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# Editing, Translation, and Recovery Work in Community College English Classes

> Christopher Leary

This article positions community college students as co-researchers who participate in the author's inquiry into the rhetorical practices of anthology editors.

To understand how writing survives (or not) and accrues value (or not), scholars across the humanities study not only the production of texts but also their selection, arrangement, and preservation in anthologies (Baubeta; Kilcup; Oggins), archives (Eichhorn), digital collections (Senier; M. Smith), libraries (Manguel), and syllabi (Bloom). They find it is not only the writers who deserve credit and blame for the consequences of their texts, but also the editors and critics who elevate them, as well as technological infrastructures, dominant cultural values, and material incentives that constrain and enable texts, their writers, and their readers.

In other words, it isn't just the quality of the writing, but the circumstances swirling around that writing that determine its lasting value (B. Smith). And quite often, the circumstances driving valuation are inconsistent with principles of meritocratic democracy. For example, when ostensibly pluralistic societies groom a homogeneous set of editors who are derived primarily from a dominant ethnic group, the writing produced by marginalized groups is often denied the opportunity to shape and create mainstream culture. This insight provides the rationale for "recovery anthologies," which recognize that past and present gatekeepers have unjustly overlooked worthy text collections and therefore attempt to "[restore] the writing of unknown writers . . . to critical view" (Kilcup 36).

Recovery scholars such as Karen L. Kilcup attempt to retroactively put overlooked texts into wide circulation, decades or even centuries after the texts were originally written. Kilcup, like most editors of literary anthologies, selects texts with excellence and representation in mind, but she also seeks texts that "challenge," in the sense that they "invite or propel readers to interrogate existing standards" (39). For example, her literary anthologies occasionally include "nonliterary" texts such as obituaries and advice columns. She advocates a critical perspective that puts Thoreau's *Walden* and Emerson's *Self-Reliance* "on a continuum with advice writing" as a way "to demystify the former and to dehierarchize the relationship between the professor/anthologist and the student/reader" (51).

In her work as a recovery anthologist, Kilcup attempts to mitigate the damage done by homogenous editors of the past, but she also wants to diversify the editors of today and tomorrow. One method Kilcup recommends, toward the larger mission of diversifying literary gatekeepers (and thereby democratizing canon formation), is the inclusion of students in editing and recovery work. When Kilcup recruits students into her editorial work and recovery scholarship, she finds them to be “astonishingly open to unconventional texts and innovative perspectives” (53). Likewise, Martha Nell Smith, editor of the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, advocates the inclusion of students in scholarly editing; her graduate students at the University of Maryland not only study Dickinson but also “simulate the work of advanced researchers so as to determine the relationships of texts to one another poetically, chronologically, and ontologically” (8).

Kilcup recommends undergraduate participation as well, arguing that students “at a wide range of institutions can, and should, be involved in the research process and the intellectual work of criticism and canonization” (53). In her experience, she has found that “students at every level appreciate ... learning about the economics and politics of canon formation” (53), and she briefly alludes to community college students specifically, emphasizing that community colleges “serve about 40% of the students in higher education in the United States” (43).

Working within the community college context, Melissa Dennihy has taken up Kilcup’s call by highlighting processes of canon creation in her literature classes. Each of Dennihy’s community college students builds an anthology of American literature, and as they do so, they invariably address “issues of inclusion and exclusion,” thereby bringing “to life the processes of canon construction” (33). She finds that the diverse backgrounds of her student-editors contribute to the diversity of their choices, “particularly their representations of diverse racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic backgrounds” (31). Her student-editors seek out writing that allows them “to construct categories they could be part of” (31). Dennihy’s article demonstrates how racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic diversity can be an asset for community college students as they theorize and practice editorial decision making. Queensborough Community College, where both Dennihy and I teach, is especially diverse because of our Queens, New York, location—QCC students “represent 127 nations of birth and 78 native languages” (“2017 Fast Facts”)—but even outside of New York City, community college stu-

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dents are “disproportionately diverse in race and class when compared with our four-year counterparts” (Hassel).

Like Dennihy, I have found community college students to be well poised for the study and practice of editorial decision making. Backed up by their own observations and experiences, many community college students can already comprehend and articulate the mechanisms by which quality is overlooked in ways that are harmful to individuals and to society. As Patrick Sullivan points out, community college students “are often among the least financially advantaged in our culture” (142), and many “have seen firsthand that years of hard work often do not lead to advancement or happiness” (143), which often yields “very complex (and often deeply conflicted) relationships to traditional American narratives about hard work and success” (143). At times, such conflicted perspectives put students at a disadvantage (P. Sullivan 146–49), but those same perspectives may prove an asset while participating in recovery scholarship, where a willingness to contest meritocratic ideals is actually a prerequisite. For those who are skeptical of the idea that “the cream always rises to the top,” the logic of recovery work needs little explanation.

### Recruiting Students into Low-Profile Editorial Projects

Scholars such as Karen Kilcup and Martha Nell Smith, who lead *high-profile* editorial projects and recruit their students into that work, can do so partly because they work at elite, well-funded institutions. For example, while constructing her 1998 anthology of nineteenth-century American women writers, Kilcup racked up \$1,200 in photocopying fees in just one summer (45), which is more than my yearly travel budget. Kilcup herself laments that scholars at non-elite colleges are often precluded from participating in literary recovery work by their 4–4 loads (48). She fears that canons will further calcify if it is “only people with money (or significant institutional support, as I had)” (45) who select the texts for literature anthologies.

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My own study of editorial decision making focuses on amateur editors who build collections of texts written by unknown and unpublished authors.

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Community college teachers are not likely candidates to oversee the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, as Martha Nell Smith does, nor the anthology of *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*, as Kilcup did, but there are other sites of editorial decision making that we can access and inquire into. We might follow the lead of Kate Eichhorn, who looks to

non-institutional collections as important sites of research and inquiry. Significantly, when studying non-institutional collections, the texts under scrutiny can be either literary or nonliterary, high culture or low culture, ancient or contemporary, carefully crafted or hastily written, prestigious or lowly. For example, Eichhorn’s study of unorthodox texts produced by young, not-widely-known feminists retraces the path—a “long and highly mediated process contingent upon the decision making

of editors, publishers, reviewers, critics, and librarians” (629)—that their zines and scrapbooks took before reaching their unlikely home in the rare books collection of a prestigious university.

Like Eichhorn’s, my own study of editorial decision making focuses on amateur editors who build collections of texts written by unknown and unpublished authors. Unlike Eichhorn’s, my research site is my own community college classroom, where I observe my students as they build anthologies from their classmates’ impromptu writing. Over a decade ago, I was inspired to introduce anthologizing assignments into my classes by Nancy L. Chick’s 2002 instructional note in *TETYS*. In the note, Chick describes a poetry assignment whereby students create anthologies of important poems from the English literary tradition. While constructing their anthologies, Chick’s students don’t necessarily interpret poems or connect them to personal experience; instead, they regard the poems as materials to build with. As students experiment with possible configurations for the table of contents, they see how a poem comes to mean differently as its position changes.

After absorbing Chick’s example, I found more examples of anthologizing assignments (Davis; Eggers; McFee; A. Sullivan), to which I return in the final section of this article. As I studied them, it occurred to me that anthologies are not limited to literary writing and poetry, so I began to adapt Chick’s assignment for many different genres of writing. Nowadays, in the English 101 courses I teach, I ask students to build collections of their classmates’ impromptu writing. Here is how it works:

1. At the end of every class period, each student anonymously writes at least half a page on any topic and in any style and in any language. I collect these texts as they walk out the door. (One student called them “exit slips.”)
2. Whoever makes it on time to the following class is rewarded for their promptness with a random text written by an anonymous classmate. Because this happens at the beginning of every class, punctual students gradually build up a big pile of their classmates’ writing.
3. So that students can tailor their collection to their own interests, I facilitate a simple bimonthly market that allows students to exchange texts with each other. For example, unwanted texts in Sheila’s pile can be acquired by Gerald and vice versa.
4. By the end of the semester, punctual students accumulate around twenty-five texts, arrange them in a table of contents, and write a preface that explains their selections.

This anthologizing assignment puts me and my students in a good position to observe texts being produced, categorized, lost, translated, exchanged, interpreted, and finally displayed by fellow classmates in a table of contents. It is true that the texts we study do not have anywhere near the literary value as the poems in the *Dickinson Electronic Archive* or, probably, the zines in the young feminists’ archives studied by Eichhorn. But as Kilcup points out, “putatively nonliterary texts exist on a continuum with literary ones, and understanding the aesthetics of the former can help illuminate the literariness of the latter” (39).

## Data Collection and Analysis

For this article, I studied how anthology editors made decisions in two separate English 101 classes. Two main sources provided the raw data for my analysis: “editor logs” written by student-editors as the process unfolded and prefaces written by student-editors after they finished their anthologies. I found the editors’ logs to be especially revealing because they offered fresh accounts from editors “in the moment”—before, during, and after they made decisions about what texts to keep and what to trade away. I prompted students to produce editor logs by regularly asking them to respond to questions such as the following:

- > What kinds of text are you hoping to get when I randomly distribute them at the beginning of class?
- > What patterns do you see between the texts in your pile?
- > Is there a text in your pile that you are beginning to treasure more so than the others?
- > How quickly can you tell if a text is a keeper or not?

The anthology prefaces, for their part, describe editors’ rationale from more of a distance, but, like the logs, they provided insight into editors’ decisions (e.g., why they went through the trouble to translate a particular text or how they sought to acquire multiple texts written by a particularly talented classmate).

Techniques from grounded theory provided guidance for me as I analyzed the student–editors’ logs and prefaces, determined patterns, and built narratives around the data.<sup>1</sup> Sifting through editors’ logs, I would label individual passages by theme (e.g., “translation” or “evolving editorial strategy”), with an eye toward themes that recur. If a theme recurred often enough, it became a category. Once tentative categories emerged, I practiced “constant comparison” (Charmaz 342), which means that I coded incoming data with attention to existing categories (and also recoded old passages to bring them in line with the new categories). For me, the main benefit of this grounded theory approach was that it allowed unexpected lines of inquiry to emerge that were not planned before the study began. I couldn’t have predicted, going into this project, that translation would be such an interesting topic; I didn’t think students would have much interest in writing, reading, and anthologizing in languages other than English. However, as I describe below, the students in class #1 did, and their perspectives shed light on how writers, translators, and editors make decisions.

In my narrative about class #1, an English 101 class offered in the fall of 2016, I describe student–editors’ shifting attitudes toward translation and linguistic variation. For class #2, another English 101 class offered in the summer of 2017, my narrative follows a series of six texts (“Love Forgotten #1,” “Love Forgotten #2,” . . . “Love Forgotten #6”) written by one female student over the course of several weeks that generated a ripple effect onto the writing and editing of two female classmates. What binds these narratives is the presence of “challenging texts” (Kilcup 39), which encountered resistance at first but eventually found hospitable

environments, from which they began to shape the values of writers and editors in the class.

### **Class #1: Under What Circumstances Will a Writer Write (or Refrain from Writing) in a Nondominant Language?**

In our diverse classrooms at Queensborough Community College, I have found nearly half the students to be capable of writing in multiple languages. The majority of these multilingual writers prefer to write in English during English class, but some take the opportunity—which I offer in our low-stakes, end-of-class writing moments—to keep their writing chops in languages other than English. This means that at the beginning of each class, when I randomly hand out the writing from the end of the previous class, students occasionally receive writing in languages that they don't understand.

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For a few editors, the idea of non-English texts circulating in an English classroom was hard to accept at first. “When I saw the option on the board to ‘write in a different language,’” Sean wrote, “I doubted what I was seeing.” Editors’ ambivalence toward non-English writing caused at least one multilingual writer to stop: Michael had been producing writing in Chinese and Spanish “because I want more people to do so as well,” but he stopped when he “realized that texts in different languages were not being taken by my classmates.” His observation was corroborated by a classmate who said, “I have been noticing my classmates writing in different languages but editors always trade away their foreign language texts when they get them because they don’t understand them.”

Isbo must have picked up on the wariness of his classmates because he urged them to create a more hospitable environment for non-English writing. “Don’t run from something that is foreign because the concept can help you,” he wrote. “If you receive a text in another language, držite ga i prevesti. Možda je pomenuto nešto važno.” He ended on a practical note, adding, “It might fit in perfectly with the theme of your collection.”

The circulation of non-English texts in our classroom was inhibited not only by editors’ wary reception but also writers’ reluctance to produce them. During the early weeks of the semester, Manuela rarely wrote in Spanish because she “knew” that if she wrote in Spanish, “nobody would be able to understand what I wrote.” For a writer named Chelsea, the pressure to “show likkle sophistication fa d writing” kept her from writing in anything but Metropolitan English until the final week of the semester, when she admitted, “Ah long time say mi min wah write lakka dis pon ma writing and dem for teacher Leary.”<sup>22</sup> Chelsea was easily the best writer in

the class, so she had very little to prove, but her hesitation reflected the reluctance of many students to roll out their entire linguistic repertoire.

It is true, like Michael said, that some student–editors immediately traded away texts in languages they didn’t understand. I noticed this too while observing our bimonthly markets. However, some editors not only kept but also sought out foreign language texts. Their reasons for doing so varied. One editor named Greta was rather existential about it: “Last week I received a text in Spanish. I decided to just keep it without knowing what it is about. There are so many things that should stay a mystery and so many things that should stay unopened.” An editor named Danesh, who noted his fluency in five different languages, decided to build a collection of texts representing a variety of languages, including languages with which he was unfamiliar. “I started going to the surplus pile everyday to look for texts in different languages and found texts with a Caribbean Accent, a text with Chinese characters in it, and so on.” In his preface, Danesh countered Manuela’s claim that “nobody will understand what she wrote,” saying that Manuela “didn’t think about Google Translate that allows us to translate almost any language.”

Besides Google Translate, memories from high school foreign language classes helped student–editors too. Chelsea detailed her bumbling effort to incorporate a Spanish text into her anthology, which revolved around the theme of “Change.”

My native language is English so the only thing I had backing me up was the Spanish I learnt from high school. When I first recieved the text, my immediate reaction was to swap it. However, I sort of glanced over the text and noticed the word “cambio” which I thought mean “change,” so I kept it. When I read it more carefully, using my high school Spanish fortified with Google Translate, I realized that the word “cambio” was used in a different context. I held onto it anyways because it was the first one I received in a different language and I had already gone through the trouble to translate it.

Manuela noticed the uptick in interest from open–minded editors (such as Greta, Danesh, and Chelsea) surrounding her in the classroom. “MMMMM!!!,” she wrote, “Today I see something interesting in class and it is that somebody is collecting writing in Spanish. It was cute, at least for me, because at least somebody is interested in collecting writing in my language.” After that, Manuela wrote in Spanish at the end of nearly every class. With more of her Spanish in circulation, the likelihood increased for it to land with editors fluent in Spanish, such as Daniel. He didn’t need Google Translate or memories of high school Spanish class to understand. In the preface to his anthology of texts related to the theme of “Weather,” Daniel highlighted one of Manuela’s texts:

One of the most interesting texts in my collection is called “La Naturaleza,” where the author expresses her mood and how the time/weather influences these feelings. She writes about “el cielo, la luna, las estrellas, todo en el universo, sentir el aire” and then describes how there is nothing more relaxing than just laying back and just feeling the aroma in the air and admiring the beauty in nature.



What conditions are needed for linguistic diversity to thrive? The narrative above describes only how low-stakes writing circulated in the literary marketplace of my English classroom, so I can't generalize too much. However, the narrative does suggest that hospitable environments require more than just the presence of multilingual readers such as Daniel. It requires generous readers and editors who offer small acts of hospitality—such as when Greta kept a text even though she didn't know what it meant; when Chelsea mistranslated “cambio” based on high school Spanish class; and when Isbo urged monolingual editors to give non-English texts another look.

## **Class #2: How Do Female Editors Boost Up Female Writers in Otherwise Inhospitable Environments?**

As I sorted through students' prefaces and editor logs from a summer 2017 class, I couldn't help but notice the recurring references to a series of impromptu texts called “Love Unfinished,” all of which were produced by a student named Iris. These texts were received poorly at first by some male students in the class. However, the series was boosted by the advocacy of several female editors and took on a life of its own, resulting in a very positive chain reaction of writing and editing.

In the exchange below, three students in the class (Clara, Iris, and Dhyani) describe the ripple effect that occurred after Iris put this series into circulation.

**Clara: (one of the student-editors who championed the “Love Unfinished” series)** At the beginning of our sixth class of the semester, while browsing the surplus table, I came across “Intro: A Love Unfinished,” which was a different text, unlike anything else I had seen so far. In the text, Iris explained that she was writing a series called “A Love Unfinished” that was “sad” and probably won't be wanted by her classmates.

**Iris: (the author of the “Love Unfinished” series)** I wrote that series of texts to test my writing and its value as seen by my classmates. I wanted to see if my peers were able to relate or feel something from my writing. I was entirely shocked with the feedback I got and the life that my writing took on after it left my hands.

**Clara:** I knew the series would be amazing just by reading “Intro” and also that this person was an amazing writer.

Both Iris and Clara noticed that male editors did not share Clara's enthusiasm for the “Love Unfinished” series.

**Iris:** As I observed my texts circulating in and out of my classmates' collections, I noticed that they were usually traded away by male students and picked up by female students. It appears that my writing has been more popular among female students.

**Clara:** When the time came to trade texts during one of our exchanges, I was surprised to see the guy sitting next to me trading away “Love Unfinished #3.” I immediately bought it from him without even reading the whole thing and I don’t regret it one bit.

Clara was not the only student-editor looking to acquire “Love Unfinished” texts. Dhyani also wanted to acquire as much of Iris’ writing as possible.

**Dhyani: (a student-editor who also championed the “Love Unfinished” series)** When looking for texts to acquire, I want to find ones that make me feel the way I feel when I read my own writing. I look for the writer who, like me, leaves a piece of their soul behind with each stroke of a pen. For example, I was randomly handed “Love Unfinished #5” during class one day. The text immediately caught my eye. I read the whole thing right away, which I don’t usually do—I’m usually a skimmer. The text was about the loss of someone she loved and the way she handled that person’s passing.

**Iris: (writer of “Love Unfinished”)** I wrote that text with passion but without much thought. It was the most honest piece I wrote this semester. I struggled while writing it, as there were so many things I wanted to say but I was limited.

**Dhyani:** I loved how open and personal it was. So simple, yet it showed so much of who she was. Her writing inspired me to attempt the same. To try to keep things simple, but to show people who I am.

**Iris:** The reason I expect my stories to get traded away is not from lack of confidence. It’s because I don’t write in response to the prompts on the board, which makes them harder to fit into anthologies that have a running theme.

**Dhyani:** I didn’t try to fit her stories into my anthology. I fit my anthology around her stories.

**Iris:** Of all the feedback I had gotten from classmates, Dhyani’s stood out to me. It was a page-long excerpt from her introductory preface and truly touching. She explained how I inspired and impacted her writing, which is something I’d always wanted to be able to do.

**Dhyani:** Her writing reminded me of the things I aim for with my own writing.

Clara noticed the similarity between Iris and Dhyani’s writing. She knew she couldn’t build a collection solely on Iris’s writing, so she began to collect the next best thing—Dhyani’s writing.

**Clara:** As I kept an eye out for more “Love Unfinished” texts, I randomly received an amazing text called “Futures.” I knew it wasn’t the same writer as the “Love Unfinished” series (different handwriting, different paper) but it reminded me of it. Although “Futures” did not fit with the rest of my collection, I kept it, and tried to find more of hers.

**Dhyani:** I was a bit overwhelmed by how well Clara and other classmates seemed to understand my writing. My writing tends to be almost completely composed of metaphors and I expect only certain, if any, people to understand it.

**Clara:** Section 2 of my anthology features several pieces of writing by Dhyani, whose writing is like art. There’s always something dark and a deeper meaning to every piece of her writing. I put the texts into a certain order because I’m trying to piece together the story. It starts with this character being swell and happy, then her becoming too attached and possessive, to the person leaving her, and as result the character becoming “a monster.”

**Dhyani:** I was sure I did only a mediocre job of conveying myself until I saw how my work was made use of by editors and written about in their introductory prefaces.

When producing their impromptu texts at the end of each class, students always have the option to produce “escape writing”—a page of meaningless sentences produced as quickly as possible in order to escape class and go home. It’s low-stakes, semi-anonymous writing, so the penalty for escape writing is little or nothing. Clara was doing her fair share of escape writing at the beginning of the semester, but her work as an editor of Iris’s and Dhyani’s writing looped back and began to influence her own writing.

**Clara:** Early in the semester, I was not putting much thought into the impromptu writing that we did at the end of class but the writing of my classmates eventually inspired me to talk more about society and the world. One of my later texts talks about the disgusting harassment and objectification of women by certain men. I didn’t put a title on it but when I got it back at the end of the semester, an editor had given it a title that I completely agreed with—“Reality of a Woman.”

Not surprisingly, it was yet another female editor who had placed the fitting title onto Clara’s text.

The chain reaction caused by the “Love Unfinished” series echoes the findings of Jean Oggins, whose research (1) offers evidence for the chronic underrepresentation of women writers in the *Best American* anthologies, (2) demonstrates how the underrepresentation is exacerbated when male guest editors make the selections, and (3) demonstrates how the underrepresentation is significantly miti-

gated when a female guest editor makes the selections. Oggins's findings, and my students' experiences, corroborate a grounding principle from feminist recovery scholarship—in literary environments without sufficient female editors, valuable writing by women has been and will be overlooked and underappreciated (and perhaps poorly titled).

### **Problematizing Great Writing: What Students Learn from Anthologizing**

I mentioned earlier that Nancy Chick's instructional note in *TETYC* was what got me hooked on anthology assignments. Since then, a variety of anthologizing assignments, from across the English curriculum, have helped me develop and revise my anthologizing assignment into a semester-long project. Here are a few projects that inspired me:

- > In high school English classes taught by Anne McCrary Sullivan, students develop personal anthologies from literary works “that best connect with their own personalities, interests, and literary tastes” (27).
- > At a community writing center called 826 Valencia, David Eggers recruits a group of high school students to help him edit *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. The high school students help to find and evaluate the texts that go into the widely circulated anthology.
- > In college composition classes taught by Robert Leigh Davis, students embed their own writing in a constellation of other people's writing. By configuring a textual matrix for their own writing to dwell in, students exert “some control over the setting in which (their) writing is taken up by readers” (35).
- > In creative writing courses taught by Michael McFee, students select thirty to fifty of their favorite poems, type each one of them out, figure out how to organize them, and write an introduction that gives the reader an idea of why they chose and arranged as they did.

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All of the anthologizing assignments . . . offer opportunities for active reading, reflective writing, collaborative editing, critical thinking, project-based learning, and higher-order reasoning. Furthermore, they all teach students how to provide stewardship for the work of others, which can empower students in community college English classes.

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All of the anthologizing assignments listed above offer opportunities for active reading, reflective writing, collaborative editing, critical thinking, project-based learning, and higher-order reasoning. Furthermore, they all teach students how to provide stewardship for the work of others, which can empower students in community college English classes. As they edit anthologies, students help “determine what degree of the past shall remain in the present,” as well as “the sequences by which texts are presented” (Grigely 74). “These sequences,” according to Joseph Grigely, “affect how we read works as individual texts, and how we read them collectively as his-

tory” (75). While anthologists read, they think very proactively, trying to figure out if a piece will make it into the anthology at all and, if so, into what section or subsection it will go.

Finally, carefully conceived anthologizing assignments introduce students to “the economics and politics of canon formation” (Kilcup 53) and demonstrate that influential texts do not survive and exert influence solely on their own merits. Nancy Chick reports that her own anthologizing assignment helps students understand “how specific aesthetics formed the canon,” which problematizes “what they may have thought were universal or unquestioned notions of what makes some literature ‘great’ and the rest ‘inferior’” (422). Mine is a writing class, not a literature class, but Chick’s statement still applies. Just as “great” and “inferior” literature is problematized for Chick’s students, “great” and “inferior” student writing is problematized for mine. Students learn not to get too high when their writing is received well, nor too low when it is received poorly. Their writing, like any writing, will accrue social merit only if it gets “help from the rest of the system” (Senier 77). With this in mind, they must account for the circumstances surrounding them as they make decisions about what and how and when to write, even (or especially) if they decide to produce texts that challenge or contest.

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### **Notes**

1. Grounded theory is an inductive approach, commonly used in the social sciences, in which researchers begin to gather and analyze data without a specific hypothesis in mind.

2. Suresh Canagarajah defines Metropolitan Englishes as versions of English “spoken by the communities that traditionally claimed ownership over the language in England, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand” (588).

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