CONTEXTUALIZING COLLEGE-LEVEL ENGLISH COMPOSITION COURSES:
A STUDY OF STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Contextualization of pre-college courses is expanding across higher education, including through I-BEST and Guided Pathways. A small case study was conducted on a contextualized college-level writing course at Bates Technical College. The lectures and assignments were contextualized to a cluster of related career programs by incorporating actual work documents, such as bid proposals, responding to customer complaints, resumes, and incident reports. The structure of the course was also modified to accommodate adult, nontraditional student needs for flexible deadlines, computer access, and planned absences for parenting. Although the students had initial negative perceptions of the value of the course, they found their needs well met through the relevance and structure of the course.

*Keywords*: technical college, two-year college, non-traditional students, contextualization, contextualized writing, adult learners, transformative learning theory.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Technical college students engage in contextualized, hands-on, concrete learning in their program courses as they prepare for immediate employment. Although the programs may be as disparate as dental assisting, welding, or interior design, all of them are concrete and immediately relevant for students. At the same time, students often see little relevance in liberal arts courses, such as English 101 (Wang, Sun, & Wickersham, 2017), seeking employment upon completion of the technical courses, abandoning their academic courses, and thus their associate degrees. The lack of an associate’s degree carries a substantial lifetime financial impact, particularly to students of color. Currently, colleges are being called on by their accrediting bodies and the public to increase their graduation rates. The Guided Pathways model, widely implemented throughout the country and the 34 public two-year colleges across the state of Washington, calls for students in pre-college courses (both adult basic education and developmental education) to learn math, reading, and writing through contextualized curricula and course materials (Washington State Board, 2018). Oddly, the Guided Pathways model does not discuss contextualization of college-level general education courses. The research on contextualized college-level English writing courses is scant at best. The purpose of this case study is to discover how technical college students and their instructor experience a college-level writing course that is contextualized to a cluster of related majors. Throughout the literature,

[Contextualization is] a diverse family of instructional strategies designed to more seamlessly link the learning of foundational skills and academic or occupational context by focusing teaching and learning squarely on concrete applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student. (pp. 3-4)

For example, in a contextualized writing course for plumbing, students might read a well-written financial analysis, a bid proposal, or a fine example of an essay in the editor’s column in a plumbing journal instead of, or in addition to, an essay on the Brazilian groundnut beetle in a standard composition reader. Students may find no relevance in the essay on groundnut beetles but would see immediate relevance in the work documents or the plumbing journal.

Contextualization of college-level courses could help instructors, curriculum developers, and administrators increase the relevance, retention, and success of technical college students, particularly at colleges redesigning their academic programs to the Guided Pathways model.

This chapter begins with a statement of the problem and the significance of this research, followed by the proposed research questions.

**Statement of the Problem**

Applied associate degrees in the State of Washington reduce the number of required academic credits to allow a higher number of credits taken in applied professional-technical programs. Even so, graduation rates among technical college students are low. Many technical college students, such as those at Bates Technical College, complete their program courses and move directly into the desired job and wage before completing the general education courses because employers require skills (e.g., welding, auto repair, dental assisting) or licensure (e.g.,
cosmetologists, nurses, professional pilots), not a college degree. Not surprisingly, degree completion in technical colleges remains very low. More than 75 percent of first-time, full-time students have not completed three years after entering college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). While Bates Technical College does not publish employment data, another nearby state technical college with similar programs states that 71 percent of their students obtain desired employment within six months of leaving the college, with or without a degree (About Clover Park, n.d.). As Bates is less than a mile from Clover Park Technical College and offers many similar programs, it should be a fair comparison. The student is employed without a degree, but at a cost.

The costs of not completing an associate degree are significant to the student and her family. A study by the Brookings Institute (Greenstone & Looney, 2013) found that a student with a two-year degree made $3,000 more annually, on average, than the student without the degree, or $90,000 over a lifetime, and earned annually approximately $23,000 more than a student without any college, or $690,000 over a lifetime. Failing to complete or delaying completion by more than two years of college-level academic courses such as English composition was shown to correlate strongly to low graduation rates for students of color (Moore & Shulock, 2010). The lifetime averages for lost wages are particularly cogent to students of color: both African American and Hispanic/Latino students are less likely to complete their degrees than White students (Perna, Finney, & Callan, 2014); therefore, courses that could potentially increase students’ perceptions of the usefulness of completing their degree may reduce this social injustice. An English writing course contextualized to a cluster of related technical programs, such as automotive or plumbing, could be what is needed to make the course relevant and transformational for technical college students.
Community and technical college students cannot always see a connection between writing, reading, math, and their program of study and are thus less motivated to learn (Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010). The literature has demonstrated that adults learn best with contextualization (Chernus & Fowler, 2009; Kalchik & Oertle, 2010; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 1998; Perin, 2001; Perin & Hare, 2010). Contextualization in adult basic skills and pre-college courses has been shown to be effective for students (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Ilton, 2013); contextualization of college-level academic courses, though less-well researched, have also shown efficacy for students (Chernus & Fowler, 2009; Kalchik & Oertle, 2010; Perin & Hare, 2010). Perin’s 2011 meta-study, reviewing research about contextualization in pre-college courses found efficacy in contextualization. Contextualization can take many forms, which will be explicated later in this chapter. One example of contextualization, Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST), which contextualizes foundational skills by inserting lessons directly into technical program courses, has proven very effective at better preparing adult students for success in college-level courses and technical programs (Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011). Based on the success of pre-college course contextualization, most notably demonstrated by the I-BEST program (Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy), the Guided Pathways initiative requires all pre-college academics courses be contextualized for adult learners.

Little attention has been paid to contextualizing college-level English writing courses to attract technical students into English, which advances students toward degree completion. Most college-level research has been around math or science (Heckman & Weissglass, 1994; Stone, Alfeld, Pearson, Lewis, & Jensen, 2006; Wang, Sun, & Wichersham, 2017). The research of English composition contextualization tends to be about writing across the curriculum in university programs (Barton, Heidema, & Jordan, 2002; Todd & Hudson, 2008), not technical
college programs. Writing across the curriculum inserts writing lessons directly into non-composition courses. For instance, a psychology instructor might teach students how to formulate and support a thesis statement (M. Wheeler, personal communication, November 7, 2017). The purpose of the present study is to understand the experience of an English 175 writing course that is contextualized to the students’ fields of study. To align with the Guided Pathways Initiative of clustering similar majors and contextualizing pre-college courses, Pete Hauschka, dean of general education (academics) at Bates Technical College, conceived of providing students in the related clusters of automotive and construction workforce programs (service trades) with a college-level English course contextualized to those programs. Dr. Peter Speelmon created and taught the course. Qualitative research on the dean’s thought processes and the technical students’ and instructor’s experiences in a contextualized English composition course will help instructors and curriculum developers in course design; further research based on this study could examine relationships between contextualized college-level general education courses and degree completion, which advisors and college retention specialists would find valuable. Therefore, this study sought to investigate a contextualized college-level writing course at a technical college.

**Significance of the Research Question**

Students face serious lifetime impacts when they complete their technical courses but not the associate’s degree, including lost wages and limited career opportunities (Greenstone & Looney, 2013). At the institutional level, low student completions hurt the reputation of a technical college or any college. The college also faces lost revenue when the students complete technical-professional courses, but not academic ones (Wang, Sun, & Wickersham, 2017).
Further, degree completion affects the local economy by impacting the job market. Washington State, with Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Travelocity, and Boeing as major employers, estimates that the rate of students graduating with associate and baccalaureate degrees must increase 6.2% annually to supply the workforce in 2020 when 67 percent of the job openings will require a minimum of college-level coursework, if not a degree (Perna, Finney, & Callan, 2012). Nationally, employers want students with good written and oral communication skills (Busick, 2011; McMurray, Dutton, McQuaid, & Richard, 2016; Omoth, 2017).

The Guided Pathways initiative, currently spreading throughout the United States, calls for clusters of similar majors to share contextualized pre-college math and English courses (Van Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016). When students recognize the relevance of what they learn in their math and English courses, completion and success rates will increase, thus bridging the gap in student achievement. The Guided Pathways initiative resulted from a broad-based area of need: across the country, college students who do not complete their degrees are penalized financially by college debt and forsaken career advancement opportunities, which impacts the economy. For many students, technical education can be a pathway from poverty to middle class (Petrilli, 2016).

**Research Questions**

Because neglecting to complete the required college-level writing class is one reason students do not graduate, the purpose of this research was to understand technical college students’ experiences in a college-level English course, English 175 Professional Writing, that uses materials and assignments contextualized to students clustered from related programs. The following research questions were proposed.
• **Overarching Research Question:** How has contextualization been implemented in a college-level writing course?

• **Sub-Question:** How does a contextualized, college-level English composition course differ from the students’ previous writing course experiences?

• **Sub-Question:** What differences does the instructor see between a traditional writing course and a contextualized one?

• **Sub-Question:** What differences does the dean see between a traditional writing course and a contextualized one?

**Definition of Key Terminology**

**Adult Learner**—An adult learner is commonly defined as over 24 or 25 years old, or has other characteristics as defined by Mezirow (1991) and others (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017), Kim, 2002). The terms adult learners and non-traditional learners are often used interchangeably in the literature. Adult learners often have additional responsibilities beyond schooling, such as parenting or full-time employment (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011).

**Contextualization**—This research will use Mazzeo, Rab, and Alsid’s (2003) definition:

> [Contextualization is] a diverse family of instructional strategies designed to more seamlessly link the learning of foundational skills and academic or occupational context by focusing teaching and learning squarely on concrete applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student. (pp. 3-4)

**Guided Pathways**—Based on the work of Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins (2015), Guided Pathways is a nationwide college initiative designed to increase student graduation rates while reducing student dropouts and costs. The Guided Pathways model streamlines the students’ path through college in several ways, including putting students into groups clustered by similar majors so the
students are exposed to several related majors during their first two quarters (increasing the chances that students change majors earlier, thus reducing the costs and time of wasted courses), accelerating the time students spend in pre-college courses, increasing support for underprepared students, and clearly delineating what courses to take each quarter, with minimal elective choices (State Board, 2018). The State of Washington has adopted the Guided Pathways model (State Board, 2018).

**Non-Traditional Learner**—Generally, non-traditional learners did not matriculate directly from high school to college, are socioeconomically disadvantaged, represent a racial or ethnic minority, and have responsibilities such as parenting and full-time employment in addition to school (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011; Kim, 2002).

**Pre-College (Developmental) Courses**—Generally, pre-college or developmental courses are math, reading, and writing courses that bring students with “weak skills” (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010, p. 255) up to college-entry ability. Because the term “remedial” is perceived negatively, “developmental” (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho) or “pre-college” are used in the literature. However, “pre-college” may also be used to include both Adult Basic Education and developmental (9th–12th grade).

**Technical College**—In the State of Washington, public technical colleges are two-year institutions that offer workforce programs (e.g., welding, computer programming), but cannot offer degrees in academic programs (e.g., general studies, history, chemistry). The purpose of technical colleges is to provide a skilled workforce. To achieve this, Washington legislators have enacted a law creating an applied associate degree. An applied associate degree decreases academic courses to three—communication, math, and social science—to allow for a maximum number of credits devoted to workforce skills.
Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow (1978) developed his theory of transformative learning in part because of the profound differences he believed existed between how adults learn and how children learn. While studying women returning to college later in life, Mezirow focused on individual experience, critical reflection, holistic learning, and dialogue (also Mezirow et al., 2009). Adults, he reasoned, use their frames of reference, think about the new information, then transform their perspective, changing their frames of reference (Taylor, 2008). Since its inception in 1978, transformative learning theory has been put into widespread use such that over 30 years later the theory is still being critically reviewed and counter-reviewed today (for example, Hoggan, 2016; Moyer & Sinclair, 2016). Perhaps the biggest contribution Mezirow has given to education is the change in focus from instructor-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction (Cranton, 2016). For example, *The Journal of Transformative Education* was established in 2003 and continues strongly today. In 2014, the eleventh International Transformative Learning Conference was held at Mezirow’s workplace, Teachers College, Columbia University, and gave special honor to Mezirow’s then recent death. Papers published in *The Journal of Transformative Learning*, several *New Directions* journals, and *Adult Education Quarterly* continue to broaden the discussion considerably. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* devoted an issue to transformative learning in 2000. Because of the plethora of papers and research, *New Directions* again devoted an issue to transformative learning in 2008 as an update (Taylor, 2008).

Mezirow (1978) created the following ten steps based on his belief that for adults to learn and to retain that learning, a transformation in the learner must occur:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169)

Over the years, Mezirow refined his theory regarding premises, furthering the definitions of his ten steps, as did many others (Cranton, 2016; Fazio-Griffith & Ballard; Hogan, 2016; Moyer & Sinclair, 2016; Owen, 2016; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012; Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 2008). For example, the first step, a disorienting dilemma, has evolved. Originally, Mezirow observed the disorienting dilemma as a dramatic event, perhaps even a crisis, a conclusion he reached after conducting a study of older women returning to or starting college in the late 1970’s. From his original position that the disorienting dilemma was “a single, dramatic event” (Cranton, 2016, p. 19; Mezirow, 1991), he came to agree with Taylor (2000) and others that the event could occur progressively over time. The disorienting dilemma was further defined by Mezirow (2000) as a clash of reality with an individual’s frames of reference, or “meaning perspectives” (p. 287). Mezirow additionally posited that one’s frame of reference is the result of one’s assumptions, or “habits of mind,” which by 2000 he had revised upward to include at least six types:
sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic and continued the explanation that learning occurs when one’s frames of reference are (generally by the occurrence of the disorienting dilemma), expanded, replaced, or created.

Mezirow specified that the transformation in adults occurs within their emotions, attitudes, and beliefs when their “meaning perspective” (step 3) changes through critical reflection leading to a new awareness and a change of previously held, faulty premises, usually received uncritically from others (Mezirow et al., 2000, p. 8). By 1991, Mezirow had concluded that student-centered, transformative learning that is nurtured in the classroom helps foster critical thinking:

Learners move from a simple awareness of their experiencing to an awareness of the conditions for their experiencing (how they are perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, acting—a reflection on the process) and beyond this to an awareness of the reasons why they experience as they do and to action based on these insights. (p. 197)

In 1995, Mezirow discussed the criticality for students to have rational discourse about their learning and identified ideal conditions for those conversations, including openness, trust, problem solving, and critical reflection. Also at this time, Mezirow added the “centrality of the experience” to critical reflection and rational discourse to become the three base components of his theory. Edward Taylor, a cowriter of Mezirow and prolific scholar, (e.g., Taylor, 1998; Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 2008; Mezirow, Taylor & Associates, 2009), noted that new perspectives of transformative learning theory (TLT) included psychoanalytic, the process through life to understand oneself; psycho-developmental, the continuous growth in learning across a lifetime; and social-emancipatory, the idea based on Freire’s work (1984) that humans continuously
reflect and update their worldviews toward an equitable society for all (Taylor, 2008). By 2003, Mezirow explained:

Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and options that will prove more true or justified to guide actions. (pp. 58-59)

Cranton (2016) later explained it this way: “If a person responds to an alternative habit of mind by reconsidering and revising prior belief systems, the learning becomes transformative” (p. 19).

Besides education, other branches of the academy began adopting and adapting TLT almost immediately. Neurobiology research discovered through MRI scans scanned an actual transformative learning pathway in the brain, giving us the term “brain-based learning” (Janik, 2005), confirming much of Mezirow’s theory and leading to the conclusion by Taylor (2008) that transformative learning:

(1) requires discomfort prior to discovery;
(2) is rooted in students’ experiences, needs, and interests;
(3) is strengthened by emotive, sensory, and kinesthetic experiences;
(4) appreciates differences in learning between males and females; and
(5) demands that educators acquire an understanding of a unique discourse and knowledge base of neurobiological systems. (p. 8)

While Mezirow saw critical reflection and dialogue both as essential to transformative learning, Tisdell (2003) promoted “intersecting positionalities” between society and the individual, based
Transformative learning theory continued expanding across the globe, particularly in Africa, moving broadly as well into the arts and the spiritual realm (Black & Bernardes, 2012; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Moyer & Sinclair, 2016; Westoby & Lyons, 2017). Other academic fields exploring transformative learning included African American studies, political science, religious studies, and many others. One notable advancement was the “planetary view” (O’Sullivan, 1999) that transformative learning encompasses more than the individual, necessitating a complete transformation of political, social, environmental, and educational systems interconnectedly across the planet. Nursing journals promptly adapted and applied transformative learning theory or aspects thereof to nursing and nursing schools (Kear, 2013; Kirpatrick, Tweedell, & Semogas, 2011; Liimatainen et al., 2001; Parker & Myrick, 2010; Pepinet al., 2017; Vaughn, 2011; Williams, 2004).

In 2003, Mezirow put forth the idea that perhaps transformation does not occur until a student acts on the learning in the real world. Mezirow had not previously considered positionality, but embraced its importance as a factor in students’ learning as well as post-instructional actions after receiving criticism from other scholars (Dirkx, 2001; Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009), while the research continued to reinforce the importance of critical reflection in expanded dimensions (Kreber, 2004; Owen, 2016; Merriam, 2004) and in other fields. In fact, many of Mezirow’s (1991) ten steps of transformative learning now have significant bodies of empirical research behind them, not just critical reflection. Allowing opportunities for critical reflection and discourse during the learning processes play a major role in Mezirow’s theory.
Critics of Transformative Learning Theory

As late as 2000, Mezirow himself still referred to his theory as a work in progress. In fact, one of the biggest criticisms of Mezirow’s theory is that he failed to set boundaries or increase his explication around the theory as other authors have expanded and expounded on it (Hogan, 2016). However, transformational learning theory “has taken a central place in the adult education, higher education and professional education literature” (Cranton, 2016). Prior to his death in 2014, Mezirow maintained that a primary tenet of his theory is the premise that adults, unlike children, have developed ingrained, established frames of reference throughout their lifetimes that must be exposed, discarded, changed, or replaced for transformative learning to occur. As recently as 2018, transformative learning theory’s applicability to children was still being written about (e.g., Guidino & Paredes, 2018).

A very credible criticism of transformative learning theory is the adaptation, and often appropriation, of the word “transformative” in education and in other arenas such as the business world. Mezirow does not hold exclusive rights to the word “transformative,” but critics are right that care should be taken not to label every learning experience involving some sort of transformation as “transformative learning” and thus identifying it as operational under Mezirow’s theory (Cranton, 2016).

As Amy Rose (2015), Mezirow’s program manager for the study leading to his development of transformative learning theory, explains, Mezirow’s original theory was based on determining what happens cognitively within the individual, but agreed with the harsh criticism he received for failure to consider social change (e.g., Taylor, 2000). Hogan (2016) in a qualitative study as a critical review of the expansion of TLT stated that outward change necessitates inward change, and thus Mezirow’s work toward a theory of internal cognition is as
important as the external manifestations, such as social change. Taylor (1998) had postulated that it was not perspective transformation, but transformation in one of these four areas: psychocritical, psychoanalytical, psychodevelopmental, and social-emancipatory. Mezirow embraced all four of Taylor’s areas of transformation, Hogan (2016) noted, and agreed that each approach has transformative outcomes and processes. Hogan carefully detailed how the outcomes and processes of each approach diverge from the original transformative learning theory. Further, after reviewing 206 relevant scholarly articles published between 2003 and 2014 from three journals (Journal of Transformative Education, Adult Learning, and Adult Education Quarterly), he coded the articles using content analysis methodology to compare learning outcomes. After comparing his results with an extended definition of metatheory Hogan concluded that transformative learning encompasses a metatheory by all criteria, and that a distinct definition of transformative learning theory should be “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (p. 71).

Dirkx (2001) also discussed the effects of Mezirow’s apparent failure to give affective (emotional, spiritual) factors enough weight in the steps of transformative learning theory. Meanwhile, Henderson (2002) agreed that critical reflection is key to transformative theory but pursued a distillation of various theories of reflection to achieve a precise definition. He found similarities between Mezirow, Brookfield (2006), and Freire (1970), noting that all three agree on learners having their worldview challenged by disruptive events causing the learner to reflect and develop a new perspective that will be integrated into his or her worldview. Henderson’s purpose was to develop the practical in keeping with the theoretical for a study of students in an economics course.
Critical reflection, one of the mainstays of Mezirow’s theory, has been carefully and critically debated and refined as has the theory in its entirety. Mezirow et al. (1990) published *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*. Fisher (2003) referred to critical reflection as “a problematic concept” as she reviewed literature on critical reflection, including works by Mezirow, and found that “while there has been detailed discussion and analysis of critical reflection in the literature, clear and rigorous definitions are hard to come by” (p. 315). Similarly to Hogan (2016), Fisher carefully examined the definitions for her term in question, “critical reflection,” as opposed to Hogan’s “transformative learning theory,” and drew her own definition from not only Mezirow’s works, but those of many others as well, including disciples of transformative learning theory (TLT). She included a summary of part of research on critical reflection using students in an economics course at her own university. To do so, she delineated the following indicators to analyze whether students have increased their capacity for critical reflection:

- articulate a contextual awareness of one’s own position. . . .
- identify one’s own values, beliefs and assumptions;
- consider other perspectives or alternative ways of viewing the work. . .
- identify how one’s own views can have a particular bias that privileges one view over another;
- perceive contractions and inconsistencies in one’s own story or account of events; and
- imagine other possibilities, i.e., a capacity to envision alternatives. (p. 317)
Transformative learning theory continues to be examined and explicated throughout the academic and business worlds today. The quest for agreed upon definitions and boundaries continue. As Cranton (2016) put it:

In the 40 years since Mezirow studied the experiences of women returning to college, transformative learning theory has developed from a 10-step transition model to a complex and comprehensive theory of adult learning. Although Mezirow remained constant in his view that transformation occurs through rational critical self-reflection and discourse, others in the field have elaborated on the ways in which it may occur. (p. 27)

Rationale

Transformative learning theory is well positioned to be used as a theoretical framework in a contextualized classroom case study at a public technical college. In the present study students were asked to critically reflect on past experiences with writing and to observe and analyze their current experiences. Because technical college students often fail to see the relevance of taking a writing course (Wang, Sun, & Wickersham, 2017), using components of transformative learning theory as the paradigmatic lens seemed justified. In addition, this study explored how the students’ frames of reference regarding writing had changed—an additional component necessary for transformative learning to occur (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2009).

Application of Theory

At least three aspects of transformative learning theory were applied to this research. First, the research setting is an adult college class composed primarily of students who were older or categorized as non-traditional. Transformative learning theory is about adult learning (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Second, because the basis of transformative learning is a perspective transformation, participants were questioned to determine whether they viewed the
content as a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991), the initial step of the transformative learning process. Third, a purpose of both the course assignments and the interviews was to promote critical reflection of the events of the class. Critical reflection is another important element of transformative learning in which the adult learner self-reflects, assessing his or her assumptions (Mezirow, 1991) considering the current learning situation. Further discussion of and explication of adult learning occurs in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

The impetus for a public technical college to increase graduation rates of students is strong. As the Guided Pathways model is implemented in Washington State colleges for the purpose of increasing student retention and graduation, pre-college writing courses are being contextualized to increase relevance and thus increase student success. At a technical college such as Bates Technical College, the student will find contextualized programs and pre-college courses because such contextualization has been justified by a significant body of research. In other words, students do not learn to wire a building without actually wiring a building. However, the required college-level writing courses, such as English composition, have not been identified for contextualization under Guided Pathways, nor is there much research discussing its efficacy. More research is needed. The research proposed here will help instructors, administrators, and policy makers determine whether college-level writing courses, such as English 175 Professional Writing, should also be contextualized.

The next chapter provides a detailed literature review.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

College-level English composition courses, to a technical college student in a workforce program, have limited relevance (Lourey, 2000), unlike program-specific courses, such as preflight checklists in the professional pilot program or medical terminology in dental assisting, which are immediately relevant to the professional pilot or dental assisting students because the courses are contextualized to the job. The literature shows that contextualization in varied forms is being used successfully in Adult Basic Education and pre-college courses by including real world, concrete, relevant instruction. Yet workforce students are expected to move from contextualized workforce courses and, for many of them, from contextualized remedial courses, into uncontextualized academic writing courses and extrapolate relevance. Bates Technical College, a Washington State two-year institution, has contextualized the Adult Basic Education program, including using the I-BEST model to contextualize academics in several technical and professional programs, and, as a technical college, offers only programs that are contextualized to real life by definition (e.g., welders perform welds in class). Unfortunately, degree completion rates at technical colleges are low. While there are numerous reasons for this, students completing their program courses but not their academic courses continue to be a significant factor in low graduation rates. Leaving a technical college program before completing the degree has lifetime consequences of lost income and opportunity.

A writing course such as English 175 Professional Writing, contextualized to a cluster of related technical programs, such as service trades like automotive and construction, or medical programs such as phlebotomy and massage therapy, could be what is needed to make composition relevant and transformational for technical college
students. This literature review considers the characteristics of community and technical colleges, their completion issues, the varied forms of contextualization, and its potential for college-level writing courses at Bates Technical College in Tacoma, Washington.

**Community and Technical Colleges**

Public higher education was based on the premise that education is for the public good; therefore, community and technical colleges should be broadly available, offering “an open door to every citizen, regardless of his or her academic background or experience, at a cost normally within his or her economic means” (RCW 28.50.020[1]; see also AACC, 2012; Choen & Brawer, 1996). During the educational reform period of the late 1940’s, community colleges became separate entities from high schools (U.S. President, 1947). Today, 1,132 community and technical colleges range across the United States serving over 12 million students annually (AACC, 2017).

Public community colleges, such as those in Washington State, offer short-term certificates, two-year associate degrees, and the first two years of academic courses for a bachelor’s degree, allowing the student to transfer to a baccalaureate institution for the last two years (Chan & Derry, 2013). Washington community colleges offer both academic and workforce programs, while legislative mandates preclude technical colleges from offering anything but workforce programs (RCW 28.50.020[1]). Technical colleges in Washington State, therefore, focus on workforce development by providing professional and technical programs for the students’ immediate entry into the workforce. Some programs, such as nursing or IT, offer a two-year workforce program with transfer agreements in place for students to complete their baccalaureate at a four-year institution (Bates, 2014). Bates, for instance, prepares students to be practical nurses, and offers necessary credits for a transfer option with a partnered school for
continuing to an RN and beyond. For most programs, such as electrician, autobody collision repair, and carpentry, the two-year degree will be the students’ terminus (Bates, 2014).

**Economic Impact**

Students who were prepared for the workforce at community and technical colleges contributed $809 billion to the U.S. economy in 2012 (Economic Modeling, 2014). While it would seem counter-intuitive to the statistics just mentioned, Aghion, Boustan, Hoxby, and Vandenbussche (2009) concluded that community colleges, unlike four-year institutions, do not impact economic growth and, therefore, are not good investments of local, state, or federal funding. When colleges and university data are looked at collectively, Tyndorf and Martin (2018) noted, the effects of the two-year college are difficult to see. Therefore, Tyndorf and Martin conducted a full-scale study disaggregating the data both by type of higher education institution (university versus community college) and type of degree (certificate versus associate’s versus bachelor’s) in a study of all 50 states. Tyndorf and Martin found after controlling for local economies that universities have a very positive impact on the U.S. economy in the long term. Certificates from community colleges, they found, have significant positive impact on the short-term U.S. economy.

The authors’ most important findings regarded associate degrees, however. Agreeing with the body of literature previous to and after Aghion et al., they found that community colleges were well-suited to meet U.S. labor market needs, while other authors arrived at a similar conclusion in developing countries (e.g., Barro & Lee, 2010; Spangler & Tyler, 2011). Community colleges assist “economic recovery, social dislocation, training for quick recovery of livelihoods and economies, or provide immediate labor training for the workforce” (Tyndorf & Martin, 2018, p. 498). Tyndorf and Martin additionally found that time of degree does have a
positive and important impact on the United States economy, with community colleges having the greatest impact on the short-term and medium-term economies through associates’ degrees—representing a sound investment of resources, given the output.

Community college education and respective degrees provide a significant impact on the US economy in the short and medium term. . . [and] should not only be promoted as viable education all the time, but especially in times of economic uncertainty or in areas with larger socio-economic inequalities. (Tyndorf & Martin, 2018, p. 499)

The authors’ findings showed community colleges are a solid investment.

The State of Washington has 34 community and technical colleges. According to the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (2017), the 29 community and five technical colleges of Washington increase the state economy by $20.5 billion annually while remaining more affordable than their four-year public counterparts. The Washington Student Achievement Council (2019) estimated quarterly tuition for 2016—2017 at the University of Washington at $10,081 and community and technical colleges at $3,852. Two-year public colleges are open enrollment, meaning students do not need a specific number of credits or a degree before being admitted. The community and technical colleges in many states, including Washington, must offer Adult Basic Education (ABE) for students generally testing below ninth-grade reading, writing, and mathematical skills (RCW 28.50.020(1)). Pre-college courses, also referred to as developmental education courses, must also be offered to bring students’ skills from ABE program completion to college level readiness (RCW 28.50.020(1)). According to The Community College Research Center (2018), 68 percent of students at two-year colleges take one remedial math or English course and 48 percent of students take two or more remedial courses. Adding remedial courses will increase tuition costs, making the relative affordability of
community colleges all the more important. The affordability of two-year public colleges compared to baccalaureate institutions make them attractive, despite current media attention focused on financial aid repayment (Four Reasons, 2019).

**Earnings**

Completing an associate’s degree increases students’ earnings significantly over their lifetimes compared to students who do not matriculate beyond high school, as illustrated in Figure 1. Torpey (2018) reported an average $7,448 annual average difference between income of a two-year college graduate and a worker with a high school diploma, but no college. Technical programs at either community or technical two-year colleges offer students the opportunity to obtain job skills as quickly as possible to get into the workforce as fast as possible. In Washington State, colleges with workforce programs may offer an applied associate’s degree (RCW 28.50.020). The applied associate’s degree is a non-transferrable workforce degree. The credits in this degree are “applied” as far as possible to the technical or professional program by maximizing the number of program-specific courses, while reducing the number of general education courses to three (communications, math, humanities). Thus, the student with the applied degree is workforce ready. A student graduating with an associate’s degree, applied or otherwise, earns an average of $90,000 additional lifetime income over students who leave the college with the job skills, such as welding or dental assisting, but no degree (Greenstone & Looney, 2013).

Abel and Dietz (2014) calculate that adult students who matriculate later and, therefore, enter the workforce later than students going directly from high school to the workplace, will still realize $325,000 additional earnings over their lifetime with the completion of a two-year degree over students without any college. After five years, the differences in earnings with post
secondary education become even more pronounced by gender. The Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE) at Columbia University (2018) found that a certificate from a two-year college increases women’s annual earnings by $2,960, approximately $940 more than men’s. Women see a much more radical climb in annual income, according to CAPSEE, upon completion of the associate degree: a national average of $7,160 compared to $4,640 for men. Although the Center reports lower figures for Washington State, they are still impressive: over $4,000 additional annual income for women and $1,900 for men. According to Carnevale and Rose (2015), women’s earnings rise impressively with any level of education, while men show the greatest increase with a baccalaureate degree.
With projections of sharply increasing postsecondary education requirements for employment in the immediate future, Bowers and Bergman (2016) claim that “the United States will not meet projected workforce needs without educating more of its adult population” (p.144). Indeed, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) projects that 18 of the fastest growing jobs through 2026 will require more than a high school diploma.

**Non-Traditional Students**

Students at community and technical colleges are older than those at baccalaureate institutions and are different in many other ways. Ma and Baum (2016) disaggregated CESSE data of students’ ages at public two-year colleges, finding 21 percent of students were under 20 years, 34 percent of students were between 20 and 24 years, while an additional 44 percent of the students were over 24 years. The data also yielded information for students in their first two years of college at baccalaureate institutions, where the students’ ages were differently proportioned. At four-year colleges and universities, 50 percent of the students were under 20 years, 30 percent between 20 and 24 years, and only 20 percent over 24 years. In summation, at public two-year institutions nearly half of the students were over 24 years, while at public four-year institutions, over three-quarters of the students were *under* 24 years. Ma and Baum also noted that over two-thirds of the students at two-year institutions were also employed, one-third of them full-time, while only a fifth of the baccalaureate students worked while matriculating.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) breaks down community college students’ household income as follows:

- under $20,000, 36 percent of students
- $20,000 - $29,000, 14 percent of students
- $30,000 - $49,000, 17 percent of students (2018).
According to these figures, one-half (36 + 14 percent) of all community college students come from households making less than $30,000 annually.

In the literature, the terms “nontraditional students” and “adult learners” are frequently interchangeable and neither have standardized definitions (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). While both terms are applicable to most workforce program college students as seen in the paragraph above, it is worthwhile to differentiate the terms before discussing them collectively. It is widely theorized that adults learn differently and have different learning needs than do children (e.g., Knowles, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Nontraditional students are adults but may have further defining characteristics that also differentiate them from traditional 18-22-year olds who have moved directly from high school to college.

Hyland-Russell and Groen (2011) acknowledge that the term “‘non-traditional adult learner’ varies widely according to context, country, institution, policy, and demographic and enrollment patterns” (p. 64). Community and technical colleges (CTCs) in Washington State have a median student age of 26 years (SBCTC, 2018), which classifies at least half of the students as nontraditional adult learners by age, whether defined as over 22 years (e.g., Bowers & Bergman, 2016), over 24 years (e.g., Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017) or over 25 years old (Kim, 2002). However, Quinn’s (2016) finding in her quantitative study of nontraditional students at more than 3,000 colleges or universities that “approximately 85% of the total nontraditional adult population fell within the age range of 23 or younger” caused her to caution against using age to define nontraditional adult learners and thus ignore risk factors for success for younger students.

Kim (2002) agreed with other authors that older students are much more likely to have other responsibilities, including family and financial responsibilities that compete with their schooling. In addition to age as a criterion for nontraditional student status, Kim noted ethnicity,
socioeconomic status, financial independence from their parents, part-time enrollment, no high-
school diploma, and single parenthood as categories of nontraditional students—none of which 
prefecture students under 22 years of age. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 
2018) agreed with Kim’s criteria (Choy, 2002). Being “economically disadvantaged, racial 
minorities, and immigrants,” Bolden (2009, p. 39) noted are student characteristics more 
prevalent at two-year colleges than baccalaureate institutions.

Engle and Tinto (2008) researched why low-income and first-generation students have 
strikingly lower completion rates in higher education than their more privileged peers. The 
authors found “that the problem is as much the result of the experiences these students have 
during college as it is attributable to the experiences they have before they enroll” (p. 3), such as 
being parents, being of color, or not having financial support. Students of color comprise over 
40 percent of the Washington State community and technical college population (SBCTC, 2018). 
Prince and Jenkins (2005) found low-income students comprised over two-thirds of two-year 
college populations. In a collaborative reboot of Kim’s (2002) original article, Kim, Sax, Lee, 
and Hagedorn (2012) revisited the need for colleges to find ways to increase the success of 
nontraditional students and conducted a study to discern whether the “over 25 years old” 
classification was enough to define nontraditional students considering the other characteristics. 
Discussing two-year colleges, the authors reviewed the literature and moved to add first-
generation students (those whose parents are not college educated) and cultural issues to the 
criteria already mentioned. Their quantitative research concluded as well that students over 25 
years old are “a complex and diverse population” whose needs must be carefully considered for 
their successful incorporation into higher education (Kim et al., 2012, p. 416). Other differences 
characterize the older, nontraditional students, as well. Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Clark, Howell,
and Breen (2016) surveyed traditional (under 25 years) and nontraditional (over 25 years) students, finding, among other things, that nontraditional students have higher self-efficacy and need materials that “[build] upon their interests” (p. 11), in line with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2016).

Kim’s (2002) study of risk factors for two-year versus four-year colleges found disproportionately higher percentages of students at two-year colleges having at least one nontraditional student characteristic, such as parenting, compared to students at four-year institutions—not a surprising conclusion given the higher average age of community and technical colleges. Older students would be, presumably, more likely to have family, job, and financial responsibilities in addition to school. Meriweather (2016) recognized the essential need of childcare centers at all colleges and universities, not just two-year institutions, to support the non-traditional learners. More importantly, Kim stated an additional risk factor for adults is their learning needs, which differ from those of children in part because adults have a high need to see the relevance of what they are learning.

Barriers to non-traditional learners go beyond age, parenting and childcare responsibilities. Engle and Tinto (2006) found, among other things, lack of funds for Pell grants and work-study created additional barriers, and so did GED achievement versus high-school diploma. Cross (1981) originally categorized barriers to non-traditional students as “dispositional or psychological” (such as fear), “institutional” (such as inconvenient class times) and “situational” (such as childcare or transportation challenges). Hyland-Russell and Groen (2011) agreed, stating that economic help alone is insufficient to remove non-traditional learners’ barriers. Goto and Martin (2009) found fear of returning to school a psychological barrier that many educators consider to be beyond the scope of their help. Kaswam (2008) found that older
students are less confident about their own academic success. Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland (2016) advocated helping older students through online support. Jesnek and Campus (2012) noted that “technological ineptitude,” not lack of subject knowledge, can greatly hinder students over 25 years (p. 2). Dirkx (2008) stated that adult learners have higher emotional responses during learning experiences than younger learners, but adult educators find dealing with the affect one of their greatest challenges. In addition, Merriam (2008) added that building on prior learning, using narratives, embodying learning, and incorporating spirituality are being recognized as increasingly important to adult learners, yet are only in infancy in course design.

**Conclusion**

Two-year colleges supply affordable workforce skills through certificates and associates’ degrees. These degrees impact the U.S. and the Washington State economies positively by billions of dollars per year in the short and medium term. Baccalaureate institutions complement the two-year colleges with their positive impact on the long-term economy. The public two-year community and technical colleges of Washington State are open enrollment, providing both Adult Basic Education and/or developmental education for almost 70 percent of their students (Community College Research Center, 2018). In addition to the impact on the economy, lifetime earnings for students who complete an associate degree are impressive: more than $325K compared to students with only a high-school diploma, and about $90K more than students who have some college, but no associate’s degree (Abel & Dietz, 2014).

As vital as the two-year college degrees are to the economy, the difference in student populations compared to four-year institutions is also important. Students at two-year colleges are more likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, with half of them reaching less than $30K household income annually; more likely to have parental, family, job, and other
responsibilities outside of college; more likely to be older; and are more likely to be students of color (Kim, 2002). Loosely defined as “nontraditional learners” or “adult learners” (terms often used interchangeably), the literature clearly demonstrates that students at two-year institutions have more barriers to attending school than their whiter, more wealthy counterpart populations at four-year institutions. Finally, these non-traditional students are largely adult learners whose learning needs differ from those of “traditional” college students.

**Adult Learners**

Adults’ versus children’s learning has been the subject of much research and scholarly discussion since the 1980’s. In this section, a brief history of adult learning theories is discussed as well as how best to devise learning experiences in the college classroom based on what is known about adult learning. Malcolm Knowles (1974) popularized the term “androgogy” to highlight differences from traditional pedagogical theories designed for children. His ideas took root, and portions of them can be found throughout much of what is currently known about adult-centered learning today.

**Andragogy**

Malcolm Knowles’ (1984) explication of how adults learn differently than children learn was quickly accepted. Working in organizational development, Knowles posited that motivations of adults to learn are much different than those of children. He found that adult learners are independent; have life experiences that are a “rich resource for learning” (p. 117); and need involvement in the planning, execution, and assessment of their learning. In addition, he popularized the European term “andragogy,” stating that adults need learning with immediate relevance or application to their lives or their jobs (Knowles, 1984). Specifically, Knowles held
that andragogy was embodied by six principles specific to adult learners and Taylor and Hamby created commentary for each principle (in italics):

(1) the learner’s need to know, *(Why do I need to know this?)*

(2) self-concept of the learner, *(I am responsible for my own decisions.)*

(3) prior experience of the learner, *(I have experiences which I value, and you should respect.)*

(4) readiness to learn, *(I need to learn because my circumstances are changing.)*

(5) orientation to learning, *(Learning will help me deal with the situation in which I find myself.)* and

(6) motivation to learn. *(I learn because I want to.)* (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 4; Taylor & Hamby, 2013, p. e1563)

Knowles (2005), concentrating on learning theories as opposed to teaching theories, drew from other theories and theorists to consider the whole individual and the individual’s environment, including stimulus-response theory, cognitive theory, motivation and personality theory, change theory, and systems theory; as well as the works of Skinner, Gagne, Mazelow, Lindeman, and others. Knowles (1984) explained that adults are largely internally motivated and particularly ready to learn when faced with real-world, developmental activities (in other words, contextualized learning) that help the adult learner progress to another developmental phase.

Other researchers agreed with his ideas, including that internal motivating factors, particularly self-concept, differentiate adult learners from children (Delahaye & Ehrich, 2008; Sachs, 2001; Silverstein, Choi, & Bulot, 2001). Lieb (1999) confirmed Knowles’ characteristics of the adult learner and saw the students’ prior learning as an important factor regarding their new learning. Fidishun (2000) pushed on from Knowles, confirming the desire of adults to use their previous
experiences while in the classroom. By 2012, Knowles’ classic text, *The Adult Learner*, was in its seventh edition, and the impact of Knowles’ work was full blown. Knowles spawned a plethora of research studies regarding the adult learner as multi-faceted: learning in context, learning in community, learning through critical reflection, learning through emotions, learning through spirituality, and others.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

As Knowles (1984) brought awareness to educators of differences between pedagogy and andragogy, Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1991) also delineated characteristics of how adults learn. His book, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (1991), has been cited nearly 10,000 times, according to Google Scholar. As John Dirks (2008), an early proponent and critical reviewer of transformative learning theory, notes, “Although we lack consensus on a clear definition of transformative learning, most would agree that it represents a fundamental change or shift in our understanding of ourselves or our relationship with the world in which we live” (p. 15).

Both Knowles and Mezirow saw that adults have different motivations compared to children (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013), and both saw adult learning theory based in creating connections between previous lived experiences and new learning (Eddy, Hao, Markiewics, & Iverson, 2018; Merriam, 2008), all of which must be placed into context within the learner, making “for a richer, more holistic understanding of learning in adulthood” (Merriam, 2008, p. 93). Kenner and Weinerman (2011) stressed the need for adult learners to connect theory to relevance and understand the reason for learning because the adult learner is likely to have spent time between high school and college “developing practical knowledge in the workplace” (original emphasis, p. 91). No mention was made by these authors regarding practical
knowledge gleaned from other experiences. Mezirow (1991) was quick to point out that adults have much experience from which the adult draws upon for learning to occur.

**Beyond Knowles and Mezirow**

New adult learning theories based on Knowles and/or Mezirow proliferated as Mezirow continued publishing. Yang (2003) coined “holistic learning theory,” in which he added explicit, implicit, and emancipatory transformation to transformative learning theory. Jaafar and Schwartz (2018) demonstrated that learning that can be incorporated into positivist, constructivist, and critical paradigms. John Dirkx (1997) moved outward from Mezirow’s (1991) “disorienting dilemma” to his own nurturing soul in adult learning theory. Dirkx (2001) stated, “Emotions are important in adult learning because they can either impede or motivate learning” (p. 63) and are imperative in adult learning for constructing meaning and knowledge (Dirkx, 2006). In fact, emotion cannot be separated from learning (Brookfield, 2006; Lehman, 2006). Yarbrough (2018) found Dirkx’ work in emotions beneficial to designing and enriching adult students’ online course experiences, as well.

Curriculum and training developers today have many adult learning theories and theorists from which to choose. Medical educators and trainers are a particularly avid audience, trying to increase the relevance and knowledge transfer to physicians, nurses, physical therapists, physician’s assistants, and others in the medical field (e.g., Clapper, 2010; Green & Ellis, 1997; Lewis & Thompson, 2017; Rutherford-Hemming, 2012). The move to learner-centered instruction, explicated by a variety of theorists, has positively inspired medical instruction. Curran (2014) explored best practices for nursing professional development based on the need for active engagement of adults—posited by both Knowles (1984) and Mezirow (1991). Her exploration of helpful learning theories included “Brunner’s (1996) teaching through inquiry,

Medical fields were not the only areas of higher education that delved into adult learning theories. A meta-study in marketing education by Edmonson, Boyer, and Artis (2012) found self-directed learning “an important construct for marketing educators, as higher levels of self-directed learning are associated with higher levels of academic performance, future aspiration, creativity, curiosity, and life satisfaction for students” (p. 45). Jameson and Fusco (2014) surveyed 226 undergraduate math students and found that adult learners have higher math anxiety and lower math self-efficacy. The authors suggest that since adults doing math in the workplace do not demonstrate the same anxiety and loss of self-efficacy as they do in the classroom (Coben, 2002; FitzSimons, Cober, & O-Donoghue, 2005), adult learners appear to need math to be made relevant and contextualized to real life (Jameson & Fusco). Gilstrap (2013) surveyed librarians to examine their attitudes toward adult learning theory as a criterion in curriculum development, finding librarians in his study were more oriented towards instructor-centered pedagogy, rather than learner-centered andragogy/adult learning theories. Gilstrap, recognizing librarians as teachers, proposed increased training in adult learning theories and incorporation into institutional-level curricula development, meanwhile also increasing inclusion of adult learning theory in masters’ programs in library science across the country. Three years
later, Malik (2016) researched librarians’ teaching practices and professional development, finding librarians commonly being taught adult learning theories in professional development and incorporating facets of those adult learning theories into their own instruction. Learner-centered instruction and transformative learning theory have continued to expand.

**Instructional Strategies**

In the now traditional perspective of learner-centered instruction, Taylor and Hamdy (2013) claim that the responsibility of engaging adult learners amid competing responsibilities (school, parenting, etc.) lands squarely on effective instruction designed specifically for the adult learner. Their foundation being, “The entire learning process starts with what the learner already knows” (p. e1567). Regarding college developmental education courses, Kenner and Weinerman (2011) built on Knowles’ premises to consider ways to increase the success of adult learners in reading and stated that adults will tend to find learning less useful when abstract theories are not explicated in such a way that also shows concrete applications and relevance for adult learners. Kenner and Weinerman suggested incorporating textbooks from other courses into developmental courses and giving students frequent opportunities to see both practical and academic knowledge side-by-side, for instance at a technical college, that could be a machine operator’s manual and a textbook.

Adults benefit from self-directed learning (Graves & Bledsoe, 2015; Kenner & Weinterman, 2011; Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Hamdy, 2013), which “is often motivated by the desire to put new knowledge to practical use” (Graves & Bledsoe, 2015, p. 8). Fisher (1995) cautioned that self-directed differs from self-taught. Chen (2014), for instance, gave students the chance to determine their own topics and personalize the content in his psychology classroom. Koehler and Burke (1996) helped non-traditional students developing
college skills take responsibility for their own learning and, in the math unit, their entire team’s learning. The authors gave students opportunities to learn to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, as well. Many authors, including Mezirow (1991), found increasing interaction time important to adult learners. Cooper and Richards (2016) found increasing the interaction during lectures and shortening overall lecture time necessary to the learning needs of graduate medical students (adults, presumably, by reason of time to educational attainment).

Reflection time is also highly beneficial for adult learners (Kunnen, 2015; Mezirow, 1990; van Halen-Faber, 1997; Wilner, Wiber, Charles, Kearny, Landry, & Wilson, 2012). Brookfield (1990) defined the process of critical reflection as three phases:

1. Identifying the assumptions that underlie our thoughts and actions;
2. Scrutinizing with accuracy and validity of these in terms of how they connect to, or are discrepant with, our experience of reality . . .and
3. Reconstituting these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative. (p. 177)

Marsik and Maltbia (2009) explained “action learning conversations” (p. 160) as a methodology for transformative learning through critical reflection, that is, learning how to frame and answer questions to critically reflect on a real-world problem by adult class participants.

Finally, the learning environment has also been found highly important for adult learners, particularly those falling into non-traditional or marginalized categories. From Marsik and Maltbia’s (2009) classroom conversations, above, to Brookfield’s (2006) discussion of critical reflection and conversation in the workplace, researchers base transformative learning on community. Hyland-Russell and Groen (2011) found it critical to maintain a respectful learning environment for marginalized non-traditional adult learners. Etienne Wenger’s (1999) book,
Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity, has been cited over 50,000 times and research continues on the importance of adults learning in community.

Conclusion

Since the mid-twentieth century, how adults learn has been a flourishing topic of academic research. Knowles (1984) brought the term “andragogy” into prominence in the United States, thus propelling what would become an overhaul of adult education systems. Plentiful research in a broad array of fields has converged to provide a very detailed picture of how and under what conditions adults best learn. While Knowles (1984) found adults have motivations and needs that differ from those of children, for instance, having rich prior experiences that must be tapped while learning and being highly self-motivated, Mezirow (1990) brought adult learning into greater light through his transformative learning theory—not a theory at all, according to some (Dirkx, 2008)—which has prompted literally thousands of articles and books, an annual conference, and at least two professional journals on the subject. In short, transformative learning theory has become the basis of most of the instruction today (Merriam, 2008). Primary elements of Knowles’ and Mezirow’s works, and researchers building on their works, include an instructional event, at which the adult student will need to a) access prior experiences to tie to the learning from the event, b) critically reflect on the learning, c) participate in discussion and learning in a community of learners, and d) the recognition of the affective as an integral part of adult learning. Although the term “andragogy” is today seen less in the literature, Knowles’ works and Mezirow’s continue to feed new research on theoretical and practical ways to increase the efficacy of adult instruction both in higher education and in the workplace throughout the literature.
Completion

Completion of program and degree requirements continues to be a challenge for many students at community and technical colleges (CTCs). This section considers some of the factors affecting CTC students and how completions are defined and measured. For several compelling reasons, CTC students feel pressured to shorten their matriculation time (e.g., Kim, 2002). The need for academic remediation is high in this population, adding quarters or years to bring students to reaching the three college-level academic courses needed for an associate degree (The Community College Research Center, 2018). Many technical programs offer skills and certificates allowing the student to obtain the desired job and pay without a degree, making degree completion less desirable in the short-term (Bates, 2014; Clover Park Technical College, 2014).

The Prevalence of Remediation

Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010) found that community and technical college students entering college with below college-level skills in reading, writing, or mathematics find remediation “a complicated and time-consuming set of services that have uncertain value” (p. 269) that may include three or more semesters of remediation. As Cohen and Brawer (2008) declared, “The overriding issue is whether community colleges can maintain their credibility as institutions of higher education even while they enroll increasingly less well-prepared students” (p. 281). Indeed, the average age of a CTC student nationally is approximately 28 years, 80 percent of CTC students are also employed, 37 percent are first-generation college students, and more students are low socioeconomic status (AACC, 2017):

Remedial course taking was widespread among students who began their postsecondary education in 2003–04: about 68 percent of those who started at public 2-year institutions
and 40 percent of those who started at public 4-year institutions took at least one remedial course during their postsecondary enrollment between 2003 and 2009. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

The American Association of Community Colleges found that only half of students attempting remediation completed their attempted remedial courses (AACC, 2016).

The attitudes of CTC students differ, as well. Unlike students in academic transfer programs, students enrolled in professional or technical programs, that is virtually all students at technical colleges, find traditional academic course requirements such as English composition courses not practical, not hands on, not problem solving, nor directly applicable to the student’s program of study (Lourey, 2000).

**Types of Completions**

To comply with success rates to maintain accreditation, Washington State community and technical colleges may assess completion using several criteria (Bates, 2014; Clover Park, 2014). Accordingly, students upon whom the institutions confer a degree or certificate may be judged completions. Degrees and certificates, however, do not preclude other means of completions. The colleges have identified at least four other ways to assess completions (Bates; Clover Park). For instance, students who transfer to a four-year institution with a 2.0 grade point average or better may be determined to have completed without an associate degree. Likewise, students obtaining employment in their desired field at the expected entry point within a certain time upon leaving the institution may be considered completions, despite lack of certificate or degree. Similarly, students already employed, but receiving the increase in pay expected as the outcome of the certificate or degree may be counted toward completion numbers. Finally,
students whose goal is licensure, such as cosmetologists, welders, and nurses, also may be considered completions, without a certificate or degree.

**Completion Rates**

The literature shows degree completion rates of CTC students in technical-professional programs are very low. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), public two-year institutions have a graduation rate within three years of 22 percent, and Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010) state that entering students at two-year colleges do not meet the academic requirements approximately 66 percent of the time. In addition, Davidson and Wilson (2017) noted that community college students “struggled to match the persistence rates of students at 4-year institutions” (p. 518) and found in their study of connectedness of two-year college students to their school that CTC students have connectedness in their lives through such areas as family, friends, religious community, and work. If the students do not find strong connectedness also within their school, or ideally where their school and other areas of support interconnect (for instance, finding someone at school who also works for the same company as the student), the student will be much less likely to persist or complete (Davidson & Wilson, 2017). In addition, the lower average household income of two-year students may pressure students to get into the workforce as soon as possible. Fifty percent of two-year college students nationwide have household incomes under $30,000 (NCES, 2018).

Specific areas of unpreparedness have also been studied. In addition to reading, writing, and mathematics, memory and time management have also been shown to lower the student’s ability to complete (Allsopp, Minskiff, & Both, 2005; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Wirth, Choy, Rooney, Provanik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). Race is also a factor. Black and Hispanic students according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Shapiro et al., 2017)
complete at much lower rates than their White and Asian counterparts at two-year institutions. As of 2014, Black students chose community college just under half the time (44%), while Hispanic students chose community college just over half the time (56%). White college students chose community college over a four-year institution just 39 percent of the time (CCRC, 2018).

Conclusion

While technical colleges can define student completion through various measures, such as degree or certificate completion, licensure, or job placement, the literature shows that students enrolling in CTCs have more challenges to completion than their four-year institution counterparts, including being older and likely to have parenting and job responsibilities in addition to school. Because CTC students need remediation in reading, writing, and math more often than students at four-year institutions, CTC students may be years from beginning, much less completing, the technical or professional program for which they entered college (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). In fact, less than one quarter of CTC students nationwide complete an associate degree within three years (NCES, 2018), and students find the general education courses, such as English composition, of questionable relevance (Lourey, 2000). The literature shows that students may drop out or complete without graduating more frequently than obtaining the degree.

Contextualization

Simply put, contextualization is making course content, activities, assignments, or homework relevant to some aspect of the students’ lives. This section explains contextualization in general, then discusses forms of contextualization and their applicability to two-year colleges. Contextualization includes many forms. Differentiated instruction tailors activities and
assignments to each student. Integrative instruction brings together necessary reading, writing, and math skills into the course major or technical program classroom. The I-BEST (Integrated Basic Skills Training) program in Washington State, in which an academics instructor co-teaches with the program instructor (e.g., a writing teacher in a welding class) is perhaps the most famous of college-level integrative instruction forms. Zeidenberg, Cho, and Jenkins (2010) noted early on how effective I-BEST is, citing a 93-percent retention rate among students.

Writing Across the Curriculum, in which the instructor of a content course also teaches the necessary reading, writing, and math skills, is well-known in the K-12 arena (e.g., Baker et al., 2008).

Using resources, instructional methods, and assignments that are relevant to some aspect of students’ lives contextualizes courses. Throughout the literature, Mazzeo, Rab, and Alssid’s (2003) definition for contextualization is widely accepted (Bennet, 2003; Hamilton, 2013; Perin, 2011; Rathburn, 2015; Wang, Wang, & Prevost, 2017):

[Contextualization is] a diverse family of instructional strategies designed to more seamlessly link the learning of foundational skills and academic or occupational context by focusing teaching and learning squarely on concrete applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student. (pp. 3-4)

To put it another way, Hull and Souders (1996) stated that “in contextual learning environments, students discover relationships between abstract ideas and practical applications within the context of the real world” (p. 85).

Referring to academic courses, Dare (2001) “saw the goal of classroom instruction being to provide more relevance and rigor in education to meet the increasing demands of the workforce” (p. 83). The instructional strategies need to involve students’ “interests, beliefs, and
background experiences” (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009, p. 319). Contextualizing to the students through instructional strategies in ways that increase relevance, rigor, and workforce scenarios has shown success (Grossman, 2005; Ross et al., 1986; Santagelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Wideen, Meyer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). Moraitis, Carr, and Daddow (2012) had positive results using a simulated workplace as a scenario to contextualize academics for students. Wang, Wang, and Prevost (2017) saw students become “active agents” in their learning when pre-college/ABE courses were contextualized (p. 26). Pham (2012) saw the benefit of contextualization because students were allowed to combine their own interests with their studies. When students can connect their past experiences to the new knowledge or place the new knowledge in job or life activities, students learn more deeply, retaining knowledge longer (Ambrose, Davis, & Zeigler, 2013; Perin, 2011; Wang, Wang, & Prevost, 2017).

The research on differentiated instruction has been positive so far. In both secondary and post-secondary education; however, instructor preparation is very high. Tomlinson (2005) recommended that the entire content of the course, from learning outcomes to instruction to homework to assessment, be individualized according to student uniqueness. Put another way, Strogilos (2017) stated that “DI involves responding effectively to the differences that exist among learners in the classroom” (para. 6). Either way requires adaptation of learning materials or lessons by the instructor for each student.

Contextualization, however defined, has been used in primary, secondary, and tertiary academics education with success (Perin, 2011; Wang, Wang, & Prevost, 2017). Ambrose, Davis, and Zeigler (2013), identify the need for academic instruction to link both the current lesson and future lessons. Perin (2011), whose writings on contextualized instruction for K-12 and pre-college academics have been foundational, notes that contextualization encompasses
several terms, including work-based learning, integrative instruction, embedded instruction, differentiated instruction, and situated instruction, as well as “anchored instruction, integrative curriculum, theme-based instruction and infused instruction” (Perin, Bork, Peverly, & Mason, 2013, p. 9). In general, contextualization encourages students “to connect course materials with their lives” (Rathburn, 2015, p. 3), personally or professionally.

The two main forms of contextualized learning, differentiated instruction and integrative instruction, cover many types of contextualization.

**Differentiated Instruction**

One form of contextualization, differentiated instruction, has been beneficial to students in primary and secondary education, as well as postsecondary education. Instruction is differentiated when the “outcomes are tailored to the students’ learning needs” (Watts-Taffe, Laster, Broach, Marinak, Conner, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012, p. 304), learning style, readiness level and interest (Turner, Solis, & Kincade, 2017). To differentiate instruction, educators reach out to students solo or collectively (Tomlinson, 2000), providing changes to the curriculum, instructional techniques, materials, or offering alternative assignments (Janney & Snell, 2006):

High-quality differentiated activities focus clearly on essential learning goals, facilitate students’ ability to understand context, are interesting and engaging, require students to use higher-level thinking, and involve use or application of content (rather than rote recall). (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009, p. 309).

Differentiated instruction concentrates on differences in learners (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Strogilos et al., 2017) and best practices “strategically employed to maximize students’ learning at every turn, including giving them the tools to handle anything that is
undifferentiated” (Wormeli, 2005, p. 28). Tomlinson et al. (2003) delineated six characteristics of differentiated instruction:

1. Effective differentiation of curriculum and instruction is proactive, rather than reactive.
2. Effective differentiation employs flexible use of small teaching-learning groups in the classroom.
3. Effective differentiation varies the materials used by individuals and small groups of students in the classroom.
4. Effective differentiation uses variable pacing as a means of addressing learner needs.
5. Effective differentiation is knowledge centered.
6. Effective differentiation is learner centered. (p. 131-133)

Differentiated instruction in post-secondary settings has similar benefits and drawbacks in K-12 situations (Turner, Solis, & Kincade, 2017). King-Sears (2008) found differentiated instruction had the potential to increase assessment test scores for many types of students in addition to typical learners, including students with disabilities and students in danger of failing. George (2005) made the case for using differentiated instruction in classrooms with gifted children and in classrooms with “large percentages of less successful students” to create opportunities for those “less successful students” to succeed (p. 190). Tomlinson (2003) explained methods to maximize differentiated instruction for several types of students, including student with disabilities. The main drawback seen in all of these authors is the extra amount of time required by the instructor.
Differentiated instruction has been researched in college classes. Reporting on the results of adding differentiated instruction to an introductory graduate class, Santangelo and Tomlinson (2009) stated:

Collectively, the data yielded the overarching theme that members of the class viewed differentiation as unique, but highly beneficial because it allowed the course to be structured in ways that reflected diversity among members. (p. 317)

Ernst and Ernst (2005) studied a differentiated college-level political science course with positive results. According to these authors, students reported “higher levels of intellectual growth, interest in the subject, and satisfaction with the course” (p. 492) compared to the control group. Chamberlin and Powers (2010) noted that by virtue of greater age, college students can help the instructor differentiate the course through higher self-awareness of, for example, learning style.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of rigorous research to assess the efficacy of differentiated instruction at the college level (Turner, Solis, & Kincade, 2017) for several reasons. College instructors will not usually have as much contact time with their students as K-12 instructors do (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010). Santangelo and Tomlinson (2009) found the time and effort a college instructor must employ to create differentiated instruction is great. Tomlinson (2004) concurred and found that differentiated instruction forces an instructor to make changes to every facet of the course, yet college instructors may not receive as much feedback because of the limited contact time (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010). The literature showed that contextualization in the form of differentiated instruction to be an evolving area in higher education. Oddly, Strogilos, Tragoulia, Avramidis, Voulagka, and Papanikolaou (2017) stated that teachers queried did not seem to recognize differentiated instruction as a form of contextualization.
Integrative Contextualization: Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST)

Another form of contextualization, integrative (embedded) instruction, has been very successful for workforce students needing remediation in mathematics, reading, and writing. At the two-year college level, contextualization by embedding remedial academic skills into the discipline through a team-teaching approach is best known from the Washington State Integrated Basic Education & Skills Training (I-BEST) program. In I-BEST classrooms, students learn their professional or technical program, such as welding. As the students learn, a second instructor team teaches with the program instructor, supplying timely remedial academic concepts and individual supplemental instruction (Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010). A benefit to the I-BEST approach is that students see the academics, such as mathematics and writing, as part of a marketable skill set (Hamilton, 2013).

The National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE) directed studies to determine the effectiveness of integrating math (Stone, Alfeld, Pearson, Lewis, & Jenson, 2006), literacy (Park, Pearson, & Richardson, 2017), and scientific concepts (Pearson, Young, & Richardson, 2013) into workforce programs. The math and literacy studies yielded significant student success. Despite weaker results in the science study, the instructors all agreed that the process was worth continuing. From the three studies, the NRCCTE found and through further studies validated (Stone et al., 2008; NRCCTE Curriculum Integration Workgroup, 2010) that integration of academics, workforce content, and workplace contexts is effective and “should begin with the CTE curricula, and not with academics” for the highest student success (Park, Pearson, & Richardson, 2017, p. 204). Other research studies concluded similarly that instructors found the integration of academic and workforce curricula positive for students (Damon, 2010; Myers & Washburn, 2008; Thompson & Warnick, 2007). Wang, Wang, and
Prevost, (2017) concluded that their study “reveals a number of compelling findings that hold strong implications for adopting contextualization in remedial math within occupations programs at the community college” (p. 454).

Logistically, I-BEST can be challenging, however. Academic and vocational instructor team teaching can be difficult (Ford, 1994), time-consuming, and expensive. Wang, Wang, and Prevost (2017) concluded that:

Others aiming to follow a partnership like this should plan to dedicate a lot of time to developing a trusting partnership through engaging in dialogue between each of the key stakeholders involved in the efforts to improve CTC student outcomes. . . .This is especially true in the case of practitioners. . . .In our case, we dedicated over 3 years to the process of building the partnership. (Wang, Wang, & Prevost, 2017, p. 32)

A multi-year study of I-BEST concluded that integrated instruction was equally important as contextualization of the instruction to the students’ learning in ABE (Wachen, Jenkins, Belfield, & Van Noy, 2012).

**College-Level Academic Contextualization**

Research on contextualization in college-level academic courses is very limited (Jones, 2012; Parr, Edwards, & Leising, 2009; Perin, 2011; Turner, Solis, & Kincade, 2017). However, as far back as 1985, Herrington, using a workplace scenario for two university chemical process design courses populated by senior chemical engineering students, researched ways to apply business-technical writing (e.g., scientific reports and memoranda) into a science lecture-lab course. More recently, Carstens (2011) intervened with writing assists in two groups of university sophomores, one class of history majors, and one mixed class. For the history majors, the writing materials were tailored to be discipline-specific to history topics in the course; in the
mixed major class, she used much more generic materials. Although both groups were successful, the history-specific lessons may have been more beneficial to those targeted students than the generic ones. The targeted students expressed a statistically significant higher belief that the writing skills they learned in class would be transferable to other writing applications (Carstens, 2011). Parlier’s (2013) study of a college-level contextualized writing course found that transfer of learning had occurred. In addition, Parlier reported increased interest and value of writing courses by students.

Another name for embedded instruction, Writing Across the Curriculum, has been tried in college-level courses. Writing Across the Curriculum at the college level has increased in research popularity in the last several years. Courses include many discrete elements of writing, including in some cases writing theory, as they apply to (a) the content course materials (Black & Rechter, 2013; Carstens, 2011; Hunter & Tse, 2013; Rai & Lillis, 2013), (b) instruction (Herrington, 1985; Johnstone & Ashbaugh, 2002; Klein & Kirkpatrick, 2010; Reardon, 2015), or (c) practice (Black & Rechter, 2013; Carstens, 2011; Herrington, 1985; Hunter & Tse, 2013; Johnson & Krase, 2012; McLaren & Webber, 2009; Rai & Lillis, 2013). In some cases, students received a writing credit in addition to the regular course credit (Kohnen, 2015); and, therefore, have a transcripted record of enrolling in a composition or other writing course.

In a variation on Writing Across the Curriculum, a course can be hybridized into a writing/content course and identified as such, for instance chemical engineering students taking a specialized chemical analysis design course, teaching students both what chemical design analyses are and how to write them for the workplace (Colton & Surasinghe, 2014; Lankford & vom Saal, 2012; Ross & Jarosz, 1978; Rapchak & Cipri, 2015). This seems to be of particular
interest to science, especially biology and graduate biology courses (e.g., Colton & Surasinghe, 2014; Lankford & vom Saal, 2012; Ross & Jarosz, 1978).

Most of the research on college-level academic courses is limited to embedding or integrating remedial reading, writing, and mathematics into an academic course. Among college-level academic courses studied, Horton & Diaz (2011) found “hopeful” results from an integration of writing improvement assignments incorporated into a block social work course. In a psychology course, students learned in the syllabus that a portion of their grade would be determined by reading literacy of the course texts (Van Camp & Van Camp, 2013). Jackson & Johnson (2013) contextualized mathematics into their chemistry, physics, and biology course worksheets. Most recently, Parker, Traver, and Cornick (2017), among the latest of many remedial mathematics studies, reported positive initial results of a college-level sociology course contextualized with mathematics.

Other studies at the college-level have included contextualization to students’ lives and interests, rather than to remediation or program of study. McLaren (2014) reported chemistry, biology, and ecology courses contextualized to student interests. Much attention has been paid to pre-college (developmental education) efficacy, including contextualization, particularly in the I-BEST model of embedding remedial mathematics, reading, and writing into professional-technical programs (Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010).

**Contextualization at Community and Technical Colleges**

Historically, community and technical colleges (CTCs) have always offered contextualized professional and technical courses, such as welding, automotive maintenance technician, and nursing, where students learn by doing what they will do on the job. Willingham (2009) saw the value of contextualization as helping students avoid learning information in a
vacuum. Instead, students build on what they know. Outside of I-BEST, two-year colleges have received a great deal of publicity recently regarding questionable efficacy of traditional remedial sequences of math, reading, and writing in published research (e.g., Fulton, 2012, Shulock, Crisholm, Moore, & Harris, 2012; Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014), prompting nationwide initiatives to redesign remedial courses and sequencing. Achieve the Dream, which targets increased achievement for young African American males through data-driven results, and Guided Pathways are two such initiatives. Guided Pathways (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) is currently being implemented in Washington State public colleges. It includes outlining a plan to cluster similar programs (e.g., welding, and automotive technician, or nursing, dental assisting, and pharmacy technician), establishing a clear scope and sequence of courses to be taken to achieve a degree, and contextualizing remedial mathematics and writing courses—all based on academic research, and intended to reduce student costs and increase student completions. Guided Pathways provides a structural plan for colleges, including alignment of programs to industry; clear, widely available information regarding program composition, such as cohorts, stackable certificates, and program requirements; the ability to progress as a part-time student; and a strong advising support model (Van Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016). What Guided Pathways does not do is require contextualization of the college-level writing courses.

**Contextualization of College-Level English**

While remedial reading and writing have been contextualized in a variety of ways, such as embedding remediation into workforce programs or into regular academic courses, traditional academic course requirements such as English composition courses are not often practical, not hands on, not problem solving, nor, in the eyes of a technical student at least, do they seem
directly applicable to the student’s programs of study (Lourey, 2000). Van Camp and Van Camp (2013) observed from their research in college-level reading that there exists a disconnection between remedial courses and college-level courses regarding reading. While no similar observations regarding writing were found in the literature, at one community college, students who failed a remedial writing or reading course were immediately enrolled into contextualized reading or writing courses and were more than twice as likely to be successful (Bloom & Sommo, 2005).

When the structure, theory, and methods of writing are overtly included in the coursework, students are very receptive (Hunter & Tse, 2013; Mealey & Higginson, 1992; Nowne, & Stebleton, 2010; Todd & Hudson, 2008; Schnee, 2014). In fact, some research indicates that upper-level academic students may need this type of explicit writing theory help, not remedial help (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Writing Across the Curriculum seems to reduce student deficiencies in writing and teach students to write in applied contexts. The courses in the studies above showed improvement in student learning. Technical-professional college students would also be likely to find success with Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) techniques embedded into their courses, as the success of I-BEST (Zeidenburg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010), a WAC program indicates. Further research will have to be done.

However, there is an implied disparity between college instructors and technical-professional instructors: a welding instructor does not likely possess the educational level or writing experience of a college writing instructor. Kohnen (2015) less-than-subtly indicates this through her quotations of the technical instructors (“it worked out really cool,” “the cop out,” and “As far as I can tell, as of right now, it wasn’t a bad mistake”) (p. 664). Asking a technical
professional instructor to teach writing in applied courses is not out of the question, but is counter-intuitive and not indicated by the literature.

**Conclusion**

Contextualization of pre-college writing has shown success for some time. While most contextualization occurs at pre-college level according to the literature, Bates Technical College provides contextualization throughout their workforce programs as well as in precollege remediation and is in the process of contextualizing college-level academics, including English 175 Professional Writing.

Contextualization in its many forms yields positive results for students. Professional and technical programs at two-year colleges are, and always have been, contextualized with specific applications of the theoretical to the practical. Integrative contextualization, in which a remedial writing, reading, or mathematics instructor co-teaches with the content instructor in a technical program, has shown tremendous success in the I-BEST program (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009; Kohnen, 2015) compared to traditional remediation. The drawbacks indicated by the literature are the time, collaboration, and cost of two instructors teaching the same course. An additional complication for the technical college is the difficulty that academic and vocational instructors have had trying to work together (Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011). The literature has shown that differentiated instruction positively impacts students, similarly to integrative contextualization. The drawback of differentiated instruction is the high amount of instructor preparation time such courses need. Bates Technical College has already contextualized Adult Basic Education and is required by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges of Washington State to become a Guided Pathways school. Guided Pathways schools require the contextualization of all pre-college mathematics and writing. When that happens, Bates will
have contextualized professional and technical programs and a completely contextualized pre-college series.

**Conclusion**

Bates Technical College introduced a contextualized college-level English composition course, English 175 Professional Writing, to align with the contextualized remediation and the contextualized professional and technical programs. Contextualization takes many forms including integrative and differentiated, are both of which have been shown by the literature as applicable to the technical college. In fact, technical and professional programs, the major areas of study at a technical college, are only taught in a contextualized manner. Students do not learn to be an automotive maintenance technician, a surgical technician, a welder, a firefighter, an esthetician, a massage therapist, or any of the many technical college programs solely by sitting through lectures.

Contextualization is increasing in use and popularity throughout the nation (e.g., Wachen, Jenkins, Belfield, & Van Noy, 2012) and at Bates Technical College. Washington State’s contextualization of basic skills and developmental education into professional or technical programs has proven so successful that it is being replicated throughout the country. However, teaming an academic and a vocational instructor can be difficult (Ford, 1994). Meanwhile, Adult Basic Education has shown success with contextualization within its own programs nationwide and locally, as well as in the I-BEST embedded instruction model (Watchen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011). The Guided Pathways Initiative implementation requires contextualization of pre-college (developmental) courses based on the proven success of contextualization (SBCTC, 2018). The Writing Across the Curriculum form of contextualization in college-level academic courses has found success, as well, nationally and locally (e.g. Stanley & Ambron, 1991). In a
WAC course, for instance, the psychology instructor assigns a paper, then teaches the students how to write the paper, including APA documentation (M. Wheeler, personal communication, 2017, November 16).

The final piece to contextualization is college-level writing courses. Although professional or technical program students at two-year institutions have applied programs, their rates of degree completion are low. According to Lourey (2000), applied program students find traditional academic course requirements such as English composition courses not practical, not hands on, not problem solving, nor directly applicable to the student’s program of study.

The literature shows low degree completion rates at community and technical colleges occur for a variety of reasons, including students’ completing enough of their program requirements to enter the profession without a degree, and thus begin earning wages immediately. Coupled with the common slowdowns forced by remedial mathematics, reading, or writing sequences before getting into the desired technical or professional program, students may be under increased pressure to get into the workforce as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the lack of a degree decreases lifetime earnings (AACC, 2017).

To induce students to complete their college-level English course, increasing their opportunities for degree completion and higher life-time earnings, college-level English composition, such as English 175 Professional Writing, should follow the contextualization trend of other aspects of the technical college course and program offerings.
Chapter Three: Research Design

By their very nature, courses in a technical college program are contextualized by providing real-world, hands-on experiences, such as taking a patient’s pulse or replacing brake linings. Soon, pre-college writing courses will also be contextualized because research has shown that students fail to see the relevance of academic courses such as math or English (Wang, Sun, & Wickersham, 2017).

Students who complete their program requirements without obtaining the associate of arts degree (AA) experience a lifetime loss of both opportunity and approximately $90,000 in wages compared to students who complete their AA degree (Greenstone & Looney, 2013). Failing to complete academic courses such as English composition is one reason for low graduation rates among students of color (Moore & Shulock, 2010). The purpose of the present study was to examine how a college-level writing course contextualized to a cluster of related technical majors (e.g., aviation technician, avionics technician, professional pilot) was experienced by the students. Analyzing the data collected in this study yielded information that can help administrators, curriculum developers, and faculty to design and implement college-level writing courses so that a) technical college students enroll before leaving college for employment, b) technical college students complete the courses successfully, and c) college faculty and staff can work to reduce any previously unidentified barriers for students brought to light by this research.

Qualitative Research Approach

In the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, it is believed that there is no single reality: all realities are equally valid, and reality is constructed within an individual (Ponterotto, 2005). Individuals make meaning of their experiences, which can be brought forth by researchers
through interviews using open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In fact, researcher-participant interaction is primary to a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Unlike the quantitative researcher, who tests a single solution to determine if it is correct, the qualitative researcher looks for trends and patterns among members of the research population (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In other words, to answer the question “why?” or “what?” careful qualitative research can be vastly more efficient than quantitative research by allowing the evidence itself to point toward potential solutions, rather than deciding on a single potential solution, testing its validity, then repeating, repeating, repeating with other potential solutions until a useful or correct solution is found. Little research has been conducted on contextualized college-level writing courses. Qualitative research will allow the researcher to explore the contexts and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the students’ individual perceptions and realities, as well as those of the instructor and administrator. Although case study methodology can be used with a positivist/post-positivist paradigm (Yin, 2014), case study methodology is well-suited for researchers choosing a constructivist paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study of one class allowed the researcher to obtain thick and rich descriptions from the students through individual interviews that were coded and analyzed.

Case Study

The study qualitatively examined the experiences of the students in one class, English 175 Professional Writing, to get rich, thick descriptions of their perceptions of their experiences in the class. The lens was constructivism. Yin (2016) stated three conditions for selecting case study as the research methodology of choice: The research question was “how” or “why,” the researcher had little or no control over changing variables in the phenomenon, and the focus is on contemporary events. This research aligned with Yin as the research questions were designed
to answer *how* the students and instructor experienced the class and *why* they experienced it as they did. The researcher had control over the choice of instructor, but not the curriculum or students.

Like Yin (2016), Stake (1995) argued that research into the reason for an event makes case study methodology applicable. Stake identified an intrinsic case study as the exploration of a specific case, particularly when the research questions “require an extensive and ‘in-depth’ description of some social phenomenon” (p. 4). The present research aligned with Stake’s intrinsic case study because the purpose of interviewing the students was to obtain “extensive and ‘in-depth’” descriptions of how the students experienced the class. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) caution that a case study is applicable to a “bounded system” and agree with Yin (2016) that the phenomenon (the students’ perceptions) and context (the course) cannot be extracted from each other. Baxter and Jack (2008) explained qualitative case study as a tool for researchers “to study complex phenomena within their contexts” (p. 544), particularly when the context is relevant. The course was a “bounded system” of student experiences and complex phenomena that could not be separated from the context of the course. All researchers mentioned used personal interviews and document artifacts. Therefore, this study used both interviews and documents (assignments) to learn how students experienced the class. The dean who conceived of the course were was also interviewed.

**Background**

Case study research, as defined by Bromley (1990), “is a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (p. 302). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) emphasized that a case study analyzes a “bounded system... within its real-life context” (p. 37); and Yin (2014), agreed, explaining that case study research is
meant to help the researcher understand a small case. Notably, Burrell and Morgan (1979) laid the groundwork for ideographic research performed outside of the positivist/post-positivist, deductive realm, making the case for “the alternative view of social reality” (p. 3) and providing the groundwork for other theorists, such as Lincoln and Guba (2011). Like Burrell and Morgan, Lincoln, and Guba advanced the acceptance of inductive research in the social sciences using the paradigms of constructivism, critical theory, or participatory theory. Case study methodology, then, seeks to answer How? and Why? through research of a particular case, or related cases.

Case study methodology aligns itself well to study of a phenomena that exists within a specific time period (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), such as a college course. Noor (2008) stated that a strength of case study methodology is its ability to provide the researcher a holistic view of a phenomenon. Stake (1995), whose case study research and theory focuses on educational settings, maintained that one child in a classroom can be a single case, or a case can be an event of an entire school system. Stake defined three types of case studies: intrinsic, the desire to learn about that particular case without prior hypothesis; instrumental, the desire to use a particular case study to learn about something else; and collective, the comparison of several individual case studies. Yin (2014) saw case studies as a way to use the positivist/post-positivist, deductive research paradigm in an individual case, or group of cases, and noted Bromley’s (1986) similarly quantitatively-based case study methodology work. Yin’s attention to case study data, whichever paradigm or reasoning style, emphasized that the data must be analyzed with tremendous care to ensure validity, reliability, and credibility.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) allowed that case study research may be quantitative or mixed methods, but focused primarily on in-depth descriptions generated by qualitative,
ontological research. Creswell (2018) saw case study methodology only in the realm of qualitative research. The design of a case study, as with ethnography, phenomenology, or other approaches, is based on the research question and the theoretical framework of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, a substantial advantage of case study over other methodologies is its flexibility (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

**Desired Outcomes**

The desired outcomes from researching this case study of English 175 Professional Writing were thick and rich descriptions of students’ perceptions of their class and their previous writing experiences as well as the instructor’s and dean’s perceptions of the class. The results increase what is known about college-level writing course contextualization. Because this was a very small study, the purpose of this study was not to generalize. Stake (1995) cautioned that case studies make inherently poor vehicles for generalizations, although he stated that case studies are commonly used to modify existing generalizations. Because contextualization has been found beneficial in pre-college writing courses as demonstrated in Perin’s meta-study (2011), the proposed research added data that can be included in future, broader research.

**Scholarly Debate of Case Study**

As recently as 2015, Yazan noted that as a methodology, case studies still lack “legitimate status as a social science research strategy” (p. 134). The three key researchers, Merriam, Stake, and Yin do not particularly disagree, but, as Yazan (2015) noted, these authors have such varying interests and foci, it can be difficult to make comparisons.

Yin (2016) looked at case study methodology as particularly applicable to positivism/post-positivism when quantitative or mixed methods studies are conducted. Stake (1995) sat firmly in the camp of qualitative research when conducting case studies, and Merriam
and Tisdell (2016) did not deny quantitative, but were openly constructivist and concentrated on qualitative uses for case study methodology. Because of his positivist/post-positivist paradigm, Yin concentrated heavily on the deductive: creating a hypothesis, collecting data, then forming generalizations as far as possible from the data. Yin allowed that qualitative methods may be necessary. Yin recognized the historical distrust within the academy of qualitative research and detailed as far as possible ways to achieve rigor, validity, and reliability.

Although not as heavily focused on validity and reliability, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Stake (1995) agreed with Yin (2016) that triangulation is necessary for validity. Stake (1995) identified Yin’s earlier work as too focused on creating generalizations—something Stake identified as difficult for the instrumental case study researcher to achieve. Not surprisingly, Yin’s latest edition (2018) asserted that Stake (2016) did not focus sufficiently on looking for methods that will provide enough data for conclusions. Instead, Yin found having interest in the case sufficient. In fairness, Yin stated in a footnote that Stake may be correct that occasionally cases might be unique and unfit for generalizations.

The biggest difference between the three seminal authors may be in the definition of case study methodology. To Stake (1995) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the purpose of case study research is to see “multiple interpretations of reality” (qtd. in Yazan, 2015). Stake and Merriam and Tisdell saw a case study defined by its boundaries, such as time or event, but are broader in their definitions than Stake. Yazan (2015) described Yin’s philosophy of case study methodology as bearing responsibility to uphold the tenets of good research, as defined by quantitative, deductive methods. The three authors have different perspectives of case study design, as highlighted above, with Yin (2018) detailing an exhaustively specific design, and
Stake and Merriam opting for much more flexibility initially and ongoing as the events and data demand.

**Appropriateness of Case Study**

This research answered “how?” and “why?” questions regarding students’ and instructor’s experiences in English 175 Professional Writing. As discussed in the background section above, case study methodology was highly appropriate for this type of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study explores a bounded system (Stake, 1995), including time and space. A class by enrollment and quarter is a bounded system. While a case may refer to either a participant or the set of participants, case studies involve participants, such as students.

**Case Study Protocol**

Case studies include interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2016; and Zucker, 2009). Yin (2016) and Baxter and Jack (2008) emphasized the need for multiple sources of data to increase validity; therefore, seven students from the class were interviewed at least twice, using semi-structured interviews. Questions were open-ended. The instructor was also be interviewed, the class observed, and the course materials examined. Yin asserted heavily that data should be triangulated through several sources, including interviews, documents, observations, and as many other types of data as possible.

Creswell (2015) identified three advantages of interviews: (a) they provide the researcher with access to information that cannot be observed, (b) they give the researcher control over the questions asked, and (c) they allow participants to provide in-depth info about themselves (Creswell, 2015). Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated an additional advantage of interviewing as the ability to combine interviews of participants (for instance, what the husband experienced and
what the wife experienced at the same event). In addition, in-depth interviewing can make one population more understandable to another (for instance, older and younger generations) (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Creswell also saw the disadvantages of interviewing including these: the interviewee may say what he/she thinks the interviewer wants to hear, or there may be unconscious bias in the questions.

**Research Site**

Bates Technical College in Tacoma, Washington, was created as Tacoma Vocational School in 1940 in the greater Tacoma area as a vocational adjunct of the Tacoma public school district. Located in the basement of an elementary school, Tacoma Vocational School provided skilled workers to support the war effort. In 2018, the college had two campuses, over 45 programs, and offered approximately 112 associates’ degrees and certificates in those programs. With a full-time-equivalent (FTE) student population of just under 3,700 and a student headcount of just over 6,700, the Bates’ student body had a median age of 32 years. Fifty-seven percent of them were parents, and 49 percent were employed (Bates, 2019). Students at Bates Technical College, similarly to professional and technical program students at two-year colleges nationwide, contribute positively and significantly to the local economy. Bates Technical College’s (2015) completion rates for associates’ degrees ran as low as the national average of 22 percent at three years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Students in high demand fields such as welding and mechatronics (maintenance and repair of industrial robotics) typically received several lucrative job offers before graduating (D. Meyers, personal communication, 2017, October 24). It is particularly difficult for a 17-year-old student in poverty to ignore a $60,000 per year job offer (L. Davis, professional communication, 2017, September 27).
At Bates Technical College, Adult Basic Education was in the process of being contextualized to students’ lives, and nine I-Best programs were operating. Bates has already contextualized remedial writing into professional and technical courses through the I-BEST program. Students not involved in an I-Best program were to be taught contextualized Adult Basic Education and ELA (English Learner Acquisition) courses. Within five years, all students in developmental writing were to participate in clustered, contextualized Guided Pathways courses, as well.

**Participants**

The primary research question being addressed was how do technical college students in a related cluster of majors experience English 175 Professional Writing, a contextualized, college-level writing course? The participants included students from two sections of a college-level writing course whose participants were all enrolled in service trade programs (automotive repair electrical construction, and welding). According to the Bates Technical College website, students at Bates Technical College were older, with a median age of 32 years. The student body included significant numbers of veterans, many with disabilities: over two-thirds of the students worked, nearly half of them were students of color (primarily Hispanic/Latino), some were simultaneous high school students, and many of them lived in poverty. The county foodbank brought a semi-truck and trailer to the college weekly (B. Reichenbach, personal communication, 12 March, 2019). Yin (2014) noted that case study participants have time and location constraints that must be respected. For many students at Bates, transportation, childcare, and work schedules were issues around which interview schedules must have adapted.
Sample Size

Because of the number of technical high school students enrolled in English 175, this course had a projected enrollment of 15-18 students over 18 years of age, creating a homogeneous sampling pool (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994) that could be researched through comprehensive sampling (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The class was small. All students were potential interviewees, but students who declined participation and students who were under 18 years of age were excluded. Had enrollment run higher, data saturation would have been considered (Morse, 2000).

Altmann’s (1974) seminal work on non-quantitative field observations of monkeys began the discussion on choice of sampling methods. Over 14,000 citations later, debate regarding sampling in constructivist, qualitative research continues in peer-reviewed journals. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) text included a set of criteria as a guideline. Boddy (2016) noted that sample sizes not determined by statistical means leave reviewers of empirical research with little help, but notes that saturation, defined by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) as the point at which additional interviews will yield no new information, must be considered. Reviewing the literature of the previous 10 years, Morse (2000) concluded that qualitative sampling size is probably somewhere in the range of 20-30 participants, determined by several factors, including scope, clarity of topic, quality of data, study design, and shadowed data. A focused research question (narrowed scope) will need fewer participants; shallow interview answers will require more (Morse, 2000). Meanwhile if participants are expected to find the topic difficult to discuss, more participants are needed, but if the interviews are longitudinal (e.g., pre- and post-interviews of the same individual) as they were in this case, the sample size could be as small as 6-10 participants before saturation occurs (Morse). Finally, Morse considered “shadowed data,”
information about one individual obtained from another individual, particularly important in small samples. The interviews with the instructor and a college administrator were shadow data in this case.

Curtis, Gelser, Smith, and Washburn (2000) conducted their own review of the qualitative sampling research the same year as Morse (2000). Noting the lack of consistent standards among peer reviewed research on the subject, Curtis, Gelser, Smith, and Washburn created their own set of characteristics, similarly to Morse, but concluded that samples should be small and need to be “studied intensely” (p.1002) with each interview yielding great amounts of data and sampling strategies aligning with the researcher’s conceptual framework.

Trotter (2012) noted progress in creating consensus around qualitative research, including sampling, and stated that in the emergent theory approach (analyzing data to see whether theory emerges) in a small total population of 15-25 it is possible to interview all members of the population. Boddy’s (2016) review of the previous 15 years of academic debate over sampling size led him to agree that the sampling size should be under 30 in all cases, and as low as fifteen interviews for case studies, but concluded that justification is needed for qualitative research sampling that uses more than 30 in-depth interviews due to data saturation. Curtis, Gelser, Smith, and Washburn (2000) cautioned that the ability to adequately manage the sample size and data an important consideration, as did other authors. In 2017 van Rijnsoever wrote yet another set of guidelines for determining sample sizes in qualitative research. Agreeing with his predecessors, he stated that the data saturation point is the place where additional sampling stops, suggesting an average of between 20 and 30 interviews to accomplish this in a case study—or 10 to 15 students that are interviewed twice, presumably. The sample size in the proposed research was commensurate with studies that have used case study methodology in college classes, for

**Sampling**

Participants were selected through purposive, homogeneous sampling methods. Purposive (non-random) sampling is appropriate for the smaller sample sizes and purposes of qualitative research (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994). When the intent of research is to describe, not quantify, a group of students, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended purposive sampling to be able to learn the most about the participants. Creswell (2015) stated that homogeneous sampling, a subgroup of purposive sampling, is selected when the participants share a common subgroup, in this case taking the same class at Bates Technical College. According to Creswell, if the intent is to “describe some subgroup in depth” (p. 206), then homogeneous sampling is the best choice.

**Procedures**

After approval of the proposal, IRB approval was sought from Northeastern University and was accepted by Bates Technical College. Paperwork, including emails, was completed by Bates and submitted, documenting Bates’ agreement to allow research to be conducted. The researcher met with the instructor to determine how they would best work together, including discussion of the proposed research and interview questions, methodology, ethics, security, confidentiality, and pedagogy. The researcher and instructor created a timeline that worked for the instructor’s curriculum for the researcher to observe the class. The number of interviews and their process was discussed. Following the NEU Internal Review Board processes, students were not solicited in any way prior to approval. Bates accepted the IRB process from NEU as sufficient (P. Hauschka, personal communication, 4 January, 2019). After IRB approval,
students were contacted through their school email and responded to the researcher’s NEU email if they wished to participate and be given a copy of the NEU informed consent form. No students under 18 years of age were included in the research. Interviews were conducted on campus before or after class, as convenient to the participants. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the data coded within 48 hours of each interview to allow new sub-questions to be added as the data informed. Students were interviewed at least twice, once early in the quarter and once later in the quarter. Besides being observed, the instructor was interviewed regularly for insights about the progress and process of the class. The instructor granted full access to the Canvas online software, which contained the curriculum, the assignments, and other course materials. To maintain anonymity, all students were given pseudonyms, a list of which was kept in a password-protected private computer.

**Data Analysis**

To obtain thick, rich descriptions of the students’ experiences in the course, the interviews were audio recorded on a password-protected tablet. The researcher transcribed all interviews to maintain student privacy. Of some two dozen initial coding methods surveyed, In Vivo coding was selected to preserve the participants’ voices. Saldana (2016) maintained that In Vivo coding is adept for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 106). Stringer (2014) noted that verbatim recordings increase the ability of the researcher to understand participants’ meaning making of their experiences. As a second initial coding, Emotion coding was chosen, particularly because it “provides insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994, p.75). The instructor and dean interviews were In Vivo coded. The course materials, including student
online discussion boards were In Vivo coded, and Emotion coded as applicable. Assignments were not Emotion coded.

In qualitative case study research, the data is collected and analyzed concurrently (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The interviews for this case study were transcribed within 48 hours and coded using In Vivo coding initially, then Emotion coding to complete first-cycle coding. Concurrent interviewing and coding allowed the interviewer the opportunity to adjust the interview questions and re-interview for follow-up based on reflection of the data. Then, axial coding in the second cycle considered dominant themes and patterns (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2016). Member checking and smaller follow-up interviews were conducted (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A focus group was considered, but rejected for lack of student availability. While Yin (2016), a post-positivist, urged the use of a database for careful data analysis, Zucker (2009) seemed to place more emphasis on the need for the researcher to continually return to the literature for assistance with meaning making. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) concurred. The research was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet, and the researcher re-examined the literature periodically.

Lincoln and Guba (2011) asserted the importance of reflexivity on the part of qualitative researchers. Throughout the research, analytic memos were created and maintained, including any insights from the re-examination of the literature. The researcher occasionally encountered student participants in other venues at the college, for instance, in line in the campus store. Participants volunteered information occasionally during these encounters, adding additional information or correcting themselves from a previous interview. The researcher detailed these in field notes for additional coding.

Yin (2016) maintained that the best way to ensure validity and reliability is to triangulate data from several sources, and this was done: interviews, member checking, observations, and
course materials. A sample of the initial coding was checked by an impartial coder for a greater than 90 percent match.

High Standards of Qualitative Research

To ensure the highest standards of qualitative research were implemented, this research was infused with Tracy’s (2010) eight criteria: worthy topic, rich rigor, resonance, significant contribution, and meaningful coherence are discussed here. The final criteria—ethics, credibility, and sincerity and transparency—are covered in the remainder of this chapter.

Worthy Topic

First, achievement of the criteria for having a worthy topic is explicated in the first chapter under the heading “significance of the research.” Because this research adds to the body of knowledge regarding student completions at two-year technical colleges, it meets Tracy’s (2010) characteristics of being relevant, timely, significant, and interesting.

Rich Rigor

The criterion for rich rigor was met through using “sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical concepts, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s), and data collection and analysis” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). Each of these characteristics has already been discussed in this chapter.

Resonance

The characteristics of resonance include both “aesthetic merit” and “generalizationability/transferability” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). One of the outcomes of this research was to produce short narratives, or vignettes, created as a composition of student responses capturing content and emotion. The purpose of such stories is to increase transferability and generalization by others.
Tracy defined transferability not as transferability of research, as is discussed in a later section of this chapter, but as the ability of the narrative to resonate within readers so that the story has a positive impact on their own lives and allows the readers to feel as though they have experienced the story themselves, such is the vividness of the narrative.

**Significant Contribution**

The aim of this research was to add knowledge about technical college students in academics courses and about contextualization in higher education. The findings may lead to improved practice by demonstrating the applicability of contextualized college writing courses. Tracy (2010) asked whether the research is theoretically, heuristically, or practically significant. The research proposed in this study was intended to speak to the latter two characteristics. It was hoped that given the wealth of research on pre-college level contextualized writing courses and the dearth of research on contextualized college-level writing courses, readers will develop curiosity about college-level writing contextualization. This was practical because its intention was to determine whether students' experiences in a contextualized technical college writing course inform practice in any way. In other words, the purpose was to increase the body of knowledge of contextualization, whether positively or negatively. A positive outcome, when combined with future, similar studies, could contribute to increasing the graduation and earning power of students, particularly students of color, by increasing the apparent relevance and practicality of taking the required college-level writing course.

**Meaningful Coherence**

It was the goal of this research to “eloquently interconnect [the] research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals,” as Tracy (2010, p. 848) stated.
Ethical Considerations

Avoiding bias in the researcher is a primary ethical consideration (Yin, 2014), as well as avoiding bias in the actions of the researcher before, during, and after (Tracy, 2010). Creswell and Poth (2018) categorize ethical considerations by steps in the research process: prior, beginning, data collection, analysis, reporting, and publishing.

Prior to the Study

Before beginning the research, the Northeastern University Internal Review Board and the Bates Technical College administrator both granted approval. The researcher was not working in a leadership capacity at the college while researching, nor did Bates have a vested interest in the outcome.

Beginning

At the start, all participants were contacted in accordance with NEU protocols detailed above and assured that their participation was voluntary and anonymous (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was explained to all participants, including the purpose and use of the data that would be collected, so participants could give informed consent (Yin, 2014). The administrator at Bates Technical College requested that no pseudonym be used for the school. However, the school had approximately ten writing instructors, so if the instructor did not wish to be named, anonymity would be maintained for that individual. No students under the age of 18 were interviewed, so parental consent was not required to participate.

Data Collection

The researcher needed to minimize disruptions to the class, avoid leading questions, provide rewards, and store data securely (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher worked with the instructor to be as unobtrusive as possible when observing the classroom. The interview
questions were reviewed by both the dissertation chair and the IRB in advance. Participants were offered a choice of gift cards, such as a grocery store or Starbucks, for substantive (not follow-up) interviews. The data was maintained in a password-protected computer or a locked file cabinet, and pseudonyms of all parties were assigned on a key document also maintained in a password protected computer.

**Analysis**

It is important to continue maintaining confidentiality during analysis and to include all findings, not just positive ones (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In Vivo coding (Saldana, 2016), in which the emphasis is on the interviewees’ actual words, was used during initial coding to maintain the language of the participants. For instance, over 1,300 In Vivo codes were assigned to student interviews, another 150 to instructor and dean interviews, and approximately 75 to assignments and course materials. Secondary coding of student interviews was done using Emotion coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994) and yielded over 1,000 additional codes. Total codes from initial coding were well over 2,500.

Saldana (2016) found Excel “provided excellent organization” for coding (p. 30). Using Excel to contain and sort the data provided this researcher with the flexibility to include and sort codes from interviews, notes, lectures, and course materials, while maintaining their separate categorizations.

The In Vivo codes were cross coded both by Excel and manually in several ways. Sorting for similar words or phrases produced very little usable data. A sub-coding of the In Vivo codes for common threads and again for categories that followed naturally from the interview questions (e.g., primary school experiences, middle school experiences, and high school experiences with writing) was indicated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (1994), and
performed. Below is an example of an initial In Vivo code and one of its subcodes next to the emotion coded to that In Vivo data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Vivo Line #</th>
<th>Individual's Pseudonym</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>IV Data</th>
<th>Sub-Code</th>
<th>Emotion Line #</th>
<th>E Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>792</td>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>&quot;When am I ever going to need this?&quot;</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>Annoyance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Care was taken in the spreadsheet to ensure data columns could not be separated from each other: for instance, the In Vivo data was always associated with that individual no matter how the data was sorted. For secondary coaxial coding, Emotion codes that had been applied to the In Vivo data were sorted with the subcodes of the In Vivo data to obtain patterns and themes. To overcome the disparity between data that was double coded (e.g., participants’ words and emotions) to data that could not be Emotion coded (e.g., assignments), the researcher physically compared the list of single coded events with results of secondary coding.

**Reporting**

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that ethical reporting should include honesty, taking care to rewrite or remove any stories or information that would allow others to identify a specific individual, and ensure that the language does not include technical jargon or a vocabulary inappropriate for the audience. Therefore, reporting maintained anonymity of all participants and was communicated honestly and clearly with understandable explanations.

**Publishing**

Finally, the participants deserved to see the “practical results” and those results should be published in methods that are accessible (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 56). Bates Technical
College has a student body with a significant proportion of Hispanic/Latino students. Because the students in the class had passed language tests to gain entry, the results of this research was not needed to be translated into Spanish. Dissertations at Northeastern University are published on ProQuest Dissertation databases, and it was the researcher’s intention to create an article for publication in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* or another journal.

**Credibility**

A qualitative case study is a search for meaning and understanding through in-depth descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility for this research was established and maintained in several ways. First, through member checking, so that participants gave repeated feedback on the quality and credibility of the transcriptions of their interviews as well as the results of analysis of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Second, sustained engagement with the participants increased credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) when qualitative studies include participant feedback in how data is taken, analyzed, and interpreted (Creswell & Poth, 2018), so this researcher discussed and encouraged feedback from participants regarding the process and results. Third, the researcher conducted classroom observations early in the quarter for students to become used to her presence and to her.

The interview questions were open-ended and were coded to create thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010), as described in detail in the next section. The data was also triangulated by using both instructor and student participation, classroom activities, and student assignments in addition to observations and interviews. This researcher particularly engaged in frequent reflexivity through journaling to examine her own “past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (Creswell &
Poth, 2018, p. 261), indicated by Tracy (2010) as one of the necessary actions to create excellent qualitative research. The journal entries were kept throughout the study and were open to review. An additional coder was used to achieve greater than 90 percent agreement in coding a segment of the data at both the initial coding and the second stage of the coding. A focus group of participants was considered to allow participants to comment on the accuracy of the researcher’s conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, an additional reader was identified who was familiar with the school and the participants but had no vested interest in the results. All students who volunteered to participate except one were interviewed in depth at least twice plus several follow-ups.

**Transferability**

Thick description was first defined by Geertz in 1973 and was later defined by Tracy (2010) as a method that “explicates culturally situated meaning” (p. 843). It is widely used in qualitative research to assure high quality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy; 2010; Yin, 2014). There are various ways to use thick descriptions for best transferability. Thick description includes:

- writing “lushly” (Goffman, 1981, p. 31)
- providing many concrete details
- noting non-verbal observations such as body language or emotion
- showing rather than telling
- identifying the interviewer’s observations of self. (Tracy, 2010)

This study used Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) responsive interviewing model to ensure accurate, thick descriptions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using In Vivo coding initially
to ensure the emphasis of the original responses was maintained. By creating detailed composite stories and vignettes in addition to thick description, confidentiality was maintained while context was highlighted, thus increasing the transferability of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Student experiences in a writing course may yield composite narratives that at once provide confidentiality to the interviewed individuals and provide readers with Tracy’s (2010) reader transferability and generalization discussed above. The purpose of this study was to look at student experiences in a writing course, but it was the intention of this study to create data, including composite narratives, that other researchers may find helpful as they seek ways to increase technical college completions, increase the knowledge base of technical college students, study the Guided Pathways model, and seek methods to increase student success generally.

**Internal Audit**

To ensure that a paper trail was saved for a reader to see the chain of evidence that leads from inception to final publication, the researcher maintained copious notes, journal entries, audio recordings and written transcriptions of all interviews, field notes, initial and secondary coding results, a table of thematic conclusions drawn from the coding, the comparison with the second coder’s results, and drafts and reports throughout. In addition, it was helpful for the researcher to jot down overall impressions immediately after an interview and collect pertinent emails to provide transparent cohesiveness to the research process.

**Self-Reflexivity and Transparency**

The positionality and power of the researcher have the possibility of skewing the research data if she is not consciously aware of and willing to examine her own positionality and biases.
For the researcher to be as neutral as possible, a self-examination was needed. Parsons (2008) stated that:

positionality is a concept that acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and other socially constructed identifiers in being (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1993, 1998) (p. 1129).

I am a privileged, middle class, straight, married, physically-able American woman of European descent on sabbatical from a leadership position at another college. To best examine my potential and actual biases as a researcher, particularly in the context of the technical college, here are pertinent aspects of my positionality and power.

**Highly Educated**

I was raised from birth by parents with the explicit expectation that their five children would all attend college. Much of my 30 years in the workforce has been in higher education. I place a very high value on higher education, which I needed to be aware of during my research. The students at a technical college earn applied degrees to get into the job market as quickly as possible. The mission and core themes of Bates Technical College align with students seeking higher education specifically as a short-term path to a living wage (About Bates, 2019). In fact, in Washington State an applied associate’s degree was legislatively created for students intent on entering the workforce as soon as possible. Because the legislation pares the general education courses to three college-level courses (logic/reasoning, communications, and humanities/social science), it could be argued that the students interviewed for my study may have been predisposed because of the legislation alone to find little value in general education courses from the outset. I needed to be aware of my bias toward the value of education, especially higher education, as the students in this study may not have shared these values.
Middle Class, European Descent

I have never been in poverty, yet many of the students are in hardship (Bates Technical College, 2014), are working class, or working poor. Last year, the College negotiated free bus-passes, opened a foodbank, and began advertising homelessness resources in response to student needs. I needed to be aware that my positionality as upper-middle class could bias my ability to hear the students I interview. I am White, without accent, and was born in the United States, making me a recipient of much unearned privilege in this country. The students participating in my research attended a college that is 41 percent students of color and includes undocumented and DACA students (Bates Technical College, 2014). I needed to be aware of the power and other effects my positionality and unearned privilege gave me in the eyes of the students. An awareness of both helped me to prevent my actions or speech from giving cues or speaking in a way that could be taken as a command.

Physically-Able, Non-Military

Many students at the college are retraining for a new career due to an injury that prevents them from performing a previous job. For instance, a plumber was struck by a falling pipe that severely injured his back, forcing him to change careers by retraining at a technical college and with funding through the Washington State Department of Labor and Industry. Veterans, many with injuries including PTSD, are students on the GI bill. I have no disability, nor a military background. These students may have values that differ from mine, so I needed to be aware of my positionality to avoid bias.

Faculty

After years of observing instructors in the classroom, my predilection would be toward observing and assessing the instructor, rather than observing the class in general, so I needed to
be aware that my being an administrator and former consultant could bias my awareness of what happened in the classroom. In addition, I was known as a dean from another college, which could have had an implicit power differential with faculty.

**Contextualization**

I was hopeful that the data would reveal that contextualization had a positive effect on students’ perceptions of the value of their learning in a college-level English course. I have tried many things over the years, both as a faculty member and as a college leader, to help students at the technical college level have greater success. As a scholar-practitioner, I will continue researching and exploring new ways of increasing student success at the technical college, regardless of the results of this proposed research. However, I needed to be very aware of my bias towards wanting contextualization to succeed as I conducted my research and remember that contextualization not helping students also adds to the body of literature.

**Final Thoughts on Positionality**

What I had to be aware of as I interviewed technical college trades students was that they may have given answers that I didn’t initially understand because they were incomprehensible to my world view. To aid my understanding, I tried to be scrupulous in my capture and analysis of student interviews. I believed the most effective thing for me to do was to be reflexive. Roulston and Shelton (2015), in their excellent article, “Reconceptualizing Bias in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods, suggested taking an approach of “strong objectivity” shored up by the transcriptions, reflection, and focus groups (p. 338). I had a written transcription of all interviews and journaled copiously.
Limitations

This was a small study of one English 175 Professional Writing class; therefore, any generalizations must be cautious. The use of Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory as the theoretical framework also limits this study away from transfer of learning (see Palmier, 2013). The transferability of this research is limited to workforce programs at community and technical two-year colleges and should not be extrapolated to an academic, liberal arts population without broad and substantial additional research. It was the intention of this research to create a data point among many case studies of contextualized classes in higher education.

Conclusion

Students at Bates Technical College will soon have all of their courses contextualized except their required college-level writing course. This research studied an ongoing class of college-level writing that was contextualized to the students’ cluster of majors. After approval through the Internal Review Board of Northeastern University and Bates Technical College, the students over 18 years of age who chose to participate were interviewed twice during the quarter, the class was observed, and the instructor interviewed. Student interviews, using pseudonyms to protect student privacy, were recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis. This researcher maintained an awareness of her positionality and potential biases to work toward the highest quality of research.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

This case study examined how English 175 Professional Writing, a college-level writing class, was contextualized for Bates Technical College students majoring in transportation and construction service trades, including automotive maintenance technician, auto body repair technician, electrical construction (electrician), and welding. To discover how students experienced the course, the researcher interviewed student participants near the beginning and again near the end of the quarter. The dean who conceived of the course and the instructor who created and implemented the course were also interviewed. The instructor was observed while teaching. Finally, artifacts were also studied, including the syllabus, course outline, assignments, student online discussions, and the Canvas learning management system platform.

The data was coded first using In Vivo and Emotion coding. The secondary coding was coaxial, using Excel software to determine superordinate and subordinate themes. Three superordinate themes emerged from the data: The students’ perceptions of the relevance of their learning, the helpfulness of the structure of the course itself, and transformative learning elements of the students’ experiences. In addition to the three superordinate themes, nine subordinate themes were also identified:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>• Public school non-usefulness – pre high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Public school non-usefulness – high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• English 175 helpfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful Class Structure</td>
<td>• Three-part teaching style/Instructor helpfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Applicable curriculum/assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pro-parenting class time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Transformative Learning</td>
<td>• Precociousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Disorienting experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Other elements of transformative learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data will be presented by describing each superordinate theme and its attendant subthemes, using all of the data collected.

**Participants**

The students volunteered to participate and were interviewed at their convenience regarding time and location. Seven students completed initial interviews and six students completed final interviews during spring quarter. A seventh student, after repeated cancellations or failures to appear, was interviewed several weeks into the quarter initially, but was not interviewed at the end of the quarter, despite the researcher’s multiple attempts to establish contact. Because the seventh student’s initial interview took place during the quarter, the student offered information applicable to both the initial and final interviews. All of the students were male, which was not uncharacteristic of the student populations of these programs. Three of the seven students, or 42 percent, were of color. Bates Technical College population was approximately the same, at 41 percent students of color. Five of the students were co-enrolled at Bates Technical High School and Bates Technical College. Technical high school offers students under 21 years of age, particularly students who are not successful in traditional high schools, the opportunity to learn a trade or profession while completing a streamlined set of required academic courses for high school graduation. Many of these workforce programs, such as automotive collision repair, are terminal; that is, there are no bachelor’s or master’s degrees in their fields. All of the students could be characterized as non-traditional college students. Two students were over 25 years of age, and the other five students were non-traditional by other characteristics, such as poverty or ethnicity. Three students had disabilities. All of the students’ names and identifying characteristics were changed to protect their privacy.
Cole

Cole was 28 years old and enrolled in the welding program. Because of relocations during his high school years, he did not graduate at 18. At 20, he completed his GED in less than two weeks. An avid reader since grade school, Cole wrote four online fantasy novels in his late teens and early twenties. Cole has worked in retail and suffered from extreme poverty. He was diagnosed with depression years ago, but currently could not afford to see his therapist or afford medications. He spent four months unemployed earlier this year and admitted he lost a lot of weight during that time. He appeared very thin. He was in the welding program to obtain a marketable skill and a living wage.

Laurence

Laurence was nineteen years old and attending Bates Technical High School to obtain a high school diploma and complete the auto body repair technician program. He was in his fifth quarter of the program. He changed schools during both middle school and high school. He said he failed middle school and particularly struggled with English classes throughout his life because he simply didn’t understand the assignments. After struggling in mainstream high school, he enrolled at Bates Technical High School. Laurence was repeating English 175 as the last class needed to complete high school.

Isaac

Isaac was 34-years old, had four sons, and was enrolled in his final quarter of the auto body repair technician program at Bates. A student of color raised in the Midwest in extreme poverty, he said he was “distracted by the neighborhood” and “went left instead of right.” His first child was born while Isaac was in eleventh grade. He chose to drop out of school and work to support his child, which he now regrets. He had completed his GED and considered the auto
body repair a trade he could eventually teach his sons. Isaac intended to own his own business and be an entrepreneur. English 175 was the last course he needed to graduate.

**Sam**

Sam was an eighteen-year-old with ADHD currently enrolled in the final quarter of his electrical construction program through Bates Technical High School. In grade school, Sam came to the conclusion that the school curriculum was “pointless” and was bored throughout his primary and secondary school years by how easy assignments were. He much preferred designing and building things over academics. A first-generation college student, he was repeating English 175 in order to graduate that quarter.

**Thomas**

Thomas was a first-generation college student who was nineteen years old. A student of color with heavy family obligations, he was enrolled in the auto body technician program through Bates Technical High School. His mother had been confined to a wheelchair for the last five years with a degenerative disease, making him responsible for both his siblings and cousins. He referred to himself as “a family person, with many children around [him].” According to the high school advisor, Thomas’s family had recently ended a two-year spate of homelessness. He attended at least three elementary schools and two middle schools. In mainstream high school, he completed AP Psychology before attending Bates. During interviews, he mentioned that many of his friends were at universities. His reasons for moving from an apparent college track to auto body were never explained. Thomas’s interviews had to be rescheduled repeatedly due to family obligations and transportation issues. A former student of this researcher, Thomas enrolled in English 175 three times, but had never attended until now. English 175 was his final academic class, and this was his final quarter.
Benjamin

Benjamin was an eighteen-year-old automotive maintenance technician student with ADHD. His family moved repeatedly during his public-school years. By middle school, he had changed schools at least five times. Instead of attending his senior year at a mainstream high school, he transferred to Bates at the suggestion of a high school counselor, Benjamin’s seventh change of school. He was six quarters away from graduation. Benjamin lived 45 minutes away from campus in an area not served by public transportation. Because of this, he canceled or postponed several interviews when he found opportunities to get a ride with another student.

Armand

Armand was an eighteen-year-old student of color enrolled in his last quarter to obtain both his high school diploma and his applied technology associate’s degree in auto body maintenance technician. His parents had him while they were in high school themselves. Diverted from public high school to Bates Technical High School at the suggestion of a school counselor, Armand was a first-generation college student. He played middle school and high school football before enrolling at Bates Technical High School. He was responsible for younger siblings and had to cancel scheduled interviews several times for both the initial and follow-up interviews. One interview was postponed because the middle school principal called Armand, not his parents, to meet immediately to discuss Armand’s younger brother’s involvement in a fight at school. Armand apologized in person to this researcher before leaving. Armand’s tone indicated talking with middle school authorities was not unusual.

Dean Pete Hauschka

Pete Hauschka was the dean over academics, transitional studies, and the principal of the technical high school. Aware of the high failure rate of technical college students in academic
courses, Dean Hauschka had implemented a number of innovations in his programs and with his faculty and staff to increase student success. The contextualized college-level writing course for students in trades was his idea.

**Instructor Peter Speelmon, Ph.D.**

Dr. Speelmon had many years of teaching experience at technical colleges, both private and public. He taught a similar contextualized writing course for business administration students at a private technical college. After that college closed its local campus, he came to Bates Technical College several years ago teaching in the electrical construction I-BEST program and teaching traditional academic writing courses. He was completing his first of three years in the tenure-review process at Bates.

**Coding**

The data yielded raw numbers of In Vivo codes and Emotion codes per participant, as seen in Table 1. The data collected for this case study will be explained by each superordinate theme and its sub-themes, respectively.

**Table 1**

*Interview Coding Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th># of In Vivo Codes*</th>
<th># of Emotion Codes*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armand</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cole</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Superordinate Theme One: Students’ Perceptions of Relevance

All students brought up the issue of relevance throughout the interview process, both explicitly and implicitly (for example, “it seemed pointless” when referring to grade school curriculum was inferred as not relevant). Of the 1,321 total student In Vivo codes, 25% related to relevance. The chronological progression of the students’ references seemed worthy of examination, as student expectations of English 175 were studied as part of their experience. Therefore, the sub-themes correspond to chronological periods: grade school and middle school, high school, and college.

#### Sub-theme One: Public School Non-usefulness-- Pre-High School

**Grade School.** By fourth grade, two of the students interviewed, Isaac and Sam, indicated that they had already decided school was superfluous, despite their capabilities. Both students stated they had no difficulty in grade school. Isaac, who described his life in the Midwest as “poverty stricken,” referred to his experience this way:
Grade school was like—I was a little bit more advanced in grade school. . . . This was like second, third, and I kind of just, you know, advanced to grade four, and then I came to a point where I guess I didn’t see the importance of reading and writing, and the significance of how much knowledge you obtain by reading, writing, and understanding.

Sam stated it this way:

Well, I kind of didn’t pay attention. It’s not that it was hard; it was just that I never wanted to do [the assignments] because they seemed pointless. So, I’d otherwise have failing grades, but it was—I could get caught up within a matter of two-three days because the assignments were just way too easy.

A third student, Cole, referred to the content of grade school as “whatever a kid in the ‘90’s had to sit through,” but remembers that while in grade school he was reading:

Probably anything that I could get my hands on. I was reading chapter books while I was still in grade school. I was told that I was reading, like, subtitles on the tv set, food containers, signs, fantasy, general fiction. . . . I loved the hell out of “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.”

These three students were not finding satisfaction in their elementary school curriculum.

While the three students above indicated they had no scholastic issues in grade school, Laurence, who changed schools several times and failed middle school, had a different memory about grade school writing lessons:

Whenever we had a writing assignment in elementary school and stuff, I’d have issues with it and have to get my parents’ help. I just didn’t understand it as well as I understood math or science.

These were not children content with their learning.
Middle School. In general, the students had much more to say about middle school than about grade school regarding writing. Students recalled more about writing experiences in middle school than in grade school, perhaps because of changing classrooms, changing teachers, and having discrete class periods. The students seemed to remember most about times they worked hard because the assignment either interested them or they had some autonomy over it, which allowed them to do something meaningful.

Despite having been forced to change schools at least four times by middle school, Benjamin showed obvious pride during the initial interview about reading at college level by the sixth grade and, like Cole, reading books far beyond his grade level outside of school. Because of Benjamin’s reading level, his English teacher had high expectations, he said, but “Just overall, the work seemed important . . . . and it felt like it would make work in the future a little bit easier and give better understanding.” Science writing, however, was a different experience:

It was mainly just projects on basic stuff like mitochondria and biology and things like that. I do remember that my seventh-grade instructor was really strict on the way you wrote up hypotheses. You couldn’t use the word “too” or “and.” He’d make you erase the whole thing and rewrite it.

Noting Benjamin’s tone of voice, the researcher asked whether he found this frustrating, to which he replied “a lot.” Looking back on the experience, he still saw the word restriction as one more useless writing exercise.

In contrast to Benjamin, Isaac did well in his middle school classes, despite his disinterest:

I was an athlete, so my grades were okay.
His interest was captured, though, by reading stories of Native Americans in history class. He liked the stories, he said, because he could put himself there:

In that time frame, about what was it like. Like how I would be if I was separated from Mom, or having to move, being separated from, like I know it’s home. I just had empathy and sympathy for them [Native Americans].

Isaac, growing up in extreme poverty, fondly recalled writing assignments that were about Native Americans. In middle school or junior high school—he attended both—Isaac recalled only one other writing assignment:

You had to have your own little presentation, and you know, you just had to show that you didn’t really just go and did it with a Google. And then just to show you did the research—this was our research—a real live bibliography, you know, real books. That’s something that stands out!

Armand, who recalled nothing of grade school except practicing writing the alphabet in cursive script, also liked a story of Native Americans. He had this to say about middle school:

I had like a reading class and we’d mostly read a book and write trying to summon [sic] up the main parts of it and what the purpose of the story was, kind of. So, here and there I had writing, but mostly it was reading. . . . I liked the workbook, actually, because I can do it whenever I wanted to.1

Apparently, the students in that class read several books. Armand stated that *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Spirit Bear* were the only two he liked. Regarding *Spirit Bear*, Armand, who noted in a later interview that he likes to take time to think about things, commented:

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1 Here and elsewhere, when a student’s overuse of filler words impedes comprehension, some of the filler words, such as “just” or “like” have been removed without affecting the student’s voice. Here, for example, the original phrase, “I had like a reading class and like we’d mostly like read a book” was modified to “I had like a reading class and we’d mostly read a book.”
I liked it because he [the protagonist] changed at the end. Something about being on the island after being in jail made him think about his decisions and what he needed to change.

Armand admitted that he did not necessarily do the assignments on the books that didn’t catch his interest. Additionally, he remembered having trouble understanding the instructions for some assignments and ignored those, too.

While Armand liked the autonomy of workbooks, Sam used autonomy in a different way by changing formats to make an assignment more interesting—from a report to a mystery story. The students in his seventh-grade language arts class were given a list of possible topics for a 4,000-word essay due at the end of the semester. On the due date, Sam reported that he hadn’t written anything. In his words:

All I had written down was the Roman villa, and I was kind of failing that class already at the beginning of the semester, so my mom was mad, and over the weekend—and it was bad it was so late—over the weekend in just over a matter of two days, I was able to write out a 4,000 word essay and ended up getting, well a late grade, but I had so much extra credit for the creativity, the plot, the setting, everything, that I ended up getting extra points and got like an A with extra points.

When he finally got around to completing the assignment, he did well without difficulty.

And it was so easy, my mom and my teacher were wondering why I didn’t just do it on time, and I said, “I don’t know, it didn’t seem like it was important at the time or appealing to me.” And both of them were looking at me and said, “But this is a really good story, and you came up with this in two days.” And I’m like, “I know, but I just didn’t want to write.”
When Sam chose to change the assignment to something that captured his interest, a mystery story based on the *Goosebumps* children’s mysteries that he loved, he had no trouble completing his classwork.

Cole, on the other hand, was successful academically in middle school, but characterized language arts this way: “The writing stuff still wasn’t a big thing for me.” His memories about reading for pleasure were much more vivid. He remembers reading adult novels in several genres, including science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Most of all, he said that he discovered pornography:

Adult smut stuff that technically should not have been allowed in the hands of a 14-year old.

But in his hands they were, or more specifically hiding in his pockets or encased in other books, so they could come with him to school, he recalled.

Thomas’s life became more complicated in middle school as his mother became confined to a wheelchair for a degenerative disease. Thomas’s mother became a positive role model for writing at that time, as Thomas stated:

My mom writes down stuff in a book, a journal because she wants to write a book about life . . . about how [the disease] affected her, and how she stays positive, and keeps going throughout her days.

He has no memories of language arts or writing class assignments in the middle schools he attended, but recalled matter of factly, “It was probably embedded assessments. I don’t know. I remember learning about the different types of essays, like expository [and] persuasive.” His use of such specific language (“embedded assessments,” “expository,” and “persuasive”) was unique among all of the students interviewed.
Similarly to Armand, Laurence continued to struggle with school and writing assignments. He stated it this way:

I remember not doing very well. I didn’t pass middle school. I didn’t do the English very well; I struggled in that. I had to get help from my teacher quite a bit, and my parents, and still didn’t do that well. I mean I tried, but just couldn’t. . . . I was trying, but I just couldn’t comprehend it very well.

Laurence, who attended three different middle schools, also remembers that middle school humanities focused on history and on English: “But the English was learning how to do punctuation and proper comma placement and stuff. I mean it wasn’t difficult per se, but it wasn’t as easy as the other subjects.” Although he much preferred math and science, he explained that punctuation is useful even though it wasn’t easy for him for this reason:

People, a lot of people, do worry about how you talk on social media. Even your punctuation and all of that, people comment on in social media. At least knowing mostly the way to say stuff is helpful.

Laurence saw relevance in punctuation and grammar, if not writing itself.

Four students had already begun forming impressions of the lack of relevance of writing lessons while in grade school, whether or not they were academically successful. In middle school, the need for autonomy, immediate relevance, and high interest were demonstrated throughout the student interviews.

**Sub-Theme Two: Public School Non-usefulness: High School**

Five of the seven students found little relevance in mainstream high school. A strong theme of increasingly non-positive attitudes as students progressed into high school emerged from the secondary co-axial coding of In Vivo and Emotion codes of the student interviews. For
four students, school became “useless” or “repetitive” or “kind of a blur.” Two students dropped out of high school: Cole at the end of his senior year, and Isaac in eleventh grade. Only Isaac, who left high school to support a child, and Thomas had positive things to say about high school.

Isaac remembers being distracted by the neighborhood:

High school was kind of like a blur, Man. I got into girls real heavy, and you know, started being promiscuous and then, before you know it, I had the “real-est” situation in my life. I had a kid coming, and it was kind of like steering away from school, so to speak, and I went another route. I maybe wish I hadn’t.

Isaac recalled just one high school writing assignment about Pueblo Indians because it caught his interest, but he left school because supporting his child was the “real-est” thing to him, not education.

Thomas was the only other student participant who displayed no distrust of the public high school curriculum. Thomas gave every indication of growing up as a college-bound student. Several times, he mentioned that his friends currently attend universities. When describing himself to the researcher at the first interview, he stated that he was “from a middle-class family that has moved around a lot in the past two years.” In past quarters, both Speelmon and this researcher had Thomas’s name on their respective rosters but did not see the student in class more than twice per quarter, if at all. Because it was the school counselor, not Thomas, who volunteered to the researcher that Thomas’s family had recently ended a two-year spate of homelessness, the decision was made not to pursue the reasons for Thomas’s abrupt change of path in the second quarter of his junior year when he joined the auto body repair program at Bates Technical High School. Thomas, a football player back then, fondly recalled mainstream public high school:
AP psychology was probably one of the hardest classes I ever had. It was—we were—we would just write essays, every week, about the psychological way of people, what they do and how they feel, and what to do about situations and stuff, and everything about the brain and, gosh. . . . It was kind of interesting learning how people control people. Basically, how you get what you want out of people, and how people think about certain situations, and how you should think, and how you should react.

In fact, Thomas stated that AP psychology and history were his favorite classes from high school. Of the seven students in this study, Thomas had by far the most interest in school and in learning for its own sake.

Unlike Thomas, Armand spent middle school almost casually ditching assignments that either didn’t catch his interest or had confusing instructions. This trend continued into high school:

Freshman year, I had a writing class. I really didn’t like it. It was a lot of book reading in essays, like every week. I didn’t really think about doing them. I did some of them. And some of them I didn’t understand, so I didn’t try ‘em.

The ones he attempted, he said, were because he “kind of remembered stuff” from middle school. Like other students in the study, he, too, really liked history, however, was quite frustrated in high school when he felt he was cheated out of history lessons:

The teacher wouldn’t say anything about history; it was all English. I was in history, and I got English instead of history. . . . I felt like I’m not supposed to be taking this class; I’m supposed to be taking history. . . . They gotta fix that.

Another class discussed a culture in South Africa. Armand said he really liked learning about it:
Don’t remember the name of it, but I remember it was about a culture, how they lived, and how they worked, and how they fed each other, and stuff.

He especially liked, he said:

Seeing how people improvise their situation to make it better. Or, instead of putting themselves first, they put other people. So it shows a respect level for how you think of things, in your mindset. You’re not selfish. . . . I would think about if I was in that situation what I would do? I’d rather help somebody than watch somebody struggle. . . .

[Reading it] made me think about a lot of stuff.

Armand commented more than once during the interviews that he likes to think about things, and he liked to discover how they apply to his life and his situation—in other words, finding immediate relevance.

Cole failed to finish high school but for different reasons than Isaac. Although he apparently had good grades throughout, Cole found high school useless, dropping out the last quarter of his senior year because he was fed up. English—specifically fiction writing—was his favorite topic in school. His family’s move to a different school district forced him to change schools near the end of fall semester during his senior year:

Well, I hated it [high school]. The English class got easier with the teacher, but then I ended up trading high schools, and I ended up in a creative writing class because they didn’t have a 12th grade English. . . . Like the creative writing class lasted all of a month and a half, and it sucked because I couldn’t do anything.

Ironically, as much as Cole loved writing stories, by the time he entered this creative writing course, the students had moved from stories to poetry, which Cole despised. But the final insult
of his public high school career, according to Cole, was his last semester English class. In Cole’s words:

The second semester was an introductory to college writing. But I’d never had any desire to go to college, so it was like I have no real reason to be here, but this is the only class that I’m allowed to take. And the teacher was like, “Oh, so long as you don’t cause a disturbance, just do whatever you want. I don’t care, just don’t bother the rest of the students.”

Cole admits that he read fiction or slept through the quarter-long class, disgusted that he couldn’t take an English class that, in his view, would be useful to him. He believed high school should have taught him to write emails, memos, resumes, and cover letters. As soon as he left school, he began writing stories: “I didn’t hit my writing stride until after I got out of high school.” He added:

I tried writing long-term fiction and the only real success I had was like when I was 19 and it was a 10-chapter, choose-your-own adventure. Even though it’s been ten years, every couple of months I get a notification. It’s like, “Hey, another user has liked your thing.”

After the novel styled after the *Goosebumps* series, he continued writing fiction:

I’ve written fan fiction stuff. Again, those are mostly one-shots. I had a chapter one going on for a while, and only managed to get like six chapters in before I burnt out. I’ve made a couple of short stories for the Magic Gathering card game. And then a couple of originals on my own and a couple of short works inspired by artworks and comics.

Cole loved writing fiction but hated school. The timing of his family’s move denied him of the only class he would have loved. According to Cole, by the time he started the creative writing
class at the new school, the fiction writing sections were done. Poetry, which he disliked, was the final section. Like Sam, he wanted to change the assignment. He asked the teacher if he could write stories instead of poems but was denied. Writing on his own after high school—in spite of high school, perhaps—worked for him.

Sam shared Cole’s beliefs of the uselessness of the primary and secondary public-school system and enjoyment of writing stories, but said, “I don’t really see myself writing stories while I’m putting together a circuit breaker in a house.” In high school Sam continued to alter writing assignments from essays or reports into stories, and he had this to say:

I get [that] in maybe half of sixth and seventh grade, or maybe before then, it would be an okay thing to teach kids how to write story things, fantasy things, but once you’re getting older, you have to stop writing about fantasies because before you know it, you aren’t going to be in school. You’re going to be out in the real world, and you’re going to have to learn how to do things the right way.

Sam’s answer to his perception of the problem with middle school writing curriculum? Practicality. Real-world assignments.

So I feel like instead of school really teaching kids to use your imaginations, and all their creativity on how to make a creative story, they really need to be teaching us how to do your everyday writing: how to build a professional email; how to write a resume; [and how to] actually talk to business people. Say they’re higher up, and you’re actually talking to them in that business you are working for, and you mess it up because you don’t know how to act?

Sam’s conclusion was simple:
I honestly felt like school was a waste of time. Well, no sorry, that’s a lie. I feel like the classes they put you through were a complete waste of time, including history and writing. . . . So, I left because it was pointless to take any extra classes I didn’t need. Like in order to graduate you had to take at least two years of a foreign language, but all we had there were German, Japanese, French, and Spanish. I didn’t want to take any of those because I thought I was never going to need them.

Sam explained that he would have stayed had the school offered languages relevant to him: Latin to learn about words or Russian because he hoped to visit or even live in Russia someday. Sam continued altering writing assignments to his tastes. He wrote a comedy instead of a report for a Native American history paper and transformed two assigned essays, one about *Fahrenheit 451* and another about Greek mythology, into mysteries. All of them were written within two days of the day they were due; all of them received passing grades. Like Armand, Sam ignored two writing assignments because they didn’t interest him.

Benjamin spent three years at the same high school before transferring to Bates Technical High School for his senior year. He reported that the freshman and sophomore English classes used the same novels and a very similar assignment, saying:

> It kind of made it feel unnecessary and kind of less motivating to work on it because it felt like you were just doing the same thing over and over. . . .The second time it felt like there was no reason to be doing it.

History, with choices in assignments, was a better experience for Benjamin:

> Every week, I think, there was an essay you had to do, 200-400 words on some important point in history and usually you got to pick the subject, so it wasn’t as repetitive.
Benjamin transferred to Bates Technical High School, he said, because he wasn’t successful in public mainstream high school.

High school English classes were more difficult for Laurence. He found science much easier to write about:

It was the materials were easier. I understood that more, so I was better able to write what I needed to write for it. . . . being able to find facts for writing, stuff I can look up and use instead of trying to come up with it for myself. As for English, I don’t especially like making stories and stuff now.

Laurence’s attitude toward a “really big assignment for the end of the year” was relief:

I remember I did okay on that because I had the whole year to do it. So, I had the whole time to tweak it and make it correct. . . . I felt I was glad that it was over with, when it was done, because I don’t like English that much because I don’t do that well in it, but at the same time I was happy that I’d actually done it and not flaked it off or something.

Similarly to Armand and Sam, Laurence admitted that he did not always complete writing assignments that were “difficult to comprehend” or for which he could not come up with a topic.

Six of the seven student participants had little use for public high school. All six were quick to label aspects or the entirety of their high school experiences prior to Bates Technical College or Bates Technical High School as ranging from mostly uninteresting (“kind of a blur”) to “boring” to downright “useless.” All of the students wanted writing experiences that allowed a degree of autonomy in topic selection, type of assignment, and/or latitude in creating their own
schedule to complete the work. Overall, by the time the students were in public mainstream high school, five of the seven were discontent with the lack of relevance in their school experiences.

Sub-Theme Three: English 175 Usefulness

The dean, Pete Hauschka, challenged the instructor, Dr. Peter Speelmon, to revise a discarded college-level English course such that the assignments would be applicable to the fields of study of the students taking the course. Hauschka explained his thinking:

The original version of the course was just focused on production of some sort of professional proposal, which certainly had some value but, of course, wasn’t as applicable to as many of the students.

Speelmon agreed and took on the challenge:

The majority of the students probably will never have to write a business plan or be in that capacity in their careers. So, I’ve been trying to change the curriculum somewhat to focus more on the specific types of writing contexts that they would have in their careers. For example, asking the questions like “When would the diesel mechanic have to apply [writing skills] and what kinds of writing skills would they have to apply in their careers?” then trying to design writing assignments around those skills.

Before attempting to revise the course, however, the instructor held practical assumptions and years of experience in technical colleges:

There are all kinds of issues around the students’ attitude toward the work because a lot of them see it as busy work, as another hoop they have to jump through. I have a lot of students who—I know that they are encouraged to take [English 175] in their first couple of quarters in their programs, but a lot of them take it during their last two quarters. A lot of the students are in, “This is the last class I need to graduate in three months, and I have
to pass this class. . . .” In some ways this taints what I’m trying to get across to them in terms of the value of the skills. Because if they don’t succeed, then they get mad, or they see it as an obstacle to [graduating]. That’s frustrating from my perspective because they’re not really engaging in it; they’re just doing it to get it done. And that’s not unique to Bates.

Therefore, Speelmon’s instructional goal for the students was this:

I want [the students] to have the mindset that they are presenting themselves to potential employers and colleagues, and that impression is important, and they can do that through writing to a large extent.

The students were asked to identify any expectations they had before taking English 175. Two students had attempted the class the previous quarter—before the class was contextualized—and were retaking it at the time of the research. Sam realized that listening to every lecture during the previous quarter but not doing the assignments was possibly not his wisest choice. He recalled his expectations before taking the class the first time:

I really thought that I’d be wiring everything and would never need to know this [professional writing].

Speelmon found this attitude typical and legitimate. He said students want to know why they need to know how to write and how it will be useful to their lives. Over the course of his career, first in academics and then in technical colleges, Speelmon has been a forward thinker. He explained that he has formed the opinion that a culture change is needed:

It seems to me that it’s becoming clear in our society that a purely academic approach to learning is only serving a small portion of the population. . . . For the majority of the population, the same college isn’t for everybody. And I think college is [emphasis his]
for everybody, just traditional college, traditional academic college is not for everybody. . .

To change the culture and attitude towards writing, I think that this English 175 Professional Writing class will be the tool to do that. That is to say, opposed to the more traditional English 101, because this course has the potential to demonstrate both to students and to career [workforce] faculty that there are applications for writing within those careers. Whereas, it’s really hard to make the argument that you need to learn to write a comparison and contrast essay so that you can fix the air conditioning in the diesel truck.

Speelmon was also practical, recognizing that workforce faculty might not be initially interested in working together to create contextualized assignments for an academic course. He was both realistic and optimistic.

The dean of the academic courses at Bates Technical College, Pete Hauschka, had been thinking for several years about how to increase relevance in required college-level writing by revitalizing a discarded course already in the master course list. Because Bates had separated workforce programs into the Guided Pathways model of “themed blocks” at the south campus (South), Hauschka sought an instructor who could redesign the course contextualized to the construction and transportation blocks, all of which are at South. He found in Speelmon:

A faculty who was willing to take that on. . . . I suggested that for the construction trades students it would be, perhaps, a good idea to look at the professional writing in context—that would be writing a bid proposal so they could do a proposal for a contract or a bid of some sort. For the transportation trades, then they would do service writing. That was my original idea.
According to Speelmon, after an orientation to the course, students work on professional communications, including their online profiles; career documents, such as resumes; customer and vendor letters or emails; reports, such as incident reports or financial analyses; and proposals, such as bid proposals:

This is where [the students] have a lot more choice about what they are going to write. . .

and then I want them to have at least some experience manipulating electronic forms of written documents, so they learn about PDF’s, they learn about some basics of using Excel spreadsheets including graphics, which can be embedded into their written works, PowerPoint or Google Slides presentations, and then some basic web page designs.

All of the student participants saw relevance in the course. At the end of the quarter, Sam explained the relevance of the class to his desire to own his own electrical construction company:

To be on a contract on any kind of job, you would have to go through a whole website—there are many websites—or if you find a job—sometimes a company will look for a company to be a general contractor to then hire other employees or workers to do the job. You would then have to know how to professionally email your answers or any complications, and then you’d have to be able to give them a simplified chart of the cost of the materials to then help out with other things, too.

Sam concluded:

So, this class kind of helped you see how to do that rather than making a fool of yourself.

To Sam, the class assignments fit the needs of an electrical contractor.

Cole was the most cynical of the students interviewed regarding English 175. During his initial interview, he expressed intense annoyance with the number of grammar lessons, stating that they would only be useful if he “goes full out Tolkien” and started “world building” for a
fantasy novel. At the end of the quarter, his attitudes about the relevance of the class were not unalloyed, but, in his words:

Being able to read through my own stuff, and it’s like, okay, now I can understand why these sentences don’t really work, how they could have been written a little bit better.

That has helped.

Further, despite Cole’s negative attitudes about school in general and his unfortunate experiences in misaligned English courses, in his final interview at the end of this course, he expressed some small amount of optimism:

I’m hoping that later on down the line, once I know I actually weld correctly, the rest of this stuff will come in, the desk stuff.

His real issues with the class, he said, came from his own cynicism about society in general. For example, he saw a cover letter as a useless, societally imposed requirement. In his eyes, the letter simply “panders” to a prospective employer’s ego by talking up the job when the resume should be self-explanatory and not need a cover letter.

Other students were positive about the career assignments and other documents. Laurence noted that when it comes to resumes and cover letters, the better he could make them, the better his chances of getting a job. He was positive about his improved resume thanks to the course and found the assignment to respond professionally to a customer complaint letter taught him a transferrable skill. In his words, he also learned how to structure his own complaints: “to have an actual argument towards why my point of view is correct.”

Sam, too, was very enthusiastic over the changes he saw since experiencing the initial course:

This time, I feel like [Speelmon] has more valuable information so he can help me in the present, instead of the future. . . . This class makes sense!
Other students had positive comments about improvements to their writing, as well.

Armand was somewhat surprised at the changes in himself. At the beginning of the quarter, he says, his work was very short. By the end of the quarter, he understood that brevity was not always the best writing:

I make everything longer than before—it was just short—and now I understand it, how it’s supposed to be expanded. . . . [I’m] trying to go a little bit further and see what I’m capable of doing now, after having the class. . . . My writing is waaaaay better!

Armand seemed very pleased with both his expanded writing style and his improved career documents. Regarding the lessons and assignments having to do with professional tone of voice, Thomas put it succinctly: “I had no idea writing was this important.” Like Armand, Thomas had been unenthusiastic about taking the course. Both stated in the initial interviews that the course would not help them in their lives or careers.

During the final interviews, however, Isaac and Thomas were the most enthusiastic about the course. Isaac, who initially thought, “I am not going to use any of this,” at the start of the quarter, saw potential use for all aspects of the class, including the need to keep a professional tone of voice. Regarding letters and emails, Isaac stated that the importance of being able to write well had many applications for his future. He gave many examples, including these:

Like having to tell somebody bad news, but to be able to communicate the bad news in a way [that] is just a person in a position of power letting [the employee] know that this is going on, versus poor customer service because I don’t know how to speak with him. . . . I’ve learned from just paying attention that you can manipulate certain forms of writing. You can start prepping for bad news, versus saying, “You’re fired!” . . . [Or] to send out a memo that won’t offend everybody else, [for instance] a grievance or something. . . . I
see how the format and your tone and . . . the need to be able to punctuate something the right way. . . the importance of all of that now.

Thomas who found himself revising his original negative opinion that the class was going to be “a blow-by,” was amazed with the changes the course brought about in himself. Throughout the final interview, he felt he couldn’t say enough:

It helped me a lot; it changed me a lot. . . . I see a major change in my paragraphs, how I format them, how I say things. It’s like a total turnaround. So much more professional. . . . It changed real life situations, like my cover letter, my emails, text messages. I feel like I have everything when I’m typing now. . . . It changed, it just changed, just like a level two to a level three or five. . . . I just feel like I don’t have any missing pieces. . . .

Now I understand the “why.” Why I’m supposed to know this.

In fact, understanding the “why” was a “profound difference” Dean Hauschka observed in interactions with students who had experienced the revised course:

The students definitely are able to articulate what they are learning and why they are learning it in a much more direct way. They are able to explain themselves and why they’re in the course in a way that they generally can’t in a typical English course that doesn’t have context for them. You know, you might have a student in a more traditional course tell you that they’re just here because they are supposed to be here . . . Whereas, [students] in this applied English course are clearly able to tell you that they are here because this course is helping them communicate in a much more profound and effective way in their own professional realm.

During the final interviews, the students confirmed Hauschka’s views.
The course was conceived with the intent that students in either the construction trades or the automotive trades would learn to be better writers through contextualized assignments, such as cover letters, incident reports, and bid proposals. The instructor designed and implemented the revisions to the course in such a way that students had many, many positive things to say about the relevance of the course to their writing, their lives, and their career choices. Notably, the students recognized the value of lessons in grammar and maintaining a professional tone of voice.

**Conclusion**

These students developed a high need for relevant learning, some of them as far back as grade school. For all of them, school was not meeting their needs. At least three of them were above grade-level in elementary school, found school mostly uninteresting, and found academic writing non-useful. Remarkably, one student periodically changed writing assignments, submitting an assignment he wanted to write instead of what was required. Sam’s autonomous move of turning the “boring” report into a mystery story might have been the most colorful example of the students finding their own way when they perceived the assignments as irrelevant and uninteresting, but it was by no means the only example. Also displaying autonomy Laurence and Armand mirrored Sam in choosing simply to ignore assignments they could not understand or relate to. Yet even Laurence, the student who failed middle school English and began giving up on writing assignments in middle school, chose to continue working on punctuation because he saw it as relevant to his use of social media and job hunting.

By high school, all of these students had been forced to change schools at least once, most of them several to many times, and six of these students had very low expectations of writing classes in particular and high school in general. All six were quick to label aspects or the
entirety of their high school experiences prior to Bates Technical College or Bates Technical High School as mostly uninteresting, “kind of a blur” to “boring” to downright “useless.” Four of the students held distrust for the school curricula and specified they wanted some autonomy in topic selection or type of writing assignment to make the assignment meaningful. Surprisingly, all of them mentioned writing assignments they had liked because they got to write the way they wanted: fiction for several and reports based on facts for the rest.

The English 175 Professional Writing course was conceived of by the dean and implemented by an instructor, both of whom recognized that the standard English composition course lacked relevance to this set of students. The students’ lives prior to taking English 175 showed an increasing need to both have autonomy in assignment choice and to see writing lessons immediately relevant to the students’ careers or lives. The instructor’s latitude in selection of assignments—all of which were from the workplace—gave the students autonomy and relevance, according to their own words. The instructor also helped the students to recognize the relevance of grammar and tone in their writing as other instructors had not. Finally, the instructor helped the students through his lecture/help/attempt teaching style to make the lessons relevant. Interestingly, when asked what they liked or found most helpful about the class, six students identified good teaching and all seven defined “good teaching” as the lecture/help/attempt model. Teaching style will be discussed further in Superordinate Theme Two.

**Superordinate Theme Two: Helpful Curriculum/Assignments**

The instructor built features into the course that helped these nontraditional students find more success than in their previous writing and/or academic courses. According to the data, the instructor’s teaching style was very important to the learning needs of these students. Students
were very positive about the realistic assignment options. Additionally, the instructor’s choice to structure class time with half lecture, half computer lab time met nontraditional students’ needs. Each of these—three-part teaching style/instructor helpfulness, applicable curriculum/ assignments, and pro-parenting class time—will be discussed.

**Sub-Theme One: Three-Part Teaching Style/Instructor Helpfulness**

Six of the seven students in this study commented repeatedly during the interviews about how helpful the instructor was and how his teaching style met their needs. While no interview questions asked specifically about the students’ learning needs or about their instructor, students volunteered frequently about both. Everyone but Cole pointed out that they liked Speelmon’s teaching style, and that it met their learning needs. Without using the term “learning style,” Laurence described his difficulties and a bit of frustration with some of his classes, particularly writing classes in public high school. In his words:

> It was helpful when the teachers would actually show you one thing and help you out with doing it, then they’d have you try it on your own, and they’d help you move on from there. . . . Most of the teachers, they’d just teach you something, have you do it on your own, then move on. Which also meant it didn’t stick very well.

In fact, this preferred teaching method was mentioned by every one of the students.

The students needed help relating the lecture to the work before applying it themselves. Admitting that he rarely asked for help from the instructor, only Cole who preferred to work alone, felt that the intermediary step was missing:

> It was more of a “We’re lecturing now, then we’re going to the computer lab”. . . . So there wasn’t a lot of actual instruction, at least not by my definition of the word.
Cole, however, was the only student who didn’t see this three-part teaching going on in the classroom. The rest of the students commented specifically that the instructor was supplying that intermediate step. During computer lab times, this researcher saw periods of intense silence as students worked alone at computers, but also individual and small groups of students approaching Speelmon for help—receiving what appeared to be that highly desired intermediary step. Benjamin’s views on the importance of a three-part, lecture/help/attempt teaching style were similar to Cole’s:

You basically get more personalized education if [the instructor is] physically helping you. . . .[For instance,] I can’t just go off of one example for a math problem because, sure, it will help me figure out that math problem, but if there’s another variation of it, I won’t know how to do it. . . .If I get more personalized education, like someone is there helping me, they can show me how to adapt it for each one, and then I can understand it all.

Although his example was mathematics, Benjamin found his need for this teaching style met in English 175. Laurence’s view were similar, but his example was from English 175:

We were talking about dependent clauses versus independent clauses, how to tell which is which, and how to put together a sentence with them. And I actually understood what he [the instructor] was saying and how to do it, and afterwards, yeah, he had us do some up on the board that I actually knew how to do. I actually knew it!

The researcher then followed up by asking whether that concept would apply to Laurence’s life. He responded:
That specific concept? It might, especially when I write cover letters and all that kind of stuff. And I know cover letters obviously have a pretty big impact as far as your livelihood.

Laurence’s enthusiasm was shared by others regarding Speelmon’s teaching style. The students seemed unable or unwilling to relate the abstract principle or theoretical concept to the assignment at hand without an intermediary guiding step.

Several students had more comments about Speelmon’s teaching style, such as Isaac:

[The instructor] would break down what he wanted you to write, and the reasons why he wanted you to write it, and what would be acceptable, what would be you taking the easy route, and what would make you ultimately fail. He kind of broke down everything. I think that was the most helpful thing about his class.

When asked what he liked best about the course, Benjamin said this:

Probably all the details and all the instructions and everything [the instructor] lays out for each [unit] and the depth you have to do. He goes in depth on everything. . . . There wasn’t anything that was not helpful.

Armand was very impressed by the helpfulness of Speelmon’s teaching style after a lesson:

[Speelmon] would ask, “What’s the problem?” and show me how to do it. He’d teach me how to do it, so I know how to do it, instead of having to ask for help again.

Thomas also liked Speelmon’s teaching style:

I feel it’s more mellow. . . . The teacher, he’s great with teaching us and showing us and explaining what we have to do. If we miss something, he always goes back and helps us with it. . . . I feel more confident in my notes and in myself.

Benjamin explained how different his high school experiences were from Speelmon’s class:
[In high school] teachers were like, “If you can’t learn it from the book, I can’t help you.” This researcher observed Speelmon lecturing and found his presentations in-depth, carefully prepared with slides, and very interactive with the students. No students in the class were texting or holding side-bar conversations. Looking back on the quarter, Benjamin thought the most helpful aspect of the class was that Speelmon “goes into depth on everything.” Armand, Isaac, Thomas, Sam, and Laurence all said virtually the same thing. They loved the way Speelmon helped them understand the value of writing in a way no instructor had previously. The students responded very positively to class time. In reference to the use of class time, Thomas said this:

It wasn’t a boring class because I feel like I was actually learning. It was actually helping me. . . . [The class] is smaller and the teacher could help more people than when it’s a full class. I feel this is the best writing class that I’ve ever had. . . . This was everything; the things they didn’t teach us.

Sam also liked the lectures:

This was a very unique education. . . . He’s [Speelmon’s] going into more depth on everything, basically explaining everything better rather than just doing surface material and leaving the rest up for interpretation.

Armand agreed and liked the instructor’s actions in the lab:

Sometimes, he would walk around the class. He would ask, “What is the problem?” and show me how to do it.

Armand was not the only student who liked the instructor’s methods as well as his lecture style. Isaac made these comments:
Dr. Speelmon has high expectations of you. . . he gives you tools. . . and makes it clear that if you need help, he’s there. . . . Before an assignment, he would explain what it was . . . and the reason he would be wanting us to be doing it. . . . In other writing classes, I guess [we were] supposed to know already.

Before taking college-level academics, Benjamin worried about stories he’d heard of strict instructors who wouldn’t help if a student didn’t understand the lectures. He found his worries were groundless:

Dr. Speelmon is probably the most relaxed person on the planet. . . probably the most helpful [instructor] outside of my actual program instructor. . . . [and] would want every student to succeed.

Clearly, the students liked both the instructor and his teaching style.

In individual interviews, the students described a very similar definition of good teaching. According to the students, good teaching is a three-step process: first, an initial lecture or discussion to introduce the material; second, an individual or small group session in which the instructor looks on or assists while the students attempt the lesson; third, only then do students perform the lesson on their own. The instructor was liked and well-respected by the students, who repeatedly commented that Speelmon “goes into depth on everything” and “explains why it’s important.”

Sub-Theme Two: Applicable Curriculum and Assignments

The curriculum of the course worked for the students for several reasons, including the realism of the assignments and lessons, having assignment choices, and the immediate usefulness of the career module. The course was laid out in a Canvas Learning Management System online
shell, which contained six modules, explained in the table below. According to Speelmon, student response was positive:

When it comes to curriculum, I think most students are pretty responsive. Since I’ve changed the content, the students seem to be a little bit more excited about it, at least in terms of the willingness to do it. I think they’re seeing the value in the activities that I’ve changed.

Table 2

*Contextualized Course Modules*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Professional Perspective</td>
<td>Preparation, organization, responsibilities, and ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Professional Communication</td>
<td>Audience, memos, email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Career Documents</td>
<td>Resume, cover letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Professional Reports and Proposals</td>
<td>Business proposal, intellectual property documentation, graphics, policy proposals, process analysis reports, troubleshooting analysis reports, financial analysis reports, lab reports, response to complaint letters, adjustment letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Professional Electronic Documents</td>
<td>Spreadsheets, presentations, web pages, graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 ePortfolio and Final Matters</td>
<td>ePortfolio and final course activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the current version of the course, the instructor had only one practical assignment: a business proposal. Unfortunately, according to Speelmon, very few students are likely to own their own businesses, and those opportunities may be years away. Making this point, Cole wanted assignments that related to entry-level skills, because, he said:

[If] it’s all designated like, “You’re the manager, or you’re some higher up,” that is not going to be happening for me. And if it does, it’s going to be like 10-15-20 years if it’s
going to happen at all. And I don’t think I’m ever going to get to a point of being in any kind of management position.

The requirement to complete the business proposal was dropped in the revision. Instead, Speelmon made it one option among many others, including other types of proposals (e.g., bid proposals), reports (e.g., accident/incident reports, financial analyses), and correspondence (e.g., a letter responding to a customer complaint). Speelmon pointed out that “when I did the business proposal, there’d only be those few who thought that it was a great idea, and they wanted to do it.”

Students responded positively to small changes as well as large ones. Sam seemed pleasantly surprised with the new assignment options and appreciated the clearly outlined deadlines. All students liked starting with the career documents (e.g., cover letter and resume) section, which they found very relevant to their lives. Speelmon’s choice to use the career document module at the start of the quarter invited the students into immediately relevant work. According to the students, the module was very well received. Thomas noted:

I’ve redone my resume probably five times before I ever wrote for that class. . . . [Now]

It’s way better. I like it better. It got me a lot more interviews.

Other students had similar comments, noting how useful the module was for them.

Even though he’d appreciated listening to the business proposal lectures the previous quarter, Sam was positive about the changes to the curriculum. Regarding the new course structure, he said that unlike other courses, Speelmon was “going into more depth on everything, basically explaining everything better rather than just doing surface materials and leaving the rest up for interpretation.” He added that he valued the fact that:
all instructions and information are so well organized compared to other courses [and] a lot more direct on what you need to do.

Regarding the revised course, Benjamin appreciated the ease of the one-click layout of the modules and, like Sam, mentioned his appreciation for the instructions being so clear. In fact, Benjamin further explained his opinion of the layout of the revised course:

I can definitely see how other writing courses could be better after taking this course.

Regarding the assignments, he said, “I prefer that it’s realistic because it’s a better motivation to do it.” Laurence, who was also repeating the course having failed it the quarter before, stated:

I kind of felt it would be the same until I realized he had restructured it completely. The further along we get in the quarter I realize that he really changed a lot. I kind of had the feeling that this was going to be the same outcome [a failing grade], but this one seems a bit easier now.

Laurence experienced a change in attitude after experiencing both the original course and the contextualized version. Other students were taking English 175 for the first time, arrived with similarly low expectations. Isaac admitted he was not overly optimistic about the course at the outset:

I went into it with low expectations, and I went into it doubting, having some doubts. But going into it, actually being there, and the lessons that I’m getting? The lessons are helping, and I’m progressing in professional business writing, and I’m a little bit more comfortable speaking to people in my trade field.

Armand’s comment on the class during his final interview showed a similar change of heart:

High school, it’s just lessons and stuff, but you get to college, and it’s stuff you need to know.
Sam was not expecting an English class to be practical or relevant, either.

In my other writing classes, I didn’t really need to know this in my real, everyday life.

But this [course] kind of taught me that you do need to know how to be professional in the way you talk to everybody in emails, or how your resumes or professional documents would look. I never thought that English class would do that. I more or less thought that was something you would have to pick up on in like a family class—to teach you how to do bills and everything.

He was surprised both by the usefulness of the assignments and the fact that such practical lessons were included in an English class. All students came to the class with low expectations of the class being in any way useful to them, and all of them appreciated the immediate practicality of the career documents module.

The instructor revised the course beyond the module of career documents (e.g., resumes and cover letters) by adding over a dozen other options to the business proposal, which had previously been required and the only contextualized document of the quarter. Speelmon’s intent was to give the students’ choices from which to select. The students responded very positively to the new format and expanded assignment options. Overall, the students were very positive about having choices and loved the relevance, enjoying “going deeper” in this class than any previous writing course.

**Sub-theme Three: Pro-parenting Class Time**

For a variety of reasons, Speelmon noted that students at Bates South have a record of low homework completion. He explained that attendance is a problem every quarter:

I mean there are certain classroom management issues that come up, and it’s not just about this course. Phones in the classroom. . . ., One of the most difficult things is
probably student attendance, and usually at the beginning of the quarter the attendance isn’t that bad, but as the quarter goes on fewer students show up. I think a lot of it has to do with culture, the devaluing of gen ed [academics] and writing.

The students in this study cited sibling or parental responsibilities, caring for a disabled parent, transportation issues, lack of internet access off campus, and poverty as factors hampering their schooling. Two students explained that they had to leave class or cancel interviews with this researcher if younger siblings or parents needed transportation or help. Several students had transportation difficulties and one student had occasional work schedule conflicts. As Cole, a very thin young man, stated:

I just got a job at the theater. I was laid off from my retail job, and it took me four months to find another job. I lost a lot of weight. EBA [the food stamp program in Washington State] just wasn’t enough. Now between my job and EBA, I am tight, but everything’s okay.

Speelmon redesigned the course recognizing online access issues for students by creating computer lab days. Armand was grateful for the lab days because he was one of the students without access to the internet at home. Cole appreciated the computer lab time for writing assignments because his only internet access at home was on his phone, unless he made the “30-40-minute” walk to the public library. He explained that he had no money for bus fare. Thomas, 18 years of age, just out of two years of homelessness and faced with heavy parental responsibilities towards younger family members, also expressed pleasure at the structure of lectures and lab time. “It’s like a calm learning experience; I’m not over excited and not overworking myself,” he said. The computer lab days were very helpful and practical for these students.
Benjamin carried a phone with him to class and to interviews. The phone had a cracked screen. He missed several scheduled interviews. He wouldn’t text with the researcher to set interview appointments or get reminders. Finally, he volunteered after several more missed appointments with the researcher that he couldn’t use the calendar on his phone or text the researcher because his phone wasn’t actually working. The researcher couldn’t help but notice that he was carrying the phone as though it were. Benjamin liked the organization of the assignments and work time:

It is very lenient in that you pretty much have all the time of the week to do your assignments. . . . Most Monday and Tuesdays we have lecture in the class, then Wednesday and Thursdays he’d have us in the lab doing work. Sometimes he’d give us lectures in there, too. But the lectures are never a waste of time—always helpful stuff.

Benjamin commented on transportation issues as a problem for school and another common reason for repeatedly missing or cancelling interviews at the last minute.

Armand wouldn’t text with the researcher because of his limited phone plan. He forgot several appointments. In addition, he missed several other appointments with this researcher to transport younger siblings, to transport his mother (who didn’t drive), and to meet with school officials regarding his younger siblings. Armand particularly enjoyed assignments that were due at the end of the week rather than the end of the day, saying that class:

Gives you time to actually take your time to get the grade you think you should get, instead of rushing it to get the grade you don’t want.

Armand commented to the interviewer the one thing he didn’t like about the course:

Everything being online, ‘cause these days, you barely have access to computers.
Basic internet service is available to students at the base price of $9.95 per month. The college also offers Microsoft Office Suite (including Word, Excel, etc.) free to current students. As Dean Hauschka pointed out, neither helps the student if the student does not have a computer, tablet, or laptop at home. The weekly lecture/lab assignment schedule gave the students opportunities they appreciated regarding getting their assignments done on time.

The instructor redesigned the course with scheduled lecture and lab days to accommodate an expanded assortment of modules, lessons, and contextualized assignments. Students were favorably impressed with both the access to a computer lab and realistic assignments. The students were positive both about the weekend due dates, instead of daily ones, and the opportunities to complete work in the computer lab because both allowed students choices. The students had frequent absences, according to the instructor.

**Conclusion**

These students had very similar attitudes and needs regarding their learning. All seven of them described good instruction in the same way: First the instructor lectures, then together the instructor and smaller groups of students complete an example assignment, and only then do the students attempt the lessons on their own. As discussed in the first superordinate theme, the students had a high need for relevance in their learning, which was met in the realistic assignments and lessons. Finally, the students cited indicators of poverty (lack of transportation and lack of home internet access, particularly) and family responsibilities as factors for needing latitude on deadlines and computer access. The course appeared to be meeting the students’ instructional and physical needs. Although neither the instructor nor the dean mentioned the needs of impoverished or otherwise non-traditional students in the conception of the course, the
course met these students’ needs for relevance in the learning and relevance to their life situations.

**Superordinate Theme Three: Evidence of Transformative Learning**

Mezirow (e.g., Mezirow et al., 2000) advanced transformative learning theory over decades in a number of important ways. Mezirow posited that adults learn by making meaning based on a number of experiences that effect change in knowledge, competence, opinion, and attitudes permanently. Interestingly, the students in this study showed precocious behaviors, suggesting they were already adult-like in their thinking and behaviors, despite five of them being under twenty years of age. Precociousness is the first sub-theme. The second sub-theme came from one of the primary elements of Mezirow’s steps for learning, a “disorienting experience,” in which the learner experiences an event that causes a juxtaposition of preconceived attitude and the learning at hand. Finally, a third sub-theme of additional transformative learning elements was indicated during analysis of the data. While relevance was the strongest superordinate theme, it also rated among additional transformative learning elements, as did “acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans,” “building of competence and self-confidence,” and “a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (p. 22).

**Sub-theme One: Precociousness**

Transformative learning theory is about adult learning. Mezirow’s (1991) definition of the needs of adult learners started with the need to see immediate relevance. All of the students had precocious behaviors—experiences and/or attitudes in childhood normally only seen in adults—through primary and secondary school. All of the students had experiences not common in a traditional childhood or youth, either through choice or forced by circumstances.
Nearly all of them demonstrated making autonomous choices based on what was possible for them at the time. Even in grade school, two students had already formed low opinions about the usefulness, and, therefore, relevance, of the curriculum. Two students were already navigating learning challenges posed by ADHD. Six students were forced to adapt to new schools as their families moved mid-school year, five of them repeatedly, over the course of public-school enrollment. Most of the students displayed characteristics of poverty to severe poverty in their lives. At least one had recently experienced homelessness. Evidence of precocious behavior came for three students by being bored with an easy curriculum.

Sam was skeptical of the curriculum as far back as grade school, saying it was “pointless”:

I’d otherwise have failing grades, but it was—I could get caught up within a matter of two-three days because the assignments were just way too easy. . . . Because writing was just really boring for me, and I thought it was just a time-consuming thing that I didn’t really need to have happen.

In a manner similar to graduate students, Sam’s answer was choosing to change writing assignments to what suited him rather than following the instructions given by the teacher:

We were doing Shakespeare’s novel of a *Midsummer’s Night Dream*, and I actually liked that one because of one character. So, we had to do an essay, it was like a 500-letter [word] response on what we thought of the book. And I did this one on time, but I got a low grade for it. But I didn’t care because I liked how I did it. I was talking most of the time I did it about the character Mustard Seed, who was only in there for half the [play].

On another occasion, Sam also wrote at the last moment, revising the assignment from an essay to a story that overcame the penalty for tardiness:
And for some reason I was unlike most kids, and I took time to look into Greek mythologies. And I ended up adding in Greek gods, and a bunch of events that happened, quickly throwing them together and instead of just getting an F or a D, I got up to a C plus, so I was able to pass that class.

Sam wasn’t content, nor perhaps able as a young man challenged by ADHD, to sit still and pay attention in school. Humor and past time activities were tools for Sam’s boredom:

Well, I was always the quiet—well not the quietest, I was the clown of the class, and I was not so much paying attention to everything. I would sit quietly back there with a Rubik’s cube under the desk, just messing with it, or I’d draw, or go on my phone with music, and I’d always get in trouble.

In public high school, Sam recalled using humor to make assignments interesting for himself and his classmates:

[One assignment] was about Native Americans. And so, I was writing it on the last day when we were all in the lab, typing it up, and sending it to her [the teacher]. I quickly typed a paragraph and a half. It was mostly just like writing facts and funny—like put together in a funny way. I got a decent grade on it. I got a B on it

Sam recalled many times in which he changed assignments without instructor permission to suit himself, fulfilling his needs for autonomy. He also recalled one assignment that did allow him the autonomy to choose how he would fulfill an assignment:

Do you know The Ultimate Game? We did another one on that book. We actually had to write it out, but in our own way. I made it where you were the one hunting the person and it kind of twists, and I made it with modern-day phrases and everything just to give everybody a little laugh.
Finally, because Sam was forced to move to Spokane for a year, he took an online writing course, which he remembers this way:

If you opted to meet with [the instructor] once a week at the campus, he would bring you back printed copies of your work, and he’d mark grammar mistakes and things like that. Then you could fix it and turn it in for half of those lost points back. . . . I was in Spokane at the time I was taking the class, so I couldn’t meet with him. But I don’t think I had too many mistakes. I definitely passed the class.

Despite pressure from his mother and his teachers to complete assignments, Sam recalled papers with which he didn’t bother, although writing was successful for him without ever needing additional writing help—including online.

Isaac also became disenchanted in grade school with the value of writing:

I was a little bit more advanced in grade school. . . . This was second, third, and I kind of just, you know, advanced to grade four, and then I came to a point where I guess I didn’t see the importance of reading and writing, and the significance of how much knowledge you obtain by reading, writing, and understanding. And I kind of ventured off into other areas.

Isaac, who attended both a junior high and a middle school in the midst of extreme poverty, explained that his childhood certainly ended when he became a parent and a functioning adult his junior year:

You know, I was an A or B student all the way up to high school, then I had my first kid, early, and that’s when I made my decision, like the worst mistake of my life, which was dropping out in 11th grade to go and make money.
Benjamin had changed schools several times by the time he reached middle school. He recalled with pride:

I do remember what I was reading. I do remember my reading level, too. I think in sixth grade I was reading at a college level. . . . It gave my English teacher high expectations, but other than that it didn’t really change anything much. . . . They just expected my work to be really, really good.

Armand also changed schools during middle school and recalled that he liked doing assignments at the time of his choosing:

I liked the workbook, actually, because I can do it whenever I wanted to.

Armand was already in charge of his own education, refusing to do assignments despite pressure from adults. When faced with what he saw as a forced choice of being taught English in a history class, what appeared to be a Writing Across the Curriculum agenda, he was indignant:

The teacher wouldn’t say anything about history. It was all English. . . . Some teachers think they could teach more than one topic, but they’re supposed to teach one, so they need to figure out how to fix that.

Regarding mainstream high school, Armand had this to say about his freshman year:

I had a writing class. I really didn’t like it. It was a lot of book reading in essays, like every week. I didn’t really think about doing them. I did some of them. And some of them I didn’t understand, so I didn’t try them.

He also ignored assignments in another high school writing class:

I think I just had troubles with it, trying to understand some of it. ‘Cause we were in a class full of 25 kids, and the teacher doesn’t have time to help you. I just didn’t do them.
Armand, at 18, was the only family member with a valid driver’s license. He was responsible for his younger siblings, although he was in high school. He missed an interview with this researcher when he, not his parents, was called to an urgent meeting with the middle school principal because Armand’s younger brother was being suspended for fighting. Armand missed several more scheduled interviews to face adult responsibilities for his younger siblings.

Thomas’s family moved a lot, forcing Thomas to adapt to new schools:

I went to many schools, Jefferson Elementary, I went to Causter Elementary School, and the last one was Brown Elementary School. . . I went to Fleming Middle School and Aster Middle School.

Thomas referred to himself as “a family person,” due to his heavy parental responsibilities toward his siblings and cousins. Again, this student had to behave like an adult while still a child. With his mother confined to a wheelchair, Thomas had had adult responsibilities since he was 13 years old. While Thomas was in high school, his family was homeless for two years.

Cole was reading far ahead of his classmates in grade school, similarly to Benjamin:

I found books, and “Oh this is a really good book!” But no one else would have heard of it, because other kids just weren’t reading.

What Cole didn’t realize in grade school was that “other kids” couldn’t yet read the books Cole enjoyed. That was why they weren’t reading them. Throughout school, Cole was non-traditional in his experiences. He not only read pornography at 14; he began writing and publishing it online in his teens, perhaps as an escape from his family situation. He also identified his own curricular needs and had no patience for things he didn’t see as useful, as identified in the first superordinate theme.
Cole felt he was pressured to know everything adults knew when he was just a child. He had harsh memories of being forced to rely on himself in childhood, both in and out of school:

When I was growing up, it was like, “I don’t understand how I was supposed to do this assignment, despite the fact that I’ve done this type of work on my own before.” And instead of sitting down with me and walking me through it in as simple terms as possible, the adults in my life have just been, “Figure it out for yourself and stop fucking bothering me.” Or they get pissed off that I’ve made mistakes on something, and basically, all the other work that I’ve put into it is irrelevant because I made a mistake.

Cole’s opinion regarding the adults in his life, including teachers was valid:

Actually, one of those instances was a math teacher who wrote a problem on the white board, and at some point, he starts pulling numbers out of the wherever, and I’m [asking] where are these numbers coming from? And his response was, “Well, if you were paying attention, then you know.” And a lot of the responses have been, “Well, if you did the work, then you’d understand,” and, “If you were paying attention, you wouldn’t be having a hard time.”

Precociously, Cole recognized at the time that adults were not treating him appropriately.

Basically, my lack of understanding was just dumped on me. And the people who I felt should have been making this an easier concept to understand were shirking their job.

Cole’s response was to immerse himself in reading, particularly pornography. Changing public high schools his senior year was also hard for Cole. Writing was his favorite subject—fiction writing. At the new school, he was placed in a creative writing class for the remainder of the semester, which should have been a good move. Unfortunately:
I ended up in a creative writing class because they didn’t have a 12th grade English. . . . I jumped in too late to actually get to do anything. So, I’ve never really been a big fan of poetry, and that was the last thing they were working on. So it was, like, way over my head.

The final semester of high school, Cole had no alternative but was placed into a college-preparation writing course. Cole recalled telling the instructor:

I have no desire to take a college writing class. I don’t plan to go to college, and I didn’t really feel the need to be here learning about academic writing. And he was “Okay, just don’t cause problems in the class.”

Unlike Cole, Laurence wasn’t dismayed by changing middle schools as he struggled through content in both. Instead, he recognized the dissonance between how he learned and how teachers taught:

Certain teachers, their teaching style didn’t help that much. Some teachers just tell you the information, and give you an assignment, and tell you to go do it without really helping that much. [In middle school humanities] most of the teachers, they’d just teach you something, have you do it on your own, then move on. Which also meant it didn’t stick very well.

These students formed strong opinions about and attitudes toward their learning from early on.

All of the students interviewed had experiences that were normal to older children or only appropriate for adults. All of but one of them experienced family moves that forced them to change schools, most of them repeatedly, suggesting, perhaps, an early acquisition of resilience to survive or perhaps a reinforcement with each new school that education wasn’t inclusive to them. Three had heavy family or parental responsibilities in middle school and/or high school.
At least three of the students were well above grade-level in reading and were bored. One student loved reading, especially the pornography he discovered and became immersed in at age 14. The students often identified an adult-like preference for autonomy in assignments, even as young as grade school.

**Sub-theme Two: Writing for Pleasure vs. “Disorienting Dilemma”**

Another sub-theme that emerged relating to transformative learning is termed the “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow et al., 2000). Common in the data was the juxtaposition of the students’ expectations or preconceived notions about writing versus their experiences in the English 175 class. And the data highlighted the seemingly odd combination of so many of them actually liking story writing but disliking school writing prior to enrolling in the contextualized English 175.

Laurence struggled with school, and especially writing. In his words, whenever we had a writing assignment in elementary school and stuff, I’d have issues with it and have to get my parents’ help. I just didn’t understand it as well as I understood math or science. [However] I don’t really remember what grade it was in, but I remember we had to write a story about something, and I made up some random story and ended up writing like three pages. That was way more than we needed to do.

Laurence, who really struggled with writing throughout school, remembered a writing assignment he liked—something unique in his experience. Sam also enjoyed writing stories:

People think I hate writing and I hate reading, but I tell them I don’t hate it; I don’t just really care for it because to me it’s a waste of time. I could be doing something else—writing stories for people to read. Instead of writing, design things that could help everybody else.
Sam seemed shocked by the content of English 175, as he had so firmly concluded that school writing assignments were “boring” and “pointless”:

They actually taught you how to do a business proposal the first time. And I thought someday that would actually help because I do hope to own my business someday. . . .

[Now, in the revised course,] I am actually paying attention to what [the instructor is] saying, and what he’s teaching us. . . . This time I feel like he has more valuable information, so he can help me in the present, not just in the future.

English 175 was a disorienting dilemma for Sam because it did not conform to his beliefs about school writing assignments having nothing useful, beneficial, or profitable for his life.

Armand had a disorienting experience of a different kind in high school:

[My parents] were in school when they had me, but they are happy that I went further steps than where I was at because it wouldn’t have been good. . . . I was focused on sports and stuff, and I probably would not have graduated. . . . [I was] jeopardizing my education, messed up that, so I stopped and realized I needed to focus.

Armand transferred to Bates Technical High School. In his initial interview he was very clear that he had no positive expectations about English 175. When asked by the researcher if anything surprised him regarding the class, he was quick to answer:

How many students were in it because normally, I’m in a class of like 30, so it’s smaller, and like, everybody’s focused . . . and the teacher could help more people than when it’s a full class. . . . Like somedays, the teacher will walk around, and . . . he’ll help me.

Compared to when I had a full class—[instructors] forget about you because everybody needs something, so they’re like, everywhere, and they forget stuff.
Armand was pleasantly surprised by the class size. Small class size is probably not profound enough to be considered a disorienting experience although he was by no means the only student to comment. Armand, who refers to any writing assignment as an essay, was also surprised by the improvements he saw in his writing by the end of the quarter in English 175, which is worth considering as a disorienting dilemma:

At first my essays would be short. It would be on topic and then it would go to something else. And now it’s all in place like it’s supposed to be, and on topic. I make everything longer than before—it was just short—and now I understand it, how it’s supposed to be expanded. . . . Actually, my writing from before to now is waaaay better. It’s different. . . . [I’m] trying to go a little bit further and see what I’m capable doing of now, after having the class.

Thanks to the “wake-up call” of a disorienting dilemma of possible failure at public high school, Armand changed route to complete high school at Bates to ensure his success. Additionally, his low expectations of English 175 were changed significantly. “My writing is waaay better now,” he stated in the final interview.

Laurence was unable to sit for a final interview. In his initial interview, he talked about his struggles with writing in public schools:

I remember not doing very well. I didn’t pass middle school. I didn’t do the English very well; I struggled in that. I had to get help from my teacher quite a bit and my parents and still didn’t do that well. I mean I tried, but just couldn’t.

However, during that same interview, which took place a few weeks after the class started, Laurence recalled writing for science classes:
I was pretty good about attending science and writing about it. . . . Yeah, it was the materials were easier. I understood that more, so I was better able to write what I needed to write for it. . . . . Being able to find facts for writing, stuff I can look up, and facts I can use instead of trying to come up with it for it myself.

Taking the non-contextualized English 175 the previous quarter had continued his pattern of struggling and failing in writing courses. He said he noticed the positive differences in English 175 course the second time he took it:

The further along we get in the quarter I realize that [the instructor] really changed a lot, which ---I kind of had the feeling that this was going to be the same outcome [as last quarter], but this one seems a bit easier now because we had to write a resume and a cover letter, which isn’t that difficult.

Laurence related a small victory in English 175:

We were talking about dependent clauses versus independent clauses, and how to tell which is which, and how to put together a sentence with them. And I actually understood what [the instructor] was saying and how to do it. Afterwards, yeah, he had us do some up on the board that I actually knew how to do. I actually knew it! [emphasis his]

For Laurence, who struggled in every writing class from first grade onward, finding successes in the redesigned, contextualized English 175 course was amazing.

Thomas, who also initially thought the course would be of little value, had the most transformational experience of the students:

[English 175] changed, opened my eyes, basically. I liked working on it. It wasn’t a boring class because I feel like I was actually learning. It was actually helping me. . . . It was more, yeah, like more in depth, and it taught me more. Like I learnt how to use my
commas and periods and exclamations and stuff, little stuff, and all that professional
writing, but like a step up. And it changed, it just changed, just like a level 2 to a level 3
or 5. It was like giving you a boost. A big boost.

Regarding texts and emails, Thomas reported more changes:

I’m like impressing myself! I’ll text my mom, and she says, “You sound so proper.” I
usually use slang a lot. I don’t really use slang anymore. I don’t type like LOL’s or
anything. I don’t know. It’s weird. It just changed everything. . . . I like full out text.
I use full words, full sentences. I use periods, commas, and people say it’s weird, but it’s
like second nature now; it’s what I do.

Texting was by no means the only change Thomas saw in his writing after taking English 175.

In an email, I could be talking to someone about a business proposition about anything,
like selling a cat, like something little, I can make it sound good. And it changed me
because, like, all my classes from middle school to high school to now, this is the only
class that really went deeper into the subject of professional writing. My other writing
classes and English classes, it was just little English things, like grammar or how to
format a paragraph, but it wasn’t deep into it. They just gave us the base and, “Here, look
at this, and then do it.” Not like, “This is why this is important.”

Thomas’s low expectations of what to expect in English 175, developed from primary and
secondary school experiences, were transformed.

Isaac also began the course with low expectations, as he related early in the quarter:

Oh, man, honestly, this is just the last class I had to do to get my degree, you know that
was one of those type of things. I gotta do it to get my degree. . . . I pretty much just
want you to know that I went into it with low expectations, and I went into it you know,
doubting, having some doubts. But going in to it, actually being there, and the lessons that I’m getting—The lessons are helping, and I’m progressing in professional business writing, and I’m a little bit more comfortable speaking to people in my trade field, and you know, being able to communicate clearly.

After the class ended, Isaac expanded:

You know I would think auto body, it’s like, you’re working with your hands, in the shop environment. . . you don’t need to know how to write, you know? I thought I’m not going to use any of this. . . .But in reality, being that I consider myself a person who plans on being an entrepreneur, being a business owner. . . . I see the need for professional writing now, and I see the need to be able to punctuate something the right way, and I see how the format and your tone and the importance of all of that now; as to where I once [thought] writing is writing as long as it’s legible.

Isaac’s turnaround regarding the usefulness of the course was very similar to that of Thomas. Both could be said to have experienced “disorienting dilemma’s” regarding their expectations and the class experience.

In fact, all of the students had poor or dismal expectations of writing class. Most of the students were positively surprised by the revised content of the course, creating, perhaps, a “disorienting dilemma” compared to their initial expectations of the writing class being, as one student stated, “a blow-by, something to get out of the way.“ After the recognition of the juxtaposition of their preconceived attitudes regarding school writing and the reality of their English 175 experiences, all seven students were able to articulate positive changes to their attitudes and values about professional writing as a result of taking this class. All of them saw ways their writing had improved because of the class.
Sub-theme Three: Additional Transformative Learning Elements

Other elements of transformative learning theory emerged in the data, most commonly the high need adult learners have for seeing immediate relevance. Because relevance is the first superordinate theme, it will be covered only minimally here. Other aspects of transformative learning were also evident in the data: “acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans,” “building of competence and self-confidence,” and “a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (Mezirow et al., 2000, p. 22).

Relevance. One of the premises of transformative learning theory is that adults have a high need for relevance. As discussed earlier, these students began recognizing as early as grade school the importance of direct relevance in what they learn. Below is a sample of students’ attitudes regarding relevant learning. Superordinate Theme One has much more information.

Sam had already dismissed school and writing in grade school as “pointless” and said the same of public high school. Sam took English 175 for the first time before the course was revised and again during the time of this research. Here is what he said in his initial interview near the start of the quarter:

So, the last time where I kind of just blew everything off, this time I feel like [the instructor] has more valuable information. . .[that] can help me in the present, not just in the future.

Armand found in retrospect that high school had little relevance compared to college and English 175:

High school is just lessons and stuff, but you get to college and it’s stuff you need to know, like financial problems, businesses—high school is just the easy stuff and then
they let you go. I mean what’s the point of going to high school when you can just go to college and learn everything you need to know?

Thomas gave many examples of activities and assignments in public schools. Never a slouch academically, he chose to take AP Psychology in public high school and enjoyed it. Cole had very little change in attitude over the course of the quarter. He was, however, initially almost angry at the three weeks of grammar and punctuation, seeing no use for it. By the end of the quarter, he said the grammar lectures “have been a bit more helpful than the actual business writing aspect of the class.” His tone was much milder.

**Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills for Implementing One’s Plans.** All of the students were enrolled in workforce programs. The assignments in the course were all contextualized to the workplace, from bid proposals to answering letters of complaint. Cole was learning to be a welder; Sam was learning to be an electrician; Benjamin was learning to be an auto mechanic; and, Laurence, Isaac, Thomas, and Armand were all learning to perform auto body repair. The students’ positive reports of the relevance of the English class to their careers, specifically cover letters, resume, and improved clarity, suggested the students planned to use the skills learned in English 175. As Isaac related, the skills included learning to give good customer service via writing:

> Like having to tell somebody bad news, but to be able to communicate the bad news in a way [that] is just a person in a position of power letting [the employee] know that this is going on, versus poor customer service because I don’t know how to speak with him.

While Isaac planned to use his newfound writing skills with employees someday, Thomas also saw writing professionalism as important to his future. Even his texting changed. Stating that writing properly had become “second nature,” he stated, “I had no idea writing was this
important.” And apparently is was important, as Thomas mentioned this concept more than once in his final interview.

Sam also had the future in mind, as he realized immediately that the class gave him the knowledge and skills to put out professionally written bid proposals as a general electrical contractor or subcontractor, his own career plan. Sam saw these skills he learned in English 175 as essential to his plan of owning his own business as an electrician.

**Competence and Self-Confidence.** To avoid repetition from other superordinate themes and sub-themes, only a brief description of this sub-theme will be made. As seen previously, the students were very positive about learning skills they could use. One can recall Sam’s and Thomas’s experiences. Sam was happy and confident to find that retaking the course meant he learned skills he could use now and in the future. Thomas saw a complete change in his writing. He saw his writing becoming “professional” in all aspects of his life. He noted that he was now confident of the entire job searching process, with a resume that was no longer “patchy.” Armand, too, improved his job searching materials and skills, stating that “now the pieces are all in place.” Sam even stated that thanks to what he’d learned from the class, he would be able to be professional rather than making a fool of himself.

**Reintegration into One’s Life.** Finally, “transformative learning includes reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (Mezirow et al., 2000, p. 22). As indicated previously, the students were already making changes. Always the most vocal about the positives of the class, Thomas said this:

> In an email I could be talking to someone about a business proposition about anything, like selling a cat, something little, I can make it sound good . . . . It’s like a total turnaround.
Laurence, too, decided that the class taught things he would use, such as knowing the difference between a complete sentence and a run-on sentence. When asked if the information was relevant, he showed how he would apply it:

Especially when I write cover letters and all that kind of stuff. And I know cover letters obviously have a pretty big impact as far as your livelihood, and I know writing correctly is a pretty big thing, especially now.

Cole, as well, found something, the grammar lessons, that would be useful to his plans to continue writing fiction in the future:

If I decide to go full-out Tolkien. . . . It’s nice to know a little bit more so I could make my own language--it would be a little bit easier for my own writing, my creative stuff. It would definitely be helpful in that regard.

Cole’s plans for future use of what he learned in the course were for fiction writing, not his welding, but were plans to use the course material, just the same. While Isaac saw great career potential in what he learned in English 175, he, like Cole, saw a personal use, as well. For him, the lessons were equally valuable for his parenting:

I’m a dad, I’m a father [of] four sons. And you know, my delivery is everything. I want to be the person that like, PJ is yelling because he’s upset, and I want to still get my message across, and so like, delivery is everything when it comes to the boys, because it could be, like, “Ah, man, Dad’s upset and he’s yelling, so I’m not listening.” I want to get past the yelling part. . . . .

In addition to communicating with his children, Isaac expanded his vision of the value of the class to people in his life:
And I’m just putting this class and the things I learned in this class about communicating to my life in general, and that’s the business part of my life, the personal part of my life, communicating with kids that might be younger than me that’s in my class, being able to speak to my instructor who’s older than me and an authority figure. . . . I just look at this class as very helpful to me.

Isaac saw transfer of learning from his English class to how he communicated with others, particularly his children. The students saw the usefulness of the class to their lives.

All of the students were in workforce programs; all of them were taking academics that were required as part of their studies. Students could articulate how they would use what they learned—something also noted by the dean as he talked with students in English 175. The students built competence and self-confidence throughout the quarter. Finally, the process of reintegrating the new knowledge into their lives was also clearly demonstrated by actions some were already taking or planned to take.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this case study research was to discover how an English course was contextualized to make it relevant to technical college students in a related cluster of majors. To understand the students’ experiences of the class, the students were interviewed toward the beginning of the quarter. They were asked about their previous experiences with writing from grade school to the start of this English 175 Professional Writing course. Students were interviewed again at the end of the quarter to identify what they had experienced and any changes they had made regarding writing and writing classes. The instructor and the dean who conceived of the course were also interviewed. By coding and recoding the transcriptions of the participants’ interviews, first by identifying exact words and phrases that captured the spirit of
the paragraphs (In Vivo coding) and second by recoding the transcriptions with emotions, if any, that were apparent from the words or the tone (Emotion coding), the data was collected in as fair and unbiased a method as possible. The researcher consciously and consistently reviewed her work for her own biases.

After collecting nearly 2,500 pieces of initial data from the students’ words and hundreds of pieces of additional data from the staff and faculty interviews, the course materials, the instructor observations, and other artifacts such as the student discussions on the Canvas learning management system shell, a secondary coding collated and synthesized the data in a number of quantitative ways. Three overarching themes became apparent: The students’ need for relevance, the overall excellence of the structure of the course, and recurrent elements of transformative learning. The data in each cluster, or superordinate theme, could be further organized into sub-themes. These sub-themes looked like this:

- **For Relevance:** Public school non-usefulness before high school, Public school non-usefulness during high school, and English 175 usefulness
- **For Helpful Class Structure:** Three-part teaching style/Instructor helpfulness, applicability of curriculum and assignments, and Pro-parenting class time
- **For Evidence of Transformative Learning:** Precociousness, disorienting writing dilemmas, and of additional transformative learning.

It became clear that the students had begun losing faith in the usefulness of good writing skills as far back as grade school, although several of them liked writing fiction. A secondary coding method (co-axial coding) was the method chosen to analyze the overriding themes of the study and find their appropriate sub-themes. In this way, the researcher saw a bigger picture of what the data yielded by comparing clusters of data and their overlapping characteristics.
The theoretical framework for this study, transformative learning theory, and its implications to this study, permeated the data. They will be covered in the discussion of this data in the next chapter.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

A college-level writing course at Bates Technical College was contextualized to students enrolled in automotive or construction workforce programs. Students, the instructor, and the dean were interviewed, and the course and its contents were examined in a qualitative case study. This chapter is organized first by restating the purpose, qualitative approach, and theoretical framework, followed by an overview of the study design. Next the findings are placed within the literature review and the theoretical framework to draw conclusions based on the research questions. Finally, the chapter will conclude with recommendations for using this study and suggestions for future research.

Purpose and Approach

The purpose of this study was to determine how a college-level writing course could be contextualized for technical college students in a related cluster of service-trade majors. This qualitative case study was conducted with semi-structured, iterative interviews of seven students early in the quarter and again at the end of the quarter. Six of the students completed both interviews. The instructor and the dean were also interviewed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by this researcher. Participants, whose names and identifying characteristics were changed to protect their anonymity, were offered the chance to read and correct the transcriptions of their interviews. All transcriptions were coded initially using In Vivo coding to preserve the participants’ words and Emotion coding to capture the feelings indicated by the participant or observed by the researcher. The instructor was observed in the classroom and the course artifacts were examined, including the assignments, the Canvas learning management system course shell, and the online student discussions. All artifacts were coded as appropriate. This
research was qualitative, particularly seeking thick and rich descriptions of student experiences. Case study was chosen as the method to answer how the course was contextualized.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was transformative learning theory, as conceived of by Mezirow (e.g., 1991; Mezirow et al., 2000) and others. Transformative learning theory posits that, unlike children, adults learn using “frames of reference” they’ve acquired through their lives. According to Mezirow, adults learn when they encounter a “disorienting dilemma” that causes them to question those perspectives. Mezirow (2009) describes transformative learning as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). Through critical reflection, community discourse, and/or other equally critically-analyzed steps, adults make changes to their frames of reference and learning takes place. Several of Mezirow’s steps to transformative learning became evident in this study after co-axial coding, including those listed below.

**A Disorienting Dilemma**

These students came in with initial skepticism that this class would be anything but “a blow by,” as one student memorably noted. This first step of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) was experienced by the students as they realized the class contained information and skills that the students would need. They found relevance and value in “school writing” for the first time as they came to realize that “school writing” was actually job writing and life writing, seeing that tone and word choice are both applicable to texting and emailing anyone and can be valuable parenting tools.
The immediate relevancy of the career documents seemed to catch the students’ interest early in the quarter, although the interviews showed the students were mostly seeing relevance in the initial grammar lessons. This may be based on the instructor’s overarching vision for the course that is worth repeating here:

I want [the students] to have the mindset that they are presenting themselves to potential employers and colleagues, and that impression is important, and they can do that through writing to a large extent.

For the first time in their lives, the students largely saw the grammar lessons as relevant. The instructor was clearly able to provide the “why” to whether grammar lessons are important.

**Self-Examination With Feelings of Guilt or Shame**

This step in transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) was lightly evidenced in the students within the context of other topics. The point could be made that the interviews were asking the students to critically reflect on their behavior and attitudes regarding the class and examine them. Although the interview questions did not probe this topic, at least two of the students were self-critical for not recognizing the importance of writing earlier in their lives.

**Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills for Implementing One’s Plans**

This seventh step (Mezirow, 1991) was demonstrated by the students during final interviews. The students volunteered the ways that they would use what they learned, its importance, and its applicability to their futures. The evidence was clear that the students were finding uses for what they learned in the class outside of school, including current life applications such as texting, parenting, and emailing, and future applications such as entrepreneurship and answering subcontractor bids online.
A Reintegration Into One’s Life Dictated by One’s New Perspective

The students changed how they texted, wrote, and in some cases spoke based on what they had learned and the value of that learning, as is indicated by this tenth step of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991).

Finally, transformative learning theory was not chosen as the theoretical framework for this study to prove students experienced transformative learning based on a progression through the steps. Rather, the theory was chosen because discovering elements of transformative learning helped to illuminate the students’ experiences of the course, as is shown in the findings presented below.

Study Design

Case study research, as defined by Bromley (1990), “is a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (p. 302). It is appropriate within a constructivist paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and, as Baxter and Jack (2008) explain, is a tool for researchers “to study complex phenomena within their contexts” (p. 544). Because the students’ perceptions (the phenomenon) cannot be extracted from the course (the context), a case study is well-suited to conduct research on a school class (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). Based on the research questions, case study was chosen for this quarter-long study.

Presentation of Key Findings

This research of technical college students in related clusters of workforce programs—automotive, welding, and electrical construction—in a college-level English class contextualized to those workforce programs yielded three significant findings. First, the students’ needs for relevance were met. Second, the non-traditional students’ needs were met through class
structure and teaching style. Third, exploring elements of transformative learning theory helped illuminate further the students’ experiences. Each finding will be discussed with regards to its significance within the literature described earlier in Chapter One and Chapter Two.

**Finding One: Relevance**

The first superordinate theme indicated by the secondary coding was relevance. The students overwhelmingly needed the course materials, design, format, instruction, and assignments to be immediately relevant as transformative learning theory insists. These students, some as early as grade school, had dismissed writing courses as, in the words of one student, “pointless.” The students were walking across campus from their contextualized programs (learning to weld by welding, for instance) into a college-level writing course for which every one of them had extremely low initial expectations regarding its potential relevance. Indeed, they were largely skeptical.

To discuss the need for relevance, it is first necessary to place these students into the literature of non-traditional students and adult learners, both of whom have been shown in the literature to have higher needs for learning made immediately relevant to them than traditional students and children do. Although the case is currently being made in the literature that children do, indeed, have similar needs for relevance as adults, for the purposes of this research, the argument that adults have high needs for relevance will be shown to be cogent.

**Non-traditional Students’ Needs**

A rather striking finding of this research was observed in the circumstances of these students’ lives. Far from being traditional 18-20 year-olds going from home to college, all seven of the students had difficult or severe situations in their past or present. Five students were under twenty years of age, yet every one of them could be characterized as non-traditional learners.
Non-traditional students have barriers to successful completion of college that traditional students do not (Engle & Tinto, 2006). Further, the needs of non-traditional students are different than traditional ones (e.g., Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011).

While the literature most commonly makes reference to age as the defining factor between traditional and non-traditional students, with non-traditional students being over 22 years (e.g., Bowers & Bergman, 2016), over 24 years, (e.g., Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017), or over 25 years, (Kim, 2002), Quinn’s (2016) study of 3,000 colleges found most non-traditional students were under 23 years of age, as five of the students in this study. The literature defines other characteristics of non-traditional students, including being of color as three participants of the current study were, being economically disadvantaged as at least four students were, having adult responsibilities such as parenting as three students did, having no high school diploma as was the situation for five students, simultaneous employment while matriculating as at least two students had (Kim, 2002; NCES, 2018), or were first generation college students as at least two students were (Engle & Tinto, 2008). A further characteristic the students shared, but not found in the literature, was having been forced to change schools locally due to repeated family moves, some of them more than half a dozen times by the time the students reached Bates. None of these students came from military families, where one would expect some sort of support or resources for children being relocated as parents are reassigned or deployed.

The five students concurrently enrolled at Bates Technical High School and Bates Technical College had come from other local high schools at which they had not been successful. The other two students, aged 28 and 34 respectively, had both experienced severe poverty, both had jobs in addition to school, and both had dropped out of high school, obtaining their GED’s
later. In short, all of these students met the characteristics of non-traditional students as defined in the literature. In addition, it is pertinent to make the argument that these students were also adult learners with adult learners’ needs, due to their circumstances. The data in this study demonstrated amply that these students were both non-traditional and had exhibited adult learning needs much earlier than most students. This characteristic was identified “precociousness” for the purpose of this study.

Precociousness

Engle and Tinto (2008) noted the significance of “experiences [students] have before they enroll” (emphasis theirs, p. 3). Taylor (2009) states that the positionality of the students cannot be overlooked for transformative learning to occur:

> Of significance seems to be the degree of life experience when fostering transformative learning. A greater life experience provides a deeper well from which to draw on and react to as individuals engage in dialogue and reflection. (p. 6)

What this research revealed was another difference between these students and traditional ones in addition to the ones identified in the literature. That is, for a variety of reasons nearly all of these students were catapulted into adult thinking or adulthood early in life. The students all showed aspect of precociousness—they resembled adult learners in childhood, some in early childhood. Two of the students were questioning the validity of the school curriculum in grade school. One student was writing and publishing pornography in his teens. Three students were parents, or de facto parents, in their teens. The students demonstrated aspects of adult responsibilities before completing high school. The positionality of these students gave them vast adult life experience, as Taylor maintains is needed for transformational learning in adults to occur. The categorization of these students as adult learners also fits with their particularly high
need for relevant learning, as Knowles’ andragogy (1980), and similarly Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory, maintained was a primary characteristic of adult learners.

While the literature has no precise definitions for “non-traditional learner” and “adult learner” and sometimes uses them interchangeably, for this study, looking at both has given a much stronger argument for recognizing that meeting the needs of these students was important to their success and supports the literature regarding this. Both non-traditional students and adult learners need learning made relevant to them. Andragogy and transformative learning theory were both posited on the fact that adults have different motives and different learning needs than children do, particularly regarding adults’ high need for context to make the learning relevant (Taylor & Hamby 2013). What became evident from the use of transformative learning theory as the theoretical framework for this study was the need to make the argument that these students, even at 18 and simultaneously in technical high school and college, were in fact adult learners and most had been that way for some time. Therefore, it followed without surprise that these students need relevant learning as Mezirow (1991) and other transformative learning theorists (e.g., Cranton, 2016) insist.

**Contextualization**

Contextualization makes the learning relevant to the students and is a primary facet of transformative learning theory. As Cranton (2016) explained,

Mezirow (1985) described learning as a process of making assumptions explicit, contextualizing them, validating them, and acting on them. Education was the process of fostering this effort.

The subject class for this case study, an English 175 Professional Writing course, was deliberately redesigned to give students in automotive or construction programs writing
assignments that would be immediately applicable, including job search documents (e.g., resume, cover letters) and job-specific documents (e.g., answering a customer-complaint letter, writing a bid proposal, completing an incident report). And, as Cranton (2016) would expect, the contextualization of the course was received highly positively by the students, particularly compared to their previous experiences with English classes. In their previous experiences, the students had little regard for academic writing. The positive response to the contextualization by the students in this study supports the literature in at least two ways. First, the Guided Pathways Initiative (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) being deployed across higher education requires contextualization in any remediation provided for college students, such as Adult Basic Education (ABE, usually up to approximately ninth-grade reading, writing, and mathematics levels) or developmental/pre-college education (closing the gap between Adult Basic Education and college-level reading, writing, and mathematics). Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) stated specifically that academic courses below college level must be contextualized to the students’ program. In the current study, the course was college-level but was contextualized to the students’ programs of study. It should be no surprise to anyone that the students in the current study were highly positive to the relevance of the course to their careers and lives based on the evidence supporting the Guided Pathway model.

Contextualization has strong evidence in Washington State’s hallmark I-BEST program, which contextualizes ABE by integrating it directly into the workforce classroom. I-BEST, has also been shown in the literature to increase student success in remediation significantly while eliminating quarters or years of remediation (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009; Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010). Wachen, Jenkins, Belfield, and Van Noy’s (2012) multi-year study of I-BEST concluded that contextualization—relevant lessons, assignments, and materials—was
equally important as integrated instruction—that is, the just-in-time academics lessons—to the students’ learning in ABE. Integrated instruction provides just-in-time training for students in their program courses (such as auto body priming 202) who lack academic skills to complete a real-world (contextualized) assignment. For instance, an automotive student might need to understand ratios to properly match and deliver automotive paint on a vehicle. Integrated instruction would provide the lesson on ratios at the time of the paint-mixing assignment. Not a quarter or a year beforehand in a math class.

Perin’s works (2004; Perin & Hare, 2010) and her meta-study of contextualization in remediation courses of reading and writing (2011) showed efficacy for students with skills below college level. Wang, Wang, and Prevost, (2017) found their research on remedial math and contextualization was “compelling” (p. 454), further showing adult students’ need for relevant learning. The results of the present study demonstrate that the need for relevant learning did not go away when technical college students were receiving writing instruction at college level. Parlier’s (2013) mixed methods study of a college-level contextualized writing course found that students had learned. Examples of students having learned in the present study are discussed in Finding Three. In addition, Parlier reported increased interest in and value of writing courses among the students. A similar outcome was found in the present study.

Given’s (2016) study of three types of contextualization led him to conclude that interest was increased, but not necessarily students’ writing abilities. The current study lacks quantitative data to acknowledge this point. However, Given looked at only one student per type of contextualization—a researcher, instructor, and student for three types of contextualization, which he designated as integrated, embedded, and contextualized forms of instruction. Because Parlier’s and this researcher’s studies both examine entire classes instead of one-student case
studies, a comparison of the results to Given’s may not be appropriate. In other college-level subjects, contextualization has already shown positive results, (e.g., in mathematics). The results of this study align with the research of other college-level genres.

The students in this study were adults whose life circumstances made them non-traditional learners. As the literature has shown, both adults and non-traditional learners have high needs for relevant learning; the results of the current study agree. The contextualized English 175 course met the students’ needs for relevance. The characterization of these students as non-traditional provided additional evidence to validate their high needs for relevance.

When students can visualize using the new knowledge in job or life activities, students learn more deeply, retaining knowledge longer (Ambrose, Davis, & Zeigler, 2013; Perin, 2011; Wang, Wang, & Prevost, 2017). In the State of Washington, students at public technical colleges can obtain an applied associate’s degree. The applied degree requires just three college-level academic courses: math/reasoning, contextualized somewhat by story problems; humanities/social science, contextualized at Bates Technical College by offering interpersonal communications; and writing (or in some cases public speaking), which had not previously been contextualized at the college. As the literature (Wang, Sun, & Wickersham, 2017) and this study confirm, writing courses at college are not seen as relevant. Failure to take English has been shown to be a reason for students’ failing to graduate (Moore & Shulock, 2010). Entering the workforce with the skills but no degree denies the student of an average of $90,000 in lifetime earnings, increases their chances of being laid off, and decreases their opportunities for advancement (Greenstone & Looney, 2013). The students in this study did not expect the English 175 Professional Writing course to be useful, particularly considering their past experiences. However, much to their surprise, the students found the contextualized course
relevant to both their programs and their lives. In fact, the student interviews had more codes pertaining to relevance than any other topic.

The instructor mainly applied differentiated contextualization—choices in format, assignments, and instruction to meet individual student’s needs—but included elements of integrative instruction through his availability and enjoyment of providing just-in-time, impromptu lessons during the student’s time in the computer lab. This combination was successful.

**Finding Two: Class Structure**

The nontraditional students in the current study found their needs met in the structure of this course, particularly instructor effectiveness, curriculum and assignments, and use of class time. Transformative learning theory resides in the belief that adult learners need relevance and learner-centered instruction (Mezirow, 1991; 2000). However, as Taylor (2009) pointed out, Mezirow failed to consider positionality. The positionality of these students, adult-thinking, non-traditional by virtue of poverty or other characteristics, was indicated as an important reason for class structure itself needing to be learner-centered, as noted in Finding One.

The students in this study have characteristics or situations that make school more challenging for them than for traditional college students. The structure of this contextualized writing class met the needs of these nontraditional students through choice of assignments, through classroom activities and deadlines, and, importantly, in teaching style.

**Teaching Style**

An unexpected finding in this study was how much the students needed the instructional methods employed in this class. The student interviews did not include any questions asking
students to define good teaching. Yet, all of the students in this study individually and
voluntarily defined good teaching nearly identically as a three-part process: first, the instructor
lectures or demonstrates to the entire class; second, small groups of or individual students
practice applying the lesson with the instructor at their side; and third, only then do the students
attempt an assignment on their own. Many authors, including Mezirow (1991) and Cooper and
Richards (2016), found increasing interaction time and shortening lecture time important to adult
learners, which is exactly what was done in the English 175 course. Dr. Peter Speelmon, the
instructor in the present case study, was observed holding highly interactive lecture times, then
offering small group or individual instruction in the computer lab, as students desired. The
students were highly positive of Speelmon’s teaching style.

What these students indicated as poor instruction is the lecture-homework style of
traditional college academic courses, further demonstration of these students’ nontraditional
learning needs. During the weekly computer lab times, the instructor was observed offering
informal small group or individualized instruction on that week’s lecture topic, as students
needed. Those actions looked more like conversations than lecture, which also concurs with the
literature on adult learning (e.g., Brookfield, 2006; Knowles, 1984; Marsik & Maltbia, 2009).
These student-instructor interactive times fit with Marsik and Maltbia’s (2009) explanation of
“action learning conversations” (p. 160) as a methodology for fostering critical reflection by
framing questions that adult students answer based on real-world problems. Allowing
opportunities for reflection and discourse during the learning processes plays a major role in
transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow et al., 2000).
Curriculum and Course Design

Another unexpected finding in this study was how much the students needed a course designed to both reduce lecture time and increase computer lab time to accommodate students’ in two ways. First, planned non-lecture days accommodated parenting needs. Second the two days a week of computer access time accommodated the students’ lack of word processing capability at home (no computers, laptops, or tablets) and the students’ lack of internet at home (no viewing online course materials or submitting assignments). The course also helped address the students’ lack of public or college library computer access due to transportation limitations (no car, no bus fare, no public transportation access, nor being able to stay after class because of carpooling issues) or time limitations (competing family or work responsibilities). Not surprisingly, the instructor’s decision to incorporate computer lab time into the curriculum was met very positively by all seven students. As one student in poverty put it, “These days, you hardly have access to computers,” a comment not likely to come from a middle class, traditional student.

Bolden (2009) noted the higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students at two-year colleges compared to four-year colleges. Kim (2002) and Bolden both noted the disproportionately higher number of nontraditional students at two-year institutions, noting factors such as parenting, job, and financial responsibilities competing with school. Engle and Tinto (2008) researched why low-income and first-generation students have strikingly lower completion rates in higher education than their more privileged peers. The authors found that non-traditional students had more challenges during college than traditional students for reasons such as not having financial support. The composition of the student population in this course fits the literature. The course design was intended, in part, to mitigate the effects of missing class. All of the facets of the design of this course—including computer access, flexibility in deadlines,
and the ability to be absent without missing lecture—met these adult, non-traditional students’ needs. Again, these findings concur with the literature regarding adult and nontraditional learners’ needs.

**Assignments**

The students responded very positively to the relevance of the assignments, as discussed in the first finding of this chapter. Students also responded very positively to the relevance of the course structure meeting their needs as adult nontraditional learners. Taylor and Hamby (2013) claim that the responsibility of engaging adult learners amid competing responsibilities (school, parenting, etc.) lands squarely on effective instruction designed specifically for the adult learner. Speelmon contextualized the assignments to actual documents these workforce program students will see on the job or will use to obtain a job, including resumes and cover letters; correspondence, such as responding to customer complaints; reports, such as a financial analysis; and proposals, such as bidding for jobs.

The literature agrees with the contextualized assignments on several grounds. First, Graves and Bledsoe (2015) found that adults “are often motivated by the desire to put new knowledge to practical use” (p. 8). Recognizing the learning needs of adults, the instructor made all assignments practical examples that use the elements of good writing—not an expository essay among them. To offer much needed autonomy to their learning, the students were required to complete the resume and cover letter, but then had their choices among over a dozen assignments. Autonomy is a basic need in adult learning (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor and Hamby, 2013).

Second, the instructor started with the career documents module, which demonstrated writing the students were already familiar with and/or needed immediately—e.g., resumes—and
helped the students progress to equally practical documents they would use on the job in the foreseeable future—e.g., customer or internal correspondence and safety reports. Referring to academic courses, Dare (2001) “saw the goal of classroom instruction being to provide more relevance and rigor in education to meet the increasing demands of the workforce” (p. 83). The instructional strategies need to involve students’ “interests, beliefs, and background experiences” (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009, p. 319). The student responses during interviews confirm that the English 175 course involved the students in such ways successfully.

**Differentiated Instruction**

It seems pertinent to compare the six characteristics of differentiated instruction by Tomlinson et al. (2003, pp. 131-133) with what happened in the English 175 class:

1. *Effective differentiation of curriculum and instruction is proactive, rather than reactive* (p. 131). Speelmon created a variety of assignment choices in advance with lenient deadlines and programmed lab time into the curriculum.

2. *Effective differentiation employs flexible use of small teaching-learning groups in the classroom* (p. 132). The instructor used two days a week of computer lab work time to be available for small group and individual additional instruction, which all of the students identified as a necessary step for good instruction to occur.

3. *Effective differentiation varies the materials used by individuals and small groups of students in the classroom* (p. 132). The Canvas shell includes a variety of resources for students, and the instructor directed the student to appropriate materials for further information during a small group or individual talk.

4. *Effective differentiation uses variable pacing as a means of addressing learner needs* (p. 132). Students were able to work on assignments at their own pace. The
instructor freely gave personalized instruction during lab time to students who were behind the curriculum. Penalties for late work were not observed.

5. Effective differentiation is knowledge centered (p. 133). Dr. Speelmon was very knowledgeable about his subject with many years of teaching experience in technical colleges, both above and below college level, including as an I-BEST instructor practicing integrative contextualization.

6. Effective differentiation is learner centered. (p. 133). The instructor used very interactive lecture times, used open access resources available on the internet to save the students the price of a textbook, and gave these adult students the option to miss lab time for competing responsibilities, such as parenting, without missing lecture.

Finally, contextualizing academics to students by using a workforce scenario is heavily supported in the literature in pre-college remediation, both in ABE and developmental education courses, and has been demonstrated in academic courses in fields outside of English, such as psychology, math, and history (e.g., Grossman, 2005; Moraitis, Carr, & Daddow, 2012; Ross et al., 1986; Santagelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Wideen, Meyer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). The findings of the current research support the extant literature, adding a data point about college-level writing courses for technical college students in workforce programs.

**Finding Three: Transformative Learning**

The third finding was the elements of transformative learning theory that emerged. Transformative learning theory was the theoretical framework for this case study research and was selected to highlight evidence of the learning meeting the students’ needs, as summarized earlier in this chapter. According to Mezirow (1991), adults learn through a “disorienting dilemma” that begins the journey through a set of steps that changes their perspectives. The
current study was not intended to discover whether the students had transformative learning experiences. However, aspects of transformative learning emerged very clearly in the data, including disorienting dilemmas, relevance, building of competence and confidence and reintegration into one’s life. Because transformative learning theory is based on the premise that adults learn differently than children, the precociousness of the students, including all five of the eighteen- and nineteen-year-old students, was notable. Precociousness, for the purposes of the current study defined as being thrust into aspects of adulthood, was rampant among the participants of the current study.

The students all had some degree of disorienting dilemmas—jolting juxtapositions of expectations and reality regarding writing—some in secondary school; most in English 175. Three additional pieces of the process of transformative learning, including acquisition of skills, competence and confidence, and reintegration of the new perspective and skills into one’s life, have been demonstrated repeatedly throughout the other superordinate themes, but deserve mention.

**Acquisition of Skills, Competence, and Confidence**

In transformative learning theory, Mezirow et al. (2000) states that for learning to occur, there must be the “acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans” (p. 23). These students reported positive changes not only in their writing but also in their value of writing. As discussed in the previous two superordinate themes, the students reported the acquisition of new skills and indicated confidence in them. When questioned about the course, students spoke of their newfound communication professionalism and the immediate and future uses of the skills they had learned. The results of this study agree with the literature. Parlier’s (2013) mixed methods study of workforce students in a contextualized first-year college
composition course found similar results from pre- and post-course surveys, noting that students “significantly improved their learning in the contextualized composition course” (p. 180). Perin’s (2011) meta-study of contextualizing foundational writing skills also showed positive results, which are consistent with the current study. Students articulated ways they would use what they learned in the writing class in their future careers and their present lives.

“Reintegration of the New Perspective and Skills into One’s Life”

One of the final steps of transformative learning is “the reintegration of the new perspective and skills into one’s life” (Mezirow, 1991). The students in this study valued what they had learned as a result of the course, and the students identified uses for the skills learned beyond professional writing. Students self-reported uses for what they had learned beyond workplace applications, including in their texting, social media use, oral communications, parenting skills, and personal emails. Lourey (2000), in her concise and eloquent argument that technical college students need the skills learned in English composition, stated that technical college students must be able to see that what they learn applies to their own writing. The technical college students in the current study amply confirmed that they had, indeed, seen how the lessons applied to their own writing and their own lives.

While this was a qualitative study, there was significant evidence the students believe they learned new skills, they valued those skills, and they were already implementing some of them, such as using a professional tone even in texts, being aware of the intention of the communication during tense parenting situations, or submitting a professionally worded cover letter. The students also talked about how in the future they would implement what they had learned, such as writing cost estimates as an electrical subcontractor, or as a future entrepreneur meeting with other business owners to create partnerships. The student who had written and
published pornography, among other things, in his teens, reported that the grammar lessons of English 175 were potentially helpful for “going full-out Tolkien,” including creating worlds and languages, in a future novel he would probably write.

The instructor’s forward thinking to design a course of college-level rigor that did not require the student to wonder why he or she needed to learn to write an expository essay in order to “fix the air conditioning on the diesel truck.” Perin (2019) noted that although “the research is lacking regarding how much instruction should be contextualized” (p. 147), students are more likely to learn when there are direct connections to their college classes. In this case, the college classes are workforce programs, but the results of this research apply. Additionally, the dean observed that unlike students in traditional writing courses, the students in this study could articulate exactly what the current class was for and how it would help in their careers. Until a quantitative study confirms that these students learned from the contextualized course, the evidence here strongly suggests that the students did learn and valued that learning.

**Conclusion**

How has contextualization been implemented in a college-level writing course? The answer justified by the data in this study is making the lessons, assignments, and course structure relevant in at least two ways. First, making lessons and assignments clearly useful by choosing writing applications from the students’ chosen programs of study made the assignments relevant to the students. As Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (2009) maintains, adult learners need to see immediate relevance in what they are learning. Second, by offering the students access to computer time, choices in assignments, and latitude of deadlines, these adult learners, all non-traditional learners, were granted a degree of autonomy they needed to better cope with
competing priorities, such as parenting, and lack of resources, such as transportation and computer access.

The findings of this study show that contextualization of a college-level writing course for technical college students includes more than work-related assignments. The students needed and found relevance both in their assignments and in the structure of the course itself. The instructor found many documents, such as bid proposals and incident reports, that students in construction (including welding) and transportation-career training will use on the job. The students responded positively to the relevance of the assignments. Moreover, the instructor covered separate topics such as grammar and tone in ways that students found immediately relevant to their lives.

All of the students could be characterized as nontraditional students according to the literature, the importance which should not be underestimated. Age is often the defining factor for nontraditional status, but other factors were prevalent, including being persons of color, having parenting responsibilities, being first-generation college students, experiencing recent homelessness, and being raised in poverty.

One significant sign of poverty, lack of computer or internet access outside of school, was highly evident. Because of transportation constraints and job and parenting responsibilities, the students’ ability to use the college library computers was limited. Some students had internet access on their phones but found it difficult to write and submit papers on them. All of the students were highly enthusiastic about the computer lab access time created during the regular class time. In addition, this classroom time devoted to writing, many Wednesdays and all Thursdays, allowed students a day to miss class without missing lecture when parenting or other issues conflicted with the class. These students needed the sick/vacation leave of the workplace,
as well as contextualized assignments from the workplace. In effect, the computer lab time gave them that leave.

The literature does not discuss disabilities as a factor of nontraditional students. Nevertheless, at least two students coped daily with the effects of ADHD, and another student’s poverty forced him to discontinue therapy or medications for his diagnosed depression.

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2009), as the theoretical framework for this study, evidenced itself repeatedly. All but one of the students reported what could be classified as “disorienting dilemmas” regarding their former perceptions of the value of writing/writing courses and their perceptions of the present course. By the end of the course, the students were surprised to see how relevant writing and professionalism in written communications was to their chosen careers. Students also applied changes in their writing to other aspects of their lives, including texting, social media, oral communications, parenting, and personal emails. The transfer of learning is another aspect of transformative learning theory.

According to Stake (1995), “single case studies are not as strong a base for generalizing” (p. 85) as other research methods, and this case study is no exception. What this study has done is illuminate the perceived needs of the students and the methods (teaching style, course design, and assignments) the instructor used to meet those needs. However, the findings of this research suggest a strong need for further study of the needs of technical college students enrolled in writing courses.

The computer access time helped students cope with another challenge of adult, nontraditional students: parenting or familial responsibilities. While the workplace recognizes that parenting or other familial responsibilities can interfere with work and offers leave or altered work schedules, traditional college courses do not offer either of those options. College students
do not accrue sick leave as workers do, nor can college students, normally, attend lecture at a
different time than scheduled. Having computer access class days helped the students who
needed occasional absences, by offering a day or two per week that could be missed for family
responsibilities without missing lecture time. Assignments, although many could be completed
during class time, were always due at the end of the week, not that day. The instructor stated that
student absenteeism was a recurring problem on the campus and part of the intent of the
contextualization was to mitigate lost learning from absences. Recognizing that age may not
indicate that a technical college student has adult learning needs or has the barriers commonly
experienced by non-traditional students, then treating students to relevant, realistic assignments
was one part of the equation for the students in this study. The second, and equally important of
the equation for student success in this study was the need for college attendance to be
acknowledged as workplace attendance is: by giving students, like employees, leave or altered
schedules to attend to family responsibilities that may conflict with their class or work schedules.
By implementing both parts of the learning equation, the instructor gave the students a pathway
for success.

This very small case study examined a contextualized college-level writing course at a
public technical college in a state that is mandating the implementation of Guided Pathways into
all public colleges. Guided Pathways requires pre-college academic courses to be contextualized
and made relevant to the students. Based on the success of writing contextualization in pre-
college courses, where I-BEST provides an outstanding example, the natural follow-on seemed
to be a contextualized college-level writing course, even though the Guided Pathways model
does not require it. Similarly to the success in pre-college academic contextualization, the
college-level English 175 Professional Writing course in this study demonstrated that the
students do want college-level writing courses made relevant. Perhaps more importantly, this study not only highlighted specific needs of adult and non-traditional students but found a way to help them overcome some of those barriers by offering computer lab time during class time. This embedded lab time met three of the students’ barriers: lack of computer and internet access at home; inability to spend extra hours on campus using computers to do homework; and, as needed, a sort of planned accommodation for missing class due to competing responsibilities (job, parenting) without missing lectures. As so many students at two-year colleges face the additional barriers of non-traditional students, this study provided a data point of promise for those students.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Although this was a small study, the implications for practice appear within the extant literature. Adult students need to see immediate relevance in their learning. At two-year colleges, students in workforce programs, such as automotive, construction, or nursing, have relevant, contextualized instruction every day. Students change brake linings, wire a new house, or take blood pressure. Under Guided Pathways, students needing remediation in mathematics, reading, or writing will have contextualized materials relevant to their lives and careers (CITE). In Washington State, students in applied associate’s degree programs need just three college-level academic courses—communications/writing, mathematics/reasoning, and social science/humanities. The standard English 101 composition course is currently not contextualized, but the English 175 Professional Writing course, the subject of this research, is contextualized. Mathematics has a degree of contextualization through story problems. For the social science/humanities requirement, Bates Technical College offers students an interpersonal
communications course, which by nature is already relevant to the students’ lives as they learn about themselves and their relationships.

Two recommendations are warranted. First, the writing course deserves to be contextualized to clusters of workforce programs and studied qualitatively (student perceptions) and quantitatively (student retention and success). Second, the students in this study demonstrated there is a high need for a class structure that works for non-traditional adult students. All of the students in this study were nontraditional adult learners and were well-served to be treated as such, regardless of age, by increasing access to computers during class time and allowing flexibility in attendance and assignment deadlines. It was apparent that these students needed some autonomy and flexibility in the class design to cope with competing responsibilities and with limitations caused by poverty. The practice of including computer access time into the design of the course needs to be continued to adequately serve this student population.

The student interview questions did not directly solicit students’ opinions on the variety of assignment choices, although students were positive about their relevance. As adult learners, these students are well served by the autonomy given them by the latitude of assignment options. Efforts to increase the assignment options would be prudent, particularly if the course is offered to students in other program areas besides automotive and construction trades.

The students were very positive about the assignments being given at the beginning of the week but not due until the end of the week, allowing some flexibility for students whose lives necessitated occasional absences. This practice should be examined for use in other academic courses.
Finally, the students were highly positive about the teaching style. All of the students had independently drawn the same conclusion as to what constitutes good teaching: the instructor begins with an initial lecture, then the instructor works alongside students in small groups or individually to practice what was learned in the lecture, and only then do the students work individually, but with the instructor in the room and available. Traditional college-level academic instructors may not be familiar with this teaching style. Therefore, the college should consider whether traditional academics instructors should be made aware of this style when they are hired and mentored.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this small case study agree with positive results of contextualization in pre-college courses, in I-BEST programs, and in scattered examples of other contextualized academic college courses in the literature. The following future research is recommended:

- Longitudinal quantitative research on student retention and success rates in contextualized college-level writing courses should be performed on future courses.
- Additional qualitative research should explore the contextualized college-level writing course experiences of students in a broader selection of workforce programs, for instance medical.
- Additional qualitative research on student experiences with a course structure specifically designed for nontraditional students in workforce programs should be conducted.
- Precociousness should be considered as a non-traditional student characteristic.
- The course studied, English 175 Professional Writing, is a non-transferrable course for students in programs that currently do not go above an associate’s degree; However, as applied baccalaureate degrees are extending opportunities for students to progress past
the associate level, additional research on a contextualized transferrable English composition course at the college level is indicated.

- Finally, the students in the current study were all male, which is not unusual for the workforce programs studied. New research needs to be done expanding the gender of student participants.

**Next Steps**

As an administrator, faculty, and educational consultant, I will continue implementing, researching, and disseminating contextualization of academic courses. Currently, I am co-writing an article on college-level academics and contextualization for *Teaching English in the Two-Year College.*
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