

# A Curriculum of the Self: Students' Experiences with Prescriptive Writing in Low and No-Cost Adult Education Programs

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*The unique perspective that adult learners have on writing and its instruction in low or no-cost education programs offers valuable information to both instructors of written components in these courses and to scholars exploring how writing in adult education functions as community literacy. After conducting interviews with instructors and students at six adult education programs, I identify significant tensions between the ways that instructors perceive their students to experience writing and the ways students describe their own writing experiences, particularly in the areas of process, enjoyment, and feedback. After situating low and no-cost adult education programs as sites of community literacy, I explore these tensions and propose that they contribute to and arise from instructors' understanding that personal development through writing occurs with free-forms such as journaling, whereas students experience these benefits through prescriptive modes such as note-taking, rote copying, and dictation. I introduce a concept called the "curriculum of the self" to identify students' use of prescriptive modes to enjoy and engage with writing, and I end by situating this concept in other tensions inherent to and ongoing in community literacy, including "turbulent flow" and sustainable practices of reciprocity.*

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Myriam<sup>1</sup> likes to date her recipes, save them, and look at them years later to remind herself of when she baked a particular cake and for whom. I met her after her Adult Basic Education class near the end of 2017, when I interviewed her and five other students from various adult education programs in the Denver area, asking questions about how they experience writing. I also interviewed one instructor from each program, asking how they perceive their students to experience writing. One of Myriam's statements helps to locate this essay in community literacy discourse. She says,

I've been trying to make a project to have a notebook next to my bed because I always forget my dreams. I'm trying to see if it works to have something and write it down as soon as I wake up, but as soon as I wake up...the first thing that I think is am I going to work? Do I go to school? What time is it? Yeah, you start thinking about your responsibilities right away.<sup>2</sup>

A dream journal is an enticing project for inquiries into how non-academic writing might help a writer reflect in ways that develop understandings of the self; community literacy programs may wish to support such a project, in hopes that Myriam does start writing down her dreams one day, both for the personal benefits this kind of reflection makes possible and for the impact her voice could have on whatever communities she touches.

However, in this essay I explore the multiple ways that Myriam and other students in adult education programs enact this same kind of reflection not through dream journals, but through prescriptive writing such as rote copying, note taking, and dictation.<sup>3</sup> I identify

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1 All names are changed per IRB agreement.

2 The responses cited throughout this essay may be abridged with ellipses but are otherwise unchanged. I choose not to use "[sic]" when participants' oral responses do not conform to Standard Academic English.

3 I consider "prescriptive" in the OED sense of "giving definite, precise directions or instructions" ("prescriptive"). While this may sometimes overlap with Deborah Brandt's attention to "workaday writing," in this research "prescriptive" writing is specifically enacted in class through note taking, rote copying, dictation, and other forms of writing that are commonly positioned as antithetical to creative and expressive modes.

adult students' personal development through prescriptive writing as a concept called the "curriculum of the self." I borrow this phrase from Walker, a native speaker of American English pursuing his GED, who suggests the term as he describes the notes he takes in class as writing that "[pieces] what you're trying to learn together" and for when "you need to understand other things to understand that thing"; this, he says, is "like building a curriculum for yourself." Walker discusses note-taking the way many writers might discuss a draft of a short story or a journal entry.

I use the concept of the curriculum of the self to evoke the inevitable tensions that occur when adults in non-traditional<sup>4</sup> education programs pursue dominant discourses. Walker's phrase connects a practice that is typically located in traditional academia, "curriculum," defined as "the subjects comprising a course of study in a school or college" (Lexico 2019), with the infinite, unknown multitude of "the self"; this pairing generates new understandings of the ways that adult students learn, use, and, most importantly, enjoy and experience writing in low or no-cost education programs. I explore three particular tensions between the ways that instructors perceive their students to experience writing and students' own writing experiences in terms of process, enjoyment, and feedback. This inquiry shares the desire that Heather Lindenman and Justin Lohr (2018) express to "prompt" consideration for the ways that "educators and institutions gauge writing knowledge and how that influences what students at all levels think writing is" (29). I will end by proposing that the tensions I find in this research enact Lauren Rosenberg's (2015) notion of "turbulent flow," the inevitable "collisions of discourses" that occur in sites of adult education (6), and that acknowledging the notion of the curriculum of the self is a new way of enacting reciprocity, the now-expected culture in community literacy programs that values the skills and experiences of students as much as those of instructors (Miller, Wheeler, and White 2011). I suggest that the concept of

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<sup>4</sup> Sharing other scholars' use of the term, I use "traditional" academia to describe a college or university in which the majority of beginning students enroll within a few years of leaving high school. I resist the term "nontraditional students," which historically refers to students fitting non-dominant identities in regards to race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Compton, Cox, and Laanan 2006, 73); while this definition fits many of the students I interviewed, the assumption of a "traditional" student belies the work of community literacy and research.

the curriculum of the self offers new considerations for sustainable reciprocity in adult education courses, contributing to scholars' many explorations of the multiple methods of and benefits from enacting reciprocity (Gindlesparger 2010; Stone 2018; Holmes 2015; Shumake and Shah 2017).

## **METHODS: WRITING AS COMPONENT, NOT PRIORITY**

I initially identified thirteen potential programs for this study using prior knowledge and the internet. I sought programs that were publicly advertised as adult-serving, low-cost (\$60 per semester or less)<sup>5</sup>, and whose curriculum included "writing" or "literacy" as part of a more general goal. This last criteria importantly excluded low-cost community college writing courses and writing-focused programs such as poetry workshops; I specifically sought programs in which writing was a component of the greater goal—not the stated goal—in order to better understand how writing is perceived by both instructors and students whose current priority is not writing. Several of these programs were one of many operations within a greater organization, which in some cases required drilling through the website. After reaching what felt to be a saturation point, I called and emailed program coordinators as listed on the website, explaining that my research was IRB-approved, that results might one day be publicly available but anonymous, and that my intentions with this research were to nuance understanding of how writing is and might be used in adult learning communities.

Four programs were eliminated upon further research because of high cost, a focus on youth without also serving adults, or because they did not consider writing an official component of the curriculum; three others were ultimately unreachable after courageous bouts of phone tag. My administrative contacts with the remaining six programs, two programs of Family Literacy and four of Adult Basic

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5 This number was determined by the figures listed on websites, which suggested a divide between adult literacy programs, most of which charged sixty dollars or less per semester, and unaccredited college programs, which charged at least twice as much. Further, administrators from all programs in the former category did not perceive cost as a barrier to student entry, as their programs offer adequate financial aid.

Education (ABE),<sup>6</sup> agreed to the terms of participation and answered preliminary questions over the phone or email to confirm that the program met criteria. Administrative contacts then connected me with an instructor in their program who agreed to participate, after which I had no further contact with administrators. This instructor in turn selected a student for voluntary participation.<sup>7</sup> I conducted each semi-structured, hour-long interview onsite at the six different programs, separately and privately with one student and one instructor, and directly before or after a class to best accommodate participants' schedules. The separate, semi-structured interview protocols for the students and instructors included questions about the ways students use writing in and out of class, the feedback given and received, and the ways that writers return to writing. The development of my questions and the ensuing coding process followed the spirit of Stephanie Vie's exploration of qualitative research and community literacy as a "celebration of the individual voice" (2010, 177). Each participant consented to recording and received a \$25 gift certificate in thanks for their time. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open coding.<sup>8</sup>

Future research might explore nuances between the experiences of writing in a non-native language and writing in a native language in community literacy programs. This research would benefit from translators during interviews in order to include students learning English as they pursue Family Literacy and ABE programs. While I do not think that students' perceptions of writing in English versus in other languages are necessarily discrete, further exploring how these experiences might differ in adult education programs would benefit instructors, students, and programs. One student's observation that "I am not a good writer in my own language, but I think I can write

6 At one site, an instructor taught both English Language Acquisition (ELA) and ABE classes and selected a student from each track. While I interviewed both selected students, I have omitted the ELA student from my results because transcripts suggest that language barriers prevented her from fully comprehending the interview questions. See the end of "Methods" for thoughts about how this writer's perspective might be included in future research.

7 I did not request any characteristics (i.e. age, ethnicity, experience, primary language, etc.) of the instructors or the students beyond that they were currently teaching or enrolled in an adult education program that used writing among other components.

8 I thank the University of Denver Writing Center for supporting this research with resources and mentorship.

better in English than in my own language” opens many avenues for additional research. Similarly, there might be compelling differences in how writing is perceived in ABE, Family Literacy, and ELA programs.

## **PRESCRIPTIVE WRITING IN LOW OR NO-COST EDUCATION PROGRAMS AS COMMUNITY WRITING**

The six students and six instructors that I interviewed participate in programs that I call low or no-cost adult education programs, a category that includes Adult Basic Education (ABE), during which students prepare for the General Education Development (GED) and Family Literacy programs, which might collaborate with an elementary school to help parents communicate with their children’s teachers, read to their children, and assist with their homework. The students that I interviewed and their classmates are, on average, older than those in traditional undergraduate settings, which may inspire different methods of instruction; centuries-old theories suggest that adults learn differently than children, so that the term andragogy, teaching adult learners, is distinct from pedagogy (Knowles 2005, 58). Participating students are also more likely to come from backgrounds that do not offer access to traditional academic settings, to pursue their learning while committed to other responsibilities such as child or elder care and full-time employment (Petty and Thomas 2014; Tighe 2013; Wells 2014), and to have “frequently experienced previous struggles and failures” (Nielsen 2015, 144). I consider these programs sites of community literacy, spaces that are defined by others as those that “engage” writers outside of traditional academia (House, Myers, and Carter 2016), value the “knowledges” of these writers (Licona and Russell 2013), and welcome the “conflicting realities” (Flower 2008, 40) these knowledges inevitably generate.

Partially because of the additional responsibilities adult students share with their coursework, many instructors of these programs consider students’ non-academic lives as an important component to their learning. For example, these programs are likely to consider “health-related topics” in curricula (Mackert and Poag 2011), and many furnish the classroom with anti-drug posters and information about financial assistance and family programs (Wells 2014). Low and

no-cost adult education programs are also more likely to make space for the emotional contexts of students, a philosophy that for decades scholars show has been detrimentally antithetical to traditional academia (Jaggar 1989; hooks 1994; Stenberg 2011). However, René Antrop-González and Anthony De Jesús (2006) caution that care for students' emotions can extend into the "Ay Bendito syndrome," a form of "soft care" manifested by a "teacher's feeling sorry for a student's circumstances and lowering his/her academic expectations of the student out of pity" (412). Below, I show how this "syndrome" participates in the tensions explored in this essay.

Despite the attention to students' experiences in classrooms, there is what one scholar calls a "dearth of adult literacy writing research" (Nielsen 2015, 144). Previous work exploring students' experiential relationships with writing focus on undergraduate students at an elite university (Sommers and Saltz 2004) and high school students embarking on a writing mentorship program (Shah 2018; Lindenman and Lohr 2018). Alongside the "dearth" of information about the ways that adult students experience writing runs a corpus that suggests best practices for instructing writing to adult learners. In a literary synthesis on research on writing as a component of adult literacy, Kirsten Nielsen (2015) finds that relevant studies suggest that adult students benefit when writing exercises incorporate a variety of factors (143), with emphasis on "explicit strategy instruction" (146). "Explicit strategy instruction" proves particularly effective for students working to improve their scores on the written component of the GED exam (Berry and Mason 2012), perhaps the most dominating of discourses; the GED website encourages students to register in order to "learn how to write a perfect extended response" (GED 2019).<sup>9</sup> Instructors, then, face pressure to teach curriculums so rigid that "perfect" is advertised as a possibility.

However, as instructors are expected to teach strategies for attaining a "perfect" score, adult writing instruction best practices also task instructors with fostering students' "motivation, persistence, and self-efficacy" (Nielsen 2015, 143). Scholars emphasize journaling,

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9 See Elizabeth Parfitt and Stephen Shane's essay "Working within the System: The Effects of Standardized Testing on Education Outreach and Community Writing" (2016) proposing methods to teach for the GED while engaging writers' agencies and strengths.

a strategy seen often in responses from instructors I interviewed, as a “means to engage and motivate writers” (Nielsen 2015, 145), and a growing corpus of research exploring the personal and social benefits of “[engaging] and [motivating]” writers, as an inclusive part of any community includes projects valuing non-academic modes of writing (Gere 2001; Brandt 2015), the ways that writing can function as a tool of personal identity and health (Burgess and Ivancic 2010; Kells 2012; Turner and Hicks 2012), and the impact of writing on community health (Peck, Flower, and Higgins 1995; Carlo 2016). My research suggests that the societal and personal benefits that scholarship more commonly pairs with journaling, free writing, and other non-academic modes can also occur in adult students’ engagement with prescriptive writing.

The explicit focus that some adult education programs have on the GED exam and Standard Academic English makes low and no-cost education programs vulnerable to labels of “practical” as opposed to “intellectual” education (Bradbury 2012); prescriptive writing, as opposed to creative and critical writing, garners a similar stigma. Research suggests that, to the contrary, adult students in non-traditional programs value intellectual processes of inquiry over skills acquisition (Knowles 2005; Bradbury 2012). The concept of the curriculum of the self suggests that, just as students of the GED exam engage in intellectual inquiries as they follow rigid essay structures, students in ABE courses and others may use prescriptive writing as intellectual, inquiring, and ongoing personal development practices.

Below, I highlight aggregate patterns between the interviews with students and instructors that suggest three tensions between students’ experiences with writing and how instructors perceive their students to experience writing in the areas of process, enjoyment, and feedback. I have considered that the interview environment contributes to the differences I explore below: questions about students’ experiences put instructors in a strange position, as perhaps they would never choose to speak for the experiences of their students, well aware of the multiple and varied ways that emotions and experiences manifest; or perhaps students felt like I wanted a particular answer from my body language; or perhaps, because students were selected



as interview participants by instructors, instructors identified their most enthusiastic writing students for a study on “perceptions of writing.” However, the tensions between the ways that instructors perceive their students to experience writing and students’ own writing experiences dominated comparisons between interview responses, suggesting that these tensions are significant.

Below, I offer close readings of responses from instructors Coral, Reggie, and Ajay, and students Myriam, Walker, Lana, and Victor, several of whom expressed never having considered the questions I asked about writing; I hope that this makes their responses all the more interesting to community literacy scholarship.

## **I) PERCEIVING AND EXPERIENCING THE WRITING PROCESS:**

*“Words Are Gone Because They Are Deleting Them” // “It Will Be Saved in Your Brain”*

One of the most fundamental differences between instructors’ perceptions of their students’ writing experiences and students’ described experiences was the question of what writing *is*. This appears in the data through differences in how writing is perceived to happen.

### *Results:*

Table 1 presents instructors’ and students’ estimated responses to the question “How often do your students/you use writing in this program?” as matched as an instructor/student pair. Table 2 orders responses from lowest to highest percentage estimates. These numbers do not measure how much time in class is technically spent on writing, but how much of class time instructors and students *perceive* writing to happen.

Table 1. Perceived Estimated Percentage of Class Time that Students Spend Writing.		Table 2. Perceived Estimated Percentages Ordered from Low to High.	
Instructors	Students	Instructors	Students
15-20%	50%	10-15%	10%
depends on level	100%	15-20%	25%
10-15%	40%	25-35%	40%
25-35%	10%	50%	50%
50%	80%	50%	80%
50%	40%	depends on level	100%

### *Discussion:*

Tables 1 and 2 show that overall, students estimate that they write in class more than their instructors perceive them to be writing.<sup>10</sup> Analysis of responses show that this dissonance occurs in two general areas: first, instructors consider the act of writing as work that produces (i.e. text), a perception that may dismiss students' thinking, planning, and self-editing/deleting as writing; and second, students' attention to prescriptive writing such as note-taking, rote copying, and dictation may be less acknowledged by instructors.

#### a) The Seven-Minute Pause

Several instructors described difficulty in getting their students to "write." Ajay, a Family Literacy instructor who carefully composes text messages to friends in "long, explanatory, full sentences" and spent much of the summer before he and I met "designing that project-based style" of instruction, describes what he calls a "reluctance" in students to begin writing. I provide a generous portion of my conversation with Ajay to offer a taste of the style of the interviews and to demonstrate in context the connection Ajay makes between reluctance and writing:

*Alison:* And do you think that the participants enjoy the actual writing part of the program?

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10 The anomalous "10%" was cited by a student who, later in the interview, said: "I take notes the majority of the times I'm in class just because I don't want to forget anything."

*Ajay:* On a whole?

*Alison:* Yeah.

*Ajay:* On a whole, no. I would say no.

*Alison:* Can you explain that a bit?

*Ajay:* There is a lot of reluctance to start. So, a lot of my writing activities there is a—I learned last year to do like a big waiting period and just kind of sit and allow the reluctance to start writing to kind of pass. Before I would jump in and try to get into teacher mode. And, well, how about this, how about that? And let's try this together. I notice that if I just sat in wait and let it stew for a little bit, that uncomfortableness would turn into all right, I'll give it a shot.

*Alison:* So literally it's like, okay, start writing now more or less and nothing happens.

*Ajay:* For like seven minutes. *[Laughter]* Yeah.

*Alison:* That's a long seven minutes.

*Ajay:* Oh yeah. I'll have people like looking at their paper and just like, waiting and thinking. And it feels super-painful. But I notice that if I just kind of wait, it actually does happen.

Ajay describes the pause as students “[look] at their paper” as “super-painful,” but he also describes students as “waiting and thinking” during this time; is this pause “super-painful” for Ajay alone, while his students enact the first stage of their writing process?

Other instructors note a similar “reluctance” in different forms. When describing a writing exercise using a computer, Reggie, an ABE instructor who regularly jots down “lists upon lists,” journals,

and frames his work as a programmer as writing, also sees evidence that his students do not “write.” Reggie notes that his students

want to be precise. They want to get down exactly what they want to say and so I see that they type out words. And then I look back over and those words are gone because they are deleting them more so than they’re creating them. And so maybe they were trying to be exact and getting everything perfect the first time through.

Ajay’s comment about “reluctance to start” and Reggie’s about “deleting...more so than...creating” emphasize an assumption that many of us have about writing: writing requires production. While Reggie goes on to suggest that “the drafting of ideas is something that needs to be developed,” (that is, perhaps instructors could better emphasize the purpose of drafts), Reggie and Ajay assume that if there is not a draft to be *seen* then there is no draft.<sup>11</sup>

The tension between process versus product of writing is particularly relevant to low and no-cost adult education programs. Instructors might love to embrace the greater process of brainstorming and “waiting and thinking,” but the GED exam doesn’t care about brainstorms, thought processes, and the back and forth generative process of beginning to write. To pass the written portion of the GED exam, as the official website says, a student needs to “write clearly” (“Reasoning” 2019), an achievement that contributes to the aforementioned “perfect” score—but first, a student needs to put words on a page. Demands of the GED test aside, the assumption that without text, there is no act of writing overlooks the labor that students undergo. The process of writing then deleting, writing then deleting, is, after all, writing.

#### b) Save It to the Brain

- 11 It is possible that this tension exposes interpretations of the word “writing” more so than differences in observation of the act. Throughout the interviews, I told instructors and students that I was interested in hearing answers responding to their own understandings of writing—transcripts show that I often add the phrase “any time pen is on paper, for example” and other versions of the same idea, showing my own bias for what writing is. However, I showed this same bias to both instructors and students, and the discrepancy remains.

Responses suggest that, in addition to instructors privileging product over process, instructors and students categorize “writing” differently. When asked to expand on the ways that they use writing in class, several students discussed prescriptive forms, such as Walker’s rigorous practice of note-taking referenced earlier. Lana, a Family Literacy student who is a native Farsi speaker and began learning English in Tajikistan, considers copying stories word-for-word as writing: one of her favorite assignments is to copy a “long story,” which she does “three or five times,” because it is “helpful...like when you save in a computer, it’s the same as writing it five times, it will be saved in your brain.” The kinesthetic act of rote-copying, a mode unlikely to be considered as intellectual or creative by instructors or scholars, is not mindless for Lana: physically copying a text into her own writing is her way of moving the material into her mind.

The dissonance between Lana’s and Walker’s enthusiasm for copying and note-taking and the “reluctance” that instructors perceive in their students to write seems to come from instructors’ own resistance to prescriptive writing. Coral, an ABE instructor, points directly at this dissonance when she explains a dictation exercise she does with her students: “They write the sentence up on the board, and the rest of the class says whether it’s perfect or not, and if it’s not perfect, what is it that needs to be fixed. They love that, which I have yet to exactly understand why.” Coral’s students are focused on making a sentence “perfect,” an exercise that she cannot “understand” as something students might “love.” The notion of “perfect,” a word Reggie also uses to explain why his students delete more than they type (above), evokes the practical forms of writing that claim to be right or wrong, such as GED exams.

“Perfect” writing typically has no home in community literacy programs: how can a student’s “lived, relational, and situated knowledges” (Licona and Russell 2013, 1) be determined “perfect” or not? How could a learning space welcome the convergence of “difference, rival hypotheses, and conflicting realities” (Flower 2008, 40) with a single notion of “perfect”? While “perfect” may go against instructors’ belief in and practice of community literacy and all that it stands for, “perfect” is what many students might be pursuing. The notion of the curriculum of the self raises possibilities that

students' pursuit of "right" and "perfect" may not necessarily oppose self-expression and means of "[engaging]" and "[motivating]" their continued writing practice (Nielsen 2015 145). As I show in the next section, students might prioritize prescriptive forms of writing in the deliberate pursuit of mastering dominant discourses because they are motivated by—and also enjoy—the challenge.

## II) PERCEIVED AND EXPERIENCED ENJOYMENT OF WRITING:

*"Students Struggle to Enjoy [Writing]" // "Personally...I Love Writing"*

A second tension that emerged between instructors' and students' responses was the way that each group perceived students to enjoy writing. I expected the question about enjoyment to be an ice-breaker that would push the conversation into other topics; the answers to this question, however, show one of the most important findings in this research.

### *Results:*

Figure 1.<sup>12</sup> Instructors' and Students' Responses to Whether Students Enjoy Writing.

Instructors	Students
"On a whole, no. I would say no."	"Yes, it's practice for me ...Yes, I enjoy it."
"I think the...students struggle to enjoy it."	"Yeah."
"It depends on the person.."	"Sure, yeah, ...I enjoy a lot [to] write... it's really fun."
"Some of them yes... there are more [students] who complain about having to write."	"Yes."
"No."	"Yes, I do."
"No, I don't."	"Personally, ...I love writing."

12 Responses in Figures that are not in quotations are paraphrased for concision.

Figure 2. nstructors and students describing students' lack of/ enjoyment with writing.

Instructors' speculations for why their students (seemingly) do not enjoy writing	Student's explanations for why they do enjoy writing
<p>"<b>Lack</b> of experience being a student"; "<b>lack</b> of practice"</p> <p>"they've <b>never been taught</b> to dream. And writing can give you wings, but only if you know that you have wings...I also think these are not students that typically journal or have learned that writing can be pleasurable. Poetry <b>scares</b> them."</p> <p>"I think a lot of them are pretty <b>intimidated</b> to write"</p> <p>"They <b>don't know</b> how to get started, they are <b>not sure</b> what's good. And they have more of a tendency to just copy from text than to create their own sentences."</p> <p>"to get them to expand on responses is generally <b>painful</b>. ... Probably stems from somewhere in the past where it's <b>not an enjoyable pastime</b>...Maybe they don't like their handwriting; ... it is a <b>struggle</b> to have writing occur in the academic environment ...maybe it's <b>overwhelming</b>...There's a lot of <b>bad habits</b> to be broken and a lot of maybe really <b>painful memories</b> associated with writing to be aware of."</p> <p>"I think it's really <b>hard</b> for them to write ...I think by the time they get here, they just might be <b>tired</b>. The other thing is that I think that it just <b>doesn't come easy</b> to them."</p>	<p>Repetitive writing exercises "<b>wake up</b> my brain"; copying "a long story" is "<b>helpful</b>"; she writes to "<b>find something new</b>. I think my brain is empty, like a flower needs water, our brains are the same."</p> <p>"Because I <b>learn more</b> with writing."</p> <p>"I <b>love</b> write because when I can't remember something, I can read my notes...so for me it's <b>good</b>. I use in home. I use my notebook in home when I need to so, yeah, it's <b>good</b> for me."</p> <p>"I <b>enjoy</b> thinking of words, like strings of words....Kind of like pushing my vocabulary or using words in a context that's... <b>dynamic</b> subjectively I guess....It's aesthetically <b>pleasing</b>, plus it's <b>practical</b> for, like, revision."</p> <p>"Because first of all, I'm – my goal is to have <b>more knowledge</b> how to read, how to write in English. That is something that it <b>helps</b> me a lot to learn how to spell words. That sometimes is <b>hard</b> for me."</p> <p>"Personally, I <b>like</b> writing. I <b>love</b> writing, so I <b>like</b> it. That's why I come here, to <b>improve</b> my writing."</p>

Figure 3. Excised words and phrases from responses about students' enjoyment of writing

Instructors	Students
Lack; lack Never been taught; scares Intimidated Don't know; are not sure Painful; not an enjoyable pastime; struggle; overwhelming; bad habits; painful memories Hard; tired; doesn't come easy	Wake up; helpful; find something new Learn more Love; good; good Enjoy; dynamic; pleasing; practical More knowledge; helps; hard Like; love; like; improve

Figure 4. Responses to "How do you use writing outside of class?"

Instructors	Students
Research paper on a Spanish novel (in Spanish); letter writing; texts with "long, explanatory, full sentences"	To "talk and write correctly" or else her kids "will not learn right"; to help her be a nurse
Daily <b>journaling</b> (gratitude and "regular <b>journal</b> "); poetry challenge of writing a poem every day; has published a book and scripts for two shows	Texting; recipes; emails; "when I go to the doctor, to the dentist, and stuff like that."
Emails, Facebook, texting, <b>journaling</b> writing thank you cards, to-do lists	"I help my husband to write.... I text message with the boss"; writes letters with her daughter
Assignment sheets; emails; <b>book projects</b> , "One nonfiction and one fiction"; social media	Note-taking; texting; "I write code"
"I have <b>books and books of journals</b> and notes... and prefer sending letters...I take notes all the time. I jot down list upon list ...I keep <b>journals</b> . I write both digitally and with pen and paper, professionally and <b>just for personal</b> . I write.... I program, too, so I suppose that's writing."	texting; "I've been trying to...have a notebook next to my bed because I always forget my dreams. I'm trying to see if it works to have something and write it down as soon as I wake up, but as soon as I wake up, I forgot"; recipes; birthday cards; notes at work
"I write all the time"; emails; texts; grant writing; letters; meeting minutes; "I do <b>journaling</b> every single night before I go to bed."	"Sometimes my... brothers in law, they ask me to write a letter they need"; texts; emails



*Discussion:*

Figure 1 shows that most instructors believe their students do not enjoy writing, and those that hesitate lean towards “no”; every student, however, answers unequivocally that they *do* enjoy writing. Figures 2 and 3 show that nearly all of the six instructors offer negative emotional possibilities for what they perceive as students’ lack of enjoyment with writing, whereas students use positive phrases and words. Instructors’ acknowledgment of students’ emotions both confirms the contrast between these programs and traditional academia’s distrust for emotions in learning (Jaggar 1989; hooks 1994; Stenberg 2011); instructors’ concern for their students’ seeming lack of enjoyment with writing informs their lesson plans. Most instructors discussed projects that engage writing in personal and reflective ways, such as “group writing” to make the work less “scary,” “human paragraphs” to increase participation, free-writing, and journaling, including creative forms such as photojournalism projects and “dialogue journals,” an epistolary conversation between instructor and student. Nielsen’s literature synthesis shows that overall, studies on adult writing instruction value journaling as a practice that “offers frequent opportunities for practice and reinforces habits of writing regularly that are essential to improvement,” can be “a substantial comfort and stress relief for students,” and “[creates] a sense of ownership over the writing experience” (2015, 147). Nielson’s research, and the instructors in this study, connect positive experiences with writing to creative and expressive modes.

Instructors’ own experienced pleasure with non-academic writing seems to inform how they perceive their students might enjoy writing: emboldened words in Figure 4 show that a majority of instructors journal and write creatively, some of them enthusiastically, whereas the majority of students use practical writing at home (see the right-hand column of Figure 4 for examples). The ABE instructor, Coral, makes most explicit that she connects enjoyment of writing to journaling and creative modes, a link that is not surprising given that she self-identifies as “a poet, a playwright, and an author” who, at the time that we spoke, was on day thirty-nine of a year-long challenge to write a poem a day that she shares publicly. She does not see similar passions for writing in her students:

I'm not sure I would say in my current group that any one of them enjoys writing. I also think these are not students that typically journal or have learned that writing can be pleasurable. Poetry scares them like math scares them. They did not typically grow up in a household where books were seen as a go-to thing.

Coral conflates the practice of journaling with the knowledge that "writing can be pleasurable"; she also suggests that "pleasurable" writing is connected to upbringing, i.e. in homes "where books were seen as a go-to thing." Perhaps the thinking goes, if people who enjoy writing keep a journal the way that I do, my peers do, and most published authors do, then keeping a journal will help students enjoy writing.

The right columns of Figures 2, 3, and 4, however, suggest that students' enjoyment of writing has little to do with journaling and free expression. Instead of connecting enjoyment of writing with the freedom to express themselves, grammatical rebellion, and a way of working through emotional hardships, students enjoy writing because it is hard and it helps them improve, perhaps manifesting characteristics of the recently-popularized notion of "grit," the "tendency to prefer labor over leisure" (Duckworth 2015). More specifically, students enjoy *prescriptive* writing, such as Coral's students' enjoyable pursuit of a "perfect" dictation, because it is hard. Students' positive experiences with prescriptive writing challenge the ways that instructors perceive students' relationship with writing in general; this tension extends to the feedback that instructors provide and the kinds of feedback students appreciate.

### **III) PERCEIVING AND EXPERIENCING FEEDBACK ON WRITING:**

*Refusing The "Crushing" Potential of "Red Marking" // "I Like to Know When I've Made A Mistake"*

Perceptions of feedback that instructors provide on students' writing offers the third site of tension that I explore.

Results:

Figure 5. Participants’ reflections on the feedback they give (instructors) and receive (students) on writing in this program.

Instructors	Students
“I don’t know if they’ll read it.”	“I always bring this in to the teacher to see if there are mistakes... <b>I never write something without showing.</b> ”
“I don’t want to <b>crush</b> the spirit and the intention behind, so particularly if there are a lot of errors, I’ll focus on one thing.”	“if somebody explain it to me and stuff like that, or read it to me, <b>then I can understand it.</b> ”
“They rarely do” [ask questions about feedback when she invites them to]	“I think that <b>it’s a good way</b> [of providing feedback]... because she is listen what we are saying and she’s like, ‘No, you need to say that because this is incorrect’.”
“I always tell them good job or good start. Because most of them are <b>very anxious</b> about doing well and so they need some kind of encouragement.”	“If I’m wrong, <b>I would like to be corrected</b> or if I made a mistake I would like to know I made a mistake. Or just any kind of error I guess or something open for improvement.”
“I don’t wanna <b>overwhelm</b> them with feedback. .... We gotta be <b>cautious</b> with feedback.”	“he check my work and <b>it always helps</b> when I do something wrong. <b>I like to know when I’m doing something wrong</b> so I can go and do it right. That makes – <b>it helps me to learn more.</b> ”
“I’ll say to them, when I’m handing back their paper, this is a great job. You knocked it out of the park or why don’t we try and work on this a little bit more, but <b>I always try and say something very positive about it.</b> ”	“The feedback <b>always helps me</b> ...that helps me to write better, <b>to be a better writer.</b> Because the next time I see that error, I would not make it again and <b>I love to have feedbacks</b> from the teacher.”

Discussion:

As noted above, most of the instructors expressed awareness of the non-academic and emotional lives of their students: these factors perhaps inspire the cautious and deliberate feedback on students’ writing shown in Figure 5. Instructors’ skills of providing intentional, positive, and encouraging feedback have likely developed over years of experience; however, the emboldened phrases from students in

Figure 5 suggest that “cautious” feedback is precisely what students *don’t* want.

Students’ responses about feedback give no indication of feeling “crushed” or “overwhelmed.” This must partially be the achievement of instructors’ deliberate care and attention *not* to create negative feelings, yet their responses also suggest they could handle more. Victor, a native Spanish speaker who grew up in Mexico, explains that his desire for writing is not hindered by rules and boundaries that might be marked during feedback, but rather boosted by them. He takes an upper-level ABE course on scholarship from an organization that supported him during his early years in the United States, and he likes writing in English more than in Spanish because when he learned Spanish as a child,

maybe I didn’t put too much attention in what I was doing at school. And right now, I pay attention to the teacher and where to put a comma or semicolon or anything like that, and before, I just write. I didn’t put any semicolons or commas or anything, just writing.

Concern for punctuation rules feeds, rather than depresses, Victor’s energy for writing: indeed, he does not intend to stop classes after passing the GED because he wants to “learn to learn.” Though instructors worry that Victor and other students will turn away from writing if given too much feedback, students like Victor write particularly *for* that feedback.

The dissonance between instructors’ caution and students’ appetite for more feedback evokes Antrop-González and Jesús’s (2006) *Ay Bendito* syndrome, the “soft care” that causes instructors to lower their standards for some students out of “pity” for their emotional and non-academic situations (412). It is easy to see how this “syndrome” could negatively impact ambitious students like Victor, but it is also easy to empathize with instructors demonstrating these symptoms in low or no-cost adult education programs. One instructor speculates that writing can be “very frustrating for students; their life has been about surviving, and when you’re in survival mode, you think about, ‘How am I gonna feed my kids?’”; another proposes that students

don't do journaling exercises at home because "they just might be tired." Perhaps because instructors understand the urgency for many students to pass the GED or communicate with their child's teachers, they understand the importance of not pushing a student too hard in the short term for the sake of the long term.

Instructors' consideration of students' emotional and non-academic lives is one of the strengths of low or no-cost adult education programs; but if instructors provide "soft care" when students want tough love, the power dynamics that community literacy programs aim to deconstruct are maintained. Perhaps feedback that doesn't "overwhelm" results less in students' sense of freedom to express themselves and more in students feeling stuck where they started. Increased awareness of these tensions could help to acknowledge space for students' extracurricular challenges without *displacing* students' goals.

## **"BUILDING A CURRICULUM FOR YOURSELF": PRESCRIPTIVE WRITING AS PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The concept of the curriculum of the self highlights the possibility that adult students can experience prescriptive writing, such as rote copying, note-taking, and dictation, as a process that is "intellectual" as well as "practical" (Bradbury 2012), which might inform the ways that instructors use writing in adult education classrooms. I do not suggest that instructors eradicate journaling and reflective writing; rather, I propose that considering the possibility that students can use prescriptive writing creatively, pleasurably, and actively, may relieve some of the pressure imposed on instructors to teach a "perfect" GED essay on the one hand and a love of writing on the other: sometimes, these goals are one and the same.

For example, instructors like Reggie, the ABE instructor-slash-programmer, are aware that note-taking is an important skill; however, he seems to perceive it as a task of the present confined to a particular course. Reggie explains,

We do note taking. We do very **formalized** notes. I teach Cornell note style<sup>13</sup> in the class as the approach that I would encourage them to use, but by no means force them to use. It is more about trying to **instill an organization** of notes and even more than that is that we need to also **refer to back to** our notes. And so I try to build that reflective piece back into the instruction model. So at some point, I stop teaching and be like, you already have notes, very detailed notes. We did them yesterday. So **use those to move forward**, to try to get them to see **the usefulness of** writing all this stuff down.

Reggie, and the Cornell method, acknowledge that note-taking can be a “reflective piece” of students’ learning; however, his phrases that I embolden suggest that he connects note-taking with short-term academic progress. The words and phrases “formalized,” “instill an organization,” “refer back to,” “move forward,” and “usefulness” focus on a systematic learning path organized along the curriculum of one particular class: taking notes helps students understand what they are learning in this class, and it will help them to “move forward” with specific material.

Comparing Reggie’s description of note-taking with Walker’s, the ABE student quoted near the top of this essay, suggests a significant difference in the way that instructor and student conceive of note-taking. (Despite their similar interests in note-taking, Walker is not Reggie’s student.) Walker says,

[note-taking is] just helpful to **continue learning** because you can get lost. And depending on what you’re learning if you need to understand multiple aspects of something to understand that, that’s where taking notes helps because you know where you’re leaving off and you know kind of **how to piece what you’re trying to learn together**. ... Like I guess if you’re trying to learn something that – it’s **like building a curriculum for yourself**. Because you can’t just go off learning about some things that you need to understand other things to understand that thing.

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13 The Cornell note-taking system is a rigorously detailed method including five steps: record, question, recite, reflect, review (Cornell University 2019).

With the emboldened words and phrases “continue learning,” “how to piece what you’re trying to learn together,” and the eponymous to this essay “curriculum for yourself,” Walker suggests that his notes serve him the way that journaling may serve other writers, including most of the instructors I spoke with: Walker’s notes help him to understand a class, yes, but they also help him to understand himself.

## **CONCLUSIONS: PRESCRIPTIVE WRITING, RECIPROCITY IN TURBULENCE**

The other students quoted in this essay, like Walker, engage prescriptive writing such as rote copying, note-taking, and dictation as ongoing personal development. For Lana, the student who copies out a “long story...three or five times” in order for it to “be saved in [her] brain,” rote-copying shapes the way she understands a subject: she says that when she is not writing, “I think my brain is empty, like a flower needs water, our brains are the same.” And Victor, the student inspired by semicolons and commas, extends his enthusiasm for punctuation into writing about himself: one of his favorite assignments is to “write stories,” but only when the assignment will be handed in. He says, “I always write about my own experiences, my own life, and I think that’s a way to tell a little bit more about myself. And so, the teacher or the students can know me a little better.” Victor suggests that personal stories can still be personal even if he writes them for the instructor rather than for himself; more, because learning to write is intimately tied to his personal goals, writing stories for the instructor *is* writing for himself.

These tensions between the ways that instructors perceive their students to experience writing and how students describe their own writing experiences identify new and specific components to what Lauren Rosenberg (2015) calls the “turbulent flow” of learning sites. Turbulent flow describes the inevitable “collisions of discourses” that occur “as people navigate their everyday experiences” and is “[a] persistent mixing rather than linear or predictable patterns” (6); I suggest that the differences between instructors’ perception of their students’ experience with writing and students’ own writing experiences are in this “persistent mixing.” As instructors offer free journaling as a way for students to write more and express themselves

while doing so, students focus on shaping prescriptive writing tasks into their own ways of learning.

Within these turbulent flows, acknowledging the unexpected, nuanced, and individualized ways that students use prescriptive writing, particularly as intellectual and personal processes, offers new ways to enact reciprocity. Rather than imposing particular methods on students of developing positive relationships with writing that invite personal expression, instructors, administrators, and scholars might value and learn from the ways that students cultivate their own ways of written enjoyment and engagement. Spaces that value students' perspectives and skills might also consider what valuing students' experiences with writing looks like, especially if they differ from (*because* they differ from) what research predicts.

After working closely with the students' and instructors' responses and considering the assumptions we all make about how others experience writing (which impacts how we teach writing, and to what extent we are open to learning and practicing writing), I caught myself in the act of assuming. Re-reading the transcript of my conversation with Myriam, I see that she, like Walker, also brings up taking notes—but, unlike Walker, she does not return to it when I pass it by:

*Myriam:* The bullet points or when I'm—when I want to have something noticeable that can go back and easier for me to find it if I don't remember. That will be a good way to make it in bigger letters or different color.

*Alison:* So those are all for when you're taking notes?

*Myriam:* Yes, when I'm taking notes or even when it's something about math, for example, that it's important to remember.

*Alison:* It's a good idea. In addition to writing when you take notes for school, are there other ways you use writing?



I wonder what Myriam might have shared had I pursued *her* ways of using writing, rather than the ways of using writing that I expected to discuss. While we learn that Victor's knowledge of commas and semicolons allows him to tell stories about himself, Walker uses notes to build his own curriculum, and Lana copies a story word for word three times over because it "wakes up [her] brain," we know that Myriam has *thought about* keeping a dream journal, but we do not know what she *does* do to write for herself, because I changed the subject.

In addition to preparing their students for a particular written exam, work, or daily communication, the instructors in this study all hope to foster students' self-expression and enjoyment of writing in ways that exceed the ABE or Family Literacy course. While scholarship on adult writing instruction cautions that, "too often, the aspect of creativity and personal expression are hidden from students, who are only driven toward academic or professional tasks in writing" (Nielsen 2015, 148), the concept of the curriculum of the self reverses the warning: creativity and personal expression might also be "hidden" from instructors and scholars when they drive students *away from* academic or professional writing tasks. Perhaps students' pursuit of a "perfect" sentence or GED score does not confine their writing to dominant modes but serves as a source of energy and inspiration; perhaps in sites of community literacy, "perfect" does not need to be a dirty word.

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