues provided me with the names of three female ENG 101 students who were reflective, outspoken, and committed online writers. These three students were interviewed in May 2014. According to my colleagues, these female students were able to write, synthesize, and reflect on their life experiences in academic contexts. I retrieved these students’ school email addresses which are available to all faculty members, and I invited these participants directly into the in-depth interview stage. I emailed each student a Letter of Consent (Appendix C) for her consideration. Each agreed to be interviewed in-depth.

Inviting participants through an initial questionnaire

The next phase of the study involved distributing an initial questionnaire to all online ENG 101 students enrolled in the fall 2014 term. As an online instructor, I was aware of my position of power, so I removed myself from teaching all ENG 101 courses
during the 2014 fall term. In order to secure a few rich informants, I surveyed a large pool of students. Defining the criteria of participants for the initial questionnaire limited the sample and scope of my study for the subsequent in-depth interviews. For the purposes of this study, I looked for a voluntary sample of a heterogeneous female population who would have different experiences of the same phenomena (Salmons, 2010). For the purposes of this study, I chose two defining characteristics:

- **Criteria 1:** Female college student 18 years or older.
- **Criteria 2:** Female college student who has taken or is currently taking ENG 101.

I created an online Informational and Invitational Letter of Consent (Appendix C) for all students enrolled in the fall online ENG 101 courses. In this invitational letter I highlighted the participant characteristics of Criteria 1 and Criteria 2. Interested students clicked on the questionnaire link that appeared at the bottom of the invitational letter of consent and by doing so, students already self-identified two key criteria for possible participation in my study.

The general online enrollment for ENG 101 online courses is approximately 100-150 students per term. I asked online English faculty to remind students enrolled in their ENG 101 courses to respond to my Informational and Invitational Letter of Consent and the attached initial questionnaire. In October of 2014, I asked all online English 101 instructors to send the Informational and Invitational Letter of Consent to the Private Folders of students enrolled in their ENG 101 sections. I also sent this Informational and Invitational Letter of Consent to each student’s individual e-mail account. The Informational and Invitational Letter of Consent (Appendix C) contained a link where
participants would then complete an initial questionnaire (Appendix D). The Informational and Invitational Letter of Consent stated the intent of the research and indicated that all information will remain confidential. The consent decision prepared participants to agree to the terms of the study by highlighting what was required of them based on reading the letter of information, reminding them that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time, and by assuring them that all information would remain confidential. They then had the choice to click on an "I agree to participate" option or “I do not agree to participate” option. Only those participants who selected “I agree to participate” were forwarded to the linked questionnaire. The questionnaire was created through Fluid Surveys and was sent to a total of 78 ENG 101 online students. No distinction regarding gender, race, ethnicity or other identifying qualities was made during the initial invitation. Reminders were sent to all students at two and three week intervals. By the end of November, 25 students answered the questionnaire. Nine surveys were incomplete. Of the remaining 16 complete questionnaires, I carefully read the responses and looked for information-rich data linked to key questions.

The open-ended questions in the initial questionnaire asked students to reflect on how technology and the online context impacted their writing. The questions addressed the themes of technology, gender, and the social construction of language/writing in online courses. Complex questions exploring how women write and learn in an online course were placed in the middle and at the end of the questionnaire. Specifically, questions 2, 5, and 10 in this initial questionnaire (Appendix D) addressed the personal nature of writing in online spaces. Only those students who shared detailed or rich
responses to these strategically located questions were invited to the next phase of the research, the in-depth interviews. Of the 16 complete responses to the initial questionnaire, I contacted 13 information-rich participants and invited them to the second stage of the research. Eight participants accepted my invitation to be interviewed. This narrowed pool of 8 individuals was able to provide articulate responses to my interview questions and were eager to share their online writing experiences.

**Inviting participants to the in-depth interviews**

The second stage of the study involved face-to-face in-depth interviews. These interviews took place during late November and December. Timing was important in order to allow students to focus on their writing and course performance. This second phase of the study allowed me to ask in-depth questions about the participants’ writing experiences in the online course. I arranged to interview these individuals in face-to-face meetings. Prior to these in-depth interviews, participants were asked to read and sign a second Letter of Information and Consent for In-Depth Interviews (Appendix E). This letter indicated that the individual was providing research information and that all information would be voluntary and confidential. Establishing a context of mutual respect and transparency early in the in-depth interviews promoted trust between me and the participants (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). The questions in the in-depth interviews (Appendix F) were open-ended so that the participants were able to explore their individual experiences as female writers in an online course.

During the in-depth interviews, which lasted approximately one-hour, I engaged in a dynamic conversation with each participant in order to elicit a rich response, which meant that I did not always ask the questions in the same order or I rephrased questions.
The interview document was a guide. The questions explored the social and cultural context of knowledge, writing, and meaning-making and considered how these ideas were expressed in an online writing course. All interviews were audio recorded and I maintained a journal to record emerging follow-up questions. During these interviews, I made every attempt to understand the participants’ values and beliefs by asking them to clarify comments they made during the in-depth interviews. The participants raised complex challenges about personal and academic writing based on their online experiences. For the purposes of this research, I wanted to know how female students used personal themes as starting points for critical reflection. Issues related to individual identity, culture, ethnicity, social dynamics, and personal experience were defined differently by each woman. During the interviews, I probed each participant about why she found certain personal themes problematic and what made her explore these personal themes online. Topics such as homosexuality, ethnicity, and work discrimination were raised as potentially problematic or marginal themes that needed clarification. By encouraging follow-up commentary during the in-depth interviews and by using various elicitation techniques (Johnson & Weller, 2001), I assumed the position of the learner in order to describe and analyze the writing experiences of these participants. As a female researcher, my gender made such transparency and rich communication more possible and may have provided me with more detailed responses. At various points in the interviews, I asked participants to review their responses and comment on or clarify their words. I repeated their words or phrases verbally and asked the participants to check if I understood their meanings correctly. This member-checking of the data contributed to a fuller understanding of the online writing phenomenon (Stake, 2010). These discovered
realities provided varied interpretations about how the participants make writing choices in the digital classroom. Making sense of the participants’ online writing experience was my goal in this phenomenological study. As Laurel Richardson (1997) argues:

I write to find something out. I write in order to learn something I didn’t know before I wrote it. I was taught, though, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. No surprise, this static writing model coheres with mechanistic scientism and quantitative research. But, that model of writing is itself a sociohistorical invention that reifies the static social world imagined by our nineteenth-century foreparents. The model has serious problems: it ignores the role of writing as a dynamic, creative process; it undermines the confidence of beginning qualitative research because their experience of research is inconsistent with the writing model; and it contributes to the flotilla of qualitative writing that is simply not interesting to read because adherence to the model requires writers to silence their own voices and to view themselves as contaminants. (pp. 87-88)

This research structure attempts to understand how women write in all their complexity. Just as my participants write their own life-stories, I hope that my research narrative will highlight the participant’s unique perspectives while still retaining my own writing voice and style.

Inviting instructors to the in-depth interviews

In order to gain the broadest understanding of how female students write in online settings, I invited online instructors to share their insights about teaching writing in this medium. Including instructors in this study provided a robust view of online learning, added a third perspective to the data analysis, and complemented the emergent themes of the data pool. Discrepant data was also explored for their relationship to the participants’ experiences. Addressing divergent themes in relation to emergent themes revealed the networked nuances involved in online writing communities. The research sample consisted of three online teachers with more than 40 years of combined experience. The
three teachers were Helen, May, and Richard, all pseudonyms. Helen and Richard were full-time tenured professors with decades of teaching experience, and May was an adjunct instructor living out of state (Table 2).

In May 2014, all online English instructors were presented with an Information and Consent Form for In-Depth Interviews (Appendix G) and interviewed in-depth. Of the three online instructors teaching in the fall 2014 term, one instructor was teaching out of state so this interview was conducted through email. All live interviews were conducted with two recording devices. During the live interviews, I quickly established a friendly rapport with my colleagues, many of whom I have known for over a decade. During all interviews I followed the questions on my interview guide. Broad, generalized questions started the interview process, followed by some key, specific questions related to my research question about personal experience, gender, and the writing process. I asked questions related to online course design, communication, the ethics of encouraging personal reflection, using personal experience as leverage for critical and political reflection, the writing process, and if these factors informed their writing pedagogy (Appendix H). I also asked these instructors how they used technology to engage students in the writing process and what, if any, obstacles they encountered. I asked if they encountered any differences in written expression in their female learners. I asked follow-up questions during the actual interview as well as after the interview ended, and instructors answered my questions through email.

All questions were used to establish a rapport with my interviewee and to gain greater understanding of this complex issue. During the early interviews with both students and teachers, I followed my interview guide methodically but, in time, I became
more familiar with the questions and asked some out of order and interspersed them with follow-up questions. As each interview unfolded, I took notes in my journal and added key phrases or ideas that emerged in the discussions. I then followed-up by asking the participant to add or clarify what they meant by the key words I noted in my field notes. I ended each interview session with a quiet moment of reflection and asked the participant if she would like to share anything new to the topic. After each interview, I thanked my interviewees, reminded them of how they can contact me and asked them if they would like to receive a copy of my research findings. Immediately after the interview, I wrote down my closing reflections in my journal. I returned to my notes and my recording device repeatedly as I began analyzing and coding the data. I compared random recordings with the transcription to check for accuracy.

**Transcription**

Immediately after the interviews I uploaded the recorded MP3 files and began listening to the recordings. I transcribed five of the interviews myself in order to gain a greater understanding of the rhythms and content of the recorded interviews, and I sent the other half to a professional transcriber. The transcriptions were strict verbatim reflections of the original recorded interviews. Incorporating verbatim participant responses is a common practice among social science research. In studying why verbatim quotations are used in social science research, Ann Corden and Roy Sainsbury (2006) maintain that using the spoken word as research data serves several purposes. Using the actual words of an interview emphasizes the participant’s experience as evidence of what is under investigation. Language use and word choice explain how individuals experience an event and their words clarify what is being researched. Quotations are used as key
evidence when illustrating and supporting the emergent themes. Corden and Sainsbury (2006) argue that quotations not only enable participants to give voice and expression to their experiences, but using verbatim quotations encourages the flow and readability of a manuscript. I chose a strict verbatim because I wanted to emphasis the exact words related to the research questions. Although some understanding is lost when the participant’s tone, emphasis, silence, pauses, meanderings and speech utterances are omitted I decided that these minor speech fragments did not add understanding to how the online medium influences how women write. A strict verbatim translation allowed for the ideas to be emphasized and analyzed, not the silences or broken speech patterns. A verbatim analysis allowed for a careful analysis of the words and how these words contributed to the participants’ motives, values, and ideas. I also made sure to check the transcribed interviews against the oral recordings to verify if the transcription captured the essence of the ideas. I listened carefully to the recording while I read the transcribed passage. Cross-checking transcription ensured that the transcriptions were accurate and as Poland (1995) argues, cross-checking is an important step in establishing the trustworthiness of the emerging data. Immediately after I received an interview transcription, I re-read the text and I contacted either the student or the instructors via email and asked her to clarify rich passages that needed clarification. This follow-up with the participants allowed them another opportunity to clarify and add to their previous comments.

**Artifact Analysis**

Besides the transcribed interviews and field notes, I originally anticipated using artifacts such as drafts, essays, outlines, or any other items related to the production of a
formal academic essay. During the interviews, I asked students if they could share any essays or pre-writing material in the form of outlines, brainstorming material, drafts, and final essays as evidence in support of their claims. Students had access to the course materials for a short time after the term ends, and they were able to download these items and send them to me electronically. Only two participants located essays and discussion threads that they felt captured points they made in the interviews; however, the majority of participants did not provide me with artifacts, even after repeated requests. The submission of writing artifacts was voluntary, and this choice was clearly articulated in the Letter of Information and Consent Form for In-Depth Student Interviews (Appendix D). I did not use any artifacts in the coding of the emergent themes.

Analysis of Data

The results of all participant and teacher in-depth interviews and field notes provided a rich data pool. A hermeneutic phenomenology framed this inquiry. This image of reality was filtered by the unique context of a community college in a given time and place. It was also shaped by a representative sample—a sample of adult women who have taken or were enrolled in ENG 101. The lens of this particular place and context coupled with the open-ended, credible participant responses are what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as trustworthy and authentic research. By analyzing how these participants perceived their own writing abilities within the context of the digital composition classroom, I was able to construct multiple and varied emergent themes.

I began the data analysis by reviewing all interview transcripts, my field notes, and copies of the interview guides. After each interview, I highlighted key ideas that emerged from the interview and recorded key words in the margins of the interview
guide. The interview questions were a guide that consisted of broad concepts related to
gender and technology and more focused questions related to my specific research
questions. Making notes during the interview phase helped me to create tags for the codes
and categories that would emerge. I would repeatedly listen to recordings as I read
through the transcriptions in order to catch the tones and voice inflections in the
participants’ voices. Listening to the participants while reading the transcriptions and
comparing the text to ideas in my field journal, summaries, and notes helped me to gain
the broadest understanding of online learning. These overlapping, simultaneously tasks of
thinking, reading, and writing about the data from the earliest collection through the
analysis process provided an ongoing, reflective understanding of the participants’
experiences. Thus, a hermeneutical reciprocity of data collection and analysis
contributed to the preliminary framing of the topics and informed future decisions.

The next step in analyzing the multiple transcripts was coding the data. The
coding process began by reading the teacher transcriptions first. I coded the instructors’
transcriptions first because I understood the instructors had different purposes, aims, and
power dynamics in the composition course. I read each transcription repeatedly in order
to gain a sense of the larger picture of how the instructors taught writing online. After
multiple readings, I assigned codes to key words and ideas that were repeated in all three
interviews. I decided to code the data manually using colored pencils. I looked for small
categories of phrases, words, and ideas that repeated themselves in variation. Several
topics emerged, some of which addressed teaching composition in the broadest terms. I
arranged these topics in a linear, numerical order and assigned each topic an individual
code beginning with the letter “T” for teacher. For example, T.1 was the first topic
mentioned and addressed students’ use of social media. T. 2 focused on Blackboard technology, and so on. Each code identified a main topic, and all ideas related to this concept were labelled as such. I distinguished variations within each topic by adding numbers to the label, such as T.2.1 which looked at how students use online library databases. This first content analysis was preliminary and provided me with a general overview of instructors’ experiences in variation. I showed my coding to my supervisor who suggested a second coding of the data. Since I was interested in how the instructors used personal experiences to teach writing online and since the research study focused on gender, I re-coded the topics using words such as *gender*, *women*, and *female*. This re-coding of the content reduced the number of topics and provided me with a clearer understanding of the instructors’ perspectives in relation to the third research question and focus of the study. I then re-arranged this new, shorter list of topics into meaningful themes. Two key themes emerged. The first theme focused on the social context of writing and was a precursor to the second theme about personal experiences and reflection. I re-numbered the codes to reflect the linear, hierarchical organization of the themes. By grouping the smaller topics into broader themes, I was able to portray the main conceptual understandings of the instructors’ goals in using narratives in an online composition course.

A similar coding process occurred with the student interviews. I focused on emic categories (Stake, 2010) to garner an insider’s perspective of writing in an online environment. The interview questions foreshadowed the problems associated with writing online and contributed to the sub questions asked during the interviews. Specifically, the interview questions were framed around the first research question that explored the
participants’ personal motivation for writing in an online writing course, and the second research question which explored how their personal experiences influence interpersonal communication in an online writing course. As a result, the interview guide combined with my prior knowledge about teaching composition online informed the general, sequential unfolding of data in relation to these two broad concepts.

I began the coding process by classifying the student data into small parts. I read each transcription carefully and took notes about recurring ideas and compared these comments to my field notes. This preliminary and recursive process of cross-checking the transcripts with my field notes helped me to create key words related to the emerging concepts. I then began the coding process. I looked at the data set and asked myself, “What is she saying here?” For each interview, I used colored pencils to highlight each key topic with a descriptive name for the subject matter. In the margins of the transcriptions I assigned each topic the letter “S” for “Student” and labeled a main idea. I added numbers for variations within a single main idea. For example, I labeled the topic of personal identity as S.1 and variations within this category, such as identity roles as S.1.1 and self-knowledge, as S.1.2, and so on. I continued to assign letters/numbers to repeated topics and letters/numbers/numbers to variations within key topics for all student transcripts and used consistent topical labels for each data set. I classified major topics as key ideas repeated by all participants. I also classified minor topics that were important or useful to the first two research questions. I then created a list of all major and minor topics on a separate sheet of paper and clustered similar topics together. This list created a visual pattern of the data and identified the relationship of the smaller sections to the larger whole. For each cluster of topics I created a new category name that
best captured the unique experience. In order to present the data into a meaningful overview of the phenomenon, I arranged the categories in hierarchical order based on the key concepts that informed the first two research questions, namely the personal and the public context of student writings in online spaces. Arranging the categories in this order required me to constantly reexamine my topics, the emerging categories, and the preliminary themes. The resulting categories were grouped to form larger themes. I rearranged the themes into some form of structure so that the reader would gain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. I then renumbered the codes embedded in these themes to show a sequential, linear, and hierarchical progression of ideas.

This systematic analysis of my data was structured and thorough, filtering all the words and texts of all data sets. The meticulous coding and clustering of topics, renaming of categories, and emerging patterns reflect key themes that relate to the first two research questions. This analysis provided a verisimilitude of how female learners experience the writing process in an online writing course. Verisimilitude is a likeness. It may not be exact, but it conveys some degree of accuracy of the research problem. In this research, phenomenology is the method through which I explored how women experienced writing online and I described a verisimilitude of a complex phenomenon. The likelihood that what the participants experienced is shared by other female learners may not be fact and is not generalizable, but it adds understanding to this complex online experience. Furthermore, the categories and themes that emerged from the data sets provide valuable insights that are central to the social phenomenon of online learning.
Ethical considerations

As Robert Stake (2010) maintains, “All research is advocative” (p. 200). While the topic of my research stems from my belief in social justice particularly as it applies to female learners, I am aware of the power relations inherent in my role as a researcher and writer of this dissertation. From the beginning of the interview phase to the follow-up member-checking of the data, I was aware of ethical considerations as it applied to all participants. Early on I tried to establish a sense of trust with the participants by asking them to tell me something about themselves and beginning with an informal opening dialogue before moving on to the more in-depth questions. While I was trying to explore deep meanings during the interview process, I probed the participants with follow-up questions. I was also sensitive to exploring deeply private or traumatic experiences that may have caused them distress or to push for words or ideas that were already discussed earlier in the interview. Some participants associated with the military struggle with frequent deployments, relocations, and partners who return home scarred from combat or PTSD. I wanted to respect individual privacy especially when dealing with sensitive issues. Similarly, with the online instructors, I did not want to risk their professional standing by directly associating the instructor with negative comments or opinions that directly contradicted the college’s priorities regarding online learning. For this reason, all the names of the participants have been changed to ensure anonymity. In my letters of consent, I reminded the participants that they were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable or uneasy, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. As a follow-up, I reminded all participants that they could read the
final manuscript for themselves and I provided them with my contact information for future use. In these ways, I tried to minimize risk and respect the participants.

**Summary**

This chapter describes the methodology and the methods used in this study. By describing the place, the participants, and the context of this study, I provide reasons for using a phenomenological approach to this study and I explain my own biases related to the research. The emergent themes resulting from this data, as described in the next chapters, show how personal experiences are integral to the writing process and how instructors value narrative agency in online courses.
### Table 1: Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Prior Online Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 3 children; Military</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 2 children; Military</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 2 children; Military</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 4 children</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabi</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 2 children; Military</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 1 child Military</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izzy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Single; Transfer student</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Single mother; special needs child</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karlee</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Single mother 1 child</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; Mother 3 children; Military</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; Mother 3 children</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; Mother 4 children; Military</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 All names are pseudonyms.
Table 2: Student Demographics of the Site of Study

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Headcount</strong></td>
<td>1420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credit Hours per Student</strong></td>
<td>9.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>2,154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>1,966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td>1701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td>2419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TBD</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Students</td>
<td>1072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Students</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Students</td>
<td>1683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning Students</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrently Enrolled HS</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGE: Under 18</strong></td>
<td>803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Traditional</td>
<td>2,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Non-traditional</td>
<td>1,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHNICITY: White</td>
<td>3,025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| American Indian/Alaska Native | 48 |
| Non-Resident/Alien            | 1  |
| unknown                       | 205|

| MILITARY & related | 1,747 |
| Non-military related | 2,373 |

Military & related may not be a reliable number.
Military & related includes active-duty military dependents, reservists and veterans.

| Active-Duty | 338 |
### Table 3: Instructor Profiles$^2$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 1 child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 1 child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married; 3 children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^2$ All names are pseudonyms.
Chapter IV

Results and Analysis: Research Question 1

This chapter discusses the results of the interviews within the context of the first research question: How/why do women use personal experiences to write in an online composition course where human interactions and relationships are different in terms of quantity and quality? Two main themes emerged in relation to this question. The first theme is that the participants use personal experiences to identify topics, write essays, and at times, frame arguments. The second theme is that the participants are influenced by the larger ecology of the online environment. These themes demonstrate how students invest their own values and beliefs into the writing process and bring greater understanding to the phenomenon of online learning.

Personal Experiences are Valuable to the Writing Process

The first theme focuses on how and why personal experiences are sources of knowledge, evidence, inspiration, and insight for female students enrolled in online writing courses. In this study, participants link experiences to their unique identities. Even online, where participants work independently and mostly in isolation, they consistently use past narratives to begin the writing process. When given a choice to write about subjects, the participants indicate that they try to find connections to their life-stories. Individual writing goals also influence how the participants weave personal experiences into their writing. Choosing life experiences help the participants at various stages of the writing process such as sharing ideas, brainstorming, framing an argument,
and supporting that argument with evidence. The following categories describe how participants use personal experience to introduce new knowledge for academic audiences.

**S.1 Personal identity informs writing**

For the purposes of this research I distinguish between identity and self-awareness as tools for narrative construction. While these terms seem interchangeable and overlapping, I appreciate Michael Bamberg’s (2011) distinction between the two terms. He describes identity as the intersections of self as located within one’s culture. Identity is an attempt to situate oneself in opposition to larger cultural and social forces that define an individual such as culture, race, class, ethnicity and minority status. Self-awareness, on the other hand, originates internally, within a person’s personal life and consciousness. The nuances between identity and self-awareness are evident in the participants’ reflections. For instance, Annie, Emmie, Faith and Lori describe themselves as shy students and writing online helps them to overcome these difficult personality traits. These self-described personality traits contribute to how they value their own narratives as important. During the interviews, I also explored the concept of identity with the participants. While I did not specifically ask them to address cisgender, transgender, or other sexual identities, I allowed them ample time to provide the broadest possible explanation of how they viewed their own gender identity including their sexual orientation, lesbianism, and bisexuality. I also probed the participants for feedback regarding how they linked their identity to their social class, race, ethnicity, or minority-status.

When I asked how gender contributes to identity, two students, Heidi and Lori, indicated that gender does not play a role in their academic writing. They believe that
gender and self are separate entities that do not influence how they frame a thesis or write an essay. Yet, after more probing questions, Heidi admits that she struggles with the question. She explains, “Men and women can have different feelings or attitudes about certain things—I guess that is the only way I can see it contributing.” Her comments suggest a binary view of male/female identities. Most participants link their gender to their identity and suggest that identity and gender are inextricably tied to their writing choices and learning practices. Mary agrees that her self-awareness and gender identity shape how she views her own life choices and social roles:

I would identify my gender most certainly because that plays a huge role in who I am. It just is—if that makes any sense. I mean, I just am a woman. I’ve also had three children and the older you get and you have more experiences that are related to your gender, even how you’ve been treated in a workplace or anything in general, it’s easier to kind of reflect upon that and say that is who I am. This is what it is; I’m not trying to fight it.

Mary indicates the “huge role” that gender plays in her life. She acknowledges that gender is socially constructed. Society creates roles that separate male and female work, access, privileges, values, and beliefs. Foucault (1972; 1980) argues that enormous energies have been invested in historical and cultural forces to secure the division of genders. Gender, he claims, is a continuous formation of practices that reinforce a division of disciplines and genders based on repeated practices, values, and beliefs. Language and experience are one such practice. He argues that language and knowledge are powerful tools of class, culture, gender and ethnicity for membership in, maintenance of, and exclusion in certain communities. Community awareness is evident in Debra’s search for like-minded women learners. Debra concedes, “Well, being a woman, I definitely write about things from a woman’s standpoint. I have noticed that in this class I pick out things from everything that I read and if I think it is against the woman or for the
woman it’s always—for some reason it is just the way that I write—if I see something woman-related I am always on it.” Debra’s search for “woman-related” topics suggests that she enjoys engaging in gender-related academic conversations. Debra’s search for other female learners online reflects what Judith Butler (1988) describes as highly nuanced gender identification. Butler claims that gender identity is relegated to an experience in time—a phenomenon. In a heterosexual culture that regulates male and female behaviors, one’s sexual identity is “intelligible” insomuch as it “institute[s] and maintain[s] relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (p. 23). Online, the words and ideas individuals post create opportunities for learners to self-identify. Through the intersections of time, language, identity, and writing practices, participants like Debra find ways to intentionally connect with other female learners.

The largest contributing gender role that informs the participants is motherhood. In this study, 11 of the 14 participants mention their identity as a mother as influential in their choice to take online courses and inform many of their writing choices. The field of motherhood research is enormous. For the purposes of this study, motherhood is viewed as a socially constructed institution within a patriarchal society that privileges a certain type of parenting. Andrea O’Reilly (2010) examines how cultural values influence mothers. Within a patriarchal society, the narrowed definition of a “good” parent means the mother nurtures while the father provides. For white, middle-class, heterosexual families living in North America, enormous pressure is placed on the mother to stay at-home and care for a child, leaving little room for different concepts of motherhood such as the single parent or the lesbian mother. In this heterosexual context, women are still
expected to be less career-oriented and more flexible in terms of their work choices. Joan Williams, Mary Blair-Joy, and Jennifer Berdhal (2013) explain how middle-class men view full-time work as responsible and all-consuming whereas part-time work is stigmatized. Mothers often opt out of the full-time work because they feel morally obligated to care for their children. As they note, “… mothers find that maintaining full-time careers is morally and emotionally untenable, since they so dramatically violate the family devotion schema’s mandate that mothers’ primary focus should be to care for their children” (p. 214). Rather than feeling prejudiced in the workforce, mothers opt-out of careers because the time investment makes such full-time work prohibitive. Flexible work and school obligations are a priority for women, especially for the participants in this study who were mothers. As Andrea O’Reilly (2004) points out, nurture, self-love, and identity-formation are essential for strong child development and these connections happen with the child’s primary caregiver, which is typically a mother. For the participants in this study, being able to care for their children was a precursor to them pursuing online courses.

The participants in my study are predominantly Caucasian and borderline middle-class. Most participants highlight their mothering experiences as central to their identity. For example, Gabi declares, “I am a mom.” Jill describes the expectations placed upon her to prioritize her child. Jill concedes, “Well, I’m a mother, I’m a wife. I’m 44. I’ve been really trying to get through this course to get a degree. I have goals and I have a special needs child, so with her, I’ve got to be able to take care of her forever.” The complex expectations of motherhood also influence Debra, who describes the social and work pressures placed on her as a single parent. Debra maintains:
Well, being a woman, I definitely write about things from a woman’s standpoint. Being a single mom, I have definitely written about that. Working as a single mom, I’ve written about that. You definitely always add in an experience about being a woman to any kind of writing. I spent a few years as a single mom. It was hard. It was hard on many different levels so I can relate to any kind of writing that had to do with a comparison of how you are treated.

Here, Debra describes the tensions associated with a narrowed view of motherhood and family life and her own experiences that did not reflect this social norm. Writing helps her view life from a more critical perspective borne out of her own life trials. Similarly, Cassie observes that “[Writing] helps me to identify me as a mom, me as a full-time student, me as a full-time worker. It helps me do that and that helps me relate to a number of different readers rather than if I were to just write it from one point of view or one thing.” For Cassie, motherhood informs all aspects of her writing choices. Lori, who earlier suggested that gender was unrelated to her identity, argues that her role as a mother, parent, and spouse to a husband suffering from PTSD deeply influences her worldview. Another student, Naomi, indicates that she is a “mother, wife, and hopefully a future RN.” When I asked why in that order, she indicates that when her daughter was born with a congenital heart defect, “the nurses helped care for her and made me want to pay it forward.” Naomi agrees with societal parental roles and claims, “I think being a mom is a big thing and everything kind of falls back into my kids and what I’ve experienced with my kids, what I’ve experienced being a mother.” These combined examples demonstrate that motherhood not only defines the participants’ identity, but also makes them more aware of their unique social role in light of the course content and discussions. Often, motherhood presents challenging life moments that require the participants to examine their own resources, intellect, time commitments, and abilities in order to meet their individual challenges and obligations.
Motherhood is an important factor for these participants because technology influences how they parent their children. In today’s culture, mothers work full or part-time and will find any time-saving device to create more minutes in their day. Motherhood is the daily, intensive labour of physically and emotionally caring for young children that, according to Sara Ruddick (1995), profoundly impacts how women think and act. Technology has helped make this labour easier, to some degree. Ipads, word processing programs, e-mail, iPhones, and Bluetooth in cars allow mothers to shop, work, shuttle children, and communicate to teachers, spouses, employees, all day, and every day. Ironically, within the past decade technology has spurred new trends toward hyper-motherhood that require mothers to spend more time and energy on their children (Akass, 2012; Jacques & Radke, 2012). Debates over breast-feeding or bottle-feeding, eco-friendly toilet-training, and working full or part-time provide fodder for online blogs and social settings. Increasingly, a middle-class view of motherhood places a premium on time and labor intensive practices, leaving women who choose not to pursue these physically demanding activities questioning their own roles. Online learning allows women to devote more time to their children. With online learning, a woman can be both a morally “good” stay-at-home mother while still pursuing her own learning and personal advancement.

Marginal social experiences linked to class and ethnicity also contribute to the participants’ self-described identity. While most of the participants self-identify as coming from the middle-class, students like Karlee and Debra face economic struggles resulting from divorce and single parenthood. Karlee, a single parent and living with her grandmother in order to pay for school, indicates that her difficult struggle with addiction
influenced her decision to return to school and informed many of her writing choices. She insists, “Well, for my first assignment we had to write an “I Believe” article for my online course, and a lot of things come from my addiction, what I’ve learned from recovery for almost two years now and being off and on it for five. It was not necessarily that I talked about ‘I’m an addict’ but I talked about gratitude, moments of clarity, coming up from the rock bottom, just self-worth and esteem.” By writing about her past life experiences, Karlee learns to appreciate her trials and achievements. Similarly, Annie indicates that her race and ethnicity influence her online writing habits. She urges, “I think that maybe because I am Hispanic I relate more to other Hispanics. I think on the “Meet Your Classmates” [discussion board] I talk to other Hispanics or people who relate to me. I think that the reason I haven’t experienced a large amount of racial issues is because of the way I look and also because not everyone catches my accent. I’ve lived in the US for almost 11 years, and only gone to Peru twice. I know more English than I do Spanish.” Annie prefers to socialize with other Hispanics online and create affinity groups based on her own cultural identity. Online, her facial features, tattoos, body piercings, skin tone, and voice are hidden, and this anonymity provides her with more leverage in terms of who to invite into her online conversations and more importantly, how other learners view her. These participants realize that writing about their own life experiences is one way to gain greater self-awareness and possibly connect with other learners online.

The participants in this study found writing about personal experiences easy and a natural process. Personal writing allows participants to examine a topic from many different angles. As Ann Berthoff (1981) argues, the pre-writing process helps students
reflect on their subjects because the resulting texts are pre-texts for larger “relationships, for assertions and questions” (p. 38). Meaning making is a personal activity and writing allows the participants to create new understandings of themselves and their place in the world. Writing helps the participants to claim an identity and thereby, inform future rhetorical arguments. Berthoff (1981) further adds, “If we aren’t gods who have perfect knowledge, we are nonetheless powerful creatures who can describe and define; argue and tell stories, encouraging, persuading, entertaining: rhetoric is what we have instead of omniscience” [author’s emphasis] (p. 43). The participants indicate that personal writing contributes to their strong rhetorical stances and online expression because it allows them to express the values and beliefs that inform their warrants and claims.

S. 2 Personal goals influence writing

The participants mention various reasons for why they write about personal experiences. Two participants note that writing about personal experiences was not an immediate writing goal, whereas all the other participants immediately identify personal experiences as topics that inspire and motivate them to write academic essays. The participants view the pre-writing stages such as generating ideas and drafting as important steps in completing the course goals and in helping them find a personal connection to an assignment. Writing about one’s self, they argue, is easier, generates more ideas, and brings them greater satisfaction and joy. For Annie, who simply wants to generate a first draft, writing about her own life experiences makes this initial step easier. She claims, “It is easier to write about something I experienced myself rather than doing research and first understanding what the topic is about in order to write it.” Similarly, Faith suggests, “It’s definitely easier for me to write about things that I’m passionate
Both Annie and Faith describe writing about personal experience as more fluid, natural, and generative. Cassie claims that writing about her life experiences not only infuses her writing with depth, but also makes her writing better. Cassie comments, “I think that your personal experiences, they affect every part of who you are, which is going to infect your writing. I think that it opens, it makes my writing a lot broader. It makes it better.” The participants also claim they generate more writing and are more creative and expressive when drawing upon past experiences than when asked to write about other topics. As Debra points out, writing allows her to express her lived experience in novel ways. Debra notes, “For me [personal experience] actually allows you to be creative with what you are writing.” Gabi also indicates making meaningful connections between her own life and her writing assignments helps her thinking process. As she describes it, “Personal experience—that is first and foremost because that is how I relate to whatever subject it is. So that’s how I try to understand it.” Gabi gains greater understanding by finding connections between her experiences and linking her knowledge to larger ideas found in readings, online conversations, and writing tasks. Finding a personal connection to a writing assignment is a priority for these participants, and they actively search for ways to make their writing meaningful.

The participants insist that their primary writing goal is to meet the instructor’s expectations for academic research and writing as indicated in the course outline. As a required course, students from all disciplines must pass ENG 101 in order to advance to other course requirements and electives, so the participants felt pressure to adhere to the instructor’s guidelines regarding academic writing. As Heidi indicates, her main goal is to pass the course, “I’m very grade conscious so whatever the professor wants or says he
wants that’s what I’m looking to give him.” Heidi acknowledges that pleasing the instructor is more important to her than exploring deeper meanings in her writing. Similarly, Emmi wants to excel in the course, which for her meant achieving a high mark. She explains, “I just like to get good grades and do the best that I can do.” Here, Emmi is aware that receiving high marks requires mirroring the instructor’s “best” writing product. In online courses, the instructor models academic writing by selecting readings, providing examples, and shaping assignments that in many cases, reflect traditional academic texts in form and content. Emmi confirms that deciphering and meeting the instructor’s preferences influences her written expression. Debra also insists that her writing depends on how the instructor sets limits on any given assignment. Debra chooses essay topics based on how much information she could gather to write an essay. As Debra describes it, “I picked a topic that I could easily write about based on research. So that’s what I based everything on. Your main goal is to do well in the class. So you do what the instructor says. To me, that’s the most important thing—you just want to get good grades.” These participants indicate a contradiction between writing for critical reflection based on personal themes versus writing to meet the instructor’s expectations for academic writing. For these participants, passing the course is a primary goal, and while personal connections are important to the writing process, they also want to succeed in this course in order to move on to their next English course. Immediate success, for them, requires reproducing writing that mirrors the instructor’s guidelines and academic expectations.

Some participants intentionally explored their personal experiences in writing tasks. These participants report that their narratives opened opportunities for expression
that allowed them to find new meanings. These new meanings could potentially help other learners see new perspectives on complex issues. In composition courses instructors emphasize brainstorming, narrowing a topic, and gathering evidence as one of the first steps in creating an essay. Gathering evidence begins with personal explorations, and many instructors encourage students to draw parallels between their own lives and their essay topics. This trend, which began in the 1970s, continues to influence composition teachers to encourage students to create links between academic writing and their own lives (Lunsford, 1980; Clark, 2003). Narratives are sources of meaning-making. As Bruner (1990) argues, narratives can help frame arguments. He claims, “Narrating becomes not only an expository act but a rhetorical one” (p. 87). Using autobiography is always purposeful. Telling a story “reveals a strong rhetorical strand, as if justifying why it was necessary (not causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) that the life had gone a particular way” (p. 121). For Bruner, narratives offer insights into complex events that depend on an actor, her actions, the time and the place. Bruner’s insights about narratives as rhetorical tools are apparent in the conversations I had with the participants. Brenda believes that writing about personal experience “is very important because if you don’t have personal experiences, how can you have opinions about something to write about it?” Brenda adds that writing about her experiences caused her to be a more purposeful and critically reflective learner. Similarly, Heidi acknowledges that personal links to her writing help her value her own knowledge. Starting from a central point of personal knowledge highlights her authority and credibility as an author. Experience and by extension primary knowledge, Heidi observes, was supposedly valued in academic contexts. She asserts, “I think just to show others–
when you write and you use a personal experience you show this is what I have been through and this is what I experienced with it, I guess, so if it happened to you, you experienced it firsthand.” Using her life as a reference point enables Heidi to filter meanings for her readers and use these experiences to write academic essays. Defending a position is important for the participants because in the ENG 101 course students must engage in rhetorical debate. For the participants, entering an academic conversation begins with lived experience. As seen below, Karlee believes that using life experiences influences how she shapes her writing tasks and frames an argument:

If you are given an option to choose any perspective on an essay, like if you can agree or disagree with an article, all that comes from your beliefs and your life history—it doesn’t matter if you are online or in-course. To me, personal [topics are] the easiest and honestly I enjoy them because there are things I haven’t thought of because they happened 10 years ago and then I decide “Oh, that kind of fits into that essay so let me write about it” but writing about it also makes me think about it, reflect upon it, and analyze it again and how it’s affecting me today, whether it is good or bad.

Here, Karlee clearly connects personal experience to critical reflection. Exploring her lived experience in writing and with others allows her to reexamine her life. Through external readings and writing exercises, Karlee selects specific life experiences to include in an essay. Sifting and selecting personal excerpts engages her in critical reflection because it forces her to explore what in her past life is useful, and what experiences are limited. Weighing personal evidence is important to Karlee’s writing goals because it forces her to consider her purpose, her audience, and her strategies for writing.

The participants link life experiences to their critical writing practices, particularly when such experiences are framed in complex cultural contexts. Lori explores PTSD and Cassie writes about homosexuality based on their past experiences. Such themes are highly contested subjects, so choosing to explore these themes online
crystallizes the rhetorical stance expected of English 101 students. Writing about PTSD and homosexuality helps the participants find the language and resources to relate their views on complex topics to an unseen audience. Lori explains how her depth of understanding enhances her writing:

I feel like it’s a true story and it’s a way that people—I don’t know if whoever would be reading it would be like an audience that would, you know, either have PTSD or going through the same thing, but I think if you add a personal story people are able to envision and understand it a little bit more, you know?

Similarly, Cassie insists that her life experiences add a level of legitimacy to her writing:

One of my essays was about homosexuality. I talked to my husband’s cousin who is homosexual and I really had to get his opinion on it. And, I had to not tip-toe, but I wanted to do it justice in a way that wouldn’t offend anybody, but that didn’t make anyone that was against gays offended. So, I really tried to walk a fine line of here’s what I think; it’s okay to think other ways, but this is what I think and I tried not to use certain words and certain things like that.

Doing “justice” to sensitive topics means finding the words and language to engage in a conversation with an external group, and to keep that conversation alive. The participants introduce life stories that shape rhetorical arguments by offering new evidence or knowledge to support their claims. Knowledge sharing is central to deep thinking.

Composition instructors emphasize how primary and secondary sources are necessary for research papers. Primary sources such as letters, speeches, diaries, can be rich sources of knowledge. If primary knowledge is accepted in academic contexts, the participants argue that their personal insights should also be valued in this context. However, as they soon discover, personal knowledge is devalued in formal academic essays. Faith, an Amish midwife, argues, “If my personal experience doesn’t mean anything, well, I guess nobody’s does either. That’s how we learn, grow, and mature is learning things and hearing from others.” Faith challenges the academic assumption that primary knowledge
is less valuable than scholarly sources. She uses her own experiences in her Amish faith community to critique online discussions about the course readings from Michael Shermer’s book *Why People Believe Weird Things*. While discussing this reading online, she acknowledges, accommodates, and refutes the author’s assumptions and meanings using her own life experiences. She contends, “He [Shermer] talked about provisional ethics a lot and I sort of, not really re-defined it, but I tried to give credit to Shermer’s definition of it. Yet, I felt he was maybe missing something and hadn’t thought through some of his definition of it. I guess I just sort of further defined it.” Here, Faith uses her primary discourse community to challenge and redirect her unseen audience’s logical assumptions about the course readings. She engages others in an online debate regarding how one author defines a belief system in contrast to her own beliefs. Faith realizes that institutions and broad cultural narratives often define how complex ideas are formed, but she offers a new definition. She believes her ideas are important for the larger online conversation. By further defining provisional ethics from her Amish faith-based perspective, Faith justifies her moral position and substantiates her rhetorical position with personal evidence.

**S.3 Topics and the centrality of trouble**

The participants mention that they carefully select personal experiences to include in their writing tasks and avoid irrelevant, mundane topics. Annie suggests, “It would be the same as a classroom; there are certain things that you keep to yourself.” Instead, the participants raise topics that highlight their roles and identities within larger social and cultural forces. These experiences are often borne in sorrow and difficulty or highlight key turning points in the participants’ lives. According to Bruner (1996), narratives
express turning points that “pivot on breached norms” (p. 142). He claims, “Stories worth
telling and worth construing are typically born in trouble” (p. 142). In literature, a
protagonist might struggle against nature, other characters, the setting, or her own
psychological turmoil. These struggles also appear in the participants’ comments in how
they reflect on their experiences in a culture that often reads/listens/affirms only limited
narratives. Topics such as Lori’s struggle with PTSD, Debra’s struggle of being a single
mother, Karlee’s struggle with cervical cancer, and Gabi’s financial and psychological
struggles resulting from divorce and single-parenthood highlight the complex prisms of
individual female identities and social experiences. Writing about such turning points
comforts the participants, but these topics also generate new knowledge by raising
deviant, separate, and often marginal insights distinct from mainstream narratives. Bruner
(1990) reminds us that stories “[make] sense only in terms of the larger picture” (p. 121).
The “larger picture” is a Discourse—dominant repeated patterns of language use,
knowledge, and social practices found in society, school or work (Gee, 2007). Marginal
narratives, such as the narratives of women and their shifting identities, compete with
larger dominant Discourses for time, space, and critical reflection in academic contexts.
This tension contributes to a robust academic learning community. In an online setting
where human interactions are significantly different than in a live classroom, these
marginal narratives highlight the participants’ priorities and allow them opportunities to
reflect and write about their experiences and possibly direct online conversations.

The participants’ narratives demonstrate how introducing troublesome topics
online is integral to their writing goals. Annie, for instance, endorses writing about “racial
issues.” She declares, “I like those topics because I’ve lived it and it’s easier to write
about those things.” Similarly, Cassie insists that writing about homosexuality is an
important rhetorical aim: “I’ve always been passionate about [homosexual marriage] ever
since I was little I can remember it. I don’t know why. I just always felt like it was absurd
to have that bias against people and then I met my husband’s cousin and he’s a fantastic
person and I adore him. So, that made me want to write about it to try and explain [it].”

Writing about her personal connection with topic of homosexuality helps Cassie focus
her argument and defend her rhetorical position. For Brenda, subtle topics like
interpersonal family dynamics reveal her mixed attitudes and values about technology,
children, and the home. Brenda’s parental experience demonstrates how technology
actively hinders family communication and human connection:

There is one paper that I wrote about electronics and actually I think it was an idea that I had to write about electronics and our children and I think I went the other route with iPads in school. But, what I wanted to write about was the electronics and our children and what it’s doing to them. It needs to be stopped because I see where my daughter has an iPod and my other daughter has an iPod and my son is on the Wii playing Indiana Jones. My husband is on his iPad and his iPod and he’s got his phone and everything all there and we’re all sitting together, but nobody is communicating. I really think it hurts our children and subjects like that, like, my husband wouldn’t write about something like that.

Here, Cassie uses her family experience to explore the strengths and weaknesses of
technology—a controversial yet inescapable topic for parents. Writing about how
technology fragments her family allows Cassie to link her own parental struggles with a
larger community of online parents who, she imagines, struggle with the same issues. She
is intentional in her writing goal. Similarly, Faith’s struggle with vaccinations originates
from her own trouble with her son:

Our oldest son, we started out getting vaccinations for him and he had a very, very severe reaction to one of them which I felt affected some of his learning and things. It was definitely a neurological reaction and it was very, scary. It totally made me re-think my position even though we waited until he was older to start.
I’ve done a lot of research so I’m not real comfortable [with vaccines]. I have some questions about their safety overall. I feel like sometimes, and I work quite a bit with the Amish communities north of us, and there are hundreds of families there that don’t vaccinate. They are not dying of these diseases. They are having them with very little complications and I would tend to rather work on building strong immune systems, work at hygiene, avoiding these where we can, but if you have a strong immune system the people who are dying from these—and some of the research I did even admitted it—The World Health Organization right on their website admits the ones who are dying from measles are the malnourished children in third-world countries. It’s not what we’re led to believe.

Here, Faith carefully sifts through her first-hand knowledge, parental experience, and evidence to argue against vaccinating children. Her experience with her son offers fresh evidence that questions vaccination practices and informs her rhetorical position on this debate. Her experiences intentionally frame her argument and open an online conversation about this issue. J. P. Gee (2007) indicates, “[Speakers] lay out information in a way that fits with their viewpoint on the information and interaction. They are always communicating much more than the literal message” (p.121-122). Faith’s experiences deviate from societal and scientific norms, and had her classmates seen her physical Amish attire, they might have assumed the Amish are isolated non-conformists. Online, however, they could not see her head covering or floor-length dress. These external markers do not matter to Faith; she relies on her experiences as a mother and midwife to articulate her arguments. Faith understands this potential marginalization and acknowledges that online, “You have to be careful not to sound like you are not willing to listen to other people’s ideas. It shuts people down quick.” In a culture that defines experiences along binaries of male/female, scientific/subjective, or even mainstream or minority knowledge, individual female stories can be easily dismissed. It is possible that when bridging the chasm that distinguishes women’s troubles from other narratives, female learners may emphasize certain identity markers and minimize differences, just as
Faith did when discussing vaccinations. As Ana Louise Keating (2013) argues, as women attempt to create solidarity and community, they will claim to be similar to other women regardless of their color, ethnicity, or class. Ignoring these monumental differences can be dangerous because they reduce female differences, resist dialogue, and often duplicate existing binaries and stereotypes. Keating insists that, “We need to engage in risky conversations—potentially transformational dialogues where listeners don’t jump to conclusions but just open our minds and listen, with the intention to learn from and, potentially, be changed by what we hear” (p. 53). Online, students may be less prone to “jump to conclusions,” when they cannot see physical markers such as clothing, accent, or skin color. What social markers are revealed through posts typically reflect the student’s social roles and contexts. Other socially constructed language patterns that potentially exclude women from discussions may persist in online settings (Herring & Stoerger, 2013).

**S.4 Differences between academic and personal writing**

All the participants identify differences between personal and academic writing. They describe personal writing as writing that is opinionated, inspirational, and easy. Conversely, the participants mention that academic writing is difficult. Annie claims, academic writing “has to be formal. You can’t really put a lot of your opinion into it.” Naomi cautions that academic writing is “somewhat boring. I think there’s not a whole lot of room for finding your own personal niche in something that you’re interested in.” Mary accepts that “You kind of have to know the basics of the rules of how to write an essay; otherwise it could get a little bit dicey.” These excerpts demonstrate that academic Discourse has different formalities or “rules” about writing. J. P. Gee (2007) defines
nuances that distinguish certain Discourses. Primary Discourses are where individuals learn basic literacy and social practices in their immediate family and cultural contexts. Secondary Discourses are different literacies, identities, and social practices that move beyond the immediate family unit into more public realms such as schools or organizations. Gee further distinguishes these two discourses by describing the difference between learning and acquisition. Learning is acquiring a skill through purposeful teaching practices. On the other hand “Acquisition is a process of acquiring something (usually subconsciously) by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching” (p. 169). As an academic discipline, English has a longstanding tradition or Discourse that privileges Standard American English, correct grammar, and parsimony. In a composition course, the Aristotelian history of rhetoric presents “good” writing as defending an arguable thesis with empirical evidence arranged in a deductive or inductive manner. Students enrolled in an ENG 101 course know that they “need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function” (Gee, 2007, p. 170). The participants in this study generally resorted to traditional composition practices and Discourses to function in this complex online setting. These assumptions about writing and rhetoric deeply influence the participants to reproduce an “academic” standard, in isolation.

The participants describe academic writing as controlled writing. The participants learn to tightly monitor and shape their words and language to mirror academic writing conventions. Mary thinks that unlike narrative writing, academic writing “is certainly more technical. I don’t feel that it’s just free writing. It’s not as creative. I mean, there’s certain limitations and expectations in order to fulfil the guidelines of the assignment— if
you just kind of just write or do whatever you want you’re not exactly getting, you know—you can’t just do what you want creatively. You have to follow the guidelines.”

Shaping language and ideas to conform to academic expectations is important to the participants. Knowledge, as Lori declares, is filtered in academic contexts: “I think academic writing is a little bit more disciplined. You have to be able to know who you are writing to, what your subject is about, write it in the correct format, know what your teacher is expecting of your essay and meet the requirements in order to get a good grade. Your format, obviously, has to be correct; your grammar and that kind of thing.” Filtered writing means knowing who will be marking their essays. Audience awareness is critical for the participants. Heidi describes academic writing as mirroring the instructor’s guidelines: “Whatever the teacher wants or whatever the professor is looking for, that’s mostly what academic writing is—basically whatever the professor wants and how you believe he wants it done.” Heidi accepts that clear, concise, and standardized writing is important when trying to frame an argument. Cassie indicates that academic writing has to be unambiguous because academic writing persuades others to see her position. Her arguments need to be clearly understood by any reader: “I think academic writing is—let me see—I think it’s different than other types of writing. Academic writing is supposed to be the very best of what you can put on paper. It has to be something that can be interpreted by anyone at any time. I think it has to be very straight and narrow writing.”

This “straight and narrow” writing may be the final product of endless revisions. Obscure meanings are eliminated and arguments are supported with textual evidence. What is clear in the participants’ comments is that academic writing is often seen as a product, written in isolation, whereas writing as a process is less important. The participants
recognize the value of online conversations and ideas, but their own writing reflects a polished document that mirrors the academic genre of formulaic, conventional academic writing expectations. For the participants, academic writing is an isolated activity, despite having access to other learners, online conversations, and digital tools.

Another distinction between academic writing and personal writing is how the participants used evidence to frame an argument. The academy has long privileged specific kinds of evidence and knowledge. As Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Royster (2010) remind us, knowledge derived from complex female identities has been both absent and scorned in academic Discourse. Instead, higher education prefers male subjects, Western cultural contexts, and powerful, public identity roles, creating “us-and-them expectations that are binary and hierarchical” (p. 642). Academic Discourse does not foster personal connections to meaning making. Students are taught early that the first-person “I” perspective should be used sparingly, if at all. This removal of “I” from rhetoric is repeated in academic readings across disciplines. Helen Sword (2012) concedes that despite reference manuals like APA or CSE that allow personal pronouns such as “I” or “we,” most academic publications particularly in the social sciences avoid the first person point of view (p. 39). Practices that deny individual knowledge are rehearsed every time a student reads a scholarly journal article where the first-person “I” perspective is obviously absent. The participants repeatedly mention that academic knowledge is objective, neutral, and limits the use of personal pronouns. Izzy insists that life experience or ideas are devalued in essay writing “Because it’s too personal. If your whole essay is I, I, I, I when you are doing an argumentative essay, it is not effective.” She goes on to say that “I also tweak my writing because in the past, my own personal
experience is that [personal] writing hasn’t been allowed.” Izzy recalls how academic journals and readings rely on empirical evidence to shape arguments, leaving little room for other kinds of evidence, experiences, or personal reflections. As Brenda puts it, “For research papers, you can only put so much of ‘you’ into it because you have to put facts into it and then a small part of yourself at the end where it’s what you interpret the facts to be.” Similarly, Debra suggests that academic writing is fact-based, not personal. She maintains, “No—it was more summarizing and facts—so no it was not a lot of what you thought—I mean in the discussion boards you could talk about your opinions more but not with the essays. . . He doesn’t like for you to use I, you, we, those kinds of things.” While academic narratives can develop counterarguments and expand multiple perspectives, the participants describe academic writing as prescriptive and disengaging. Faith notes, “You have to be objective. If you’re not objective, you’re not really open to other viewpoints and open to learn, really. You always have your idea and you’re trying to disprove everything else if you’re not being objective.” For the participants, engaging in an academic conversation suggests assuming a scientific, empirically based writing style where individual perceptions or opinions are limited.

The participants acknowledged that academic writing favors neutral tones, objective evidence, and arguable perspectives. Such academic thinking and writing habits may prevent further explorations into the complex cultural, political, and economic forces that inform the participants’ lives. There is an absoluteness to academic Discourse that does not allow for what Sword (2012) calls honest and vulnerable writing (p. 39-44). Michel de Montaigne, who solidified the “essai” as a literary form in the 16th century, wrote meandering essays from an autobiographical perspective and from his life in the
French court. Today, academic essays are far removed from such musings. While personal reflections that explore complicated ideas can help readers revise their own ideas, the participants felt that such reflection was not typical of an academic essay. When these assumptions about academic writing appear online, autobiographical explorations may take more energy to explain or may be difficult to share with an unseen/unknown audience. In an online setting that has significantly different interpersonal dynamics, such deep thinking requires great effort, time, and space. Perhaps to simplify the writing process or to meet the Discourse standard, the participants rely on their previous assumptions about academic writing to reproduce this standard.

**Personal Narratives and the Ecology of Online Learning**

The second theme that emerged from the data is that narratives are contextual. Writing is an organic experience that includes the technology medium itself, the use of digital literacies, and time. Writing is an organic activity much like an ecological environment that consists of varied environmental influences. Marilyn Cooper’s (1986) ecological model of writing considers writing as a dynamic process whereby the writer is in constant relationship with her context and with other writers. Rather than writing an essay in isolation and presenting arguments to a generally unknown reader, writers engage with other learners and the medium during all stages of the writing process. Marilyn Cooper (1986) presents a fluid model whereby writers communicate their own values, beliefs, meanings and social identities with other learners:

An ecologist explores how writers interact to form systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers in the systems. An important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly
changing, limited only by the parameters that are themselves subject to change over longer spans of time.” (p. 368)

The ecology of the online environment consists of technology, digital literacies, and time. These three elements are important in understanding how the participants used personal experiences in an online context.

S.5 Technology and the writing process

The participants suggest that technology contributes to their personal writing in complex ways. Participants interpret technology in terms of the broadest first encounters with the online medium including the Blackboard learning system, the keyboard, word processing programs, and the computer screen. The participants also acknowledge that technology can be used for more complex learning activities. Understanding that technology for writing tasks is different from technology as a learning platform is key to the participants’ reflections. Participants engage with the technology first before moving on to more complex writing tasks, so this initial encounter reveals the participants’ attitudes and expertise with the medium. The participants indicate they are comfortable using the technology to complete writing tasks and they encounter few problems with Blackboard, although Gabi cautions, “The most difficult thing about Blackboard is all the teachers use it differently” and Izzy argues that Blackboard was “way too confusing.” Overall, the learning management system posed few problems and did not influence the participant’s writing choices.

Several participants indicate that despite minor challenges, computers simplified the writing process. Emmie thinks that the computer and online technology makes writing a more fluid process. She notes, “I think it’s easier online because rather than crossing things out you can just delete and replace instead of writing it all—you can just
type it and do both.” For Cassie, the technology helps her writing, but still has limitations. Cassie argues, “[For] brainstorming, I write it on a piece of paper line by line or I’ll type it line by line. Drafting, revising and editing is definitely easier online than it is in a classroom or writing it, but the other thing is when you’re drafting, revising and editing when you delete it, it’s gone.” Accidental mishaps related to technology frustrate Cassie, but Annie is able to gain new critical perspectives on her arguments, even with such technical setbacks. Annie notes, “Sometimes I have accidentally deleted my work and that’s very frustrating, but maybe it can be good because you approach the subject from a different point of view.” These participants’ comments acknowledge that word processing programs and online editing tools allow them to delete, edit, or reorganize their texts and in turn, help the participants write and revise quickly.

Technology as a learning tool helps the participants conceptualize their arguments. Online conversations create a digital imprint that allows the participants to reexamine their ideas and alter them if necessary. The participants indicate that writing online is more intense because it requires that they articulate their ideas in discussion forums, group work, and in assignments. For Cassie, the constant writing and thinking involved in online learning influences both the quantity and quality of her learning:

In an online course you’re constantly writing it, you’re constantly typing it and it’s always there to go back and read. So, once you put something on there, it’s on there for good. I think that both helps and hinders because it’s nice to go back and re-read; whereas in a classroom you can’t rewind and listen to what somebody said. It also hinders it because you might not like what you wrote.

Cassie implies that she writes more text online but she also carefully considers her rhetorical context, claims, and purposes. Similarly, Faith indicates that the medium allows her to frame her arguments. Faith claims, “I like writing [online] in the sense that I
can read over it and think about it before I actually send it.” Here, Faith explains that she can situate her claims in the context of other readings, theories, and perspectives and reflect on them as she inputs her own ideas. Such filtering enabled her to focus her argument and select evidence for her audience. The writing process involves words, conversations, short responses, and collaborative writing assignments that all contribute to how she shares ideas for other readers. The participants assert that the online digital imprint gives them the common benefit of time to reflect on what is being shared.

The participants indicate that the technology for writing and learning also creates a tension-filled learning environment. These tensions consist of balancing personal responsibility with the teacher’s expectations to participate in a community of learners. Participants are responsible for their own success, which often means making writing decisions on their own, in isolation. Gabi suggests that online learning forces her to ask different questions and find answers on her own. She insists, “If I were in class then I would probably have more questions for the teacher whereas sitting at home online in front of the computer, I have to make those decisions on my own and turn it in and hope for positive feedback.” Communicating ideas with the teacher or other learners is a solitary, impersonal experience that requires self-discipline and self-directed learning. Izzy adds the lack of community influences her own thinking and writing process. Izzy concedes, “You are brainstorming on your own whereas if you are in class you can sit there and ask the teacher like, should I do it this way or should I do it that way. So you’re kind of stuck brainstorming on your own; outlining on your own.” Here, Izzy indicates that the online context encourages her to produce a written product—a product that is largely created by her own efforts.
While the online medium creates a solitary space for writing, Mary recognizes her role in resisting this isolation. She suggests, “It forces you to engage the format of the classes with discussion. When the requirements are that you discuss or that you post things, you interact even if it is online; you are pushed into it whether you want to or not.” Mary deliberately resists the solitary online dynamic by forcing herself to participate in conversations. Conversely Lori, a self-described quiet, shy learner, finds the online setting liberating. Lori claims the medium, “puts up a barrier, so all those jitters I would normally get, I don’t have.” She adds, “Online classes are easier for me because I’m able to focus and if I have any questions I can email the instructor and it’s more directed toward me and not the whole class.” For Lori, the isolation and distant nature of online learning actually makes learning easier. These comments suggest the medium created benefits and challenges, as some participants used the technology in completely different ways. Participants choose with whom and when to talk to someone online. This phenomenon of being alone together is how Sherri Turkle (2011) describes technology’s influence on human relationships. Turkle explains that even though technology has made constant communication possible, individuals still choose when, where, and with whom to connect with online. Speaking online is not the same as human conversation because it provides an illusion of a relationship. During my interviews with the participants it became clear that while the medium had certain benefits, the participants primarily used the technology to accomplish individual writing assignments and course requirements.

The participants agree that the online medium requires enormous self-discipline and self-motivation. These tensions influence their writing choices. Writing tasks and related online conversations require constant monitoring and productivity. Faith
acknowledges, “I think with being online you do have to be more self-motivated. There are deadlines to meet; you have to be able to work it into your life.” Time constraints and structured assignments mean that the natural give-and-take of learning and uncovering ideas is suppressed in favor of task-oriented outcomes. Annie emphasizes, “I must do my assignments with my own will-power and it’s not like there’s any consequences.” Similarly, Brenda insists, “It makes me have to sit down and actually do the work myself and read the books and definitely engages me in more of the actual work; whereas, you can go, sit down and get lectured. Instead, you have to do the lecturing yourself.” The medium provides the participants with tools that achieve tasks. Extensive reading, thinking, and writing tasks often limit how frequently the participants purposely engage with other learners for meaningful collaboration and identity-sharing.

Because online technology depends on user skill, productivity is internalized and learning becomes self-directed. While self-directed learning is appealing to many adult women, the participants in this study claim that these combined technological factors make online learning uninviting and less engaging. Naomi rejects the idea that online learning is engaging: “I really don’t think that it does engage me a whole lot. I do what I need to do to get the assignments done and that’s about it.” Mary explains, “It certainly makes it more impersonal for someone who communicates much better in person with someone. I can communicate better by speaking, you know, just inflexion on the voice.” Gabi adds that the isolation removes the challenge from learning:

Online learning doesn’t personally engage me. I have to do the work myself. Yes, they give me what needs to be done, you know, read this chapter, do this activity or write about this but the computer isn’t engaging with me personally. You know like I have to do the research myself or read the chapter myself and take my own thoughts from it.
Personally engaging academic work varies for each individual, yet engagement is important if students are to share personal life stories. Solitary learning practices may hinder a student’s full expression and reinforce a cognitive model of composition (Appendix A) where writing occurs mostly in isolation and ends with a completed product—the formal essay. Emphasis on self-discipline, independence, internal reflection, and motivation are hyper-individualized neoliberal values and practices that make online learning convenient but not necessarily enlightening, as Karlee mentions below:

I think it takes a lot of the interactions out of it—it takes all the interactions out of it. You and a laptop on your couch. I don’t think in any way, shape, or form an online course, at least the ones that I have taken, actually makes you do any sort of self-reflection or any extra thinking. I think it actually takes a lot of thinking out of learning.

Writing is a form of “thinking” and learning. As Flower and Hayes’ (1986) cognitive model shows, students are constantly drawing upon their long term memory and audience awareness to plan, monitor, and revise their written texts in isolation. For Karlee, writing online is more isolating, rather than more ecological or interconnected. She contends that while technology makes the writing process easier, it also creates fewer opportunities for interpersonal communication and participation. Thus, in Karlee’s case, online learning implicitly duplicates a binary emphasis on cognitive meaning making, and thereby reinforces preexisting academic expectations that separate knowledge from experience. This is an important consideration for a feminist approach to online learning. I view a feminist pedagogy as learning that expands dialogue and communication, so any attempt to limit communication directly opposes feminist values. In a medium where human interactions are significantly different in terms of quantity and quality, online learning
can be a reductive space that “reinforces a masculinist approach (whether to learning or to childbirth) with a “product” to be “delivered” at the end of each” (Chick & Hassell, 2009, p. 197). Participants like Karlee indicate that because they prioritize their productivity, they had fewer opportunities to critically reflect on their own narratives.

**S.6 Digital literacies influence writers**

The participants indicate that online learning makes access to digital information easier and enhances their writing process. Technology as a learning platform consists of Web-based literacies such as websites, hyperlinked databases, search engines, wikis, blogs, scholarly and non-scholarly websites. Such digital information, or literacies, enables the participants to see their personal narratives with new perspectives. All online students are required to complete an online orientation module that reviews how to use the technology. As well, composition instructors often include hyperlinks to databases and external resources for students. Because information is Web-based, immediate, and accessible, the participants claim digital literacies benefit their writing goals and help them shape their rhetorical positions. As Gabi describes it, “You have access to the hyperlinks and then you can just do the research online. Because if I don’t know about a subject then I can read about it and it helps me understand the subject, so therefore I can write about it.” Gabi indicates that using the Web enables her to broaden her research.

Greater access to links and Web resources helps to shape her thesis. Karlee also concedes that access to the Web can be overwhelming. Karlee notes, “With the use of the Internet you are able to be open to a lot more information on things like on any topic that you want to do.” Unlimited access to information helps Karlee during the pre-writing and brainstorming stages because the information sparks her interest in essay topics. For
Lori, the Web supports her writing agenda: “You’re able to just type in whatever you’re researching on your complex essay topic. If you need clarification on it, you can just type it in and hopefully you have a good source to go off of.” Not only is research more fluid and accessible, but using Web sources forces participants to pay attention to specific knowledge relevant to their writing. As Naomi highlights, “I really like the research papers and actually getting in there and not being able to just use Wikipedia. You know, actually having to go in and dig into the journals because you can put in a subject and you get all kinds of different articles. You actually have to read into it to get information that is specific to the topic that you’re writing about.” The participants indicate that the electronic resources enhance their thinking and help them to become more reflective and intentional in their research and writing. The digital tools provide unlimited learning opportunities and access to information, which also requires the participants to balance this extensive information with their own specific writing needs.

Even though digital and electronic resources support the participants’ research and rhetorical goals, the participants argue that the technology as a learning platform also has limits. Jill insists that searching online requires a lot of time to read and reflect on the data. Jill grants, “You get your research then you read it and then you have to think about it because you can’t just sit down and write with no thought in your head.” Sifting through hyperlinks and web pages requires higher-order thinking skills about what is relevant to her essay topic. For Jill, synthesizing external research and exploring “really complex issues” remains elusive in online settings because she conducts research that suits her own writing goals. Jill suggests that she does not have the opportunity to engage in socially minded critical thinking online because her online searches are intended for
her own benefit, not others. Izzy claims that while Web resources are an option, going in-depth with a complex topic in an online course is never really an option. Izzy argues, “I mean you have access to as many references as you want but even then I mean online courses don’t really give you the option of exploring really complex issues. It is just the way it is.” Izzy does not harness the potential of digital resources to engage in meaningful discussions with other learners. Instead, she acknowledges and succumbs to the passive nature of research and writing as “just the way it is.” Similarly, Debra cautions that while the information her instructor provides was “very overwhelming,” she also filters external Web sources for credibility and relevance. Debra notes, “But when you Google MLA there are so many different websites that say one thing and then say something different…With an online class—you research stuff online and sometimes the information can be fact or fiction and you never really know what is real.” This filtering process appeals to Debra, but again, it is research that occurs in isolation. Digital resources can be a distraction and this distraction is a positive quality because it allows the participants to pause or rest from their intense writing tasks. Annie claims:

We have social media, emails and other things that are relevant to you, but you shouldn’t be looking at while you’re writing because you should focus on your assignment. I have never just sat and looked at my paper and just kept writing. I would do that for twenty minutes and take a break; subconsciously I just go to other windows and look at things. Even take a break from the writing and do a different assignment. I think it’s good because it gets to the point [where] you can’t talk about a certain topic anymore, so you have to take a break. When you’re not thinking about a topic, ideas come to you and you can write about those.

These excerpts demonstrate that access to Web-based literacies helps the participants find evidence to support their rhetorical positions and influence their thinking and writing process. The participants indicate that researching online contributes to how they frame
their rhetorical positions and causes them to gain a greater awareness about the interrelatedness of their essay topics with new academic resources. Yet, the participants also indicate that access to Web-based literacies is primarily an individual activity. In many cases, the ease and immediacy of digital information is timely but also distracting, requiring the participants to make writing decisions about purpose and audience alone, thereby increasing the hyper-individualization of the online experience.

**S.7 Time influences writers**

The participants all indicate that time is a driving force in their writing choices. Both broadly in terms of managing the technology and completing assignments and narrowly in terms of composing an actual essay, time is a constant pressure. The demands of family, work, and parenting are reasons why participants enroll in an online course, and they acknowledge that writing always requires more time than expected. The asynchronous nature of the course means that time compresses and expands online. Time feels compressed when certain writing tasks like discussions or group work are date restricted, and time expands when participants try to engage in the thinking and writing process only to be interrupted by time delays and fragmented feedback. These participants agree that time management is critical to success. However, they acknowledge that they did not anticipate the time-consuming online workload that required them to prioritize writing tasks into their compressed schedules.

Participants report that online activities require more time to complete the postings and maintain a consistent online presence. Time management and personal responsibility are important to the participants especially since their online presence counts toward their final mark. The participants explain how they need to think broadly
about how to accomplish larger essay assignments and then narrowly when completing collaborative writing tasks and discussions. Repeatedly, the participants mention the importance of self-monitoring, avoiding procrastination, and constantly engaging with the technology in order to maintain productivity. Cassie confirms that self-directed learning requires higher-order thinking and writing skills that need an incubation period. She observes, “Time is always a factor. In a writing course, there is no right answer. It’s kind of you have to discover it and you have to write it and you have to shape it into your own. So, that’s something that takes a lot time and however much time you spend on it that’s going to show in your work.” Similarly, Izzy reports that reflective feedback contributes to how she responds to online topics. She claims, “Time is definitely a factor. You actually have to have time to write something, to understand, to get the topic, to post back to people, to write something meaningful.” Izzy needed time to produce the depth of thought necessary for writing and thinking online. Furthermore, managing online discussions and tasks require careful planning, especially given the participants’ busy lives. Debra argues, “All of my classes are online and it seems that I am doing schoolwork 24 hours a day. I’m up till 2-3 in the morning, so just time management is very important.” Technology makes learning online accessible and easy, resulting in participants feeling the pressure to produce work. Heidi also equates learning with work: “I mean basically you need to manage your time well, break down the assignment, and understand everything well and basically make a plan. So you really need to use your time wisely, and if not, you’re not going to pass.” As for Karlee, writing and thinking online is extremely task-oriented and time-consuming. Karlee declares:

Even though it’s an online course, you have to have set times where you are left alone with your computer, whether that means going to your local library and
doing it. When you think female, you think children, husband, wife, responsibilities. They are the primary caretaker, so you still need to take time like you’re going to school.

These comments suggest that in order to avoid being overwhelmed with the online workload, the participants must carefully manage their time. The participants realize that online learning and composition in general requires certain skills and knowledge that improves with practice. They share the underlying assumption that online learning requires them to be “present” in the course and to write extensively, and they all agree that online learning takes more time than they expect.

Time influences how the participants explore complex topics and essays related to their experiences. Essays linked to personal life experiences require careful thought and planning. The participants indicate that when given the opportunity, they would write about personal experiences, but often, assignment due dates coupled with other competing life forces make such reflective writing difficult. For some participants, fragmented time allows for more independent inquiry and self-reflection. Emmi notes, “I guess you have more time to think about it, more time to research it than you would in an hour or two class setting.” Similarly, Jill adds, “You get that chance to think about what you were writing and that can help you, ‘gee, I should have brought up this’ because you can step away from it for a minute. In a classroom setting you can’t step away from anything.” These comments suggest that in live courses, conversations are more reactive, whereas online, they can be more reflective. Participants decide what words, ideas, and images they will use to convey meanings. Determining how to think and carefully compose online responses requires that participants read extensively, master concepts, and frame rhetorical positions, all time-consuming tasks that occur both on and offline.
Cassie comments that the separation between active online engagement and offline work results in greater productivity and self-reflection:

When you’re writing online, it could take 24 hours to hear back from the professor and then the work is due in two days, so you really don’t have a lot of time to have the professor look at everything that you’re doing. You really have to trust your own writing because you don’t always have that ability to get feedback right away, so you really have to think everything out—well thought, well examined.

The participants argue that online time significantly influences how they approach writing tasks. Timely discussions and assignments require them to think critically during the various rhythms of the course.

The participants also indicate that time fragments their online writing experiences. The interruption in the thinking/writing process forces Brenda to reconsider her writing approach. Brenda cautions, “If I have a question [and] I need the information now, it’s going to be tough to get back into what I’m thinking and where I am in the paper. You get into that groove and it’s hard to get back into it.” The participants realize that despite the advanced technology of online courses that attempt to recreate the live classroom through private emails, chat sessions, online group work, and discussions, they still have to wait for feedback. Because time is so scarce in their everyday lives, completing complex essay assignments or discussions became burdensome. Izzy concedes her frustration with online learning and her own writing tasks:

I am home and I say I want to get this assignment done like right now so I don’t have to worry about it later or at least today I want to get it done. It’s like you’re waiting there and waiting and waiting and waiting. It’s like I guess there is going to be a time lapse before I get it. That can hinder you, like your enthusiasm about getting it done about wanting to do your homework whereas if you do something and you’re waiting and then it is like oh, I am going to go off and do something, and then you get busy.
Izzy suggests that the time delays reinforce the conceptual distance between herself and her classmates. Without a real class partner to keep her accountable, Izzy waits for feedback that never comes, resulting in her less than enthusiastic response. Mary points out that while time allows her for more reflection, it frustrates her when too much time passes. She writes:

Well, it certainly gives you time to think about it more when you’re not getting an instant response. You get more time to kind of mull it over and think, ‘I didn’t think about that, so maybe that will be something, you know, a topic I can bring up or bring something into it to question further.’ But, unfortunately, I think the biggest problem is when there’s two days that go by and you’re feeling lost or you’re feeling like I really want to know how others think or I really want to know what the response is or the answer…It can be frustrating—really frustrating—like, tick, tick, the ticking of the clock.

Naomi also describes being frustrated with time delays when dealing with important information related to her writing:

I realize instructors have certain times that they’re doing things and that they can dedicate to their online courses, but then, too, a lot of people that take online courses, they have other things going on too. They are working and, you know, whatever the case may be. So, if you post something and it takes your instructor one or two days to get back to you and they get back to you at a time when you’re still not going to be able to see it for another, you know, eight to ten hours before you get done with whatever you’re doing, it’s kind of really frustrating.

Both Mary and Naomi describe how online time makes them frustrated with the writing process. While instructors attempt to create assignments and activities that promote critical thinking and dialogue, time delays suppress valuable academic conversations or opportunities to develop rhetorical stances. Delayed time results in potentially rich ideas and discussions remaining unexplored. For Lori, assignments and activities that would otherwise benefit from prolonged reading, engaged dialogue, and collaborative inquiry are simply not done. Online learning does not allow for the fluid and immediate exchange of ideas. Lori explains:
Time is definitely a factor and that only leaves like three hours a night for me to get something done. I think, honestly, because I have so much going on that I really don’t have time to reflect on what I write, so it is, for me, to be honest, I’m just kind of like this assignment is over let’s go on to the next! I don’t really have time to reflect on it or I feel like I don’t at least.

These comments suggest that while online learning can be convenient, the technology and asynchronous nature of the medium contributes to separating research, writing and thinking process into distinct tasks. While online learning invites more women into the post-secondary arena, these women are still subject to cultural forces that emphasize overarching narratives such as motherhood, parenting, flexibility, and cost-efficiency in their daily lives. These complex forces may influence the degree to which detailed and robust narratives that seek to reshape cultural assumptions actually appear in online learning spaces.

Summary

This chapter explores the first research question about how female students introduce personal narratives into an online writing course. The data show that personal narratives are important for female writers and that writing depends on the ecology of the course. The first theme highlights how participants tried to incorporate life stories into their learning experiences. Participants argue that writing about social issues related to their gender, race, class, and culture is easier than writing about forced topics. Such knowledge enables them to challenge existing social structures. The participants’ personal narratives inform the participants’ rhetorical stance both in online conversations and in assignments. The second theme demonstrates that narratives are influenced by the intersections of technology and time in the online environment. The technology itself poses few problems. Instead, Web resources provide participants with greater freedom
for individual research and reflective choices, but using these resources requires individual effort. Participants did not mention receiving instruction on how to use digital sources to engage in new writing practices. Time also poses a constant challenge for the participants. Participants needed time to self-monitor their work, generate essays, and become more task-oriented. Time both interrupts the writing process and helps some participants to think deeply about their topics. Time delays reduce constructive feedback for the participants during critical junctures in the writing process. The participants note that while technology creates opportunities to overcome time and space boundaries, the technology also creates barriers to reflective writing practices. Instead of becoming spaces where personal lives and critical thinking with other learners online intersect, the online environment becomes a means to an end—a learning environment that largely emphasizes productivity over reflectivity. Technology enables the participants to enroll in the academy, but it does not necessarily allow them to be fully engaged in a critically reflective learning community.
Chapter V

Results and Analysis: Research Question 2

This chapter continues to explore online learning from the participants’ perspectives. In this chapter, I consider the second research question that explores what influences these participants to introduce personal experiences with other students and instructors in an online writing course. One recurring theme emerged in relation to this question, namely, that online interpersonal dynamics shape the participants’ writing process. Discussion boards, emails, and course communications help bridge the physical distance between a student and other learners. However, since time influences how participants engage with the course content and with other learners online, discussions take longer to unravel and ideas can be interrupted or deleted online. The technology, in complex ways, can promote, hinder, and even mute critically reflective conversations linked to personal narratives. The resulting categories in this chapter point to online dynamics that both facilitate and hinder the participants from using their personal experiences to their fullest capacity. The participants explain that sharing their personal experiences between the shifting communities of fellow learners and instructors as well as contending with the course content makes them cautious about using personal narratives as a rhetorical tool.

**Online Communication Shapes Writing Practices**

Online communication is the central theme of this chapter. The dynamics of interpersonal relationships create a space where female identity and competing cultures collide. On the Internet, the expression of identity can be fluid, selective, and even
anonymous. Andrew Wood and Matthew Smith (2005) suggest that technology allows individuals the ability “to manipulate their personal identities in ways that call into question assumptions about what is possible and what is appropriate in the presentation of self” (p. 51). Similarly, Sherry Turkle (2011) demonstrates that technology and computers have enabled a mostly middle-class clientele greater access to social networks and media, allowing them to navigate, socialize, and recreate their own self-identities in virtual spaces. Parallels exist between how identities are formed on the Web and in online courses. The constructivist model that informs most online course development aims to engage participants with other learners and create opportunities for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, assessment, and community building (Anderson, 2008; Jonassen & Land, 2012; Ruey, 2010). Constructivist practices, in theory, create a community of inquiry where teaching, social, and cognitive presence intertwine to provide students with the best opportunities for engaged, active online learning (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Shea, Gozza-Cohen, Uzuner, Mehta, Valtcheva, Hayes, & Vickers, 2011). Since online students are self-paced and responsible to create and sustain communities of inquiry, and since the course content is determined by the instructor, students are constantly making decisions about what kinds of knowledge and experiences to share in their online community. For instance on Blackboard, students can self-identify using a traditional picture, a mash-up of images, or any kind of visual identification, or they can remain anonymous. Given this complex medium where identities can be transparent, distorted, or hidden, the participants in this study acknowledge that sharing personal knowledge in their writings, especially with an unknown audience, can be challenging. Trust, dialogue,
self-monitoring, and audience awareness inform how the participants explore complex life stories.

**S.8 Trust impacts online expression**

In this category, the participants mention trust as critical to online communication and writing practices with other learners. Sharing personal experiences that focus on individual trouble (Bruner, 1996) means that participants expose their life-stories—stories that are often linked to complex, unequal, and shifting societal contexts—to readers who may or may not share the writer’s assumptions, values, or beliefs. In fact, the unseen online reader may actually represent dominant cultural narratives. Dominant cultural narratives produce normative values and beliefs about lifestyles, gender norms, identities, and social practices that reinforce the values and beliefs of a mainstream culture. Individuals who share a dominant narrative seek other individuals with similar narratives, knowledge, and practices that secure their location and power in this culture (Bruner, 1996; Gee, 2007). Shifting or unclear female identities can create online tensions, especially in an academic Discourse where knowledge from marginal communities is suspect. In composition studies, personal knowledge and points of view often succumb to larger, rhetorical practices that largely focus on a separation of public and private knowledge. Furthermore, composition teachers encourage students to perfect writing habits that argue a position from an academic standpoint, often with little regard for how individual knowledge and social experience contribute to rhetorical claims (Royster & Kirsch, 2012). These practices reappear online. While the online medium provides participants with a space to share their personal experiences with other readers,
interrogating complex subjects involves more than simply posting comments on a discussion board.

In an online course, language transmits one’s identity, so how words are used to conform or resist complex topics contributes to trusting relationships. Even with other communicative tools such as emoticons, long dashes, colons or images, students primarily communicate using words. Commenting on online communication, Andrew Wood and Matthew Smith (2005) warn that although human interactions are always a subjective experience, given the limited opportunities for processing words and social information and the time consuming task of processing different social perspectives, computer mediated communication can be an impersonal experience, depending on how the individual perceives the exchange (p.84). Similarly, participants in this study expect an online course to be somewhat anonymous and “impersonal.” Naomi suggests, “It doesn’t bother me. I mean, if you want to stay anonymous and more private, that’s perfectly fine with me. I mean, it is an online class.” Jill notes, “I don’t know these people, so there’s really not a trust factor. I’m not putting my name and address out there or even my picture for that matter.” Karlee appreciates the impersonal setting. Knowing that only the instructor would read her essay and realizing that she is writing for virtual strangers, Karlee feels safer sharing her narrative:

With the English [101] online, if [the instructor] were to say that with one of the personal essays we were going to have to put it up on the discussion board, I’d probably feel more open to that because I can bump into these people in the hallway and 10 minutes after the reading, they’re not going to know it is me.

Naomi and Jill indicate they did not expect to form trusting relationships online. They anticipate online exchanges to be impersonal. In their minds, exchanging personal information with other learners or exploring personal identity online is not relevant to the
course or is too time consuming. In a recent study, Heeyoung Han & Scott Johnson (2012) explore how online interactions and emotional satisfaction influence learners. They note that while building trust or community is valued by online learners, it is less important to busy adult learners who chose online learning for its convenience. However, Wade, Cameron, Morgan, & Williams (2011) claim the opposite is true. Wade et al. (2001) insist that building relationships online and knowing other students is more important to female learners than to male learners and contributes to female learners’ course satisfaction. In Wade’s study, female learners experience more positive interpersonal relationships and desire deeper online connections than their male counterparts. These studies suggest that while time and convenience impact online relationships, building trusting interpersonal relationships is important to learners and may contribute to how they write about their identities and share ideas. The technology is a medium that influences how the participants respond to other members in the online community. Many barriers to communication exist online, and while students may desire positive and deep online interactions that build trust, the medium and the opportunities to develop deep connections are limited.

The anonymity associated with online learning makes the participants inherently wary about sharing personal knowledge and trusting other learners. Annie, who is Peruvian, avoids “really tough topics” because, as she said, “I don’t know somebody and I can’t really see them and I don’t know how they are reacting when I say those things either.” Being unable to see other learners means that social identity markers such as race or ethnicity are hidden or obscured, and this anonymity makes online communication challenging for some of the participants. Brenda compares online learning to live
communication, and finds that her own meanings are difficult to convey online. Brenda notes, “I think when you see somebody and speak face-to-face, like, you can bond with the person differently than when you have the barrier of technology. It’s the same way with texting rather than calling somebody. You just get more personable rather than like a façade.” This “façade” is indicative of students’ perceptions that social identity is removed from online spaces. Izzy notes that bonding is significant in terms of her writing habits and inhibits her ability to form interpersonal relationships. Izzy claims, “You don’t really get to know people. I mean you get to read their essays and that is pretty much it. You can have sort of a conversation, but it is not face-to-face. You never get to know somebody in depth. You never really get to put a name to a face.” Conversations are important to building trust. In online courses, where identities are often one-dimensional and conversations consist of disembodies sentences, establishing a sustained dialogue can be challenging. As Faith describes it, “It can be a little intimidating because you’re not seeing these people. I tend to like to be face-to-face with somebody, so I can get feedback. Online it’s a little bit harder to do that.” While students can still receive feedback online, what may be at issue here is the fluid, intoned, or instantaneous feedback that assists Faith in her writing practices is lacking online. Other participants also describe the online anonymity as hindering their ability to trust others and share knowledge, especially without consistent feedback. Gabi argues, “Nobody knows me. We don’t personally get to interact and put a face with the name.” Similarly, Mary claims that, “I do not know any of these fellow classmates, really. I really don’t, so for me, trust as a person is huge. It just makes you cautious. You don’t know who everyone is, no idea.” These comments indicate that online trust begins with an awareness of other
learners’ socially-constructed identity. Without this audience awareness, the participants remain cautious about sharing personal complex ideas.

While anonymity was mentioned as a hindrance to trust, some participants argue that anonymity actually enhances their thinking and writing practices. During online conversations, social identity-markers do not necessarily link a subject to an individual. In the absence of any identifying traits, Faith and Heidi indicate they are able to reflect more on other students’ online postings and possibly explore complex ideas through further, self-directed research. Faith argues, “Online, I like to read it over and over trying to understand what this person is really trying to say. So, there are some hindrances and yet in other ways it feels a little safer because you are right in your own home and you can just walk away from it if it gets to be too much.” Tensions linked to individual rhetorical debates become safer online because when ideas or conversations become “too much,” Faith can simply “walk away.” She can shut down the technology, and the debate. Heidi, on the other hand, admits that because online learning is self-directed, she is entirely responsible for her own thinking and writing. She notes:

In a way I like it because we are there for ourselves and if somebody doesn’t want to get into their background or anything then they have that choice. I guess there can be a downside because if you don’t know who you are talking to you don’t really know the person you are talking to. I guess it just makes it dangerous if they have hidden intentions. But other than that I don’t really mind if someone wants to kind of keep to themselves and keep their anonymity.

Both Faith and Heidi indicate that audience awareness, or “know[ing] who you are talking to” is essential to trusting conversations. Without an awareness of other students’ offline identity, participants feel uncertain about engaging in complex conversations. They use words like “safer” and “dangerous” to suggest that online communication can be misunderstood without adequate commentary by the original author. Faith and Heidi
contend that online communication requires making assumptions about individuals based on the words or in some cases, the images that they use online. These assumptions inform how relationships form online, yet participants agree that limiting online communications to words on a screen makes establishing trusting relationships difficult.

Trust is important for building relationships with other learners online. For the participants, finding like-minded individuals creates a comfort zone and overcomes the generally neutral and one-dimensional medium of their computer. The online activities, discussions, and collaborative exercises create relational opportunities to develop important personal connections. Maria indicates that “Just talking and getting to know each other makes me feel more comfortable just to share certain topics.” Finding relatable stories or experiences creates acceptance and membership in a social group which helps the participants build a better online community. Relatability, as Cassie writes, has a reciprocal effect on her learning. Cassie claims, “You trust your own instincts and look at what other people are saying and what is already up online in the content.” Gabi also finds that relating her own experiences with other learners who reciprocate with positive feedback creates a more stable, trusting online presence. She explains:

My life experiences are my life experiences. Seeing other people’s views on it sometimes are helpful. Like maybe I was going through this at this time but I think what is more helpful is to hear other people’s stories rather than mine. Like I already know what I have gone through but being able to relate to other people helps especially in an online setting. If you can relate to someone then I am going to be more apt to read their paper than someone else’s paper and comment on their discussion than someone else’s discussion because I feel I have some type of connection with them.

Being “able to relate” to other people is important to knowledge sharing. Relatability creates safer online spaces where ideas and identities can be shared with other unseen readers in healthier, more positive ways.
While the participants indicate that relating to other learners is essential to building a trusting online space, they also suggest that instructors do not provide enough opportunities for sharing personal identities or narratives. Faith indicates she is cautious when reaching out to other online learners given the students’ and the instructor’s tone. She explains, “For me, I have to get the feel of where the classmates are at, then I would feel more comfortable; get a feel where the instructor is at, I would feel more comfortable. For me, I’m not the first day going to be just blabbing out all of my personal experiences.” Faith needs some affirmation from her online community before she shares any of her personal identity. Similarly for Jill, establishing trust takes time. Jill needs to consider the larger social networks, conversational norms, and interpersonal online dynamics before arguing a complicated position. Jill explains, “I think when you first start, you’re kind of leery of like the professor and other students and I kind of sit back and I like to take things in before I put myself out there.” For Jill, finding a rhythm to the course readings and assignments and gaining an awareness of the instructor’s goals, intentions, values, and beliefs inform how safe she feels in this online medium. Karlee also indicates that respecting and trusting her classmates is an important first step in learning; however, online learning does not create positive conditions for establishing such trust. Karlee suggests, “Trust contributes to anything anyone does, but I don’t think that I have trust built up between my instructor and any of my classmates because the interactions are so minimum.” For these participants, the type and quantity of feedback related to individual identities directly contribute to online social dynamics.

Social dynamics also involves asking questions that reveal more information about other learners. Knowing about other learners’ identity influences how the
participants are able to self-identify and share personal experiences. Brenda accepts that the online medium prevents her from building a good rapport with other learners. Brenda claims, “I think maybe it goes back to the technology where I didn’t have a relationship with all of the other students and I didn’t want to sound stupid asking certain questions.” Brenda argues that without “a relationship” with other learners, she indicates being anxious about how others would perceive her and hesitant to ask “certain questions”—possibly questions that may isolate her from the larger group norms or offend other students in the course. Wood and Smith (2005) warn that “social identity reacts to the situation and correspondingly takes its cues for appropriate behavior from others in the same situation” (p. 85). Suppressing individual identity in favor of larger social norms can hinder constructive dialogue about complex issues. More recently, Eunmo Sung and Richard Mayer (2012) show that identity-sharing and communicating online is frustrating for students primarily because of a limited social presence. Sung and Mayer argue that social respect, social sharing, having an open mind, sharing social identity, and establishing intimacy attempt to overcome the barriers associated with online communication. These authors suggest that one way instructors can make online learning more hospitable is to encourage sharing personal identities and narratives online. Aside from associating the instructor with authority, participants in this study do not mention their instructors ever sharing their identities in their online courses.

The participants’ comments indicate that establishing trust requires intentional dialogue. Discussions and activities attempt to bridge the time and space gaps between learners and the instructor. Often, however, these activities are not specifically focused on self-identification or allow for deep thinking. With few opportunities to self-identify,
important stories remain untold. Faith’s and Brenda’s comments reflect a recent study that examines how identity, language, and trust are established in online settings and how sharing personal experiences and stories by instructors adds to the perceived student satisfaction in a course (Ke, Chávez, Causarano, & Causarano, 2011). Instructors can encourage community building by sharing their own perspectives and narratives. In a similar study, Gustavo Mesch (2012) adds that trust is based primarily on shared personal information and self-identification. He suggests that students feel safer when instructors create conditions that promote trust, identity-sharing, and relatability when attempting to build safe online communities. When instructors and students are open to the ideas and comments of other learners, they may feel more inclined to share their own narratives as a way to complicate topics.

The participants repeatedly indicate that trusting the instructor significantly influences their learning. The participants report they inherently trust their instructor because he or she held a position of power. They assume that instructors will respect their life stories and where necessary, keep them confidential. Annie grants, “There has to be a reason to trust. As a teacher, you are obligated to keep my writing to yourself, unless I give you permission to share. As an online teacher, I won’t normally meet you, which gives me the liberty to share even more things I would keep to myself otherwise.” While confidentiality seems to resist the larger purpose of online discussions and group activities, confidentiality and respect are essential for deeper inquiry. Heidi claims, “Well if you don’t trust your classmates or your professor you will hold back what you say [and] what you do, so I guess that when you are establishing trust you are more open with your questions and with your problems.” Anxiety and stress over personal information
can be reduced when individuals form more positive interpersonal connections online. Brenda highlights the importance of online communication with the instructor as a continual process of reading, sharing, thinking, and responding to each other. She describes the importance, specifically, of a trusting relationship with the instructor:

I think that actually goes into when I can communicate with [the instructor] I can show more of myself rather than with the entire class because as a professor, I guess I would trust you more than everybody else in the class where there’s a lot of them and you don’t know them. Not that I knew you either, but your status, I guess, helped me to trust you more.

Cassie agrees with Brenda that trust and mutual respect contribute to honest, robust writing:

Trusting the professor is a big one too, you know, writing an essay about gays I just had to trust that you would grade it objectively and not with personal views. I remember talking to my husband about that and I remember saying I really hope that it’s not graded on any kind of bias or anything.

These excerpts address part of the second research question that asks what factors influence how these participants introduce personal experiences with instructors. The participants note that while anonymity hinders feelings of trust and safety, trusting the instructor is one of the first steps in building an online community and directly influences their writing habits. Online learning leaves many social cues hidden and the participants rely largely on words, texts, and dialogue to carry their meanings to other learners. How the instructor and other learners communicate online helps overcome these time and space barriers. Christine Wade et al. (2011) confirm that deep relationships are dependent on time, individual personalities, and levels of participation. Wade suggests that while building strong relationships is a precursor to trust, “deeper relationships will happen only if the individuals within the group want it and make it happen” (p. 393). The participants in this study attempt to build community through online conversations, but
communicating one’s identity and establishing personal connections with other learners and the instructor takes time and effort, and as they repeatedly agree, building spontaneous, immediate dialogue is challenging.

**S.9 Dialogue influences interpersonal communication**

Participants repeatedly mention dialogue as important to online communication. Online conversations in the form of discussion threads, group work, and course specific blogs are important features in establishing cohesion among learners. Creating strong online communities is a powerful learning strategy for creating an online community of inquiry (Rovai, 2007; Young & Bruce, 2011). Writing instructors know that dialogue resulting from discussions and group work provides students with valuable writing activities that can enhance thinking, critical reflection, and problem-solving. Although many of the participants acknowledge the solitary nature of composing an essay, they report that online dialogues can overcome this isolation by revealing richer identities online and exploring diverse perspectives.

Bahktin’s (1981) theory about language and dialogue is helpful in understanding how online discussions and feedback influence communication. Bakhtin claims that language has rich, complex, and shifting definitions resulting from the historical and cultural meanings associated with words, signs and symbols. Language is never fixed, but reflects an author’s ideology, folk language, hierarchy, class, and world view. Writers use language to voice their point of view or shape a concept within a specific setting, or context. Mono-languages—languages that are the dominant, homogenized, or official language of power—are limited because such language does not reflect the diversity of cultures, ideas, and histories of other listeners and speakers, and thereby shuts down
dialogue. Dialogue is critical for Bakhtin because it reflects how words, meanings, styles, and syntax are structured for rhetorical purposes. Dialogue originating from diverse speakers with different histories and intentions breaks down mono-languages of power and high culture. This disruption creates a healthy tension. He writes, “The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse. On all its various routes toward the object, in all its directions, the word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering it in a living, tension-filled interaction” (p. 279). Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004), in exploring the parallels between Bakhtin’s work and women’s writing, claims that language and writing do not reduce a text to a single reader or author. Instead, writing becomes a juncture where social, cultural, and historical meanings combine to make the intentions of the words meaningful. She writes, “The history of meaning associated with words and the shared rhythms of language are part of a writer’s work as she attempts to shape that language and engage some of her own history in its use, struggling against forces that would narrow interpretation and exclude women” (p. 62). The “history” associated with meanings is apparent in the conversations I had with the participants, as each participant comments on how online dialogue encourages them to write and share ideas with other learners and the instructor. Online discussions are informal and do not reflect a polished academic prose, so the participants are able to write about their values and beliefs in a more relaxed narrative.

Online discussions require the participants to become more aware of other learners’ values and beliefs. As Brenda argues, online conversations identify other learners’ social location in relation to her own. Brenda insists, “With the discussions, I
had a lot of replies back where people either agreed or added different ideas of things that I didn’t think about which made me think of other things. That made me feel like I’m significant, I guess, and that my opinions matter.” Engaging in discussions locates individuals in a two-way dialogue that recognizes individual differences. Ideally, such dialogue fosters an appreciation for other student’s writing. Ongoing conversations make Brenda feel “significant.” Debra adds, “I loved the discussions. I think the discussions were for me the most favorite parts because it was a way for me to express myself.” The discussions create a semi-structured space where the participants share their ideas, unlike the formal constraints of a structured essay. Discussions generate fluid writing and guide participants in their understandings of each other. Heidi highlights how discussions create a robust backdrop from which to explore complex course readings and allows for diverse values and beliefs to emerge:

I believe online learning helps you to reflect just because you come into contact with so many different people. Like there are some people from completely different cultures, backgrounds, religions, whenever someone tells you about their experience, it’s like, I never even knew that or I never even experienced that, so you learn more about them and whatever different background they have.

The participants indicate that positive, constructive online dialogue promotes personal reflection, self-identification, and cultural awareness. I asked Heidi to clarify her comments about how feedback relates to her writing. She contends, “If you get good feedback then you know, I did well and I did this right or they related. But if you get negative feedback then maybe your personal experience was not the best.” Heidi suggests that positive feedback encourages her to explore her own meaning-making related to her personal experience which can lead to deeper reflection.
The participants agree that getting and giving positive feedback makes them feel valued and in turn, makes writing about personal life stories easier. Faith insists that feedback of any kind matters. She declares, “I think feedback [matters]. If I got a lot of negative feedback I’d probably sort of think twice before I’d write something else.” Substantive feedback that critiques ideas or generates more questions makes learning relevant. Cassie highlights the value in both positive and negative feedback.

Constructive online feedback encourages her to write more:

Definitely, when you write something and someone goes, ‘Wow, that’s a really great idea’, or, ‘Hey I didn’t think of it that way’, I mean, that always makes you want to write more or when you say it to someone else it’s going to make them feel like, ‘Hey, that’s really great.’ I think it’s a confidence-booster and it makes people feel like, ‘Oh, someone understood what I said, that’s great.’ So, I think that the discussions are great for just making you feel like you’re on the right track or making you feel like other people agree with you.

These comments indicate that online dialogue is a powerful tool to develop ideas and critical reflection in an online writing course. Still, time fragments dialogue and online conversations are far removed from Bakhtin’s (1981) “constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (p. 426). Dialogue and discussion threads contribute to meaningful conversations that influence the participants’ writing output, but the participants were quick to acknowledge that the online medium had limitations as well.

The participants repeatedly indicate that online dialogue is disruptive. Online conversations are interrupted by time delays causing shorter sentences, fragmented ideas, and silence. Bakhtin (1981) describes how language in a time-space context appears as a “chronotype.” Even though there are different types of time and space, Bakhtin views time and space as interdependent in language use. Writing about a life-story means that
the narrator is already “outside the time and space in which the event occurred” (p.256), and the narrator uses language to shape meanings about his or her own identity and role in that narrative. This concept is useful for understanding narratives because “an individual’s private self-consciousness begins to force itself through and bring to the surface the private spheres of his life” (p. 143). An individual’s narrative intersects the larger narratives of social context. Online, these intersections appear in conversations and activities. Commenting on Bakhtin, Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004) explains, “While Bakhtin primarily focused on chronotopes as they functioned in literature, he also recognized that the sense of space and time in lived experience serves as the source for literary representation. He noted that organisms relied on a variety of rhythms that differed from each other and from those of other organisms” (p. 127-128). Dialogue, even interrupted dialogue, allows for a “variety of rhythms” and narratives to emerge. In many ways the participants in this study adjust their online communication in light of these conversational and time-sensitive “rhythms.”

Theoretically, dialogue offers a rich space for important ideas and writings to emerge, but practically, the participants struggle with the time-space “rhythms” of the course. During the interviews participants indicate that time disrupts how they interact and share ideas with other learners. Gabi grants, “You can’t get direct feedback. You have to wait and sit around. With it being an online course I learned that you cannot procrastinate.” Too much time between responses or too many online assignments prevent Gabi from fully engaging with other learners. Karlee also describes the online rhythms as difficult to manage. Karlee explains, “We have discussions in each Module but it’s just weird ‘cause people are on it at different times and like you go in and you ask
someone a question and say ‘That was very interesting—what about this or did you look into that’—and they just don’t get on, or they are just going in and doing their three minimum posts.” Here, Karlee argues that multiple perspectives that can potentially offer rich understandings remain dormant because the conversational rhythm is broken. Karlee, a single mother who works the night shift and often doesn’t go online until midnight, describes her own reasons why she does not “interact” with others online. She admits her own schedule and responsibilities prevent the fluid exchange of ideas, as she notes:

But like not having the people to bounce information off from and to be able to look at a student and say “Do you understand what she meant by this?” ‘cause then I have to sit in the whole email process and I have a question and it’s 2:00 in the morning and the article is due tomorrow but I won’t be able to get online until 2:00 in the morning again tomorrow, and you know obviously she [the instructor] emails me back at 5:00 at night but I’m working and I can’t get to the computer, so my question that I had I’m not going to get the answer for this actual assignment.

For Mary, the rhythms of online learning prevent her from receiving critical feedback in a timely manner, thus, stifling creative and critical meaning-making. Mary writes:

With an online course there’s not that immediate feedback. You know, some people might not read it for two days or however long or some people might not even bother, ‘Hey—that was posted three days ago. I’m not even going to bother to look at it.’ So, it’s hard to get a good gauge, but if you were in a class with a group of people and everyone is having a discussion, they’re all engaged at the same time and not everyone is engaged at the same time in an online course.

These comments challenge the idea that dialogue and collaboration alone solves the conceptual gaps between learners. The participants want to explore complex ideas with others, but time disrupts a fluid exchange of ideas and dialogue. Time prevents the participants from asking questions, seeking clarification, sharing anecdotes, giving and receiving timely feedback, and exploring complex subjects. Collectively, these time delays prevent the participants from sharing larger understandings of complex topics.
The participants also mention tone as essential to dialogue. The participants claim that because online communication emphasizes the written word, word denotations and connotations can often be misinterpreted. Tone relates to communication because it enhances a message through body language, vocal inflections, volume, facial expressions, and attitude toward a subject. Online, however, such non-verbal communication is absent. As Jill asserts, “When you write in a discussion board, you’re not getting that person’s expressions or their body language, and expressions and body language tell just as much as words in a lot of people.” Complex meanings are contextual and authors need an arsenal of physical and textual interpretive symbols to convey meanings. These complexities are incomplete when online participants only use words to communicate meanings. Naomi concedes, “Well, when you’re just typing something in you don’t know the person’s tone, you don’t know their body language. You don’t know any of that; it’s just words on a screen.” Narratives emerge from individual lives, and online, the participants claim they only read words, despite having access to other multimodal tools. Participants never mention other digital tools such as images, video, sound, or hyperlinks to convey complex meanings. During the interviews, the participants refer to words as the primary tools of communicating meanings related to gender, identity, and difference. As such, words without vocal or physical tones may limit the participants’ understandings of each other, as Cassie notes below:

It’s very easy to type something and to talk to people online; whereas raising your hand in class kind of puts all eyes on you; whereas, you can put it out there and slowly people read it and you get feedback on it. I think that’s great. I think that it also leaves a lot of things open to interpretation. It’s very easy to misinterpret what someone is saying online because you don’t have tones, you don’t have hand signals—you don’t have anything like that. There’s no physical signal. It’s just reading and I think it’s easy to misinterpret things. I know there have been times
where a student would misinterpret what I was saying, but luckily I could just go back and say, no, I meant it like this and just re-word it a different way.

Tone infuses a text with meanings and purpose. Tone also frames a discussion by inviting participants into a larger community and into a complex rhetorical debate. When verbal cues are absent or hostile, some participants can disengage from constructive conversations or like Cassie, spend more time clarifying or correcting their message.

Perhaps the largest obstacle to dialogue is silence. When silence separates participants from other students and the teacher, the participants indicate feeling disregarded and irrelevant. Silence is a highly complex dynamic. Silence can suggest deep thought and reflection. Silence can also suggest disapproval or even resistance to online conversations. In an online course where participation and dialogue are expected, instructors view silence negatively. Silence prevents the participants from adequately recognizing and responding to other narratives. Annie argues, “I look to see if people have responded and it’s kind of upsetting when nobody responds to you.” For Izzy, the discontinuity of dialogue and fragmented discussion threads make it difficult to establish connections between ideas and authors. Izzy cautions, “I don’t think anybody really clicks through and responds to posts. It is always post after post after post after post. Nobody really opens a post, reads it and responds which I think is a flaw in [this] class because [the instructor] doesn’t require responses.” Sharing different perspectives about history and social context are important to learning, but these exchanges seem limited online. Naomi thinks, “When somebody else comments on something that I have posted. That lets me know that there is somebody out there actually reading it and that’s actually interested in what I have to say.” Being recognized and feeling relevant in an otherwise silent online space validate participants like Naomi.
Dialogue, in all its complexity, changes online. Dialogue can be used to build community and camaraderie. However, time and space can fragment individual conversations. Narratives allow participants to form individual connections with other learners and provide rich opportunities for dialogue. When women share their experiences online, they are able to contribute to a group’s larger meaning-making. Female knowledge, when used intentionally for rhetorical purposes, can offer deep insights on complex social topics. Bakhtin (1981) uses “refraction” to describe how words are carried from a sender to a reader with loaded meanings. The participants maintain that the meanings of words can become distorted or refracted online, possibly undermining the original author’s intention. Gabi cautions, “It’s difficult in a writing course to understand how people are responding. You know, like someone might write something but I might take it as an insult whereas they are not trying to insult me. They are just trying to see a different view of the topic.” Here, Gabi examines her own assumptions about what she has written. This self-reflectivity affords her new insights about her own values and beliefs in relation to her other classmates. Cassie, however, warns that the ambiguity of dialogue may result in distorted meanings. Cassie insists, “You never know how people are going to react. You never know if people are going to react the way you want them to. A personal experience for me might have a different effect on someone who has had the same experiences.” The connotations of words may have different meanings for readers and can lead to useful questions about a specific experience. Imagining what an experience means depends on what kinds of opportunities students have for shared reflection and meaning-making in online spaces.
Dialogue is important to all the participants I interviewed. The timing of online interactions and unclear online feedback makes sustained dialogue difficult, and by extension, the participants can feel cautious about sharing life experiences. Overall, the participants insist that dialogue allows them opportunities to pursue online connections and begin conversations relevant to their lives and writing tasks.

**S.10 Self-monitoring online communication influences writing choices**

The participants indicate that they self-monitor their written ideas, musings, and online conversations. The participants realize that writing for an unseen audience consisting of other students and the instructor means that they must approach writing differently. Understanding how writers negotiate their text with a reader led me to Julia Kristeva’s (1980) ideas about intertextuality. Reflecting on Bakhtin’s idea of dialogue, Kristeva claims that words shift between objective meanings or denotations and historical or cultural meanings. An author’s words initiate a process of understanding between the text and the reader. Kristeva claims, “Narration, therefore, is always constituted as a dialogical matrix by the receiver to whom this narration refers. Any narration, including history and science, contains this dialogical dyad formed by the narrator in conjunction with the other” (p. 76). Thus, meanings are made intertextually by the author, by the reader, and by other historical or cultural texts. Kristeva further suggests that because language is historically and culturally situated, individual identity cannot be reduced to a single, heterogeneous narrative. Instead, language must account for the infinite variables that inform one’s life. Kristeva’s connection of identity with writing is important to my research because female identity is unfixed and in process. There is no singular female identity. Even though the participants in this study are primarily Caucasian and middle-
class, their experiences of race and class are all unique and different. The language, ideas, words, and phrases participants use online have different meanings and historical contexts for each individual. The participants primarily used words to explore ideas in writing and in conversation, which also may have reduced their identity-sharing to one form of expression. The quantity and quality of their online communications as well as the academic context of the course makes the participants self-monitor what ideas they share and how they use language online.

The participants emphasize that since the context of the composition course is academic, they used words and online communication that reflect the formal learning and “academic” context. The participants understand that academic Discourse requires a level of formality and netiquette (good manners and general polite language use on a computer). In an online course, participants use words to convey identity, values, beliefs, and associations—so words are powerful conveyors of meaning. Participants repeatedly mention professionalism as important to their online persona. Debra admits, “I don’t have a very professional writing style” and Emmie indicates that she tried to write clearly “to seem more intelligent—get a good grade.” Emmi adds that when communicating online, she does not want to be “rude or too outlandish, not like swearing or using obscene words—just having the proper etiquette that is required.” Other participants also highlight how they carefully engage in online communication and monitor how they use language to create an online persona. Such language use mirrors a recent study exploring how online bloggers and Second Life users define their identities online. In this study, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) show that gender identification is important for women, but not for men. Character traits such as trustworthiness, humor, and honesty
influence how individuals communicate online and develop their personas. These
researchers found that online users separate public and private information and while the
individuals are not masking their identities, they are “emphasizing some parts and
censoring others” (p. 108). Bullingham and Vasconcelos argue that online, individuals
will adopt a specific persona as a way to “fit in” and conversely, some will choose
anonymity as a way to explore and experiment. In a similar way the participants in this
study all agree that because words reveal personal identity, they use language
intentionally and select words that portray them in a positive light. Gabi comments, “I am
changing my own words to be viewed a certain way.” I asked her to clarify what she
meant. She explains that because others don’t see her, she needs to monitor how she
conveys her own ideas and priorities online. Other participants emphasize that their
words must mirror the academic practices and expectations of formal communication.
Heidi insists, “Nobody is going to take it seriously if you are typing the way you are on
Facebook.” Heidi realizes that social media allows certain intersections of identity and
language that academic settings do not. Izzy argues, “You want to be able to come off, I
guess, as smart; it is an academic paper.” Similarly, Jill acknowledges, “I can say what I
want within the realms of the course, of course. There’s a certain etiquette that you need
to follow and I hope most people would anyway.” These comments suggest that even
though the participants cannot see their readers’ reactions to their written comments, the
participants are aware of the differences between formal and informal writing styles.
Writing for an unseen audience means internalizing the larger expectations associated
with academic settings and monitoring the minutest personal expression against these
expectations.
Lev Vygotsky (1986) describes how abstract thought changes in the writing process. He claims that complex ideas or concepts “can become subject to conscious and deliberate control only when it is part of a system” (p. 171). In writing courses, the academic culture deliberately creates systems of language use, grammar, tone and communicative expectations. Language must be precise in order to be understood in a larger system. These academic writing conventions appear in course readings, course outline expectations, and research articles, creating certain expectations for formal language use in academic conversations. Vygotsky claims that written language requires more conscious effort than spontaneous oral speech because written speech “must explain the situation fully in order to be intelligible” (p. 182). By extension, the participants in this study grapple with how to translate often abstract internal cognitive concepts and experiences into external words and phrases so that all readers can understand the message. Furthermore, with access to digital literacies, participants have even more options for communicating their ideas, although they use these resources sparingly, if at all. Online learning creates intersections of competing literary practices that cause the participants to question when, what, and how they use language.

Rereading the interview transcripts, I found the participants carefully self-monitoring what subjects and personal views they share online. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicate that they carefully select topics to share with other learners and decide what subjects remain unexplored. Cassie, for instance, insists she does not write about “polarizing discussion board posts.” When I asked her to clarify her comment, she adds, “you don’t know where the students are from or what their race or religion or you don’t know anything about them, so I try not to write things that are going to offend
people or that are going to make them not want to write back to me.” Other participants share this view and claim that online communication hinders them from complete transparency. Annie confirms, “Sometimes I might type a comment and delete it because I think it might be too much, too personal or too long.” Aware of the online intersections of personal experiences with academic content, Annie deletes contentious or personal concerns and thereby eliminates possible conversations related to her now self-censored topic. Faith relies on her interactions with other learners online when gauging what to introduce into a conversation. Faith asserts, “You can say something and if it’s causing a problem, I think it’s better just to, you know, ‘it’s okay, I don’t have to say anymore.’ I like to try and keep peace. I will say what I think, but not be unnecessarily contentious.” Civility and decorum are more important for Faith than arguing online. Mary also shares this view: “Like in our discussion posts I will see things and go, ‘Well, I’m just not even going to respond.’ I just choose not to respond or have an opinion because it could go, you know, be misconstrued, so I say I’ll just take the safe route.” Safety, for Mary, means not engaging in online debates. Such online interactions may be marginal to her overall mark in the course and since every thought/word must be typed, she opts out of the discussion. By opting out of socially minded and complex conversations, Mary silences potentially important dialogue. Choosing a “safe route” influences how these participants share personal experiences with other learners. When important dialogue that can explore the restrictions on women’s lives and self-awareness are silenced, critical reflection that can promote forms of thinking and writing remain unexplored. Brenda also self-censors as a way to avoid oppressive stereotypes and not “stir the water” She writes:

I think with the online discussions and stuff, I think I inserted a lot of my own experiences in that, I mean, I guess I censored it a little bit because I don’t want
people to think badly about me sometimes or judge me. Like, when I’m submitting an essay and I know that you’re pretty much the only one reading it, I’m okay with that, but if I’m writing to the entire class I definitely censor myself more and re-read it. I mean, I re-read the essays, but—I don’t know—I try not to stir the water.

Like these participants, Heidi experiences few opportunities to explore complex personal experiences because most online conversations focus on specific course readings. When I asked Heidi if she makes a conscious decision about how she writes online she claims:

I would say so—because you don’t want to say anything wrong or say anything that might offend someone else because you don’t know different religions, you don’t know about people or what they might find offensive. But in general, basically, you don’t come across those situations because you’re sticking to what the topic of the professor is or the discussions. So unless you are posting something completely unrelated you really don’t have to think about that.

Similarly, Izzy curbs her personal views on heated political issues because the effort, time, and preciseness of online debates are too intense and lengthy. She comments, “I mean say you’re writing about politics and you may have a different view on things than the person next to you and so that just causes more and more debate and there comes a point when it’s like, okay, when is this going to end?” Online conversations that focus on women’s experiences can raise awareness about how individuals make sense of their lives and social practices in relation to larger, dominant social forces and inequalities. However, as Mary and Lori point out, consciously deciding what to include and omit online is one way to manage the potentially disruptive conversations surrounding subversive social practices that inform women’s lives. Lori cautions, “I’ll be conscious of what I write on there. I don’t want to put too much personal information on there, you know? Then, also, you have to remember that I work for a government agency. I have to be careful of what I put on like workwise for that.” Lori’s work status prevents her from sharing her own identity because the military requires confidentiality, so Lori appreciates
this anonymity. Mary, however, self-monitors her conversations because she realizes living in a close-knit rural community requires some restraint. Mary argues, “I’m extremely cautious. This is also a smaller community, so there are certain things that you just need to be careful of. There are people who are local, there are people who are military, so you just have to be aware of your classmates and people around you so that makes you more cautious about what you might delve into.” Both Mary and Lori consider the larger social context of the college when deciding to self-identify or explore complex topics. These external factors combined with few online opportunities to share personal experiences suggest that Mary and Lori monitor what they share online. Online interpersonal dynamics largely rely on the learners’ ability to make observations, provide feedback, and share conversations. In a writing course where students are expected to provide constructive feedback, factors such as one’s off-line identity and online decorum influence how the participants communicate with others students and demonstrate that responding to complex ideas in writing is labour-intensive, complex, and carefully monitored.

S.11 Audience awareness shapes writing choices

The participants indicate that audience awareness shapes their writing choices. The audience consists of other students and the instructor. The participants overwhelmingly agree that drawing on personal experience informs their writing, but few opportunities exist to link personal narratives to the larger goals of the course. In other words, subject-based knowledge trumps individual, subjective knowledge. In her research, Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004) explores the “subjunctive power of a text” as freeing female writers to imagine what experiences and perspectives give rise to their
writing choices (p.91). She claims that along with a writer’s social and cultural framework, a writer creates textual meanings by presupposition—suggesting that something will happen, subjectification—seeing the world through the author’s point of view, and multiple perspectives—finding meaning through different viewpoints. She notes, “Texts are sites of contingency and possibility. In a way that lived experience does not allow, through writing we can imagine the fullness of time and the patterns of choice. Within the subjunctive spaces of writing, one can realize the complexity of experience while the very openness of writing and the considerations of possibilities call into question what we have assumed” (p. 93). This subjunctive power of a text relates to this study because the participants I interviewed claim that their writing choices are influenced by the audience, particularly the instructor. Limiting creative and subjective explorations of themes in writing hinders the participants. Tools such as creative imagination (Royster & Kirsch, 2012) and exploring social links related to one’s identity and essay topics are overlooked as rhetorical pre-writing tools. Even in a writing course that focuses on rhetoric, the participants indicate few opportunities to bridge their own narratives to larger social and political debates. Instead, the participants claim that their readers’ priorities about any given subject influence their writing choices. As Jill argues, “I seek help, I really do.” When asked about how she explores ideas online, Izzy explains why she focused on her peers first. She insists, “They are just like me—trying to get a good grade in a class and move on.” Given that ENG 101 is a required course, the participants realize the importance of achieving the instructional goals of the course and moving ahead in their post-secondary journey, which may also mean subverting their own writing goals in favour of more standardized academic writing practices.
Participants primarily rely on the instructor’s feedback for writing tasks. The participants suggest that the instructor’s goals and expectations determine their writing practices. When I asked Jill to clarify her comments about how she solicits feedback online, she suggests that many of her online conversations centre on a specific, limited vision of academic writing—a “right way” of creating an essay, particularly for her reader—the instructor. Mary also suggests a “right way” to write an essay. She urges, “It’s about understanding the clarity of the assignment. That’s the only problem that I’ve had, is like, am I interpreting, you know, what we’re supposed to be doing correctly? So, am I going on the right path of research and brainstorming and everything? Am I putting it together in the right way?” These comments show that the participants envision a “right way” to write an academic essay, and academic writing has different standards than other kinds of writing. The participants desire the instructor’s feedback as a way to demystify the discipline’s expectations. Gabi, for instance, argues, “I will ask the instructor or I will ask the class and see if someone can help me there,” but adds, “I ask the teacher more questions than the class, probably because I don’t want to sound stupid.” Similarly, Heidi claims she looks for guidance from “the instructor and peers. Because I’m very grade conscious and if I don’t understand something I look to be better informed about it. The first person I look to is the professor, and then, maybe the peers if maybe I am having problems with the assignment.” The instructor plays a pivotal role in establishing safe spaces that promote dialogue.

Writing to an audience creates contradictions for the participants. Faith asks many questions online, but she contends that much of her online communication depends on the teacher’s goals and the tone he sets for the class. She maintains, “I did make it clear how
I felt about some things, but I was very hesitant in the discussions just to bring up controversial things because I knew that he was trying to keep some of that to a minimum. I wanted to be respectful of that.” Online instructors who choose readings and limit opportunities for personal, critical reflection about the life experiences that matter to women may subvert these complexities and thereby duplicate academic preferences for objective, neutral knowledge. Karlee describes her own tensions associated with online communication below:

If I get an article that says, write about the one experience that changed your life, and I say, well, as I’m writing it I’m thinking it changed my life that way, back then when it happened, but every day today, I still make decisions differently because of what it did to me then. So how is it changing me now? So I’m reflecting on it and bringing it up, but like, if a teacher doesn’t assign anything like that, then no, because the online setting doesn’t give a way to do self-reflection or analyze self-issues or incidences with other people or by yourself online unless the person, unless the instructor gives an assignment about personal experience and if the person is going to take the time to go that far in depth with it.

Lori also argues that what she writes “depends on what the teacher is asking for.”

Karlee’s and Lori’s comments highlight the importance of the instructor’s expectations in a writing course. The participants imply that instructors have specific standards of rhetoric and critical reflection, and while life stories are not excluded, the instructors encourage students to shift from personal to objective knowledge when writing for academic purposes. As Karlee adds, “You’re basically [writing] about a really complex issue but you have to keep your personal thoughts out of it and write about the topic at hand.” This separation of individual knowledge from larger academic and cultural commentary prevents participants from engaging in rich discussions about complex issues and exploring these tensions in future essays.
Overwhelmingly, the participants focus their online communication on pleasing the instructor. While sharing experiences and ideas with other students through dialogue and peer-review is helpful, the participants follow their preexisting ideas about academic writing and mirror the instructor’s expectations. After all, the instructor will grade their work. The participants imagine an essay, and writing in general, as a product that will please the instructor, and not necessarily a place of possibility. Mary argues, “I like to follow rules,” suggesting that instructors represent the larger dynamics of English discourse and stylistic rules. Knowing her audience’s expectations is critical for Cassie. I asked Cassie whether or not using personal experience helps her to make sense of her experience. Cassie explains, “It helps me to relate to whoever is going to read it—depending on who is going to read it.” Cassie knows that she needs to argue a position. When I asked Cassie about her writing process, she claims, “In discussions, I try to use what people are going to read and then in the final draft I use what is going to sound the best, what is going to make the essay sound the best, what’s going to make it flow and what is going to make it the best paper, rather than what are my peers going to like. I do what the professor is going to like.” Here, Cassie focuses on the outcome—a good mark on her essay. Lori also writes to achieve a good mark. Lori explains, “I don’t really ever ask a student. Normally, I will look back on what I have written on before and then if I still need some clarification I normally just email the teacher.” Similarly, Brenda immediately asks the professor for clarification. Brenda notes, “If I needed clarification I would definitely ask the professor because the professor is the one who can clarify what is needed of the writing. I mean, other students I would ask also, but I would definitely follow up with the professor to make sure.” Their approach to the writing process
reinforces that writing is a product that will be read by a single author. While online communication gives them opportunities to explore different understandings, the participants write knowing that the instructor is the ultimate reader, and marker, of their essay.

These comments suggest that composition and rhetoric continues to be a discipline that adheres to traditional disciplinary standards. Academic writing emphasizes objective content and research as tasks to accomplish rather than tools to be used to explore how female experiences are sources of knowledge and rhetorical weight. Academic standards are heightened online because students associate the instructor with power, influence, and gatekeeping. When the participants communicate online, they use clear, concise grammar and follow business-like netiquette. Even when opportunities for deep learning are available, the participants are under time constraints to produce a text, so they are more likely to communicate with the instructor. Writing to pass the course and meet the instructor’s expectations means that the participants communicate to receive quick feedback about their writing process, with the aim to submit a final product for the instructor.

Summary

This chapter explores what factors influence how these female participants introduce personal experiences with students and instructors in an online. The interpersonal dynamics associated with online learning makes these participants think about how to frame productive conversations around their lived experience. Trust, dialogue, self-monitoring, and audience awareness are integral to understanding a fuller view of writing as related to the ecology of language (Cooper, 1986; Luce-Kapler, 2004).
Writing is a complex cognitive process, and online learners enter into an organic, evolving, and dynamic online context. As seen in the previous chapter, the participants in this study actively use technology and digital resources. In this chapter we see a different view of how technology and writing is fluid and dynamic in terms of how the participants engage with the attitudes, values, expectations, and motives of other learners and the instructor. In our Web-based culture, writing can be enhanced with hyperlinks, media, and digital literacies to shape rhetorical positions and debate complex, personally relevant topics. The Internet bridges the geographical distance between a participant and other learners so that writers can build a community and create texts that provide new insights into women’s lives. However, these digital possibilities are not fully utilized by either the instructor or the participants in this study. As the data in this chapter indicate, the participants in this study limit what and how they write, depending on who is reading the text. Time delays and their own assumptions about academic writing influence how the participants develop and express ideas in their essays.
Chapter VI

Results and Analysis: Research Question 3

This chapter explores the third research question about how teachers situate personal experience in an online writing class. Specifically, I explore the intersections of gender, writing, and teacher-student relationships. Since this chapter focuses on the teacher-student relationship and since I am also an online teacher, I found this chapter challenging to write. My research rests on the premise that female knowledge can be a source of critical reflection, analysis, and potential resistance to dominant ideologies. Yet I have real-life experience about how this particular online medium fosters a culture of silence and non-reflectivity—two important qualities the feminist teacher actively strives to undo. Within this context the teacher serves a key role in online courses as he or she represents the larger academic culture and its values, beliefs, and practices. What the teacher chooses to emphasize and how the online course is developed through personal narratives are important steps for learners to feel a sense of community in an online course.

In this chapter I explore how educators situate personal experiences in an online composition course. To answer this question within the parameters of a phenomenological study, I considered the different experiences of three online writing instructors. To this end, I asked the instructors general introductory questions related to online learning, and I continued to ask more specific questions related to the writing process and the use of personal experience. Several categories emerged that resulted in two main themes relevant to the data, namely, that instructors value the social context of
writing online and they use personal experiences as leverage for critical reflection. These two themes address the third research question and demonstrate how these instructors value narratives within the context of a required online writing course. The instructors’ responses indicate that narratives are important tools for interpersonal connection, online community, and meaning-making, but transferring knowledge from personal narratives to academic essays is difficult and time-consuming. I consider these insights as critical to this study as it shows how disciplinary expectations often prevent these writing instructors from systematically exploring socially meaningful topics and from fully using the technology as a learning platform.

**The Social Context of Writing**

During the interviews, I asked these three educators how they situate personal experiences in their online composition courses. All three instructors said they value personal writing in online contexts. Writing about life experiences encourages students to examine their unique historical and cultural locations. Exploring these locations can help students to make connections between their real-world problems and larger unequal social forces, and to critique these forces. Female students whose shifting identities are based on different and overlapping discourse communities such as school, home, work, and parenting are influenced by the cultural associations that inform gender, ethnicity, language, race, and class. As Gee (2007) notes, “d” discourses, which is language in use, and “D” Discourses, which is language, expressions, values, beliefs, and practices that reinforce dominant power structures, create ongoing tensions. Such competing d/Discourses appear online. The third research question focuses on the instructor’s role in linking personal narratives and discourses to writing practices and larger Discourses.
How do instructors situate personal narratives in an online community where other learners and the instructor are physically separated? The following data demonstrate that these instructors encourage students to share personal experiences as a way to foster online cohesiveness and to direct students to more complex, subject-focused narratives.

**T.3 Teacher-student interactions improve writing**

All the instructors consider human connection as vital to composition pedagogy. Online instructors realize that writing is a social activity and it is important to establish feelings of trust and safety in this online medium. Lev Vygotsky (1986) argues that thinking and learning is a reciprocal process that requires individuals to constantly negotiate and learn from social contexts. As individuals share ideas in a group, their ideas may be read in ways that confront existing assumptions and practices. Writers must consider the psychological pressures associated with writing that explores new knowledge, and teachers must find ways to create safe spaces for introducing lived experience into an educational context. As a social activity, the instructors believe that good online pedagogy involves a strong teacher presence. A teacher with a strong online presence will communicate frequently, identify students individually, provide consistent encouragement, give feedback, and instruct students on course tasks. These instructors describe an online medium that can potentially create rich social networks that would require students to think critically about their personal life stories. Furthermore, the teachers indicate that technology contributes to the writing process and teacher-student interactions. Online communication not only encourages participation, but it enables the teachers to comment on students’ ideas and prepare them for more rigorous academic inquiry later in the course. Both social context and technology contribute to the larger,
organic nature of the writing process and are important in understanding the phenomenon of teaching writing online.

There are many examples where the instructors emphasize the importance of strong teacher-student online connections. The instructors consider their role as pivotal in getting students to engage online. Helen comments on how she tries to overcome the distance in an online course by frequently reaching out to students:

They can call me, they can talk to me in addition to classroom space to get help, but often they do not. It’s that disconnect which I work very, very hard to keep students from developing. So, I’m thinking that when they take it online, if the instructor is conscientious, the students will have twice as much writing experience than they do in the classroom, I would say, at least if you hold their feet to the fire.

Here, Helen recognizes the significant challenges of teaching online. She establishes a strong online presence by encouraging all forms of student–to-instructor dialogue and she mirrors strong communication practices for her students. She sees her role as more than a teacher—she is a teacher who helps students improve their communication skills for academic audiences. Writing for the academy, in her mind, requires a higher level of literacy, verbal clarity, and communication. By “pushing” her students to engage with her personally, she establishes a personal connection with the students in her course and models how students should engage with other learners online. Her strong online presence demands that student engage with her personally, and she also makes constant decisions about how to respond to her students. Online, Helen establishes an online presence by consistently engaging in conversations and sharing comments, as seen below:

I push. I push private messages if someone is not reading. I push with grades and when I grade a discussion—the first couple of discussions not with all of them for the entire semester—I write exactly what was correct and what was incorrect and
justify why the grade was lower or higher. I will sometimes send an email and say, “well, what happened to you, you haven’t been answering my questions?”

Here, Helen assumes a proactive role in establishing communicative links with her students. Like Helen, Richard also values strong instructor-student relations. Richard suggests that although writing is a social activity, students have misconceptions about what is involved in an online writing course in terms of pacing, communication, and the actual writing process. Richard restructures his course to encourage an online culture that emphasizes personal engagement and responsibility. He claims:

I think they think it’s self-paced and that’s one of the misapprehensions they tend to have is that it’s going to be do-it-as-I-go and I can dispense with things and get done with them quickly and then have big gaps in coverage. So, I think I’ve had to structure my courses to avoid those participation gaps; to make sure they are doing pure editing, drafting, and writing their own essays even.

Both Helen and Richard share the view that instructor-student communication is important in guiding students in their learning. They believe that instructors must constantly intervene online and teach students how to communicate, as well as model good writing habits. While the interviewees realize the complex social identities of their students, the instructors consider their role as agents of change. Prodding and “pushing” students to substantiate their own ideas with evidence helps students introduce life experience into academic Discourses that may not value marginal themes of difference.

The ENG 101 instructors prepare students to write for academic audiences. Typically, academic authors will incorporate empirical evidence in essays and in ENG 101, students must locate concrete, relevant primary and secondary sources to support their rhetorical claims. The academy reflects a mainstream culture that consists of a dominant white, middle-class, mostly male community. Diverse races, sexual identities, cultures, ethnicities, and life experiences challenge a dominant culture in positive ways,
and the instructors indicate that this social diversity is important to their online classroom. Dynamic instructor-student conversations are catalysts for incorporating complex social problems into writing and thinking practices. As Helen interacts with her students online, she tries to find ways to make students think differently or challenge their own assumption. Helen reflects on these difficulties below:

I have said many times to the students that you can have five pages of a very well written piece that says nothing. That should be your last concern in the process. Your first concern should be to have ideas. What I get is in the beginning, just the ideas. Then I push for evidence of different forms and then the toughest thing is to push for the commentary—the extrapolations, explanations, comparisons or what have you. They are just so unsure about providing that or maybe they don’t know how. So, that stuff is difficult to do in an online environment because, yes, they can give me examples, expert testimony and statistics, but they end there. That’s never an ‘A’. That’s maybe a ‘B’, but they need to provide that commentary and it’s difficult to teach that if you just do this in a written format.

Helen realizes the painstaking effort required of her to engage with students online.

Promoting reflective thought rather than mundane writing tasks is important online.

Helen explains to her students that understanding a claim, warrants, and assumptions are important to their argument. Richard also knows that his role is to teach students to perform within the academy. Like Helen, Richard actively encourages students to hone their ideas during the pre-writing and brainstorming phases, and then “refine” these ideas in a final draft that will be posted online for other peers: Richard explains, “I try to get them to think of language as important first and that their voice is important. And, that they already have a voice and now they’re working on refining it. I do that first and then worry about the academic side.” Teaching students to become critically reflective writers requires fostering an online culture that encourages openness and discussion. As these
instructors indicate, teacher-student interactions are important if students are to have a greater awareness of how to connect life experiences to larger academic arguments.

In ENG 101, instructors teach students that writing is a process. This process involves teaching recursive principles such as brainstorming, narrowing a topic, drafting, and framing an argument. The teachers I interviewed consider teacher-student interactions as important to helping students see writing as argument-based, even when students introduce personal experience. Modeling how to argue and advance a position with verbal instructions is integral to the teacher-student relationship because modeling such rhetorical practices online reminds students of academic writing expectations. Helen, for instance, takes an adversarial role with her students early in the course to help her students see that academic discourse depends on debate:

I do not take simple answers—I probe. I have a picture of a devil with a pitchfork which I put in my announcements and I say I’ll be the devil’s advocate. It has nothing to do with your answer being right or wrong. I’m just probing and playing the devil’s advocate and sometimes it is looking at the opposite side. Sometimes you have to explain it; you have to give me examples and tell me why, how. I will ask you these questions, so I’m going to play the devil’s advocate. That works extremely well in literature classes online, but also does extremely well when we are discussing an essay from the book we are using.

Richard also views his role as an adversary—someone who argues with his students about their ideas in order to help them clarify their thesis claims in an essay. This adversarial approach is typical of a Western academic discourse that challenges knowledge through rigorous testing. The Cartesian binary that separates the intellect/mind from the physical/body suggests that no experience is valid unless it is falsified; thus, personal experience is never valid unless it can be substantiated. Richard, a product of Western academia, knows his students will be tested on their claims and evidence, so he openly challenges them to verify their claims.
I’ll take a devil’s advocate point-of-view or try to tweak their ideas slightly and not show them that they are wrong, but like have you considered this? Then, I’d try to point something out. It’s like, ‘yes, but.’ I find that’s sort of how I can operate often in the discussion. I don’t want to come out with some definitive statement that they then respond to. I’d rather respond to them and keep the discussion going.

Keeping students engaged in online debate is important to Helen’s and Richard’s teaching practices. All three instructors view their role as promoting an adversarial view of rhetoric and language encouraging students to shape their writing to this academic standard. The instructors indicate that assuming this adversarial role is significant if they are to prepare students for membership in the larger academic culture. Promoting such an adversarial role of writing aligns the instructors with long-established academic practices that reinforce a narrow view of writing and rhetoric.

Teacher-student communications are notably different when gender is factored into the analysis. In an online course, technology can make gender-identification difficult for instructors. Technology hides physical traits that are often a precursor to communication patterns. The instructors I interviewed indicate that gender-identification can be misleading, causing these instructors to question their own teacher-student role. In the following excerpt, Helen erroneously identifies a female student as a male student based on his written communication and her own unexplored assumptions about gender and language use.

Ilka:  Do you notice any identifiable differences in how students who can be identified by their gender express themselves in their writing?

Helen:  That’s a really good question because sometimes I don’t know their gender. I had an experience recently where I had a student in my class and the only thing I remembered was the name was Shannon or something like this. I made some assumptions, which I try not to, but I did in this case because the student was writing in such a way that I thought it was a woman. I went to Sears and I was buying something and the person had the name tag and I said, ‘Oh, I have a student by that
name!’, and it was a man. Oh, my gosh! So sometimes I assume they are women by their writing style and if the first name does not tell me their gender—quite often it’s with foreign students— I have right now two Jamaicans—or if their names are unusual and I can’t find in this country I may not know. If I were Indian I might know that, female versus male, or in English there are some names that I don’t know, but I do find differences in how they write. I think women are more florid in style, more elaborate I would say.

Ilka: Why do you think?

Helen: I don’t know. Well, that example made me realize that I was thinking that style—they are better at providing the examples. They elaborate more, do you know what I’m saying? I don’t know if they think because they say that more is better or longer is better. Men are like a cut and dry style. That’s why I thought that this [student] was a woman, but it was a man. So, women will enter discussions earlier, I think, than men during the range of dates. Men will be more cryptic without explaining.

Here, Helen explores her own assumptions about female speech patterns. Yet, despite her better knowledge, she resorts to her preexisting ideas about how she thinks men and women communicate by suggesting that women “elaborate more” whereas men are “cut and dry.” As Berger and Luckmann (1966) remind us, meaning-making is sociocultural and influenced by time, history, culture, and society. When face-to-face communication is not possible, the listener depends on social structures and identifying markers for sense and meaning. Communication without facial gestures and body language relies more on cultural assumptions about the reader’s gender, identity, cultural, and social location.

Helen observes one student writing extensively and consistently like many other women in her course—an assumption supported by studies that show women engage in online conversations more frequently and more consistently as a way to establish interpersonal connections (Ma & Yuen, 2013; Nistor, 2013). However, she was wrong. Discussions are important for all online learners and Helen encourages such dialogue, but her false assumptions that link gender to communication patterns influence her own interactions.
with this student and raise her awareness about the deceptive nature of online learning. Like Helen, Richard confirms that identifying a student’s gender online is difficult. Even though Richard strives for a strong online presence, his false assumption about his students’ name and gender identity prevents him from fully engaging with his students online: “A lot of times it is difficult to define the gender where a lot of names now are indeterminate, so you don’t know. They’ll come into office hours and they’ll almost forget you don’t know them because you’ve never seen them—here I am! Yeah, sometimes it’s hard to trace back.”

One possible interpretation of why Helen and Richard are troubled by their student interactions is because online, gender is largely hidden. Students may have distinctly feminine names or post their pictures, but when these identity markers are absent and the gender is unidentifiable, the instructors may rely on preexisting gender assumptions about language and communication styles when engaging a student. Like their students, instructors also write for an imagined audience. Audience awareness requires that writing does not occur in a vacuum. Instructors engaging students online may rely on certain assumptions about race or gender as they read students’ discussions and essays. Helen and Richard realize that their own stereotypes about gender and language limit their understanding of the student’s identity.

T.4 Student-student interactions improve writing

All three teachers acknowledge that student-student communication is important in building an online community that encourages sharing personal experiences. In the previous category, the social context of communication is important during all writing tasks. Unlike instructor-student interactions where communication benefits the
individual learner, online collaboration helps students express their knowledge and learn from other students’ experiences. The teachers I interviewed value group work and search for ways to make group dynamics work online. Peer-review is one way students can share ideas and improve their writing, and all three instructors incorporate peer-review into their courses. As Peter Elbow (1973) demonstrates in *Writing without Teachers*, writers influence each other through the free exchange of ideas at all stages of the writing process. Peer-review and group sharing help students clarify their writings.

When I asked Helen to explore why she uses online collaboration, she claims that peer-review offers invaluable feedback to the novice writers in her class. Yet, as she describes it, some students choose not to participate, making the peer-review more passive online than a live peer-review session:

> Another part of the process is I have what I call ‘peer review’ or ‘think tank’ where they can look at each other’s papers and help each other. They don’t know how to do it or they don’t do it, so I decided to do it as optional because so many of them did not do it and it became useless. Obviously I did put in instructions how to do peer editing or peer reviewing because at first they want to talk about ideas, organization, and later on just clean up the prose, but they are passive aggressive about it not because they say I don’t want to do it, they just won’t do it.

May also indicates that while she actively promotes online peer-review, the technology changes how ideas are exchanged or emerge among the group. In this section, May shows that while the technology attempts to recreate the live classroom, the medium reduces how students contribute to discussion and share ideas online.

> I do peer-review through a discussion board. Students post their papers then download someone else’s paper and answer questions on it. The process is adequate, but in-person peer review allows for more back and forth, which I think is more beneficial to the writing process. In face-to-face peer review, a student might ask a peer what is meant in a certain section of the paper then help to rewrite that section. In online peer review, the reviewer would just say that that section of the paper did not make sense.
The passivity Helen and May identify may have several underlying causes. Students who take online courses already lead busy lives, so any extra online activity is often difficult. Students also may not want to give feedback to someone with whom they have little or no social contact. Sharing writing in groups encourages students to explore how an author makes decisions about her evidence, theme, thesis, and point of view. Often, students are uncomfortable giving constructive feedback that would suggest they have more authority over the text than a teacher or the author herself. In a writing course, where the teacher’s writing goals are perceived by students to be more important, students may feel uncomfortable providing feedback and dialogue that critiques ideas. Lacking a continuous, ongoing, real-time dialogue that explores unclear sections in an essay, the student in May’s class creates “sections of the paper [that do] not make sense.” This “sectioning” of writing without the author’s commentary may confuse the reader, and online, where every question must be typed, the dialogue between students is reduced, limiting potentially constructive conversations about complex ideas and encouraging a culture of silence. Thus, the technology that would normally work to empower writers by including a heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1988) of voices and dialogue actually reinforces a silence around what students already know about academic writing—that writing for academic audiences online is impersonal, objective, isolated, and empirically based.

During the interviews, Richard notes that managing student dynamics is both difficult but necessary for creating safe online spaces. He claims that women share ideas as a way to support and encourage their classmates, rather than critique their written work. During his own two-day peer review process, Richard sees female learners providing supportive feedback:
A lot of the women will either mark up the paper like I asked, but they’ll put it in balloons or they’ll try to make it look nicer and be very tentative with their comments even though they are much more particular in their pertinent comments. A lot of the guys will just try to be brisk or negative or they don’t know where to start. They try to encapsulate it in a few comments. A lot of the women will sort of soften the blow by putting a lot of detail into the comment. Almost sometimes more than is needed, but it’s a sort of like, ‘I might be wrong, but I think you might have plagiarized here’.

Here, by describing some female students as offering commentary “in balloons,” Richard suggests that the female students are less adversarial and less authoritative in their peer editing. Women are “very tentative with their comments” and this may suggest that these students acknowledge their marginal voices and expertise in academia. When the instructor and other learners are hidden online, female students must create an imagined audience. To avoid offending anyone, she qualifies her ideas with the phrase, “I might be wrong.” Having the authority to critique and question other students’ ideas is bold for any writer. For female students, questioning and isolating authorship means that they can challenge hierarchical communication patterns and even challenge the instructor’s authority. Richard observes that female learners are hesitant to critique their peers, and this hesitancy is important to this study. If online writing courses attempt to strengthen students’ analytical reading and writing skills, then teachers must provide opportunities for such peer-to-peer dialogue to evolve. Ongoing and consistent peer review are labor intensive and time consuming tasks that may be hard to sustain in online environments.

Similar to peer-reviews, group discussions are another way teachers create safe online spaces. Online discussion boards push students to share their ideas, but again, their ideas are met with mixed results. Generating ideas and establishing a respectful peer-to-peer online presence conducive to critical thinking is important for student satisfaction (Hosler & Arend, 2013). The online context, time, and space disrupts a fluid, reciprocal
conversation and makes the communication more linear and less fluid, as Richard notes below:

Because they are doing postings that are sort of informal and they’re developing their voice through the postings, I think they have trouble modulating change between a posting tone and a detail level and the essays. And, especially in a course where the early essays are subjective or personal-based so we get to know them, they can have trouble then transitioning.

Here, Richard describes the differences between a student’s “posting tone” and peer-to-peer dialogue and how they write an essay. This difference, he notes, is promising because it creates a space for students to develop “their voice.” Unfortunately, that critical “voice” is diluted in formal writing. Despite online instructors’ efforts to encourage students to share potentially complex ideas with other learners in discussion boards, students may be reluctant to share personal narratives, especially since the course goals focus on writing for varied academic audiences. Rhetorical writing changes depending on who is reading a text. The academic expectations of critical debate through dialogue, exploration, and discussion may actually silence online students when they have to shift their writing for a different reader—namely the instructor. May also notes that while discussions can be used to generate ideas or express their “unique voices,” the online context must be closely monitored depending on who is engaging in a rhetorical debate. May cautions:

In discussions, students show their unique voices even more than in their writing since the writing is a little less formal. For example, students will be sarcastic or make jokes more often in discussion boards. I think online discussions also allow students to let their guards down more, for better or worse. This can help a shy student feel confident in speaking up to express an opinion, but it can also lead some students who tend to be more bullish to not really stop and read carefully what their peers are trying to say.
“Bullish” language can serve to silence ideas, values, and personal narratives and shuts down further online inquiry, a dangerous dynamic.

While all the teachers I interviewed value group discussions as a way to promote dialogue, they indicate that discussions were shaped by communication styles, group composition, and gender. As the previous category shows, the individual composition and identities of participants influence how online discussions unfolded. Helen claims that women participate early and frequently online. She notes that they actively respond to other online discussions:

So, women will enter discussions earlier, I think, than men during the range of dates. Men will be more kind of cryptic without explaining. Yes, they [women] build community and they post more frequently and they respond to the ones who respond to them and the men will maybe one or another one because it’s required and we’re done!

Richard also notes that women are more active in online discussions. The women, he notes, are timely and this timeliness may be one way to build a strong sense of community. He asserts:

Definitely [women post] more consistently. I also require posts within the first 48 hours of the discussion board opening to get an early start. It’s not even early, it’s just timely. They [women] will do that well and a lot of the guys won’t. Sometimes the guys will write these overly long posts and do like four in one day and then wait. It’s annoying.

All three instructors confirm that women communicate with other learners as a way to strengthen their online community. The links between how female students attempt to build an online community is repeatedly noted in the literature (Rovai & Baker, 2005; Zhao, Sullivan, & Mellenius, 2013). Women frequently and consistently enter into online discussions as a way to bring other learners into a conversation of ideas—a conversation that may contribute to students building a network of ideas and partnerships with other
learners. However, as Helen notes, the social lines of writing within and between communities are often blurred:

I don’t want to say that men compete with each other, but women’s competition is more upstaging. So, if this one does this, that one will do more. It’s not competition; it’s just not the same as healthy competition, but more like upstaging. Women have more excuses because of their family lives. Children are sick, this and this and this; whereas, men may have the same excuses, the child may be sick, but they won’t give that to me.

While online discussions try to promote a “healthy competition” among learners, tensions may rise when a female student shares information or narratives that diverge or resist the Dominant discourse of the online learning community. The “upstaging” that Helen describes reflects how gender is a source of power and struggle. In higher education, where a mind/body split encourages distinctions between knowledge and power, women may use more social and gender-based “excuses” to challenge the online expectations associated with the class. Using their own “excuses” suggests that the women are drawing upon their body, social communities, and gender norms to resist public, “neutral” academic expectations of personal performance.

Like Helen, Richard argues that gender impacts student interactions. Richard claims, “I think in a quiet way, whether it’s male or female, I think that it [identity] comes out in their responses to some topics and then we can use it to mold the discussion. It’s not something I can plan for, but I can react intelligently to. So, of course, it’s obviously important if one is a male or female.” Richard implies that women respond differently “to some topics” and this uniqueness can help diversify an academic writing course. Steeped in disciplinary pressures to reproduce what Foucault (1972; 1980) refers to as “epistemes of knowledge” and dominant themes and knowledge, individual female responses can challenge the reproduction of mainstream knowledge. Women entering the
online writing classroom bring with them new insights about their own life circumstances that contribute to unique online conversations, as Richard notes below:

More women are taking the course. We are getting a lot more non-traditional women taking the course often working and having a kid in the middle of the semester, still doing the work, and they kind of show up some of the younger guys who tend to fail in these courses. It’s like, if I’m doing the work why are you doing nothing and they will actually be out right with that. Online can create some boldness as well.

Richard suggests that online, a female student can risk direct confrontation, knowing that other students may not recognize her in person or she may not receive a direct communication for days. In an online setting where the body is invisible and the written word becomes hyper-visible, female students can become more “bold” and express their discontent verbally. The instructors I interviewed claim that women use language differently to build community, to construct social meanings, to compete, and to perform for the intended audience.

May also identifies female students as having unique peer-to-peer discussions. She notes that while the women post more frequently, the themes of these online discussions relate to their socially constructed roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and caretakers. She insists:

Female students often are more likely to put very personal experiences (for example their experiences having a baby or dealing with the death of a grandparent) into their writing. Yes, the gender distribution can influence the dynamics of the class particularly in discussion boards.

The female students’ narratives serve as a foil to the larger canonical narratives of society. As Jerome Bruner (1990) argues, deviations and breaches to the norm are how meanings are made. He points out, “Thus, while a culture must contain a set of norms, it must also contain a set of interpretive procedures for rendering departures from those
norms meaningful in terms of established patterns of belief” (p. 47). The instructors I interviewed understand that gender and female narratives are important in online peer-to-peer contexts. Female students introduce personal experience as a way to enact individual identity in an online learning group. These narratives can challenge the dominant culture’s knowledge and values and resist the mimicry (Bhabha, 1994) of academic Discourse that occurs in online academic contexts. Writing that focuses on individual identity can help learners come to a greater awareness of complex social meanings and avoid reproducing the language, writing, and communication styles of a dominant academic cultural discourse. An awareness of the shifting identities and experiences of female students is critical in shaping a robust pedagogical perspective. One way Helen promotes more diversity is to actively mix students working together in online peer groups. Helen describes this practice:

I split them up into groups and I make sure that I have a man in every single one of them because, like I said, I feel there are more women taking online classes than men. So, I feel like I have to and sometimes I run out of men. So, if I have five of them and five groups, I am happy to have at least one.

Diversity is an important cultural value especially in a postsecondary culture that often showcases a predominantly white, male, middle-class clientele. Colleges and universities may promote diversity in their mission statement and documents, but in subtle ways ranging from classroom reading materials to classroom conversations, introducing difference in the form of gender, identity, race, ethnicity, and class can be difficult. Helen recognizes the need for diverse social communities online and tries to create social dynamics that lead to rich discussions and student engagement.
T.5 Responding to student preparedness

Another category the instructors mention as key to promoting writing and sharing personal narratives relates to student preparedness. Student preparedness is a broad term that can refer to academic preparedness and/or technology preparedness. In this category, instructors indicate that students have diverse skills that influence their online performance. Life circumstances, gender roles, study skills, basic literacy, and technological capacity all shape how women express their experiences online and ultimately, what themes are explored. Helen argues:

I see a lot of women who take online classes because they are pregnant or have a baby or work full time. I guess I notice fewer men taking online classes especially writing for some reason. I haven’t discussed that with anybody to figure out why, but I’m thinking a lot of additional concerns besides jobs and school, family-related issues, press women into taking online classes and they are surprised at how much more work that involves especially writing and reading.

Helen maintains that the student’s discourse community and social responsibilities compete with the instructor’s expectations of reading, writing, and thinking. Students must have strong literacy skills to read the online lectures. Richard comments on how weak literacy skills can make online learning challenging for some students.

Especially the last five years students have brought down the pace because their reading level is lower. We lack any entry standards for them to get into the courses, so we’re getting a lot of students who probably shouldn’t be in online courses and they are taking these. It’s strange, the middle has been taken out a lot and we get very high performing students and then very low—not very many C students any longer.

Reading levels, basic literacy, study skills, and writing habits limit how well students perform in a writing course. In a writing course where the oral lecture has been removed, students must read lectures, discussion prompts, and responses and reply in writing. Discussions and group activities require students to actively engage in written
communication, and invariably, students with strong literacy skills do better with the extensive reading, writing, and technology involved in online writing courses.

In addition to life circumstances and basic literacy, instructors indicate that some students lack basic computer literacy and word processing skills. Surprisingly, Helen and Richard indicate a danger in assuming that because most students are millennials who use technology daily, they are technologically savvy. Some are not, and this gap in technology competency results in faculty teaching basic technology skills for writing to some students while simultaneously teaching students essay writing skills. Helen emphasizes:

I have students who think they know technology and they don’t. They don’t know how to attach, for instance, so they will not submit drafts or if it’s a revision they will not submit it in the right place and they’ll say they did. So, that’s a lot of housekeeping type of stuff that I cannot demonstrate. I can only send them a verbal set of instructions maybe with pictures or something like that. I notice that they don’t know much about the word processing programs they use. They don’t know the features for revising—how they can make the changes and accept the changes. For instance, with tracking they don’t know how to do that so it could benefit them more because then they could see the changes they are proposing and then accept it or not accept it in the revision. So, they just use a word processor like a typewriter. They don’t know anything about anything else. So, they don’t use it to its full potential.

Richard also found a gap between what students should know about the technology and what they actually are able to do online. Richard explains this disconnection below:

With Microsoft Word, I just think they are learning the basics and not seeing the program’s features very much. So, they think they are very tech-savvy, but they can no longer even cut and paste. Any of the keyboard commands, they slow themselves down and kind of stutter through essays because they don’t have the facility or even see the need to have that. I don’t know if it’s from texting or what, but they perceive themselves as being really savvy and they just aren’t. Saving and attaching can be a challenge for some of them.

The instructors insist that some students struggle with technology for writing purposes.

This preparedness for the online medium hinders what can be accomplished online.
Students who are not familiar with the technology and basic computer skills are at a disadvantage. These students require more instruction on how to use the medium, forcing instructors to use their time to teach computer literacy rather than engaging in online discussions or using digital tools to frame rhetorical arguments. When students do not feel comfortable using technology for writing purposes, they may not have the tools to advance to using technology as a learning platform where students use the medium to create complicated, though-provoking online reflections that link their narratives to larger social issues. Moreover, online instructors are not required to use digital tools to reimagine the formal essay. Introducing students to writing practices that involve digital tools is too time-consuming, and unless faculty intentionally help students practice digital literacy, faculty are not using the technology as a platform for deep learning. As Janette Hughes and Sarah Tolley (2010) point out, “Facilitating the interconnections between multiple literacies is the crux to developing literacy as social practice and, where in this new space, the development of multimedia and multimodal skills occur” (p. 18). The “interconnections” between writing, technology, and critical reflection are often dismissed in favor of more traditional writing practices. Richard points out that while online learning is “less linear” due to the increased emphasis on digital literacy, the larger aims of a writing course still promote the traditional view of academic writing—writing a final product in isolation. Richard believes, “I think we have a hard time selling English 101 because the end product is a research project that is not like what they will do as professional writers or even in their subject area courses.” As Richard notes, the final goal of the ENG 101 course is a product—a documented academic essay. Computer skills focus on producing this final product. A pick-and-choose approach to learning allows
students to navigate through the course to find relevant material that applies only to specific assignments, but not necessarily to their own personal writing goals. This selective learning increases students’ academic self-reliance, but it also requires students to focus only on an end product—a product that meets their own assumptions about what is expected in academic writing.

Furthermore, Richard points out that he is unsure to what degree students understand the course goals, academic writing, or their own personal connections to essay topics. Richard’s final observation regarding student preparedness summarizes the impact of online learning, student preparedness, and gender from his perspective:

Ilka: Anything else about gender, writing, and technology?

Richard: I would just probably say that I think, although I try to bring up gender issues and be sensitive to it, I think some of the process we just talked about is probably favoring males even though it’s probably not favoring the youngest males. It’s almost like a business environment where it’s sort of keyed toward—if you are consistent, you win out. I don’t think writing is like that, but I think there are forces that push it to be that way.

The “forces that push it to be that way”, that is, business-like writing models that produce a final product by a singular author, reflect the academy’s dominant writing patterns and styles. Writing in isolation, citing reputable sources, and minimizing the first person “I” point of view are hallmarks of academic writing. A writing style that favors “males” reflects a North American cultural value that aligns gender with technology. From a young age boys, particularly white, middle-class boys, are encouraged to experiment and play on computers, resulting in men being more comfortable with technology and computers (Abiss, 2011; Ensmenger, 2012). Computer communication occurs in codes, scripts—both curt, linear languages. A parallel interpretation can be made to the online context. Richard suggests that men write in a manner that reflects the medium. Richard
adds that online learning does not favor the “youngest males.” In terms of online learning, his comments reflect a recent study that explored online learning preparedness. Hung, Chou, Chen, & Own (2010) explore factors such as computer/Internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control, and motivation as elements in successful online learning and discover that while gender does not determine learning outcomes, older students who have more hands-on and life experience fare better than first or second-year students in the online learning environment. The online course of this study is a first-year course. It is possible that the participants enrolled in ENG 101 online are new to the medium, new to higher education, and new to using digital literacies as rhetorical tools in their writing; as a result, participants may have different degrees of online preparedness that contribute to their overall success.

**Using Personal Experiences to Expand Reflection**

This second theme directly addresses the final research question. A feminist approach to teaching and writing values personal experiences as a starting point for dialogue and critique (Kirkup, Schmitz, Kotkamp, Rommes, & Hiltunen, 2010; Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2002). Reflexivity is intentional because it allows teachers and students the opportunity to examine complex and critical positions associated with D/discourses, and opens up critiques of these positions (Stern, 2011). For this reason, I interviewed the teachers about how they position personal experience within the context of their online writing course. Unanimously, the instructors I interviewed value personal experience as a source of deep knowledge and meaning-making for all students, not just female students. Personal narratives and life-stories are important starting points for inquiry in an ENG 101 course. Life experiences allow students to become more reflective.
writers and thinkers. However, all instructors indicate that transitioning from personal writing to academic writing requiring critical reflection was difficult, especially in complex online settings. The aims of a writing course are often quite different than the feminist aims of teaching writing for critical reflection and social justice, even though colleges and universities claim to be sites of critique and inquiry. The instructors confirm that their students have difficulty shifting from a subjective/reflective to an “academic” point of view and contextualizing personal knowledge within scholarly and disciplinary writing expectations.

T.6 Valuing personal experiences in online writing course

In this category, instructors shared how and why they situate personal narratives in their online writing courses. A feminist understanding of identity requires that composition instructors do not generalize female experience. Experiences are always embedded within cultural contexts of gender, class, race, and sexuality. As such, a writer must define, name, and describe unique experiences based on her historical time and unique identity. The instructors indicate that writing based on individual identity is the beginning of meaning-making for these students. May maintains:

Writing, especially in first year composition where students are not writing about a specific content, is very linked to identity. A student’s identity and experience informs what research topics he or she gravitates towards when topics are not assigned. Students also use their personal experiences as evidence and anecdotes within papers. When I say "identity" I mean their culture, interests, and personal experiences. When given open choice or even two or three options for essay topics, students gravitate towards issues that they can relate to because the issues involve their race, culture, gender, ethnicity, and so on. For example, students in the military sometimes gravitate towards topics on war. Students with strong religious affiliations might write about topics that involve religion such as separation of church and state or abortion rights. A black student may have stronger opinions about a current issue like stop and frisk because he or she may have seen the issue first hand. Similarly, a Hispanic student who knows people that are illegal immigrants may have his or her opinions shaped by that
experience. In a class like English 101 where the writing is focused on creating persuasive arguments, students are more comfortable and more engaged when they can make an argument they are passionate about. Their "identity" dictates what topics they have passion for and knowledge of. I don't think that online learning affects whether or not students link their identity to writing assignments and/or research. I think the same link between writing and identity exists in online, hybrid, and traditional classes.

Similarly, Richard also shapes his online practices to include writing that reflects one’s identity. He claims that writing and identity are inextricably linked, and finds ways to encourage such expression in the writing process. Richard affirms:

I think identity comes through in one’s writing. The process of doing it is self-discovery, but when it gets coupled with something like a research project which has these formal components, it can be very frustrating. The work they put in may not yield the result that they thought or they might find that they are actually learning something and don’t believe what they thought. So, it can be very scary for them.

Richard and May show that personal experiences are important. Experiences are often situated within deeply embedded cultural norms that reflect the values and beliefs of a dominant group. This is especially true in the academy. While the academy is a place where students can share identities, the dialogue surrounding identity can be silencing when only certain students choose to self-identify or when other mainstream groups prohibit the expression of other non-mainstream voices. Individual experiences of class, race, gender, and identity can resist these larger cultural narratives. Jerome Bruner (1990) argues that a narrative is a point of juncture between cultural norms and personal interpretation. He claims that narratives specialize in “…forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary” (p. 47). As the writer finds herself in a complex experience, the writer can use narratives as a way to make sense of the experience. As Bruner (1990) explains “Thus, while a culture must contain a set of norms, it must also contain a set of interpretive procedures for rendering departures from those norms meaningful in terms of
established patterns of belief” (p. 47). Narratives allow for meanings to be remade in light of normative meanings. Personal experiences allow for the writer to deviate or introduce more commentary to a cultural norm. The story, as Bruner suggests, is a “verisimilitude” of life (p. 50). This verisimilitude is expressed in the experiences that female students share in their writing. However, using personal experiences to engage in critically reflective academic writing can be challenging. The instructors indicate that they try to link personal experience to the larger contexts, purposes, and audiences associated with academic writing. Yet Richard and Helen believe that writing about personal experience can be problematic when students do not challenge their own assumptions, as well as societal assumptions. Richard contends:

I think we have a very assumption-based culture where we just assume we’re the center of things; self-identity and I’m what matters. I try to slow them down or shake that off and into the critical thinking approach. We use this [experience] as a starting point a lot with synthesis and defining terms that they do. So, synthesis, adding your own experience to the new material and out of that comes something new. I think if we can tap them into that, they get a sense of authority and then they can analyze the parts and how they function and then apply it to themselves.

Similarly, Helen notes that the academy is a place where historically, knowledge is shaped to accept universal truths, not individual, contextual truths based on one’s identity and the intersections of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. These institutional values emphasize larger-order academic priorities of evidence and empirical knowledge, rather than individual, subjective meanings. Helen notes:

I treat examples and anecdotes from their own lives as a legitimate form of evidence. I notice that students want to write more about their personal experiences and I noticed that women can give examples from their own lives; men don’t want to give examples, so they don’t share much of it. They share more about the sports activities, problem-solving; whereas, women tend to choose more personal topics about family and so on and so forth. I kind of like to use, thematically speaking, social issues in my writing classes; 101 in particular but also 100. Then, trying to have an opinion on that outside of the personal
experiences is difficult, but I do allow them to choose their own topics, but they have to be shareable concerns so it’s not only about themselves, but they use examples from their personal lives to back these up. If it’s research related, obviously they have to find examples and other forms of evidence from outside, but when they do add their own personal experiences, women had no problem with examples that were personal. Men either don’t put examples or they don’t really delve into personal issues.

These “shareable concerns” must be linked to exploration—to opinions that can be supported with external evidence. Helen is aware of the hierarchies associated with academia and how female knowledge is often viewed by the academy as sub-standard or too subjective, yet she also feels a responsibility to teach writing that reinforces these traditional academic values. Helen feels that in order for women to be heard in the academy, female learners must be grounded in basic, historical rhetorical writing principles, namely, writing that is objective and based on empirical evidence. They need to learn the tools of the academy in order to function in this context. Teaching students to find scholarly, peer-reviewed articles related to their personal narratives—narratives that address issues of gender, race, or ethnicity, and written by female researchers—requires time and space, which ENG 101 online instructors may not have. These time and space barriers challenge all three instructors. The instructors indicate that they struggle to demystify academic writing and scholarly expectations to first-year students, particularly as it relates to self-analysis, research, synthesis, and critique. The academy is supposed to be a place where students learn critical thinking and writing, but as Helen so aptly describes below, providing feedback that promotes critical reflection must be carefully worded so that students will be receptive to the instructor’s comments. She notes:

I think writing is ego-driven even if it is not just about themselves, but I think they tie writing to their worthiness as a human being. So, quite often when I write comments, they think I am critiquing them or criticizing them as human beings, as people, if they don’t know how to write well; whereas, I am only focusing on
writing and it has nothing to do with how I feel about their character or person. So, I do think that there is almost like an exposure to the instructor, so you have to trust the person. Men may not tell you they’re upset. I don’t know that. Women will more likely tell you that I hurt their feelings or something. Men will drop out or attack me in an email or something. So, maybe it is not gender per say, but it is how it is communicated or whether it is communicated at all that is different by gender.

In this excerpt, Helen struggles to communicate with her students about their own life experiences while still upholding academic expectations. The divide between academic expectations and personal writing can reinforce how students are still acquiring the cognitive and literacy tools to explore complex social, cultural, or political reflections. Even though the female student feels her own experiences are significant, when Helen highlights the expectations of Standard English or challenges underlying social assumptions in the student’s writings, Helen’s academic expectations overshadow the critically reflective potential of narratives and may challenge the student’s identity-sharing online. When comments appear on the writing style of paragraphs or sentences, Helen suggests that her students feel their personal ideas are being “criticized” when in reality, Helen is highlighting the larger expectations of academic writing. Although the academy may claim to deny difference in favor of established knowledge, Helen does not deny that each student has different life experiences, educational backgrounds, and academic skills. Ironically Helen, who is the only instructor with a PhD, knows the rigid academic expectations. Helen knows that legitimizing personal knowledge alone may be considered anti-intellectual and she realizes that dominant academic norms allow for a very limited, prescriptive kind of writing and evidence. So she tries to remove the attitude that “I hurt their feelings or something” in favor of feedback that reflects the standards of her own academic discourse community. She teaches her students to use the skills,
language, and techniques of the academic culture when critiquing their own or other student’s texts. Richard also realizes that academic writing is restrictive and does not endorse certain themes or writing. He claims:

It’s hard to require it [personal experience], but some of the assignments do call it out. Just going from that personal sort of essay to the others, they’ll see that and they’ll start noticing it. They will say, ‘I know in your posts you usually say this. I’m curious what you think about this’. They’ll ask questions, but that’s the tricky one with online. I think it’s hard to get them to buy into that.

Richard encourages students to make critical connections to their personal life experiences, but that students are keenly aware of a prescriptive academic writing style and do not “buy into that” exploratory prompt. Similarly, May believes that personal narratives offer unique interpretations. She values writing, thinking, and language that represent real-world scenarios. May notes:

In my directions for all discussions, I always instruct students to use their own knowledge/personal experiences and information from sources to shape their responses. Similar to what I said above, a student’s prior experience will lead them towards certain topics. I have had a female student who wanted to write about abortion because she had recently had her first baby, which affected her stance on abortion. Even when topics are assigned, one’s prior experience is going to affect the argument that the person makes.

Exploring hidden social and culture forces that may marginalize female students requires sustained writing and dialogue—a time commitment that may not be part of the asynchronous course design. With deeply personal themes like abortion and racial discrimination, personal experiences are important sources of evidence. Personal knowledge that emerges from Bruner’s concept of “trouble” has certain goals and is contextual. Those goals may not be evident to the writer at first, but with practice and time, students can become more confident writers.
Female narratives can offer students valuable insights that contribute to argument and persuasion—an important goal of rhetoric. This subjective knowledge complicates larger narratives and helps students become more critical learners, thinkers, and writers. If the goals of composition are to teach students to defend a thesis using logic and evidence, then writing about personal experiences is one way to transition to higher-order thinking. An incremental awareness of how knowledge is produced and retained means helping students understand that even the academy has its own hierarchies of rhetoric.

Helen explains:

I think [personal writing] is a valid way of doing it because students don’t have knowledge of an academic disciple yet. The first year, I mean, they have to go in concentrically circles from personal experience to community to world. They don’t have the outside knowledge like a Ph. D. in sociology has.

Richard also found transitioning from experience-based writing to rhetorical writing difficult to manage. Students are task-oriented, and online, the nuances and progressions between experiential writing and thesis-driven writing become reductive. Richard notes a tension in academic writing courses: “In 101, it becomes more let’s dispense with that and let’s get to text-based writing. That transition from maybe a first paper as personal to something else is very difficult.”

One possible reason why Richard and Helen duplicate these hierarchical structures is because they are products of an academic culture and they reinscribe its values and beliefs. Instructors are the gatekeepers of the academy, permitting only select students to pass through its gates, that is, pass ENG 101. Another possible reason is that the instructors promote the academy’s hierarchical values and beliefs to teach students to critique the system. In both instances, the instructors value personal knowledge as a source of critical reflection, but the online effort to leverage personal knowledge against
normative cultural values is too time intensive. I asked Richard if he felt constrained as an English teacher to teach a type of writing, and he notes:

Yes, in my case, it’s really influenced by the topic selection and assignment selection to the point where I’ve gotten something that works to get them a middling sort of, ‘I can handle academic writing and once I get into my subject I can write on demand and I can do these things, but I’m probably not going to have the depth of experience’. I’m trying to make them more critical and it’s coming at the cost of like applying—I don’t know about applying it to themselves, but applying it in a formal essay to themselves. We are doing it more every day, but at the same time, I don’t often say, ‘you’re doing a great job with your postings because they are so important’. It’s more like hitting the requirement.

Richard argues that while he encourages experiential writing, too often he finds himself “hitting the requirement[s]” of the English Department’s assessment that uses the final ENG 101 research paper as a tool for the State’s General Education requirement. May takes a different approach. She feels that personal knowledge is important to students’ writing goals, but insists she only uses personal narratives as a link to deeper meaning-making. May explains:

The first writing assignment of the semester in my English 101 is always a personal essay where students explain a belief that is important to them. After that, essays are based mostly on source support for an argument, but I often encourage students to use their own experiences as a way of introducing the topic to the reader or as part of the evidence for their argument.

These comments suggest that instructors realize that personal experience and subjective knowledge is a precursor to academic writing. Yet the instructors know that the academic culture has rigid, preexisting expectations about knowledge, evidence, and writing style. The dichotomy of academic values versus personal writing goals can be problematic, even for seasoned teachers. By asking students to consider personal themes for public analysis and critique, instructors are implying that personal reflections are acceptable, when in fact personal knowledge is often challenged in academic contexts. These
instructors indicate that while personal narratives are important in making students more reflective thinkers and writers, they use personal reflections in different ways.

**T.7 Reflectivity and online narratives**

Related to how incremental learning is linked to personal experience is how students in general and women in particular become more reflective writers. The concept of reflection came up repeatedly in the interviews and for the purposes of this study I use the term reflection and reflexivity interchangeably. For Jerome Bruner (1990), reflection is an important hallmark of Self-hood. In *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner discusses reflection as tied to major shifts in the cognitive research field. Historically, psychological cognitive research moved away from processing information and test-based research methods toward meaning-making research methods and studies. Citing the work of Kenneth Gergen, Bruner shows how understanding the Self required psychologists to adopt “an interpretist, constructivist, and ‘distributive’ view of psychological phenomena” (p. 108). The Self was not an essentialist view of the individual. Instead, the Self was now situated within larger cultural contexts and produced within unique settings. Gergen argued that while the Self cannot be generalized because each context gives rise to different outcomes, what can be generalized are two findings:

The first is human *reflexivity*, our capacity to turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the past nor the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity. The ‘immense repository’ of our past encounters may be rendered salient in different ways as we review them reflexively, or may be changed by reconceptualization. The second universal is our ‘dazzling’ intellectual capacity to envision alternatives—to conceive of other ways of being, of acting, of striving. So while it may be the case that in some sense we are “creatures of history,” in another sense we are autonomous agents as well. The Self, then, like any other aspect of human nature, stands both as a guardian of permanence and as a barometer responding to the local cultural weather. The culture, as well, provides us with guides and stratagems for finding a niche between stability and change: it exhorts, forbids,
lures, denies, rewards the commitments that the Self undertakes. And the Self, using its capacities for reflection and for envisaging alternatives, escapes or embraces or reevaluates and reformulates what the culture has on offer.

(p. 109-110)

Individual narratives are understood in a cultural context. Self–narratives can help students transition to larger cultural narratives which, in turn, can potentially exhort, forbid, lure, deny, and reward students. Instructors associate reflectivity with their power to steer online conversation to complex issues, encourage dialogue, and situate student themes within larger academic and social contexts. The instructors all agree that perspectives about identity are legitimate sources of knowledge, but that these experiences must be framed for an academic culture that is predominantly resistant to marginal themes of race, gender, ethnicity, and subjective knowledge.

Teaching students to reframe their personal narratives for broad-based academic culture is an important writing and rhetorical skill. The instructors argue that students must realize that personal experiences need to be situated within a larger inter-disciplinary academic context, and all instructors felt the need to teach students how to write within the constraints of this academic context. Helen highlights how she encourages reflectivity in her female students’ writings:

They [women] will bring it down to just a personal level like stories about the children or from personal life. Some are over-confident and think they know everything, but they don’t. Reflectivity, well, I’m hoping that all forces reflection because when I write comments in their discussions, which I’ve written of course and on their papers that they reflect on it and make changes. I would like to see substantive changes when I look at drafts, for instance, right? So, I kind of force reflectivity, but I cannot force the change from one draft to another or from one essay to another. So, the reflection is actually productive; I cannot force that. Reflectivity, well, I’m hoping that all forces reflection because when I write comments in their discussions, which I’ve written of course and on their papers that they reflect on it and make changes.
When I asked Helen to clarify what she means by encouraging students to be more reflective online, she said she links reflectivity to critical analysis and metacommentary—reflecting on what other experts and individuals have to say about a specific topic or experience. Metacommentary is important in academic writing because it allows for students to position their own argument in relation to existing readings and theories and allows them to see larger interdisciplinary connections. Helen argues that metacommentary forces students to reevaluate their own assumptions:

Well, by allowing them to use their own examples, but progressively asking them to find outside evidence supporting it or not supporting it for validation or non-validation and maybe move from totally narrative focused-writing to a more analytical and argumentative writing that needs to take into account more than just their own experience. They can situate in their identity within the context of the research that validates or not. There could be an issue where there’s only validating evidence there. It could be that there is only negating evidence that could be both. So, what happens to your identity when you feel one way and there is not validating evidence for that; how do you change that? Well, in the beginning they stick to it because that is their identity and that’s their experience. So, they have a lot vested in it. Identity, ego—whatever you want to call it, but they want their experiences to be the final word on everything and they need to see that other people experience it differently. There are other perspectives that may be equally as valid or theirs may not be valid at all. So, here you are, in a way, asking them to shift their perspectives that have been entrenched over the years, so besides writing, which is apparently difficult for many students, they also have to deal with their ideas and views and perspectives that they have to change. Or, they hold on to them still and write papers that cannot be backed up because they don’t use evidence.

Richard also claims that reflectivity is important to his composition pedagogy and influences how he asks students to write about personal experience. He observes:

I like to teach them about the questions like how, why, and to what extent . . . They think they are center of the universe like an adolescent might or they lack authority and feel alien to that process. So, I think getting them to back it up, but also to recognize that someone else may differ and not that there’s just one truth to things. Postings are great for that if you can get a thread going. A lot of times they just post what they think and never check it again.
Reflectivity, for some instructors, means supplying students with readings, hyperlinks, and other texts to support students in shaping their own arguments. Reflection encourages students to step back from their own assertions and consider larger conversations for academic audiences. Audience awareness is important in reflectivity and knowledge-making. In a required ENG 101 course, the stakes are high. Sometimes, the instructor wants students to become more reflective, but students simply want to pass the course. Students write to please their intended audience, namely the instructor. Women may also find that becoming reflective writers and sharing personal experience online may jeopardize their status with other students or the teacher. A personal narrative that involves commentary and that resists institutional and cultural norms requires women to exercise their authorial voices. As Richard points out, voice, authority, and stance are important in academia, and part of teaching writing is not only to debate, but also to "look back at something" and reexamine it in the light of new information. Richard accepts that "the idea that they would look back at something is bizarre." To counter this non-reflective online tendency, Richard incorporates reflectivity into his assignments to "get them looking at annotation as a way to interact with the material." Richard firmly believes in the value of online metacommentary:

This is interesting because I think they’re being reflective when they apply the readings in most of their postings. Even when they create a subject for their posting, if I ask them to write a sentence for a subject they may do it last rather than first. They start thinking about who is my audience because they assume the audience either knows nothing or knows everything and trying to end postings with an insightful comment or problematic—with our military students, particularly, they want to answer everything and be done. It’s not possible with ongoing discussions. I try to give them the idea [that they are] entering a conversation that’s going to occur and continue after you leave, even if you do the best essay. So, I think they become more self-reflective just from doing posts; how they respond to other people and disagree. That’s where the gender issues,
that you had some good questions about, come into that because I think they disagree in different ways.

Here, Richard highlights how audience awareness, critical thinking, and reflectivity intersect online and benefit the larger class. The process of writing online allows students to pursue subjects that matter to them, and as a result, students become stronger writers when they explore competing views and conversations with their audience. Richard’s observations suggest that students see writing tasks as different from the writing process.

The instructors I interviewed generally want their students to write essays that critically reflect on social themes, but these goals are not always apparent to the students, as Richard points out in the following passage:

Ilka: What happens if a student brings in personal experience that deals with a social issue like racism and discrimination, very complicated social issues that they can explore in writing and that may seek to shift the awareness or critique, analysis or boundaries of that? How do you encourage that or do you encourage that at all?

Richard: That’s another big change with academia. The use of ‘I’ has increased and we have some amazing students because of the geographical—especially the army—the diversity. I’ve had students writing about racism where they were standing at a check-out line recently, and they would tie it in with a concept like provisional ethics that we were defining. They were using themselves and commenting on it. They are taking risks. Or, they’ll say, “Hey, I’ve worked for so many years doing this” and they’re using their army experience and using their experiences more and more I think. They are blending it and they’re not only relying on it.

Ilka: So, are you saying the online medium lends itself more to transparency and reflectivity for some people as opposed to other people or that some people like the anonymity?

Richard: Yeah, I think some people will like that and they’ll like to do the basics. They will try to summarize what the reading was rather than ask a question about it or react. Some people only want to react and then there’s people who are doing both, but they are varying their approach…I think they need to see that their voice matters if—and then there are some dots there—and what are those conditions in academic writing? You know, backing things up with reasons and facts and recognizing there is an audience who thinks something.
Tensions are evident online. Students accomplish basic writing tasks “rather than ask a question about it or react.” Students manage the technology, the discipline, the research process and the larger academic expectations. These complex learning intersections may not be observable online when students spend so much time thinking, brainstorming, and drafting off-line. What appear online are more polished responses rather than ongoing reflective comments. Female students are no different than other students in that some will “summarize what the reading was rather than ask a question about it or react.”

Clearly, Richard wants students to comment more. He wants students to see that “their voice matters—and then there are some dots there—and what are those conditions in academic writing?” Commentary for any student can be challenging, but especially for female students. A female student who chooses to locate herself within the conflicting locations of gender, race, or class complicates an issue for the reader. Online, when students do not use the technology to its full potential, the written commentary that is so necessary to collaborative thinking may hinder future dialogues. Furthermore, teachers who feel at ease with both the technology and the conventions of academic writing may have nothing to lose. The first-year female student who is tentative about the technology or who may not trust her audience may be less inclined to share complex personal experiences online. Instructors draw upon personal experiences for a larger good, but the important communication that requires female students to make conscious decisions about what they write online is an ever-present tension. May also suggests that the online medium stifles reflectivity. She acknowledges:

I think there is less reflection in an online environment. There is something to be said for the shared energy in a classroom when a topic is being discussed. For example, I do an activity when I am teaching about how to use visual argument
where students look at a slide show of *NY Times* photographs that are all on the same subject. In the in-person class, I would ask for reactions to each photograph and beyond that just people’s body language and verbal cues would contribute to the reflection. In the online class environment, I do the activity as a journal entry where a student reflects on the photographs individually. Even if I did this activity as a group discussion or group-writing project, the group not being present in the same room would lose some of poignancy of the reflection. A lot of times the nature of an online class as a way for busy people to get their education affects the ability to reflect. Students have more of a check-things-off-the-list mentality in an online class than they do in a face-to-face class. One of the most important parts of education, especially higher education, is what happens spontaneously when you put a group together in a classroom. It is hard to describe what that feeling is, but I think it has to do with knowledge and reflection and becoming more open to other people’s perspectives. That part of education is almost entirely lost in the online environment.

A reflective writer views a complex subject from different perspectives and in so doing, examines what is assumed or accepted in a new light. Personal narratives are places where writers can complicate themes and invite others into a richer dialogue about difficult social issues. Reflection occurs when discussions around the “self” from various female perspectives are shared with other learners and the instructor. Yet, both instructors and students in an online course are working within the demands, constraints, and expectations of higher educational and institutional expectations. Furthermore, online technology that attempts to bridge social context can actually disconnect students from each other. How female identities emerge within these constraints in online settings is complex. Like May, Helen struggles with online reflectivity. In the passage below, Helen wants one female student to reflect on her experience but she cannot bring that student to comment on larger societal inequities. Extrapolation, or helping students see larger academic writing expectations, is an important goal for Helen. She notes:

I can understand an example from one’s own life rather than the focus of the entire essay, which is what a lot of inexperienced writers do and women have a wealth of these experiences. I need [it] to be extrapolated to a larger population and talk about significance, impact or effects of that example or society at large or
a group/community or something like this. That is when I have to really focus on explaining the difference between just telling a story, the narrative, and telling the story for the purpose of illustrating the point and then making the point with the explanation. So, for instance, if you’re talking about race relations and I have a lot of military students who go from one area to another, geographically speaking, and someone just this past week said something that there is less discrimination here in [this] area as opposed to—and I can’t remember which Fort they lived in, Fort Hood, but I’m not sure which one—but she said in the south. So, I didn’t even know the student was African-American until she made these comments in the essay and [she] said it was less discriminatory. Then, telling a story about how she was discriminated against or her children were and it just ended there. So, I went back and said [so in] the next draft with revision. I do revisions in the beginning, but not in the second part of the semester because I want them to be able to be independent later. I said, that’s not enough to say, so what is the conclusion you are drawing on the basis of this example? Does it mean up North people are more open to different races? I didn’t think [this town] was extremely progressive in that area, but she said yes. So, now I started to think that I am changing my view on how people come in and the perspective from another area because it’s worse someplace else? Does that make sense? And that is good critical thinking. First one, she made the point then she gave an example, but just telling the story and it ends there and I’m supposed to provide these extrapolations and conclusions myself as the reader? I will read into it, right, because apparently I was under the impression that we were not that good here and she was saying we were, but she was able to explain it eventually.

Reflecting on life experiences is an important step in the writing process, especially for first-year students enrolled in a composition course. In this course, students learn to move beyond pure description and engage with more difficult analysis and commentary required by post-secondary research and writing goals. Narratives are meaningful to individuals writing about lived experience and can serve as a rhetorical aid in making an argument. As Jerome Bruner (1990) reminds us, narratives “[reveal] a strong rhetorical strand, as if justifying why it was necessary (not causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) that the life had gone a particular way” (p. 121). Personal narratives offer rich evidence to help readers reflect on how their stories relate to more recognizable mainstream narratives. Yet readers also define narratives. Students who remain anonymous or who may be more at ease with technology may have different learning
experiences than students who must search for answers on their own, in isolation. These interview excerpts capture the various ways these three educators situate personal experiences in online composition courses. These instructors use narratives to engage students in critically reflective writing tasks, yet they suggest that the online medium presents many challenges to basic writers.

**T.8 Voice and audience awareness**

In this final category, the instructors link a writer’s voice with narratives as a way to broaden academic discussions. Personal knowledge may be a legitimate source of understanding, but instructors realize that such knowledge appears marginal when juxtaposed next to traditional expectations of academic writing that favors objective knowledge. This limited view of composition pedagogy leaves little room for female knowledge and selfhood, as Richard points out:

I think in that transition from subjective to objective, which are both loaded terms—there’s no such exact thing—it can be used as a platform to talk about voice and self and what matters in academic writing. But, it can also be sort of an easy “A” that they then never recover—they actually don’t recover from their success because there’s a lot of online learning to do. It’s like, “I used ‘I’ there and it mattered, so how come I can’t use it now?” So, one answer is to not allow it [first-person ‘I’] in the formal essays. It’s everywhere else because it’s in peer-editing and posts.

The disconnection between first-person “I” commentary in online discussions does not carry over to academic essay writing, which can unsettle some students. Richard further emphasizes that complex definitions of identity and selfhood are not endorsed in all academic disciplines. He claims, “And then entering the academy and being able to be a voice, but that you should recognize that certain disciplines recognize certain things and actively don’t. They [other disciplines] discourage other ways of knowing things.”
Helen, however, claims that the intersections between self and society and between subjective and objective voice must be taught. I asked Helen how she uses personal experience to critique social issues and whether she finds such critical analysis valuable. She endorses such writing and thinking habits:

I think it [personal experience] is valid, but I don’t think it is valued in every discipline because I hear from my students and from my colleagues, equally, that for instance in psychology or sociology they don’t want to hear personal examples at all even as a springboard to analysis and explanation and so on and so forth....Now there is more hybrid kind of writing even in disciplines like psychology and sociology where that kind of objective versus personal prose is more hybridized rather than just objective in certain fields....There are apparently some people who have a hard time in certain disciplines to go away from the neutral objective writing, third person, to a more subjective one or, like I said, a hybrid or both. That is a slow change in academia, but in English, in my writing courses, I have no problem with that.

For both Richard and Helen, writing about the “self” means that students must negotiate their life experiences while using the online technology and while simultaneously learning basic rhetoric and writing skills. This mix of technology, conducting research, and writing an essay can be overwhelming for first-year students who may not be adept at some or all of these skills. Students must master basic technology and literacy skills before moving on to higher-order writing tasks. The instructors I interviewed recognize that teaching writing online has multiple challenges for students who want to express their own voices and situate their identities within larger academic contexts and expectations. A multi-tiered approach to writing requires teaching students to be conscious of the purpose, audience, and strategies required of writing in any discipline. Such multi-tasking can be challenging, especially when online technology reduces tasks to bits and pieces of information. Shari Stenberg (2013) indicates that a feminist approach to teaching composition should “emphasize the importance of kairos—a term from
classical rhetoric meaning the opportune rhetorical circumstances and contingencies including audience, social dynamics, message, and timing to choose the most effective way to communicate” (p. 66). This “kairos” suggests that students engage with the entire online medium while conceptualizing writing tasks. I asked instructors how they encourage students to discover their own writing voices within the complex online medium Helen insists:

Technology? Their voices? That’s a difficult thing to teach, because we kind of almost sanitize our own voices. Here, they use their own colloquial language, their own grammar. That’s a comfortable thing and it’s easy to express. All of the sudden they have to write formally and that’s not something they are accustomed to. So, in a way we stifle their voices there. With grammar, one way I try to teach it to them is that there are certain grammatical rules that cannot be broken in formal English, but there are others that are stylistic and you can choose it. That’s also about vocabulary, sentence structure you use, etc. So, how do I encourage technology? I use tracking. I use tracking and show students how to do tracking for revisions and will you accept it or not accept it? That’s probably the extent of it and the synonym finder or grammar/spell checker. Those are the three things I use.

Helen limits her use of technologies whereas Richard encourages his students to use technology to develop their own writing voices. For Richard, “exercising” one’s voice involves writing that links technology and readings to real world problems. He actively encourages students to integrate external sources with personal experiences and situate their arguments, in writing, for their online readers. For Richard, teaching students to access digital tools to support an argument is part of the writing process. He asserts:

They can’t really cheat that process and I think they’re transferring that, but it’s hard for me to tell them they could use these types of things [technology/online resources]. It’s almost like the ones who are going to might find it out on their own. If I put a bunch of those options, it might confuse the average student. I don’t mean to say it that way, but there’s a sort of dazzle factor. If you put too much in they lose any reference point, so I’m not trying to dazzle them, but there are ones, they’ll come up with their own, and they’re taking risks. It’s wonderful to see when they do that and it usually pays off for them as far as their score—
getting them to see that language matters and that they can impact others. I think they see that in the [discussion] boards. They probably see it less with influencing me as I read their major essays, but because they have that audience in peer editing, it’s there. So, the idea that you already have a voice, are you choosing to exercise it? Then, I just try to get them thinking of the forces that have influenced their assumptions.

Online learning offers participants many opportunities for reflection and deep thinking. For students who are able to reflect and “take risks” with their writing, they are likely to produce writings that incorporate life-stories into their analysis. In an environment that is linked to a web of knowledge and information, sharing lived experience with other students may be more conducive to reflection than sharing those ideas with an instructor who represents the larger academic Discourse. Reflection is important for the instructors if they are to help students see that “language matters”, especially when helping students shape rhetorical positions that confront the unequal power structures that inform the participant’s lives.

Summary

In this chapter I explore how these three educators situate personal experiences in their online composition courses. The intersections of gender, writing, and technology are evident in all categories and reveal the complex tensions associated with teaching academic writing online. These categories reflect two key themes that explore the social context of online writing and the use of personal experience in the writing process. Composition instructors consistently value the central role of life experience in the writing process as a way to challenge diverse cultural assumptions. The instructors observe that some students explore complex sociocultural issues like racism or sexism. When such dangerous narratives are juxtaposed next to dominant academic cultural values, female experiences may be marginalized. The categories in this chapter reveal a
complex phenomenon where instructors serve a key role in encouraging deep thinking in online writing courses. Teachers indicate that some students face challenges when dealing with technology or basic literacy. Despite these challenges, teachers encourage students to see the benefits of using personal experience to write academic essays and to use technology to supplement their analysis and online interactions. Although the instructor represents the larger academic culture in its values, beliefs, and practices, the instructor can also decide how to use personal experiences to critique unequal social structures and help students develop writing practices that focus on critical reflection and deep thinking.
Chapter VII

Discussion and Recommendations

In this section I explore the implications of this study. Here, I discuss how the findings of this study inform teaching online composition that considers the contexts and needs of female learners. The data confirm that both students and teachers have different goals for using narrative experiences in a composition class, and these goals may collide when academic and cultural expectations drive course delivery and student productivity. Moreover, when hierarchical disciplinary expectations question the relevance of personal experiences in scholarly writing practices, introducing female narratives can be contentious. Added to this complexity is the technology that can bolster opportunities for knowledge and expression and at the same time, create profound barriers between teachers and students. Using some examples from this study I discuss how female narratives shape the rhetorical choices the participants make in their online writing courses. I end this section with specific recommendations for educators and administrators.

Neoliberal Context of Writing Instruction

Cultural values shape learning (Giroux, 2005; 2014). In North America, online learning has coincided with neoliberal forces that value a free market. A corporate mindset has infused post-secondary institutions forcing administrators and educators to make difficult choices about how learning occurs. Online courses are the most cost-efficient means of course delivery because such courses reduce the expense of brick-and-mortar classrooms. Full-time tenured faculty can be reserved for live course instruction, making online courses more available to part-time instructors who do not require the
additional costs of pensions or supplemental health care. With the institutional infrastructure for technology and the Internet already in place, colleges and universities can simply pour courses from one semester to the next. Learning becomes accessible for busy adults and educational administrators embrace online learning as a way to generate revenue. These neoliberal values influence pedagogy because online learning is viewed more as a commodity rather than a transformative learning experience.

Technology contributes to a market-driven postsecondary culture by making learning convenient for teachers and students. Foucault (2004) argues that “in order for there to be a market, there must be buyers as well as sellers” (p. 64). Students, particularly female students who are primary caregivers, “buy in” to online learning because it is convenient and accessible. New mobile devices mean that students can take part in online discussions from the convenience of their smart phone or write an essay on a tablet. Technology also enables composition instructors to teach writing that uses technology to share complex ideas online. Students have access to a web of information and can research, write, and talk about topics any day, all day long. The economic reality of online learning means that students must finance every detail related of their online learning in order to succeed. However, these financial costs are undervalued in a free-market culture where self-improvement and personal advancement are overvalued. Every student must fend for herself. Female students who want to participate in the social capital of a college education will pursue their goals even if it means buying the necessary equipment needed to succeed in an online course. These market forces challenge the concept of education as a basic human right in a free and democratic society.
Neoliberal values combined with technology hyper-individualizes learning. Earning a course credit means that students must produce texts and manage the course content on their own time. Self-paced learning enables students to have access to the course any time, and instructors expect students to participate in online discussions and group work. In a required English course, students want to accomplish the course tasks quickly in order to pass and move on in their academic career. Personal narratives that would otherwise provide engaging debates are both time consuming and questionable in this online space. Whereas feminism once claimed that “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1970), neoliberalism avoids political debate entirely by viewing the individual as an economic agent and inverting “the relationships of the social to the economic” (Foucault, 2004, p. 240). The speed and efficiency of technology leaves little time for the deep, ongoing, and often disruptive space of critical reflection. For female students in an online compositions course, the concept of the “essai” as an “attempt” to persuade the reader to see the world in new way remains elusive. These elusive feelings are evident in participants’ comments. The participants in this study argue that their instructors’ expectations, limited time, and the burden of being constantly productive online inhibit their writing. Often, they view writing as producing essays that adhere to current-traditional writing patterns and as a result, they use personal narratives sparingly or only in online discussion forums. Even though the participants have access to varied digital literacies, most of the women I interviewed did not use such resources. Ultimately, the participants reproduce traditional essay forms that they believe will please the instructor.
Disciplinary hierarchies

The participants’ and instructors’ comments reveal that rhetoric and composition is largely bound by traditional disciplinary hierarchies. In most colleges and universities in the United States, required compositions courses are part of an English Department. English literature and theory like poetry, drama, and novels, are coveted courses and part of a high-class culture associated with the humanities. In contrast, teaching composition is lowly work (Ede, 2002). It is lowly, disciplinary teaching that is often relegated to part-time instructors. Because the only way to assess writing is to write extensively, teaching a composition course is time consuming, tedious, and demanding work. Teaching rhetoric and composition online reinforces these disciplinary hierarchies because aside from writing formal essays, every thought and imagination must be typed on a computer or tablet screen. Many of the instructors and participants indicate that while the course seems to encourage critical thinking and writing, both students and faculty share the assumption that academic writing is objective, neutral, arguable, and professional. The participants in this study realize that they should avoid using personal pronouns in their formal essays, and the first person “I” is largely reserved for online conversations. Removing first person identifiers in writing practices demonstrates that the disciplinary expectations of rhetoric and composition are reproduced online. By favoring certain kinds of knowledge, writing, communication, and research, composition instructors design courses and prioritize writing exercises that emphasize the dominant composition Discourse. The participants’ comments suggest that personal writing is not considered formal academic writing. Writing based on this assumption indicates that the participants had few opportunities to connect their writings with the larger course readings or even
with other individuals in the class. Such a narrowed view of writing limits interpersonal exchanges and meaning making. I argue that online instructors must resist recreating academic binaries that devalue the “I” perspective or the removal of identity from narratives. Instead, instructors should actively encourage students to explore the diverse intersections of their gender, identity, race, culture, and sexuality during all stages of the writing process. The experiences that inform students’ lives can be used as leverage when reading texts and framing an argument.

The participants in this study indicate that there are few bridges that link personal experiences to critically reflective thinking and writing. They claim that essays and discussions focus on specific topics based on assigned readings—readings that may have no bearing on their daily lives. Instructors use the personal essay in the course, but experiential writing is an isolated, one-time assignment typically submitted early in the semester. Often, because the personal essay is the first essay, it does not require external resources. By sectioning off the personal essay from other essays that require external documentation, the instructors reinforce the widely held assumption that personal experience or knowledge is distinct from scholarly writing and research. The participants claim they do not see connections between personal writing and critically reflective, academic writing. The teachers, on the other hand, try to establish bridges between personal subjects and larger social themes, but they are overwhelmed with teaching students basic writing and research skills. Emphasizing specific rhetorical skills without fostering links to real life experiences can create an online space where students mirror traditional writing expectations. It is possible that the participants in this study internalize and duplicate hierarchical expectations of academic writing and communication styles,
resulting in what Homi Bhabha calls mimicry. As cited in Burney (2012), Bhabha claims that “mimicry is a word for the concept of a class of individuals who mimic or copy cultural habits, styles of living, and values of the colonizers in order to be accepted, recognized, and successful” (p. 190). Research manuals and professors favor standardized written expression and select textbooks that provide examples of the typical five-point essay. In many textbooks, disciplinary expectations favor an authorial stance, neutral perspectives, thesis driven essays, and topics that can be supported by empirical evidence, not anecdotal evidence. Furthermore, the participants and instructors never imagine other ways to debate issues in writing. Instructors rarely practice or encourage participants to use the digital tools embedded in the course. Digital tools such as blogs, videos, group exercises or the digital essay can help participants generate new ideas about writing and structuring essays, and can often fill gaps in how individuals think about societal power structures. Trying to describe, analyze, and critique an experience may be difficult to achieve in a five-point essay. Mimicking the traditional academic essay did not provide the participants with opportunities to learn from other students or to experiment with digital tools. The data show that the instructors also have a narrowed view of academic writing. The technological and conceptual distances between the instructor and participants often hinder rich online discussions. However, encouraging students to use more technology to make connections in their ideas and sharing these ideas with other students can foster the rich critical reflection that instructors want and expect from their students. Rhetoric rests on debate and with technology, this debate can be robust. Choosing to integrate technology into writing skills can lead to rich learning experiences. Moreover, integrating technology into writing skills and highlighting
personal experiences can help students become more invested in any given academic conversation.

**Instructors’ Use of Narratives Online**

The results of this study indicate that the instructors hold complex views about personal experience. All three instructors indicate that first-hand knowledge is fundamental to the writing process, especially early in the term where students explore personal themes in discussions and in a personal essay assignment. The instructors understand that life experiences can be used to situate one’s identity and to complicate, challenge, and argue for new understandings of the world. These new insights can provide students with tools for uncovering the political, social, and economic powers that order women’s lives. However, the instructors also feel pressure to teach students the skills and techniques of academic Discourse. Mastering academic speaking, researching, and writing would, in their mind, empower students to articulate their experiences in such a way that encourages reflection. As a core writing course, the instructors may feel pressured by the larger ideological academic expectations of language and discourse that often limit non-academic personal narratives from critical inquiry. The instructors, either in their previous teaching or personal experience, are conscious that academic discourse is not welcoming to subaltern narratives. They realize that in composition studies, scholarly rhetorical arguments are highly thesis driven and “prove a point” and are far less open-ended explorations yielding multiple perspectives. These disciplinary assumptions limit how the instructors use narratives as a teaching tool.

This study also suggests that narratives are not fully incorporated into composition pedagogy. During the interviews, the instructors did not say they use their
own life stories as examples of social inequity, nor did they connect their own experiences to rhetorical debates or documented research. Even in online discussions, they rarely make scholarly links between their personal life experiences and student themes. One possibility for this omission is that the instructor represents the academy’s larger values and beliefs. As such, instructors are aware that individual narratives are difficult to intersect into academic conversations critiquing social or culture issues. By limiting personal experiences, the instructors are modeling writing perspectives that subordinate personal knowledge and privilege objective, mainstream knowledge.

Added to this traditional view of composition is the emphasis on the linear essay without acknowledging other writing practices that include digital literacies. Students are taught the current-traditional essay form that focuses on an arguable thesis and proves that thesis with claims and evidence. Writing is viewed as words on a screen. With new technologies, however, students can develop arguments using multiple media, sound, images or hypertext and practice using these tools to bridge personal experiences into their writing. Multi-modal essays can frame rhetorical positions in new ways by including images or a screenshot, but the participants never indicate that multi-modal essays are presented as an option. Access to such media can be empowering for students who want to find new ways to express their experiences and provide evidence. The participants claim they used Web-based sources like the Internet or databases to research personally meaningful topics. The instructors, however, never mention using digital literacies when teaching the academic essay nor do they mention offering examples of multi-modal essays as part of the writing process. Instructors describe writing as solely word-based and they do not provide examples of writing using images or other media. In
these ways, the traditional view of the academic essay is reinforced online and the participants’ explorations of identity and gender are subordinated in favor of more traditional essay themes and models.

As an online instructor, I am aware that in an asynchronous online course, where lectures and dialogue are read in solitude, learning can be static. This passivity is dangerous because it echoes what Freire (1970) warns against—a type of banking system of learning where students are passively reading pre-made lectures and completing assignments in isolation. Writing about complex subjects means considering life experiences in new ways. I argue that one way to bridge the personal with the political is for instructors to gradually shift students’ perspectives to show how personal evidence can be used to acknowledge difference and explore more complex cultural ideologies and contradictions. Writing about different understandings centred on life narratives can help students to think deeply about social inequalities. Using new digital tools to explore such meanings can also deepen students’ understandings. Writing patterns that may be limited by traditional expectations about the academic essay can be made new when students and instructors use digital technologies as a learning platform for meaning-making. When students learn that writing is more than just words on a screen and practice creating academic essays using sound, media, or images, then both the writer and reader can replay ideas in his or her mind. New writing habits can move students, particularly female students, to assert their identity, race, culture, class or ethnicity online in ways that reimagine traditional academic essays. Narratives that allow women to write about life experiences and explore how meanings are made in different contexts recast knowledge. Student can use new technologies to reshape writing into a recursive space rich with critical reflection.
**Student-centred narratives are a source of knowledge**

This study indicates that narratives are important sources of knowledge and meaning making for female students in a composition course. These participants repeatedly suggest that they view writing tasks through the lens of their identity in terms of their gender, race, ethnicity, social role, and myriad other roles. Competing and overlapping discourse communities means that these participants look for opportunities to use personal experience to write for their instructors as much as for themselves. In some instances, the instructors framed academic rhetorical goals to allow participants to explore personal connections in the writing assignments. The participants in this study explore experiences that are unique to their local and cultural context. Articulating rhetorical positions from these unfixed social spaces is difficult. The participants realize that academic writing has a different agenda that focuses on a purpose, audience, and a strategy. The participants indicate that finding connections between personal narratives and rhetorical writing seems beyond the course goals. They know their own life narratives cannot always be used to leverage rhetorical positions in their arguments. While they look for ways to use their life experiences to bring new understandings to other online learners, the participants understand that rhetorically, complicated, extended personal narratives are not highly regarded. The participants’ comments suggest that academic writing, particularly in an online setting, focuses on duplication rather than exploration. A feminist approach to rhetoric and composition challenges such duplication. As Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) suggest, rhetoric can be linked to feminist studies because such an approach disrupts the public-private dichotomy in academics. They argue that examining the “ever-vibrant, interlinking social circles”
that connect women, students and teachers can reexamine their assumptions and explore new perspectives, contexts, readings, and interpretations of female learners (p. 101). Female narratives enable students to find new purposes, audiences, and strategies to express their ever-shifting identities. Even online, narratives provide rich information about life and can be linked to academic research and writing practices.

Furthermore, the participants claim that sharing personal narratives in an online course is complicated. The anonymity associated with online learning allows some participants to feel more expressive and reflective, whereas other participants suggest that the anonymity hinders their self-expression. The participants repeatedly mention that trust and dialogue are important to their learning, yet they were given few opportunities to explore their identity, race, culture, or history online and they often self-monitored their ideas. The online anonymity creates an illusion of safety and openness. Maggie Savin-Baden, Christine Sinclair, and Second Wind (2011) claim that online learning means that individuals struggle with imposed boundaries, positioning their own identities in vague online spaces, and at times, being overwhelmed with the freedom and restrictions of technology. The participants suggest that the instructor’s expectations combined with often silent co-learners makes online writing generally and personal writing specifically, less appealing. These comments about identity exploration reflect James Paul Gee’s (2001) work on identity formation. Gee describes four key ways to view identity within the framework of process, power, and sources of power. One way to view identity is to see ourselves as derived from natural forces such as biology. Another way to view identity is positional, as issued by authorities in institutions. A third way to view identity is to recognize oneself in a specific discourse community by other
individuals. Finally, a fourth way to view identity is through affinity spaces, that is, by sharing the practices and values of like-minded individuals. Gee’s ideas reflect the many comments made by the participants in this study who struggle to incorporate their identity in their writing tasks. Participants claim their identity is a natural part of their writing and self-expression, but they do not see their identity necessarily valued by other individuals in the online course. The academic context reflects a discourse community where personal musings are often silent or restricted. This silence may be the result of the participants approaching the discipline with traditional assumptions about teaching and learning that centre on asking the right kinds of questions for a specific task. Questions that trigger complex conversations about lived experiences may not be familiar to first-year students. Moreover, online conversations are controlled by interpersonal social dynamics and online feedback. Sharing personal ideas that can potentially complicate course readings or assignments can be a bridge that links female learners with other online students, but it is a shaky bridge. When silence pervades the online space or instructors are the only ones raising complex questions in discussion forums, students may be less inclined to explore the links between personal and political complexities that constitute rich, critically reflective conversations. I argue that online community building occurs through frequent and varied student-led discussions that contribute to more cross-examination. When students send messages, these messages need to be acknowledged online. Emphasizing cultural contexts as intersections to identity allow students to make stronger links to gender, especially when gender-identification is less transparent online.

Another possible limitation associated with narratives and instructor-student engagement is the potential class divide between teachers and students. North American
post-secondary schools are largely products of a white, middle-class. This class privilege offers mostly middle-class white men and women access to different educational opportunities that position them with privileged knowledge, learning opportunities, and academic abilities (Bordeiu, 1990; Giroux, 2005; Giroux & McLaren, 2014). All three instructors in this study are white and middle-class. While most of the participants are also white, their class and cultural exposure to higher education, reading, writing, and study skills may differ from the instructor’s expectations, and this gap may affect how they approach writing assignments. All the instructors seek active, student-centred learning that promotes critical thinking, but they may also expect students to adopt the writing habits of higher education and their own middle-class privilege that places a premium on certain kinds of language use and knowledge. In their conversations with students, these instructors may inadvertently duplicate these long-standing academic expectations about what kinds of knowledge and evidence are valued in college essays.

**Dialogue creates space for narratives**

This study confirms the importance of engaging and interactive dialogue in online courses. The participants all indicate that dialogue helps them share ideas related to their writing goals. Dialogue helps the participants build camaraderie by encouraging them to share their personal insights, experiences, and knowledge. Such knowledge sharing creates opportunities to investigate meanings and self-identify. Furthermore, online dialogue enables participants to become self-aware of their own rhetorical choices and to make connections between arguments and personal life experiences. The participants are drawn to discussions as a way to seek and find like-minded individuals in their writing course, and the many positive references to online conversations suggests that dialogue
provides a semi-anonymous space where traditional barriers such as race or ethnicity are largely erased. Yet this anonymity also contributes to self-monitoring and even censorship. The online medium is a complex, contradictory space where narratives can be both voiced and silenced. This contradiction may suggest that female students are not given enough opportunities to use their narratives as leverage when writing essays and sharing ideas. It is possible that students are also uninformed about how to integrate complex digital literacies into their writing habits.

Instructors are integral to online dialogue because they create safe contexts for personal narratives to unfold. The instructors’ comments suggest that they are constantly trying to overcome the time and space gap inherent in online learning. The instructors describe how they encourage dialogue, monitor discussions, and ensure all learners engage in civil behaviors. However, even with the best intentions to promote dialogue, instructors are limited by the technology as it is a tool, not a replacement, for the interpersonal relationships that would occur in community. If instructors and students are not intentional with their online activities, it is possible that some knowledge and meanings will remain unexplored and learning can become an exercise in duplication. As Freire (1970) suggests, a banking concept of learning is dangerous because it duplicates rather than recreates knowledge. This duplication is evident in the many instructor comments where they try to weave narrative agency into writing activities, but also feel they have to teach students both basic computer skills and traditional essays forms. Dialogue overcomes the conceptual online space, but the technology reinforces delayed feedback, fragmentation, silence, and separation. Ideas must be typed on a screen and without the space for extended discussions and questions, student responses are reduced.
to short responses or even silence. Short responses to complex ideas reify a binary in knowledge construction. Silence reinforces mainstream narratives and prevents newer narratives or experiences from emerging. Knowledge becomes split into traditional academic meaning-making and/or irrelevant personal comments—all of which influences how students perceive of writing tasks. Thus, the static and interrupted nature of asynchronous online learning creates a binary of meaning making. Instead, I argue that a conceptual bridge linking narratives to specific rhetorical choices is necessary in online writing courses. As Freire (1970) suggests, instructors must redefine their role in classroom to become facilitators rather than directors of knowledge. Facilitating learning online is easy because students are largely self-directed, and instructors can encourage student-led learning activities that focus on narratives and identity-sharing. I argue that when instructors create an online culture that dissolves the teacher-student hierarchies of disciplinary knowledge and binaries of meaning-making, then female participants can make more personal connections in their writing. This online culture could be shaped by student-initiated pre-writing activities. Online activities that link critical inquiry with interdisciplinary and cross-cultural readings and writings can help female learners see their own identity in relation to other diverse and marginal experiences. Bridging the gap between personal life-stories and academic writing is important if composition instructors are to disrupt binaries of meaning-making for women.

Related to dialogue is the concept of trust. The participants claim that while narratives can be a starting point for critical reflection and essay writing, the online medium does not facilitate trusting other online learners. Whether writing for a student or an instructor, the online setting creates a professional, neutral framework that makes
spontaneous dialogue difficult to achieve and fragments the writing process. Without trust, the identity and social construction of life-stories remain unexplored. This study reminds instructors and administrators that creating safe online learning spaces is essential to good pedagogy. Teachers can build trusting online spaces—spaces where teachers “should help [students] learn how to inquire, to seek connections between their chosen subject and other subjects, to give up the notion of teaching their subject only for its own sake, and to inquire deeply into its place in human life broadly construed” (Noddings, 2005, p. 178). One way to create safer online spaces is allow more student-led discussions that incorporate digital literacies. Having students engage in self-authored discussion threads and leading the course content online allows them shape the direction of online conversations and contributes to deep thinking and writing. Such opportunities can also foster creativity and openness and help other students respond to complicated narratives.

**Time and writing**

This research points to the complicated and regulatory nature of time in online writing courses. Both instructors and students mention how time makes learning and writing tasks difficult. Time is part of the ecology of writing and the online medium. By neoliberal standards, time is one way to measure efficiency, productivity, and market value. “Time is money” is a common value or “veridiction” that most students and teachers know. Foucault (2004) mentions “veridiction” as a discourse of truth (p.36). Veridiction can refer to value beliefs, and sayings that when repeated often enough, translate into a commonly accepted truth or assumption. In the online composition classroom, time becomes an assessment of the quality of work submitted. Productivity is
equated with success, and failure to post an online discussion or submit a polished essay suggests that students are not devoting enough time to their academic work. Moreover, online courses are highly time-consuming. While the participants note that they enroll in online courses for their convenience, they are often unprepared for the long hours it takes to respond in writing to a discussion or an activity, not to mention the laborious pre-writing tasks required to produce a formal essay. Instructors often expect students to be constantly engaged online because there is always some activity or discussion to post. Time constraints can make writing less exploratory and more productive—generating writing that is superficial and unfocused. Similarly, students’ social roles and cultural expectations means that the self-paced nature of online learning also makes the experience perfunctory. Thus, time and technology can potentially diminish the in-depth reflection required to write for personal satisfaction or public reflection.

I argue that time—while tyrannical for female students who must negotiate social and cultural roles—can be redeemed when students choose to share life-stories. Time can be used by instructors in how they design the course. Teaching rhetoric and composition requires methods that allow students time for reflection and inquiry in different modes. Good writing requires an incubation period. Online, lower-order writing tasks such as discussions and group tasks can be made time-sensitive, whereas higher-order writing tasks that require more thinking and pre-writing can be spaced further apart. Writing also follows certain rhythms, especially when writing is intentional. As Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004) contends, “The rhythms that are created from particular words being in proximity to each other, the silences, the line breaks, and the punctuation create sensations that are difficult to describe in language but that can be clearly felt when the words are read. Not
only do our words reveal some of our intentions, aspirations, designs, or aims, but also how we choose to say them” (p. 103). Here, the content and form of writing mingle to create new meanings. These new meanings can take shape online when instructors create spaces that allow for creative expression and commentary, such as a course-specific blog or wiki assignments that allow students to own, shape, and publish their own co-authored essays. For narratives to take shape online, learners should have the opportunity to create texts in the broadest sense. Narratives need not be linear or text based. Different “texts” such as media, visuals, screenshots, hypertext, or sounds create new meanings and link personal experiences to larger societal issues. Writing takes time. Time needs to be considered in all the course design modules and writing tasks. Allowing students adequate time to create narratives can provide them with more experience in framing rhetorical debates and introducing counter-normative gender narratives with online learners.

**Recommendations**

I understand that writing is a complex cognitive process. I am also aware that feminism may have different meanings for each individual. For me, however, a feminist approach to composition pedagogy means that female learners should have more confidence and opportunities to share life experiences online and women should be taught to use life experiences as a critically reflective rhetorical tool in writing assignments. In this section, I offer some general recommendations for administrators engaged in online learning and educators teaching online writing courses. An overarching recommendation for both administrators and educators is that composition courses should incorporate more opportunities for narrative inquiry, and doing so requires a series of
smaller, incremental recommendations. I understand that these recommendations will take years to implement, but gradual adjustments to existing pedagogies and programs can begin to change the learning outcomes for all online learners.

**Recommendations for administrators**

- Understand that technology is limited. Technology is a tool. It does not replace the human interactions inherent in learning. Administrators should engage writing instructors in meaningful conversations about what kinds of courses should be taught online and which courses should be taught in-seat and live. Context is key to online learning and writing instructors should have a first say in how they will deliver the content to students.

- Understand how technology changes space and time for all learners. Students form virtual communities from vastly different locations, yet online students are still connected to colleges or universities. Ensure that consistent support services are available to all online students. This means access to online student success services such as online tutors. Secure new funding to expand or enhance existing student support services.

- Consider removing ENG 101 from its English/Humanities discipline. Positioning ENG 101 in a literary discipline and requiring writing courses as a fundamental academic skill reinforces disciplinary hierarchies. Administrators and English Departments should consider how to make academic writing more interdisciplinary by a) removing ENG 101 from a stand-alone General Education
requirement; b) making writing an interdisciplinary requirement in all courses and degree programs and/or c) offering separate classes. One class would focus on academic writing with an emphasis on critical reflection, analysis, and rhetorical writing and the other class would focus purely on academic skills acquisition related to research writing (i.e. information technologies, research skills, etc.).

- If ENG 101 remains in the English/Humanities discipline, consider establishing specialized theme-based undergraduate writing courses. Linking composition and rhetoric to theme-based courses such as gender and composition or gender and social justice or other disciplinary courses allows students to explore the interdisciplinary tensions and rhetorical positions related to gender and identity.

- Avoid making ENG 101 a massive open online course (MOOC). Massive online courses diminish the teacher-student ratio and do not necessarily contribute to trusting or safe online spaces.

- Continue to cap online English class sizes to match the enrollment in live courses. Smaller online classes allow instructors to establish dialogue and build trust among students.

- Online learning is time sensitive. Creating a strong online presence requires instructors to spend more time engaging in online activities and conversations. As a result, allow online instructors course-load reductions for teaching online
courses. Allow virtual and synchronous online office hours as part of the instructor’s teaching load.

- Provide professional development for full and part-time instructors on a) how to use the learning management system technology; b) how to incorporate multi-media and modal-modal writing into a composition course; and c) how to introduce new and emerging technologies into their teaching practices. Help instructors see value in teaching alternate methods of composition and rhetoric.

- Ensure students are prepared for online learning and writing by requiring students to enroll in pre-course technology training modules. These modules will train students in basic computer literacy and the learning management system.

- Conduct surveys among online students that explore their learning outcomes. Institutional research that examines areas such as online attrition, grade point averages, graduate enrollment rates, and satisfaction can show trends in online enrollment that affect students’ future choices. If a college has fully online degree programs, conduct research that explores students’ post-graduation outcomes or employment rates. Such institutional research can provide new information about whether or not students are successful with their online learning and where the college/university can improve their delivery.
Recommendations for online educators

- Understand that technology and culture are linked. Mobility and convenience are necessary for today’s busy college students. Educators should consider how to create learning activities that use varied digital tools in order to help students succeed in the medium.

- Continue to provide online writing assignments that focus on cultural awareness and gender identity. Value personal narratives as instrumental to critical thinking, reading, and writing practices. Orient students about how online identities are formed and how to respond to other students in online spaces. Instructors should receive training on how to create activities, assignments, and modules that invite students to analyze and critique all identities (e.g. thematic readings, scaffolded writing assignments, writing portfolios, graphic narratives, peer-review training, student surveys, etc.). Instructors should also share their own personal narratives when critiquing ideas and practicing writing tasks as a way to engage students in deep thinking.

- Ensure that online spaces are safe spaces. Monitor abusive or dismissive language and oppressive themes. Check for netiquette.

- Find ways to disrupt writing contexts so that students write for their own personal goals, and not necessarily for externally defined disciplinary goals. For instance, students can create their own essay assignments and invite other students they
select to share in online conversations. They can create specific folders and “share” essay drafts with a few classmates rather than with the larger anonymous online class.

- Create multi-authored texts that include women. Creating female-focused collaborative texts through group work, discussions, and wikis allows women to become more expert authors and writers. Moreover, their voices undo the fixed disciplinary binaries that separate expert/dominant/writers from other voices. Framing ideas around gender promotes deeper thinking and reflection.

- Allow for multi-modal essays that use technology as a learning platform. Essays that include images, screenshots, videos, and other media become a digital essay. Teach students how to use digital literacies in their writing. Encourage and expect students to engage in digital composition practices (course-specific blogs; blog assignments, online rhetorical debates).

- Consider different ways to assess student learning through writing. E-portfolios, narratives, digital writings, genre-based writings are some ways to move beyond the formal essay as the only measure of assessment.

- Provide options for more synchronous learning though live group discussion sessions or instructor chat spaces using digital tools like Skype or Collaborate. Embed real-time group work and writing tasks with students at select junctures.
during the term to allow students time to engage with other learners and the teacher collectively. Allowing such real-time, synchronous opportunities would allow female students to visually see the other students in the course and give everyone the opportunity to reflect more on authors’ ideas in conjunction with their offline identities.

In sum, teaching writing online requires a new approach that acknowledges the richness and limitations of technology. It requires strong infrastructure, funding, and priority-setting from administrators. Instructors and administrators must examine their own college resources and their student body when delivering online programming. While initial investments of time and money are needed to create new online courses, funding that expands infrastructure and instructors’ training is needed to sustain and build excellent online programming. Finding new funding sources to improve the quality of online teaching is especially important as federal and state funding continues to decline. Educators and administrators must consider all these variables when designing online courses in order to help students become the best thinkers and writers in their academic and career lives.

**Implications of the Research**

This study is important because in higher education, writing is regarded as the expression of an educated individual. Students must wrestle with complex ideas, argue their positions, and communicate their ideas in almost every college course. Good writing begins when students read extensively. Students are taught how to connect their ideas with existing literature and within all disciplines. Furthermore, students gain a greater awareness of the interconnectedness of reading, writing, and deep thinking. Technology
aids in this learning process by providing students with a host of digital resources such as blogs, wikis, visual, and audio options that enable them to express ideas for an increasingly mobile and technologically-savvy audience. Technology also helps in the writing process, from the earliest brainstorming and drafting stages on a computer keyboard to the later revising and editing stages using editing programs. If writing and thinking are at the heart of a post-secondary education, then more attention is needed to the teaching of writing, particularly in light of advancing technology.

Linked to the heart of a post-secondary education is critical thinking, and a feminist approach to writing and learning promotes a critically reflective lens for deep thinking. I view a feminist pedagogy as a way to complicate and promote deeper thinking about all social issues that seek to perpetuate mainstream values and institutions of power. Personal narratives offer a fresh perspective on controversial issues that may reveal new insights into societal power relations. Too often, women have been marginalized in literature and in post-secondary institutions. In online settings, women may censor their narratives. Online instructors must work around the dangers of silence and censorship to encourage women to express their views and experiences as a way to overcome the physical separation of mind and body inherent in the online medium. A feminist approach to teaching writing coupled with reading and writing about social and cultural theories helps develop a well-rounded, critically reflective student. Writing about readings, particularly readings about critical and feminist theorists, can help students strengthen their rhetorical skills and can provide them with examples of how academic writing can build on personal experiences.
This study is also important for educators. Instructors often encounter online students who lack strong literacy and digital skills. Students with different literacy and technology skills need individual attention and concrete suggestions. This individualized attention takes time, especially early in the term. Helping students to identify lower-order and higher-order writing challenges as well as directing students to institutional resources (e.g. Writing Centres, tutors, etc.) can assist first-year students in their online journey. Instructors also need to be trained in how to best leverage technology to reach students of varying skill and ability. Technology unique to Blackboard as well as other forms of (e.g. Google Drive, Microsoft Word, etc.) can help instructors assist students in drafting and revising their essays. Instructors need guidance on how to integrate technology into their courses in order to help students write essays using new digital tools. Educators also need online training, external resources, compensation, and time to meet the challenges of a diverse student body and the ever-changing technological advancements inherent in online courses.

Finally, this study has wide-ranging implications for educational administrators and policy makers. Understanding how technology influences the writing and learning process is part of today’s post-secondary culture. Making online learning accessible to students is integral to creating a more democratic educational system. Although current online policies seek to address the pedagogic, library, and personnel capacities needed to support online courses, many policies do not fully address the larger impact of distance learning on teachers and learners. The underlying assumption in many policies is that good technology infrastructure is the foundation for a sound online program; however, this assumption does not address the different values and beliefs of the academic staff,
both full and part-time, and the students enrolled in these courses. Anne Schneider and Mara Sidney (2009) argue that policies should be assessed “in terms of their impacts on problem solving, justice, citizenship, and democratic institutions” (p. 112). Challenging administrators to examine assumptions based on economic constraints can potentially improve writing courses and degree programs.

**Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest that more research focusing on gender dynamics in online courses and composition studies is needed. More work is needed exploring identity-sharing in online spaces. How is identity juxtaposed to academic writing contexts where students collaborate on texts and writing activities? Gender and culture inform the words, themes, and narratives that appear in online spaces, yet few studies directly examine gender, composition, and online learning. More work is needed exploring how personal experiences inform the online rhetorical choices women make in terms of their subject, theme, and evidence. How are narratives constructed online? How are critical meanings enacted online? How do women use online tools and language to adopt, manage, or resist larger rhetorical narratives? My study considers the phenomenon of one small rural college, but more studies are needed that explore how women make rhetorical writing choices in larger post-secondary colleges and universities that offer greater diversity. Composition instructors also introduce their own shifting and complex identities online, and they must consider how their own priorities influence their teaching habits. Findings that consider the complex and shifting identities of gender within post-secondary contexts will enhance the learning outcomes for all students.
Moreover, more research is needed that focuses on online composition courses. With ever changing technology, distance learning continues to become more interactive. Yet transferring and applying technological advances to teaching practices remains challenging. More studies are needed that explore how new technologies can be used to build community, interaction, and dialogue among learners. Students expect to use technology in their online courses. The struggle will be training educators to skillfully apply new technologies to their online courses, as well as reimagining how to teach disciplinary content and composition that incorporates new technologies. More research is needed that examines what technologies can be used in composition studies to create dynamic environments that invite students to think about their own narratives and learn collectively. Narratives are a way to promote critical reflection, and focusing on individual identities can begin to redefine knowledge. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014), commenting on the importance of narratives insist, “Students (and teachers and scholars) must come to realize, however, that we do not all experience the world in the same way. Collapsing distinctions in our experiences of equality and justice in order to narrate the story of our common humanity runs roughshod over the very critical stories that show us systems of inequity and injustice at work” (p. 443). Online learning can “collapse” identities when students and faculty resort to traditional views of writing and rhetoric. More studies are needed that encourage students, particularly female students, to articulate their complex histories. Composition and rhetoric will continue to be a fundamental academic skill in post-secondary settings. Writing that incorporates personal experience is a social activity that contributes to collective consciousness-raising. Exploring the daily lived realities and constraints placed on women in online
writing courses requires new tools, and research, that equip students and teachers to function more effectively in these ever-shifting networked spaces.

**Closing Words**

This study describes the phenomenon of online learning and composition pedagogy through the lens of neoliberal forces and gender. In a culture that overemphasizes the individual, women can succumb to larger time and social forces that challenge them from fully expressing their identities online. College writing continues to focus on the mechanics of learning and emphasizes a traditional view of composition that emphasizes rhetorical writing skills and the essay as a product. Disciplinary traditions are reified online when teachers fail to engage students in new digital literacies and learners lose sight of the larger rhetorical possibilities that inform their essays. As more women enroll in online courses, more work is needed that considers the needs and contexts of women learners. Pedagogically, such new insights can push educators to respect female voice, agency, and experience and by doing so, help learners cross-over into the “Borderlands” that Gloria Anzaldúa imagines is possible.

Yet, this research is mostly about narratives. Narratives are a portal to learning—a door through which writers enter and share their own identities. Narratives are “in-between” spaces that provide writers with material that demonstrates their individual locations, values, and beliefs. Narratives allow writers to share their individual concerns, explanations, and interpretations with other readers. Only when individuals enter this door can other learners see the various customs, languages, traditions, injustices and experiences of women. Trouble appears in these in-between spaces, and narratives allow female writers to explore their identity and use that knowledge as leverage for rhetorical
positions. Narratives begin conversations about issues that affect women—conversations about discrimination, marginalization, workplace disparity, family sacrifice, unequal access to resources, sexism, ageism, and other injustices. Yet, narratives themselves are not a final destination. Narratives are a means to an end. Narratives offer insights into thinking, and with technology, can be used to tell a different story. Beyond the door, beyond the “in-between” space, is a place of possibility.


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APPENDIX A
Flower & Hayes Model of the Writing Process

December 20, 2013

Ms. Ilka Luyt Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-712-13; Romeo # 6011645
Title: "GEDUC-712-13 In-between Spaces: A Study of the Influences of Gender and Technology on the Writing Process in Online Composition Courses"

Dear Ms. Luyt:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-712-13 In-between Spaces: A Study of the Influences of Gender and Technology on the Writing Process in Online Composition Courses" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair. On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Chair, General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Jane Chin and Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Faculty Supervisors
Dr. Benjamin Bolden, Chair, Unit REB
Ms. Erin Wicklam, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research
Dear Possible Participant:

This project titled “In-between Spaces: A Study of the Influences of Gender and Technology on the Writing Process in Online Composition Courses” is being conducted by Ilka Luyt in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance according to governmental and university required ethics guidelines. Thank you for your willingness to consider participating in this study.

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to explore how technology influences your writing. I hope to discover (1) How/why women use personal experiences in the writing process in an online environment where human interactions are different in terms of quantity and quality than in a live classroom? (2) How educators situate personal experiences in online composition courses? (3) How personal experiences influence how women communicate with other students and the teacher in an online composition course?

Participants in this study must be adult women enrolled in ENG 101 or who have completed ENG 101. This research aims to improve learning for all individuals involved in online courses.

What does this study involve? The study will require you to complete a questionnaire. The questions will focus on what you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of writing online. The questionnaire will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable. There are no known risks to completing this study.

Is my participation voluntary? Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without pressure or consequence of any kind. To withdraw from the research please contact the researcher Ilka Luyt (luyt.ilka@queensu.ca; 613-353-2318). If you withdraw from the research, your responses will not be used in the study.

What will happen to my responses? Your responses will be confidential. Only I will have access to your responses. Course instructors will not know your responses. After filling out this initial questionnaire, you may be invited to participate in the second stage of the research. The results of this questionnaire may be used in future publications. Your responses will be retained for five years after which time it will be destroyed.

Will I be compensated for my participation? By answering this initial questionnaire, your name will be placed in a draw for one of fifteen $25 Best Buy gift certificates to be given away in all ENG 101 online courses this term. If you are invited to participate in the in-depth interviews and you accept, you will receive further monetary compensation.
What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Ilka Luyt at luyt.ilka@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Jane Chin at (613) 533-6000 ext. 74937, chinj@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca or to Professor XXX at 123-456-7890.

What do I do if I am interested in participating in this study? If you consent to participate in this questionnaire, please click on the consent decision below and begin the survey. Otherwise, you may exit the survey now. Each question in this initial questionnaire serves a role in the overall research. I thank you in advance for your careful consideration.

Ilka Luyt
English Instructor
Jefferson Community College
Watertown, NY 13601

Consent Decision

By selecting “I agree to participate” below you confirm that you:

1. Understand what is required based on reading the letter of information.
2. Understand that your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.
3. Understand the provisions for confidentiality.

- I agree to participate.
- I do not agree to participate.
APPENDIX D
Initial Questionnaire

Please provide your responses to the following questions:

1. My research focuses on how the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, essay-writing) is one way to explore our life experiences. Have you ever experienced a life problem or a disorienting dilemma and shared your experience with others in an online writing course?

2. Does writing about a personal experience change your perspective about the topic?

3. How does writing help you to see yourself, your experience, and/or your world in a new way?

4. In what ways does your gender influence what you share with others and how you express yourself in writing in online composition courses?

5. How does the online context influence your writing that is based on personal experiences?

6. What factors influence how and what you share with your teacher?

7. What influences what you write about and how you write it in an online writing course?

8. What is significant about your online class community that contributes to how you write about your life experiences?

9. In your mind, how is your own writing shaped by the entire online learning experience?

10. Do you feel comfortable writing about personal experiences in an online course? Why or why not?
11. Please provide me with an email and a phone number so that I can contact you if your name is drawn for the gift card and/or if you are interested in participating in an in-depth interview.
APPENDIX E
Letter of Consent for In-Depth Student Participant Interviews

Project Title: “In-between Spaces: A Study of the Influences of Gender and Technology on the Writing Process in Online Composition Courses”

Principal Researcher: Ilka Luyt, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University, (613-353-2318), luyt.ilka@queensu.ca.

Online education has provided women with increased opportunities to pursue higher education. Women who write essays online often introduce personal experiences into the unknown context of asynchronous learning. This study investigates the decisions that women make when they write for teachers and students in an online course for the purpose of making recommendations to course structure and policy decisions. This study will consist of interviews with female students and online writing instructors. As a participant, you will be asked a series of questions related to composition, gender, and technology in the online writing course. The interview will take place near the end of the course at a place convenient for you. The interview will be recorded with a digital audio recorder and will take less than one hour. Additionally, you may volunteer texts produced in an online writing courses to examine in the interviews (i.e discussions, brainstorming, outline, drafts). You will be compensated for your time with a gift card as a token of my appreciation. This study has been granted clearance according to the governmental and university required ethics guidelines.

There is no known risk associated with your participation in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw yourself and any of your statements from the interview at any time. You are not obliged to answer any question that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable.

Your identity will be kept confidential in all research material. The only individuals who will have access to your statements are my supervisors at Queen’s University. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible and your statements will not be connected to your name in any publication. Course instructors will not know your responses. Research results may be presented at conferences and/or published in academic journals. If you agree to the terms of this research, please sign your name at the end of this letter of consent.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Ilka Luyt at luyt.ilka@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca or to Professor XXX at 123-456-7890.

Yours Sincerely,
Ilka Luyt
English Instructor and Researcher

(continued)
I have read and retained the Letter of Consent that outlines the purpose of this research and my participation in the project. I have also had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction. I am willing to participate in this research and I understand that:

- My participation consists of a one-time interview by Ilka Luyt. This interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio recorded.
- My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time at which point any recorded data will be destroyed, if I desire it.
- I grant permission to use volunteered texts produced in an online writing course (i.e. discussion, brainstorming, outlines, drafts).
- My identity will be kept anonymous in all research material.
- I am not obliged to answer any questions that I find objectionable or that make me feel uncomfortable.
- Any questions about study participation may be directed to Ilka Luyt at luyt.ilka@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Jane Chin at (613) 533-6000 ext. 74937, chinj@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca or to Professor XXX at 123-456-7890.

PARTICIPANT’S NAME_________________________________________

SIGNATURE _________________________________________________

DATE _______________________________________________________

EMAIL/ADDRESS if you would like a copy of the results of the study.

_____________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________
APPENDIX F
Interview Guide for In-Depth Student Participant Interviews

General/Introductory Questions

- Tell me why you chose to take an online writing course rather than a live course offered on campus.
- What role does online learning play in helping you pursue higher education?
- What sorts of skills are necessary for success in an online course?
- What did you wish you knew before taking an online course?
- How does technology influence the social dynamics associated with learning online?
- How would you describe academic writing?
- How would you describe exploratory/self-reflective writing?
- When you need clarification about a writing assignment, do you follow your preexisting ideas about academic writing or do you seek input from your instructor or other students?
- What influences your online writing behaviors?

Gender and Composition

- How do you identify yourself?
- How does your gender contribute your sense of self?
- Do you change your identity online or for your audience?
- If you remain anonymous online, is that anonymity advantageous? Why?
- What influences what you write about and how you write it in an online writing course?
- What qualifies as personal experience?
- Is writing about personal experiences important to your writing goals? Why or why not?
What are some of the challenges of introducing personal life experiences into an online writing course, either in your own writing, in online group work, or with the instructor?

What makes you feel that your ideas are worthwhile/relevant in an online writing course?
How does trust contribute to what you say and how you write online?
To what degree does writing online allow you to explore the root causes of complex issues?
How do you make choices about your online language use during the pre-writing stage (outlines, drafts, discussions) and in the final documents that you share online?
Have you ever felt your words, essay topics, or ideas were honored/promoted in an online writing course?
What helps or hinders your written expression when enrolled in an online composition course?
Do you make assumptions about your teacher or your peers online?
Do you make conscious decisions about how you communicate online based on your audience awareness?
In your student experience, think of a time when you gained a greater awareness of life, culture, society, or power relations related to a personal life experience. In what ways does online learning encourage/help you to challenge or reflect on such experiences?
What does it mean to be “reflective” in an online writing course?

Online Learning and Composition

In what ways do asynchronous courses help or hinder your understanding of complex topics?
How does online learning engage you personally?
What about online learning helps you to see your life experiences differently?
- Is time a factor in how you engage with the online technology and the writing assignment? Please explain.
- Is it important for you to accomplish tasks quickly and move forward or do you take more time to reflect upon your writing choices?
- Do you find yourself spending more time dealing with online technology issues rather than dealing with the content of the course?
- In your estimation, does the online medium influence the choices you make throughout the writing process (brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising and editing).

**Concluding Questions**

- If you had a choice, would you take a live or an online writing course? Why?
- What are your largest concerns about writing essays online?
- What would you say to help other learners, particularly female students, who plan to take online courses?
APPENDIX G
Letter of Information and Consent for In-Depth Instructor Interviews

Project Title: “In-between Spaces: A Study of the Influences of Gender and Technology on the Writing Process in Online Composition Courses”

Principal Researcher: Ilka Luyt, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University, (613-353-2318), luyt.ilka@queensu.ca.

Online education has provided women with increased opportunities to pursue higher education. Women who write essays online often introduce personal experiences into the unknown context of asynchronous learning. This study investigates the decisions that women make when they write for teachers and students in an online course for the purpose of making recommendations to course structure and policy decisions. This study will consist of interviews with female students and online writing instructors. As a participant, you will be asked a series of questions related to composition, gender, and technology in the online writing course. The interview will take place near the end of the course at a place convenient for you. The interview will be recorded with a digital audio recorder or through Skype/email, and will take less than one hour. You will be compensated for your time with a gift card as a token of my appreciation. This study has been granted clearance according to governmental and university required ethics guidelines.

There is no known risk associated with your participation in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw yourself and any of your statements from the interview at any time. You are not obliged to answer any question that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable.

Your identity will be kept confidential in all research material. The only individuals who will have access to your statements are my supervisors at Queen’s University. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible and your statements will not be connected to your name in any publication. Research results may be presented at conferences and/or published in academic journals. If you agree to the terms of this research, please sign your name at the end of this letter of consent.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Ilka Luyt at luyt.ilka@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca or to Professor XXX at 123-456-7890.

Yours Sincerely,
Ilka Luyt
English Instructor and Researcher

(continued)
I have read and retained the Letter of Consent that outlines the purpose of this research and my participation in the project. I have also had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction. I am willing to participate in this research and I understand that:

- My participation consists of a one-time interview by Ilka Luyt. This interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio recorded.
- My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time at which point any recorded data will be destroyed, if I desire it.
- My identity will be kept anonymous in all research material.
- I am not obliged to answer any questions that I find objectionable or that make me feel uncomfortable.
- Any questions about study participation may be directed to Ilka Luyt at luyt.ilka@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Jane Chin at (613) 533-6000 ext. 74937, chinj@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to either the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca or to Professor XXX at 123-456-7890.

PARTICIPANT’S NAME_________________________________________
SIGNATURE _________________________________________________
DATE _______________________________________________________
EMAIL/ADDRESS if you would like a copy of the results of the study.

_____________________________________________________________
APPENDIX H

In-Depth Instructor Interview Guide

- In your mind, does the online environment encourage certain expectations or assumptions about academic writing?
- In your experience, does technology change the writing process or product?
- What do you find rewarding or frustrating about teaching writing online?
- How does teaching online influence how you present information, construct meanings, and encourage students to write?
- To what degree do you use Web 2.0 technologies (Google, Facebook, Twitter, hyperlinks, wikis, etc.)?
- In what ways does online teaching affect how students perceive of their own knowledge, authority, and/or reflectivity?
- To what degree do you view writing as linked to students’ identity? Do you think writing is linked to one’s gender?
- How is writing informed by the students’ prior life experiences?
- Tell me how you encourage students to explore their own identity and/or life experiences through the writing process?
- Tell me how you encourage students to discover their own writing voices online using technology?
- Do you notice any identifiable differences in how students, who can be identified by their gender, express themselves through writing activities (i.e. discussions, group work, brainstorming, sharing documents, etc.)?

- Does the gender distribution of the class influence the course dynamics?

- How do you make students feel that their ideas are worthwhile or relevant?

- How do you motivate students to share personal ideas/experiences online?

- In your opinion, what should an online teacher do to encourage students to use their own personal experiences in their academic writings?

- Are your aims for an online writing course focused on practicality, deep learning, or some other kind of learning?

- What are your largest concerns about online writing courses?