**Special Research Column:**
**Empathetic Genres, Empathetic Spaces, and Mentoring: Examining Contemporary Research on First-Generation College Students in First-Year Writing**

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## Introduction

This essay gives an overview of contemporary research on first-generation college students in higher education and shares pedagogical interventions that may best engage them in the classroom, thereby improving retention efforts. I have divided this essay into a number of sections. The first section shares recent information on the college readiness of first-generation college students, according to reports shared by the ACT and U.S. Department of Education. The second section details extant research within three areas of pedagogical intervention that can be used for engaging first-generation college students. These three areas include creating safe classroom spaces that allow for a greater empathetic discourse among both student groups: first-generation college students and multiple generation college students; genres that may work best to help ease students who demonstrate less college readiness into relevant academic discourse communities; and creating stronger opportunities for mentorship for first-generation college students. This research is shared in hopes that instructors of writing can use this research to further improve the academic engagement of first-generation college students by creating a first-generation pedagogy in the writing classroom.

## First-Generation College Students and College Readiness

According to recent U.S. national statistics, "first-generation college students are a population that has continued to grow since the 1920s" (National Center for Educational Statistics, para 2). A study published in 2012 shared that "roughly one-third of enrolled undergraduate students are considered to be first-generation college students" (U.S. Department of Education, para 4). The reason for this growth since the 1920s is largely due to the influx of students enrolling in college after World War I, with more enrolling after the GI Bill became instituted after World War II. Because of the consistent growth of this population in universities, developing first-generation pedagogies is necessary in order to address the needs of first-generation college students to help them grow as writers and see themselves as academically productive scholars in the university system. Furthermore, to create opportunities for mentorship, teachers need to understand the multiple identities these students hold in the classroom and beyond. If a teacher is aware of these diverse identities, that teacher can better instruct these students, and perhaps improve the students' motivations and attitudes toward academic writing assignments.

Universities receive information on how many incoming freshmen are first-generation college students through answers provided on standardized tests. American College Testing (ACT) assessment is a college readiness evaluation that tests high school students for college readiness and asks students to identify the highest level of education for each parent. Because the information from the ACT is sent to the university the students plan to attend, the universities do have this data. The data from the ACT in 2013 shown that "just over half (52%) of high school

ACT test takers who would be first-generation college students failed to meet any of the ACT College Readiness benchmarks" (Adams para 2). This data shows that there is a need for further educating and engaging first-generation college students in our college-level classrooms that goes beyond placing these students in academic support services. These students must first be supported in our classrooms as they can be identified as a high-risk population, according to the data shared by the ACT.

Examining the college readiness of first-generation college students through ACT data is of interest because the data shares appropriate college readiness benchmarks in four key areas: Mathematics, Science, English, and Reading. As for how many first-generation college students may be entering our college classrooms for fall semester of 2015, the "national 2015 ACT-tested graduating class had 18% potential first-generation college students, or whose parents did not enroll in postsecondary education" (ACT 3). In 2014, data showed that most first-generation college students did not meet appropriate ACT College Readiness benchmarks. First-generation college students had 70% not meeting ACT College Readiness benchmarks in Mathematics and Science (ACT "Conditions of College Readiness: First Generation" 5). In testing ACT College Readiness benchmarks in Reading, 63% of first-generation college students did not meet appropriate benchmarks, whereas 47% did not meet appropriate benchmarks for English (ACT, "Conditions of College Readiness: First Generation" 5). Of the first-generation college students who took the ACT in 2014, only 9% of these students demonstrated college readiness in all four areas (ACT, "Conditions of College Readiness: First Generation" 14). Because of the presence of first-generation college students in our classrooms, with many of them not meeting college-

readiness benchmarks, we as teachers of first-year writing need to create spaces where these

students can feel academically and socially supported. Furthermore, the final acknowledgement

for change shared by the ACT College Readiness white paper was a call to action that argued for

"federal, state, and local policy makers and agency heads to support the readiness of *all* students

for college or career" (ACT 17, italics theirs). This call to action demonstrates the need for

further academic support of all students. To create this need for potential support, I've researched

three key areas: empathetic genres, empathetic spaces, and development toward mentorship

opportunities to help create key criteria for developing pedagogical interventions that may meet

the needs of first-generation college students. All these areas provide ways of extending support

to first-generation college students through working with their peers and the instructor to help

them succeed in a college environment. Many of the areas I examine are areas that could

potentially help improve the lower scores first-generation college students receive in their

writing and English, scores that are typically lower than their peers, according to data shared

above from the ACT.

## The First-Generation College Student Pedagogy in Three Areas: Empathetic Spaces, Empathetic Genres, and Mentorship Opportunities

### *Empathetic Genres in the First-Year Writing Classroom*

Because of the unique and diverse individual and cultural backgrounds of first-generation college students, it may at first seem that creating a classroom pedagogy that benefits all of them will be difficult. However, as Engle and Tinto emphasize, teachers need to find ways to "focus on increasing interaction and engagement in the classroom to make use of the only time some of these students spend on campus" (4). With this concern in mind, there are pedagogical strategies a teacher may use to help promote learning and engagement of students who may not have met all the benchmarks for learning, such as seen in the ACT data. These pedagogical interventions may work to ease students toward more rational and academic discourses later in their academic careers. In this sense, employing a first-generation college student sensitive pedagogy in the first-year writing classroom may help to better engage the first-generation college student population. With increasing engagement, it may also be possible to see increasing motivation and attitudes toward writing tasks from these students. A first-generation writing pedagogy focuses on the teaching of empathetic genres, such as memoir and ethnography, establishing empathetic spaces for a meaningful, emotional exchange between first-generation college students, teacher, and peers, and creating mentorship opportunities for first-generation college students. When teachers employ writing assignments that are empathetically designed, teachers

also create environments where spaces of community can be created. These spaces of community can include writing labs, peer review groups, and student and teacher writing conferences. These empathetic spaces also build opportunities for mentorship opportunities, an important element of future academic success for many first-generation college students because of their diverse needs in navigating an unfamiliar academic environment.

One of the pedagogical goals for engaging first-generation college students is to provide them with genres that are familiar and reflective, giving first-generation college students the opportunity to ease into seeing themselves as academically productive scholars. One way to engage these students might be to include teaching genres that may be more comfortable or familiar to first-generation college students. These genres would be more personal in nature, such as a personal narrative or memoir assignment. As Nancy Mack has found in an assignment she calls the "meaningful memoir," in giving more familiar, reflective writing tasks, first-generation college students have the potential to show increased motivation and a more positive attitude toward writing assignments because of the personal nature of the genre (28-29). First-generation college students will likely better approach a more personal writing assignment as compared to a writing assignment these students may view as academic in nature. Nancy Mack has researched and taught ways of creating a memoir assignment, introducing concepts such as source use into students' more personal writing. Mack's goal in her work was to engage student writers who feel they are not up to par with their college peers, a characteristic that defines many first-generation college students. Mack writes that first-generation and working-class students "frequently have trouble imagining themselves as scholars" ("Ethical Representations of

Working Class Lives" 53). Mack also reminds teachers about how "a student's motive to write is more important than the parameters of an assigned writing task" ("Writing for Change" 24). Because of some students' inability to imagine themselves as scholars, it is important to give these students motivation and encouragement to write and not just focus merely on the assigned criteria of a writing assignment. Instead, teachers must allow students who are first-generation to grow and develop as writers, and instill within them a motivation to write, before concerning the student too heavily on not meeting selected writing task parameters.

To encourage students to write, Mack created an assignment that asks students to focus on a topic they find interesting, and one they have experienced, but an assignment that also asks these students to engage in using academic and other outside sources. Assignments such as this one can be found in Mack's meaningful memoir assignment. In creating assignments such as the meaningful memoir, Mack is attempting to help first-generation college students "locate an academic voice" by joining their own experiences with researched history and folklore from their home areas ("Writing for Change" 26). Mack also argues that writing teachers need to spend time "constructing the premise for writing and allowing students to help design some elements of the assigned tasks to promote student ownership" ("Writing for Change" 28). Mack's arguments for writing engagement provide direct ways to motivate and encourage positive attitudes surrounding writing tasks for first-generation college students. Mack's research is motivated by engaging the unique needs of working-class students; however, it is important to realize many first-generation college students come from different kinds of working-class, or low-income, backgrounds. As Davis notes, some discrepancies between these two populations exist, primarily

concerning their different reasons for attaining higher education. Davis shows how low-income students have a "survivalist attitude" toward their education, meaning an education is seen as a means to a better paying job and therefore being able to attain a better life (67). Meanwhile, Davis argues, first-generation college students see education as a symbol of status and that they feel "relatively entitled to a college education," whereas multiple generation college students reportedly feel "fully entitled to a college education whether or not they have prepared themselves for one" (67). Davis takes much of this research from sociologists Richard Ochberg and William Comeau's theories on important life decision-making, including analysis of why people attend college (66). Despite various reasons for attending college, both populations need the types of pedagogical engagement that allow them to work with familiar writing genres to begin to feel ownership of their writing. Mack argues that the pedagogical concepts she suggests for writing teachers will help first-generation college students feel as if they are scholars, or academically engaged in their writing tasks.

A memoir or personal narrative assignment can become an instrumental genre for a first-generation college student because it is what I term to be an *empathetic genre*. A memoir is an example of what I term an *empathetic genre*, or a genre that creates a space for a student to personally reflect on his or her experiences through writing and share them with others, such as the instructor, while also learning valuable academic writing skills, such as secondary source use and the ability to successfully integrate outside knowledge and ideas. While the memoir is a self-reflective genre, and can be seen as a confidence-building writing assignment, the memoir can also function as an empathetic genre because of the nature of sharing experiences between

student writer and teacher, and occasionally between the student writer and their classroom peers. While memoirs can be intensely, and perhaps at times painfully personal, it is important to allow students a space for reflection in the writing classroom, even if that reflection is merely on their writing process for a particular assignment or if the reflection isn't necessarily shared with others in the classroom. This reflection will allow students greater space to raise their own awareness of themselves as writers and help them start on their journey to seeing themselves as academic writers as well.

One important role of genres like the memoir is that they allow for self-reflection. Mack shares the importance of having students reflect on their lives and work because "reflection can help us link theory to practice, enabling both teachers and students the agency to make conscious changes for the better," a skill that is particularly important to instill prior to students moving into more complex writing tasks within the classroom environment (Mack 74). Assignments that encourage reflection, like memoirs, also serve as a good starting point for a teacher to get to know students and help students get comfortable with the writing process before the students move onto more complex writing tasks. Having students reflect on the familiar in writing may help students feel more comfortable about a particular writing task; however, first-generation college students have a hard time envisioning themselves as college writers who are aware of academic writing conventions. Because first-generation college students have difficulties envisioning themselves as academic writers, a unique situation surfaces in finding ways to have first-generation college students write from their own experiences and viewpoints. In doing this,

they also learn academic writing conventions through memoir assignments that ask them to think critically about their experiences to help motivate them in further writing tasks.

Motivating first-generation college students in personal writing tasks, such as memoir, is not the only way to teach the writing process to first-generation college students. The research of compositionists, such as Seth Kahn, has shown how ethnographic assignments help guide students toward socially reflective writing, which is another example of an empathetic genre. Seth Kahn, in his unpublished dissertation, describes how ethnography assignments create democratic space in the writing classroom (8). Kahn argues that assigning ethnographic writing assignments allows students to learn about other cultural identities and the social barriers those groups experience. In interviewing people from other cultural backgrounds and social experiences Kahn argues, "students develop an empathetic stance toward these populations leading to social reflective action" (22). For example, Kahn notes instances where students volunteer time and energies to organizations that focus on the populations they studied. Kahn also points out that sometimes students form bonds with their interview subjects that continue beyond the classroom exercise and "extend into cultural and social spaces of the participants choosing" (25). Kahn's research establishes ethnographies as useful assignments in helping students empathize with diverse identities outside of their own cultural spaces.

Kahn also gives a contextual framework for teaching ethnographic assignments to first-year writing students. Kahn's discussion of the rationale and context for teaching ethnographic writing assignments gives an example of ethnography as an empathetic genre assignment that helps build a first-generation pedagogy in the first-year writing classroom for all students. Kahn

argues that ethnographic writing introduces students to the varied tasks of writing, such as analysis and synthesis, but also "highlights and emphasizes human relationships between participants and researchers" making the genre an empathetic genre ("Putting Ethnographic Writing in Context" 176). When ethnographic writing is successful, Kahn notes, the assignment can help students navigate relationships between different populations and improve the understanding students have of the different lives of people (176). Like Kahn, I believe this learning objective creates a meaningful experience for first-generation college students where they can work with familiar concepts, such as reflection and relationships, and also learn more about different cultures and populations.

Along with a deeper understanding of different populations, first-generation college students would also learn more about the writing process with ethnographic writing assignments. Kahn argues "because ethnographies require students to complete a number of tasks related to writing—such as interviews, field notes, pre-writing tasks, keeping a journal, among other tasks—first generation college students would become familiar with the multifaceted processes involved in academic writing" (176-77). Ethnographic writing assignments also help teach first-generation college students how to organize research, compile data, synthesize information, and communicate effectively, along with numerous other tasks associated with the writing process. Most importantly, the process of ethnographic writing is recursive, meaning first-generation college students will learn the workings of the writing process, instead of thinking of academic writing merely as creating a finished product, which also helps highlight revision as a key writing skill. Most writing teachers will tell you that students sometimes see revision as merely

editing a paper for clarity, instead of making contextual changes. Ethnographic writing may be a

key player in helping writers, particularly first-generation college student writers, see revision as

a recursive, continuing process because ethnography requires ethical writing practices. For

instance, students must not only research a specific community, like a community outside of

their own familiar community, but also be ethical in how they represent that community. This

means revision may focus on issues of context and content, rather than on proofreading practices.

Ethnographies also supply students with a real-life contextual situation where first-generation

students may learn more about how writing helps us view and shape communities in the public

sphere.

Like Kahn, fellow composition researcher David Seitz also argues that ethnographies

create powerful spaces where students can "critically analyze cultures and engage in their own

theory-building" (220). Seitz doesn't directly link what he shares about ethnography assignments

to first-generation college students specifically, but does note how these assignments can help

engage students who may not be exposed to outside cultural groups, which could benefit some

first-generation college students who grew up in closed-knit communities or students who may

not have experienced a wide range of cultural differences. In Seitz's conception of ethnographic

assignments, students critically analyze different discourse communities to understand the

complexities of identity and different social groups. Seitz argues how "ethnographic assignments

help students examine the power relations, social structures, and group dynamics that exist in

different social situations" (222). In completing these tasks, first-generation college students can

better understand the social and political power structures that exist outside of their own social

experiences. Not only do first-generation college students learn about outside experiences, but learning about the outside experiences of other populations and cultures help students better reflect on their own power and privilege (or lack of it), especially as individuals who will one day achieve a college education. Giving first-generation college students the opportunity to engage in analyzing power relations and social and group dynamics creates a powerful case for using ethnography to better engage first-generation, or working-class, college students. Ethnography allows students to critique and examine the social power structures that create economic and social capital barriers for first-generation college students and other minority students, allowing for reflection on power, privilege, and class status. With this in mind, it is possible to combine this type of teaching with critical pedagogical methods.

### *Empathetic Spaces in the First-Year Writing Classroom*

In working with first-year students who are often new to the college environment and some students living away from family members for the first time, emotions can be commonplace in the first-year writing classroom. Emotions can especially play a role in situations where expressive styles of writing are at play, such as with memoir or personal narrative assignments where students share stories of struggle and loss. It is important to remember that emotions are not foreign to the first-year writing classroom, where much of the pedagogy involves active learning strategies, such as peer review, small group work, and class discussion about the personal and political. As a rationale for this, composition professor and researcher Janet Bean draws on lessons learned in instructing first-year writers at Akron to argue

that, "emotion can function as a powerful tactic when introduced to academic discourse because it disrupts—at least for a moment—the privileged position of rationality" (104). By giving an opportunity for affective discourse in the writing classroom, an empathetic space is developed where teachers can encourage students to share affective discourses around topics before moving on to a more academic, rational discourse.

Along with Janet Bean, Julie Lindquist has focused her work on the experiences of working-class students and examining rhetorical structures in the classroom that aid in building what she terms *strategic empathy*. Lindquist writes of the importance of emotional connection and emotional displays in the writing classroom, especially when a teacher is working with working-class and first-generation college students. Lindquist's goal, and a goal that can be extended to all teachers of first-generation college students, is "to provide an inquiry into how teachers might perform emotional engagements that students find authentic" (188). Learning how to position us as teachers of writing to open up space for emotional discourses is pertinent to the success of our underprepared students in the first-year writing classroom, especially when working with first-generation college students who may value a more emotional discourse over an academic discourse because of their familiarity with more emotional types of discourse. Allowing space for emotional discourse, within the space typically reserved for academic discourse, becomes necessary. This need opens up a gateway for creating what I term empathetic spaces.

Empathetic spaces and empathetic genres must work together. Empathetic genres work to connect first-generation college students to the multifaceted process of writing, as well as work

with informal and formal types of writing, but in order for empathetic genres to be supported, *empathetic spaces* need to be a part of the first-year writing curriculum. I define *empathetic spaces* as areas of support in a first-year writing classroom where students are encouraged to discuss and share personal experiences, along with sharing their experiences as writers, with other peers and the teacher in a supportive environment. In creating empathetic spaces, one factor that is important is to have all students consciously and continually practice listening rhetoric within the space of the classroom. Wayne Booth describes listening rhetoric as paying attention to opposing views and "listen to the other side and listening even harder to our own responses" (Booth 21). In practicing listening rhetoric in the classroom, it is imperative we create classroom policies where differences are listened to, but where we also pay the same, if not more attention, to our own biases. With this practice in mind, it is obvious that empathetic spaces may occur best through teacher support and encouragement with the teacher working to foster the classroom as a space where students can openly discuss current events and their personal reactions to daily events, but also discuss their motivations and attitudes toward various writing assignments and their conditions. While empathy is something a teacher cannot necessarily teach to students, creating spaces and moments to encourage empathy is something a teacher can design within a classroom, such as by creating course policies designed around this practice and by encouraging open sharing in the space of the classroom.

To further describe empathetic spaces, looking at Mary Louise Pratt's essay "The Art of the Contact Zone" becomes useful. Pratt defines "contact zone" as "social spaces where disparate cultures clash, meet, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of

domination" (Pratt 16). The contact zone is an important concept to be aware of as teachers of

first-generation college students because frequently first-generation college students enter our

classrooms with different values and a different understanding of the purpose of higher

education, as compared to the values and perceptions of their multiple generation peers. For

example, Jeff Davis has shown that first-generation college students see higher education as a

way to a better life and often make very thoughtful choices about majors (67). His research has

also found that many first-generation, low-income students typically choose majors in STEM

fields, as these fields have a good chance of career stability and are known to be higher paying

careers (28).  This research indicates that many students may come with different attitudes

toward the college experience but, if the classroom commits to practicing listening rhetoric, it

may be possible to create the classroom into a more empathetic space and open gateways to more

effective communication within the contact zone of the classroom.

Another way to negotiate contact zones is through centering the curriculum on working

to create empathetic spaces in the physical space of the classroom. Davis describes the

importance of negotiating the physical space of the classroom for first-generation college

students because "the physical space [of the classroom and campus] can make the acclimation

process more difficult for first-generation college students, even exacerbating feelings of

confusion and isolation" (65). It is important to remember that the numerous, open spaces of a

college campus can remind first-generation college students of the loneliness and isolation they

may be experiencing. Because of the potential of first-generation college students feeling

confused or isolated within the spaces of the college environment, creating a space of empathetic

practice within the classroom may be imperative to first-generation college student success. To

understand how empathetic spaces can function in the classroom, look at Jeff Grabill's analysis

of the classroom as a space not just filled by the technologies of table and chairs, but also a space

filled by a multitude of attitudes, opinions, and experiences (Grabill 465). Grabill refers to this as

the classroom's inherent infrastructure, which Grabill notes is something beyond just a static

space, but instead is a space constantly in flux, in movement. Because part of a teacher's job

exists to negotiate the multifarious movements of the classroom, creating empathetic spaces in

the classroom can be a strategy to better engage first-generation college students. Empathetic

spaces are spaces where instances of community open up that can directly engage all

participants.

In researching ways to engage first-generation college students, it is worthy to examine

work within disability studies. Margaret Price's work in disability studies provides the

inspiration for creating these community-opening spaces. Price describes what she calls a

"*kairotic space* in the classroom where most or all of the following factors should be present: a

real time unfolding of events, impromptu communication that is required or encouraged, in-

person contact, a strong social element, and a high stakes learning situation" ("Ways to Move"

Price, 61). Price values most or all of these factors because "the classroom boundaries are neither

rigid nor objectively determined as such instances can occur in online discussions that do not

exhibit in-person interactions" and also shares, "attention to relations of power is of great

importance in understanding kairotic space, as is recognition that different participants in kairotic

spaces will perceive those relations differently" (61). Price is arguing that instructors must value

the space of the classroom as a space for communication and a sharing of common goals, hence developing a potential space of empathetic development through the interactions from participants and differences of authority between the participants. In other words, teachers need to be aware of the changes of attitudes, perception, and knowledge that exist within the space of the classroom in order to create an effective learning environment for all students.

My concept of empathetic spaces in the classroom is slightly is similar to Price's notion of kairotic spaces. Instructors need to be aware and attuned to potential differences in the classroom, and be a good listener to those specific needs and differences. This is partially why I advocate for instituting low-stakes writing assignments that ask for personal reactions to written assignments and other ideas while in the classroom environment. In this sense, instead of always asking students to participate in high-stakes learning situations where they are graded solely on papers and verbal classroom participation, I argue for low-stakes learning, at least at the start of the semester, in efforts to help students, especially first-generation college students, to begin to learn to move in academic discourse communities. For example, the previous research shared from Mack and Kahn all relate that having students work on low-stakes assignments first, such as the memoir, can help underprepared students begin to feel more adept at academic writing tasks, allowing the class to move on to more complex writing assignments. Because of this previous research, I focus more on low-stakes tasks because low-stakes tasks better encourage participation from students who may not have much confidence to share their ideas. This practice allows students to feel free to fail, falter, and learn in an environment that isn't focused on high-stakes writing tasks where a large percentage of their grade may be affected. These low-stakes

tasks will also allow students to start to build rhetorical knowledge and practice before moving

on to more complex assignments, such as a research paper. Low-stakes learning also opens up

in-class writing and discursive practice, such as think-pair-share activities that work to invite

more student participation.

To give an example of creating a low-stakes environment, an example that can be shared

is something that an instructor can do at the start of class. To begin class, an instructor could

create what Michael A. Nussbaum terms a "conversation starter" or "note starter," which are

specific prompts that create student discussion and participation around the day's topic or lesson

(Nussbaum 116). The conversation starters can be simple, such as an "I need to understand"

statement that encourages further discussion and questions surrounding a topic. These can also

be more complex, allowing students to share thesis statements or main arguments they are

making in their paper. Students can share these arguments and have the instructor and other

students in class help them fine-tune the argument or even present counter-arguments to the topic

the student is proposing. With the instructor as a guide, the conversation starter would encourage

participation from all students and also teach these students about academic and democratic

discourses.

To better encourage democratic discourse, a discussion around personal, social, and

cultural identities could be useful in creating the classroom as an empathetic space. Irvin

Peckham, for example, is a composition scholar who is well known for his progressive

ideologies in teaching and learning in the classroom. In his book, Peckham argues for more

clarity and critique in the writing classroom when teachers discuss different social identities.

Peckham also argues for the importance of teachers themselves to critique their own social identities, and often admits that while he aims for progressive ideologies in the classroom, he also knows he is speaking from a position of privilege (19). Peckham furthers his argument by sharing relevant data regarding college completion rates from low-income students, many of who are first-generation college students: "one out of fifteen students in the low-income quartile make it through college, compared to one out of two from the higher income quartile" (5). If a teacher is open to examining and interrogating his or her privilege, however, it can open an empathetic space for students and the instructor to discuss their own privileges, or lack of privileges, which could become an empathizing activity for first-generation college students and their multiple generation college student peers in how each begin to see how the other is affected by privilege.

As teachers of writing, we need to encourage creating a space for emotional discourse, and have students know that the classroom is a safe space for this type of sharing, meaning nothing a student will say will be shared outside of the space of the classroom. A way to create this emotional discourse can be by sharing personal experiences with personal positions of privilege. By interrogating privilege, first-generation college students can also start to interrogate class and class systems. Peckham defines class as "a system of social relationships within which people act toward each other, sorting each other on the basis of occupation, level of authority, assets, level of education, and social relationships" (26). Identifiers of class, as listed by Peckham, are useful contexts for first-generation college students to utilize in analyzing and observing social and cultural barriers they may face. By analyzing these barriers, multiple generation college students could come to understand first-generation peers better, according to

Peckham's argument. Furthermore, for first-generation college students, the opportunity to provide a cultural critique of their status, whether related to their educational background or not, presents an important analytical skill in that it combines personal perception with outside knowledge leading to the ability to synthesize information with the ultimate goal to help first-generation college students become academic writers.

Many expressivist methods in writing may help underprepared students grow more comfortable with writing because expressivist methods, as Elbow posits, are not "focused on writing correctly," as much as they are focused on "getting started with the act of writing" (23). Elbow's overarching advice focuses on the "process of writing" and not necessarily on correctness, which can possibly move first-generation student writers out of their writing anxiety, if they have any writing anxieties (31). Instituting expressivist writing methods is valuable because it may be that key in unlocking the door toward more extensive writing practices in the academy. After all, expressivist writing is focused on finding the "authentic self" of the writer, which may be of interest to first-generation college students who are new and unfamiliar with academic writing genres, and may help them progress into more unfamiliar writing genres later on (Elbow 73). Further, these writing mechanisms may help first-generation college students unlock an empathetic discourse with other students toward their own experiences and motivations. For example, if a first-generation college student is given an opportunity to share a focused freewrite on her educational experiences, other multiple generation college students may start to express their own educational backgrounds and privilege allowing them to better

recognize the needs of their first-generation peers. This exercise may also help instructors better evaluate the needs of first-generation college students in their classrooms.

Another important way to build empathetic spaces in the first-year writing classroom is to begin class with students writing a freewrite about their responses to a prompt and having students discuss their responses in small groups and later with the class as a whole. Peter Elbow describes freewrites as a significant genre for getting students to become more comfortable with writing tasks as "freewrites introduce students to the *process* of writing" (14, italics Elbow). In using short freewrites, an instructor encourages participation from more introverted or alienated students who may have to think more about a response before they share it with a small group before moving on to share their thoughts with the class. In this way, freewrites can build empathetic spaces in the first-year writing classroom by promoting self-reflection and group discussion among different personality types.

Elbow posits that freewriting activities are also useful to help less academically prepared students become more aware of the writing process and writing strategies (16). Elbow suggests that freewrites are useful to underprepared students because it gives them a chance to write outside the confines of a graded assignment, allowing for a low-stakes writing opportunity. Freewrites give underprepared students a chance to practice writing in an environment outside of formal, high-stakes assignments while also being among other peers who are involved in the same tasks, with the support of a teacher in the room. Freewrites provide a unique writing experience for first-generation college students that are typically enacted in first-year writing pedagogy.

To better articulate how expressivist writing methods may appeal to students, examining the work of Lad Tobin may be useful. Tobin accounts for the benefits of instituting expressivist styles of writing instruction in the writing classroom. Tobin posits that in focusing on the process of writing, "students will adopt more productive attitudes and practice (e.g. starting earlier, employing freewriting and other invention strategies, seeking feedback, relying on revision, to name a few) that may take time to integrate but that will remain long after the course has ended" (12). Process pedagogies, or expressivist writing pedagogies, are of use in the first-year writing classroom, particularly in regards for first-generation college students because, if these student populations do feel underprepared for college, the process pedagogies can help these underprepared college writers develop strategies for writing. Tobin further argues that while concepts such as "positivist notions of agency, authorship, voice, and self may be philosophically naïve, they can still be pedagogically powerful" (15). In other words, Tobin is arguing a student writer can find moments during the writing process where she thinks she has an authentic voice in her writing style that is entirely her own creation, and did not originate, or finds itself subject to, a certain discourse community. If someone is a beginning writer, it may be beneficial to them to feel that they have some authority over their writing style. From this feeling of authority and perhaps confidence, they can begin to grow as a writer, and start to learn more complex forms of academic discourse as they progress through their lives as college writers.

Criticisms of expressivist pedagogies persist, despite the benefits some students may draw from the classroom practice of expressivist writing. Writing teachers view expressivist-style writing methodologies as outdated. Tobin discusses how many writing instructors argue it

is outdated because of its inherent "focus on the writer as a singular, autonomous self" (12). In this sense, some instructors view expressivist modes of teaching writing as perhaps not useful to student academic writing development since these tasks focus more on personal writing than academic writing. The most cited concept of this critique of expressivist writing methods comes from David Bartholomae. In his argument, Bartholomae writes of the importance of introducing students to "academic discourse" and "academic styles of writing" immediately so that they learn to "appropriate specialized kinds of academic discourse" (456). While I find Bartholomae's insistence thought-provoking, I also feel that because of the under preparedness of first-generation college students (and other students as well), it is important for writing instructors to offer a number of writing methodologies to their students in hopes of successfully engaging as many students as possible. Therefore, I do not want teachers of writing to forget Bartholomae's advice and still insist that students work on developing the discourses that are necessary to the academic and professional communities they will enter. In conclusion, I find all these methods of teaching writing valuable, in one way or another, but also contextual. When it comes to teaching first-generation college students, using a variety of methods while also scaffolding these methods may prove most useful. For example, it may be beneficial to start a writing assignment with expressive methods, like freewriting activities, before moving on to more critical methods, like unpacking genre. These methodologies can be used to help create a space where students can freely share ideas and learn to be comfortable in academic spaces.

One academic and teacher who examined how to create such empathetic spaces in the academy is Julie Lindquist, a professor of Rhetoric, Writing, and American Culture at Michigan

State University. Lindquist has focused her work on the experiences of working-class students and examining rhetorical structures in the classroom that aid in building what she terms *strategic empathy*. Lindquist writes of the importance of emotional connection and display in the writing classroom, especially when a teacher is working with working-class and first-generation college students. Lindquist's goal and purpose in her essay is "to provide an inquiry into how teachers might perform emotional engagements that students find authentic" (188). As Lindquist notes, the composition classroom has often been a place of "rational inquiry" and treated as a largely middle-class enterprise where students learn the beginnings of academic and professional discourses (188-89). In reality, however, a fair amount of emotional labor takes place in a first-year writing classroom, as Irvin Peckham and Peter Elbow have sought to illustrate.

As argued in the extant research, providing students an opportunity to practice their emotional labor in the first-year writing classroom opens up a space for first-generation college students to rhetorically practice and analyze their affective responses and better move on to more formal, academic critiques. By giving an opportunity for affective discourse in the writing classroom, an empathetic space is developed where teachers can encourage students to share affective discourses around topics before moving on to a more academic, rational discourse. This activity is particularly useful to first-generation college students who may not immediately value rational, academic discourses, or be as familiar with them as they are with more pathos-inspired rhetorical appeals. The instructional concept that Lindquist, Bean, and other pedagogues for emotional discourse in first-year writing argue for is that if students understand their own emotional responses to events and topics, these students, particularly first-generation college

students, are better able to rationally analyze these events in later assignments and in-class activities.

Lindquist's work is of relevance in discussing pedagogical imperatives for first-generation college students because her work shows emotional responses are useful in moving underprepared students toward academic and logos-related responses. As I'll discuss further along in this essay, and have discussed previously, much of the research surrounding first-generation college students argues for the positive, instructional use of pathos arguments and appeals for instructing academic writing to first-generation college students and other underprepared college students. Many teachers also view emotional rhetoric as less important than rational appeals because these teachers consider emotionality not as a logical response, but simply an emotional one distant from logic. One must remember that pathos is still a rhetorical construct worthy of inquiry and a rhetorical approach that is highly valued by working-class students and first-generation college students because of the students' familiarity. While Lindquist describes no clear methodology for developing a framework for incorporating strategic empathy that other writing instructors can use, she does effectively argue that primarily emotional rhetoric and building spaces for empathetic discussion in the writing classroom is important to the intellectual development of all students.

*Creating Opportunities for Mentorship in the First-Year Writing Classroom*

A third area providing a potential pedagogical intervention for first-generation college students is in creating opportunities for mentorship in the first-year writing classroom. To create spaces where mentorship practices may happen, emotion again plays an important role. For example, Julie Lindquist's focus on empathetic pedagogical approaches in the writing classroom can create a strong starting point to help a teacher put students into stable, productive, small peer groups, a teaching strategy that could help first-generation college students acclimate to the academic classroom setting. These stable, small peer groups can serve as mentorship gateways for first-generation college students because it will pair these students with multiple generation college peers who can help first-generation college students adjust to the busy college life the university culture creates. Lindquist's work shows the importance of connecting with students in the classroom and how that connection can help build empathetic spaces. These empathetic spaces can be used to engage students in small, productive peer groups to help and guide students in their academic writing practices. Creating small peer groups for in-class writing assignments is also be beneficial for engaging first-generation students in helping these students maintain positive motivation and attitudes toward writing. By creating peer groups that remain throughout the semester, first-generation students can create interpersonal networks and learn from multiple college generation peers.

Creating interpersonal networks between multiple college generation peers and first-generation peers is an important gateway toward mentorship, which is the third and final pedagogical imperative for improving the instruction of first-generation college students. For

example, Pascerella posits in discussing the effect of mentoring on students that, "mentoring

first-generation college students helps students feel more connected and engaged on campus,

which can ultimately improve student outcomes" (547). The data shared earlier in this chapter on

results from the ACT demonstrate that any mentoring contact that we, as college instructors, can

do to help engage first-generation college students is crucial, since these students are shown to be

the least academically prepared of their peer cohorts. For instance, some first-generation college

students also tend to feel isolated from family members who have never attended college and

therefore cannot relate to their struggles while in college. Many first-generation college students

also find difficulties in navigating the diverse structures of the university, both socially and

occasionally in navigating the university academically. Because of these and other situations,

building mentorship practices into the first-year writing classroom can serve as a much-needed

support in the lives of first-generation college students.

Before discussing mentorship, I must discuss what the term "mentor" implies. Tiffany R.

Wang's research argues that a mentor is one who conveys a "memorable message about the

importance of education to a first-generation college student" (335). Wang notes mentors can be

on-campus or off-campus, but are typically on-campus individuals, such as teachers, fellow

students, or advisors. Pascerella defines a mentor as one who connects the first-generation

college student with the campus community (546). A mentor is one who helps connect students

academically and socially with the multifaceted experience of the writing classroom and the

wider higher education experience. In this definition, a mentor doesn't have to be the instructor.

A mentor could be a fellow student who has more social capital and academic experience than

the first-generation college student in question. The important aspect to realize is that mentorship has an important role for the first-generation college student and often is the key to that student's academic success because of the lack of familial support or academic and social capital.

One way to create positive mentorship practices is through the incorporation of peer groups. Peer groups create a support system for these first-generation college students inside the classroom, which can perhaps extend outside the classroom as well. These support systems can help positively motivate first-generation college students in their writing tasks leading them toward academic writing success. The research done by Jessica M. Dennis, Jean Phinney, and Lizette Chuateco, for example, argues for the importance of peer networks for first-generation students in the classroom. For instance, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco argue that peer groups will help increase motivation and help first-generation college students better adjust to college life (224-25). In their study, they found that the "support of peers, even when compared to the support of parents, was more important to the success of first-generation college students' academic success and retention" (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 226). This finding supports the concept that in creating strong peer networks in the classroom environment, such as through instituting static peer review groups, writing instructors can help better support first-generation college students in their classrooms.

The important role of mentorship in a first-generation college student's life is not limited to peer networking as the teacher or instructor also serves an important role. In researching engagement and retention of first-generation college students, K.M. Soria and M.J. Stebleton found that positive mentorship by the instructor helps first-gen students see the instructor as a

"real person" if that instructor engaged the first-gen student in "informal interactions" outside of classroom tasks (682). By viewing the instructor as a person, Soria and Stebleton found that the first-generation student was more likely to use the instructor as a resource in navigating the diverse networks of academic culture, causing the first-gen student to be more successful in their academic pursuits.

What are some ways an instructor can create "informal intereactions" outside of the classroom? On suggestion includes holding one-on-one writing conferences with students. In conferencing with students on their writing, instructors can begin to create that "real person" role for the first-generation college student. One-on-one student-teacher conferences are often considered a hallmark or a signature pedagogy in the context of first-year writing because it allows for real-time feedback and in-person discussion of a student's progress in the course. These instances are particularly beneficial to first-generation college students' motivation and attitudes toward writing because student-teacher conferences play into the students' personal beliefs regarding in-person, straightforward communication. Mottet and Bebe, in their study regarding student-teacher relationships, argue that the teacher-student relationship can "create shared meanings regarding the positivity of the educational experience" and thereby aid in motivation and attitudes toward writing tasks through the writing conference (299). Conferences also give the opportunity for first-generation college students to ask questions and voice concerns in a space away from the classroom environment, thus creating its own empathetic space, if you will. In conferences, the student and teacher can discuss aspects related to the class

in a that space the first-generation student may feel more comfortable in since the time is reserved for just that student and teacher.

Structured spaces that encourage gateways toward mentorship, such as the writing conference, provide opportunities for creating what Tiffany Wang calls "memorable messages," or moments where first-generation college students felt supported during their time at school (335). Wang found these memorable messages held a number of common themes that included encouragement about pursuing academic success, valuing school, education as a way to increase future potential, and recognizing the importance of social networks (338-39). Wang argues that these memorable messages help to influence first-generation college students' approach to academia since the responses from family members about school can be supportive, but also contradictory since the family unit has little to no experience in college classrooms (351). In connecting the concept of memorable messages to mentorship, teachers must realize that the messages they share with students can have an effect on students' progress through academic life. By realizing what first-generation college students have responded to and found memorable, instructors can utilize these themes to work with first-generation college students to encourage and further their academic success.

Another important aspect of mentorship for first-generation college students exists in "communities of belonging," which are instituted support systems that directly engage the first-generation college student population by providing services and opportunities geared toward the needs and success of first-generation college students (Cartney and Rouse 82). I view these "communities of belonging" as potential opportunities to further engage the needs of first-

generation college students in the academic environment. An example of a community of belonging could be an extracurricular, student-run on-campus organization or a college sports team a student participates in. These communities function as social spaces where students connect with one another to form meaningful relationships.

Along with organizations, these "communities of belonging" can also be campus or university initiatives. These initiatives can take the form of "first year seminars and new student initiatives designed to fully engage first-generation students" and, as Soria and Stebleton note, "first-generation students tend to thrive from involvement in educational practices such as learning communities" (682). Practices that create "communities of belonging" for first-generation students have a high success rate because they often combine both the social and academic engagement that first-generation college students need. The most successful of these practices include learning communities because first-gen students both live and study with their other first-generation college student peers. Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard have noted that living learning communities have provided some of the best support systems for first-generation college students because these communities provide both the academic and social support first-generation students need in order to be successful (407). Learning communities also find success in giving the first-generation college students educational opportunities, such as first-year experience classes, that are specifically designed for their academic needs. I will add, however, that a classroom may function as its own community of belonging. In the typical space of a writing classroom, students encounter numerous opportunities to discuss everything from what is rhetoric to recent social and cultural events. In these discussions, various viewpoints are shared

and occasionally viewpoints find themselves in disagreement. However, when students have the

opportunity to share their thoughts, they also form bonds with one another. These bonds can be

strong enough in the context of the writing class to continue to grow outside of the boundaries of

the writing classroom.

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