Electronic Portfolios in a High School Community of Practice:
Action Research Exploring Writing Experiences in an Advanced
Placement Writing Course

Archibald Franklin Harrison IV

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ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS IN A HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: 
ACTION RESEARCH EXPLORING WRITING EXPERIENCES IN AN ADVANCED 
PLACEMENT WRITING COURSE

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Susan Harrison, to Chris and Katelin Alexander, to Mara Harrison, and to Caleb Harrison. All I am and all I have accomplished, I owe to you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have achieved this goal without the support of many people. I would like to express my extreme gratitude to Dr. William Morris, my committee chair and my mentor throughout this process, and the other members of my committee: Dr. Michael Grant, Dr. Ismahan Arslan-Ari, and Dr. Anna C. Clifford. I appreciate your time, your expertise, and your guidance.

I also wish to thank my family and friends for your loving support. You have been my strength and source of energy and determination.

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ABSTRACT

The underlying assumption of this study is that writing as a process has profound implications for success and fulfillment both in and beyond the classroom. A second assumption is that electronic portfolios provide students a space to write, revise, reflect, share, and explore themselves as writers. Students who engage with and embrace the writing process to the point that they self-identify as writers may be more likely to not only succeed at academic writing tasks but to integrate writing into their future lives (Lengelle and Meijers, 2014). For writing to play a prolonged role in this level of academic, professional and personal achievement, individuals must integrate the concept of being a writer into their multi-faceted identities. Junior high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement Language and Composition, a writing intensive course, are preparing to take a writing exam for possible college credit and are also on the threshold of transitioning to college. Embracing a writer’s identity may help them through and beyond these processes. Therefore, the purpose of this action research was to explore how students in an Advanced Placement writing course develop identities as writers while engaged in an online community of practice. Three research questions were (1) what do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?; (2) how does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?; and (3) how does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?
Eight students enrolled in AP Language and Composition were purposively selected from larger classes to participate in this study. The data was collected from semi-structured focus group interviews, writing reflections, and students’ reflective journals. A general inductive approach was used to analyze the data (Cresswell, 2014). Inductive analysis involves 1) transcription, 2) reading the data, 3) assigning codes to parts of text, 4) identifying similarities and differences in codes and organizing them into categories, and 5) identifying themes that emerge from the categories. Three themes emerged from this study: (1) confronting anxieties as developing writers in an AP classroom, (2) finding community with developing writers in an AP Classroom, and (3) thinking like developing writers in an AP Classroom.

Findings indicate that use of electronic portfolios and working collaboratively with other student writers supported students writing efforts and positively impacted how they viewed themselves as writers in the course. Implications of findings for implementing student portfolios into a high school writing community of practice are discussed, as are the limitations of the study.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

National Context

“Writing well means believing in your writing and believing in yourself, taking risks, daring to be different, pushing yourself to excel” (Zinsser, 2006). Often for today’s high school students, however, writing well enough is the target goal rather than the elusive writing well. Social communications such as tweeting, Snapchat, and texting and overall lack of interest in or commitment to the process of writing threaten to dilute the power of writing for these students. So, herein lies the conundrum. Is it acceptable for students to write well enough, or does it merit investigation into the processes and experiences that promote writing well?

It is common knowledge that preparing students for college requires attention to developing their writing skills. The dearth of research on writing at the secondary level, then, becomes curious (Durst, 1990). Juzwik and her colleagues (2006) conducted a comprehensive review of scholarly publications from 1999-2004 and found that the majority of writing research was being conducted at the elementary, middle, and post-secondary levels, with only 10.4% being conducted at the secondary level. These gateway years seem too important not to address.

One possible rich vein to mine in this field is the students’ affective perceptions of themselves as writers. According to Howe (2017), first-year college writing students are underrepresented in this research, with the majority of the studies looking at at-risk
secondary students (Heitin, 2014; Houp, 2014) and mainstream college students (James, 2012; Ostrom, 2012). It is a small leap to make from first-year college writing students to secondary-level Advanced Placement (AP) writing students. AP writing courses are purposefully aligned to college expectations and rigor. College Board offers two AP writing courses, each “designed to provide high school students the opportunity to engage in a typical introductory-level college English curriculum” (College Board, 2014a).

In the decade from 2003 to 2013, the total number of AP examinees nationwide increased by 51% while the number of low-income examinees more than quadrupled during the same time (College Board, 2014b). These statistics paint a portrait of an increased college-bound mentality among our nation’s students characterized by a broadened and less stereotypical AP demographic. This portrait is supported by the National Commission on Writing (2003) which reports that three-quarters of American students are enrolling in college. In addition to college readiness, writing also is identified as playing a significant role for professionals in securing “higher-skill, high-wage, professional” positions in the work-force (National Commission on Writing, 2004, p. 19).

Finally, the positive implications of writing on life transitions and overall life-long satisfaction are supported in the psychological literature. Having a writer’s mindset and engaging in journaling and other forms of written reflective discourse have shown to help freshmen adjust to college life and experience overall contentment (Işık & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2017).
Local Context

This action research took place at a suburban high school in the southeastern United States. The school is located in the fifth largest public school district of South Carolina. The school’s fall 2019 enrollment had a student population of approximately 2100 students and houses two magnet programs, Explorations and Discovery, both of which are competitive and draw motivated and accomplished students from across the district. The Discovery magnet program is an Honors level program that allows students to engage in research in mathematics and the sciences. Explorations is a college-preparatory program in which students take a problem-based approach in mathematics and the sciences (Temoney, 2018).

The 2018-19 demographic breakdown of students at this high school were 50.8% African American, 25.9% white, 6.6% Asian, 12.4% Hispanic, 4.3% other. 35.4% of the student population receive free or reduced lunch and 45.3% are defined as living in poverty (Temoney, 2018). These statistics suggest a diverse student population yet do not even hint at the variety of student backgrounds, experiences, and feelings that made up the student body.

At schools nationwide, AP Literature and Composition is typically offered at the senior level and focuses on fiction and poetry. AP Language and Composition is the junior level course taught nationwide and is a course steeped in rhetorical analysis and persuasion (College Board, 2014). For the 2018-2019 academic year at this high school, 12.3% of the school’s population opted to take one of the school’s AP English courses (Temoney, 2018). Students taking AP Language and Composition scored an average of 3.2 on the AP exam (out of a 5-point scale). Most colleges and universities offer college
credit for scores over 3, although some of the more competitive universities require a score of 4. The specific score breakdown at this high school for this course was: Score of 5 = 12%; score of 4 = 27%; score of 3 = 34%; score of 2 = 27%; score of 1 = 0%.

While some of the students who take these AP courses are enrolled in magnet programs, suggesting initiative and ability, personal observation suggests that they are science and math-oriented students who are oftentimes more comfortable with a beaker or an equation than an essay, journal, letter, or poem. Joining them in these courses are students from honors level and college-preparatory classes, some of whom have never taken an AP course. The range of writing ability and writing confidence is wide in these classes. It is the school’s mission to increase student access to AP courses by encouraging students who are not on an AP track but who show signs of potentially being successful in these courses to enroll in them (Temoney, 2018). Therefore, the diversity in ability and confidence level is likely to increase in the coming years.

**Statement of the Problem**

There exists a problem with first-year students arriving at college not prepared to meet the demands of college writing courses (ACT, 2018; Goldstein, D., 2017; National Commission on Writing, 2003). This begins at the secondary level where many students are also not prepared to navigate the difficult transition from high school to college. Although bridge classes such as AP English courses are designed to offer high school students an accelerated path to college credit, the profile of the AP student is changing. Students from various backgrounds and ability levels are opting into or being encouraged to take these courses (Tugend, 2017). While for the most part they may not exhibit significant deficiencies in basic writing ability, it is not uncommon for many of them to
identify as reluctant writers or to not think of themselves in a writing context at all. This detachment from a writer’s identity inhibits their potential. Understanding how conditions within a writing community help foster a self-concept as a writer could benefit these students within the context of that community, with transitioning to college writing, and with life-long satisfaction.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research was to explore how students in a high school Advanced Placement writing course develop identities as writers while engaged in an online community of practice.

Research Questions

In order to consider how students in an Advanced Placement writing curriculum develop identities as writers, this study examined three research questions:

1. What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?
2. How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?
3. How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?

Statement of Research Subjectivity and Positionality

I served as both the researcher and the teacher and facilitator of the learning process throughout the unit. I have been a high school English teacher since 1999 and have taught AP English courses since 2007. My teaching schedule typically includes AP, Honors, and College Preparatory (CP) level courses, all of which include writing instruction, but the AP courses are writing intensive. Every year, for a variety of reasons,
students opt to take my AP course who do not have a proven record of success in AP courses. While maintaining the rigor of an advanced curriculum I also had to be aware of the varying levels of ability within my AP courses and design the instruction accordingly.

The researcher is the “primary instrument” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5) for data collection and analysis and has the advantage of seeking clarification, noting nonverbal as well verbal cues, and being flexible to explore when the unanticipated occurs. My role as teacher-as-researcher allowed me to embrace an interpretive qualitative stance (Merriam, 2002, p. 4) in which I gathered data on individuals experiencing and interacting with their social worlds from which both they and I derive meaning. A necessary precaution was to identify and monitor any biases I had in the process. In an action research qualitative design, an ethical issue to be cognizant of is not allowing the researcher’s relationship with the student participants to influence the analysis of data (Mertler, 2017). In my study this meant not allowing my opinions, feelings, or knowledge of students (from other teachers or their reputations at school, for instance) to guide the interpretation of data, but to allow the data to inform me of student identity.

Because I was perceived as being in a position of power in the classroom setting, it was important to be aware of this power imbalance when interacting with students as a researcher. This imbalance had the potential to influence students’ decisions to participate in the study, therefore I made certain that students knew that participation was voluntary. I also had to craft interview and focus group questions that were not leading.
Definition of Terms

1) Identity:
   a) “What it means to be recognized as a ‘certain kind of person’” (Gee, 2000, p. 100) within a given context.
   b) “A way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5).

2) Writer Identity:

According to Ivanič (1998) we are referring to one or more of four things when we refer to writer identity. They are categorized in the following manner: 1) aspects of the identity of an actual writer writing a particular text (autobiographical self, discoursal text, and self as author); and 2) abstract, prototypical identities available in the socio-cultural context of writing (possibilities of self-hood).

- Autobiographical self “is the identity which people bring with them to any act of writing, shaped as it is by their prior social and discoursal history…and that this identity they bring with them to writing itself is socially constructed and constantly changing as a consequence of their developing life-history: it is not some fixed, essential ‘real self’” (p. 24).
• “The ‘self as author’ is a relative concept: writers see themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors, and present themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors” (p. 24).

• The possibilities of self-hood refers to the “prototypical possibilities for self-hood which are available to writers in the social context of writing” (p. 27) and do not belong to particular individuals but are social identities.

3) Electronic Portfolio: A digital space for writers to “revise, reflect upon, and showcase their work where they can imagine, refine, and convey their self-constructed identities over time” (McAlpine, 2005)

4) Advanced Placement: A program created by the College Board that provides college-level curricula and the opportunity for college credit to high school students in the United States and Canada. In order to earn college credit students must earn high scores on examinations.

5) Advanced Placement Language and Composition: A course designed by the College Board for junior-level high school students focusing on written rhetorical analysis, argumentation, and persuasion.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this action research was to explore how students in a writing intensive Advanced Placement course suburban high school in the southeaster United States develop identities as writers while engaged in an online community of practice.

For the purposes of this study, I framed the variable how students see themselves within identity theory, relying primarily on the discoursal construction of identity as presented by Ivanič (1998), Gee’s (1999) contextual views of identity assignment, and Wenger’s theory of identity development in communities of practice. In addition to identity, the variables (1) student writing (affective implications of writing) and (2) electronic portfolios (integrating technology into the writing process) were used to guide the literature review process. I used the electronic databases ERIC, EDUCATION SOURCE, and Google Scholar to locate published scholarly articles and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global to find dissertations related to my line of inquiry. Combinations of the following keywords were used to facilitate the search: constructivism, communities of practice, advance placement, writing, emotion, identity, technology, digital, electronic, portfolio, student, secondary, adolescence, and high school. In addition, I followed the researcher’s tradition of mining the references and scoured each source’s reference list for potentially useful sources.
This literature review is organized into two sections: (a) the first section addresses the theoretical basis for this investigation, specifically discussing constructivist learning theory, communities of practice, and identity theory; (b) the second section reviews the literature related to writing and identity as well as the literature on how electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves.

**Theoretical Basis**

Writing and identity are both social constructs. This exploration of how students develop identities as writers in an Advanced Placement classroom is rooted primarily in two theories: 1) Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice, which in turn has its roots in Vygotsky’s (1978) constructivist learning theory, and 2) identity theory as proposed by Wenger (1998), Ivanič (1998), and Gee (2000). This section will present information on these theories and ultimately connect them to the writing.

**Constructivist Learning Theory and Communities of Practice**

Struggling writers—reticent writers—bad writers. Forms of these terms are staples in educational professional developments, teacher-to-teacher conversations, student’s self-expressions, and/or the professional literature. In 2011 only 24% of American eighth and twelfth graders were found to be proficient in writing and only 3% were advanced (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011). Although the ubiquity of technology and social media in students’ lives has changed how they communicate, writing remains an essential skill in the workforce, daily lives, and often the personal satisfaction of most individuals (Işik & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2017). This discrepancy between what students can do when it comes to writing and what students should be able to do is striking. To address this, in 2009 the National Council of Teachers
of English issued a report claiming three challenges face educators aiming to “support writing in the 21st century” (Yancey, 2009). The challenges are 1) to develop new models of writing, 2) to design new curriculum to support those models, and 3) to create models to teach the new curriculum.

Despite this introductory bad news, the outlook is not necessarily bleak. As stated in Zemelman and Daniels’ *A Community of Writers* (1988)—a precursor to Wenger’s *Communities of Practice* (1998)—“junior and high school students want to write, can write, and do write” (p. 3). They go on to say that for these particular adolescents the stakes are high and that writing can help students make sense of their worlds and of themselves during a consuming and often turbulent period of identity formation. The psychological research also suggests that writing has positive implications on life transitions and overall life-long satisfaction. Having a writer’s mindset and engaging in journaling and other forms of written reflective discourse have shown to help freshmen adjust to college life and experience overall contentment (İşik & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2017). Whether they know it or not, students want to and need to write.

A constructivist view of learning is that literacy is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1999; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988) and that the totality of the learning environment—tasks, persons, materials, and modes of communication—are all essential components, so it is a fitting endeavor to explore how secondary students function within a writing community. This writing and learning space or environment could be called a community of practice.

Communities of practice (CoPs) first emerged as a model in the early 1990s with the publication of *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave &
Wenger, 1991) and then more formally defined in *Communities of Practice: Learning Meaning, and Identity* (Wenger, 1998). As the former title indicates, CoP is part of situated learning theory and has its roots in the sociocultural perspective that learning is socially and culturally constructed. This view holds that learning begins through interactions with others and eventually internalizes and transfers to individual practice (Vygotsky, 1978). CoPs are defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

The CoP model that evolved from Wenger and Lave’s (1991) initial work includes four essential characteristics posited by Wenger (1998). They are: a) meaning, b) practice, c) community, and d) identity. These characteristics are all interconnected and at times even interchangeable. CoPs may be formally or informally developed in any setting, from nursing to youth gangs to engineers to soccer moms (the list is inexhaustible), as long as a tacit or explicit understanding of these characteristics is in place. It is the interchange of purpose, ideas, resources, and experiences that bonds members in one of these learning communities. While the model was conceptualized in recent decades, CoPs have existed for as long as humans have learned together (Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015).

In a CoP, *meaning* is located in a process and it is negotiated by the members of a community. If the members do not feel personally connected to the domain or area of expertise within a community, they will not fully commit themselves to the work of the community (Wenger, 2000). This component of the model has implications for both teachers and students, although the majority of the research on educational CoPs focuses
on teachers. For example, in the domain of writing in the school setting much of the research begins from the premise that teachers themselves are not confident writers and that by addressing teachers’ identities as writers in CoPs writing instruction will improve (Dix & Cawkwell, 2011). In other words, teachers must find meaning in writing themselves as opposed to approaching the task of writing instruction aloofly. The negotiation of what is valued and how it is defined in a CoP is at its core and is essential for the other components to be operational.

Practice in the CoP model is social practice and at times is indistinguishable from the other components (meaning, community, identity). Wenger (1998) is clear that practice connotes doing, but that it is “a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do.” In a CoP the term “passion” has been used to connote a commitment to the practice in play within a community. In educational settings, CoPs are often discussed in conjunction with or are confused with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). A review of articles in 2007 found that for teachers PLCs were focused more on increasing student achievement while CoPs focused on improvement of practice (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). In general, CoPs proved to be less structured than PLCs and rely more on negotiation in defining goals, leadership, and norms. A CoP of teachers could be a formally or informally organized group of educators who share a passion or keen interest in improving how they teach.

Community is defined as having a) mutual engagement, b) a joint enterprise, and c) a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). Again, these components are not mutually exclusive and suggest a fluidity and interaction among members of a community. In a CoP a community may be virtual as well as face-to-face. A critical review of research
from 2000-2014 revealed that of a sample of 60 research articles about blended or online learning (identified using the search criteria community of practice, Wenger, and online and blended learning) 41 of the articles made substantial use of the CoP framework and the other nineteen mentioned or referenced it (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017).

Identity Theory

The shaping of identity is a central concept in the learning process in CoPs in that one cannot separate learning from “becoming of the learner” (Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., & Wenger-Trayner, E., 2016). Sfard and Prusak (2005) acknowledge that identity as a concept in humanistic discourse has received wide-spread attention in recent years and further refine the definition of identity as—among other things—significant stories about a person. This “identity-as-narrative construct” (Juzwik, 2006) allows for third-person statements about a person to be part of their identity makeup. Wenger makes the point that with this perspective, even Mozart’s identity is still under construction today (Farnsworth et al, 2016). Because Wenger focuses on lived experience, this third-person component suggests incompatibility with Juzwik’s view, but Wenger says that at their core they are very similar, if not identical.

Similar to Juzwik, Gee (2000) defines identity as “what it means to be recognized as a ‘certain kind of person’” (p. 100) within a given context. In other words, the context or third parties assign or prescribe an identity to another person based upon contextual factors. Gee sketched out four ways to view identity. The first is natural identity and includes characteristics assigned to individuals by nature. Natural identify factors include race and gender, among others, and constitute what others see that nature has given us. Gee (2000) provides being an identical twin as an example of a natural identity factor (p.
The second way to view identity is institutional identity which suggests that the positions we occupy in society determines who we are and how we are seen. Being a college professor is an example of an institutional identity factor. The third way to view identity is through dialogue and discourse—we are who we are because of our interactions and is labeled the “discursive perspective” (Gee, 2000, p. 103). Gee’s example of a colleague who is perceived as a charismatic individual depends upon other interacting with and perceiving her as charming and fascinating. Finally, Gee recognizes affinity-identity as identity that emerges from a group who may share little other than an “allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices that provide each of the group’s members the requisite experiences” (p. 105). Gee’s provided example involves Star Trek fans or Trekkies. These individuals may come from diverse locations and be of diverse races, ethnicities, cultures, and ages, but they share an affinity for Star Trek. Gee says that the source of power in an affinity group is a “set of distinctive practices” (p. 105) based on participation or sharing.

Gee’s “affinity perspective” (2000, p. 105) is akin to Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice in that both are defined by like-minded groups of individuals who share a set of practices, defining norms, or passion about an activity. For writers, this could manifest itself in writing workshops or blogs or coffee-house poetry slams. For the writing classroom this would mean a space where writing and writers are honored and a clear set of expectations and practices are shared.

**Literature Review**

This section focuses the theoretical foundations presented above into a lens through which to view writing and identity as well as the use of electronic portfolios in
the writing classroom. Additional theoretical considerations are offered as well as a synthesis of relevant research in the connected areas of writing, identity, and electronic portfolios.

**Paradigm Shifts in the Teaching of Writing**

In the latter half of the twentieth century the term *writing process* became common not only in educational jargon but also among the general public. While there are some variations among what educators agree to be the elements of the process (Whitney, Blau, Bright, Cabe, Dewar, Levin, Macias, & Rogers, 2008), the general agreement that writing is a process was revolutionary enough to be referred to as a significant paradigm shift (Hairston, 1982). Citing Kuhn’s (1962) propositions on how paradigm shifts take place in the scientific field, specifically within the “hard sciences” (Hairston, 1982, p. 77), Hairston (1982) suggests that changes within the social sciences similarly evolve when enough scientists within a field question an old model and adopt a new one. The shift from writing as product to writing as process is one such example (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

An early and resounding call to action to view the teaching of writing as a process came in 1972. In his paper “Teach Writing as a Process not Product,” Donald Murray urges practitioners to reevaluate the practice of the time—the teaching of writing as a product—and compare it to the actual process of writing. He suggests that the root of the problem grew from our own training as English teachers and our study of literature where we routinely study and analyze the polished and finished product, a process he refers to as being “trained in the autopsy” (p. 3). Rather, he proposes that writing teachers should view it as a living process “of discovery through language” (p. 4). Murray (1972) goes on
to identify three stages to the process: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. The stages, he says, are not rigid, but that most writers engage with them most of the time. Eschewing the analysis of the polished product as effective writing teaching, he instead celebrates the unfinished product as fervent ground for growing future writers.

As the number of social scientists and practitioners began to adopt the process model of teaching, the paradigm shift became a reality. It became increasingly clear that the stages in the writing process are recursive and often simultaneous (Sommers, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Lipson, Mosenthal, Daniels, & Woodside-Jiron, 2000). Writing is a process of messy engagement, struggling and searching, writing and scrapping, and moving back and forth until the writer finds her own way (Zinfon, G.J., & Duke, C.R., 1975). Unfortunately, evidence suggests that this type of writing instruction in today’s schools is the exception rather the rule (Witte, 2013). In a nationwide mixed-method longitudinal study, for example, Witte (2013) solicited feedback from 181 writing teachers about their use of revision in their own writing practices as compared to how they approach revision in their writing classrooms. Results indicated that while teachers routinely incorporated the recursive process approach in their own writing, this approach was not consistently used with their students.

Just as the writing paradigm shifted from product to process, a broader cultural revolution was also taking place as writing and information accessing technologies were created or evolved in a technological new world (Applebee & Langer, 2009). The move from typewriters to word processors and the advent of the internet, in addition to countless other digital tools since, have reshaped how writers are able to approach the writing process. According to the 2011 Writing Report Card published by the National
Center for Educational Statistics, 77% of the nation’s seniors who scored above the 75th percentile on the writing assessment reported using a computer to make changes on a paper or a report. In comparison, only 33% of seniors scoring below the 25th percentile reported similar habits. However, despite these tools and the shift in thinking among practitioners and researchers, the process approach is still not uniformly evidenced across classrooms.

In one study, for example, researchers observed 34 students from four secondary schools in England writing in a classroom setting and interviewed them about their composing processes (Myhill & Jones, 2007). The majority of the students reported that they preferred a “write first; think later strategy” (Myhill & Jones, 2007, p. 332) rather than a recursive approach (moving between stages while writing), but the researchers acknowledge that the students’ self-reporting about their post-writing revision processes could not be completely supported by the observations.

A writing classroom that focuses on product will typically ignore the forest while searching for trees—a culture of identifying grammatical, spelling, and other mechanical errors rather than viewing the whole through transformative lens, an attempt to make the piece into something better (Myhill & Jones, 2007). While the reasons for adhering to a product approach to writing instruction may vary from lack of time in the traditional classroom to lack of knowledge about the process (Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014), it is necessary for writing teachers to guide and instruct students on how to move beyond surface errors (Beltran & Decker, 2014). One study of English primary school teachers found that of the 88 participants, the majority reported that classroom revision took place at the word-level with whole-text revision occurring much more infrequently, typically
about once a month (Dockrell, Marshall, & Wyse, 2016). The study is limited because teacher self-reports were collected via an e-survey, were anonymous, and the researchers could not control for which teachers from which schools voluntarily responded and why they responded, leaving unknown their levels of investment in the study. The suggested take-away, however, is that despite the wide-spread acceptance of the process model, it may not be widely applied in an authentic way.

The next section of this chapter concisely reviews the writing workshop, a model of writing instruction that evolved in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the process model of writing (Leung & Hicks, 2014).

**Writing workshops.** The writing workshop is designed to provide the space and time for student writers to authentically engage in the writing process. It is typically composed of the following elements, though there may be variations: 1) a writing community with common goals, 2) teacher as facilitator, not judge, 3) students writing in various genres, 4) and student choice of topic and style (Xu, 2015). Zemelman and Daniels (1988) liken a writing workshop to a crafts workshop, where a master craftsman observes, assists, helps, and teaches apprentices. Time, patience, and collaboration are key ingredients to a successful writing workshop (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). In the workshop space participants are encouraged to embrace writing as a process and to take the time to truly engage in it. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) suggest that the optimal sign of writing engagement is having participants achieve a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) in which time falls away and working and playing with language becomes effortless. For this to be possible in high school writing workshop, an
established set of “norms, expectations, leadership behaviors, and communication patterns” (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988, p. 90) are necessary.

The next section will provide an overview of the scholarship on creating identity through writing process.

Identity in Writing

Ivanič (1998) presents a model of the writer as performer engaging with an audience in a social relationship. Through the manipulation of language and their own representation of their own creativity, value system, or commitment to the subject matter (Ryan & Barton, 2014), the “discoursal construction of identity” (Ivanič, p. 217) takes place. Creating a “discoursal self” through the manipulation of language aligns with Elbow’s (2000) theory that identity is linked to creative expression. Simplistically, identity emerges through a writer’s voice. Elbow (2000) presented five different types of voice and the following three relate to Ivanič’s (1998) “discoursal self or how the writer wants to present themselves” (Ryan, 2014): a) the audible voice which is the sound of the text when spoken aloud (rhythm, tone, accent), b) the dramatic voice of the persona or character presented by an author, and c) the distinctive or recognizable voice of the author. The other two voices are an authoritative voice and a resonant voice that serves as a link between what the writer writes and what lies in her unconscious.

The focus of this study is students’ identities as writers. Another viable area of research, however, is teachers’ identities as writers (Cremin & Baker, 2014; Wells, Lyons, & Auld (2016), which according to Cremin and Baker (2014) is under-researched. In their singular case study Cremin and Baker found that their primary-level teacher subject experienced conflict as she navigated between her teacher and writer identities as
she attempted to write alongside her students. They assert that this aligns with Ivanič’s (1998) position that teachers are limited by the needs and demands of their professions, but that they also “have the intellectual freedom to be aware of the way in which these forces privilege one discourse at the expense of others and to compensate for this…” (2004, p. 241). Exercising this freedom, Cremin and Baker (2014) suggest, would benefit both teachers and students.

Similarly, when teachers write outside of their classroom work as teachers, Wells, Lyons, and Auld (2016) found that the teachers were empowered by contributions to their communities and by contributing to the “grand narrative” (p. 60) of their professions. They also found that through writing, teachers’ identities drew from the different facets of their lives and were continually being shaped and reshaped, but that ultimately writing had an impact in “generally positive ways” (p. 60). Though both the Cremin and Baker (2014) and Wells, Lyons, and Auld (2016) studies were limited by small sample sizes, the findings are encouraging for teachers who write.

The literature on student identity development spans elementary school through graduate studies and includes using specific writing strategies to support students’ attitudes and perceptions about themselves as writers as well as more holistic approaches in the writing classroom. In a review of related literature and by providing case examples, Lengelle and Meijers (2014) found that creative, expressive and reflective writing practices support personal development and promote career learning. Taking a similar approach, O’Reilly (2015) found that collaborative mind-mapping supported students’ writing efforts and development of their writerly identities. In a multiple case study design with two teachers and six students, Shand and Konza (2016) found that teachers
play key roles in student identity construction. Writing about their own doctoral level writing groups and the adoption of scholarly identities, Lassig, Dillon, & Diezmann (2013) found that community of practice developed within the group shaped their identities.

Leung and Hicks (2014) took an autobiographical and retrospective approach to explore how writing workshop experiences influence writer identity. Hicks, an undergraduate honors student, and Leung, a literacy teacher educator, used multiple data sources to investigate Hicks’ 2nd grade writing workshop and how that specific class engendered in her a concept of her writerly self. Data sources included Hicks’ writings from 2nd grade (which she had kept through the years), a video created during that year titled “Writer’s Workshop: One Child’s View” which Hicks narrated as a second grader, Hicks’ 2nd grade teacher’s teaching journal, and notes from an interview with Hicks 2nd grade teacher conducted at the time of the research study. Other data sources included video segments from the workshop that were not included in the final video and essays from Hicks’ 2nd grade classmates on their feelings about writing. The pair identified four key features of the writing workshop that contributed to Hicks’ writing identity: 1) a writerly tone in workshop interactions; 2) time, choice, and process as parts of the workshop; 3) a literature-rich environment; and 4) a writing community.

This connection between writing and identity was demonstrated in a study by Romagnoli (2018) who analyzed the written response of four ESL high school students to a prompt related to a graphic novel. Through a theoretical lens of comic deconstruction (McCloud, 1993), Ramagnoli (2018) emphasized that reflection as part of the writing process assists students in expressing and constructing their identities. The study was
limited by the low number of participants (four) and the scope (a single writing prompt asking “How would you describe the trashcan’s role in the city based on the comic you just read?” (p. 6)), but results indicated that participants’ values and cultural associations became manifest.

Immersion in a racially sensitive writing workshop indicated that for adolescent African American males, opportunities to engage with empowering texts and to write texts that do not stress a victim mentality created a shift in their identities (Tatum & Gue, 2012). 12 males ranging in age from 12 to 17 and who were identified as being of low and average academic range were purposely selected from a pool of applicants based on ideas communicated in a writing sample. The participants, referred to as “Brother Authors” (p. 130), met for 45 hours over a nine-week period in a structured community of practice that began and ended with a writer’s preamble and included activities that anchored their writings into themes that the authors identified from an historical analysis of African American writers. The themes were a) defining self, b) becoming resilient, c) engaging others, and d) building capacity. The authors determined that for students who “have yet to discover the power of writing in their own lives” (p. 124), the format of the workshop increased student engagement in the writing process and empowered them to find their voices as writers.

Daniel & Eley (2017) explored how refugee teens in a writing workshop integrated their own unique senses of self with their postsecondary goals. Six high school students in the workshop were selected based upon their consistent participation and their informed consent and were all enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The workshop, entitled Writing Our Identities for Successful Endeavors
(WISE) had the end goal of helping these students who were facing multiple language and cultural obstacles to connect their different senses of self and express it through writing. Ultimately, they hoped, the foundations would be laid for successful college application essays. Implementing semantic mapping in the analysis of exemplar identity texts as well as exploring participants’ own identities facilitated students own integration of their different identity components. Additionally, the authors’ use of a questioning technique they referred to as “connective press” (p. 426) encouraged students to move beyond the semantic maps to make deeper connections between ideas. The researchers suggest that writing opportunities for refugee students that move beyond basic grammar and vocabulary instruction greatly enhance their senses of self and literacy engagement.

In the next section I will review how the electronic portfolios have been used and have evolved in education.

**Portfolios in Education**

A 2009 report from the National Council of Teachers of English acknowledged that the 1960s, 70s, and 80s the paradigm shift to process writing. The report goes on to say that this time was also characterized by new approaches to assessment, and it cites portfolios as among the most influential of the period (Yancey, 2009).

Portfolios have existed in various fields for decades. The term artist’s portfolio instantly brings to mind folders of watercolors or etchings just as the term financial portfolio suggests records of investments and transactions (Barrett, 2007). Educators originally embraced the portfolio in college writing classrooms with the emphasis being on assessment. As K-12 educators began to implement portfolios in their classrooms the emphasis more typically was on showcasing student work (Barrett, 2007). Portfolios have
tangibly morphed over the years as they have expanded from paper format to include electronic/digital formats.

The general requirements of the electronic portfolio, however, have remained essentially the same (Cambridge, 2010; Purves, Quattrini, & Sullivan, 1995). In most instances, students are tasked with producing and selecting a variety of types of writing that either showcase their best work or serve as examples of growth over time or mastery of a set goal or goals. Additionally, an essential component of portfolios is a reflective entry where the writer takes time to consider the following: 1) the writing process, 2) the goals and objectives of the course or program, and 3) the writer’s choices for inclusion in the portfolio (Reynolds & Davis, 2014). Allowing students some choice in what to include in a portfolio, opportunities for revision of their work, and the space to reflect on process, products, and goals mirrors the real world process of writing (Fullerton, 2017).

Consistent with communities of practice (CoPs), Adler-Kassner and O’Neill (2010) claim that ethical writing assessment models “must be designed and built collaboratively, with careful attention to the values and passions of all involved, through a process that provides access to all” (p. 183). Ethical writing assessment implies fairness, inclusion, access, and meaning (Allen, 2016), characteristics that traditional standardized tests cannot claim. Unfortunately there are limited examples of teachers and administrators actively attempting to include students in decision-making and implementation of assessment practices (Fullerton, 2017; Cambridge, 2008).

Current research, however, does present examples of the advantages of using portfolios in the writing classroom. Kobra (2018) found that in a study of 90 intermediate EFL students who were randomly divided into three groups, students who engaged in
portfolio development outperformed students in a dialogue journal group and the control group. Portfolios, they determined, supported students’ reflective skills and encouraged students to monitor their own learning and to take more responsibility. Similarly, in a multiple case study of six elementary school classes taught by two teachers, Mak and Wong (2018) found that portfolios are empowering for students and contribute to the development of self-regulated learning. The year-long study in Hong Kong collected data from interviews with the two teachers and 69 students, focus group interviews, observations, and documentary analysis. Findings support the portfolio as a change agent for increasing students’ reflective and self-regulation skills as well as their engagement in the writing process.

Further evidence of the successful marriage between a process approach to teaching writing and the portfolio is presented by Cunningham, Bartesaghi, Bowman, and Bender (2017). The authors were three graduate teaching assistants and one course supervisor teaching interpersonal communication classes at a major American university. Each class began with a grading contract which guaranteed every student a B as long as all course requirements were met. Only students whose final portfolios showed evidence of substantial revisions received a grade of A. Results indicated that the non-traditional approach to grading relieved students’ concerns about grades and allowed them to focus on the processes of writing and portfolio development, which in turn led to a stronger appreciation of writing.

In the next section I will provide an overview of how portfolios mediate identity in different contexts.
Portfolios Mediating Identity

While not viewing portfolios through the lens of identity theory, Costa and Kallick (2004) capture the relationship between portfolios and identity when they say “portfolios can tell us who we are and who we want to be” (p. 64). They go on to say that within the boundaries of the electronic portfolio are opportunities for students to gain an understanding of themselves, artifacts of “failure and misfire” as well as “triumphs and breakthroughs.” The ease with which electronic portfolios can be made public or shared within a classroom also adds a publishing component, turning colleagues and classmates into audiences for burgeoning writers.

Arguing for the inclusion of all stakeholders to be involved in writing assessment practices, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill (2010) do invoke the term identities when they say that assessments should be “ integrally tied to the identities and passions of teachers, administrators, and even students” (p. 178), suggesting they share an instinctive if not theoretical awareness of the connection between writing and who we are.

More recent research into how electronic portfolios mediate the development of identity, however, point to the following characteristics of portfolios as significant to the process: curation, reflection, and narration. Singer-Freeman, Bastone, and Skrivanek (2016) found that for underrepresented community college students “ePortfolios can be a reliable means of documenting applied collaborative learning and academic identity” (p. 45). The thirty-eight student participants were required to include a minimum of one journal entry, one image that documented learning, and one piece of writing that documented learning. In addition, students were required to respond each week to a specific written prompt. Similarly, Singer-Freeman and Bastone (2017) found that
students who completed a graded portfolio rather than a graded paper as part of a mindset intervention showed more evidence of reflection. They surmise that the public nature of electronic portfolios—awareness of a future audience—encourages students to engage more deeply than they would when simple writing a paper. Simply stated, “ePortfolios add value to assignments that are intended to evoke personal reflection and application of core concepts of self” (p. 151).

After implementing a pedagogical framework utilizing electronic portfolios in a university honors colloquium, Jones and Leverenz (2017) found that “ePortfolios can facilitate students’ development of key 21st century meat-skills as well as their own human and social capital” (p. 78). When students were provided with opportunities for self-exploration and given the resources and space to develop a narrative about their experiences and their learning, the researchers found that students were able to craft digital identities. Again, reflection and developing a narrative seem to be key.

Munday, Rowley, and Polly (2017) asked participants in two professional (education) learning workshops to post photographs and images that symbolically or metaphorically represented aspects of their professional lives and to write statements about each. They determined that the written statements supported deep reflection and created a narrative about self that ultimately helped participants form a more nuanced understanding of their professional self-identities.

In a study that explored how students of music and writing at four Australian universities develop learner identity while engaging with electronic portfolios, findings supported the researchers premise that “ePortfolios facilitate, make explicit and enable the online negotiation of aspects of identity” (p. 115). Specifically, Bennett, Rowley,
Dunbar-Hall, Hitchcock, and Blom (2016) point to the processes of selecting, gathering, reflecting upon, and critiquing one’s own work as instrumental in articulating aspects of one’s identity. Data collected included written reflections, surveys, and focus group discussions yielded the following themes: a) the ePortfolio as self-portrait; b) identity constructed through the development of an ePortfolio; and c) the ePortfolio as a prompt to adopt future-oriented thinking. The second theme is perhaps the most relevant to this dissertation as Bennett et al. (2016) found that electronic portfolios are a space where identity is constructed and negotiated. This study also has implications for how students will engage with a discipline or activity, such as writing, in the future as the ePortfolio seemed to support students’ thinking about their possible selves.

Instructors and researches at Thomas Jefferson University implemented electronic portfolios in their general education classes that students maintained over the course of their undergraduate studies (Schrand, Jones, & Hanson, 2018). Students were required to write reflective essays for each artifact included in the portfolio. The researchers suggest that the extensive narrative and reflective processes involved in maintaining the portfolios helped students cultivate their identities as “learners, citizens, and future professionals” (p. 1). Therefore, electronic portfolios are a space for reflection, negotiation, and engendering ownership of who we are.

Cordie, Sailors, Barlow, and Kush (2019) describe how a large university’s electronic portfolio requirement revealed that students who identify and develop a narrative theme throughout their portfolios are best able to reflect upon, construct, and articulate a professional identity.
Nguyen (2013) found that for eight Stanford students, the value in portfolios comes from both the reflective space portfolios provide and the narrative of self that emerges. Specifically, portfolios allowed the students to shape and share their stories of self, learn new things about themselves, and helped them make sense of past experiences and explore future possibilities.

Therefore, the research supports portfolios as vehicle for identity development and shows that the processes of choosing and curating contents, reflecting upon and critiquing contents, and creating a narrative that connects the owner to the contents are essential.

The next section will provide a concise overview of the use of portfolios in the Advanced Placement classroom.

**Portfolios and the Advanced Placement class.** Of the current roster of 38 Advanced Placement courses, only those concerned with art have a portfolio-based assessment. The Council of Writing Program Administrators’ (WPA) 2008 “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition” states, however, that “writing in the 21st century involves use of digital technologies” and that students should be prepared to “use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts.” Boyd (2010) argues that the Advanced Placement English Program’s use of a timed multiple choice test and timed writing prompts to assess student mastery of stated goals is inadequate and should be replaced with a portfolio-based approach.

According to Boyd, as early as 1989 voices were being raised questioning the alignment of Advanced Placement writing goals and writing assessment. Scharton (1996) expressed concern that the standard writing assessment of the period—utilizing measures such as scores, statistics, and validity—did not marry well with the values and belief
systems of the “affected parties” (54). Whether it be to mirror real world writing (Foster, 1989; Scharton, 1996) or to incorporate fairness in the assessment process (Elbow, 1996), arguments were being made to move the Advanced Placement English Program to a portfolio-based system.

Boyd proposes that the three portfolio-based Studio Art courses could serve as models for a revamped English assessment, suggesting that serious writers as well as serious artists could benefit from the extended time, depth of inquiry, and the choice factor that are inherent in the art portfolios. By writing in multiple genres—even those outside of the scope of the traditional Advanced Placement test—and through multiple revisions, Boyd says that students could develop their own tone and voice while immersing themselves in the electronic environments characteristic of today’s world.

While the purpose of this study is not to advocate for such a nation-wide revamping of the Advanced Placement assessment format, this action research study could show that in my classroom students’ concepts of themselves as writers were enhanced if not transformed and that for them the writing experience takes on new meaning.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided the theoretical foundation supporting this investigation into how incorporation of electronic portfolios in an Advanced Placement classroom supports development of students’ identities as writers. I reviewed Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice which has its roots in constructivist learning theory as well as Gee’s (2000) and Ivanič’s (1998) views on identity development. Then I offered a review of the relevant literature on writing, identity, and electronic portfolios.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of this action research was to explore how students in an Advanced Placement writing course develop identities as writers while engaged in an online community of practice. Three research questions guiding this study were:

1. What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?
2. How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?
3. How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?

Research Design

Action research is a systematic inquiry by school stakeholders into an identified problem or area of interest with the intended purpose of gathering information that will facilitate understanding and meaningful change (Mills, 2011; Mertler, 2017). Brighton (2009) identifies seven basic steps of the action research process: 1) identify a focus, 2) develop a plan of action, 3) collect data, 4) organize the data, 5) analyze and draw conclusions, 6) disseminate findings, and 7) develop a new plan of action. This mode of research calls for collaboration by all stakeholders with the researcher facilitating at all stages (Glesne, 2006). The process is iterative and relies upon reflection of one’s
practices at every stage with the purpose of moving “towards an envisioned future, aligned with values” (Riel, 2017, para. 1). Action research is appropriate to explore the issue of students’ identities in a classroom setting and will facilitate my quest to reflect upon and improve my practices as a teacher of writing.

More specifically, because the goal of this study is to understand participants’ experiences and attitudes, a qualitative approach of inquiry is appropriate. Positioned on the opposite end of a continuum from a quantitative approach (Newman & Benz, 1998), qualitative research emphasizes discovery and description with the objectives usually being to interpret the data and pull meaning from participants’ experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research assumes that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). Writing is a socially constructed activity, even when done in isolation, as shared symbols and conventions frame the process and an audience/reader is an assumed component (Ivanič, R., 1998). For this study, where writing will be a foundation of our classroom community, the social aspect is even more pronounced. Identity is also a social construct in that it comes from one’s social experiences and interpretation of the world (Wenger, 1998). A writer’s community and an individual’s identity both exemplify the “complexity of a situation” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 4) that is a hallmark of qualitative inquiry.

Following a review of introductory research texts, Cresswell (2014) presented the core characteristics of qualitative research. These characteristics distinguish a constructivist and interpretivist qualitative approach from a more positivistic quantitative approach. These qualitative characteristics include: 1) collecting data in the participants’
natural settings as opposed to a lab or artificial setting, 2) the researcher as the key instrument for data collection as opposed to surveys or instruments developed by others, 3) multiple sources of data such as interviews, observations, and documents rather than relying on a single data source, 4) an initial and iterative inductive approach to data analysis where patterns, categories, and themes emerge from the “bottom up” followed by a deductive and iterative review of the data from the themes to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether more information is needed (as opposed to a purely deductive approach in quantitative research where the researcher is looking to find support for an idea or theory), 5) a focus on meaning derived from participants’ experiences rather than the researcher’s pre-conceived meaning or a validation of relevant literature, 6) an emergent design in that the research plan is flexible with the consistent goal being to learn about the problem or issue from the participants, 7) a continued reflexivity on the part of the researcher, including reflection about how the researcher’s background, culture, and experiences could potentially shape their interpretations, and 8) a holistic account that includes a complex picture of the problem or issue under study.

A qualitative approach to data collection and analysis will yield nuanced and complex answers to my research questions. Because a qualitative study relies upon varied and multiple sources of data, the product is “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6) and allows the researcher to describe a phenomenon in “words and pictures” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6) rather than in numbers — perfect for exploring writer identity development. Therefore this study lends itself easily to a qualitative research methodology.
Setting and Participants

This study took place at a large suburban high school in the southeastern United States. This site was selected because I teach at this school and have access to my students and their parents as well as administrative and technical support at both the school-level and the district level. Participants for this action research study were eight high school juniors purposefully selected from a sample of students enrolled in one of my sections of AP Language and Composition. At the time of the study I taught two sections of AP Language and Composition with a total enrollment of 45. AP Language and Composition is an advanced English course that draws students from both magnet programs as well as motivated non-magnet students. Students in my AP course use technology to access and interact with Google Classroom where assignments are posted and submitted, complete online annotations on the site Perusall, and view and discuss essay prompts and model responses posted by the College Board. Most of the student writing in the course is handwritten to prepare students for the actual timed essays on the AP exam in May. Students in the class have not to this point maintained electronic portfolios.

Student placement in Advanced Placement classes is based on a combination of factors. The course is open to students who score a B or higher in an honors level feeder course or a B or higher in a CP level course combined with the previous year’s teacher recommendation. Guidance counselors also use their judgment and insight into student potential to enroll students who may not have met the established benchmark. Students who have not been recommended can also elect to take the course by signing a waiver. Reasons for non-recommended students signing a waiver include an intrinsic motivation to challenge oneself, a desire to take course with friends, and the teacher’s reputation.
In this course the female students typically outnumber the male students by a slight margin and the ethnic makeup of each class is diverse. As I sought to describe the phenomenon of how students in a writing intensive course develop identities as writers, I made no special effort to select participants with specific characteristics. Rather, after explaining my research purpose and design, I purposefully selected eight participants from the pool of students who expressed interest in participating. My final subset included both magnet and non-magnet students. It should be noted that the magnet students for the most part were in the process of developing identities as future researchers or health care professionals, but from my experiences with them I would say that few had developed identities as writers.

This research took place in my classroom on the second floor of the suburban campus. The room is comfortable, large enough to hold 30 student desks in addition to my desk, but with little room to spare beyond that. Desks are typically in straight lines (six rows of five desks each) but are easily moved to facilitate group work. Each student was issued a Dell Chrome Book or brought his or her own personal device to class daily. In addition, on the wall directly in front of the students was an interactive white board used for presentations, displaying information, and interactive games.

It was my responsibility to acknowledge that by being both teacher and researcher I was creating opportunities for biases I may have to influence my interactions with my students or my interpretation of the results. By acknowledging biases, remaining conscious of them, and taking steps to keep them in check I was attempting to create “an open and honest narrative that will resonate with readers” (Cresswell, 2014).
Intervention

High school students are navigating sometimes challenging social and academic settings and are defining how they see themselves in these settings. School is significant in this process because “learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). For these students, writing is an opportunity to explore and express different facets of how they see themselves. Similarly, electronic portfolios are spaces for writers to revise, reflect upon, and showcase their work where they can imagine, refine, and convey their self-constructed identities over time (McAlpine, 2005). Electronic portfolios have the potential to be empowering for students because students have ownership of the contents and the ability to develop skills and awareness over time (Wallace, 2009). With both choice and reflection as characteristics of electronic portfolios, students have a voice and an awareness of their relationship to the portfolio contents (Snider & McCarthy, 2012), in this case to writing. Table 3.1 below shows the alignment between electronic portfolio implementation in my classroom and Wenger’s (1998) Community of Practice framework and Ivanič’s Aspects of Writer Identity framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Characteristics Reflected in the ePortfolio that I am Implementing</th>
<th>What Does this Look Like in my Class?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communities of Practice and Practice</td>
<td>Wenger (1998) proposes three dimensions regarding “practice as the source of coherence of a community” (p. 49):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1) mutuality of engagement
- choice in writing tasks
- peer reviews (P-Q-Ps)
- portfolio production
- weekly routines

2) a joint enterprise
- peer reviews (P-Q-Ps)
- sharing portfolios

3) a shared repertoire
- discussions about writing and portfolios
- College Board 6-point rubric

In addition, Wenger (1998) refers to the process of reification, which along with participation, produces artifacts that give the work of a CoP “thingness” (p. 58). Reification projects a CoP into the world.

Communities of Practice and Identity

Wenger (1998) says there is a “profound connection between identity and practice” (p. 149). In a CoP, identity may be characterized as:

1) negotiated experience of self (in terms of participation and reification)
- personalization of portfolios
- choice in portfolio components
- reviewing peers’ writing and portfolios

2) membership
- student choice in who reviews writing
- offering and receiving feedback
- shared experiences of writing in multiple genres

3) learning trajectory
- peer reviews
- revisions
Ivanič’s Aspects of Writer Identity

Ivanič (1998) suggests there are three ways to think about identity and writing particular texts (p. 23):

1) Autobiographical self
   - writer-as-performer (the person who sets about the process of producing the text)
   - the identity people bring with them to any act of writing

2) Discoursal self
   - writer-as-character (the identity which the writer-as-performer portrays)
   - tied to a particular text
   - concerned with the writer’s ‘voice’ or sound

3) Self as author
   - the sense of authority presented by the author
   - concerned with ‘voice’ in the sense of the writer’s position, opinions, and beliefs

   - written texts (stance, tone)
   - writing reflections with authorial voice
   - awareness of audience as evident in writing reflections
   - awareness of audience as evident by claims and evidence

   - written texts
   - awareness of audience as evident by use of language

---

I implemented the use of electronic portfolios in my writing classrooms and explored students’ emerging identities as writers as they interacted with the portfolios. Students were required to design, publish and maintain individual websites where they
were also required to publish and share their work and to reflect upon their process and their learning. Specifically, students were required to write two of the three types of argumentative essays that they would write on the AP Language and Composition exam. Because of the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic at the start of 2020, the high school eventually transitioned to an online learning format in the spring and College Board decided to reduce the AP Language and Composition exam to a single rhetorical analysis essay. For this reason, I made the decision to not include the synthesis essay in the study. The synthesis essay requires students to use provided sources as evidence and synthesize them into their own essays to support a claim. The analytical essay, which I did include in the study, asks students to analyze the techniques a writer uses to achieve a purpose in a given passage and to write a convincing argument about it. Finally, for the argument essay—also included—students make a claim about a multi-sided quotation or passage and support it with original evidence from the students’ experiences, readings, or observations.

I used prompts from released AP Language and Composition exams for these argumentative essays. Historically, College Board assessed each of these essays on a nine-point rubric, with eights and nines deemed excellent, sixes and sevens adequate, threes and fours inadequate (five serves as a bridge score for essays that have some inadequate characteristics and some adequate characteristics), and ones and twos very poor. For the 2019-2020 academic year, however, College Board has revised the AP Language rubric, make it 6-points (one point for providing a defensible thesis statement, up to four points for use of evidence and supporting commentary, and one possible point
for “sophistication of thought and/or complex understanding of the rhetorical situation” (College Board, 2019). I used the new six-point rubric to assess student essays.

In addition, students were required to experiment with voice by writing poetry, short stories, memoir, and/or personal essays. Students selected works from both their argumentative writing and their creative/personal writing to include in the electronic portfolios. While they were required to write through these various genres and to post at least one finished draft of each genre to their portfolios, they had choice within each genre of what to post. Finally, for each genre, students were required to write and post a reflection about the process and final product(s).

Students were encouraged to express their individuality in the look of their portfolios because students who have the liberty to personalize their e-portfolio are more motivated to engage in the process (Ring, Weaver, and Jones, 2008). Although electronic portfolios were personalized, some characteristics were consistent across all portfolios. Each portfolio had a home page that had at least one photograph of the student writer and a student-selected quotation about writing by a notable individual. A horizontal navigation provided tabs to the different genres of writing.

Finally, I posted URLs to all portfolios in Google Classroom so that all students in the class had access to all portfolios. In addition, students periodically shared their electronic portfolios in small groups where students were required to talk about and write about each other’s work. In this way the electronic portfolios served as a space for students to publish their writing.
Data Collection

In order to explore the three research questions, I used three data collection methods, including (a) student focus group interviews, (b) writing reflections, and (c) student journals. Table 3.2 shows the alignment of research questions and data collection methods.

Table 3.2

Research Questions and Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?</td>
<td>- Focus Group Interviews (before and after instruction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Writing Reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2: How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?</td>
<td>- Focus Group Interview 2 (after instruction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Writing Reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3: How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?</td>
<td>- Focus Group Interview 2 (after instruction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Writing Reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Journals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus Group Interviews

In qualitative action research interviews are a common method for collecting data from participants when the researcher wants to explore a phenomenon or experience (Cresswell, 2014). Specifically, this study sought to explore how students in an Advanced Placement writing course developed identities as writers. Because focus group interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to gather a large amount of rich data in the
participants’ own words (Gizer, 2007) and because it was important for me to understand how my participants—a subset of my classes—made sense of the experiences in my classroom in terms of their writing lives and selves, student focus group interviews were an appropriate method of data collection.

I conducted two focus group interviews with eight participants—one at the beginning of the data collection period and once at the conclusion of the data collection period. Focus group interviews were in a semi-structured format (Appendices A and B) to allow for emerging ideas to be investigated and for probing for deeper levels of thought and explanation (Mertler, 2017). Because the interaction among participants encourages respondents to more deeply reflect upon their own experiences in a setting where they have the freedom to add to the statements they made earlier, I ensured that participants had the opportunity to speak and share during these interviews (Mills, 2011; Krueger, 1994).

Participants and I arranged for mutually convenient times to conduct the interviews. The first interview took place in my classroom, which is a convenient location. The second interview was conducted via a recorded Google Meet due to the online learning format required during the early days of the pandemic. The first session lasted 35 minutes and recorded and transcribed immediately. Questions for this interview primarily focused on students’ concerns about the course, their writing, and their past experiences with portfolios and writing. Table 3.3 shows the alignment between the research questions and the first focus group interview.
### Table 3.3

*First Focus Group Interview Protocol*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Interview questions aligned with research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **RQ1:** What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course? | 1. Does writing take talent? What makes a good writer? How do you feel about your writing as you embark on this AP Lang journey?  
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you say more about that? How do you think that will affect how you approach the course?  
   2. What challenges are you anticipating in this course?  
   a) *Possible Probes:* Why is that a challenge for you? Do you anticipate it affecting your work in the course?  
   3. What do you know about AP Language and Composition? What do you feel prepared for? What do you feel underprepared for?  
   a) *Possible Probes:* Tell me more about that. Why do you think that might be hard for you? What experiences do you have with that?  
   4. How do you feel about yourself when it comes to writing?  
   a) *Possible Probes:* Why do you think you feel that way? Could you tell me more about that?  
   5. What challenges have you faced in past writing classes?  
   b) *Possible Probes:* Why do you think you feel that way? Could you tell me more about that? |
| **RQ2:** How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves? | 1. Do you keep records of your writing for school or personal use?  
   a) *Possible Probes:* Why or why not? Could you tell me about it?  
   2. How do you feel about sharing your writing with others? |
The second session lasted one hour and 24 minutes and was also recorded and transcribed immediately. Participants had the opportunity to review and comment on the transcript as well as any interpretations I made based on their responses. The second interview included questions about students’ experiences in the course, including their thoughts about themselves as writers, using electronic portfolios, and working collaboratively. Table 3.4 shows the alignment between the research questions and the second focus group interview questions.

Table 3.4

Second Focus Group Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Interview questions aligned with research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?</td>
<td>1. How do you feel about the challenges and concerns you expressed in our last interview?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ2: How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?

1. How did publishing your writing impact how you feel about yourself as a writer?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? Why does that matter?

2. How did viewing each other’s portfolios affect how you felt about yourself as writers?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? What do you mean by that? When you say [……], what are you actually saying?

3. How did you feel about others viewing your electronic portfolio?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? Can you give me an example? How did others respond to that?

4. What challenges did the portfolio present to you as a writer and how did you deal with them?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? When you say [……], what are you actually saying? How did you handle it when this happened?

5. What was most beneficial to you as a writer in constructing your portfolio and designing it?
RQ3: How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?

1. How has working with your classmates in a writing classroom impacted your view of yourself as a writer?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? Why was that important to you? Why does that matter?

2. What experiences in working with others helped you most as a writer?
   a) Possible Probes: Can you give me an example? Can you tell me more about that? How did others respond to that?

3. What challenged you most as a writer while working with others in the class?
   a) Possible Probes: It sounds like you are saying [.....]. Is that a fair summary? Can you give an example? How did you handle that?
   b) What group experiences did you find challenging or unhelpful?
   c) Possible Probes: It sounds like you are saying [.....]. Is that a fair summary? Can you give an example? How did you handle that?

To best answer the research questions, I interviewed participants in focus groups both at the beginning of the data collection period and at the conclusion, with the objective being to discern how maintaining portfolios and working collaboratively impacted students. Conducting interviews at different points of the study yields a deeper understanding of participant perspectives and how they change over time (Jaeger, 2018, 2015; Panayotova, 2013). Therefore, the data collected in the first focus group interview at the beginning of the course helped inform my interpretation of the data collected at the end of the data collection period. During these semi-structured interviews I asked
questions that target participant perceptions about attitudes about and impediments to successful writing (question one), electronic portfolios (question two) and collaboration (question three).

**Writing Reflections**

Collecting qualitative documents enables the researcher to analyze data in the participants’ own words. It is also a convenient data source because the researcher does not have to transcribe the already existing written evidence and can be conveniently accessed (Mills, 2011; Hubbard & Power, 2003). In addition to argumentative writing, which is the staple of the AP Language Classroom, students practiced creative and personal writing. While the assigned writings were not analyzed as data, students periodically reflected on the process of and their attitudes about writing and sharing their essays, personal, and creative writing. This study made use of the writing reflections to explore how students develop identities as writers. Students submitted handwritten or printed drafts of assignments and reflections to me as they were assigned as well as posting scans of polished self-selected works and reflections to their portfolios.

**Journals**

Journals are a space for students to write about their experiences and thoughts and for researchers they have the potential to become sources of insight into student perceptions (Mills, 2011). Journal writing tends to be more personal than the typical writing done in the classroom in that student-writers bring themselves to the page (Crème, 2005), and when students are provided with clear expectations about journal writing, they are able to explore and analyze issues related to their identities, past
assumptions, and beliefs (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Therefore, journals are an appropriate source of data for this study.

All students in the class maintained writer’s journals where they periodically responded to their writing and to the writing of others. These journals were characterized as a safe place for students to explore their thinking about writing and a place to develop the habit of consistency as a writer. The journal entries were be a combination of structured prompts about writing (e.g., “How does Poe create suspense in “The Pit and the Pendulum”) and freewrites where students were encouraged to write about their own writing or a classmate’s writing or their thoughts about writing. Journal prompts were assigned two to three times a week. I approached the journals as sources of both student reflection and places for making connections to what we are routinely examining—writing and writers (Hiemstra, 2001).

**Data Analysis**

The analysis stage of qualitative research is typically characterized by voluminous amounts of collected data and a system of organization and synthesis to make sense of it. I used a general inductive approach in this action research study (Liu, 2016; Cresswell, 2014; Thomas, 2006) to winnow the data into manageable categories and cohesive themes that address the research questions. Specifically, this approach “begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The process is iterative in that it proceeds “hand-in-hand with other parts of developing the qualitative study” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 195) and each review of the data yields deeper nuances and insights. Table 3.5 shows the alignment between the research questions, the data collection methods, and the analysis.
Table 3.5

*Research Questions, Data Collection Methods, and Data Analysis Methods*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
<th>Data Analysis Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| RQ1: What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course? | • Focus Group Interviews (before and after instruction)  
• Writing Reflections                                                              | Inductive analysis       |
| RQ2: How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves? | • Focus Group Interview 2 (after instruction)  
• Writing Reflections  
• Journals                                                                       | Inductive analysis       |
| RQ3: How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves? | • Focus Group Interview 2 (after instruction)  
• Writing Reflections  
• Journals                                                                       | Inductive analysis       |

**Focus Group Interviews**

Applying the process of inductive analysis to the focus group interviews involves 1) transcription, 2) reading the data, 3) assigning codes to parts of text, 4) identifying similarities and differences in codes and organizing them into categories, and 5) identifying themes that emerge from the categories. I followed Tesch’s (1990) eight step process of coding as described by Cresswell (2014). Specifically, I got a sense of the whole by reading all transcriptions carefully and then I selected one transcription and read it for its underlying meaning while also making notes in the margins. Saldaña & Omasta (2017) refer to this process as memoing. Once I read all transcripts I made a list
of topics and grouped them by similarity. Next, I abbreviated topics as codes and wrote them next to the appropriate segments of text, all the while remaining open to emerging categories and codes. The remaining steps involved finding the most descriptive wording for my topics and turning them into categories, grouping topics as a reductive step, finalizing and alphabetizing category abbreviations, and assembling the data material for each category in one place and performing a preliminary analysis.

My unit of analysis for focus group interviews were “monothematic ‘chunks’ of sentences, or full paragraphs” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 85). Each chunk or paragraph of each transcript were reviewed and coded using simple words or phrases. Where possible, in vivo coding was be used so that applied codes remain as close as possible to participants’ language.

**Writing Reflections and Journals**

The documentation collected complemented and supported the interview data and was analyzed for both their manifest and their latent content (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). For each document to be analyzed, I engaged in document memoing where I wrote two to five sentences for each document saying what it is and what was significant about it. I followed this first step in coding by collapsing memos into categories and matching student writing chunks to categories. Throughout the process I tracked memos to student writers by faithfully labeling each memo. The same process of descriptive and in vivo coding as described above was used to code written documents.

**Method of Coding**

I collected a large amount of data (two focus group interviews and numerous written documents) and I therefore took advantage of computer aided qualitative analysis
software (Delve) to manage and organize all transcripts and documents. Text segments were given codes and these codes were organized into categories. Themes were identified by examining the data for uses of repetition, and for similarities and differences (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017). The relationship between codes, categories and themes were represented through a set of diagrams representing the relationships between codes and emerging themes.

**Representation of Findings**

I began my findings with an introductory paragraph that served as an advance organizer which included all of my themes in the order I planned to write about them. As each theme is discussed I described what the theme means as well as the categories that created the theme and their meanings. I used a combination of thick, rich description supported by quotations, document images, and summary tables of the interpretations. Summary tables served as both an organizing framework for the dissertation writer and as advanced organizers for the readers (Buss & Zambo). Any assertions and themes included in tables were also explained in the text along with supporting quotations.

**Rigor & Trustworthiness**

The qualitative approach used in this study required careful consideration of the methods that were used to assure that the study would be characterized by rigor and that the findings and interpretations could be trusted. In addition to the rich, thick description of my findings and the clarification of researcher bias already discussed, the following methods were used to accomplish this: (1) participant right to refusal, (2) member checking, (3) presentation of discrepant information, (4) triangulation of data, and (5) a researcher’s reflective journal/memo-writing.

**Participant Right to Refusal**
This action research study assumed an existing relationship between the researcher and the participants, so I took care to make sure that participants did not feel coerced. Therefore, I made every effort at the beginning of the study to communicate to my students that participation in this study was completely voluntary and that refusal to participate would not negatively affect their progress in my course or their relationship with me. In addition, I communicated to them that they could drop out of the study at any time without consequence. Participant responses will be viewed more credibly if they have responded without concern of duress or fear of reprisal (Shenton, 2004).

**Member Checking**

For those students who do participate, I validated the integrity of my process and my findings through member checking. This required my participants to review drafts of my interpretations, including any categories and themes that emerge during the analysis phase (Cresswell, 2013; Guba, 1981). If any discrepancies between my interpretations and the participants’ reviews had surfaced, I planned to take steps to reconcile them and record the process, but no such instances arose.

**Presentation of Discrepant Information**

Because qualitative research deals with individual perspectives and experiences, it is possible and even likely that information will arise that is not aligned with the themes identified during analysis of the data. This information was not ignored, but rather it and the identified themes were reviewed and reflected upon to see if there is a way to reconcile them (Shenton, 2004). If reconciliation had not been possible, I planned to report them as contradictory evidence. Doing so will make my results more realistic (Cresswell, 2013).
Triangulation of Data

Triangulation of data supports trustworthiness by requiring the researcher to rely on more than one data source (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004). I therefore collected data from multiple sources and compared and synthesized the data to support my findings and interpretations. These data sources included focus group participant interviews, participant reflections, and participant reflective journals.

Researcher’s Reflective Commentary and Memo-writing

Finally, I maintained a detailed reflective commentary (Shenton, 2004) in the form of a researcher’s journal throughout all phases of the study. This journal included my thoughts and observations during each stage of data collection and analysis, including my own evolving constructions of and thoughts on emerging patterns and theories. Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that a method of monitoring a researcher’s evolving thoughts and biases in the form of a written commentary is essential in establishing credibility. During the analysis phase, the process of memoing was an important step in creating an audit trail, or a record of my decisions and interpretations (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Silver & Lewins, 2014). Memoing involves writing notes and phrases on transcripts and images as I began the process of synthesizing the data into higher level meanings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The memoing process continued throughout all stages of analysis and supported the credibility of the study by leading to a “richer and more powerful explanation of the setting, context, and participants” (Janesick, 2011, p. 148).

Procedures and Timeline

The timeline for the procedures for this study were categorized into five phases. They are: 1) participant identification, 2) data collection one, 3) data collection two, 4)
data analysis, and 5) validity assurance. Table 3.6 below is included to detail the timeline of all the procedures.

Table 3.6

*Timeline of Participant Identification, Data Collection, Data Analysis and Validity Assurance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Phase 1: Participant Identification | • Identify participants  
• Distribute consent and assent forms | 1 week     |
| Phase 2: Data Collection 1 | • Coordinate initial focus group interview time  
• Conduct and transcribe focus group interview #1 | 1 week     |
| Phase 3: Data Collection 2 | • Facilitate development of student electronic portfolios  
• Collect documents (writing samples, journals)  
• Conduct focus group interview | 5 weeks    |
| Phase 4: Data Analysis  | • Focus group interview transcription and analysis  
• Document collection analysis | 4 weeks    |
| Phase 5: Validity Assurance | • Member checking  
• Peer debriefing | 2 weeks    |

In Phase One I solicited participants from within my Advanced Placement Language and Composition classes with an announcement to the class about an opportunity to participate. My goal was to gain a subset of the classes consisting of four to eight students. Because I was not looking for students with any special characteristics other than being in an Advanced Placement writing class, I purposefully selected my
participants from the students who expressed interest in participating. Once the participants were identified I distributed assent and consent forms. This phase took one week.

During the second phase of the study I scheduled a time for the first round of focus group interviews, which was an initial interview before participants engaged in the writing process in my class or develop their electronic portfolios. I secured assent and consent forms prior to the interviews and I conducted and began transcribing these interviews during Phase Two. This phase will tool one week.

In Phase Three of the study I guided participants in construction of their electronic portfolios, giving them a few specifications regarding content and navigation requirements. These portfolios housed most of writing documents that were analyzed in Phase Four. In addition, I collected journals where students responded to prompts related to the writing activities we are engaged in. These journal responses were a combination of personal reflections, student evaluations of their own writing, and responses to literature and other students’ writing.

At the conclusion of the writing unit I conducted a second focus group interview which last one hour and 24 minutes. During this interview I engaged in the process of reflexivity by taking detailed notes to document my “initial interpretations, assumptions, or biases” (Mertler, 2017, p. 143). I recorded this interview for transcription during the next phase. Due mainly to immersion in the writing process, this phase took five weeks. Table 3.7 below shows the weekly activities during the instruction and data collection period.
### Table 3.7

**Weekly Activities during Data Collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | - Focus group interview  
|      | - Students write a biographical statement/narrative about their writing lives |
| 2    | - Google site tutorial; set up portfolios  
|      | - Tutorial on using smartphone to scan documents  
|      | - Overview of AP Language and Composition synthesis essay  
|      | - Draft two synthesis essays (student choice of prompts); scan handwritten documents  
|      | - Solicit scoring and revision commentary from at least three peers and teacher using P-Q-P format (praise something, question a choice or choices, make suggestions for polishing)  
|      | - Review and discuss model student responses published by College Board  
|      | - Revise one essay based on feedback; post first drafts, P-Q-Ps, and revision to portfolio  
|      | - Write two to three journal entries reflecting on the process  
|      | - Write and post a culminating reflection about this genre |
| 3    | - Overview of AP Language and Composition analytical essay  
|      | - Draft two analytical essays (student choice of prompts); scan handwritten documents  
|      | - Solicit scoring and revision commentary from at least three peers and teacher using P-Q-P format (praise something, question a choice or choices, make suggestions for polishing)  
|      | - Review and discuss model student responses published by College Board  
|      | - Revise one essay based on feedback; post first draft, P-Q-Ps, and revision to portfolio  
|      | - Write two to three journal entries reflecting on the process  
|      | - Write and post a culminating reflection about this genre |
| 4    | - Overview of AP Language and Composition argumentative essay  
|      | - Draft two argumentative essays (student choice of prompts); scan handwritten documents  
|      | - Solicit scoring and revision commentary from at least three peers and teacher using P-Q-P format (praise something, question a choice or choices, make suggestions for polishing) |
• Review and discuss model student responses published by College Board
• Revise one essay based on feedback; post first draft, P-Q-Ps, and revision to portfolio
• Write two to three journal entries reflecting on the process
• Write and post a culminating reflection about this genre

5
• Draft creative and/or personal writing
• Solicit commentary from at least three peers and teacher using P-Q-P format (praise something, question a choice or choices, make suggestions for polishing)
• Write two to three journal entries reflecting on the process
• Write and post a culminating reflection about this choice
• Post creative writing and reflection to portfolio

6
• Complete any tasks as needed
• Share portfolios (URLs made public to classes)
• Write one to two journal entries about peers’ portfolios and the portfolio process
• Focus group interview

After all data had been collected, I transcribed the second focus group interview during Phase Four. The first interview had already been transcribed as detailed earlier. Once all transcriptions were complete I analyzed all interviews and interview notes along with the collected documents (journals and writing reflections). The analysis of data took a significant amount of time due to the quantity of text collected. This phase took four weeks.

Once all data had been analyzed, two weeks were be allocated for Phase Five. During this phase I attempted to assure the validity of this qualitative study by conducting member checks and peer debriefing. Each participant had the opportunity to review and comment on the interview transcripts and my interpretations. In addition, a qualified colleague reviewed and critiqued my processes during each of the phases of the study.
Plan for Sharing and Communicating Findings

Results of this study will be shared locally and regionally. At the local level, I will share the results with student participants via a PowerPoint presentation that reviews all major and relevant aspects of the study. Student participants will have the opportunity to meet with me individually and discuss the process and results in a safe environment that includes anonymity of all other participants. While participants will be known to each other from the focus group interview, all other data, including private journals and individual interview responses, will be protected by pseudonyms. I will also make myself and the results of this study available to parents of participants by sharing the same PowerPoint presentation and answering questions at a time and location that is mutually convenient. I will meet with the parent(s) of each participant separately.

In addition, I will share the findings with English Department at Spring Valley High School at a regularly scheduled department meeting with an opportunity for questions and answers. Because site administrators and district personnel are stakeholders in this study, results will be shared chapter electronically. If approved by administration, results will be shared at a regularly scheduled school-wide faculty meeting or professional development session. Finally, results will be presented at a district-wide technology fair held each summer and efforts will be made to present at a regional conference.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this action research was to explore how students in a high school Advanced Placement writing course develop identities as writers while engaged in an online community of practice. This study focused on the following research questions:

1. What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?

2. How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?

3. How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?

This chapter presents an overview and analysis of the data collected during a qualitative research study. Eight 11th grade students enrolled in AP Language and Composition were purposefully selected from the 45 students enrolled in my two sections of AP Language and Composition. These participants took part in two focus group interviews in addition to their writing reflections and journal entries. Analysis of the interviews, reflections, and journals helped me address the research questions.

**Qualitative Analysis and Findings**

In this study I collected qualitative data from three sources. These included semi-structured focus group interviews, student journals, and student writing reflections. Table 4.1 describes this data set. A total of two focus group interviews were conducted, one each at the beginning and at the end of a 14-week period of activities. In addition, a
total of 48 writing reflections and 72 journal entries were collected in this study. This section includes a description of the qualitative data I collected, the analysis of my qualitative data, and themes and interpretations.

Table 4.1

Summary of Qualitative Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Qualitative Data Sources</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total Codes Applied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi Structured Focus Group Interviews</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Entries</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>944</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews took place near the beginning of second semester and again near the end of second semester during the 2019-2020 school year and were separated by a period of 14 weeks. The same eight participants were interviewed together in each session. The participant pseudonyms and their demographic data are presented in Table 4.2.
Table 4.2

*Participant Pseudonyms and Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashton</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regan</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samira</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahlia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trudy</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first focus group interview was recorded using a USB microphone attached to my classroom desktop computer (Dell OptiPlex 7010 with a Windows 10 operating system) and lasted thirty-five minutes. Because Richland School District 2 went completely virtual in March 2020 with the widespread arrival of COVID-19, the second interview was conducted and recorded via a Google Meet and lasted one hour and 24 minutes. Within three days following each interview, I played the recordings on the same desktop computer used to make the recordings and transcribed these audio recordings by hand into Microsoft Word. Transcribing each interview by hand allowed me to make assurances about accuracy and nuance so that I could preserve authentic participant
viewpoints (Mertler, 2017, Morgan & Guevara, 2008) (see Figure 4.1). The transcription of the focus group interviews yielded 76 pages with a total word count of 19,298.

**Figure 4.1.** An example of a transcription by hand before online coding began.

**Reflections**

Students wrote structured reflections about their writing experiences throughout the data collection period. These reflections consisted of a) an introductory reflection about their writing life before entering the course, b) reflections about the two types of argumentative essays written in the course, c) reflections about their classmates’ portfolios, d) a final reflection about their portfolios and writing in the course, and e) a
reflection about the AP exam writing experience. Table 4.3 lists these reflections and each are described below.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reflection on student’s writing life</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>argument writing reflection</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflections about classmates’ portfolios</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>final reflection about their portfolios and writing in the course</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflection about the AP exam writing experience</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflections on Student’s Writing Life**

With the understanding that reflective writing positively impacts high school students’ abilities to become self-regulated and aware learners (Chang et al., 2016), I asked students to engage in reflective writing about their relationship with reading and writing upon their entrance into the course. Reflective writing helps students process an experience on a deeper level because “the act of getting something down on paper often helps people to think an experience through” (University of Cambridge, 2022). It, therefore, seemed to me an appropriate first step to ask students to think through their past experiences with reading and writing as I asked them to embark on this journey with me and with each other.
At the beginning of the data collection period students created a one page document about their reading and writing life as far back as they could remember or wished to go. The term *one-pager* is commonly used in both educational and business settings when referring to a single page document that showcases details of a specified content area. In education, one-pagers are promoted by the nonprofit organization AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) as a successful strategy for students to respond to their reading in unique and imaginative ways by combining images and text (see Appendix F). Students at my school are mostly familiar with the one-pager as it is a strategy promoted through professional development and it is practiced by many teachers. One-pagers are essentially synonymous with entries in reflective text and image journals, which are shown to be a successful component of a holistic approach to learning that prompts deep reflective engagement (Hyland-Russell, 2014). Many students find the illustrative component engaging and helpful when expressing themselves (Munday, Rowley, & Pollly, 2017). As stated, my students were tasked to reflect upon their past experiences and then to create a meaningful representation of them combining text and images. An example of a student one-pager is shown in Figure 4.2.
Figure 4.2. An example of a one-pager reflecting on a student’s writing life.
Argumentative Writing Reflections

During the course of the data collection period, students wrote four rhetorical analysis essays (Q2) and three argument essays (Q3). After drafting essays of each type, students selected one essay, referred to as the choice essay, to revise, polish, and publish along with the earlier drafts. For each choice essay, students wrote a reflection about their selection and writing processes and their feelings about publishing the piece (see Appendix G). An example of a student’s portfolio portal to their argumentative writing is shown in Figure 4.3 and an example of a student’s subpages for the rhetorical analysis essay is shown in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.3. An example of the portal to argumentative writing in a student portfolio.
Reflections about Classmates’ Portfolios

Student portfolios were accessible to all class members through links posted in Google Classroom. Publishing and sharing work through portfolios benefits students through an exchange of information, ideas, and feedback (Karami et al., 2019). Participants were able to interact and share ideas about portfolio content and design through face-to-face discussions and in shared blog content. Further, sharing written content through portfolios emphasizes audience for student writers and shifts the focus away from the instructor and the grade (Gallagher & Poklop, 2014). Near the end of the data collection period, students reviewed classmates’ portfolios and completed a reflection highlighting seven portfolio elements that they liked from seven separate portfolios (see Appendix H).
**Final Reflection about their Portfolios and Writing in the Course**

For the final review and reflection of their own portfolios, I provided students with a template specific to portfolio review based on *Reflecting on Your Writing* as presented in *Everyone’s an Author* (Lunsford, Brody, Ede, Moss, Papper, & Walters, 2020, p. 812). Specifically, the template asked them to a) review each piece of writing in their portfolio, b) analyze their writing process, c) describe the strategies they used to write, d) reflect on their works as an author, and e) define their goals as writers. This reflection was written in essay format. An example of a student’s portfolio portal to their final reflections is shown in Figure 4.5.

![FINAL REFLECTION](image)

*Figure 4.5. An example of the portal to the end-of-course reflection in a student portfolio.*

**Reflection about the AP Exam Writing Experience**

The day after taking the AP Language and Composition exam on May 5, 2020, students wrote a reflection about the writing/testing experience (due to COVID the exam was reduced from a multiple choice section and three essays to a single rhetorical analysis essay). This post-exam reflection consisted of three prompts: a) describe how
you felt during the essay writing experience, b) describe how you felt after the essay writing experience, and c) other comments including technical issues (see Appendix I).

Journal Entries

Students maintained a journal that was a space for them to a) reflect upon the writing process, and b) practice different types of writing. Students wrote in their journals approximately one to two times per week during the data collection period and during this time they responded to 18 journal prompts. Of the 18 journal prompts, student responses to nine were included as part of my data set. I included only responses to the nine journal prompts that were designed to elicit responses that were reflective in nature and had potential to give me insight into students’ thoughts and feelings about writing. An example of this type of prompt is “What is your response to blogging (posting and replying) the 2012 Q3 Certainty vs Doubt essay? What did you learn about yourself as a writer from other people’s essays and other people’s comments (to you or to others)? What did you learn from your own comments to other writers?” These nine journal prompts can be seen in Appendix J.

The nine excluded journal prompts and responses were creative and personal writing, and while they gave students an opportunity to explore types of writing not typically found in an AP Language and Composition classroom, they did not reflect upon writing or our classroom experiences. Although the excluded responses to these nine prompts were not analyzed and coded, students’ thoughts and feelings about them were addressed in the final focus group interview.
Finally, students were asked to review all 18 of their journal responses and select ten to include in their portfolios. Figure 4.6 shows a student’s portal to this section of their portfolio.

![TOP 10 JOURNALS](image)

*Beneath are my top 10 journal entries from our writer’s journals that we kept as an ongoing way to track our progress and write out creative writing prompts throughout the months of February through May. I chose the first six journal entries because they were my favorite and most well written creative writing prompts from the passages that were given to us. The last four entries were responses to prompts about the essays that I wrote or other conversations I could’ve had about my writing experiences during this course. Throughout the entries, I feel that you can see my growth as a writer, in both types of prompts.*

*Figure 4.6. An example of the portal to journals in a student portfolio.*

### Analysis of Qualitative Data

I used inductive analysis to analyze the data collected. Inductive analysis involves three steps: organization, description, and interpretation (Mertler, 2017). The process is “cyclical and spiraling” (Mertler, 2017, p. 36) and includes analyzing and coding data, organizing it in search of patterns, categorizing codes, and repeating the process to reflect on it and to develop and refine themes and assertions (Bazeley, 2009, Mertler, 2017, Saldaña, 2016).

After transcribing the focus group interviews by hand and verbatim, I printed and read the transcriptions and wrote analytic memos in the margins of each transcript. This first step facilitated the emergence of patterns and categories in the initial phases of inductive analysis (Creswell, 2014, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). Figure 4.7 presents a transcript page with memos.
I then entered the interview transcripts, along with the reflections, journals, and blog comments, into Delve (2019), an online coding tool for analysis. I did not apply any codes to the data prior to entering them into Delve. Analysis units were monothematic.
‘chunks’ of sentences, or full paragraphs” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 85). Using the Delve coding software allowed me to efficiently code my data several times. I met with my dissertation chair virtually for peer debriefing sessions throughout the analysis process during which I would share my progress, ask questions, and receive feedback. These sessions helped to focus the process and typically resulted in my dissertation chair and I setting goals for our next meeting. What follows is a description of (a) first cycle coding of qualitative data, (b) second cycle categorizing data, (c) third cycle developing themes and assertions, and (d) developing the story of the data.

**First Cycle - Coding of Qualitative Data**

Initial coding assigns provisional codes to data in a preliminary and open-ended analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña. 2016). What follows is a description of the rounds of first cycle coding.

**First Cycle Round 1.** I began first cycle of coding by creating a new project in Delve and titling it Cycle 1 Round 1 Harrison Dissertation. I uploaded all data transcripts into the project. I then began applying eclectic codes to *snippets* (the Delve term for a unit of analysis) based on the meaning of the snippet. For this first round of coding I highlighted sentences, portions of paragraphs, or full paragraphs and added codes using the *Search or Add Codes* box in Delve. I wrote analytic memos with descriptions and thoughts about each code under each code label to track my thought process (Creswell, 2014, Saldaña. 2016). I continued performing analysis of the transcripts as I reflected on each chunk (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Marshall & Rossman, 2016) and I also continued adding descriptions for each code as I created them (Bazeley, 2009).
All transcripts of the data sources with codes were saved in Delve. I generated 1,103 codes in the first round of coding for all of the data sources.

**First Cycle Round 2.** In the second round of Cycle 1 coding, I reviewed Cycle 1 Round 1 codes for additional meaning. In this round I continued to use different types of elemental coding methods in order to continue making sense of my data. First and second pass eclectic coding consisted of initial, descriptive, and simultaneous coding. Descriptive coding allowed me to apply broad labels to the data as a first step in making sense of it. Although descriptive coding offers limited analytical insight into the data (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2014, Saldaña, 2016), it gave me a preliminary overview of my data set.

In addition, first cycle coding included simultaneous coding in which one segment or passage could be have more than one code (Saldaña, 2016). In both the focus group interviews and in individual artifacts, participant statements frequently overlapped several codes. For example, some comments by students were coded as *portfolios and AP essays, portfolios and audience awareness, portfolios and community*, and *portfolios and growth as a writer* because a single response by a student could include these multiple concepts. The screenshot of the Delve transcript from the second focus group interview shows data sources (first column), the interview transcript (second column), and the eclectic codes characteristic of the first and second rounds of the first cycle of coding (see Figure 4.8). Figure 4.9 shows such simultaneous coding in Delve.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Search or Add Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Writing (22)</td>
<td>+ Portfolio (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic About Writing (5)</td>
<td>Formatting Challenge (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Writing (4)</td>
<td>Portfolio Presentation (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentative Essay (21)</td>
<td>Portfolio and All Others (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Awareness (10)</td>
<td>Portfolio and Authors (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Collaboration (22)</td>
<td>Portfolio and Community (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog King's On Writing (1)</td>
<td>Portfolio and Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Essay (1)</td>
<td>Portfolio and Reflection (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Ajax Understand (6)</td>
<td>Portfolio and Self-Assess (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.8.** Screenshot of the second focus group interview in Delve with eclectic codes

**Figure 4.9.** Simultaneous coding in Delve

**First Cycle Round 3.** Prior to beginning cycle 1 round 2 of coding I engaged in peer debriefing with my dissertation chair and it was evident to us both that was necessary to extract more meaning from the data. Based on our discussion, I created a
new project in Delve and applied process coding and In Vivo coding to the data. Applying these code types allowed me to refine the code language in a way that best represented that data. Process coding identifies keywords and phrases related to actions students took during the process (Saldaña, 2016). For example, the process code *archiving writing* was applied because it captured a student process as described by participants themselves. The student comment “I think the fact that we have someplace to put the writing and to go back and easily access it, I think was really like the main thing for me,” when combined with similar comments from other students, showed that students saw value in archiving their writing in their portfolios and I therefore applied the process code *archiving writing*.

In order to capture the authenticity of student voices during the second round of cycle 1 of coding, I also applied In Vivo coding to the data. In Vivo codes are verbatim extractions of students’ language (Strauss, 1987) and since this study explores how students experience becoming writers, In Vivo coding assured that I would “prioritize and honor the participants’ voices” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106) and produce a more powerful analysis of the phenomenon being observed (Saldaña, 2016). I placed In Vivo codes in quotation marks to distinguish them from the descriptive and process codes (see Figure 4.10).
Figure 4.10. In Vivo codes in Delve

**First Cycle Round 4.** There was overlap between and within the process codes and the In Vivo codes, so I used the opportunity of looking at the data with fresh eyes and applying more meaningful code types to the data to combine codes based on content and meaning. For example, I was able to merge snippets assigned the process code *reflecting on writing* into the In Vivo codes *reflections helped me see what I should do* and *reflections helped me in realizing what I am best at*.

Combining codes based on content and meaning made the data both more manageable and more meaningful (Saldaña, 2016). Each time codes were combined I recorded an analytic memo in Delve to track my thinking, assertions, and analysis about the codes’ meaning (Bazeley, 2013; Mertler, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). Another example of how codes were combined would be merging the codes *finding time to write* and *managing time* since the essence of each was essentially the same.
First Cycle Round 5. As a final round of Cycle 1 coding I reviewed the final list of codes to assure that the codes best represented the data set as much as possible. I determined that I was indeed satisfied and moved to second cycle coding.

Second Cycle - Categorizing the Data

Second cycle coding brings a deeper understanding of the data by reorganizing and merging codes based on similarities in content and meaning (Charmaz, 2014; Mertler, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). My goal at this stage was to view my refined set of codes in a meaningful way and to move from individual codes to categories and subcategories that made the most sense of the data. In this cycle I utilized pattern coding to organize and group similarly coded data into groups that share some characteristic. Pattern coding uses classification reasoning and intuition to determine which data belong together (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldana, 2016). During this second cycle of coding I moved through several iterations of possible groupings in order to find the most authentic and manageable set of categories and subcategories.

Second Cycle Round 1. In order to help me to begin to organize my data and make sense of my codes, I printed, cut apart, and originally arranged the codes alphabetically on a table. This second cycle of coding allowed me to engage in initial code mapping (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2016) which allowed me to create a self-generated map to better frame the data. I considered several possible ways of grouping codes by physically manipulating the codes on the table (see Figure 4.11).
Figure 4.11. First cycle codes ready for manipulation

Visualizing my data in this way was a useful reflective process that encouraged further refining, renaming, and merging codes based on similarities into more manageable groups (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Each time codes were combined I recorded an analytic memo into Delve to have a record of my thoughts about the codes’ meaning. An example of how codes were combined would be the use of tracking growth through portfolios in place of having everything in one place, I could see how I grew, and reviewing over time. Another example of how closely related codes were grouped would be feeling anxious about managing time in place of the first cycle codes “if I just had more time,” finding time to write, and managing time.

Second Cycle Rounds 2 & 3. I engaged in further manipulations of the codes, experimenting with different groupings and overviews of the data until the most authentic patterns began to emerge. During these rounds of cycle two coding, I began to identify differentiations within groups of codes. For example, when the group of codes about the
positive impact of portfolios became the category *perceiving portfolios as impactful*, it became obvious that the subcategories *recognizing audience*, *growing as a writer*, and *valuing AP writing* were some of the subcategories that were subsumed under that category. This process of identifying categories *within* categories is the process of creating a hierarchical coding scheme where related codes are nested together in subcategories (Saldaña, 2016; Silver & Lewins, 2014).

Therefore, I continued the process of mixing codes into possible groupings that made sense of the data to be certain that I had exhausted all possible and reasonable interpretations of relationships among the data. During these rounds of cycle two coding, I began to get what felt like a more accurate overall picture of what the data set represented. I grouped codes as I saw them telling the story of becoming a writer in an AP classroom.

**Second Cycle Round 4.** I then stepped away from the code strip categories and subcategories and came back to them several times to make certain that they truly were the best representation of the data. During this round I continued to experiment with alternative ways of mixing and grouping the codes to ascertain if there was a more accurate way to make sense of the data, but each time I came back to the groupings identified in the previous round. I settled on these and then moved to the next cycle of coding.

**Third Cycle - Identifying Themes**

**Third Cycle Round 1:** Following the iterative processes of organizing codes into categories, I began a new stage of consolidating categories into even larger groupings through which themes began to emerge. To do this I continued to physically manipulate
the code strips (now grouped into categories) in various ways searching for the conceptual groupings that felt most authentic and representative of the data. I created several tables by pushing student desks together and laid out code strips into categories with category labels written on post-it notes above them. I was able to walk around the tables and move categories. Figure 4.12 presents the physical manipulation of codes.

![Figure 4.12. Grouping of categories related to becoming a writer](image)

**Third Cycle Rounds 2-3:** I repeated this process of mixing categories several times, first on the makeshift tables in my classroom. Then, to further facilitate this process, I created a table in Microsoft Word that included relevant participant quotations and their related categories along with the number of codes that were related to each category. A portion of this table is presented in Figure 4.13.
Figure 4.13. Theme development from categories

I moved through several rounds of grouping categories in different ways, with each successive list beginning to reveal more specific themes with supporting categories. Visualizing the data in these different ways by developing alternate lists of categories based on similarities helped me to better understand the themes that were emerging. For example, the themes Test Anxiety and Writing Anxiety were combined into one theme Anxieties as Developing Writers because they shared codes and categories in common such as writing for a grade, timed writing, and AP writing.

Through these combinations and manipulations, I also grouped categories related to collaboration and community. These included collaborating enhances learning and...
confidence, learning through blogging, valuing peer and teacher feedback, and managing discomfort with peer feedback. Finally, I grouped codes related to writing and being a writer. These included archiving, reflecting, critiquing, practicing, revising, recognizing audience, growing as a writer, valuing AP writing, finding motivation, personalizing portfolios, positive perceptions of personal writing in an AP classroom, and negative perceptions of personal writing in an AP classroom. After multiple manipulations of the codes and categories through previous rounds, these groupings felt representative of the data set.

**Third Cycle Round 4:** In order to review the final themes and be sure that they truly represented the data, I then created flow charts of subcategories to categories to themes on large Post-it Easel paper (25 in x 30 in) with adhesive backs and posted them on the back wall of my classroom across from my desk where I could look at them and reflect upon them daily. Figure 4.14 shows the flow from subcategory to category to the theme confronting anxieties as developing writers in an AP Classroom. Figure 4.15 shows the flow from subcategory to category to the theme finding community with developing writers in an AP Classroom. Figure 4.16 shows the flow from subcategory to category to the theme thinking like a developing writer in an AP writing classroom.
Figure 4.14. Flow from subcategory to category to theme

Figure 4.15. Flow from subcategory to category to theme
I ultimately changed the code name *Personalizing Portfolios* to *Owning through Design* because it more effectively captured the perceived student benefit of personalizing portfolios—a design process—and was therefore a more accurate descriptor. This change in code name also was a better fit with the other related subcategories which also reflected perceived student benefits. I also renamed *Struggling with AP Writing* to *Supporting Claims with Evidence and Commentary* because it more specifically reflected another set of discrete tasks identified as core skills (such as its related subcategory *Interpreting Difficult Rhetorical Analysis Passages*) in the course with which students expressed anxiety. This reflective process lasted several days and helped me be sure that the final categories and themes were the best possible representations of the data. I then created these flowcharts in Microsoft Word and continued reflecting upon them. They are represented in Figures 4.17–4.19.
Figure 4.17. Confronting anxieties as developing writers in an AP classroom
Figure 4.18. Finding community with developing writers in an AP classroom
Figure 4.19. Thinking like a developing writer in an AP writing classroom

**Third Cycle Round 5.** Once satisfied that I had accurately represented the data, member checking occurred through an email exchange with my eight participants. I emailed them the categories and themes I had identified and shared my interpretations with them in order to ensure they were accurate. I heard back from five of the eight
participants. A portion of my email to them is presented in Figure 4.20 and a sample participant response is presented in Figure 4.21.

**Figure 4.20. Part of an Email to Participants for Member Checking**

*Frank Harrison*

May 24, 2021, 12:41PM

Hello there!

Before each of you head off to the next chapter of your lives I want to thank you again for your participation in my research study. I also want to share with you my assertions and rationales that emerged from our two focus group interviews, your reflections, and your journals. Your feedback would be greatly appreciated!

The attached tables visually illustrate the four assertions and rationales. Here, though, is a summary:

**Assertion #1:** Many students enter AP Language and Composition with a certain level of anxiety about writing and the AP Lang exam.

Rationale for Assertion 1:

1. Students often experience a loss of joy in writing around middle school.
2. The timed nature of the exam creates high levels of anxiety for some

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**Figure 4.21. Sample Response from Participant for Member Checking**

Hello Mr. Harrison!

I hope you are doing well! Looking over the data, I believe everything is accurate and representative of our opinions. I appreciate you doing your research on this topic!

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**Presentation of Findings**

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: 1) confronting anxieties as developing writers in an AP Classroom, 2) finding community with developing writers in
an AP classroom, and 3) thinking like developing writers in an AP classroom (see Table 4.4). Each of these is discussed in detail below. Any quotations are verbatim.

Table 4.4 Qualitative Findings at a Glance

Assertion 1: Students enter an advanced placement language and composition course with various levels of anxiety about writing and standardized testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confronting Anxieties</td>
<td>Losing joy in writing during adolescence</td>
<td>Transitioning to middle and high school writing</td>
<td>“It describes how school has played a big part in that as writing has become troublesome and nerve wrecking.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Associating middle school and high school writing with grades</td>
<td>“You may be a good writer, but, like, because all of it’s based on a grade, because all of its based on you need to have this in your writing to pass this class, because all of it’s based on, like, that, it’s like sucked the joy out.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiencing AP test anxiety</td>
<td>Feeling anxious about timed writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I also struggle with time management, especially when the essays are timed, which is why my essays are not as well written during my first draft than when I revise them.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling anxious about AP scoring</td>
<td></td>
<td>“And having anxiety anyway is going to make it harder to write, like, with my whole heart because I’m just going to be like “I don’t know if I should put my whole heart into it because are they going to put their whole heart into it?”</td>
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</table>
| Feeling anxious about AP writing | Interpreting difficult rhetorical analysis passages |                                                | “I mean I read the prompt and thought to myself “why in the world does this matter” and “who had the audacity to write such a bad prompt (sorry if you are that person).” To improve these
pieces, I would have to at least make an attempt to prepare next time. Aside from this, it is difficult for me to write if I think the prompt is irrelevant or something I cannot connect with, so I don’t know how much more I could correct.”

Supporting claims with evidence and commentary

“I tend to be lacking in the explanation area. My biggest problem is getting off-topic. I will explain something that leads to an explanation of something else and the vicious cycle just goes on.”

Assertion 2: Students developed a sense of community within the class through shared goals and tasks.

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding Community with</td>
<td>Interacting with others</td>
<td>Collaborating enhances learning and</td>
<td>”I don’t think, like, any other year in high school I’ve had as much collaboration time as this year and I just think it, you know, when we’re grading our peers’ work and the perspective of the grader for the AP exam…it helps us to see where our writing is at and what we need to do better on.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Writers in an AP</td>
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<td>confidence</td>
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<td>Classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning through blogging</td>
<td></td>
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<td>“And then like the interpretations and stuff when we do the blogs and everything and I get to go see all of the different essays, it’s like “Oh, you thought of it this way” and “you thought of this example, and that was really clever.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Processing peer feedback</td>
<td>Valuing peer and teacher feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Even though the replies were very uplifting, they always taught me what improvements I could make in the future.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing discomfort</td>
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<td>“But I feel like—my only problem with peer review and stuff is that”</td>
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</table>
Somebody has my paper in their hands.

Assertion 3: Students cited experiences with writing and portfolio curating as having positive impacts on their writers’ mindsets.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking like developing</td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Archiving</td>
<td>“I think the fact that we have someplace to put the writing and to go back and easily access it, I think that was really like the main thing for me.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>writers in an AP Classroom</td>
<td>growth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>through</td>
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<td>portfolios</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflecting</td>
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<td>“This process has allowed me to reflect on my development in the writing world and has given me the ability to set goals for myself.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing to improve</td>
<td>Critiquing</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m still not really satisfied with it but I guess I’ll have to sit on it and hopefully get some new ideas on how to make it better.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practicing</td>
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<td>“Yea, that’s probably the most essays I’ve ever written during like one semester at school, and I feel like that really helped, just all that practice, and I feel like also prepared me for when I have to take the AP exam.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revising</td>
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<td>“I had urges to completely rewrite the essay, with new points, and everything, but I couldn’t really find any and decided not to spend lots of time looking. So after, I attempted to brush up on my vocabulary and fix certain things; for example, I attempted to eliminate my use of long quotes.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceiving portfolios as</td>
<td>Recognizing</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I really want my essay to “wow” the AP graders, which I feel can only be done with a high impactful audience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceiving portfolios as</td>
<td>Recognizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceiving portfolios as</td>
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<td>impactful</td>
<td>Recognizing</td>
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understanding of the topic and a high level of sophistication.”

SEEING GROWTH AS A WRITER

“I definitely feel like I improved over the year. With like different writing prompts and developing my portfolio and the writing journals, I’ve had a lot of time to reflect on my own writing.”

VALUING AP WRITING

“It was interesting to see the change in my feelings and attitude towards writing the essays, and then how much of a better writer I became while practicing those (argumentative essays), and then now like if someone were to ask me an opinionated question I would feel more comfortable in person talking to someone about voicing my opinions ‘cause I know that I’m able to like back it up with commentary and stuff like that from this class.”

FINDING MOTIVATION

“I got to remember that the writing that we’re doing here isn’t like the writing I typically enjoy, and like actually do, but you know, if I get better in this writing it will help me with all of my writing, so I guess that helps.”

OWNING THROUGH DESIGN

“I tried to kind of make it look cute. Like my background’s like this nice sunset on the beach, which I really like. It’s very peaceful.”

PERCEIVING PERSONAL WRITING IN AN AP CLASSROOM BOTH POSITIVELY AND NEGATIVELY

“Personal writing is definitely a good way to clarify my thoughts and come to conclusions, so I want to continue in the future. One goal that I have is to become more comfortable sharing my personal writing as it will be a skill I must have for college and potential jobs.”
Negative perceptions

“As I mentioned, it presents an area of vulnerability with which I am not yet fully comfortable.”

**Theme 1: Confronting Anxieties as Developing Writers in an AP Classroom**

Writing is an essential skill and high levels of anxiety have been shown to impede student growth in writing and negatively impact student’s attitudes about writing (Zorbaz, 2010). For highly skilled students, anxiety can serve as a motivator for writing, but for average or low-skilled student writers, anxiety can cause low performance (Akpur, 2005). Taking an advanced placement writing course introduces students to a variety of factors that may be new and intimidating for some students: timed writing, argumentative writing, rubrics, anonymous graders, a faster pace, and inflated expectations for students to name a few. The culture created by these elements can be challenging for many students and they may respond to the higher expectations by becoming anxious about writing (Arinda & Ardi, 2020; Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). For students who believe they are up to writing in a given situation, however, the result can be to become more successful writers (Zumbrunn, Broda, Varier, & Conklin, 2020).

The range of writing ability among students entering the course was wide and students in this study collectively acknowledged feeling anxious about the writing tasks in the course and on the upcoming exam. The data collected suggests that students experienced various levels and forms of anxiety they perceived as affecting both their writing performance and their attitudes about writing. Three categories were identified in this theme, (a) losing joy in writing during adolescence, (b) experiencing AP test anxiety, and (c) feeling anxious about AP writing, and are described below.
Losing Joy in Writing during Adolescence. Moving from middle school to high school often brings specific challenges including a much larger student body, a more impersonal school environment, and increased rigor in students’ academic workload (Beland, 2014). These changes in academic structure are accompanied by a developmental period during which most adolescents are experiencing psychological, physical, and social changes related to puberty (Lord et al. 1994). As students move through these stages of childhood and adolescent development and are introduced to the new challenges and expectations of high school, attitudes towards school and curriculum are significant factors affecting motivation and how students see themselves. This section describes factors contributing to a loss of joy in the writing process prior to joining my AP Language and Composition classes and includes the increased demands and lack of choice associated with (a) transitioning to middle and high school writing from elementary level writing, and (b) associating middle school and high school writing with grades.

Transitioning to Middle and High School Writing. Some of the research shows that as students advance through the various levels of school, writing self-efficacy tends to decrease. Pajares, Johnson, and Usher (2007) found that elementary school students have higher writing self-efficacy than middle school students. Similarly, Pajares and Valiante (1999) found that sixth graders had higher writing self-efficacy than their seventh and eighth grade peers, and Arslan (2018) reported that the writing self-efficacy perceptions of fifth graders were higher than those of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. While not all research supports the idea that writing self-efficacy is impacted by grade
level, Demirel and Aydin (2019) concluded that for high school students as grade level increased writing self-efficacy decreased.

In this study, focus group interviews, student journal entries, and student reflections indicate that there is a noticeable decline in students’ attitudes and feelings about writing from their elementary and middle school years to the time they reach their junior year of high school. By the time students enroll in Advanced Placement Language and Composition, many students have a resigned attitude about writing and accept it as one of the necessary evils of high school. As stated by Tahlia in the first focus group interview, “But, um, like, it is very evident as you grow up, that they start making you write stuff and start making you read especially, and then that takes—I don’t want to do it anymore, I don’t want to do it anymore.”

This sentiment was echoed by Trudy when she said in the same interview that:

In my opinion, school sucks the life out of writing. Because, it’s like writing is subjective, like the whole concept of writing is subjective, so the fact that some AP grader some—no offense, Mr. Harrison—teacher is going to like grade my essay based on their own personal experiences, like, annoys me, in a sense, because it’s also, like, you’re an adult, you’ve been through more than I have, so yea, my writing may not be accurate in the context of, like, a whole life, but it’s accurate in the context of, like, my life, like I understand it. People who are my age, probably might understand it more. Not to say that you don’t understand all of my writing.

The students seemed to be mostly in agreement that the type of writing that they engaged in during their elementary school years sparked joy. Anne recalled identifying as
a writer early in her education when she said, “it all kind of started in elementary school because I did find, like, this passion for writing and I kind of wanted to be a writer.” The expectations of high school writing, particularly in an advanced placement course, however, are perceived as a far cry from those earlier childhood experiences. For example, Charlotte said, also in the first focus group interview:

When I was younger, like, my teachers were like ‘brainstorm about whatever you want’ and I’d be like ‘yes, I love this story, it’s great, pretty pink princess’ whatever, right, but then once we get to middle school and stuff it’s like, yea, you may be a good writer, but, like, because all of it’s based on a grade, because all of its based on you need to have this in your writing to pass this class, because all of it’s based on, like, that, it’s like sucked the joy out, so now if you told me to write, like even if it were ‘you can choose what you want to write about’ I’d be, like, reluctant to do it because I’ve associated writing with, like, grades and bad things.

Charlotte described becoming a reluctant writer because writing for grades “sucked the joy” out of the process for her.

**Associating Middle School and High School Writing with Grades.** Assigning grades to student work is as old as the American educational system itself. For assignments such as writing, grading is a teacher’s subjective opinion of the quality of a student’s work, effort, or ability, and sometimes of the student’s willingness to follow instructions (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Simon et al., 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that much of the measurement and evaluation research into grading suggests that classroom grades are unreliable (Brimi, 2011; Brookhart et al., 2016). Ultimately, however, for many teachers grades are a tried and true strategy to attempt to motivate
students and to signal to them the value of an assignment (Anderson, 2018). High achieving students, in particular, are prone to be incentivized though grades, but this is not true for all students (Anderson, 2018; Betts & Grogger, 2003).

Students in this study seemed to agree overall that the narrow scope of writing options available in high school and the grading of student work were “joy suckers,” depriving them of any joy they had experienced earlier in their educational journeys. As Regan said in the second focus group interview:

If it were just my opinion or just what I think about like a piece, then maybe I’d feel differently about it. However, since like with the AP writings, we have to, like, do it based off of the rubric. We are trying to get a certain score. Like, that makes it more difficult for me. So, yea, I didn’t enjoy writing.

David agreed, saying in the first focus group interview “But like, I don’t know, I feel like just the very fact that we even grade writing just makes no sense to me. Like I understand, like a certain point, you know, if you’re an 11th grader writing like a 5 year old, then, yea, something…” Regan went on to say in the first focus group interview that:

In the past—since middle school—all of my writing I have done has just been for school, so, like, if I read a book or an article or an assignment or something, and you have to write an essay or even just a paragraph, like, I’m doing that for the grade, not because I truly believe in what I am writing or something, it’s because I want to get that A and I want to get that good grade.

For the students participating in this study, therefore, attitudes about writing at the beginning of the school year were mostly described in apathetic or joyless terms, often because of the emphasis and significance of grades. This is a challenging dynamic for
students entering a writing course. As Charlotte said, “when I’m like reading something and have to like respond to it or make an argument about it, I just, I never necessarily do what I want to do, I do what I think will be easier to help me get a better grade, which like, isn’t what I want to do but in the long run it’s all about getting that good grade.” Charlotte’s dilemma about how to approach the blank page is resolved by her choice to pursue the grade rather than approaching writing tasks how she wants to—a choice that comes with consequences for her attitude about writing. By the time Charlotte entered AP Language and Composition she was already a frustrated writer focused on grades. Her mother—an English teacher—would proofread Charlotte’s work, but this strategy was also frustrating in that “teachers grade it so differently and everyone’s looking for stuff…I still won’t just get the grade I want just cause teachers grade it so differently…which makes it hard.” Charlotte’s defeatist attitude was learned over time and it affected how she viewed the task of writing and how she viewed herself as a writer.

**Experiencing AP Text Anxiety.** For students in an AP Language and Composition course, experiencing and confronting anxiety over the standardized test for which they will practice and prepare throughout the year seemed to be a common concern. Research dating back to the 1950s has suggested that feelings of worry or anxiety about tests significantly and negatively affects performance (Schillinger, Mosbacher, Bruner, Vogel, & Grabner, 2021). The topics covered in this section are mostly course specific—as opposed to the feelings about writing learned during middle and high school discussed earlier—and refer to anxieties about standardized testing and AP Language and Composition in particular. They include (a) feeling anxious about timed writing and (b) feeling anxious about AP scoring.
Feeling Anxious about Timed Writing. The anxiety experienced by the students in this study, as suggested by the data collected, is in large part because of the timed nature of the test. Students are given one hour to complete the multiple choice section and they are given two hours and 15 minutes to plan and write the three argumentative essays. Some students become so unnerved at a timed-writing situation that they take a resistant stance to a timed prompt and refuse to comply fully with it (Petersen, 2009). While that would be an extreme response for a student who has voluntarily enrolled in Advanced Placement Language and Composition, writing three essays in two hours and 15 minutes is a daunting task, and it certainly was a concern for students in this study.

Both focus group interviews and student writing reflections during data collection revealed that the timed writing portion of the test was a constant source of anxiety. Regan summed it up when she said in the second focus group interview that “timed in-class essays, like they stressed me out a lot, because like how was I supposed to write a really good essay in 43 minutes?” Trudy agreed, saying in the same interview, “I have like 40 minutes to write an essay, it’s probably not going to be my best essay, no matter what, no matter like how you frame it, put it—it’s not going to get much better with revising or anything…I struggle with like timed writing –I feel like it’s not my best writing when I write something timed, because like why put a time limit on it? Good writing is good writing. Just take however long.” In the first focus group interview, Trudy compared the Advanced Placement test administration to another standardized testing format:

Like remember MAP testing? They put everyone in a room, and then, like, at a certain two hour mark, like, if you weren’t done they put you in a different room, but you still could take your test. It was fine. Nobody had a problem. Just, the
people who were finished carried on. People who weren’t—yea. And like, my scores were usually really good because I could take my time and actually answer correctly.

In the same interview, Charlotte gave an example from a previous experience with timed writing on an AP exam and the anxiety it produced:

I’m one of those people, I remember on the AP Psych exam last year, I’d look around and I’d see people who were like just chillin’ and taking their time, and I’m like “they’re ahead of me” or like people would be done before me and I’m still like on the last question, I’m like freaking out. And then I just feel like my level or writing just got worse, because I was just like scrambling. My handwriting gets so bad, like I would go and rewrite something and it was so illegible.

Students did not go so far as to take a resistant stance on the essays they wrote for the course, but they obviously found the timed aspect of the writing task daunting and it shook their confidence.

For example, Ashton wrote in her Question 2 reflection, “I also struggle with time management, especially when the essays are timed, which is why my essays are not as well written during my first draft than when I revise them.” During the early days of the course and the bulk of data collection, students first wrote an essay during a 47 minute class session and then were given time to reflect upon that essay and to revise it in another class session and at home. The goal was to practice the timed writing aspect of the exam and then to foster reflection about their writing during the revision process.
Samira echoed Anne’s feelings when she stated in her Question 3 reflection, “If I wrote another draft, I could possibly add more commentary. Due to the time constraint, I was only able to talk about the main commentary I had.” Samira is referring to the AP Language and Composition rubric which in part scores student essays on the presence of a defensible claim, the use of specific evidence, and student commentary connecting the evidence back to the claim. She felt the time constraint prevented her from writing a higher scoring essay.

Student post-exam reflections after students had completed the AP Language and Composition, however, revealed that many students felt emotions from relief to confidence as a result of completing essays within the time constraints:

Samira: The setting remained the same, but I had an overwhelming sense of relief from being able to complete the entire essay. I did not include a conclusion, which I feared may cost me some points, but I referenced the rubric once more, which may have only cost me the complexity point.

Regan: I was a little stressed about the time constraint on the essay since I had never been under that certain time frame for an online essay prompt. I felt that it was harder with the passage being online and I was slightly frustrated with the fact there were no line numbers and I was not able to physically annotate it, but I found ways around it. Overall, I was calm and collected and felt confident in what I was writing during the exam.
David: There was a bit of a time crunch in the last 10 minutes that made me a little anxious because I was rushing to finish up everything. Overall, I felt fairly composed and confident.

Charlotte: I definitely remember being on my second body paragraph thinking, “wow I actually am going to finish in time.” I remember this because I was so worried about the time limit, but I was able to finish just as the five minutes to submit began and everything was fine.

Ashton: I thought that if I only had 5-10 extra minutes I could have easily written another paragraph and my essay could have been stronger. Despite this, I still felt that the other aspects of my essay were good and I felt pretty satisfied with that.

These young student writers entered the course, and even approached the examination with trepidation and a little bit of anger about the timed conditions of the writing portion of the exam. Throughout the course and during the exam, however, they accepted the challenge, found their own ways to write within the time constraints, and overall felt good about it.

**Feeling Anxious about AP Scoring.** Associating writing with grades during middle school and early high school, as discussed earlier, often negatively impacted students’ attitudes about writing before students entered my course. Beyond this there were also Advanced Placement exam-specific factors—beyond the classroom—that students expressed anxiety about once in the course. These factors included some of the specific tasks required by College Board involved in writing AP Language essays (to be
discussed in the next section) as well as the application of the AP scoring rubric and grading procedures set in place by College Board. In this study, students found the uncertainty of a score given on College Board’s six-point rubric by unknown AP scorers as sources of concern and even resentment. For instance, during the first focus group interview participants expressed concern about AP scorer bias or indifference and their own resulting defeatism:

Anne: Well, like with the AP Art rubric and everything, like with that it all genuinely depends on who’s grading your art, because they can look and it and feel like “this is a 3” then another person will look at it and be like “oh, this is a 5” and it all depends on who’s looking at it and I don’t know how subjective it’s going to be with the AP Lang thing because I, personally, like I don’t know how subjective and objective to be because if I get the wrong person grading my test and everything, then, you know, I could get a bad score and I deserved better. And I just don’t know how that’s gonna go down and that kind of making me anxious.

Regan: I feel like with that issue, also at the same time, um, are they really going to care that much? Because it’s like you’ve got a bit—all of America being graded within, what, the same two or three months to get all of your scores back by June or July.

Trudy: It’s a week. It’s not even two or three months. They go there for a week and grade all the papers.
Regan: Yea, so these teachers who are tired of reading the same exact essay over, are they really going to be like, “oh, does she deserve a 5, or does she deserve a 6?” and they’re just going to be “I don’t really care anymore.”

Anne: I think it’s unfair, because their first essay they might be more like on top of it and be like “oh, this is a 3” and somebody who wrote even worse could get like a 4.

Regan: Every unbiased grader has a bias.

Anne: Yea, exactly. And having anxiety anyway is going to make it harder to write, like, with my whole heart because I’m just going to be like “I don’t know if I should put my whole heart into it because are they going to put their whole heart into it?” I don’t know.

These responses demonstrate how students enter the course and early-on gain an overall picture of College Board’s process of scoring essays, but they do not trust the process. These anxious feelings about AP scorers seem formidable at the beginning of the course, leading some students, as Anne states, to wonder “should I put my whole heart into it.” Therefore, early on students suggest that they had learned the writing in the classroom did not merit their full commitment because of the grading structure established by College Board.

From the beginning of the course I made it routine to discuss and review the new six-point writing rubric with students. College Board’s move from the previous nine-point rubric was designed to make the evaluation process more objective, with the new
six-point rubric allowing one point for a defensible thesis/claim, up to four points of use of evidence and commentary, and one point for sophistication of writing. This rubric itself was also a source of anxiety for Anne: “the AP exam is kinda stressing me out, ‘cause I’m like that one stupid sophistication point makes no sense to me. [general agreement] What is sophistication? It’s just writing.” While more objective than the previously used nine-point rubric, the sophistication point seemed to students to be a strong example of subjectivity still built into the scoring system.

The rubric does give bullet points on how to secure the sophistication point. For example, the portion of the rubric for the Question 3 argumentative essay is presented in Figure 4.22. Despite the bulleted list, the students singled it out as a source of concern.

![Figure 4.22. Sophistication point rubric for Question 3](image)

In their post-exam reflections (written the day after taking the AP Language and Composition exam in May but before knowing their scores), however, several students expressed having let go of their feelings of anxiety regarding how their writing would be scored. Ashton wrote that “I thought my essay was pretty well written/sophisticated and I
also thought I included a nice introduction and conclusion paragraph, a strong thesis, and commentary that related my evidence to my thesis. I am sure that I was able to pass the exam and get the college credit.” Similarly, Charlotte wrote “After the exam I felt very relieved. I think I wrote one of my best essays and I was proud of how well I think I did in the time given. Once I submitted all I felt was happy.” Regan provided a final example of finding peace with the exam scoring process:

After finishing and turning in the essay I felt relieved. I was no longer stressed and worried about what I was going to have to write about and if I knew everything I needed to in order to get a high score. I was also relieved to feel like I was practically done with the class and I successfully completed it. I was worried and a bit anxious right after just because I knew my scores wouldn’t come in for two months and I wanted to know how well I did, but it soon got off my mind. I enjoyed the experience as much as I could and I felt happy about the results I am going to get, even without knowing them, just because I prepared as much as I could for it and that there was no going back after then.

It appears that for them, feelings of accomplishment in writing and attaching value to AP writing compensated for feelings of anxiety.

**Feeling Anxious About AP Writing.** Upon entering my Advanced Placement course focusing on argumentative writing, students expressed concerns about being up to the task of writing at a level expected by both me and by College Board. Some recent studies have validated their concerns. AP Language and Composition is considered an introductory college-level composition course taken at the high school level (College Board, 2022) and despite its advanced pedigree, many students entering the course are
novice writers, particularly when it comes to the types of writing done in the course. Argumentation requires critical thinking and many students have struggled to move beyond conventional high school writing towards the new patterns and ways of argumentation and to determine what is needed in an argument essay (Marni, Suyono, Roekhan, & Harsiati, 2019; Liu & Stapleton, 2018; Wingate, 2012). For these students, this unfamiliar territory combined with the perceived high expectations creates anxiety (Gilken & Johnson, 2021; Cameron et al., 2009).

This section discusses students’ attitudes about tasks involved in responding to the two types of essays students wrote in this study, the Q2 rhetorical analysis essay and the Q3 argumentative essay (due to the pandemic the shortened face-to-face school year, this study did not address the synthesis essay—Question 1. The tasks discussed in this section are (a) interpreting difficult rhetorical analysis passages for the Q2 essay, and (b) supporting claims with evidence and commentary for both the Q2 and the Q3 essay.

**Interpreting Difficult Rhetorical Analysis Passages.** Again, while all three of the essays students write on the AP Language and Composition exam are argumentative in nature they are differentiated by the sources of evidence students draw from to support their claims. Data collection for this study focused on drafting Question 2 (rhetorical analysis) and Question 3 (argumentation) essays and students overwhelmingly targeted the rhetorical analysis passage prompts as sources of anxiety.

The one outlier in the following discussion from the first focus group interview, Samira, expressed a fondness for analyzing writing, setting off some strong reactions from the other participants:
Samira: One thing that I do like about writing with like the school-based, I like analyzing writing a lot, so like, when teachers, like, really teach you, like, how to analyze like out of a text, so I get a whole new perspective of a story that I probably would not have ever seen before. I feel like that’s one thing that, like, school…

Anne: I just don’t agree with you.

Samira: Joy sucking?

Anne: Yea.

Samira: I like the analytical part where like that it can show new perspectives and stuff.

Charlotte: I think like with the analyzing is like some of the passages that we read I think are like “oh that’s cool” but like some of them are so just so random—and pointless—but like I have to read them like multiple times just to like get the point because I get—it’s so like boring to me. Like I remember once we had to read like about windmills. Pointless.

[general groans]

Regan: Or even if it’s boring but sometimes we have to read like 1800s literature and like the way of life and the language and everything was just so completely different that it’s so hard to translate and interpret the meaning in today’s world because what we think it means is not what the author meant because the author was
thinking “Oh, well this happened in 1817” it’s now 2020, well that has like probably two completely different meanings.

Me: Okay, alright. So some of the texts feel, or passages feel antiquated, and just not accessible to your generation?

Trudy: Or also, if it’s something like a scientific journal or something, like, I understand that somebody needs to analyze that, but it does not need to be me! [laughs] I just wish that the passages were more like geared more to our generation, like it doesn’t even have to be like a newspaper article from two weeks ago, just like something that like I can read and like follow.

Anne: Yea, like something interesting that can keep my attention because, like, I think that even if I have like the slightest bit of interest I’ll find more joy in trying to find a way to get a good grade on it rather than it just being a task that I have to complete.

Charlotte: Yea, I feel like I remember it more when I…[inaudible]

Me: Well, maybe when they roll out the new AP questions that they’re modifying this year, maybe they’ll be a little bit qualitatively different. I don’t know, but I hope so. But we’ve kind of been stuck with that same College Board stuff for years now that you guys are talking about and these complaints are not new. I’ve heard them before.

Trudy: College Board, if you are listening—hear us now!
This exchange between the students highlighted their discomfort with the types of passages provided by College Board as part of the Question 2 prompts. Charlotte called them “pointless” while Regan emphasized that the challenge in interpreting them siphoned any joy from the task. Obviously, Trudy’s plea to College Board—“hear us now!” ignores the objective of College Board to task advanced placement students with honing and ultimately showcasing their close reading and critical thinking skills, but her saucy comment succinctly and humorously summarized the group’s overall position—except for Samira—that the more technical and/or antiquated passages were obstacles to feeling confident about writing this type of essay.

In final writing/portfolio reflection, David continued the sentiment that “analytical writing … resulted in me writing very technically.” He said that other types of writing, such as the Question 3 argumentative prompt and writing in his journal allowed him to be a more effective writer because they “allowed me to express myself as a person.” Other students also felt less anxious when the writing felt more personal to them. For example, Regan also described her contrasting feelings about the Question 2 analytical prompt (“hard to translate and interpret the meaning in today’s world”) as compared to the Question 3 argumentative prompt (“I enjoy expressing my thoughts and opinions”), highlighting her concern that during the AP Language and Composition exam she will be facing an analytical prompt that would have her stymied. She, and other students, expressed a strong preference for prompts that allowed them—what they considered—the creativity to generate original evidence rather than searching through passages for how and why a writer used rhetorical strategies. For Regan, generating or applying her own self-selected evidence “allows the audience to know I am knowledgeable about my points
and also that I am not ignorant on the subject.” The implication here is that Regan felt anxious that the analytical essay prompts could make her appear ignorant to any readers of her essay.

Interestingly, the students overwhelmingly saw a qualitative distinction between the Question 2 analytical task and the Question 3 argumentative task, which for them—almost across the board—consisted of Question 3 providing students with the opportunities to support their positions with their own opinions, a characteristic that they felt the Question 2 analytical prompt did not provide. In fact, student opinions are at the core of each type of essay response. For Question 2, students form opinions about a writer’s purpose and use of rhetorical strategies, and for Question 3 students state a position on a topic or issue and are tasked to “Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument” (College Board). Student comments in this study suggest that the Question 2 task was anxiety-provoking, while the Question 3 task provided room for originality that they found somewhat comforting, or at least approachable. It has been argued in the literature that regardless of how motivated students are they will not produce their best writing if they “find the topic dull, confusing, or intimidating” (Ruth & Murphy, 1988, p. 12), and students in this study supported this with their comments. Obviously, College Board attempts to set the bar high for advanced placement students and wants students to reach for it, so, as a practical matter, student concerns about interpreting the Question 2 rhetorical analysis prompts need to be addressed in the classroom.

**Supporting Claims with Evidence and Commentary.** Effectively supporting arguments with appropriate evidence and convincing commentary should not be new to
students entering AP Language and Composition as it is a skill outlined in the South Carolina ELA Standards throughout their educations since elementary school. For example, Figures 4.23 and 4.24 show the emphasis on argumentative writing in the standards for middle school grades 6-8 and for high school English 3.

**Meaning, Context, and Craft (MCC)**

**Standard 1:** Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>GRADE SIX</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Write arguments that:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. introduce a focused claim and organize reasons and evidence clearly;</td>
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<th>GRADE SEVEN</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.1 Write arguments that:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. introduce claims, acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically;</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>GRADE EIGHT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Write arguments that:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. introduce claims, acknowledge and distinguish the claims from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.23.* South Carolina ELA Standards Grades 6-8 regarding argumentation
Despite this, high school students tend to struggle with skills necessary to engage in successful argumentative writing (Lin et al., 2020). This is certainly true for students in this study who expressed concerns about using evidence and commentary to support claims. These skills—identifying evidence and using commentary to connect the evidence to the claim—represent the largest points-available portion of the AP Language and Composition writing rubric (4 out of a possible 6 points). The evidence and commentary portion of the Question 2 rubric is presented in Figure 4.25.
Regan, in her final portfolio reflection, identified integrating effective commentary into her arguments as a recognized weakness:

My weaknesses throughout my portfolio are my commentary. Although I feel that I have enough commentary to tie the evidence to my thesis, I find myself repeating a lot of points, just in a different way. This can lead to excess fluff and information that can confuse the reader and possibly make me lose a point. I also find it difficult to distinguish the line between evidence and commentary, especially when paraphrasing. I tend to explain and describe the evidence before adding my personal thoughts and support for the thesis, so sometimes it is hard to find where evidence stops and the commentary begins. There are always ways to improve on every part of my writing, but I feel that the commentary and bigger picture are the things I struggle with most.

Also in her final portfolio reflection, Charlotte pointed out her essay responding to the 2013 Question 3 prompt as her weakest piece due to her perceived inadequate use of evidence and commentary. Figure 4.26 presents this prompt.

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**Question 3**

*Suggested time— 40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.*

For centuries, prominent thinkers have pondered the relationship between ownership and the development of self (identity), ultimately asking the question, “What does it mean to own something?”

Plato argues that owning objects is detrimental to a person’s character. Aristotle claims that ownership of tangible goods helps to develop moral character. Twentieth-century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre proposes that ownership extends beyond objects to include intangible things as well. In Sartre’s view, becoming proficient in some skill and knowing something thoroughly means that we “own” it.

Think about the differing views of ownership. Then write an essay in which you explain your position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self. Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

---

*Figure 4.26. 2013 Question 3 essay prompt on ownership*
Charlotte identified this essay as her weakest piece of writing and state that “My evidence and commentary in this essay is terrible, so if I could go back that would be the first thing I would fix, and possibly even get rid of and start over.” In the same reflection, Charlotte identified writing effective commentary as a goal she would set for her future self as a writer:

I want to be able to be creative and unique, but most of the essays I have to write for school do not allow me to do so. I definitely see that my strength is gathering evidence, but my weakness is being able to effectively explain this evidence to defend my argument. I feel like to me my commentary makes sense and is enough, but to someone who does not know what I am thinking it is a lot harder so I need to work on that. Based on my analysis I definitely want to work on my commentary, and the only way to do so is to keep practicing.

Charlotte’s insightful comment touches upon audience awareness and how her commentary is for them, something she struggles with in her writing. Her goal to continue practicing this skill ended the course on a hopeful note for her.

Similarly, Anne identified explanation of evidence—commentary—as a concern in her Question 3 (argumentation) reflection:

I believe that if I wrote another draft, I could go into more detail with my examples and connect everything even more. I tend to be lacking in the explanation area. My biggest problem is getting off-topic. I will explain something that leads to an explanation of something else and the vicious cycle just goes on. I’m getting better at avoiding that, but sometimes my essays just ramble on and I think if I revised my essay again, I wouldn’t have any of that.
In her final portfolio reflection, Anne targeted explaining evidence as a weakness:

My weakness is most definitely my inability to explain evidence properly. I’ve tried to improve, especially since my Gandhi essay. Finding evidence for this essay wasn’t my problem. I would have 1 sentence of explanation for every 2 sentences of evidence. I always felt like my explanations were redundant and that led to them lacking description, instead.

However, in the same reflection, Anne described a strategy she had developed to address her concerns about struggling with writing insightful commentary:

“I’ve learned to heavily rely on bullet points to write my essays. I brainstorm a thesis, evidence, and explanations and then go back and add proper sentence structure and explanation. It prevents me from rambling or missing key points.”

David’s concern with effectively writing commentary to support his claim and evidence was also a theme in his reflections. In his Question 3 reflection, David described his use of commentary as “underwhelming.” In his Question 2 reflection, he also expressed concern about his lackluster commentary:

I could definitely improve more on my commentary. I tend to have a habit of adding too much evidence and having little commentary to back it up. This causes me to lose points on the evidence and commentary section of the grading rubric.

In the same reflection, he zeroed in on commentary as an essential component of AP argumentative writing:

At least one thing that I learned about good writing while revising this piece is: ADD COMMENTARY!!! Evidence without explanation is basically worthless.

The AP graders want to see your own insight and commentary on the prompt.
Finally, in his Question 3 reflection David responded to the same sentence stem “At least one thing that I learned about good writing while revising this piece is…” by creating a metaphor:

One thing I learned about good writing while revising this piece was that I have to concentrate on where my focus is at. I envisioned my essay as a burger. The introduction and conclusion should be the bread. Instead of garnishing the bread and making it look amazing, I should focus on the evidence and commentary, the meat. By doing so, I can effectively manage my time and focus on the important things so that I can get all of my points.

David’s folksy use of metaphor was not unique to this reflection—he loved metaphors. But his recognition of evidence and commentary as the meat of the essay shows that struggling with skills and recognizing weaknesses led him to develop strategies and to setting goals.

This section presented several factors about writing AP Language and Composition essays that caused students to use the adjectives stressed, anxious, frustrated, and annoyed, as well as the nouns weakness and struggle to describe how the writing and evaluation process made them feel.

**Theme 2: Finding Community with Developing Writers in an AP Classroom**

Learning is essentially a social endeavor (Bandura, 1977, Brown et al., 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, it is understandable that much of the research suggests that it is vital for teachers to engage students in collaborative learning environments in order to meet established educational goals and to prepare students for the future (Gee, 2004). One of the hallmarks of a collaborative learning environment is that knowledge is often shared among learners, tools, and technologies (Polat & Öz, 2017, Ramirez &
Squire, 2014; Swan & Shea, 2005). Another distinguishing characteristic of sustained and safe collaborative learning environments is that for disengaged, disinterested, or struggling learners, the classroom can become, for them, a community where they are able to participate peripherally through the observation of more adept peers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Two categories were identified in this theme, (a) interacting with other and (b) processing peer feedback.

**Interacting with Others.** Research has shown that productivity of academic writers improves in a collaborative and peer-based environment rather than as a solitary activity (Kensington-Miller & Carter, 2019). Further, participating in writing groups helps writers relieve tensions that accompany the writing process and that the laughter that sometimes characterizes these groups dramatically does so (Thesen, 2014). Throughout the course I made it a priority to create a scholarly and collegial classroom environment that was defined by mutual goals, shared activities and readings, and both whole-class and small group discussions and sharing of student writing. The established goals of the class included internalizing the AP Language and Composition rubric, mastering the three types of argumentative writing, and approaching the AP exam in May with confidence. Shared readings in the course included Stephen King’s memoir *On Writing* as well as novels and plays. Shared activities included (but were not limited to) peer review of essays through blogger.com, sharing thesis statements, review and discussion of model essays, discussion of shared texts, and portfolio development. The code *building community* appeared 44 times in the data and was defined as any reference to learning from or interacting with other classmates and me. Participants’ responses indicated that they were impacted by the sense of community they felt through their
interactions with others in the classroom. The topics covered in this section include 1) collaborating enhances learning and confidence, and 2) learning through blogging.

**Collaborating Enhances Learning and Confidence.** Students in the class collaborated with each other in a variety of ways—through whole class discussions facilitated by me, through peer groups that routinely shared their writing or analyzed published pieces of text together, and through informal sharing and conversations that evolved organically as students conversationally interacted with each other. Throughout the year-long course students found comfort in these collaborations.

Frequently throughout the course I would facilitate whole group discussions where together the class analyzed nonfiction passages, reviewed model essays and scoring commentaries published by College Board, brainstormed how to approach essay prompts published by College Board, and drafted argumentative claims and identified possible evidence for essays. Regan expressed the value she saw in these discussions when she wrote in her final writing/portfolio reflection:

> My weakest piece of writing in my portfolio is my 2014 Q2 Abigail Adams essay. I think that this is my weakest piece because I did not fully understand the passage and the devices I was allowed/supposed to use. I was at a disadvantage because I was not in class when we went over the passage originally, and I feel that that shows in the essay.

Regan’s absence the day we discussed the Adams’ letter put her at a disadvantage, she thought, showing that she found value in the community aspect of our class. For reference, the 2014 Q2 Abigail Adams essay prompt is presented in Figure 4.27.
I attempted to scaffold students towards independent analysis of passages and
drafting of essays by frontloading the course with these collaborative discussions where
students could share ideas and learn from each other, sometimes hearing from other
members of the class ideas about a passage that they might not have considered if
working alone. Regan stated that she felt at a “disadvantage” on this particular rhetorical
analysis essay, which suggests that the discussions helped bolster her confidence. In the
real-world context, obviously, the timed writing nature of the test prohibits advance
reading or discussion of passages to be analyzed, but in the early days Regan felt them to
be helpful.

Samira echoed Regan’s sentiment that whole-class discussions were beneficial
when she wrote in her Question 2 reflection:
The day before the first draft was written my AP Lang. class held a discussion, which aided in the thought process of the first draft, which helped speed up the process, which allowed me to add my own commentary. The selection process included that I had received a 6/6 on this piece, which aided in my confidence in the piece.

Samira’s confidence in writing these essays was supported by the whole class discussions and her resulting score of 6 out of 6 (scored by me) on the AP rubric. The opportunity to have advance knowledge of a passage before embarking on the task of deconstructing it in an essay is, of course, advantageous, but membership in a writing group within a safe space also seems to be beneficial to developing confidence as writers (Gurbutt & Houston, 2021).

Both the formal and the informal small group (peer) activities and interactions during the year also seemed to help students develop confidence in their ability to approach writing AP Language and Composition essays. Throughout the year I would either group students—typically 3 to 4 students per group or they would group themselves. Groups would share their essays and use the six point rubric to evaluate other group members’ essays. A typical small group peer review assignment as posted in Google Classroom is presented in Figure 4.28.
Figure 4.28. Peer review assignment as posted in Google Classroom

Tahlia valued the peer evaluation aspect of the course, stating in the second focus group interview:

I don’t think, like, any other year in high school I’ve had as much collaboration time as this year and I just think it, you know, when we’re grading our peers’ work and the perspective of the grader for the AP exam…it helps us to see where our writing is at and what we need to do better on.

Tahlia suggested that metaphorically donning the cap of an AP grader allowed her insight into her own writing—that by reviewing and evaluating the work of her classmates she could more easily determine what she had to work on as a writer in comparison. David felt the same way, saying in a journal entry that “reading other people's essays really help me to analyze certain parts of their writing that I thought I could implement into my own as well.” David went on more specifically, calling out two colleagues who helped him develop more as a writer:
For myself, I realize my introduction was too long—thank you Marcus! It was definitely something I could implement on to my next essay…My small group criticized my writing in such a way that was informative and helpful. My thesis was a little too vague and I could have improved it to be more concise. Krishiv helped me to understand why some things did not make sense and why I should add some more details to get to the point.

While David cited constructive criticism from his peer evaluators, he calls it “informative and helpful” and wrote confidently about his writing in this reflection piece.

Anne also developed some confidence from the peer group experiences, finding confirmation in her ability to identify appropriate rhetorical strategies in a passage when she saw that she was thinking similarly to her classmates. In the second focus group interview she stated that:

Whenever I was looking at what other people were seeing [in the Q2 rhetorical analysis passages], I was thinking, yea, that’s probably what I would focus on as well, so I was able to understand like what I should put more emphasis on, whereas I don’t spend too much time focusing on like the wrong stuff.

Therefore, students expressed finding confidence as writers through both whole and small-group interactions and both by evaluating the writing of others in the class and having their own work peer-evaluated.

**Learning through Blogging.** Blogging has been shown to be a useful tool in online courses to facilitate engagement, critical thinking, and a sense of community in virtual environments (Gurer, 2020; Angelaina & Jimoyiannis, 2012). Further, blogs give all students a voice, even the quiet ones (Johnson, 2013). Our class did go virtual in the
spring of 2020 due to the increasing spread of COVID-19, and we certainly utilized blogging during those last weeks of virtual learning, but students also engaged in blogging during our face-to-face instruction. Dissimilarly from the face-to-face peer groups, blogging gave the entire class exposure to all classmates’ essays. Blogger.com was used to create blog posts and instructions for students were posted in Google Classroom. Students engaged in blogging both during class and for homework and students could review as many essays as they wished prior to providing feedback to classmates. A typical blog assignment is posted in Figure 4.29 and Figure 4.30.

![2018 Madeleine Albright Analysis](image)

Post your Albright essay to the blog (you may need to condense it a bit to meet the length requirements of the blog, but post your full essay to your portfolio). Comment on at least three classmates' blogs, focusing on thesis statements and their use of evidence and commentary.

**Figure 4.29.** Blog assignment posted in Google Classroom
Overall, students saw value in the blog experiences because of the feedback they received and because of the opportunity to read their classmates’ essays and comments on other student essays. Charlotte said in her final reflection that the feedback she received on her essays posted to the blog helped her:

understand what I needed to improve and edit and what I did not need mess with.

I think this was very helpful because often as the writer of my essays I am blind to my mistakes and what I think may sound fine others may think is confusing.

Regan agreed that the comments were helpful, stating in her own journal entry:

The comments that my peers gave me on my essay that was posted were very helpful. They were complimentary about my writing, but also gave constructive criticism back in order to enhance and improve what I had already written. I ended up including their suggestions in my final choice essay.
Ashton also felt that her classmates’ blog comments on her essays caused her to reflect on her own writing. In a journal response about the blog experience, Ashton’s response to the feedback she received showed an awareness of a need to improve her writing style, which College Board would probably term sophistication (as stated on the AP rubric one way to achieve the sophistication point is by “Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive”). Ashton wrote:

Overall, I felt like this was a difficult prompt, which is why my essay wasn’t as well-written as I would have liked for it to be. It could have also been more engaging and entertaining to the reader.

Ashton also felt that reading multiple essays written by her classmates and posted to the blog informed her own approach to writing argumentative essays. This is evident when she stated “I also believe it [blogging] helped me see essays by others from different points of views, allowing me to take into consideration what their stance on the topic was.” Regan’s own journal response showed another positive attribute of blogging when she stated simply “It [the blog] also gave us a chance to view more than our friends’ essays, but everyone in the class.” Regan’s sentiment shows that not only did blogging prompt the reflective thinking described by Ashton and Charlotte, it also extended the learning community beyond a close circle of friends.

Trudy wrote in own journal entry “Reading the works of others was helpful, and [it] allowed me to see a few other opinions. It also reminded me that I need a counterclaim. Overall, the blog was a good experience, and I hope we do it for our next essay,” adding her own voice to the others in agreement that blogging provided a learning
opportunity. But Trudy also found the blogging learning experience to be somewhat limited. She said in the second focus group interview that:

> Like when I read through my comments, they were all like—they were nice, and that was great, but like for some of my essays there was like literally nothing that I could fix or that I thought I could fix because I didn’t have like any feedback. It was all like “Oh, it’s fine.” “It’s good.” “It’s great.” And I was like “Well, thanks, but there’s always room for improvement.” But I don’t know where to improve ‘cause I don’t have the commentary on that.

Based on Trudy’s comments, she found more value in reading other students’ essays posted to the blog than she did in the comments posted to her own essays. Trudy wanted specific feedback from her peers on how to improve her writing, and apparently felt that she wasn’t getting it. In general, student comments on essays fell into two categories—short paragraph comments and comments that followed the P-Q-P format where students first praised something about the essay, then asked a question about the writer’s choices, and finally made a suggestion on how to polish the essay or what to work on in future essays. For example, one of David’s short paragraph responses to a peer is presented in Figure 4.31 and one of his P-Q-P responses is presented in Figure 4.32.
Trudy’s experience might be an individual response to the sometimes generalized feedback from peers, but overall she and the other students participating in this study found the experience worthwhile and were able to learn from it, whether directly from the peer feedback posted or from reading the essays of other writers. Blogging seemed to function as both as a means of reflection for these student writers and as a space for community building where written works were published and discussed.
**Processing Peer Feedback.** A significant part of building a classroom community of writers is sharing work and giving and receiving feedback from peers. Providing peer feedback is shown to support students’ writing abilities for both the receiver and the giver of the feedback (Cho & Cho, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2020; Diab, 2011). However, in order for the feedback to truly impact performance, positive feedback must be balanced with constructive feedback (Kensington-Miller & Carter, 2019) and it is most beneficial when applied with criteria, standards, or a rubric (Liu & Charles, 2006). In this study, students engaged in peer feedback for both partial-draft and full-draft essays though small writing groups and blogging comments and always while referencing the six-point AP Language and Composition essay rubric. The code *processing peer feedback* occurred 26 times as was defined as any evidence referring to being impacted by feedback about writing. Students in this study reported finding both providing and receiving feedback from classmates to be valuable in creating community and validating their writing but some wished for their peers to be more constructive in their comments. The topics covered in this section are (a) valuing teacher and peer feedback, and (b) managing discomfort with peer feedback.

**Valuing Peer and Teacher Feedback.** Students in a writing classroom desire trusted feedback, whether it be from teachers or peers (Sincoff, 2016). Trudy affirmed this when she said in the second focus group interview:

I need feedback on my writing or I just don’t know where I am. For example, like the Gandhi essay. Like I thought that essay was pretty decent, like deserving of like a 5 (out of 6) I guess—not to sound conceited, but like I thought it was like
deserving of a 5 kind of when I wrote it I felt good about it. But then, looking at the feedback from you, I was like “Oh, so that’s where…” At first, okay, at first I saw the score and I was like “What?” And I mean, I think it was like a 4, but still, I saw it and I was like “Why? What’s the problem?” And then looking at what you wrote I was like “Oh, okay that makes sense. This is where I need to go.

I gave Trudy a 4/6 on the essay, depriving her of the 5/6 she felt that she deserved. She lost a point for use of evidence and commentary and she did not get the sophistication point. After processing my feedback on her essay, Trudy agreed with me where the essay could have been strengthened. Figure 4.33 shows Trudy’s Ghandi essay submission to her portfolio with her introduction acknowledging her score after feedback and describing her essay as “short.”

Figure 4.33. Trudy’s Ghandi analytical essay submission to her portfolio
Trudy trusted my feedback and reflected upon it enough to acknowledge it in the final focus group interview.

David described a similar experience when processing peer feedback. He wrote in his Question 3 reflection that based on the feedback from some of his peers he was able to identify what he was lacking and what he could add. He went on to describe in the same reflection how he used peer feedback to improve his writing:

Regarding the revision process, I began by reading the suggestions from my classmates. By having these in mind, I also looked over the rubric to see what I was lacking and what I could delete. Finally when I was done, I compared it to the rubric once again and graded my essay to see if I got a perfect score.

Armed with both feedback from his peers and the AP Language and Composition rubric David revised his essay attempted to getting a perfect score.

Regan also wrote in her Question 3 reflection about her process of integrating peer feedback into her own writing to improve it:

After my first draft was complete, I asked my peers for feedback through our class blog. The comments I got back said that my statements were strong, but I needed to expand my introductory and concluding paragraphs and add to my commentary. During my revision of this essay, after I selected it as my choice essay, I took those comments into consideration and tried my best to do what I thought my essay needed. Afterward, I asked another one of my trusted peers to read the final draft to make sure everything was clear, concise, and correct. After I got all good feedback from everyone and reread my essay, I knew that I could publish it with confidence I would score high on the AP rubric.
Regan referred to her peers as “trusted” and that by taking their comments to heart she could “publish with confidence” and felt that she would get a high score on the rubric.

**Managing Discomfort with Peer Feedback.** While Regan did express a positive reaction to peer feedback during the final focus group interview, she expressed trepidation about the peer review process earlier in the course during the first focus group interview. At that time, Regan’s trust seemed reserved for the teacher—me, in this case. The teacher as *all-seeing and all-knowing* from Regan’s perspective is clearly stated:

For me, so I love peer reviewing people’s essays, I don’t know why, but I like editing them, and I’m like “oh, they could do this!” but it’s also subjective because at the same time, like, I would not want them to do what I do to their essays. Um, and so, I know that whenever I have like a real question about something, I’d rather go just straight to the teacher, which, it’s hard because, like with the teacher they have the right answer, um, because like, their the teacher. So you’d rather go them for their advice to read over your essay to make it’s really good and everything like that rather than have a peer, but there’s only one teacher and they only want to grade all the essays and read them only once, so, like I don’t really know a solution to that issue, um but, like it’s just, you know, you’d rather have someone not only that you trust but you know has, like, been through the practice of knowing actually what writing is supposed to look like, especially that goes along with the rubric.

With more experience in the course, Regan grew to appreciate the varying levels of experience in the class and came to view all members as worthy of contributing to her
success. During the first focus group interview Charlotte also was more interested in my opinion of her work:

    Even if I get a peer review that I trust completely they might not fully, like, understand exactly what you’re (the teacher) looking for, which kind of makes it hard. And like, you can explain the rubric as much as you want, but if you have an idea of exactly what you’re looking for, but we don’t necessarily get that exact same idea, so it’s kind of hard.

Charlotte seemed to be concerned with writing an essay that fulfills any expectations that I might have, presumably because I would be the one assigning any grades to her work.

    Several students commented on the lack of specificity in peer feedback or that peer feedback tended to be mostly nice and supportive rather than constructive. In her final reflection, Samira recounted that:

    A majority of the comments were positive, but sometimes one person would comment that some areas were unnecessary or strayed away from the thesis. These comments helped me out the most when I revised my essays as they pinpointed where I could make my argument stronger.

In a separate journal entry, Samira went on to say that negative comments she received from her peer reviewers on one essay “didn’t affect me as a writer because I knew that this was not my best work.” Samira seemed to be able to accept specific constructive feedback without letting it infringe upon her own view of herself as a writer. However, the key seems to be constructive and specific feedback in order to it to be fully helpful and appreciated. Trudy wrote in her final reflection that peer feedback was helpful, but could be improved:
One thing that was beneficial for improving essays was feedback. Through in-class activities and blogs, I was able to get feedback when needed, helping me to improve my choice essays. The only flaw I found was this was a lack of constructive criticism from peers as they didn’t want to be rude. Therefore, incorporation of both teacher and peer feedback elicited feelings of support, benefit, and community, but concerns about peer feedback aligning with teacher expectations and the lack of constructive suggestions in some peer feedback were somewhat concerning.

This section presented several factors in our AP Language and Composition class that contributed to a sense of community as students developed as writers in the course.

**Theme 3: Thinking like Developing Writers in an AP Classroom**

As mentioned previously, the goal of the course and this study was to foster student perceptions about their selves as writers interacting in a writing community. Ivanič’s (1998) theory of writer identity development posits two aspects of writer identity that are supported by the data collected in this study. Student focus group responses, reflections, and journals all elicited comments about the “self” that students brought to any act of writing—the autobiographical self. An example of this is when Trudy said “I would not be the writer I am, or even nearly as intelligent had I not spent the years I did reading with my mother.” A second aspect of Ivanič’s (1998) writer identity is self as author, which is how people see or present themselves as writers. Samira presented herself as a writer when she said in a reflection “my portfolio has helped me understand that I am a better writer.” The portfolios and accompanying reflections served as a lens through which Samira could identify as a writer. The data supported portfolios as a lens
regardless of what participants saw, therefore two of the four emerging categories for this theme relate specifically to portfolios. The four categories in this theme are (a) tracking growth through portfolios, (b) writing to improve, (c) perceiving portfolios as impactful, and (d) perceiving personal writing in an AP classroom both positively and negatively.

**Tracking Growth through Portfolios.** Benefits of portfolios for students include the ability to monitor their growth in developing skills and competencies in any course of study (Sowers & Meyers, 2021). Tracking growth through portfolios includes archiving work, reflecting upon practice, self-assessing, and course-correcting when necessary (Chye et al., 2013). In this AP Language and Composition course students used Google Sites to create electronic portfolios where they archived and reflected upon their work in real time, meaning that each portfolio artifact was added to the portfolio while or shortly after it was created, including AP Language and Composition argumentative essays and students’ personal reflections. The topics covered in this section are 1) archiving and 2) reflecting.

**Archiving.** The essays that were posted to the student portfolios were a combination of required postings and choice postings. I used essay prompts that College Board released from previous test administrations and all students in my class wrote the essays and received feedback from me and/or peer reviewers, after which all students would post their essays to their portfolios. Of the three essay types, students responded to Question 2 prompts (rhetorical analysis essay) and Question 3 prompts (argument essay) because in 2020 the pandemic shortened our face-to-face instruction and College Board limited the test to only Question 2. After drafting three essays of a particular type (rhetorical analysis or argument), students were given the choice of one essay from each
type to polish and revise and post to their portfolios. Students could choose an essay that in their opinions needed minimal revision or they could take on the challenge of revising an essay in need of significant improvement. A sample Choice page of a portfolio is shown in Figure 4.34.

Figure 4.34. A student’s Question 2 choice essay page in his portfolio

Students would explain how they made their choice in a written reflection.

In both the second focus group interview and in their final written reflections about their portfolios, students commented on the value of archiving their work in their portfolios. They expressed that they saw value in not only having their work accessible to them throughout the course, but they could see the advantages of having their electronic portfolios available to them later in high school or college. Regan wrote in her final
reflection that she had a sense of pride in her collected work and looked forward to sharing it with others:

This portfolio has given me something to show for what I do in school and something to send and be proud of when I share it with people. It is the perfect mix of both personal and professional for a high school student.

Charlotte also, in her final reflection, wrote that she was looking to the future and saw value in maintaining her portfolio:

I just think like the whole experience was really beneficial and like I’m just kind of like excited to like in the future to come back and look at my portfolio to see like how different my writing has changed.

Tahlia wrote her in final reflection simply that “I think the fact that we have someplace to put the writing and to go back and easily access it, I think that was really like the main thing for me.” Students overwhelmingly reported that using portfolios to curate and archive their writing was a valuable experience.

Whether it was to share their writing, to review writing, or to reflect upon their writing, the students recognized value and received satisfaction from the processes involved in archiving their work throughout the course. The value in archiving work, however, is only one step in the development and maintenance of electronic portfolios. The students in the study recognized that reflection, which is discussed next, was also essential.

**Reflecting.** Archiving student writing provided accessibility to student essays during the course and would provide access to student work in the future long after the course. Students, however, overwhelmingly saw the reflection component as a truly
valuable step in creating their portfolios. Students wrote formal reflections for their portfolios after writing essays for each type of prompt and they wrote a final reflection after reviewing their archived work and after reviewing colleagues’ portfolios. Figure 4.35 shows the Final Reflection page of Tahlia’s portfolio. Her introduction to this page refers to the “realizations” she had because of the portfolio:

Here, we’ve reached the end. I hope you enjoyed going into the recesses of my mind as much as I enjoyed it. This portfolio had [sic] brought me even closer to writing, and other realizations that I now know I needed for me to better myself.

Figure 4.35. Tahlia’s introduction to the final reflection page of her portfolio

Tahlia’s “realizations,” or reflections, brought her closer to writing, she says.

David agreed, stating in his own reflection:

My portfolio gives me a virtual representation of a timeline that allows me to analyze my writing style and techniques throughout the semester. By looking at my essays and personal stories, I can reflect and analyze things I did well as well as things I could improve on.”
Charlotte said that the written reflections of her work showed her what she needed to do to improve:

I just think like with my reflections I was able to see like what I’m good at and what I don’t really need to focus on, ‘cause I could just like—when I’m writing like a timed piece, like it’s fine just ‘cause I can kind of knock it out, but it kind of just showed me like when I am writing in a timed manner the kind of stuff that I need to like focus on more, and for me that was like my commentary—I felt like my commentary could have been stronger. So, like when I was writing like my other timed—like the argumentative essays, I focused more on my commentary and so I think they kind of helped.

Finally, in the final focus group interview Anne expressed a sense of ownership over her portfolio as a space to review, reflect, and set goals:

I felt like being able to look back on my writing, I kind of forget for a second that other people are going to be looking at my portfolio, like I forget that it isn’t just for me, and, um, that kind of affected how I put together my journals, too, ‘cause I kind of just didn’t care if anyone read it because I forgot that it’s even like a big thing. This is mostly for me. Whenever I am making my portfolio I make it so that it’s the best for me, you know, to look at, because I feel like it is really important to be able to see where you started, so that way you can really focus in on your end goal, so it was really helpful for me to be able to, like, have a specific website where I can just see like all of my writing for the year and then just, you know, be able to look at my growth.
Each of these student writers felt that reflecting on their work helped them improve their work, the process of which is discussed in the next section.

**Writing to Improve.** While portfolios provide a space to archive and reflect upon student work, students’ efforts to improve their writing is happening simultaneously, along with archiving and reflecting. Writing portfolios provide a space where other processes of writing—namely critiquing, practicing, and revising (and indeed, publishing) take place (Bader, Burner, Iverson, & Varga, 2019; Lee, 2011). In our class the students and I took a multi-faceted approach to these processes, including teacher feedback, peer review, journal responses, reflections, time writings, and formal revisions of essays. Table 4.5 shows the stages of the writing process discussed in this section along with corresponding classroom activities.

Table 4.5

*Stages of writing process and corresponding classroom activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Process</th>
<th>Class Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critiquing</td>
<td>• Written reflections</td>
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<td>• Teacher feedback</td>
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<td>• Blog comments</td>
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<td>• Journal responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practicing</td>
<td>• Timed writings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Formal revisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revising</td>
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<td>• Revisions of timed writings in real time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Revisions for blog posting of essays</td>
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</table>
The data showed students in this study engaged in and thought about these processes in dynamic and different ways and that they were in general agreement that the classroom activities and assignments, including the portfolios, supported their writing selves.

**Critiquing.** Humorously, after entering the course Tahlia learned the value of critiquing her work and having her work critiqued by others. In the second focus group interview she recalled a bit of hubris she displayed about her writing in the first focus group interview:

> So, about the essay writing, and like actually liking it. I don’t know if y’all remember but at the first discussion I was talking about ‘So, I’m a good writer’—I remember that, I’ll never forget that, I’ll never forget that, but, um, it was like a week after and we did the Gandhi essay, my essay was total crap, like I hated that essay, and I was like ‘dang, I was just talking about what a good writer I am’ but I feel like this year we’re actually learning, first time in my high school career I’m actually learning how to do AP writing, and um, ‘cause where I’m from we don’t go as hard as you guys do down here.

But Tahlia also stated in the same interview that “My portfolio has definitely helped me understand that I am my harshest critic, and that I should probably let up a little.” Her comments suggest that both the course and the portfolio helped her to examine herself as a writer.

Students in the class also developed routines of critiquing specific pieces of work and planning how they could—hypothetically or in reality—improve them. In a journal
entry about a specific essay, Tahlia was still hard on herself, but reached for then dismissed excuses:

   Personally, I think my essay is a mess; there are grammatical errors in more than one place: it looks like I just spewed words down; and it's very clear that I did not reread the essay. Frankly, I did not have enough time but that is neither here nor there.

Ashton gave an example of critiquing specific work in a reflection she wrote after critiquing her Question 2 (rhetorical analysis) essays:

   I could have elaborated more on my evidence, discussing more on how it enhances Adam’s advice as I stated in my thesis. I could have done a better job relating it back to my thesis, instead of just explaining what my evidence means. Even though I did show how my evidence was supported by my thesis, I still feel like I could have done a better job because there is always room for improvement.

And Charlotte offered an example of how critiquing her writing helped her set goals for future efforts when she said in her final reflection “I think in the future I would like to work on finding better evidence to support my claim.” The process of critiquing their writing as a component of the reflection process helped students see what they needed to work on, what they did well, and set goals for the future.

   **Practicing.** As stated earlier, students practiced writing in different genres—journal writing, reflective writing, and argumentative writing. Most of the focus of the course, however, was on the argumentative strand in preparation for the AP Language and Composition exam, and *practice* in this discussion refers to practicing argumentative essay writing. Each student wrote three rhetorical analysis (Question 2) essays and three
argument (Question 3) essays to completion in addition to two choice essays (revised versions of one Question 2 and one Question 3 essay) in addition to numerous exercises drafting defensible claims and introductions as well as brainstorming evidence.

Ashton, in her final portfolio reflection, wrote about the value of practice and learning from practice:

Throughout the semester, my portfolio has equipped me to understand that everyone, including myself, can become a skilled writer if we address our work with certainty, if we have a specific method for our writing, and if we continue to practice and learn from our mistakes. No one is a perfect writer—we all hold particular strengths and weaknesses that shape our writing as distinctive from the rest.

Charlotte agreed in a journal entry, saying “I also realized that other people felt that bad writers could become good. I think that with practice and finding one’s own voice anyone can become a good writer.” Both Charlotte and Ashton saw practice as an opportunity to grow as writers.

Ashton also saw practice beyond the broader context and felt that by practicing writing during the course she was better prepared for the upcoming AP Language and Composition exam in May, stating in the second focus group interview:

Yea, that’s probably the most essays I’ve ever written during like one semester at school, and I feel like that really helped, just all that practice, and I feel like also prepared me for when I have to take the AP exam. Then I feel like I’ll have no problem writing that rhetorical analysis essay ‘cause I’ll know how I need to approach it with the “how” and the “why” of the essay. I feel like annotating the
essay [prompt] will be easy too. I’ll be able to point out the rhetorical strategies they used, and I don’t know. I just feel like I’ve definitely grown as a writer through this whole process.

A final example of the power of practice as perceived by the students in this study was Anne’s looking toward the future as a writer:

Something I want to work towards in the future is explaining my stance on prompts better. I have a pretty decent flow and voice, but my ability to explain myself is still rather weak. With more practice, I definitely feel like I could reach my goal. I’ve learned a lot about the art of writing this year, and my writing ability has grown substantially. Most of all, I’ve learned that there is always room for progress.

Ashton and Anne expressed that she grew as a writer during the year and that she recognizes that with continued practice she will be able to continue to grow.

**Revising.** While practice can refer to the simple (yet not so simple) act of writing, *revision* refers to the act of revisiting and reworking a piece of writing to improve it.

Revision, however, can be practice, too. In our class, one way students *practiced* writing was by writing essays in a timed setting during class. These essays were posted to student portfolios as they were, in hand-written form. Students could revise these essays during the timed session in real time, by scratching out, adding in, and reordering content with arrows and margin notes. These revisions mimicked how students could revise their essays on the AP Language and Composition exam—handwritten and in real time.

Students also practiced *revision* more formally in our class by reflecting upon their first draft Question 2 and Question 3 essays and selecting one of each type to rework
and polish (i.e. revision) for an improved and word-processed version. They also had the opportunity to revise their essays before posting them to class blogs. When students commented on revision in this study they almost always were referring to the process of selecting, polishing, and publishing an essay to their portfolios or to blogs.

During the second focus group interview, Tahlia and Ashton discussed their appreciation for the ability present their best work rather than a first-draft attempt:

Tahlia: Totally. I think…I’ve seen a lot of good essays, like our class is good on essays, but I feel like, you know, with the blogging process we’re getting to show our best essay writing, too, because we have time to, like, go in and revise it if we need to and make it look nice. And I feel like that’s a good step as well.

Ashton: I definitely agree because I feel like when we were writing the essays in class we didn’t have nearly as much time to actually focus on how we wanted our essay to look, so when we got to go back and edit it and revise it, I was like looking at my essays and was like “dang, this could have been so much better if I had just had more time.” When I actually had time to go fix it, it sounded a lot better. I feel like my main issue is usually how my essays flow, so I got to fix that issue a lot.

Even though these students would not have the luxury of formally revising their essays for the actual AP Language and Composition exam in May, the process in class seemed to bolster their confidence with the opportunity to showcase their more capable efforts.
For Anne, the revision process was a reminder to focus on audience and get out of her own head. She wrote in her Question 2 reflection:

During my first draft, I just referred to my annotations on the passage and wrote down my first thoughts. It wasn’t a bad start, so I just read through it and decided what pieces I should touch up. When I was revising, I focused on making sure I added more explanation or rephrased my sentences to sound more fluid and make more sense. I found that sometimes, even though I knew what I was talking about, the reader may not quite understand my point. I tend to forget that people can’t read my mind.

For these students, the processes of critiquing writing, practicing writing, and revising writing seemed to help them develop writers’ mindsets and to engage in the writing process with more confidence than when they began the class. They generally all saw a path to improvement as writers. The next section discusses in which ways students found portfolios impactful.

**Perceiving Portfolios as Impactful.** Numerous studies have described the benefits of using portfolios in the classroom. Some examples of benefits include facilitating student reflection (Sowers & Meyers, 2021; Landis, Scott, & Kahn, 2015), student motivation (Douglas, Peecksen, Rogers, & Simmons, 2019), and student achievement (Karami, Sadighi, Bagheri, & Riasati, 2019; Chelli, 2013). According to Bowman et al. (2016), students who complete electronic portfolios show heightened levels of metacognition when it comes to their learning, suggesting that electronic portfolios could facilitate student articulation about their own progress and growth. The data—which in this study is composed of student voices—presented indicates that
creating portfolios as a place to archive, reflect upon, and share written work can give students a writer’s mindset and sense of ownership over what they write. Students in this study identified the following areas of portfolio creation and use as ways in which they were positively impacted as writers: (a) recognizing audience, (b) growing as a writer, (c) valuing AP writing, (d) finding motivation, and (e) owning through design.

**Recognizing Audience.** The AP Language and Composition Conceptual Framework (College Board, 2019) lists *The Rhetorical Situation* as one of its *Big Ideas*. The components of the rhetorical situation include the exigence, audience, writer, purpose, context, and message. College Board’s emphasis on understanding audience as part of the rhetorical situation is shown in Figure 4.36.

![Figure 4.36. Audience awareness as an AP Language Big Idea](image)

Becoming cognizant of audience while writing is particularly challenging for novice writers, especially when it comes to academic writing (Young & Morgan, 2020). Students in this study generally agreed that the portfolio aspect of the course helped them
remember to consider audience in both their writing and in the design of their portfolios. In the second focus group interview Anne said:

I know for me, it helped me a lot to realize that I’m not just writing for my teacher, I’m not just writing for me. It’s more like I want what’s on my portfolio to represent, like, me, but so that other people could understand where I’m coming from, and that like... I don’t know, it just made me realize that some of my examples and my descriptions of things, just, I get into my head and so I forget that other people aren’t hearing my voice go along to try and explain what they are reading. So I kind of had to be more specific with what I was writing and I felt like it created more of a challenge, but it also allowed me to grow because I was able to see, like what my weaknesses were, and then I can kind of fix what I need to fix so that I know that everyone else that is reading my portfolio can understand what they are reading.

Anne says that she grew as a writer because remembering her audience led her to be more specific in her writing. In her final reflection Regan said that she preferred responding to Question 3 prompts (argument essay) because the type of evidence she must generate makes her more credible to her audience:

My favorite type of writing is definitely the argumentative Q3 essays. I find it the best mix with my strengths allowing me to write a good essay while still challenging me by getting me out of my comfort zone. I enjoy expressing my thoughts and opinions, especially in a sophisticated formal way with evidence to back up my points. It allows my audience to know I am knowledgeable about my points and also that I am not ignorant on the subject.
Regan mentions her audience offhandedly, which to me suggests a writer’s mindset.

**Growing as a Writer.** Completing a portfolio for this writing course played a role in helping them grow as writers, according to students in this study. Samira’s portfolio helped her see herself as a capable writer, as made clear when she wrote in her final reflection that “my portfolio has helped me understand that I am a better writer than I previously thought, which has given me more confidence in my writing.” Samira went on to say that while she does not see herself as an exceptional writer outside of classroom assignments, she was very comfortable knowing that she was more than up to the task of writing AP Language and Composition essays:

> The writing in my portfolio shows my growth as a writer, and my growth as a person. I am not able to convey my personality through my work giving it a unique voice, but I am able to carry out assignments fully with a strong defensible thesis, supporting evidence, and strong and relevant commentary.

Similarly, Anne wrote in her concluding reflection:

> This portfolio has shown me that I can be a good writer if I actually put in the time. My biggest weakness is not seeing my own potential. I get inside my own head and feel like what I’ve written is my best work and then give up, not giving myself the chance to improve my writing at all.

Samira and Anne’s comments suggested that the portfolio and the practices that accompanied it gave them insight into their writing selves. One would like to believe that the implication is that they will not give up in the future.

In the second focus group interview David spoke about his growth and the power of reflection:
I definitely feel like I improved over the year. With like different writing prompts and developing my portfolio and the writing journals, I’ve had a lot of time to reflect on my own writing.

Regan’s final reflection revealed her positive feelings about her growth, also:

Overall my portfolio has taught me a lot about myself. It has shown me different kinds of writing that I am able to do, how to publish and share my work so more people other than my teacher can see it, and give me something to be proud of from my work in school. It has helped me understand that it is okay to struggle with writing and have extreme strengths and extreme weaknesses… I see that I am strong in developing an argument to support an essay, no matter what kind of essay it is.

Finally, Ashton’s final reflection addressed her growth as a writer when she says “my work has shown vast improvement. I know that I have matured into a stronger writer, which is proven by the work in my portfolio.” David, Regan, Ashton and the other students overall attributed their growth as writers, at least in part, to developing and creating their portfolios.

**Valuing AP Writing.** This study collected data as students moved through various types of writing, including responding to AP Language and Composition Question 2 (rhetorical analysis) and Question 3 (argument) prompts. During this time they seemed to grow comfortable with the language of argumentation and of AP Language and Composition expectations. The students in this study expressed that they recognized value in the essay writing, although some did express a preference for one type of essay over the other.
Samira was the lone member of the students in the study who preferred the rhetorical analysis essay over the argument essay, as she made clear in this excerpt from her final reflection:

I enjoy analytical writing the most. I struggle with argumentative writing as there are many topics that I do not have a strong viewpoint on which makes it difficult to come up with content. I also struggle finding the correct words to support my argument when I do not know a topic well.

Samira’s awareness that she struggled to generate her own evidence for the Question 3 argument essay in no way suggested she does not value it—perhaps it suggested that she had a healthy respect for it, but preferred to write what came more easily to her.

The other students overwhelmingly favored responding to Question 3 argument prompts. David, for instance, felt that by making his own claim and coming up with his own evidence (as opposed to deconstructing a nonfiction passage as required by the Question 2 prompts) he could infuse his writing with his personality. He wrote in his final reflection:

The types of writing that proved to be effective were pieces that I could implement my personality into. Argumentative writing and the journal prompt allowed me to express myself as a person. Analytical writing made that very hard, and this resulted in me writing very technically.

While David’s comment above addressed expressing himself “as a person,” later in the same reflection he talked about being able to express himself as a writer in his Question 3 essays:
My better writing tended to include personal anecdotes and argumentative prompts that I could implement more of my personality into. This allowed me to truly express my thoughts and techniques as a writer.

Regan agreed, writing in her own Question 3 reflection:

I learned how to explain the evidence I came up with to make my points stronger and get my message across to the reader. I also found that I enjoy writing these types of essays since I have more freedom for what I am able to do with the prompt.

Regan was referring to the Question 3 argument essays when she refers to “these type of essays.”

**Finding Motivation.** Students in this study were in general agreement that the portfolios helped them become motivated as writers and as students. Ashton, in her final reflection, was focused on the future and on setting goals, and refers to herself as a writer:

The more I write, the more comfortable I will become in these areas. Instead of ignoring these issues, I must acknowledge them and do my best to repair them in the future. Having goals for myself will let me exceed expectations and will allow me to become the best version of myself in this field. In the future, I promise not to let my mistakes as a writer define who I am. Instead, I will use them to expand, grow, and improve my work for the better.

Charlotte was also looking to the future when she stated in the second focus group interview:
I just think like the whole experience was really beneficial and like I’m just kind of like excited to like in the future to come back and look at my portfolio to see like how different my writing has changed.

Anne wrote about becoming a good writer by putting in the time required:
This portfolio has shown me that I can be a good writer if I actually put in the time. My biggest weakness is not seeing my own potential. I get inside my own head and feel like what I’ve written is my best work and then give up, not giving myself the chance to improve my writing at all.

The portfolio, as a visual archive of student work, and the processes involved in creating it, seemed to generally motivate these students see themselves as writers and to continue to write.

**Owning Through Design.** I created a Google Site portfolio template and posted it to Google Classroom. Students were required use the template as a model and to replicate the pages for their own Google Site portfolios with their pages in the same order as the template. Students, however, had the freedom to select fonts of their liking and to add color and images if they wished and to personalize their portfolios as they pleased. According to Garrett (2011), portfolios are “owner-centric” and that through customization, personalization, and stylistic choices creators of portfolios are able to develop a sense of ownership and identity. Students in this study seemed to develop a sense of ownership of their portfolios through the design process in addition to posting content.
Anne entered the class with an artistic temperament, so it is no surprise that in the second focus group interview she expressed that design of her portfolio was meaningful to her:

And so, whenever I found a pretty picture to make the banner or something, it made me feel like “Okay, this is something that I can get behind because I actually really enjoy putting all of the artistic pieces of it together, because I do focus a lot on art, so being able to kind of mix in writing with art, it made me feel like it was more personal and I personally [emphasizing] loved the way it like flowed through the website and you could still like see the aspects of my personality into it with my writing, and I found a good medium between, you know, what Trudy was saying about the personal and the professional writing, because I was able to have like the professional writing along with the art that I picked, or you know this picture of me or something. So it made me feel like I could enjoy myself while I wrote everything into it.

Regan clearly agreed:

It kind of made me happy to put the pictures of my dogs on it, because I just kind of like, some of them were like silly pictures and so it kind of made me chuckle and like every time I went on my portfolio and I like went through it because I had to like make sure that I had everything there, it kind of made me smile and be like “Yea, I like this” you know. I have my own thing and something that makes me happy incorporated into my writing.
Regan referenced her “own thing” and smiled when she accessed her portfolio because the look of it reflected things that mattered to her. Her portfolio became a place that combined her writing and her life.

David also contributed during the second focus group interview that his portfolio was a representation of who he was:

It’s just like special to you, like you put your time into your portfolio and you want to make it like “you”—you want it to represent you. So, like just having a good visual that other people can see—it will kind of be like “hey, I’m this kind of person. This is like my style of writing. This is like a representation of who I am.

Beyond the design aspect, Anne found great satisfaction in learning the technical aspects of building an electronic portfolio. In this comment from the second focus group interview Anne referred to learning how to share Google Docs and make them public so that other people could see them once they are posted to their portfolios:

We did all of that stuff in class where you would go through it and you would look at all of our portfolios, and that was really beneficial to me because, um, even if I didn’t know that you couldn’t access a certain document or something, it made me like aware. I didn’t even know you could publicly share documents until this year. I had no idea that was even an option, so I had to figure out how to do that, and it kind of just blew my mind because I was like “I’m just this web-tech genius now because I can share a document with everyone.

The students in this study found ownership through making their portfolios reflective of who they were, despite the similarity in the shared posted content. Just as
written works on the same topic will have different voices or directions, these students’ portfolios visually captured some aspect of their individually and identity.

**Perceiving Personal Writing in an AP Classroom both Positively and Negatively.** In addition to the argumentative essays students wrote in preparation for the AP Language and Composition exam, students in this class also kept electronic journals where they could explore their writing selves beyond the AP exam. I chose prompts that I thought would allow the students to reflect upon their lives and to also play with language in different ways—each journal entry was a small exploration of self and/or language. Figure 4.37 shows some of the prompts assigned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12) Thursday</td>
<td>Read the mentor text “What is Beauty” and follow the instructions in the margin. The text is posted under the heading “Journal.” Be thoughtful. Have fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Monday,</td>
<td>Read the mentor text “I’m From” and follow the instructions in the margin. The text is posted under the heading “Journal.” Be thoughtful. Have fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Friday,</td>
<td>After posting your blog on pages 111-180 of <em>On Writing</em> and reviewing comments on the posts, write a thoughtful reaction. What insights did you have—about King, yourself, or your classmates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Thursday,</td>
<td>In <em>On Writing</em> Stephen King makes several references to Strunk &amp; White’s <em>The Elements of Style</em>. Read Chapter 1 (posted in Classroom under the heading “Journal”) and write a thoughtful entry about the rules and your writing life. Try writing a short passage purposefully using 2 or 3 of the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Tuesday,</td>
<td>Read the mentor text “Running Dream” and follow the instructions in the margin. The text is posted under the heading “Journal.” Have fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Monday,</td>
<td>Read the mentor text “Apparently” and follow the instructions in the margin. The text is posted under the heading “Journal.” Have fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.37. Sample journal prompts assigned to students*
Near the end of the academic year students were assigned the task of selecting 10 of their journal entries to post to their portfolio. According to Thibodeaux et al. (2019), allowing students to have choice in their learning environment facilitates them in developing their voices as learners. Figure 4.38 shows a portion of the journal directions posted to Google Classroom.

![Writer’s Journal Specs](image)

*Figure 4.38. Journal assignment description posted for students*

By posting selected journal entries to their portfolios, students were giving all other students in the class access to their journal entries as all student URLs to portfolios were posted in Google Classroom. By allowing choice, I was giving students the opportunity to select what they considered their best entries and the opportunity to avoid posting entries that they felt were too intimate or not up to their standards. Additionally, students could revise their entries before posting them. Figure 4.39 shows the template page that I posted in Google Classroom so that students could refer to it when adding their *Top 10 Journal Entries* to their portfolios.
Figure 4.39. Journal selection page in the Google Site template

Figure 4.40 shows a sample selected journal entry posted to a portfolio. The student has reproduced the journal prompt at the top of the entry.

Mon, 02/24/2020
Read the mentor text “Apparently” and follow the instructions in the margin. The text is posted under the heading “Journal.” Have fun.

Apparently,
My life is great
And I don’t mean that to brag, so don’t hate
It’s just that I’ve come to see
That I make everything about me
When I live so happily
With my parents and sibling in a family
This poem has me sad
And the poem I’m writing is bad
I’d like to change the subject
But I can’t think of a word that rhymes with subject
Thus this poem ends here
I know I’ve been such a dear
If you need me, I have an ear
But I might just shed a tear

The poem Apparently made me sad as most things do, which is why I stay in my bubble. My bubble will be popped some day, and I am absolutely terrified waiting for that day to arrive waiting that day’s arrival (I hate English).

Figure 4.40. Sample selected journal entry
Figure 4.1 shows a sample student explanation for the selected journal entry (shown above) posted to a portfolio.

This is the poem that I featured under my borrowed ideas page. I chose this journal entry, because the original piece that this is based on made me feel quite sad. I felt that since it could evoke emotion, it was pretty important. I promise it is not intended to be self-centered, I just felt that the original piece was eye-opening.

Figure 4.1. Sample student explanation

Students in this study expressed mixed feelings about writing and sharing what they considered more personal in nature than the academic argumentative essays they wrote and posted. The next section presents a discussion about students’ (a) positive perceptions and their (b) negative perceptions about writing and sharing what that they considered personal.

**Positive Perceptions.** During the second focus group interview, Trudy and Tahlia both expressed that journal writing was a positive experience:

Trudy: Um, kind of. Like, generally, it made me realize that I kind of want to kind of start writing a journal, just because, like I said I used that journal pretty personally and it felt good to like write out my thoughts, so though it didn’t make me want to be like (a bit mockingly) “Oh, I’m going to be a writer and tell everybody my opinion, how I feel about things!” Like, it didn’t make me want to do that, but it did make me want to say “Maybe I do want to, like, write more” just to organize my thoughts and like clear out my head, you know?
Tahlia: “I think that like what Trudy said about the journals is pretty spot on. Like how feel, how that makes you feel as a writer is kind of different from how it makes you feel as an AP writer… I think that the journals—journaling is great. My creative writing class we keep a journal, and those are like personal-personal, but we don’t ever like, um, we don’t like publish them. Like, we get the chance to read them if we want to but we don’t have to. So, those are really personal, but yea, when I was putting my journals on the thing, the Top 10 Journals, I realized, like, some of mine stunk, it was like crazy (laughs). I remember specifically thinking “Why don’t we take these out because Mr. Harrison is going to think I am crazy.” Yea, um, I think journaling influences, like, a lot of people, anybody—if you are constantly journaling I feel like it will put you in a place where it is like “Mmm…I should do this more often.” That’s what happened to me this year.”

Tahlia said that journal writing made her feel like a writer in a “different” way that how being an AP writer feels, and both Tahlia and Trudy said that the journal made them want to continue writing in that format beyond the class. Anne also planned to continue journaling, stating in the second focus group interview:

I’ve started my own journals since we started the whole journaling and I’ve started writing a lot more. I’ve really grown to love it. Like, I have a connection with writing now. But, um, I’m definitely going to have some trouble with the AP exam, so…
Anne said that journaling helped her create a “connection” to writing, although she did see her journal writing as disconnected from her AP writing.

In his final writing/portfolio reflection, David showed a great appreciation for the journal responses:

A particularly meaningful post to me was the journal entry I posted under the tab “Borrowed Ideas.” It was particularly special to me because I was able to implement a lot of personal thoughts and ideas while maintaining a good technique of writing. As a writer, the inspiration to perfect your craft never comes to an end.

The “Borrowed Ideas” to which David refers were the journal prompts referring students to mentor texts, passages by other writers that students could use as a springboard for their own writing, whether it be to model the style of the writer or make their own connections to the content. In this reflection, David pointedly referred to himself as a writer. Figure 4.42 shows David’s “Borrowed Ideas” portfolio entry with an introduction.

Figure 4.42. David’s Borrowed Ideas portfolio introduction
Finally, Charlotte positively regarded the journal writing because it allowed her work to feel unique, rather the bear the hallmarks of what she considered typical argumentative essays. She wrote in her final reflection:

Often I feel like when writing analytical essays everyone’s is so similar, and while we may all use different pieces of evidence the context and what is being said is very similar. However, with creative writing I am able to interpret the prompt in whatever way I choose to do so, and everyone’s pieces will always be unique which I love.

Students seemed to value opportunities to practice writing that allowed for different voices.

**Negative Perceptions.** Students generally perceived value in the more personal journal writing, but sharing the entries with me and with the class created anxiety for some students. Trudy, who tended to express anxiety about elements of the class and the AP exam (namely timed tests and peer review), felt anxious when it came time to select and post entries because they felt too personal. She stated in the second focus group interview:

Because just like I said…like, like the month of February I was going through kind of a rough time—just slightly rough--and so my journal, I guess just took it out on my journal, but I just wrote some personal stuff in there. And I was like “do you really want to write…” Like reading it back, when we were typing them up, I was like “Why did you put this in a journal that somebody else was supposed to see?
She went on distinguish between having an audience for AP essay versus having an audience for what she considered private journal entries:

When you write the essays it’s with the expectation that somebody’s going to grade it on the 6-point rubric, they’re going to be like “your writing sucks, your writing’s great.” You know? The essays kind of came with that assumption, so I didn’t really care about posting those. But, what I felt was kind of a challenge was actually the journals, because I am sure you probably didn’t want us to take the journals this far, but I felt like my journal was really personal, and it was really weird ‘cause I was like “why am I writing all of this? Mr. Harrison is going to read this”—no offense, but I was like “Mr. Harrison is going to read this—I don’t need to write all of this.” So, I was actually thankful that we ended up putting them online. Because I edited some of my journals and took out some of the *(using air quotes)* sappy stuff, I guess, because for me I wouldn’t have felt comfortable like putting that out and online. So, for like the journals and like the genre writing and stuff like that, that was a challenge in my opinion. I did feel weird about putting it on there, but for like the essays it was like, whatever.

Trudy knew that her essays would be read, and she accepted it, but the idea that I or anyone else would read her journal entries was too much for her so she ended up editing them until the content felt publishable for her.

Regan wrote in her final reflection that her journal entries felt personal, which suggests interacting with the journal on an authentic level, but perhaps too personal to share:
Some of my published journal entries were very personal and I was open about my feelings and thoughts about the prompt, which normally doesn’t happen with AP writing.

While students generally said that they were invested in journal writing, some of them seemed to embrace the task so authentically and so personally that they did not feel comfortable sharing it. The choice element of posting journal entries certainly help students navigate this concern, but it was a concern nevertheless.

This section presented several factors in our AP Language and Composition class that contributed to students thinking like developing writers.

**Chapter Summary**

For this study qualitative data was collected. This qualitative data included two focus group interviews, written reflections, and journal entries. Three themes emerged from the data: 1) confronting anxieties as developing writers in an AP classroom, 2) finding community with developing writers in an AP classroom, and 3) thinking like developing writers in an AP classroom. The analysis of the data and creation of themes gave me insight into the experiences of young writers in an AP writing classroom.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Introduction
This chapter positions the findings from the present study within the existing literature on academic writing, electronic portfolios, and communities of practice. The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of young writers entering an Advanced Placement writing course while engaged in an online community of practice. Qualitative data were collected to answer the following questions:

1. What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?
2. How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?
3. How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?

Eight student-participants took part in this study. These students participated in two focus group interviews, once at the beginning of data collection and once at the end. In addition I collected written reflections and journal responses from them. The transcripts of the interviews and the written artifacts were analyzed to help accurately answer the research questions. The following sections will present the (a) discussion, (b) implications, and (c) limitations for this study.
Discussion

AP Language and Composition is an introductory college level course that focuses on developing students’ argumentative, analytical, and composition skills (College Board, 2020). Students who enroll in the course opt to do so and it satisfies one of their high school English credit requirement. Students enter the course with varying degrees of experience in argumentative writing and with varying levels of ability. The course culminates with the national administration of a three hour and 15 minute examination the offers successful test-takers and essay-writers potential college credit. This study used a purposively selected sample of students enrolled in AP Language and Composition at one high school and gathered data about their writing experiences.

The discussion of the findings in this study will be considered through the lenses of writing, identity, and communities of practice theoretical frameworks. The discussion is organized according to the three research questions guiding the study.

Research Question 1: What do students in an AP writing course perceive as impediments to becoming successful writers in the course?

The reasons behind the decision to enroll in one or more advanced placement courses are varied and include both a desire to create a competitive transcript with an eye toward college admissions to a desire to earn college credit early, ultimately saving on college costs (Morgan, Zakhem, & Cooper, 2018). Students may feel pressured to enroll in these courses, or put pressure on themselves to enroll (Ttreault & Nimesheim, 2022). Students entering the course may not be aware of the specific demands of the course, or anything at all beyond the potential for college credit, and once enrolled encounter unexpected levels of rigor and what may be perceived as impediments to success in the
course. Some of the research shows that students in advanced placement classes report significantly higher levels of stress associated with course expectations than do students in general education (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013; Suldo, Shaunessay, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2009). Because of this, some of the research has begun to look at success in advanced placement courses in different ways. Completion of accelerated courses (Adelman, 2006), performance on end-of-course exams (Ackerman, Kanfer, & Calderwood, 2013), and engagement and emotional well-being of students (Suldo, Shaunessy-Dedrick, Ferron, & Dedrick, 2018) are some of the ways researchers have looked at student success in accelerated courses. If success in the course is to be measured by scoring a 3 or higher on the AP exam, 57.8% of students taking the exam in 2021 scored at that level, meaning that 42.2% did not meet that measure of success (see Figure 5.1).

![2021 Score Distributions: English](image)

*Figure 5.1. 2021 Score distribution for AP Language and Composition*

For this study, Research Question 1 asks what impediments to becoming *successful writers* students perceived in the course. It is a small distinction, but a distinction that merits mentioning. The AP Language and Composition multiple choice test does require students to analyze writing—to use a writer’s mindset to deconstruct
passages—but this study’s focus was the drafting of two different types of AP Language and Composition essays—on the actual writing process. From the various writing prompts and interviews, the following as impediments to becoming successful writers were identified by students: (a) loss of joy in school-based writing, (2) stress caused by the timed writing conditions, and (c) challenges associated with finding and using evidence to support claims. The first impediment does not directly address the skills required to draft essays on the AP exam that would likely contribute to a score of 3 or higher, but rather suggests a negative stance toward school-based writing in general. The second and third listed impediments do directly address skills required for success on the AP Language and Composition exam.

**Loss of joy.** Students in the study expressed that while they generally found middle school writing enjoyable, they felt that their experiences with high school writing had left them unmotivated as writers. They generally referred to this defeatist feeling as a loss of joy. In the first focus group interview Trudy fondly remembered writing fanciful stories and the freedom to choose what she wrote about. However, she said that high school “sucked the joy out” of writing and that even if given choice about what to write, she would be reluctant to do so. This is not an isolated reaction. Gifted writers respond favorably to freedom and autonomy in their writing. Once in high school, the emphasis often switches to a strong assessment focus (Garrett, 2011). The transition from middle school writing to high school writing was a bumpy path for some participants in the study, leaving them without the *joie d’écrire*, or the joy of writing, they recall experiencing earlier in their educational journeys.
The objective of high school writing too often is to prepare students for the short, single-draft writing they will encounter on high-stakes assessments, leaving them with fewer opportunities for choice or sustained writing through multiple drafts (Applebee & Langer, 2009, 2011; Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009; Wahleithner, 2018). When lengthier works are assigned in high school, the common five-paragraph essay is the often go-to essay assignment, sometimes leaving students with a formulaic feeling about the process (Ferris & Hayes, 2019; Kiuhara et al., 2009). In the first focus group interview, Anne described her disenfranchisement from the writing process in high school when she said that she would like to write about “something interesting that can keep my attention” because she would be more likely to enjoy the experience rather than writing because it was an assigned task. Anne, similar to other students, seemed resigned to what she probably determined was the necessary evil of formulaic high school writing that offered little choice, and for them it came with a loss of joy in the process, so much so that they considered it an impediment to becoming successful writers in the course.

**Timed writing.** For the essay portion of the AP Language and Composition exam, students are given two hours and 15 minutes to draft three argumentative essays based on prompts they have never seen. The suggested time for each essay is 40 minutes, but students must monitor their own time on each essay and not expend an excessive amount of time on one or two essays at the expense of what remains to be written. In our class, students practiced writing in both timed and untimed conditions. The data collected in this study suggested that students considered these timed conditions stressful, so much so that they felt that their chances for success were possibly thwarted.
Warren (2010) posits that the impromptu nature of the timed essays on the AP Language and Composition exam “severely limits its opportunities for invention” (p. 83), suggesting that students don’t have time to craft authentic arguments. Ashton agreed, writing in a reflection “I also struggle with time management, especially when the essays are timed, which is why my essays are not as well written during my first draft than when I revise them.” Warren suggests that Foster (1989) had the right idea when he called for at least part of the AP English exam be replaced with a portfolio approach. Foster recommended that at least one of the three essays be a revised version that students completed under the supervision of an AP teacher (Foster, 1989). Having practiced writing in both timed conditions and in untimed conditions in our class, Trudy obviously preferred the latter. In a reflection written after taking the AP exam in May, she wrote “I would like to ask College Board why they feel the need to time me while writing, but as I’m sure the timed aspect will never change, I’ll keep it to myself I guess.” Trudy never made peace with the timed writing conditions of the test, writing in her post-test reflection that during the test administration she panicked, her palms sweated, and she forgot how to type.

The timed testing conditions were a common stressor for students. Kültür & Özcan (2022) found that the cognitive and affective components of test anxiety did negatively impact test performance for high-achievers, but no such relationship was found for the low-achieving and mid-achieving group. Also in her post-exam reflection, Trudy described her anxiety about the timed experience during the actual testing experience when she recalls telling herself “Trudy, please for the love of God, write!”
She said she knew her writing was “bad” but there was no time to revise it. Her anxiety was evident as she was primarily focused on monitoring her time.

Yaman (2010) identified two types of anxiety, a negative anxiety that impedes success and a positive anxiety that promotes motivation. Yaman suggested that the negative type of writing anxiety results in procrastination, fear, tension, loss of self-confidence and power, and interruption of the thinking process (Yaman, 2010). Tahlia seems to be describing experiencing negative anxiety when she wrote “When I first wrote the essay I wasn’t pacing myself at all, and I definitely did not re-read; I didn’t have enough time in the period. I wrote it knowing it was not good.”

Experiencing negative writing anxiety could have far-reaching implications for students. Apprehension towards writing could result in the student being a “poorer writer” (Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996, p. 30). Zorbaz (2010) said that writing anxiety can affect students at all levels, and that once it is experienced the students may begin to avoid writing experiences. Ryan (2019) found that there is a strong correlation between lower self-apprehensiveness and higher writing self-efficacy, meaning that lower levels of writing anxiety go hand-in-hand with positive views of writing ability. The reality for the students in this study, though, was that timed writing generally seemed to create higher levels of anxiety and became an impediment to them viewing themselves as successful writers.

**Identifying, describing, analyzing, and selecting evidence.** College Board outlines several *Big Ideas* as the foundation for AP Language and Composition course as well as course skills that students should have mastered while in the course (College Board, 2020). Figure 5.2 shows the four big ideas, one of which is *Claims and Evidence.*
The big ideas serve as the foundation of the AP English Language and Composition course and enable students to create meaningful connections among course concepts. They are threads that run throughout the course, and revisiting them and applying them in a variety of contexts helps students to develop deeper conceptual understanding. Below are the big ideas of the course, along with the enduring understanding associated with each one:

**RHETORICAL SITUATION (RHS)**
Enduring Understanding RHS-1: Individuals write within a particular situation and make strategic writing choices based on that situation.

**CLAIMS AND EVIDENCE (CLE)**
Enduring Understanding CLE-1: Writers make claims about subjects, rely on evidence that supports the reasoning that justifies the claim, and often acknowledge or respond to other, possibly opposing, arguments.

**REASONING AND ORGANIZATION (REO)**
Enduring Understanding REO-1: Writers guide understanding of a text’s lines of reasoning and claims through that text’s organization and integration of evidence.

**STYLE (STL)**
Enduring Understanding STL-1: The rhetorical situation informs the strategic stylistic choices that writers make.

Figure 5.2. AP Language and Composition Big Ideas

College Board also outlines *course skills*, nestled under each *Big Idea*, which students should master while in the course. Figure 5.3 shows a portion of a table displaying the course skills nestled under the *Claims and Evidence Big Idea* (College Board, 2020).
Identifying, describing, analyzing, and selecting evidence are listed as required course skills, but many students find these skills challenging (Salih, 2021). A National Assessment for Educational Progress report showed that only about 25% of eighth and twelfth grade students’ argumentative essays provide strong reasons and supporting examples (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Wahleithner (2020) suggests that traditional education’s reliance on formulaic essays has left many students struggling with the academic thinking and academic writing necessary to hone these skills. Current research has taken notice of a changing world that will find today’s students in a workforce that increasingly calls upon critical thinking and writing skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007). Applying reading and writing skills associated with argumentation will be necessary for these students to thrive in many professional environments in the future (Ferretti & De La Paz, 2011).
Students in this study wrote the Question 2 (rhetorical analysis) and the Question 3 (argument) essays. Although both essays are argumentative in nature, the evidence used to support students’ claims is qualitatively different for each type of essay and each will be described in the sections (a) question 2 evidence, and (b) question 3 evidence, which follow.

**Question 2 evidence.** To respond to the Question 2 essay prompt—the rhetorical analysis essay—students had to identify and use evidence taken from a previously unseen passage. The rhetorical choices that the writer of the passage used were expected to become the evidence that the student writers used to support their claims. For example, the 2014 Question 2 prompt asked students to analyze a letter Abigail Adams wrote to her son, John Quincy Adams. After identifying Adams’ purpose in writing the letter, students were asked to deconstruct the letter and to “analyze the rhetorical strategies Adams uses to advise her son” (College Board, 2014). The students in this study found identifying and using evidence for this type of essay very challenging, mainly because the passages were either from a different century and the language felt inaccessible or antiquated, or because the subject of the passage did not interest most of the students. In the first focus group interview some of the student participants expressed their frustration and disengagement with these passages:

Charlotte: I think that with the analyzing is like some of the passages that we read I think are like “oh, that’s cool” but like some of them are so just so random—and pointless—but like I have to read them like multiple times just to like get the point because I get—it’s so like
boring to me. Like I remember once we had to read like about windmills. Pointless.

[general groans]

Regan: Or even if it’s boring but sometimes we have to read like 1800s literature and like the way of life and the language and everything was just so completely different that it’s so hard to translate and interpret the meaning in today’s world because what we think it means is not what the author meant because the author was thinking “Oh, well this happened in 1817” it’s now 2020, well that has like probably two completely different meanings.

Me: So you are talking about passages we have read in this class?

Regan: Yes.

Me: Okay, alright. So some of the texts feel, or passages feel antiquated, and just not accessible to your generation?

Trudy: Or also, if it’s something like a scientific journal or something, like, I understand that somebody needs to analyze that, but it does not need to be me! [laughs]

Charlotte: I just wish that the passages were more like geared more to our generation, like it doesn’t even have to be like a newspaper article from two weeks ago, just like something that like I can read and like follow.

In one study, Scorsby (2021) found that when her AP Language and Composition students routinely analyzed sports articles they were able to increase their ability to
identify the choices the writers made to create tone or to write persuasive arguments. Scoresby also said that the students felt confident about transferring these skills to genres other than just the presumably more accessible sports articles (Scoresby, 2021). But in this study my students wrote arguments based solely on College Board released prompts, and most of them saw the Question 2 AP passages as obstacles to their success.

**Question 3 evidence.** The Question 3 essay—the argument essay—asks students to develop their own evidence to support a claim and it can be anything from their reading life, their observations, or their experiences. For example, the 2019 Question 3 prompt asked students to take a position on something that is considered overrated (the 2019 Q3 prompt is presented in Appendix L). Once students took a position on something that was overrated, they were tasked with generating their own evidence to support their claims. Some of the students in this study preferred this type of argument to the Question 2 argument because it offered broader choice in selecting evidence. Regan, for example, wrote in her Question 3 reflection that she “found that I enjoy writing these types of essays” because they allowed her to express her thoughts and opinions. She felt that this type of essay allowed her to be seen as “knowledgeable. David agreed. In his final writing and portfolio reflection, he compared his Question 3 writing with his Question 2 writing. He wrote that his Question 3 writing “proved to be effective” because he could put his personality into them. He went on to say that the rhetorical analysis essay (Question 2) made his writing feel technical.

It is not uncommon, however, for students to struggle with incorporating their own ideas into their writing (Wahleithner, 2020), and that is certainly how some of the students in this study felt. In her final writing and portfolio reflection Ashton wrote that
“the process of forming evidence off the top of my head is one that is very complex and time-consuming.” She also said that the prompts did not provide inspiration. Although some of the students showed a preference for finding and using evidence for the Question 3 essay over the Question 2 essay, students generally expressed frustration with one or the other types of evidence.

Therefore, in answering research question 1, students identified the following impediments to becoming successful writers in the course: (a) experiencing a loss of joy in school-based writing prior to entering the course, (2) stress caused by the timed writing conditions in the course, and (c) challenges associated with finding and using evidence to support claims made when responding to the Question 2 and Question 3 essay prompts required by the course. Loss of joy in the writing process experienced by students prior to entering the course is not skill-based, but is an attitude about writing that students perceived as having a negative impact in their journeys as writers. The second and third listed impediments do directly address skills required for success on the AP Language and Composition exam.

**Research Question 2: How does use of electronic portfolios impact how student writers see themselves?**

Use of portfolios in education is not a new trend, but the ways in which portfolios are used in different content areas and with differing groups of users is still being explored. The literature on portfolios and writing supports portfolios as powerful tools to teach and evaluate students’ writing skills, particularly when the instructional focus is on student learning and process writing skills rather than on polished final products (Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygall, 1994; Yancey, 1992). Also, because portfolio development
and assessment are process-oriented, students are motivated over time to engage in the cognitive, metacognitive, and affective dimensions of their own writing (Earl, 2013), including using portfolios to support ongoing reflection (Landis, Scott, & Kahn, 2015; Parkes, Dredger, & Hicks, 2013; Jones & Hanson, 2018), viewing work over an extended period of time (Buzzetto-More, 2010; Singer-Freeman, Bastone, & Skrivanek, 2016), and sharing work with an audience (Bass, 2017; Gallagher, C.W., & Poklop, L.L., 2014).

The data from this study supports that these portfolio-facilitated processes were valuable to the student writers participating in it. Therefore, in answering research question two, electronic portfolios impacted students’ views of themselves as writers by providing them with opportunities to (a) reflect on their writing, (2) to see their growth as writers over time, and (c) to publish as writers.

**Reflecting on writing.** Recognizing reflection as an essential component of the learning process has a long history of support (Dewey, 1916; Flavel, 1979: Kolb, 1984; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). Dewey (1916) wrote that “thought or reflection…is the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence. No experience having a meaning is possible without some element of thought” (p. 169). Driessen et al. (2005) claimed that to optimize students’ reflective experiences with portfolios, students should be provided with structure and clear guidelines. In this study, students were provided with a portfolio template that evolved as the course evolved and students were required to use it as a model for adding pages and content to their own portfolios. Driessen et al. (2005) also suggested that portfolios should be included in some sort of summative assessment to ensure that students were motivated to put in the
effort required to develop portfolios. Completed portfolios in our course counted as students’ second semester exam grades.

Portfolios have been and are being used in multiple disciplines and with various purposes (Douglas et al., 2019; López-Crespo, 2022). Using portfolios to support writing instruction and writing development has been shown to be a successful approach (Bader et al., 2019; Denton, 2012). For example, in a systematic review of the literature from 2000 to 2019, Wolt & Nenad (2021) found that students of dental programs that incorporated reflective writing practices increased both their critical thinking skills and their learning. Similarly, Bowman et.al. (2016) found that students in a first-year college writing program showed heightened levels of metacognition related to their learning and to career or personal goals. Portfolios have also been shown to facilitate students’ reflections about their writing in other settings, such as elementary school (Mak & Wong, 2018) and in English as a second language classrooms (Farahian & Avarzamani, 2018), further empowering them as writers.

In this study students wrote both formal and informal reflections. Informal reflections are characterized by their unstructured nature and their perceived limited audience and are exemplified by student journal entries and by a post AP exam reflection. Students responded to journal prompts (see Appendix J), usually about in-class timed essays, with the primary objective being to write for themselves about their first draft writing (students had choice over which journal entries to post to their portfolios). Informal reflections also included a post AP exam reflection (see Appendix I) in which students wrote about their feelings after taking the exam. This reflection gave the students an opportunity to vent about or to celebrate their exam experience, was written for me as
their audience, and not posted to portfolios. Formal reflections are characterized by guiding questions regarding students’ writing processes when revising essays and about curating artifacts for their portfolios and what these pieces said about them as writers. The guiding questions I provided to students resulted in more structured responses, and these formal reflections were also characterized by a perceived audience beyond the student and teacher as students were required to publish them to their portfolios. Formal reflections are exemplified by writer’s reflections about argumentative essays students selected to revise and to post to their portfolios (see Appendix G), colleague portfolio review reflections (see Appendix H), and a final portfolio and overall writing reflection (see Appendix K).

As mentioned above, students wrote less formal reflections in their journals. The journal entries are referred to as less formal because they could be kept private and were written for the student (and me) by the student unless the student wanted to post them to his or her portfolio. One journal prompt asked students to score their own essays responding to the 2013 Question 3 prompt about the concept of ownership (Appendix M) shows this essay prompt) and how a previous in-class small group scoring exercise impacted their thoughts about their own writing. In Samira’s response to this journal prompt, she critiques her own writing and describes her experience with a peer evaluation group. While she says that she thought of the product—her essay—negatively because of peer comments, this did not affect her view of herself as a writer because she knew it was not her best work and that she could do better. Samira’s hand-written entry (most students kept electronic journals, but Samira preferred to hand write hers) is shown in Figure 5.4.
3/19/20
I would give myself a 4/6. I included a clear thesis statement, which would give me one point. I gave myself a 3 on evidence and commentary because I often evidence to support my claim. The argument is organized as a line of reasoning and it had multiple supporting claims. I included commentary with each piece of evidence. However, I felt some commentary may have failed to support some of my claims. I gave myself a 0 for sophistication as I don’t have a specific style. I did include a counterargument to show limitations of the argument, but I didn’t feel it was well done correctly. When I was with my group I viewed my writing negatively due to comments about the type of evidence I used. People were confused on how it related to my thesis, which made me think negatively of this piece of writing. The comments didn’t affect me as a writer because I knew that this was not my best work. The prompt was very confusing to me and I had trouble writing the prompt as I anticipated such comments. Both graders gave me a 3/6.

Figure 5.4. Samira’s informal reflection responding to a journal prompt
Figure 5.5 shows a portion of the portfolio page of one of Ashton’s more formal reflections of a Q2 essay that she chose to revise and polish. She introduces the page and her reflection by writing “My writer’s reflection for the rhetorical analysis essay is the document below. In this reflection I analyzed my revision process, what I would do if I wrote another draft, and what I learned throughout the process. This was written in the week of 3/2/20.”

Figure 5.5. A sample reflection page for a revised essay

In the second focus group interview, Ashton said that the reflections on their writing helped her to “see what I need to do to grow as a writer” so that she doesn’t continue to make the same mistakes in future essays. These formal reflections allowed students to
consider not only final products, but their writing processes, goals, and what they learned as writers.

The final portfolio/writing reflection covered all of the work students had posted to their portfolios, their comments on their own growth as writers over time, and positive takeaways from their classmates’ portfolios. Figure 5.6 shows the opening of a final reflection page in a student’s portfolio.

Students generally found value in these more formal reflection activities. David wrote in his final reflection that his portfolio gave him a “virtual representation of a timeline” of his writing life where he could analyze what he had created. Charlotte also described in her final reflection how the process of reflection gave her insight into her processes as a writer. She wrote that she “noticed trends” in her writing by reflecting on each piece. These emerging trends came from viewing her work over time. Similarly, Aston’s final reflection showed how reflecting helped her identify strengths and weaknesses in her writing her “development in the writing world.” The reflection
component of portfolios gave these students opportunities to consider themselves as writers of individual pieces as well as writers of an archived collection, and to consider what they had done well and how they could improve as writers.

**Seeing growth over time.** Going hand-in-hand with the reflection process is a meaningful activity portfolios provide—serving as a curated storehouse or archive where a writer’s work over time is available for review and for sharing for an indefinite period of time. In this way, electronic portfolios serve as digital repositories of writing and reflecting and provide students with opportunities to track their progress over time (Gordon & Campbell, 2013; Nguyen & Ikeda, 2015; Roberts, 2018; Volmer & Sarv, 2018). Jenson (2011) cited this characteristic of portfolios as one of the four learning centered principles of the University of Minnesota Duluth’s required ePortfolio system conceived by Paul Treurer in 1996: “Students are encouraged to create a lifelong record of their learning through the University granting its graduates lifelong access to their portfolios.”

Students in this study generally indicated that this ability to have extended access to their writing and reflections was a novel experience for them and a valuable one that they could see returning to after the AP Language and Composition course was over. For example, in the second focus group interview, Charlotte stated that she was “excited to like in the future to come back and look at my portfolio” so she could continue to see how her writing has changed. Tahlia agreed in the same interview, saying that the portfolio gave her the opportunity to view her writing and have insights such as “Oh, there’s this one thing I do, so I need to like do it less or do it more.” Tahlia was able to identify patterns in her writing that once brought to her attention through viewing her
work over time she was able to address. David also felt that being able to visit his past work was an opportunity to view how he had grown as a writer. In his final writing and portfolio reflection he stated that he valued seeing his growth over time and what he still needed to work on as a writer.

Regan, in her final reflection, echoed the sentiments that viewing work over time in her portfolio showcased her growth and heightened her awareness of her writing self. She wrote that she came to understand that “everyone, including myself, can become a skilled writer if we address our work with certainty, if we have a specific method for our writing, and if we continue to practice and learn from our mistakes.” For the students in this study, growth over time is exemplified by not only what they did better on as time passed, but how they viewed themselves—weaknesses and all—as writers.

In her final reflection, Samira said that being able to view her work over time showed her that she had developed argumentative writing skills—the basics of AP Language and Composition—but also that her writing—at least this type of writing—lacked what she called voice. She stated that she was not able to convey her personality through her work, giving it what she described as a “unique voice,” but she went on to say that she felt that she was up to the task of successfully writing arguments with a strong defensible thesis, supporting evidence, and strong and relevant commentary.

For these students, an archived collection of their writing that would be available for future review, whether for other courses or for their own personal review, informed their writing selves in a positive way. It allowed them to take pride in what they had done, gave them the opportunity to share their work in the future, and allowed them to set goals as writers.
A published identity. Of Ivanič’s (1998) three aspects of writer identity, the data in this study gave insight into students’ *autobiographical selves* and their *selves as authors*. The data sources—written reflections, journal entries, and the two focus group interviews—yielded information about the social influences students experienced as writers, both before and during the study, as well as information on how these students saw themselves as writers (*authors*). An investigation into students’ *discoursal selves*, Ivanič’s third identity aspect, would have required that the students’ academic essays undergo discourse or textual analysis, and that was beyond the methodological scope of this study. Students’ written reflections and journals as well as in the two focus group interview transcripts, however, were analyzed and coded for insight into their perceptions of their writing selves, lending the data in this study relevant to discussing the participants’ *autobiographical selves* and their *selves as authors*.

Ivanič identified research questions relevant to each aspect, and Table 5.1 shows the research questions identified by Ivanič (1998) as typical for researching the *autobiographical self* and *self as author*.

Table 5.1

*Aspects, characteristics, and research questions proposed by Ivanič relevant to this study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant aspect with associated characteristic</th>
<th>Research question relevant to this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Autobiographical self (writer-as-performer: the person who sets about the process of producing the text)</td>
<td>• <em>How has people’s access to discourses and associated positionings been socially enabled or constrained?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self as author (how writers present themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors)</td>
<td>• <em>To what extent do people present themselves or others as authoritative?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The *socially enabled or constrained* dimension of the autobiographical self research question targets students’ social interactions, and the *extent people present themselves as authoritative* dimension of the *self as author* research question targets students’ perceptions of themselves as writers, both of which students addressed in interviews, reflections, and journals.

The reflections students created at the beginning of the course—their one-pager reflections on their writing lives—gave insight into their autobiographical selves as they moved through elementary, middle, and early high school. Trudy’s one-pager presented the voices of these different Trudys as she saw herself performing as a writer in each of these stages. Figure 5.7 presents snapshots of Trudy’s concepts of herself as a writer at these different stages excerpted from her reflective writing life one-pager.
"I don’t no [sic] what to writ [sic]."
~ Preschool Trudy

"Well I still don’t know what to write but my teacher says I’m a writer now and that I have to keep practicing to get better and learn more."
~ Elementary School Trudy

"It astounds me that a topic about which to write still evades me, but little remains out of my grasp, and thus, I will persevere."
~ High School Trudy

"The topic of writing still baffles me, because I don’t quite see the point, but I will continue to try."
~ Middle School Trudy

Figure 5.7. Snapshots of Trudy’s autobiographical self from her reflective one-pager
Trudy’s entire reflective one-pager is presented in Figure 5.8.

*Figure 5.8. Trudy’s one-pager reflecting on her writing life prior to the course*
Part of the reflective one-pager assignment was to add a border that related to their writing lives in words and/or images. Trudy’s border includes a mixture of Xs, Os, and question marks. Trudy’s explanation of her one-pager, which she posted to her portfolio and includes an explanation of her border, is presented in Figure 5.9:

\[
\begin{array}{|c|}
\hline
\text{Discuss your one-pager on your writing life. Explain it and/or discuss the process of writing it (reflecting, drafting, committing to ideas, etc.)} \\
\text{My one pager expresses how I truly feel about writing; I don’t know yet. I tried to express both my development as a writer, and my everchanging feeling towards it. The first piece of my one pager to note would be the line of diagonal boxes (light blue) across the page. Using these boxes with quotes from “each Taylor,” I intended to show how much my writing has changed throughout my life by using the same topic for each quote. Moving to the left of the page, this section shows aspects of writing that I generally dislike. From essays and books I didn’t care for to the general idea of me reading alone after years of being read to, I have come to dislike writing more or less. It’s quite sad, but I felt that it was necessary to show. Next looking at the right side of the page, we have more happy notes. This section juxtaposes the left side, thus it has books and essays that I liked (far outnumber the dislikes) and an image of me reading with my mother when I was younger. This image specifically is important to me, because I would not be the writer I am, or even nearly as intelligent had I not spent the years I did reading with my mother. That is of course one of my favorite pieces of my one pager, but another would be the writing in other languages. Part of the reason that I still find writing interesting is because of the role it plays in my learning of other languages. Finally, the border again reinforces my inability to decide between my love and hate for writing. (Also, if you’re wondering why this page is so long, yet I say I dislike writing, it is because I enjoy talking, not writing)} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

*Figure 5.9. Trudy’s one-pager published explanation*

Trudy describes her border as representing her love/hate relationship with writing. Trudy’s concept of her writing life presented in this reflection is socially situated within her educational experiences, with references to *my teacher* and the implied assigned tasks of writing with her elementary school self not knowing what to write, references to *topics* in middle and high school, and the determination to *persevere* in high school. Trudy’s autobiographical self at these stages was a sometimes confused student who learned
within a social context to follow the rules and do what was asked of her. However, Trudy also credits her mother’s consistent reading to her as contributing to her sense of her writing self when she writes “[the image of me reading with my mother] specifically is important to me, because I would not be the writer I am, or even nearly as intelligent had I not spent the years I did reading with my mother.” Figure 5.10 presents this image.

![Figure 5.10 A close-up of Trudy’s depiction of her reading with her mother](image)

In the second focus group interview, however, Trudy and Charlotte discussed publishing essays for an audience—presenting themselves as *writers as performers* (one must have an audience to perform) while also shedding light on how they present themselves as *authors*:

Charlotte: When I’m writing an essay I assume like somebody is going to read it so I’m always writing it for somebody else to read it,
whether that’s like you or the AP grader or like one of my peers, so I’m just kind of like “yea.”

Me: Alright. Did you have the same attitude about creating your portfolio, about what it looked like, or were you just kind of nonchalant about it?

Charlotte: My portfolio, I tried to kind of make it look cute. Like my background’s like this nice sunset on the beach, which I really like. It’s very peaceful. So (laughs) yea.

Trudy: I knew when you write the essays it’s with the expectation that somebody’s going to grade it on the 6-point rubric, they’re going to be like “your writing sucks, your writing’s great.” You know? The essays kind of came with that assumption.”

Both Charlotte and Trudy understood the audience aspect of publishing to their portfolios, and it became part of both of their writing personas. Trudy’s final portfolio/writing reflection continues to concentrate on the theme of her discomfort with publishing her work in general, but she describes the portfolio as a medium that became not only comfortable for her to publish her academic writing but she came to love talking to the readers through the portfolio narrative, while still remaining guarded about her personal writing:

I associate expressing my opinion in writing, especially in a place that is to be published on the internet, with discomfort. In this journey that was our portfolio, I enjoyed finding a medium in which I felt comfortable enough to post about myself and my opinion. I came to love putting in little headers that just talked to
the readers, but I also found it difficult to post things like the my story piece and my journals. As a whole, the experience was good, and it allowed me to realize that maybe I should just write for myself more.

Trudy may still be trying to find her footing as an author, but using words such as comfortable and love to describe her portfolio experience suggest that her published identity is evolving.

The audiences for electronic portfolios are multiple and often dynamic and expanding. An audience can include teachers, other evaluators, parents, and classmates. But when reflection and learning are the goals of the portfolio, the student also becomes audience (Polkop, 2014; Ramírez, 2011). These writer-audience relationships are all social constructs that contribute to the writer’s development of a persona or an identity (Yancey et al., 2013). Similar to Trudy’s reflective writing life one-pager, Regan’s one-pager presented an autobiographical self that had a love/hate relationship with writing that was socially constructed mostly in the school setting where she experienced a shift in her attitude about writing once entering middle school. Regan’s one-pager is presented in Figure 5.11.
Regan describes loving to write in elementary school, her early-years imagination taking flight in original stories, and the power of personal journaling. All of this took a hit in
middle school. Regan’s aspect of *writer as performer* began to respond to the emphasis on grades in middle school and in high school and affected how she performed as a writer. Figure 5.12 presents a close up Regan’s depiction of this aspect:

![Figure 5.12 Regan’s autobiographical self responding to the emphasis on grades](image)

Regan bullet points these aspects of her autobiographical self in her portfolio where she introduces her reflecting writing life one pager. This portfolio introduction is presented in Figure 5.13.
Figure 5.13 Regan’s published introduction to her reflective one-pager in her portfolio

In this entry from her final portfolio/writing reflection, Regan addresses how her portfolio reaches both her and others as audience and helped her develop a sense of self as author:

Overall my portfolio has taught me a lot about myself. It has shown me different kinds of writing that I am able to do, how to publish and share my work so more people other than my teacher can see it, and give me something to be proud of from my work in school. It has helped me understand that it is okay to struggle with writing and have extreme strengths and extreme weaknesses. It helped me get out of my comfort zone by sharing and publishing some of my more personal thoughts and experiences many of my classmates wouldn’t know. I see that I am strong in developing an argument to support an essay, no matter what kind of essay it is.

Regan presents a more authoritative version of herself as a writer here—even if she is not at the point of loving writing. She is describing how she sees herself as a writer—strengths and weaknesses—and attributes much of it to her published identity.
As is evident from the data in this study, portfolios create a “sharable narrative of identity” (Nguyen, 2013, p. 141) and their development is an exercise in self-authorship and is an “inherently social process” (Buyarski, et al., 2015, p. 286). One of the requirements for student portfolios in this course was to include a running narrative on each page whether it be to welcome a viewer or to introduce content. In other words, no page should have an assignment or material posted without a narrative, however short, written by the portfolio owner/writer. Even this small requirement puts audience and the social aspect of portfolios at the forefront. Anne expressed an awareness of this when she said in the second focus group interview that she “try to make it as viewer-friendly as possible.” Anne described here her awareness that writing and publishing are social activities.

Finally, Ashton sounded like an author in her final portfolio/writing reflection when she wrote that her portfolio displayed many sides of her. She also stated that “I know that I have matured into a stronger writer, which is proven by the work in my portfolio.” Ashton’s reflection suggested that her portfolio showed her development as an author, although she did distinguish between more personal writing (journal and genre) and more formal argumentative writing, citing more personal writing as difficult to share despite the importance of “letting people see your true self.” Although she admitted to not enjoying argumentative writing, in this reflection she said that she presented her AP work professionally in her portfolio and that her portfolio showed her maturity as a writer over time—a published identity. Writing and publishing for an audience—or multiple audiences—in a socially constructed situation helped the students in this study view themselves as writers.
Therefore, in answering research question 2, this section has shown that students in this study indicated that electronic portfolios impacted how they see themselves as writers by providing them with opportunities to (a) reflect on their writing, (2) to see their growth as writers over time, and (c) to publish as writers.

**Research Question 3: How does working collaboratively with other student writers impact how student writers see themselves?**

The shift from viewing learning as an individual achievement to an awareness that it is an inherently social process situated in specific contexts was a significant one (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Rogoff, 1990; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Wertsch, 1985). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice framework is rooted in this social view of learning. According to Wenger (1998), there are three dimensions necessary for a true community of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Wenger-Traynor (2015) defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). As members participate in and negotiate for a place in a community of practice, their identity in relation to the practice evolves (Wenger, 1998). Viewing a writing classroom as a community of practice where writing identity has the potential to develop is appropriate because writing is a social activity when it is taught as a process rather than as a product (Güneyli, 2016). In this study, as students engaged in a writing community of practice, their views of themselves as writers were supported through (a) ongoing writing interactions and (b) providing and receiving feedback on writing.
**Ongoing writing interactions.** Writing groups are found to be socially situated practices that reinforce participants’ self-assurance and academic identity formation (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Geurin et al., 2013; Hemmings, 2012; Lee & Boud, 2003). To be effective, writing groups should be perceived as safe spaces where the practices are clearly outlined and where students can find their voices through meaningful interactions with other members (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). Wenger (1998) said that these interactions do not have to all be positive and that shared practice can be defined by tension and conflict as well as harmony. It is the commitment to the practice and the dialogue and the space that makes it a community.

In this study, students wrote essays, reflections, and journal entries of different genres. They engaged in whole class discussions about writing with me and each other. They met in smaller peer groups to share their writing and to offer each other both praise and criticism. They blogged about what they had written. Pyrko et al., (2017) refers to these synergistic components of communities of practice as examples of *thinking together*, a term meant to explain the learning taking place in a community of practice. Students who participate in writing groups that have the characteristics of *thinking together* have been shown to have higher levels of academic writing confidence.

Anne, in the second focus group interview, described how the small group work positively impacted her view of herself as a writer. She said that “I do better in small group settings” because they made her more comfortable and gave her the opportunity to teach her peers things that she know or felt strongly about. Similarly, Regan—also in the second focus group interview—said that working with a small group of peers was both enjoyable and an experience that confirmed that her voice and her point of view could be
different from her peers and still be valid. She found value in seeing the different approaches her classmates’ took to the same writing task, did not feel intimidated by them. She said that could “add what they said and the things that they used to, like, my writing experience,” indicating that she was learning from what her peers did.

Ashton’s journal entry describing a peer review blogging exercise provided a good example of how interacting online also provided opportunities for thinking together. Similar to Regain, Ashton said that reading and evaluating others’ essays allowed her to “take into consideration what their stance on the topic was” and learn from it. For this blogging exercise, students posted their essays to the blog forum and were asked to comment on at least three of their classmates’ essays, giving students both feedback on their essays as well as their classmates’ essays to consider as writers. Here, Ashton felt both the feedback and other essays could help her improve her writing.

In her Question 2 reflection, Samira commented on one of our whole class discussions. In this instance, the day before the students were to draft an essay in a timed setting I displayed the prompt on the Clear Touch Panel at the front of the room and facilitated a group discussion about it, specifically talking about making a claim and using evidence to support it. Samira felt that the collaborative discussion aided her in writing a successful essay. She said that the discussion “aided in the thought process of the first draft, which helped speed up the process, which allowed me to add my own commentary.” In our course, our whole class discussions tended to be dynamic, with multiple voices contributing to the conversation. For the more reticent or less experienced students in the class, legitimate peripheral participation—the community of practice concept that suggests that novice learners benefit from close association to and potential
membership with a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)—suggests that learning can still take place during such conversations. Samira tended to hold back in class, but still found benefit in the community conversations.

In the second focus group interview Trudy captured the overall feeling of security that being in a safe community of practice brings when she said that the ongoing class conversations and sharing made it clear to her that “everyone is in the same boat.” This awareness helped to give her some confidence in the course because everyone was dealing with the same thing. Everyone being in the “same boat” brought Trudy comfort. This is an example of how writing communities allow for shared laughter and diffused tensions in what can be perceived as high-pressure stakes situations (Kensington-Miller & Carter, 2019; Thesen, 2014).

Anne echoed this sentiment. In the second focus group interview she made reference to reviewing her classmates’ portfolios and writing entries. Specifically, she enjoyed witnessing her classmates’ growth over time because “I have been with these people for this entire year and we have all been going through the same thing.” She described a sense of community through shared experiences for this entire year and that she benefitted from observing her classmates’ growth over time as exemplified by their portfolio entries.

**Providing and receiving feedback.** Writer identity development is supported both by receiving feedback from peers and by giving feedback to peers, as students feel empowered as writers by giving support to and receiving support from each other (Gilken & Johnson, 2021; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018; Cho & Cho, 2011). For the feedback process to be truly beneficial and to become an important element in building a writer’s
confidence, however, there should be a significant level of trust and familiarity among 
group members (Larcombe et al., 2007). Also, feedback should be specific about how to 
improve writing and it should be understood by the recipient to be perceived as helpful 
(Strijbos et al., 2010; Kollar & Fischer, 2010). Although it is not uncommon for members 
of writing groups to initially feel a lack of confidence in being able to provide meaningful 
feedback to peers (Lee & Boud, 2003), providing feedback over time has shown to have 
positive effects on writing (Huisman et al., 2018; Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016; 
Cuthbert et al., 2009). In this way, establishing the processes of receiving and providing 
feedback as the norm in safe writing spaces becomes a critical component of students 
seeing themselves as writers.

Students in this study generally found that by engaging in the peer review process 
that their writing improved and they felt more confident as writers. Regan, in her final 
reflection described how comments about her essay from her peers helped her move 
forward in her own writing:

I can’t remember what essay prompt we were going over, but we got into small 
groups and we each read each other’s essays and, like, my group rotated and we 
got to read everyone’s essays and then we each graded them according to the AP 
scale (rubric), and then like had little commentary, and so I had three different 
people read my essay, and then give me a score, and it helped me see like what 
other people thought of my writing and like if they could really understand it and 
if I was giving enough good examples to like get my point across, and that just 
really helped me see how other people read my writing and which areas on the AP 
rubric I could improve on.
David echoed Regan’s sentiments about the value of peer review in helping him improve his writing when he wrote in his final reflection that feedback from peers helped him effectively “develop an idea for a more concise and to-the-point introduction that would make my essay more effective.”

Peer comments on Charlotte’s essay reminded her of her audience and she appreciated both the positive and the constructive comments they gave her. In her final reflection Charlotte wrote that the peer comments on her work were helpful “often as the writer of my essays I am blind to my mistakes and what I think may sound fine others may think it’s confusing.” Ashton also found the positive and the constructive comments from her peers to be helpful. In her final reflection she stated that despite the responses to her work being generally “uplifting” that they “always taught me what improvements I could make in the future.” Although Ashton felt that she received enough constructive criticism from her peers to help her improve, some students are often concerned about social dynamics in a high school setting and fear harming relationships by providing criticism of their peers’ writing that could be considered harsh (Topping, 2009; Christianakis, 2010; Peterson, 2003). In this conversation from the second focus group interview, Regan and Anne discussed this concern and how it affected how they approached providing feedback to peers:

Regan: I definitely caught myself multiple times throughout the class like reading someone’s essay and be like “Oh, I would not write this essay” like I would change so many things about it, like it’s not well-written, or whatever, just like being super harsh in my mind but then I know I have to put a filter on, like to give feedback and I
would never really say everything I really wanted to say, because I
felt like if I said too much, then either they would like “Oh, she’s a
know-it-all, she thinks she’s so good at writing” you know—“She
wants to change everything on everyone’s blah, blah, blah, blah.”
Um, and I didn’t want to hurt their feelings or be mean or
whatever, and like sometime they would just like give you’re their
essay and they’d be like “Oh, I know it’s not that bad” like they
didn’t have that much time to write it or like “I didn’t really
understand it so I know it’s really bad” or like “I’m not a good
writer” and then you’d read it and you’d like low-key agree with
them, but then you’d have to be like “Oh, gosh no it was great” and
then like there’s really no point because it’s not helping anyone
and by putting a filter on about what you’re saying ‘cause it’s not
making them a better writer, but you also don’t want to be mean
and don’t want to be known as that person who says stuff like that.
So it’s like hard.

Me: Navigating writing and relationships…Yes, Anne?

Anne: Um, I also have that problem. I agree with Regan. I try to find a
way to politely disagree with what other people have written or
something and I had to deal with that a lot this year, because I’m
also in AP art class and we critique each other’s art works, so I was
having to go and be like “Oh, yea, this picture’s great, but also
probably don’t do that again” or something. And so I was trying to
find a way to apply that type of formatting to telling people about their essays and I could be like “Oh, yea.” I started out with complimenting them and then I say “Yea, maybe you shouldn’t have you know blah, blah, blah” and also you end with complementing them, and that way, you know, you make a compliment sandwich and it makes the slight insult a little easier to handle and I felt like um it was harder to get my point across whenever I was trying not to hurt everyone’s feelings…So, yea, the whole like not trying to insult people has been a very big challenge this year.

While the concern over offending peers may have caused Regan and Anne to hold back or to dilute their criticisms, their comments do show awareness of their participation in a community and awareness that the point of feedback is for one writer to help another writer. Communities are dynamic, and members of a community of practice will construct different social positions within the community as he or she moves to more mature ways of participating in the community (Brown, 2007). Anne’s “compliment sandwich” concept in particular suggested that she is trying to move to mature ways to constructively criticize other members of the community. Both Regan and Anne’s comments showed that they had reflected upon their positions within their writing community and how they could affect others. Most importantly, even if Regan and Anne held back on their criticism when providing feedback, they still engaged in the critical thinking processes of evaluating a peer’s work, considering how to respond to a peer, and responding to a peer—processes that benefit writers (Huisman et al., 2018; Philippakos &
MacArthur, 2016; Cuthbert et al., 2009). As stated earlier, Wenger (1998) posited that interactions in a writing community can be defined by tension and conflict as well as harmony. Regan and Anne’s comments `examples of attempts at conflict avoidance, but certainly describe instances of tension.

While Regan and Anne experienced tension in trying to find ways to deliver constructive criticism, other students experienced tension when they felt they did not receive enough constructive criticism. Trudy expressed this concern—attributing part of it to the online format of school at the onset of the pandemic—and experienced tension because of her classmates’ reluctance to offer usable constructive feedback:

So again this was kind of affected by us getting out of school, but for me, I need feedback on my writing or I just don’t know where I am. For example, like the Gandhi essay. Like I thought that essay was pretty decent, like deserving of like a 5 (out of 6) I guess—not to sound conceited, but like I thought it was like deserving of a 5 kind of when I wrote it I felt good about it. But then, looking at the feedback from you, I was like “Oh, so that’s where…” At first, okay, at first I saw the score and I was like “What?” And I mean, I think it was like a 4, but still, I saw it and I was like “Why? What’s the problem?” And then looking at what you wrote I was like “Oh, okay that makes sense. This is where I need to go.” But like, with other essays—and I know you don’t have time to look through all of them—like that’s just not possible—but like, just getting feedback, like specific feedback helps me, so like for the blog posts I felt like they were helpful, but at the same time nobody really wanted to put anything mean. Like when I read through my comments, they were all like—they were nice, and that was great, but
like for some of my essays there was like literally nothing that I could fix or that I thought I could fix because I didn’t have like any feedback. It was all like “Oh, it’s fine.” “It’s good.” “It’s great.” And I was like “Well, thanks, but there’s always room for improvement.

Trudy’s need for specific feedback created a sense of tension for her. In the same interview, however, Trudy also described the sense of community and collegiality she developed with her near-by seatmates:

Okay—so I don’t know how this was for the rest of y’all, but y’all I know I was in the back corner with all of the boys, and it was weird at first, but to be honest it made the class so much better because like every time like I was going through something or like we were doing something in class that I didn’t like or anything along those lines just sitting next to them (laughs), I was able to laugh, it took my mind off of it, it made it better, like just in general—even like one day we were doing an in-class essay and I was not ready for the essay at all—like I had stayed up the night before doing homework, I didn’t have my thesis ready, I was just feeling like crap, but then I came in and they were being doofuses, like just straight up silly and it made it better, it lightened my mood, and like the essay went better for me, just because it improved my mood. So I think being able to like talk to the people in class, being able to like choose our seats in the beginning of class just made it better because like anytime I was feeling down or upset about something specifically in the class, like I could just turn around—yea, I may have gotten made fun of but it made me laugh, so it just made everything better in my opinion.
When Trudy referred to “feeling down or upset about something specifically in the class,” the response she got from her nearby doofuses lightened her mood and “made everything better.”

Overall, the students in this study found that the processes involved in engaging in peer feedback—receiving feedback, giving feedback, and considering how to deliver feedback—helped them view themselves as writers in a writing community. However, as noted, when peer feedback vague or nonexistent, student writers experienced tension. The more high school students engage with peer feedback, the more likely they are to improve their learning and confidence related to writing, but the feedback should be concrete and specific (Wu & Schunn, 2021).

Therefore, in answering research question 3, this section has shown that students in this study indicated that working collaboratively with other student writers impacted how they see themselves as writers through engaging in (a) ongoing writing interactions and (b) providing and receiving feedback on writing.

**Implications**

This research has implications for me, classroom practitioners, and scholarly practitioners and researchers. Three types of implications are considered: (a) personal implications, (b) implications for developing writers, and (c) implications for future research.

**Personal Implications**

As a result of this study, I have learned several lessons that will help me optimize my effectiveness as an educator and enable me make informed decisions regarding the
teaching of writing. These lessons include (a) valuing process as well as product, (b) valuing the voices and perspectives of students, and (c) becoming a scholarly practitioner.

**Valuing process as well as product.** In an AP Language and Composition course, product of course matters. On the AP exam, students will be judged not on their processes of writing but on the products they submit within the required time frame. Product matters in this course. However, through this study I have also learned to truly value the processes of writing, of building community, and of learning. I believe that these processes offer students benefits which they will carry with them far into the future, even for those who come up short on their AP Language and Composition test scores.

Students engaged in many meaningful processes in this course, including the recursive and reiterative processes of writing (Gezmiş, 2020), the processes involved in reflecting (Cunningham et al., 2017; Cameron et al., 2009; Cathro et al., 2017), and the processes involved in giving and receiving feedback (Bader et al., 2019; Diab, 2011). The data supported that students valued these experiences and came to see them as essential to their learning.

As a teacher of writing, when I give my students time to write I want them to embrace the process approach—to reflect and brainstorm and draft and revise while drafting and step away and come back and review and revise—to recognize that writing is not static. Even writing a timed in-class essay is a process that moves through all of the stages of writing that is untimed, just in abbreviated form. I want my students to find joy in the process, even as they find it frustrating (Barnes, 2020). I also want my students to feel supported in their writing journeys, by me but also by the community of writers that we build in our classroom because the processes involved in creating and experiencing a
writing community foster belonging, engagement, and learning (Leekeenan & White, 2021; Payne, 2019). By valuing the processes as well as the all-important-product, I am able to move forward as a practitioner and use this knowledge to make informed decisions in my classroom.

**Valuing the voices and perspectives of students.** Learning to value the voices and perspectives of my students is a lesson that I have learned by engaging in this qualitative research project. The concept that students should be active agents in their own learning rather than passive recipients of facts and information may have seemed cutting edge at one time, but the constructivist concept that learning takes place through social activity now is an accepted view in education (Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1999; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). Students are now seen as essential stakeholders in their education and as such should have a voice in their educations (Cook-Sather, 2020). In fact, when students know that their voices are heard, they are much more likely to be engaged (Keys, 2019).

Data collection methods in this study placed me in a position to hear my students. Through two focus group interviews and numerous written reflections and journals collected as data (not to mention the daily conversations that were not included as data in this study), I was able to hear what my students had to say about instruction in my classroom and I was able to gain valuable insights that I would not have otherwise gained. I set out to design and conduct a qualitative study because a voice in my head repeated that *I want to tell a story*. I now know that quantitative data tells a story, too, but I wanted to tell an experiential story through student voices. And that is what I did. Their voices shaped the story that is told in this study, and they shaped me as a teacher and as a
researcher. I did not collect observational data as part of this study or pose interview or reflection questions that would yield data about it, but I would venture to say that the students in this study felt empowered by knowing that their voices and opinions mattered to me. As I move forward as a teacher I will be aware of the value of student voices and perspectives and of how being heard creates a sense of belonging.

**Becoming a scholarly practitioner.** Conducting a review of the literature related to the teaching and learning of writing, implementing ePortfolios in the classroom, and communities of practice provided opportunities to immerse myself in the dialogue of scholarship that has explored, defined, and invited me and other researchers to be a part of. At the core of this scholarship are the questions *how do students learn?* and *what pedagogical choices are best for students?* Designing and implementing my own study required me to build upon the prior knowledge base of others to inform my own innovation and analysis of the data I collected.

Unquestionably the most significant contribution to the development of my scholarly practice during the design and implementation of my study and in the writing of my dissertation was the process of discourse I had with Dr. William Morris, my dissertation chair. These interactions via regularly scheduled Microsoft Teams Meetings and via email challenged me, enlightened me, bolstered me, and at times comforted me. Any tension I experienced via these sessions were in confronting shortcomings in my design or in recognizing what was clear to me as a writer was not necessarily clear to my readers, but Dr. Morris would converse with me as a colleague and encourage me to problem-solve as a scholarly practitioner. Just as my students learned from interacting
with other, these scholarly conversations contributed greatly to my identity as an academic.

I have always used small groups for writing and for literature circles as a way to offer variety to my students, but to some degree the attempts were one-off strategies without an ongoing sense of building a reading or writing community. Similarly, I began implementing portfolios in my classes a few years ago when I had an inkling that some sort of tool that would give my students ownership over and a place to view their writing would be useful. These approaches were led mostly by instinct, experience, and some study, but not disciplined inquiry. Disciplined inquiry turned out to be the missing ingredient.

I am not alone here—the divide between research-based best practices and actual classroom practices has been noted by stakeholders (Boser & McDaniels, 2018). Policy makers and scholars have recommended that an effective approach to bridging the divide between scholarship and practice is action research (Mertler, 2017). Action research led me to a deep dive of the research literature of the areas in which my research questions were embedded. I discovered a wealth of information about how to pose research questions, design studies, apply theoretical frameworks, and how to engage in both qualitative and quantitative data analyses. I also learned more about the language of academic writing.

In my own research and writing, when I would hit a block or get *stuck*, as is not uncommon for some doctoral candidates at some point (Kiley, 2009), very often conducting a literature review in an area of interest would open things up for me. Research has shown that literature reviews help researchers make links between theories,
concepts, and their own work (Wisker, 2015). Engaging in action has been shown to develop a teacher’s critical thinking skills and to help him or her become a responsive problem solver in his or her own classroom (Messikh, 2020). This is certainly true for me. Action research has deepened my sensibilities as an educator and excited me about identifying questions and searching for answers that will benefit my students.

**Implications for Developing Writers**

This study suggests two major implications for developing writers in a high school advanced placement course. These include (a) implementing electronic portfolios and (b) cultivating a community of practice. To some degree, the data in this study has shown that both portfolios in an AP writing classroom and creating a community of practice help students at least manage their concerns about the perceived impediments to becoming successful writers (Research Question 1) in the course. The growth and identity students associated with portfolios (Research Question 2) and the collaborative nature of the community of practice (Research Question 3) directly touched upon students’ concerns about challenges associated with finding and using evidence to support claims. Finding joy in writing and becoming comfortable with timed writing may also be impacted by portfolios and COPs, as attitudinal changes associated with seeing oneself as a writer and the recognition that “everyone is in the same boat,” as Trudy said, seemed to potentially lessen students’ anxieties.

**Implementing Electronic Portfolios.** Utilizing portfolios in writing classrooms has shown to improve students’ reflective skills and encourages students to monitor their own learning and to take more responsibility (Kobra, 2018; Mak and Wong, 2018). A typical reflective entry for a portfolio is the writer’s consideration of: 1) the writing
process, 2) the goals and objectives of the course or program, and 3) the writer’s choices for inclusion in the portfolio (Reynolds & Davis, 2014). Lew (2011) defines self-reflection as:

the processes that a learner undergoes to look back on his past learning experiences and what he did to enable learning to occur (i.e., self-reflection on how learning took place), and the exploration of connections between the knowledge that was taught and the learner’s own ideas about them (i.e., self-reflection on what was learned” (p. 531).

Through this study I came to believe in the power of portfolios as multi-dimensional tools through which students could reflect on individual pieces of writing as well as upon their growth as writers over time.

Portfolios support identity development through the processes of selecting, gathering, reflecting upon, and critiquing one’s own work as instrumental in articulating aspects of one’s identity (Bennett et al., 2016). In this study, students had a choice component for each type of argumentative essay and were initially guided through the reflection process before undertaking it on their own. They also had to write a narrative on each page of their portfolio about the posted content so that their portfolios told a story and were tailored for viewing. The extensive narrative and reflective processes involved in maintaining portfolios help students cultivate their identities as “learners, citizens, and future professionals” (Schrand, Jones, & Hanson, 2018, p. 1).

Developing and maintaining portfolios helped the students in this study hone their reflection skills and gave them deeper insight into their writing selves. They expressed pride in their individual collections of work and indicated that the portfolio process
helped them to grow as writers. Their concepts of audience awareness were heightened
by having a showcase of their work to share.

Writing instruction at all levels could benefit from implementation of portfolio
practices. While the AP Language and Composition course does not currently utilize a
portfolio assessment method on a national level, using them in individual courses to
prepare students for the exam might be beneficial. By writing in multiple genres—even
those outside of the scope of the traditional Advanced Placement test—and through
multiple revisions, students could develop their own tone and voice while immersing
themselves in the electronic environments characteristic of today’s world (Boyd, 2010).
Helping students develop identities as writers has positive implications well beyond the
AP exam.

Cultivating a community of practice. Writing is at its core a social activity,
particularly in a writing group environment. Writing groups have been shown to be
effective in reinforcing participants’ self-assurance and academic identity formation
(Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Geurin et al., 2013; Hemmings, 2012; Lee & Boud, 2003). Lave
(1991) suggested that “the process of changing knowledgeable skill is subsumed in
processes of changing identity in and through membership in a community of
practitioners” (p. 64).

In the AP Language and Composition classes represented in this study, the classes
each constituted a writing community of practice. These communities each saw meaning
in their writerly pursuits, engaged in ongoing practice, developed a sense of community
and purpose both in whole-class and small-group settings, and began to take on the
language and identity of writers. These align with the characteristics of a community of
practice model that Wenger (1998) posited: a) meaning, b) practice, c) community, and d) identity. The findings and interpretations for this study suggest that this development of a classroom community of practice positively impacted how the students viewed themselves as writers.

Students in these high school communities of practice engaged in argumentative writing to prepare for the AP Language and Composition exam. This common goal provided an initial foundation for establishing meaning to write as a community. These high-stakes writing tasks can feel daunting and difficult to approach. Through routines of practice, sharing work, and creating safe spaces, these students found that rigorous tasks became more approachable.

Because communities of practice facilitate learning through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), all students have the potential to be positively impacted as writers. Membership in these communities promoted writer identity development for the participant students, which suggests that ELA instruction, including Advanced Placement writing courses, can benefit from cultivating communities of practice through the deliberate incorporation of student collaboration in authentic and engaging contexts.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings and interpretations of this study suggest three implications for future cycles for future research: (a) employing quantitative methods to assess writer identity development, (b) broadening the scope of the study to include various skill and/or grade levels, (c) designing a longitudinal study to gather data about long-term portfolio
development, and (d) designing research regarding anxiety’s effects on cognitive load and Advanced Placement writing.

**Employing quantitative methods to assess writer identity development.** It might prove interesting to gather quantitative data on how students perceive themselves as writers in a quantitative survey design or a mixed-method study. A survey design would provide a quantitative or numeric description of “trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 155), but unlike a qualitative study the researcher is able to generalize the results to a population. Utilizing instruments such as the Student Attitudes and Beliefs about Authorship Scale (SABAS) (Cheung et al., 2015) or the writer identity questions developed by Walsh (2018) and based on the SABAS, or other instruments measuring writing self-efficacy, would allow for researches to increase the number of participants, increasing the validity and reliability of the findings and their significance. In doing this I could potentially make the findings generalizable. Another quantitative approach would be to conduct a quantitative comparative study with a control group not using ePortfolios to truly see the impact, if any, on their beliefs about their writing selves.

**Broadening the scope of the study to include various skill and/or grade levels.** This study gathered data from a very specific group of students who were enrolled in an advanced placement writing class in a high school. It would be worthwhile to extend this exploration of communities of practice, portfolio implementation, and identity development to other grade levels and skill levels, including at-risk students.

For researchers interesting in best practices for advanced placement writing course, a comparison of AP Language and Composition and AP Literature and
Composition courses could yield information not only about age and/or grade level differences, but possibly any differences in how the content of the courses and exam preparation (nonfiction vs. fiction) affects how students see themselves as writers.

**Designing a longitudinal study to gather data about long-term portfolio development.** The goal of this study was to describe AP Language and Composition students’ experiences in a writing class and how they perceived themselves as writers. The nature of the course and the nature of this study put constraints on the data collection period that prevented gathering data on the long-term implications and effects of keeping a writing portfolio. It might prove interesting to conduct a study that views students’ experiences with portfolios over an extended period of time. Bryant et al. (2013) recommend “…the adoption of institution-wide ePortfolio systems that will follow students from their freshman year to graduation provide a new opportunity for researchers” (p. 95). Therefore, future research could employ a longitudinal design that follows participants and their use of ePortfolios through their high school careers.

**Designing research regarding anxiety’s effect on cognitive load and Advanced Placement writing.** Determining how anxiety affected performance on writing tasks was beyond the scope of this study, but it would be interesting and possibly valuable to design studies that look into the effect of anxiety on cognitive load and the resulting impact on AP writing. Such research could answer questions such as *How much does anxiety and worry impact cognitive load?* and *Does the anxiety impact a student’s ability to write clearly (do they have less processing power for their argument construction)*?
Limitations

As with any research study, this study is not without limitations. The qualitative action research approach itself is one limitation. Because the goal of action research is to affect change, it is inherently localized and embedded in real world contexts (Mertler, 2017; Mills, 2018). I made every effort to identify and monitor any biases that might appear during the study because of my dual roles as teacher and researcher, however it is possible that my presence may have biased participant responses or otherwise affected the study’s outcome. And, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2007) state, "since analysis ultimately rests with the thinking and choices of the researcher, qualitative studies in general are limited by researcher subjectivity" (p. 87).

Findings of this study are limited to the contexts of the eight AP Language and Composition students who volunteered to participate in this study. The small sample size is a limitation because it may not be representative of all the students enrolled in my AP Language and Composition courses during the 2019-2020 school year. The eight students participating were selected because they agreed to participate, their schedules allowed them to participate in the two focus group interviews during school hours. Typical of action research, small sample sizes prevent generalizability of the findings beyond the context of the study. As with any small purposively selected sample, the number of participants limits the use of the research study (Cresswell, 2014). Readers should use discretion when making assumptions beyond the context of this study.

Another limitation of this study is the timing of the data collection. My AP Language and Composition courses were year-long courses running from August to June. Data collection took place during second semester and ran for 14 weeks. This timing
limits this study in two ways. First, by the time data collection began students had been in
the course for a full semester. During this first semester we focused primarily on
literature units and AP Language and Composition multiple choice practice as I did not
want to immerse them in argumentative essay writing prior to the study. They did,
however, have some experience with essay writing first semester. Secondly, the COVID-
19 pandemic occurred during the spring of 2020 and our high school went virtual during
the last days of data collection. Because of this students did not draft the third type of AP
Language and Composition essay—the Q1 Synthesis Essay—during the data collection
period. We instead, focused on the two types of essays students began exploring prior to
the pandemic onset. If the data collection period had begun earlier or if it had not been
interrupted by the pandemic, results might have been different.
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APPENDIX A:

FIRST FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

RESEARCHER: I am glad that you are here. I really appreciate you taking the time to work on this project with me and also for taking the time to talk to me this afternoon. I have already explained the purpose of this study to you and you have assented to participate and your guardians have consented to your participation. But do you have any questions for me before we begin? [allow time for questions and answers] Okay. Good. Do you all know each other? Since I have two sections of AP Language and Composition I want to make sure. [makes introductions as necessary] I will be recording this conversation if that is alright with you and I will transcribe it when we are done. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and my interpretation of your comments before the study is completed. Do you have any questions about that? [allow time for questions and answers] Okay. If you are all ready, let’s get started…

1. Does writing take talent? What makes a good writer? How do you feel about your writing as you embark on this AP Lang journey?

   a) Possible Probes: Could you say more about that? How do you think that will affect how you approach the course?

2. What challenges are you anticipating in this course?
a) *Possible Probes:* Why is that a challenge for you? Do you anticipate it affecting your work in the course?

3. What do you know about AP Language and Composition? What do you feel prepared for? What do you feel underprepared for?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Tell me more about that. Why do you think that might be hard for you? What experiences do you have with that?

4. How do you feel about yourself when it comes to writing?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Why do you think you feel that way? Could you tell me more about that?

5. What challenges have you faced in past writing classes?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Why do you think you feel that way? Could you tell me more about that?

6. Do you keep records of your writing for school or personal use?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Why or why not? Could you tell me about it?

7. How do you feel about sharing your writing with others?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? What do you mean by that? When you say [.....], what are you actually saying?

8. What experiences in past English classes were most beneficial to you?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? Why was that important to you? Why does that matter?

9. What are your past experiences with collaborating with other students in writing classroom?
a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? What was significant about this to you?
APPENDIX B:

SECOND FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

RESEARCHER: I am glad that you are here for our second and final interview. I really appreciate you taking the time to work on this project with me and also for taking the time to talk to me this afternoon. I have already explained the purpose of this study to you and you have assented to participate and your guardians have consented to your participation. But do you have any questions for me as we conclude things? [allow time for questions and answers] Okay. Good. I will be recording this conversation if that is alright with you and I will transcribe it when we are done. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and my interpretation of your comments before the study is completed. Do you have any questions about that? [allow time for questions and answers] Okay. If you are all ready, let’s get started…

1. What does “being a writer” mean to you?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? What do you mean by that? Can you give me an example?

2. How do you feel about yourself as a writer?
   a) How do you feel about writing?
   b) Could you share some of your past experiences with writing? What role has it played in your life?
c) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? Have you always felt this way? What was significant about this to you?

3. How do you typically approach a writing assignment in school?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? Can you give me an example? How did others respond to that?

4. What about writing outside of school?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? What was significant about this for you?

5. How would you describe how you have changed as writers during this class?
   a) Which experiences in the class were most beneficial to you as a writer? Why?
   b) What could have helped you grow more as a writer in this class? Why?
   c) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? What was significant about this for you?

6. Which experiences in the class were most beneficial to you as writers?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? What was significant about this for you?

5. How did publishing your writing impact how you feel about yourself as a writer?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? Why does that matter?

7. How did viewing each other’s portfolios affect how you felt about yourself as writers?
   a) Possible Probes: Could you tell me more? What do you mean by that? When you say [.....], what are you actually saying?

8. How did you feel about others viewing your electronic portfolio?
a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? Can you give me an example? How did others respond to that?

9. What challenges did the portfolio present to you as a writer and how did you deal with them?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? When you say […..], what are you actually saying? How did you handle it when this happened?

10. What was most beneficial to you as a writer in constructing your portfolio and designing it?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? Why was that important to you? Why does that matter?

11. How has working with your classmates in a writing classroom impacted your view of yourself as a writer?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Could you tell me more? What was significant about this to you?

12. What experiences in working with others helped you most as a writer?
   a) *Possible Probes:* Can you give me an example? Can you tell me more about that? How did others respond to that?

13. What challenged you most as a writer while working with others in the class?
   a) *Possible Probes:* It sounds like you are saying […..]. Is that a fair summary? Can you give an example? How did you handle that?

14. What group experiences did you find challenging or unhelpful?
   a) *Possible Probes:* It sounds like you are saying […..]. Is that a fair summary? Can you give an example? How did you handle that?
APPENDIX C:

PARENTAL CONSENT FORMS

DATE

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am your child’s Advanced Placement Language and Composition teacher, Frank Harrison. I am also a doctoral candidate in the Educational Technology program at the University of South Carolina (USC), Department of Educational Studies under the direction of Dr. Michael M. Grant (michaelmgrant@sc.edu), which requires me to complete a research project. I will present the completed project at the end of my program at USC and may submit my research project for presentation at a professional conference or for publication in a professional journal.

My research project will explore how students engage in the writing process, specifically how they develop identities as writers. Students will write in multiple genres—creative and argumentative writing as well as personal and reflective writing. I will also guide students through the design and construction of electronic portfolios where they will be able to showcase their work.

For this study I will purposefully select four to eight students from the pool of students who express an interest in participating. Should your child be purposefully selected, your child will participate in two small focus group interviews lasting 30-45 minutes each. I will be asking students about the writing they produced in the class and their perceptions about their electronic portfolios. I will also collect student writing samples as data. Your child will not be named in any material presented or published, and all information will be kept absolutely confidential. All data will be stored securely during the study and destroyed upon completion.

Knowing how students feel about writing in a writing community is important in my efforts to help students reach their potential both academically and personally. In addition, knowing which practices support students’ writing engagement will help other teachers improve their work in the area of teaching writing.

I would appreciate your child’s participation in this research, but please know that participation is voluntary. Should your child choose to not participate, there will be no penalty. It will not affect your child’s grade or treatment in my class. Should your child choose to participate, you or your child may choose to opt out at any time. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at fharriso@richland2.org or (803) 331-4415.

In addition, questions about your or your child’s rights as a research subject may be directed to Lisa Johnson, Assistant Director, Office of Research Compliance, University of South Carolina,
Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Frank Harrison
AP Language and Composition Teacher
I understand that you are enrolled in a program that requires a research project that you will present at USC and which could be presented at a professional conference and/or published in a professional journal.

I understand that you are asking for my permission to include my child’s data in your research, that my choice to allow my child to participate is voluntary, that I or my child may opt out at any time during the study, and that no child will be named in any resulting presentation or publication.

Please choose one:

_____ I GIVE my permission for my child, ___________________________________,

   to participate in your research during the Spring 2020 semester.

_____ I DO NOT GIVE my permission for my child, ___________________________

   to participate in your research during the Spring 2020 semester.

Print Parent or Guardian’s Name: __________________________________________

Parent or Guardian’s Signature: __________________________________________

Date: ____________________________
January 10, 2020

Re: Harrison Research Request

Dr. Arnold,

I have approved Frank Harrison’s request to conduct research at examining how students in Advanced Placement classes develop identities as writers. He is aware that student participation is voluntary and that parents must provide written consent.

Sincerely,

Principal

cc: Frank Harrison

...A Tradition of Excellence...
May 28, 2019

Frank Harrison

Re: Research Request

Mr. Harrison,

The Research Committee has approved your application to conduct research in our district. You are authorized to conduct the requested research examining how students in an Advanced Placement writing course develop identities as writers. Parents must provide written consent for their child(ren) to participate in this research. Their participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. Please also be aware that each school principal has the final authority to approve research activities on their campus and is under no obligation to do so.

The committee reserves the right to terminate the study at any time if circumstances change or the members feel it is in the best interest of our students. You must complete all research activities in the district on or before December 31, 2019. If you need to conduct research activities beyond that date, you must ask the Research Committee for an extension. Finally, you must submit a copy of all final reports, dissertations, or publications based on this research to me upon completion of your study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Director of Accountability and Assessment
January 9, 2020

Frank Harrison

Re: Research Request

Mr. Harrison,

Your request for an extension to conduct research in [redacted] approved. You are authorized to continue conducting your research examining how students in an Advanced Placement writing course develop identities as writers. As before, parents must provide written consent for their child(ren) to participate in this research. Their participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. Please also be aware that each school principal has the final authority to approve research activities on their campus and is under no obligation to do so.

The committee reserves the right to terminate the study at any time if circumstances change or the members feel it is in the best interest of our students. You must complete all research activities in the district on or before June 1, 2020. If you need to conduct research activities beyond that date, you must ask the Research Committee for an extension. Finally, you must submit a copy of all final reports, dissertations, or publications based on this research to me upon completion of your study.

Sincerely,

Director of Accountability and Assessment

c:
APPENDIX F:

READING AND WRITING LIFE REFLECTION

My Reading & Writing Life One Pager

A One-Pager is typically a single-page response that shows your understanding of a piece of text you have read, be it a poem, novel, chapter of a book, excerpt or any other literature. It is a way of displaying your individual, unique understanding and response to your reading imaginatively and honestly. The purpose of a One-Pager is to own what you have read.

In this case, your One-Pager will display your understanding of your experiences with both reading and writing—as far back as early childhood through today if you wish. What have your experiences been with reading and writing—yours or someone else’s? What feelings do you have about reading and writing and can you connect those feelings, positive or negative, to your own experiences or to specific texts or teachers? What writers have influenced you? The purpose of this One-Pager will be to own your experiences (dearth or plenty) and feelings (positive and/or negative) about reading and writing.

The Rules

1) Include a “border” that reflects your general attitude or specific experiences about reading and writing. This can include words, pictures, symbols, or quotes.

2) Fill the paper to the edges with limited blank space. Use multiple images and styles of text to fill the page—be creative with both words and images. A minimum of three separate vignettes should be included.
3) Include lots of color--be neat, but fill the page!

4) Portrait or landscape is fine, but use 8½ x 11 paper. Your name goes on the back.

5) When you finish, your audience should be able to understand and relate to your writing life, experiences, and attitudes, however you see them.

[examples provided]
APPENDIX G:

ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING REFLECTION FORM

Writer’s Reflection

(5 sentence minimum for each statement/question. There are 6 statements/questions.)

Title of Published Piece: __________________________________________________

The reason I chose to publish this piece was:

____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________

My favorite part of this piece is:

____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________

What could you still improve if you wrote another draft?

____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
Describe your processes during the first draft, selection, revision, and publishing of this piece.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

GROWTH AS A WRITER:
At least one thing that I learned about good writing while revising this piece is:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

At least one thing that I learned about myself as a writer while writing and revising this piece is:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX H:

COLLEAGUE PORTFOLIO REVIEW REFLECTION FORM

My Top Seven

1. Take some time to review your colleagues’ portfolios--view at least a dozen or more. Don’t just look at your closest friends’ work--branch out!

2. Move through each page noticing what is posted and how it is presented.

3. Make a list of the top seven things that pleased you--only one per portfolio (in other words, you will be praising seven different portfolios). These are not rankings, so do not worry about order.

4. Create a Google Doc and title it “My Top Seven.” Numbering them 1 through 7 and for each identify the writer/colleague (creator of the portfolio), what you are praising, and why you are praising it.

5. Share and post to your portfolio under “Final Reflections” and to Google Classroom by Monday May 11.

Example:

My Top Seven

1) The way that Connell Waldron’s guides the reader through each page is commendable. I really felt like he went above and beyond and it made the whole portfolio feel more cohesive. The best example might be on his Top 10 Journal page. The way he described his decision making process had me in stitches. I could tell that he really took the process seriously.

2) Marianne Sheridan’s Final Reflections page was stellar. I could tell that she really took the writing process seriously and I really connected to that, because so
did I. The reflection was well written and insightful and I learned things about Marianne that I did not know. I really hope she reaches the goals that she set for herself and I am sure that she will. Excellent work Marianne.

3) Paul Sligo’s “About Me” page was very creative and well developed….etc.
APPENDIX I:

POST AP EXAM REFLECTION FORM

AP Exam Reflection

1) Think back to taking the AP Lang exam on 5/20/20. Describe how you felt during the essay writing experience. Avoid writing about technical issues--focus on the assigned task.

2) Describe how you felt after the essay writing experience on 5/20/20.

3) Other comments about the AP exam (here you can make references to technical issues if you wish):
APPENDIX J:

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PROMPTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, April 7</td>
<td>Describe yourself as a reader and a writer during this quarantine period. How, if at all, has limited social mobility impacted you as a reader and a writer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, March 30</td>
<td>What is your response to blogging (posting and replying) the 2012 Q3 Certainty vs Doubt essay? What did you learn about yourself as a writer from other people’s essays and other people’s comments (to you or to others)? What did you learn from your own comments to other writers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday, March 19</td>
<td>Give yourself a score for your 2013 Q3 Ownership essay and write a scoring commentary referencing all three sections of the AP rubric. In addition, if you were in class Thursday write a bit about how the small group scoring exercise enlightened or did not enlighten you about your own writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 28</td>
<td>After posting your blog on pages 111-180 of On Writing and reviewing comments on the posts, write a thoughtful reaction. What insights did you have--about King, yourself, or your classmates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday, February 27</td>
<td>In On Writing Stephen King makes several references to Strunk &amp; White’s The Elements of Style. Read Chapter 1 (posted in Classroom under the heading “Journal”) and write a thoughtful entry about the rules and your writing life. Try writing a short passage purposefully using 2 or 3 of the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 21</td>
<td>Make a personal connection to at least ONE thing in this section of King’s <em>On Writing</em> (pp. 55-107). Cite the reference and share a personal memory, desire, goal, relationship, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 14</td>
<td>After scoring your essay analyzing Gandhi’s rhetorical choices in his letter to Viceroy Lord Irwin, write a scoring commentary for your essay. What score do you give yourself in each area, and why? (Scan and post your essay to your portfolio under “Argumentative Essays” on a page titled “2019 Q2 Gandhi.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 14</td>
<td>Respond to King’s <em>On Writing</em> pgs. vi to 54. Make a personal connection to the text. What speaks to you and why? Be specific. Share a memory if you like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, February 10</td>
<td>Discuss your one-pager on your writing life. Explain it and/or discuss the process of writing it (reflecting, drafting, committing to ideas, etc.).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K:

FINAL REFLECTION ON PORTFOLIO/Writing

1) Read the passage.
2) Open a Google Doc and title it “Reflecting on My Writing.”
3) Use the six bulleted prompts in the passage as a checklist as you write your reflection. Did you address all six? Make sure that you do.
4) Share and post to your portfolio and to Google Classroom by Monday May 11.

Source:
Reflecting on Your Writing

An essential component of your portfolio is a statement that introduces and reflects on the work that's included in the portfolio. Such a statement should explain what's included and why you included the pieces you did, describe your writing process, assess what you've learned, reflect on your development as a writer, and perhaps establish goals for yourself.

Writing such a statement gives you the opportunity to take a good look at your writing and to evaluate it on your own terms. Maybe the essay on which you received your lowest grade was one where you experienced a breakthrough in your writing process. You may well want to discuss this breakthrough in your statement. Did you discover that freewriting worked better than outlining as a way to generate ideas? These are the kinds of insights you can include in your statement to demonstrate to your instructor that you have thought carefully about your writing and your writing process. Following are some prompts to help you think critically about both:

- **Review** each piece of writing in your portfolio. What are the strengths and the weaknesses? Which is your best piece? Explain why it is the best and what it demonstrates about what you've learned. Which would you say is the weakest—and how would you change it if you could?

- **Analyze** your writing process. Study any drafts, responses, and other materials you're including. How did any responses you received help you revise? Which of them helped the most? Were any not helpful?

- **Describe** the strategies you use to write. Which ones have been most helpful, and which have been less helpful? Which ones do you enjoy?

- **Reflect** on your work as an author. What does the writing in your portfolio show about you? What do you do well—and less well? What kinds of writing do you like the most? Is there any kind of writing that you struggle with or dislike—and if so, why?

- **Define** goals. What has your portfolio helped you understand about yourself as a writer? What strengths or weaknesses do you now see? Based on this analysis, what do you now want to work on?

This statement is usually written either as a letter or as an essay. You may or may not have an explicit **thesis**, but you need to make clear what your portfolio demonstrates about you as a writer. Remember that the statement itself demonstrates your writing ability: write it thoughtfully and carefully.
APPENDIX L:

2019 QUESTION 3 ESSAY PROMPT

2019 AP® ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Question 3

Suggested time — 40 minutes.

(This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

The term “overrated” is often used to diminish concepts, places, roles, etc. that the speaker believes do not deserve the prestige they commonly enjoy; for example, many writers have argued that success is overrated. A character in a novel by Anthony Burgess famously describes Rome as a “vastly overrated city,” and Queen Rania of Jordan herself has asserted that “[b]eing queen is overrated.”

Select a concept, place, role, etc. to which you believe that the term “overrated” should be applied. Then, write a well-developed essay in which you explain your judgment. Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

STOP

END OF EXAM
APPENDIX M:

2013 QUESTION 3 ESSAY PROMPT

2013 AP® ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Question 3

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

For centuries, prominent thinkers have pondered the relationship between ownership and the development of self (identity), ultimately asking the question, “What does it mean to own something?”

Plato argues that owning objects is detrimental to a person’s character. Aristotle claims that ownership of tangible goods helps to develop moral character. Twentieth-century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre proposes that ownership extends beyond objects to include intangible things as well. In Sartre’s view, becoming proficient in some skill and knowing something thoroughly means that we “own” it.

Think about the differing views of ownership. Then write an essay in which you explain your position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self. Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

STOP

END OF EXAM