Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

CHAPTER 4

"THERE IS A LOT OF OVERLAP"

Tracing Writing Development across Spheres of Writing

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While considerable research documents the impact of first-year composition (FYC) on students, we know much less about what happens to college writers once they leave FYC, especially as they write in a myriad of contexts, among them classrooms, but also workplaces, cocurriculars, and internships. Our project takes up this question about the contexts where students write by going to the source—students who have completed at least two years of college—and explicitly asking them about (1) the contexts where they write, and (2) their understandings of relationships between and across these contexts. We call such relationships *recursivities*.

In designing our study of upper-division student writing, we operationalized students' writing contexts as *spheres* of writing. Like contexts, spheres of writing refer to circumstances and occasions for writing, but whereas contexts are also specific to given texts, spheres are neither time-bound nor text-bound. Like rhetorical situations, spheres of writing include authors, audiences, occasions, and exigences; spheres, however, are not tied to a single instance or

even recurring instances, but rather can host a diversity of rhetorical situations and actions (see O'Sullivan et al. 2022). In operationalizing spheres, we also identified seven potential spheres: self-motivated; cocurriculars; internships; workplaces; civic/community spaces; academic classrooms; and other spheres. Given this set of spheres, students were asked, first in surveys and then in follow-up interviews (1) which *spheres* they composed in; (2) what, if any, relationships, or *recursivities* they perceived between spheres; (3) how their understanding of writing developed as a result of these experiences; and (4) what recommendations they might make to faculty and program administrators about how to best support college writers.

Three research questions guided our study:

1. What, if anything, do upper-division undergraduate students (year 3 and above through graduation) learn about writing in their writing-beyond-the-classroom experiences?
2. What kinds of recursivity, if any, do they perceive among their non-academic and curricular writing experiences?
3. What are the implications for universities, globally, for the ways that they can foster and support students in making connections across spheres?

In the pages that follow, we briefly describe the project before detailing three case studies demonstrating the most common type of recursivity reported by participants: between the academic and the self-motivated spheres. Although each of the case study students noted the importance of writing in self-motivated and academic spheres, the participants' observations differ in two ways: in the intensity of the relationship they perceived between these spheres, and in the directionality they plotted between them. One student, Chris, reported a high level of intensity between the spheres, seeing them as nearly conjoined; Bushra, the second student, reported mid-range intensity; and Mel, the third student, reported low intensity. Each case of recursivity also differed in terms of spherical *directionality*: Bushra spoke about one sphere, the academic, influencing the self-motivated sphere *unidirectionally;* Chris relayed his view of the two spheres influencing each other equally, or *bidirectionally*; and

Mel described the relationship between these two spheres *centrifugally*, with learning from the self-motivated sphere extending outward to all of her other spheres. These students' accounts thus highlight the multiple spheres in which they write, the relationships they perceive across and among them, and the ways writing in them has helped shape them as writers.

Methods Overview

This multi-institutional study included a large set of survey responses (n=239) and follow-up semi-structured interviews (n=24). Survey responses were collected in fall 2019 and spring 2020; we identified from the survey data a representative sample for interviews in terms of institution, year of study, and the number of spheres in which students write; and interviews were conducted online, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in spring 2020. Each interview included a mapping exercise, a series of interview questions, and a mapping revision. In the initial mapping exercise, participants identified and drew the spheres in which they write, the types of texts they write within each sphere, and any recursivities they perceived among the spheres. Their maps guided the interviews, as did a series of questions prompting discussion of participants' experience of writing in each of the identified spheres and representative samples of texts that participants shared ahead of the interview. Finally, participants could revise their maps after discussing the spheres and recursivities across them. Each interview was coded by two researchers as a means of ensuring inter-reader reliability, using a coding schema developed by the research team.

Collectively, the students who completed surveys and interviews represent a wide range of institutions: Allegheny College, Meadville, PA; Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA; Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA; and Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, all in the United States; the University of Limerick, in Ireland; and Sohar University, in Oman. (See "Comparative Information for Institutions in Study" in the online resources for additional details.)

Recursivities across Academic and Self-Motivated Spheres of Writing

The interview data and maps reveal that students in our study uniformly write in at least two spheres, and most students write in three or more. Students reported writing most commonly in two particular spheres: academic (n=24) and self-motivated (n=23).
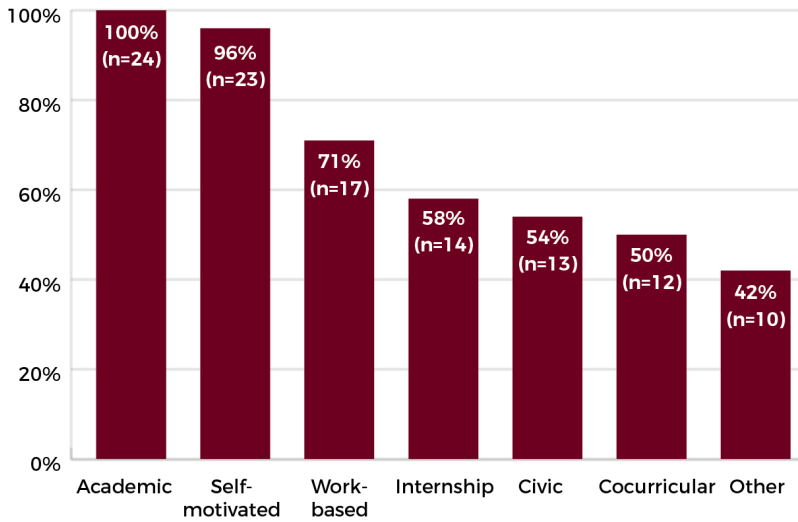

Figure 4.1. Spheres of Writing Identified by Interview Participants

Both our conversations with students and the maps they generated during our interviews demonstrated a great deal of recursivity between their academic and self-motivated spheres. Of the 338 instances of recursivity coded in the interviews, most prominent was the recursivity between these two spheres. Students articulated recursivity between academic and self-motivated spheres in terms of the similarities in discourse (e.g., syntax, voice, genre, as in our first case study, Bushra) and rhetorical situation (e.g., audience, purpose, genre, and subject, as in our second case, Chris), as well as in their sense of motivation and engagement with writing (as in Mel, our third case).

In some cases, student-drawn maps visually documented relationships between their self-motivated and academic spheres through

Venn diagrams or arrows; in others, the interview conversations highlighted intensity and directionality. For Bushra, the overlap between academic and self-motivated spheres moved in one direction—from the academic to the self-motivated sphere. For Chris, there was a bidirectional recursivity between self-motivated and academic spheres functioning as what he called a "two-way street." For Mel, the recursivity from the self-motivated sphere to other spheres seems omni-directional, a directionality we categorize—drawing on language in physics—as *centrifugal*, meaning the energy or force from one sphere moved outward to inform the others. We see the direction of recursivity as, in part, a function of the intensity these students saw between the academic and self-motivated spheres (see figure 4.2). As explained in the following cases, Mel's reporting a lower level of intensity between academic and self-motivated spheres results from the distributed nature of the centrifugal directionality, while Bushra and Chris wrote in fewer spheres but reported mid- and higher levels of intensity in their understanding of recursivities between those spheres.

The case studies profiled below explore more fully the pronounced relationship between the academic and self-motivated spheres, highlighting the *complexity* of individual iterations of recursivity between these spheres in terms of *intensity* and *directionality*.

Case Study 1, Bushra: Mid-Level Intensity, Unidirectional Recursivity: "My course in university helped me"

Bushra's case showed mid-level intensity in the relationship between her academic and self-motivated spheres, with the direction of impact going from academic toward self-motivated. On the survey, Bushra reported writing in three spheres; during the interview mapping exercise, she drew spheres for work-based, classroom, and what she originally called "optimistic" writing but changed to self-motivated before sharing her map. The academic sphere was in the middle intersecting the other two, and the circles are graduated in size, with academic the largest (see figure 4.3). The first text Bushra submitted was an example from the self-motivated sphere, a grammar book she wrote for young English as a Foreign
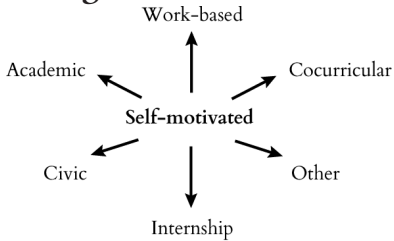
	Intensity of recursivity between spheres	Direction of recursivity
Bushra	Mid-level intensity	**Unidirectional** Academic ⟶ Self-motivated
Chris	Higher levels of intensity	**Bidirectional** Academic ⟷ Self-motivated
Mel	Lower levels of intensity	**Centrifugal** Work-based Academic ↖ ↑ ↗ Cocurricular **Self-motivated** Civic ↙ ↓ ↘ Other Internship

Figure 4.2. Intensity and Direction of Recursivity in Case Studies

Language (EFL) learners. The second sample text was from the academic sphere—a classroom assignment. In discussing these texts, Bushra identified seven instances of recursivity between academic and self-motivated spheres.

   In the interview, Bushra discussed her final-year course in the English language studies major, which focuses on professional writing and critical thinking. She reported recursivity here, saying the academic and self-motivated spheres have "a relationship between my course in university that's helped me to write more professionally, to manage my writing, and help me to know about what level I wrote." Moreover, she described the direction of influence from her academic writing to the self-motivated, where she writes books in English and her vernacular language. Explaining that her writing development in the academic sphere supports her
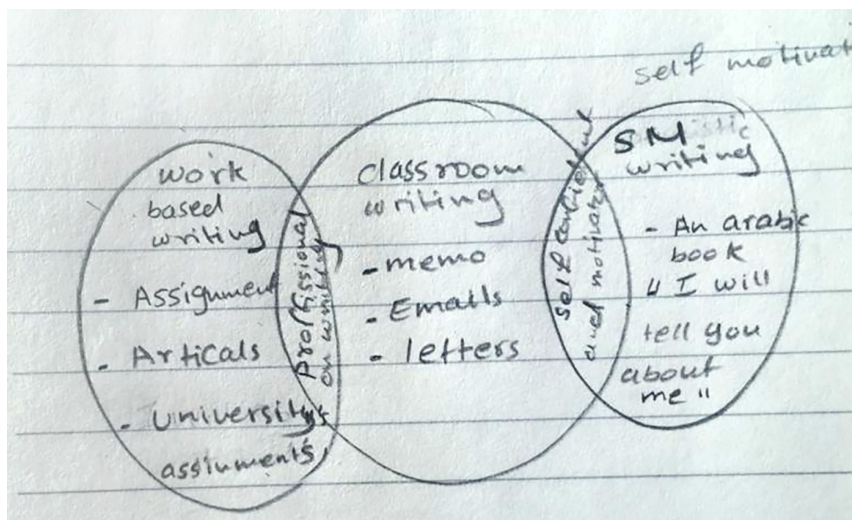
Figure 4.3. Map of Bushra's Spheres of Writing (Case Study 1)

self-motivated writing, she drew connections, noting: "That's the similarity between them. I wrote for the audience to attract them to my writing." The impact of the academic on the self-motivated sphere is especially pronounced in the books she has written outside of school, which promote academic literacy. When asked about the inspiration for writing her books, she said, "So the courses in university helps me." Bushra reported several times, though not as frequently as our high-intensity case study with Chris, that she had learned writing principles and strategies at school; in response to a question about how academic writing informed the other spheres, she indicated: "That's influenced my writing and organizing and arrangement [of] my writing."

Bushra's case emphasizes how a student's cultural context can influence their perception of recursivities among spheres. The substantial role of the academic sphere in Bushra's literacy landscape makes sense given the role of English in Arabian Gulf states: English language learning is perceived as a harbinger of positive change in people's social, academic, and professional lives. Moreover, Bushra's cultural upbringing taught her to show gratitude toward teachers; she stated, "The lecturers in my university, they do a good way of

writing. From my experience that's benefit me—a positive impact in my writing." Comments like this reinforce the linear directionality of how Bushra conceives of her spheres of writing, with the academic sphere impacting her self-motivated sphere at a mid-level of intensity.

Case Study 2, Chris: Higher-Level Intensity, Bidirectional Recursivity: "I would say that it's a two-way street"

In his response to the survey, Chris reported writing only in the academic and self-motivated spheres. However, when prompted to draw his map, he included four spheres, one each for academic, self-motivated, work, and internship (see figure 4.4a). The academic sphere is the most prominent on Chris's map, followed closely by the self-motivated sphere. In his interview, Chris identified thirteen instances of recursivity (i.e., high-level intensity) between the academic and self-motivated spheres; he plots their bidirectional relationship as indicated by the double-headed arrow on his map and his characterization of the recursivity as a "two-way street."

As Chris noted, "[T]he two largest spheres for me were obviously classroom, which is probably everybody's largest. And then it overlaps a little bit with the self-motivated sphere, at least in my personal case." Within that overlap, Chris draws particular attention to "discussing music." In fact, the high intensity of Chris's recursivity between academic and self-motivated spheres is largely due to the number of texts he writes that are centered on his interest in music. As he stated,

> [O]bviously you saw that music is a very large interest of mine, and so that often overlaps with classroom work and academic papers. . . . So a lot of times [in academic papers] I'll compare music to film, or I'll talk about the rhetorical techniques in an album through the lyrics and the instruments. And so the self-motivated part of [writing about music is] sometimes I like to just sit down and write about, like try and put into words why I like [an album] so much.

Although Chris initially began writing about the albums he liked via stream-of-consciousness (or self-described "mental vomit"), he found himself drawing on more academic/authoritative genres to bolster his self-motivated music reviews, because "pulling the style of classroom to self-motivated makes the impact a bit larger, a bit more profound. . . . I mean, if I wrote in stream-of-consciousness then I feel like it wouldn't be as rigid in pointing out these different things. And music reviews are structured for a reason." In returning to his map at the end of the interview (see figure 4.4b), Chris added a notation elaborating on this point: "Some self-motivated compositions require a formal tone."

While Chris turns to academic structure and format to add credibility to his self-motivated music reviews, he finds recursivity moving from the self-motivated to the academic in his use of "a more natural voice" and topic choices for his academic assignments. For example, Chris describes the sample academic text he chose to share with the interviewer, an essay in which he "translates" the novel *Moby Dick* into metal music, as "the fusion of self-motivation and classroom because obviously . . . I'm a big music person. Listening to a lot of music, I was able to bring that over and really break it down and . . . figure out exactly why *Moby Dick* lends itself to this particular genre of music." On his map, too, Chris notes that his academic research papers are "often [about] SM topics" and "classroom works are often somewhat self-motiv[ated]."

Like Bushra, Chris saw movement between the self-motivated and academic spheres. However, for Chris, the bidirectional recursivity is provided by his persistent focus on the topic of music in both spheres. This dynamism and multidirectional movement leads us to our final case study, Mel, who saw recursivities between all spheres, with the self-motivated in the center informing all other writing.
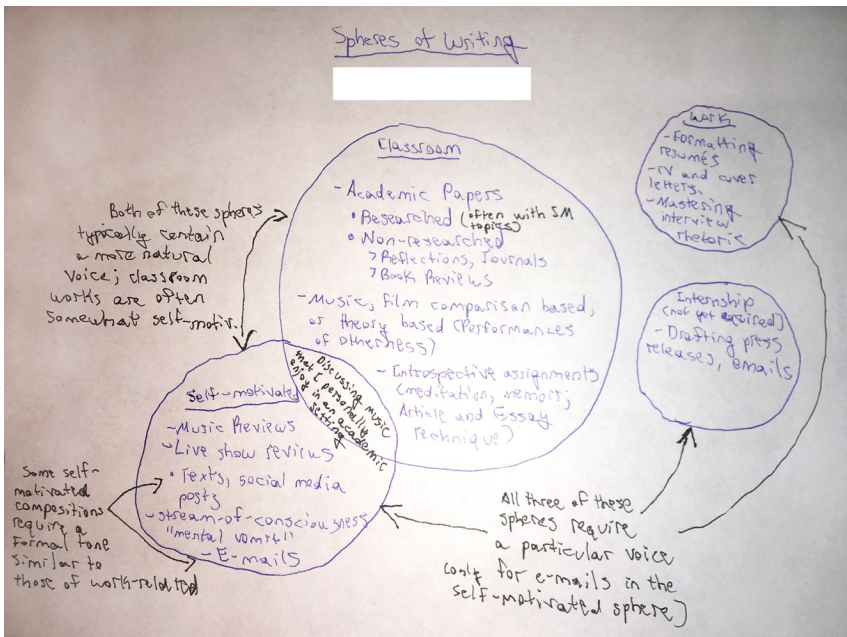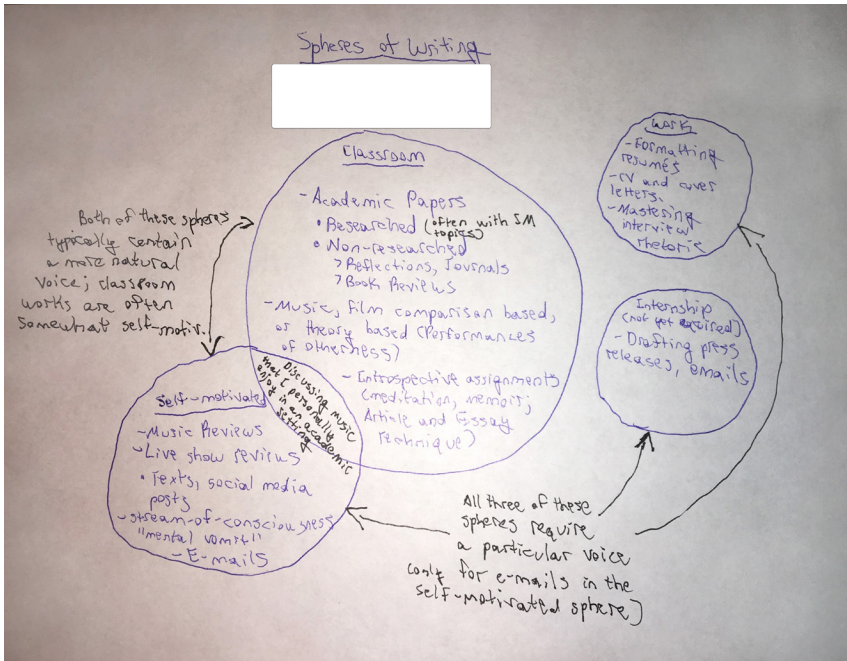
Figure 4.4. Pre– and Post–Interview Maps of Chris's Spheres of Writing (Case Study 2)

Case Study 3, Mel: Lower-Level Intensity, Centrifugal Recursivity: "All of my circles will always lead towards self-motivated writing"

While Mel, a chemistry major with a math minor, traced multiple connections across spheres and exemplified what we call "centrifugal recursivity," here we focus on the connections she made between her self-motivated and academic writing. Inspired by Mel's scientific writing, we borrowed language from physics to describe the direction of her recursivity: just as centrifugal motion moves outward from a center, Mel approached writing in all spheres from the sphere she saw as most connected to one's "core": the self-motivated. Mel's story is one of development; while writing across spheres in college, she developed a more nuanced, multiperspectival view of the world. Mel constellated the four spheres in which she reported writing with the self-motivated sphere in the very center: as she stated after drawing her map, "All of my circles will always lead towards self-motivated writing."

Mel engaged in a rich range of composing activities and genres in the self-motivated sphere, including poetry, letters, drawing, editing, social media writing, and bullet-journaling. Mel positioned her self-motivated writing as aligned with her interests and "strengths in the arts," highlighting that she "loves color theory." Mel's love for design and visual rhetoric in the self-motivated sphere informed all instances of recursivity. When asked about creative and visual arts in her academic writing, Mel discussed composing scientific posters and demonstrated her understanding of rhetorical design choices, such as "not wanting garish colors" or nothing "too outstandish." Mel understood effective writing and poster design in the academic sphere through the centrality of her self-motivated writing, stating that she "sees a cross between . . . the two" spheres.

In Mel's personally held theory of writing (Yancey, Robertson, Taczak 2014), the self-motivated sphere seemed to anchor one's writing in all spheres due to its closeness to the self, or one's "core"; Mel's centering of the self-motivated sphere is also closely connected to intrinsic motivation and positive affect, calling to

mind Nowacek's (2011) discussion of the affective component of transfer in *Agents of Integration* (27). Mel stated that "self-motivated writing does lead into the other categories" because it is "what our true selves are speaking." She referred to self-motivation as the key to overcoming writing challenges in all other spheres: "If we can use what we take as our self-motivation, our core, and utilize that in the other spheres, then we've cracked it." Mel seemed to align affect and motivation with communicative efficacy: "If you don't feel passionate about it, I don't think your writing will translate exactly what you want very well."

The most compelling evidence of Mel's recursivity emanating outward from the self-motivated sphere can be found in her map revision. Mel made a number of changes in how she visually represented recursivities across all of her spheres of writing. Although her initial map didn't fully capture the dynamism and directionality of the recursivity, her revised map (see both maps in figure 4.5) at the end of the interview shows enhanced detail, attention to design, and what appears to be scientific reasoning. In the first version, Mel had two separate circles for "self-motivated" and "class-oriented" spheres, with pronounced space between them and no arrows. Returning to the map, Mel entirely redrew it instead of making additions/deletions, placing the self-motivated sphere prominently in the center, connecting it to all other spheres with double-headed arrows. Asterisks next to the arrows guide readers to a note describing the relationship between self-motivated and all other spheres: "you should have self-motivation to perform these tasks." This note reinforced that Mel saw self-motivation as a driver for writing tasks.

The visual details articulated in the revised map highlight the convergence of Mel's self-motivated and academic literacies: in the second map, she utilized visual literacies obtained in the self-motivated sphere (color-coding) coupled with scientific reasoning drawn from the academic sphere (arrows and interconnected placement of spheres). In some ways, her revised map resembles a concept map representing a chemical reaction that a chemistry major might draw for her notes.
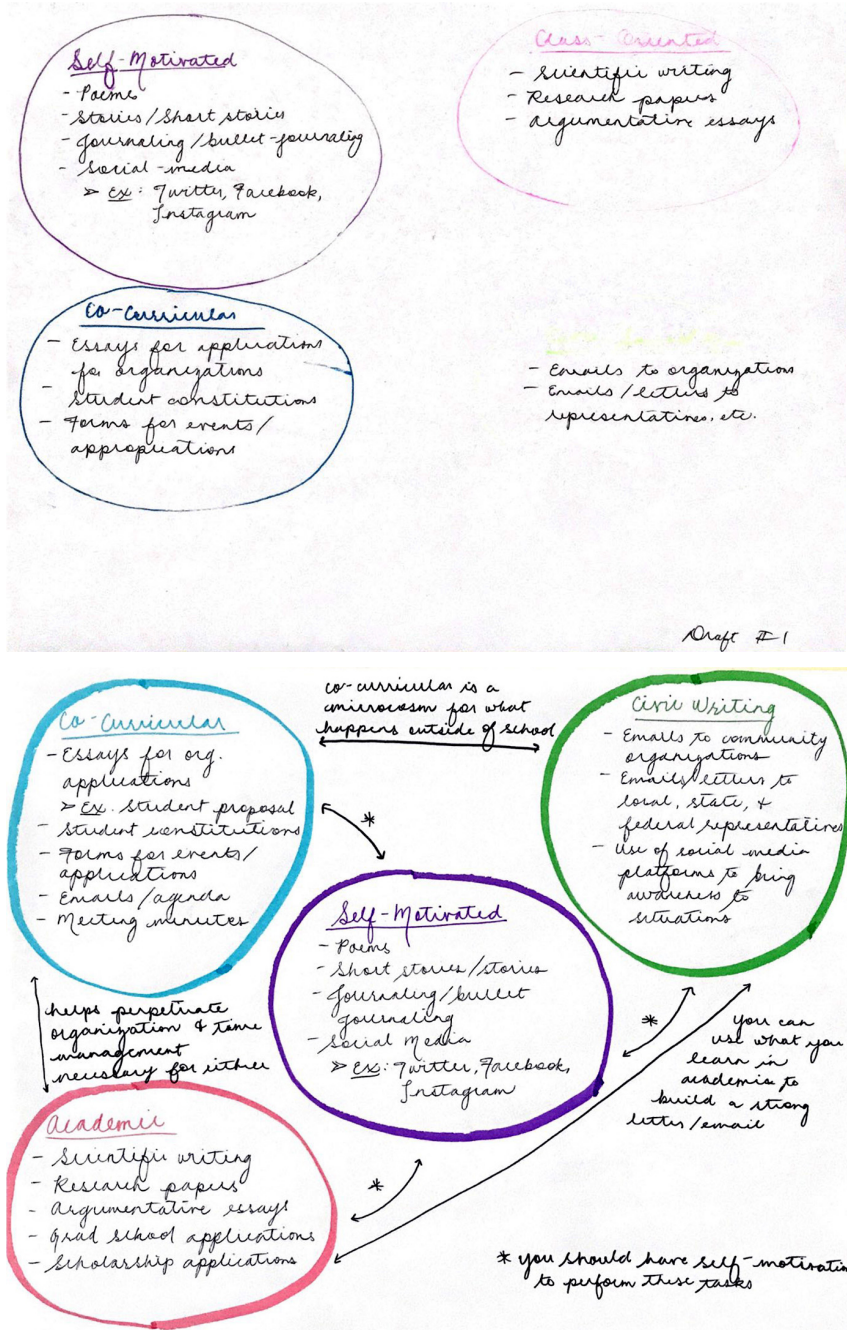
Self-Motivated
- Poems
- Stories/Short stories
- Journaling/bullet-journaling
- Social-media
  ⊳ ex: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram

Class-Oriented
- Scientific writing
- Research papers
- Argumentative essays

Co-Curricular
- Essays for applications for organizations
- Student constitutions
- Forms for events/appropriations

- Emails to organizations
- Emails/letters to representatives, etc.

Draft #1

Co-Curricular
- Essays for org. applications
  ⊳ ex: student proposal
- Student constitutions
- Forms for events/applications
- Emails/agenda
- Meeting minutes

co-curricular is a microcosm for what happens outside of school

Civic Writing
- Emails to community organizations
- Emails/letters to local, state, + federal representatives
- Use of social media platforms to bring awareness to situations

helps perpetuate organization & time management necessary for either

Self-Motivated
- Poems
- Short stories/stories
- Journaling/bullet journaling
- Social media
  ⊳ ex: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram

* you can use what you learn in academia to build a strong letter/email

Academic
- Scientific writing
- Research papers
- Argumentative essays
- Grad school applications
- Scholarship applications

* you should have self-motivation to perform these tasks

Figure 4.5. Pre- and Post-Interview Maps of Mel's Spheres of Writing (Case Study 3)

Ultimately, Mel's self-reports and map revision suggest that her personally held theory of writing positions all spheres as interconnected, with the self-motivated sphere occupying the most central position and informing her writing in all other spheres. Like Chris and Bushra, Mel saw a link between her self-motivated and academic writing; however, in her understanding, the self-motivated sphere informed writing in all other spheres, with motivation and composing competencies moving outward from the center.

Implications

As these case studies demonstrate, students' writing development is much more complex and sophisticated than is ordinarily reported in the existing literature; more specifically, students' writing development is located in many spheres *beyond* the university. Our recommendations, accordingly, highlight ways that faculty, programs, and institutions can support such writing development in their own practices.

In keeping with prior research emphasizing the critical role of metacognitive reflection in cultivating transfer (Roozen 2010), we found that while most of the writers we interviewed seemed aware of connections between their writing in different spheres, they tested and refined these connections through the metacognitive work of the mapping exercises and interviews. Therefore, we suggest providing students with structured opportunities to map their spheres of writing and the recursivities between spheres to help them perceive and draw upon their prior writing knowledge.

We encourage instructors to explicitly draw students' attention to the recursivities at play in their academic writing and their writing-beyond-the-classroom (Rosinski 2016) to help them recognize how their practices in one sphere influence and inform their choices in the other spheres. As with Chris, who recognized the relationship between his academic and self-motivated writing was a "two-way street," other writers may begin to understand how such borrowings can be assets in multiple spheres.

The participants in our study overwhelmingly suggested that faculty can support students in perceiving, mapping, and strengthening connections across the various spheres in which they write by giving them more freedom and agency to create meaning within the academic sphere. Therefore, we recommend faculty provide flexible assignment options that allow students to make meaningful (sometimes personal) connections to their writing (Anderson et al. 2015; Eodice, Geller, and Lerner 2019). One participant recommended "having less structure" and making students "come up with their own ideas and find their own voice when they're writing." Another suggested that instructors "[open] up the topics to the interests of the students" to make it "easy for [them] to select something that [they] enjoy and bring it into the classroom sphere."

Similarly, along with John Bean (2011) and Dan Melzer (2014), we recommend that faculty assign a range of written genres. Our findings suggest that assigning a variety of genre types in academic settings can help students perceive and act on recursivities across spheres as well as provide opportunities to tap into and build on their prior knowledge.

We also suggest that faculty developers facilitate an institutional shift toward more "student-centered curricula" (Budwig 2018) and "holistic teaching" (Henderson, Castner, and Schneider 2018) practices. As Tia McNair et al. point out, student-ready colleges demonstrate "intentional leadership centered on student learning and belief in student capacities" (2016, 83) and "address the talents and assets all students bring to college" (2016, 87).

By facilitating faculty development to implement the curricular approaches we recommend above to value students' lived experiences and prior knowledge, program directors and senior academic officers can continue to challenge deficit models of student learning. As the writers in our study demonstrate, college students *want* to make meaning across the contexts in which they move; it is our responsibility as writing instructors, program designers, and educational leaders to provide structured opportunities for them to do so.

In closing, we echo McNair et al.'s urging of institutions to "intentionally design, deliver, and maintain the resources and culture necessary to ensure student success" (2016, 62). One element of such intentional design is making visible the interconnections in students' lives to help them "see how systems and structures work" (McNair et al. 2016, 87). Our research suggests that drawing attention to the recursivities in students' writing lives, including the social nature of writing-beyond-the-classroom, is one way to help them prepare to recognize and adapt to the structures and systems in post-graduate employment and civic engagement.

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