

Beyond the “Improvement Imperative”: Writing to Change Oneself and the World in First Year Composition

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For almost 40 years, our university’s first year writing program has included a shared outcome: “Students will appreciate the capacity of writing to change oneself and the world.” This outcome, unlike our more typical composition goals concerning writing processes, rhetorical acumen, and critical research abilities, had never been assessed. Based on survey data collected from first year writing students (n=145) during the Spring 2020 semester, this article offers a student-generated construct of what “writing to change oneself and the world” meant to students at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore how this nebulous outcome helps us better understand the ways students situate themselves in enacting change as well as the productively uncertain relationship between self and world for student writers. We also consider how the outcome’s open-endedness creates space for meaningful, writing-adjacent learning.

In the mid-1980s, our university’s first year writing program created a new programmatic learning outcome: “Students will appreciate the capacity of writing to change oneself and the world.” At the time, literature and composition experts in our department were debating the curriculum of the university’s first year writing course. Literature faculty supported a “great books” approach, while the few composition experts pushed for an approach inspired jointly by the growing Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement, William Perry’s theories of intellectual and ethical development, and the Students’ Right to Their Own Language statement (Gordon). The outcome that resulted, a compromise between the camps, in some ways also embodied a cultural shift in composition studies, a moment when expressivist approaches were meeting with the “social turn” in the field (Berlin; Hairston; Roeder and Gatto; Weiser). Barbara Gordon, the writing program director at the time, explained that in creating this outcome, the primary goal was for students to “feel the power of writing to effect something in the world”—which could include changing the self, but was ultimately geared more toward changing others’ minds. Most early examples of this outcome in practice were student-penned op-eds, some of which were submitted to and printed by students’ hometown newspapers. We attribute the fact that this outcome has persisted

unchanged through multiple programmatic revisions to the allure of its idealism: who wouldn't want students to believe that writing can make the world a better place? At the same time, and as one might imagine, "the capacity of writing to change oneself and the world" is not so straightforward when it comes to assessment, and there had been no attempt to assess this outcome until now.

In this article, we examine the questions this outcome, still a part of our first year writing program, raises for us nearly forty years later. How did students interpret and practice "writing to change oneself and the world" in the spring of 2020 when we conducted this study? What sorts of things did they write, and what exactly did they think changed? Our assessment of this legacy outcome offers us a lens to reconsider, as a program and as a field, what students value in their first year writing experiences, and the inter-animating relationship between writing for self and others. It raises questions about the ways first year writing programs provide space for "meaningful writing" (Eodice et al., *Meaningful Writing*, "Power of Personal") and learning beyond the "improvement imperative" (Oleksiak), which include shifts in perspective and relationship building. Based on survey data collected from first year writing students (n=145), we offer a student-generated construct of what "writing to change oneself and the world" meant in one diffuse first year writing program and during the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following analysis of that data, we explore how this idealistic and ambitious outcome helps us better understand the productively uncertain relationship between self and world for student writers, and we confirm the importance of holding space for composition students to use writing for growth unrelated to technical improvement.

Although our study focuses on one particular outcome unique to our program, our findings raise questions relevant to composition studies and first year writing programs more broadly. When viewed expansively, and from a student's perspective, what might "writing to change" entail? To what extent can and should "writing to change" oneself be a central part of a first year course? Guiding documents for writing programs, such as the WPA Outcomes Statement and CCCC Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing, emphasize rhetorical knowledge and practice, including audience and genre adaptation; writing processes, including collaboration; critical thinking; reading and information literacy; and writing across technologies. Only on the periphery of these guiding documents, however, is a central aspect of our study findings: that writing can and does work as an agent of change on students' senses of self, knowledge of the world, and perspectives. These writing-adjacent outcomes of first year composition classes are ones we do not ordinarily capture in program assessments; our work to articulate them here deepens our understanding of

the impacts that “writing as a social act” (CCCC) and writing-to-learn experiences have on the people doing the writing.

Writing for Self and Others in Composition

From the beginning of our study, we found ourselves both mired in and motivated by an inherited language challenge: as written, the outcome we studied separately names both “self” and “world” as the entities that writing might change. In our survey of first year writing students, we thus asked participants whether they “wrote or created something for ENG1100 . . . that changed yourself or the world in some way” and, if so, to describe the writing they composed. We used this phrasing both to keep the stakes for “change” as low as possible (“in some way”) and to ensure students would not think their writing had to change both themselves and others to be worthy of discussion (“or”). The wording of the outcome largely predicts—and raises new questions surrounding—the problems we encountered with the language orienting students’ analysis of their experiences. Surely, the self and world are neither discrete nor disconnected, but the survey responses we got reinforced our hypothesis that the nomenclature would pose a challenge, with some student responses distinguishing the self and world and others merging them. That said, we did not take this as a fault so much as evidence of a historical record: the outcome itself worked to bring together competing interpretations of the goals of the field of composition, itself a complicated and noble endeavor, especially at the time it was written.

“Writing to change oneself” and “writing to change the world” have both separate and intertwined histories in writing studies. For instance, scholarship that addresses critical empathy (Leake), the therapeutic potential of classroom writing (Batzer; MacDevitt), and positive psychology (Belli) illuminates the uses of writing for personal and interpersonal wellbeing. “Writing to change oneself” is also in many ways the signature goal of the “much-maligned” expressivist movement, which has retained its place in writing studies through its ongoing “tacit” influence on why and how people write (Goldblatt 439). Eli Goldblatt reminds readers of the “importance of two impulses that compel writers: the desire to speak out of your most intimate experiences and to connect with communities in need” (442), which are both aspects of expressivism, the latter pointing toward the more recent “critical expressivist” turn. The critical expressivist school of thought of the twenty-first century values and prioritizes the individual voice and experience as embedded in social practices (Roeder and Gatto); earlier composition research likewise offered approaches to teaching writing, such as ethnographic inquiry, that complicate the binary of “expressivism” and “objective” research writing as a means of merging self-change with changing others (Kahn; Mack).

Some work in composition studies emphasizes the already mutually informing and interconnected nature of writing for “self and world.” Gesa Kirsch’s argument for bringing contemplative practices into the classroom is based on the premise that introspection, and in this case introspective writing, is a prerequisite for community action. She claims that the act of writing from the heart, which “reflects our search for meaning in life,” enables students to become more civically engaged (W2). The students in Benjamin Batzer’s “Healing Classrooms” likewise use writing about the self to foster a greater care for others: by writing about difficult experiences and sharing those writings, he argues, students were drawn into “a community of self-exploring, yet outward-looking people.” In this piece too, Batzer documents how writing to change the self equips and motivates students to engage with community problems and support others.

Coming to the self-world from the other direction, and following the field’s social turn, many first year courses emphasize the development of critical consciousness in the interest of civic engagement. Some courses focus on civic education and public writing (Russell; Sundvall and Fredlund), such as those that position first year students to intervene in public debate through multi-modal texts (Goodwin), while other community-engaged courses aim to help students become “critical citizens” (Accardi 143) and teach how “writing can enact social change” (White 29). Elizabeth Ervin frames the classroom space as a virtual-public, arguing that it can serve as a stepping-stone for students as they transition toward civic participation (389), and Tyler S. Branson likewise makes the case that the “protopublic” space of the classroom gives students the opportunity to “critically grapple with the complexity of writing for public-facing audiences” (141). In these cases, the value of the public intervention gets greater emphasis in outcomes, though self-reflection and deliberative dialogue also play key roles in writing for civic engagement.

One pattern in the research on “writing to change” is that, rather than focusing on ways students’ writing develops, it focuses on the uses of writing, and how acts of writing can have perlocutionary force. Put differently, in our analysis of student responses regarding this outcome, we notice a shift in emphasis away from just learning to write, and toward learning what writing can do—and how the impact of writing on writer/world goes both ways. Indeed, theories of postcomposition, ecologies of composition, and new materialism have changed the ways we think of writing interacting with the writer and larger world (Cooper; Syverson). Margaret Syverson’s work shows how writers and texts shape one another in a mutually “enactive” way. More recently, Marilyn Cooper argues that there is a complex ecology of change-agents in writing, and that “intentions, purposes, plans—and even writers themselves—do not exist prior to writing but rather emerge in the process of writing” (13). We might

think of writers and their writing as involved in a constant multidimensional emergence, parts of each always influencing and influenced by the other; instead of “changing” something through their writing or becoming a “better writer,” writers and their writing mutually change in multiple interactive, iterative ways.

The possibility of writing and writer mutually changing one another in unpredictable and nonlinear ways exists in tension with what Timothy Oleksiak terms the “improvement imperative,” or the demand that the goal of a first year writing course should be to “improve” student writing (307). Oleksiak reminds us that any version of improvement is subjective and ultimately “shaped by an instructor’s values regarding what counts as good writing” (308). Oleksiak asks that we replace the improvement imperative with a new space for students to consider more fully who they are in relation to others in the “worlds” they create in their writing, which includes “consider[ing] communities that are possibly not their own” (323). Moving away from the improvement imperative, argues Oleksiak, creates space for students to better understand themselves as writers in and of the world and in community with others. In what follows, as we share our findings from our assessment of “writing to change oneself and the world,” and borrowing Oleksiak’s phrase, we provide students’ understandings of what exactly learning “beyond the improvement imperative” in their first year writing course entailed. Specifically, we provide analysis of what students perceive their writing as changing, including in themselves, others, and both; the types of writing that produced change, according to participants; and what the act of writing meant to students during the very early days of the pandemic, when data collection for this study took place.

Methods

The goal of this study, launched during a writing program revision, was to learn how students understand and practice our long-standing program outcome, “Students will appreciate the capacity of writing to change oneself and the world.” Our analysis provides a student-generated construct of this outcome and how students perceive it to work in practice.

Data Collection

This study was conducted at Elon University, a mid-sized private university located in the South Atlantic region of the United States. Each year, approximately 1,500 first year students enroll, and approximately 90% are required to take first year writing.¹ While all first year writing courses at Elon share program outcomes related to process, rhetoric, research, and multimodality, faculty of all ranks have significant autonomy in course design and develop their own syllabi and course projects. The shared outcome we research in this

article is among those that faculty integrate in their courses through a variety of projects, assignments, and approaches.

We collected student interpretations via IRB-approved survey, which was distributed in April 2020, approximately six weeks after the university shut down in-person learning due to COVID-19.² All 738 students enrolled in our first year writing course in Spring 2020 received an automated Qualtrics email invitation to participate. After removing all partially complete responses, we had 145 completed surveys, or a final response rate of 20%.

The survey consisted of six open-ended questions broken into three sections (see Appendix A for survey). The first and second sections ask students whether they wrote or created something in their first year writing course that changed themselves or the world even “slightly,” and, if so, asks them to describe the piece of writing and how it changed them or aimed to change others. We asked about “aiming” to change others because asking students to cite evidence that some other entity was changed seemed unreasonable if not impossible. Students were asked to answer these questions once for the period before spring break, when they were learning in-person on our residential campus, and once for the period after spring break, when they left campus to learn remotely due to COVID-19. The final section of the survey prompts students to generalize about their experiences with writing as they relate to both the pandemic and the specific course.

Though we did not gather demographic information for the specific group of survey takers, the cohort of students who were enrolled in first year writing at our university during Spring 2020 identified as 36% male and 64% female. In terms of race and ethnicity, the students enrolled were 81% white, 6% Latinx, 5% Black or African-American, 3% Asian, and 3% two or more races. Six percent were first-generation college students.

Data Analysis

The five-member First Year Writing Advisory Committee analyzed and coded anonymized survey responses for recurring patterns and emergent themes (Glaser and Strauss; Saldaña). We met as a group to discuss the themes and to construct a preliminary coding framework that we would apply to the data (Smagorinsky 401). For the first and second sections of the survey, where students describe projects that they view as “changing themselves or the world,” the group coded for the following themes: genre/type of project (including multimodality), the degree of freedom participants felt they had in choosing those projects, and types of changes to participants or the world. For the third section, related to differences in their views and uses of writing due to the pandemic and course, we did two layers of coding: first, we coded for positive changes, negative changes, and other/unknown, and second, we created

a code bank of thematic codes to understand the types of changes students experienced. See Appendix B for an abbreviated codebook.

The number of codes applied to each response varied based on the responses themselves. Allowing the option of applying multiple codes helped capture the richness and complexity of many responses. For instance, if a student reported writing a document that was both reflective and research-based, codes for both “reflection” and “research” were applied. Similarly, if a student experienced increased engagement and used writing as an outlet, the response was coded with both. Double coding (and in some cases, triple coding) helped capture the fact that the same document often served a range of purposes and changed the self and others in more ways than one. To ensure reliability of the coding, each question was assigned two coders, with different pairings across all questions. After coding 20% of the data independently, each pair met to discuss and resolve their disagreements and revised the codebook accordingly. They then proceeded to independently code the remaining 80% of the data for that question and met again after that to discuss each item. Following Peter Smagorinsky’s method of collaborative coding, the pairs reached full agreement on codes through collaborative discussion rather than independent corroboration. After these pair meetings, the codes and codebook language were tested by a third rater who checked 30 responses for each question (approximately 20% of total). For all questions except one, about how students’ perspectives on writing had changed during the first weeks of COVID-19, this independent third rating showed 80% agreement or higher, with inconsistencies in the final question primarily related to the subcodes of how exactly students’ perspectives changed for better or worse. After this independent coding, the full group met once more to clarify and refine any outstanding questions in the codebook language.

The primary limitation of this study is the lack of data we gathered from students who did not write something they felt changed themselves or the world in some way. These were different from incomplete responses, which were removed from the dataset. If a student did not feel they wrote something that changed themselves and/or others, they were asked to leave that particular item blank. As a result, we know that 43 students (30%) did not feel the outcome was met, but we know little to nothing about their experiences or why they felt that way. We also surely missed some instances of “change,” because change is not always immediately apparent, and can occur in unexpected ways, including after significant time delay. Another limitation is that our demographic information is based on institutional data alone, rather than the specific survey takers, so we do not know the degree to which our cohort of participants was representative of the students at our university.

An anticipated limitation with unanticipated benefits is that we did not collect samples of student writing. Though we originally intended to collect writing samples, the pandemic caused us to adjust to avoid overburdening students. Without samples, we could not succumb to the temptation to assess writing quality, and we instead focused on students' perspectives.

Students' Perceptions of "Writing to Change Oneself and the World"

Overall, the study results made clear that students do, in fact, produce writing in the first year writing classroom that they feel changes themselves or others: Seventy percent of participants indicated they wrote at least one piece in their course that changed themselves, the world, or both/all, in some way. The aspects of themselves that changed include expanded knowledge, perspectives, and self-realization through self-reflection. While we expected to learn specifics about the writing prompts, assignments, genres, or topics that might facilitate such change, what we found instead was more open, pointing not at a specific type of writing as key but rather to the importance of flexibility afforded to students in forging their own paths. In sum, our study findings provide three main takeaways about "writing to change oneself and the world" relevant to the first year writing classroom:

1. Writing composed in the first year course is and can be an agent that changes, intra-acts with, and emerges in tandem with students' perspectives, emotions, and knowledge.
2. When assigning "writing to change oneself and the world," the type of writing does not seem to matter as much as the personal connections that writing enables, facilitated by the degrees of freedom students have to make their writing project meaningful to them (Eodice et al., "Power of Personal"; Mack).
3. Writing in the first year course has and can have significant value for students beyond academic or knowledge growth and includes increased engagement with the world around them, connection to others, enjoyment of writing, appreciation for writing as an outlet for mental and emotional health, and increasing appreciation for the civic uses of writing.

When asked about the impact of the pandemic on their writing, students noted that these early days of COVID-19 increased their appreciation for the importance of writing as a means of staying connected, a means of counter-acting false information, and a tool to effect change. Students saw writing as a way to investigate themselves and their perspectives and, given the pandemic, one way to contend with a world they felt to be in disarray.

What Do Students See as Changing in Themselves and in Others?

Of the 70% of students who reported writing something that yielded change, the majority indicated they feel their projects changed the self, rather than others. As discussed earlier, the relatively clear distinction between self and world in most responses is at least partially due to the bifurcation of “self” and “world” in the original program outcome (and therefore in our survey question). Overall, 96 (62%) responses to the question indicated that students felt their writing project changed themselves, compared with 30 (19%) who saw their writing project as changing or influencing others. Twenty-three (15%) saw their writing as changing both themselves and others (6 responses, or 4% of total, were unclear) (See Figure 1). Self-change is likely more discernible to students, particularly since audiences in first year writing contexts are not always immediate or observable.

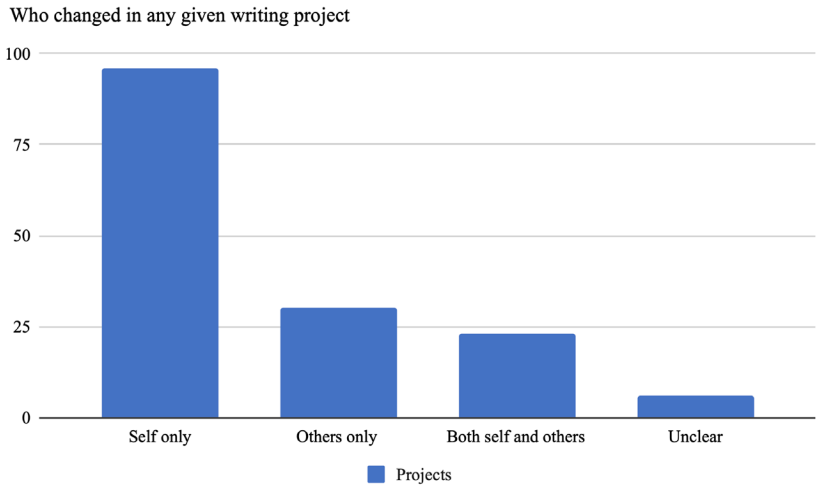


Figure 1: Who changed in any given writing project (out of 155 projects)

Whether students reported that their writing changed themselves or others, there are four themes about what, exactly, their writing changed (in any given project): knowledge, reflection, perspective, and writing abilities. Table 1 provides definitions and the number of responses for each category.

Table 1

What changed: Code definitions and number of mentions; percent out of 155 projects

Category	Totals	Definition (summarized)
Knowledge	56 (36%)	Writer indicates learning and/or disseminating new knowledge, developing a new understanding of a topic or of the complexity of a situation.
Reflection	51 (33%)	Writer indicates practicing introspection, focusing on their own life/experiences and experiencing self-realizations; using writing to support mental and emotional health; writing to express aspirations or goals.
Writing	37 (24%)	Writer developed new writing, research, and analysis skills.
Perspective	37 (24%)	Writer explains that writing taught new perspective(s) or openness to new ideas; writing provided a deeper understanding of others; writing increased empathy.

Writing That Changed the Self

A large proportion of writing that students reported as changing themselves expanded their knowledge and generated reflection. Responses coded “knowledge” (56, 36%) show ways that students developed deeper or more complex understandings through the research and writing process. One student who composed an essay about the ethics of zoos, for instance, said it increased her awareness of what happens to animals in captivity: “It opened my eyes to what goes on behind closed doors of zoos and how there needs to be extensive change to end animal cruelty.” Another explained how their research project on poverty changed their beliefs:

After reading . . . I am able to understand that [poverty] is much less an issue based on personal choices, but a systemic one in nature. . . . This is evident through the predatory practices of student loan companies, the manufacturing of most mass-produced items, and laws of various sorts that prevent minority groups from accumulating substantial wealth.

In the instances where writing facilitated reflection (51, 33%), students saw their work as a means of enabling introspection and processing emotions.

A student who researched Liberia as part of an analytical project wrote, “I feel like the whole project kind of humbled me to what I have.” Several students reported using their writing to process grief, particularly related to the emerging pandemic. One wrote that their personal essay “helped me process death and view it in a new way.” Another individual, a student who had been assigned weekly reflections during the early days of COVID-19-induced remote learning, offered detail about the effect these writings had on her, particularly when she lost a close family member:

This writing allowed me to confront the emotions I was feeling. I was able to relinquish the heartache and pain through writing about it in an objective manner. I identified what was occurring and what my reaction was through my actions, forcing me to realize that it is okay to be upset during this time. I allowed myself to not force happiness or optimism, but to accept sadness and any emotion I was feeling. This aimed to help me readjust my point of view on my productivity and mental health during this time of crisis.

This student was one of many whose school-assigned writing, adapted in many cases by faculty who responded to the unique time, enabled them to process their experiences.

In the case of the “writing” category (37, 24%), it is neither surprising nor profound that a writing project could change a student by increasing their writing knowledge and ability (at best we can say: well, we should hope so). In these cases, students’ responses name composition practices they developed, such as “creat[ing] a video,” as well as their development of information literacy. For instance, a student assigned to compose an editorial wrote, “I learned more about the news sources I look at and how they use certain appeals and forms of media to push the reader toward a certain opinion.” These are useful skills that map clearly on to typical first year writing course objectives related to multimodality and textual analysis.

Students who reported changing their “perspectives” (37, 24%) explained ways their writing projects productively challenged their worldviews. One student wrote a letter to himself about climate change that helped him “consider the thoughts of people with different views.” Another who conducted an interview explained that doing so “changed my worldview on the value of a college education . . . I’m surrounded by people who chose the college path and sometimes ignorantly forget all of the other choices people can make.”

We see that many students discuss a type of change, like accruing new knowledge and having a personal reflective experience, that is largely unrelated to writing—that is functioning beyond the “improvement imperative” typi-

cal of a first year writing course. Indeed, it is notable that, in 88% of projects described (136), students share ways that writing changed something about them beyond or unrelated to their writing “skills,” including their beliefs, their knowledge, their mental or emotional wellbeing, and their perspectives. For many, the writing they composed had a meaningful or even profound impact on them. A close look at student responses (including some mentioned above) shows how they situate writing as an agent that supported change and re-seeing: “it made me realize,” “it opened my eyes,” “it allowed me to confront,” “it gave me time to reflect,” “it forced me to really think,” “it changed my worldview,” “it helped me process death,” and it “humbled me to what I have.” These statements present writing as more than a means to convey information or practice rhetorical awareness. Instead, writing functions as a force that compels re-vision, pauses life for reflection, and decenters the writer. Writing, and the act of writing, alters students’ sense of self and perspective; in some cases, it even refocuses emotional struggle. These are some of the types of learning we hope the humanities might enable and that researchers rarely capture in a systematic way.

Writing That Changed Others

In the 53 (34%) responses where students indicate their writing changes “others” in some way, the entity they hypothesize they “changed” ranges from classmates to university-level groups to the general public. Surely, we do not know whether there was any actual change; at best we capture what students meant or hoped to change, or suspected they had changed. The majority of these examples are coded “knowledge”; that is, the writer indicates that their writing changed “others” or “the world” because it changed someone else’s knowledge of something, altered someone’s misconceptions, or persuaded others to act in a certain way. For instance, one student explained, “This writing aimed to . . . convince [others] to follow social distancing guidelines. I was able to share this writing on my social media pages to help inform others.” Another student explained her goal as “inform[ing] universities of the current problems [with] . . . the way sexual assault training is taught.” In many cases, students’ claims are quite “I”-centered, based more on the content of their writing and what they imagined it conveyed than any particular relationship with their audience.

One pattern in student responses about writing to “change others” is their reluctance to claim their writing made any large-scale difference. They tend to focus instead on ways their work may have shifted the dial slightly, reached a few people, or made minor changes. For instance, in response to the question about whether their work “changed yourself or others in any way,” a student who wrote about “how to implement a compost education unit into

elementary schools” explained that it might have helped others become “more knowledgeable about our carbon footprint so I feel like it was a small step in the right direction but it didn’t make drastic differences.” Another student admitted their hesitation to make broad claims and uses similarly tentative terms: “The multimodal advocacy project we are doing has the potential to ‘change the world’ but there are limitations to how actionable what we do is.” These responses indicate student awareness that their own work might make incremental change but that they are careful not to overestimate the impact one writing project might have.

Considering the connection of changing oneself to changing the world, we note that out of the 53 responses where students indicated their writing changed others, in about half of those responses students likewise indicated change in themselves. This suggests that, while adopting our survey language separating “self” and “world,” students still pointed to a relationship between their own self-change and the potential their writing had to impact others. For example, one student noted, “I gave advice on ways to center yourself during mourning and many peers of mine were moved by the presentation.” Another stated, “It was a research paper, so I learned a lot myself. However, I also wrote it to inform others about how they can avoid or diminish these stressors, so hopefully it changed the readers as well.” One student shared that writing about an experience “that has haunted me for years” enabled her to “find peace and clarity with my memories of that night. This has lifted a huge weight off of my shoulders that I didn’t even know was there.” She goes on to say that her piece also aims to raise mental health awareness for others and “stresses the importance of seeking out help for yourself or a friend in need.” As these examples show, students thought about their projects as changing themselves in similar ways to how they hoped they would change their peers.

What Types of Writing Do Students Identify as Changing Themselves or Others, and Why?

In our analysis of student responses, no specific type of writing assignment stood out as especially well-suited to support writerly emergence and change. In other words, when it comes to what makes a project likely to “change” its authors and readers, the genre and medium do not seem to matter as much to students as other factors. There is one exception to this: 80% of projects coded as changing “others” included a requirement to reach an outside audience (such as a research report targeted to university administration). Altogether, however, there are no other notable differences in genre, topic, or medium indicative of writing assignments likely to encourage change. Survey respondents described 155 unique writing projects that they saw as changing themselves or others (some students described two projects and others de-

scribed only one) and these map on to many of the most frequently assigned metagenres in first year writing courses (see Figure 2). Note that projects were coded more than once if students reported working in multiple categories simultaneously (e.g., a research-based argument was coded both “position” and “research”), so the total “number of mentions” is greater than the 155 total projects described.

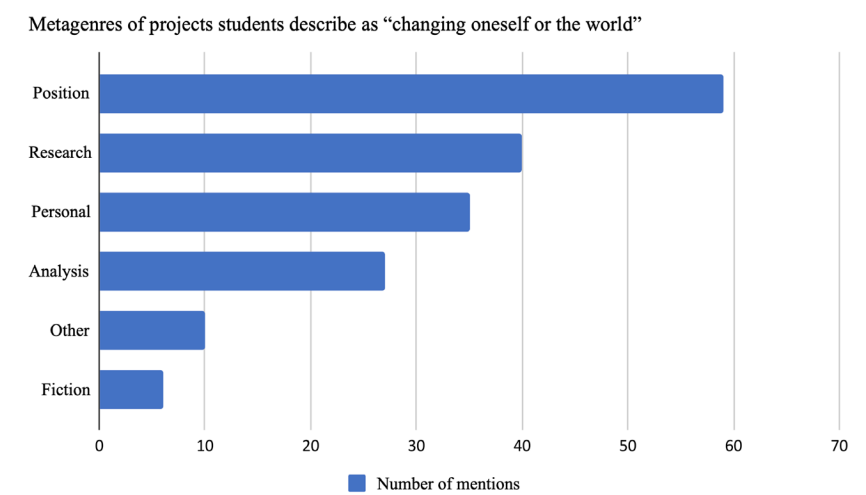


Figure 2: Metagenres of projects students described.

At the top of the list are assignments that ask the student to take a position on an issue: to persuade readers and/or advocate for a specific outcome (59). The next most common types of projects that students discussed are research-related projects, where students gather and synthesize information from multiple sources (40); personal projects, where students reflect on their writing, lives, goals, etc. (35); and analytical writing, where students analyze films, essays, or other texts (27). At the time this study was conducted, persuasive and research-based writing were among the most commonly assigned types of writing in our courses, which at least partially explains their prevalence. Fiction on the other hand was very infrequently assigned. While our coding scheme grouped projects by common goal and students’ descriptions of “types” of writing, the medium of students’ projects ranged widely, from traditional essays to debates, from infographics to collaborative presentations. Multimodal writing was common in survey responses.

So what makes writing projects stand out to students as agents that effect change? Because we did not directly ask students to comment on why a given piece was meaningful to write and we did not collect prompts or assignments,

we do not have comprehensive or numerical data about every text mentioned. However, when we look closely at the projects and the ways students discuss them, two themes emerge: personal connections and degrees of freedom. Specifically, and consistent with findings from the Meaningful Writing Project, students described writing projects where they made personal connections, regardless of genre or purpose of the project (Eodice et al., *Meaningful Writing*, “Power of Personal”; Mack). These included personal connections to their majors, life experiences, career ambitions, and extracurricular interests, among others. One student explained that his project on the impact of environmental regulations

taught me ways to practically and effectively transition our country to a more sustainable future without harming our labor market, something that felt very exciting. I’m also a business major very interested in social change but prior to this paper was struggling to make a connection between my interests. This paper reminded me of the power of business in spurring social change.

Likewise, though we did not explicitly ask about degrees of freedom in our survey, students’ short-answer responses indicated enthusiasm regarding projects that offered at least some freedom in medium, approach, and/or topic (“The Power of Personal Connection” 333).

Freedom in topic selection was a particularly important factor for students, and so was choice regarding the extent to which they focused their writing on the unfolding pandemic: some felt strongly about wanting to write about the pandemic, and others wanted to write about anything else. Among those who wrote about the pandemic and its associated challenges, one described writing an argumentative essay about “the impact of social distancing on everyday social interaction” and another described composing a creative response piece: “I wrote about a pandemic that took people’s ability to speak or reading/writing abilities. I had to change the ending and made it so that the people had to figure out how to survive in the uncertain times.” Those who did not want to focus on the pandemic expressed appreciation for the freedom to write about unrelated topics that mattered to them, such as ways that “universities [can] offer more tangible and intangible sexual education resources,” “the stressors that dancers face,” and “veganism.” Importantly, students had the choice to use writing to process and discuss the early days of the pandemic—or not.

How Did the Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic Complicate and Extend Students' Views of the Uses of Writing?

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the semester, we had a unique opportunity to understand what role school writing might play in students' lives as they managed this global disruption. We therefore ended our survey by asking students to reflect on whether their views and uses of writing changed since they'd left our residential campus to learn remotely (March-April 2020). The findings show that, to some extent, students viewed writing more positively during this short time: 60 (41%) respondents indicate that their views and uses of writing changed for the better, compared with 29 (20%) who indicated a change for the worse, 41 (28%) who indicated no change and 3 (2%) whose views and uses changed for the better in some ways and for the worse in others (Figure 3).

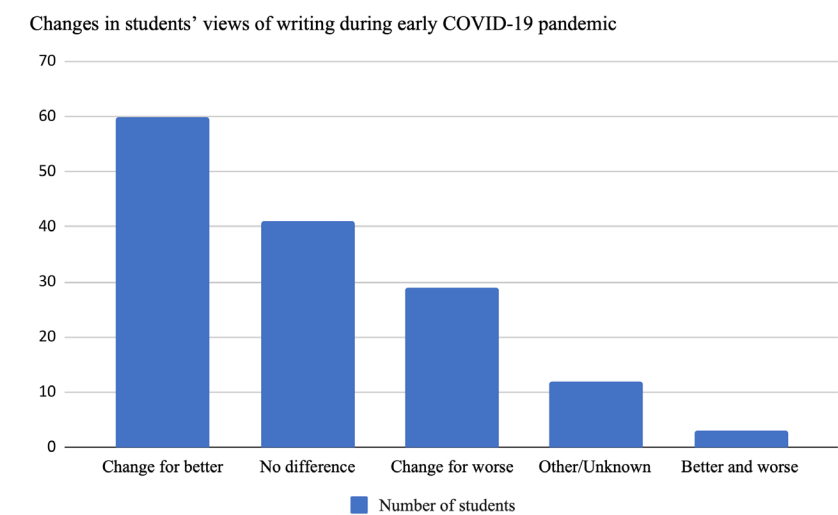


Figure 3: Changes in students' views of writing during early COVID-19 pandemic.

Among those who indicated a change for the better, many explain that writing offered a productive distraction. One wrote, “the assignments we’ve been doing have definitely served as a sort of outlet to escape the reality of the world right now.” Another wrote “During COVID-19, writing has been something to keep me busy and as a result, has become something I look forward to. ... it gives me something to challenge myself with.” For others, writing became a means of processing emotions and managing mental health. For instance, one student wrote, “Writing has become much more therapeutic during this time.

It allows me to unleash myself in ways that would not have been the same previously.” Another wrote that “I have begun journaling, which has helped me express my thoughts and feelings regarding the pandemic.”

Others indicated an increased appreciation for the power and value of using writing to convey information and maintain interpersonal connections. One student considered the high stakes of writing to inform and persuade others from a distance:

As we are all quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has become our primary source of communication. On social media, it is so easy to send a link to strong pieces of writing that inspire people, but it is also easy to send messages without thinking, to make people feel small, and to aid the spread of fake news. This has only strengthened the importance of good, clear and impactful writing.

Students explained the thought they put into writing and how the value of writing increased in their lives: “I write more frequently to others now through email, text, and letters . . . I am very careful with the words I use in order to convey what I’m thinking and feeling since we are all isolated.” During these very early days of the pandemic, many survey respondents indicated their appreciation of writing as a tool for connection and communication.

Those who indicated a negative change describe feeling a sense of disconnect: they felt less motivation, had less guidance, and lost their sense of community, and these in turn negatively impacted their relationship with writing. These students notwithstanding, our findings suggest that the early days of the pandemic generally served as a magnifier for students’ perceptions of writing, which for the most part amplified the value of school writing in non-school aspects of students’ lives. While this was an atypical time, we contend that participants’ reports of the value of writing in their lives transcends times of tumult and has relevance across circumstances. Our observations of students’ uses of writing as a therapeutic act, an impetus to increase one’s own understandings, and an earnest attempt to connect with others demonstrates its range of functions for students in a first year space, beyond the typical course goals of improving academic writing and rhetorical acumen.

Implications: What “Writing to Change” Means to Students

The goal of our study was to learn how students perceive “writing to change oneself and the world” in their first year writing course experience. Participant survey responses suggest that they experienced self-growth and (inter)personal engagement as they pursued obligatory classroom writing projects.

We contend that the writing-adjacent reflection and learning that students reported, including emotional-interpersonal engagement, was made possible at least in part by the existence of our program's idealistic, somewhat nebulous outcome, which held open space for types of learning that might not otherwise be supported, prioritized, or charted. Students who considered their experiences with this outcome reported gaining knowledge, adapting their perspectives, and reflecting; in many cases, they reported developing a relationship with writing that extended beyond leveraging it for academic gain. While writing to "change the world" in the form of writing to enhance others' knowledge was present in our survey findings, students most frequently discussed their appreciation for writing acting as a change agent on themselves, its writers. Additionally, in terms of changing others, students spoke modestly, gesturing at how people might learn from one another in small ways. The process of trying to tease out "self" and "world" both while coding and in subsequent outcome revisions has made clear the importance of their interconnection. Our study revealed that students see the writing they compose in their first year courses as reaching beyond teaching them about writing, and that the writing process is one means of locating themselves in terms of their own beliefs and priorities, as well as a way of developing a more relational understanding of their experiences and perspectives in connection with other people.

For example, the ability to share meaningful work-in-progress with peers was a key way students reported writing functioning as an agent of change. One student who "gave advice on ways to center yourself during mourning" (also quoted above) reported that "many peers of mine were moved" by what she shared; another student explained that "through our peer review process [my] writing changed others' point of views, as I learned a lot from reading others' papers." The opportunity to share with others in the classroom space was, for many, a means of integrating self-change with changing others' views. A student who "chose to write something that was very personal to me" explained that sharing with others gradually helped her feel more comfortable and another wrote, "After our class discussion, my perspective and others' changed drastically." Sharing with peers in our study appeared both in mentions of class discussion as well as peer review of writing projects. Peer review is a space we often think of as valuable for improving a writer's skills and the quality of a writing project, but not so much as a place where students can practice openness and personal disclosure, as a space where student work can, as Oleksiak writes, "create ways of knowing and unknowing that circulate and impact readers in (un)intended ways" (315). Our survey respondents suggest that peer review is important to them not just as a way to receive feedback on writing, but also as a space to learn and share new ideas, connect with others,

and practice articulating stories about themselves, their realizations, and their life experiences—in short, as a space to hear and be heard.

One question our findings raise is just how far first year writing should go down the road of supporting personal self-discovery, mental health, and emotional wellbeing. This is complicated. Our study took place during the first six weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, many faculty members allowed or even encouraged students to write for emotional wellbeing and mental health. In this article, we celebrate the emergence of intrapersonal and non-writing-skills-based growth, as articulated by students, that came from their writing in the first year course. Gordon, who developed the outcome, is quick to say that a writing class “has to be about writing” but—she adds—if a student learned that writing can help process feelings, “that could save a life.” The recently developed Writing and Well-Being conference (hosted by the University of Arizona) celebrates the extra-academic work that writing can do, as shown in its 2024 conference themes: integrity, creativity, compassion, and playfulness. We likewise celebrate the power and value of writing for personal, relational, and civic growth, and we appreciate how the openness of our inherited outcome enabled many students to engage with self-world change on their own terms. We are simultaneously wary of formalizing or institutionalizing writing for well-being into our course requirements, especially because we as writing faculty are neither trained in nor should we teach writing-as-therapy, and many students will not want to pursue that path. That said, we see value in maintaining an outcome that names, intentionally vaguely, the goal of experiencing writing-as-useful beyond the goal of writing ability improvement.

As we reflect on our assessment of this outcome, we are drawn back to its beginnings. Gordon developed this outcome and committed our writing program to it during a time when composition studies was working to establish itself as a field in contrast to literature, with distinct theoretical grounding, research methods, and goals. The competing priorities of expressivism and the social turn in the 1980s informed the outcome, but so did the desire to, in Gordon’s words, do something “radical”: “challenge students in a way that their world falls apart and they have to reconstitute it.” Her objective of transformation was as ambitious as one might get. By codifying this outcome into program goals, she also found common ground with literature experts who likewise believed in the power of writing to urge questioning, personal introspection, growth of social consciousness, and shift in perspective. While the composition-literature rift was deep in the 1980s, in 2024, the field of writing studies is established enough to recognize that it shares with literary studies a commitment to types of learning that the humanities especially enable: changes in perspective, genuine questioning, and mutually informing affective and cognitive engagement. Within the classroom space, participants in our study took creative risks, wrote

for their mental health, and delved into personal topics that merged their own life experiences with systemic problems. While the outcome itself might not have directly brought about these practices, we believe its existence has opened space for faculty to encourage the writing-adjacent learning that likely often occurs but goes unacknowledged. Importantly, our assessment enabled us not only to acknowledge this learning, but also to deduce what exactly about it students see as valuable, namely its ability to foster new knowledge, perspectives, and reflection, both intra- and interpersonally.

Notes

1. First year writing is housed within the English Department and is part of the First Year Foundations at the University. It is taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty, permanent lecturers, and adjunct faculty.

2. Our research study, “ENG1100 Program Assessment: Writing to Change One-self and the World” (#20-246), was approved by Elon University’s IRB on April 20, 2020.

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