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The Emotional Work of Revision

Forty years ago, Nancy Somers identified *dissonance* and the ways in which writers respond to incongruities between "intention and execution," as a core competency of revision. While still a challenge for student writers, dissonance now takes different forms, particularly for advanced student writers who embrace theories of revision but struggle to implement the practices. Unspoken, these experiences of dissonance become internalized as fear-based narratives and scripts that negatively impact student writers. Through in-process reflection, this study surfaces the ways in which students navigate the dissonance by adapting, or rescripting, their fear into a productive element of writing and revision. To better understand the interplay of strategy and struggle, we argue that revision pedagogies for advanced student writers must take the emotional work of revision into consideration.

Where does revision come from? Or, as I think about it now, what happens between the drafts? Something has to happen or else we are stuck doing mop and broom work, the janitorial work of polishing, cleaning, and fixing what is and always has been. What happens between drafts seems to be one of the great secrets of our profession.
—Nancy Sommers, "Between the Drafts"

We both served on a portfolio committee for Avery, an MA student in our program, and on a chilly Monday afternoon in November, she presented a draft of her prospectus, a study of the rhetoric of disclosure in personal essays. We both thought it was excellent work—well written and well reasoned, and a fine start to her culminating project. But we also knew something about the angst the polished writing of those pages concealed. Revising an early draft of the prospectus left Avery feeling "inadequate" and "very small." She felt stuck between "not feeling like I have the right to say what I'm saying, and also very strongly believing in what I'm saying." This anxiety surprised us. Avery is a bright, capable, and experienced writer, one who tutored students in revision at our university's writing center. How is it possible that the prospect of revising her prospectus would make her feel such dread about her authority and competence? When we talked to Avery about her writing process, she named several sources of anxiety (e.g., self-confidence, wanting to please her professors), but ultimately, she explained, "There's added pressure because I care a lot about it."

For experienced student writers who have invested time and emotional energy into their writing, revision can trigger a fear that they will be "exposed," creating emotional dissonance that often goes unrecognized and unspoken.

As writing teachers, we want our students to care about their writing. We want them to be motivated to return to their drafts and wrestle with big ideas through revision, and we tend to think of caring as an unequivocally good state. Caring, however, is complicated, in that it is intimately linked to feelings of vulnerability. Aspiring writers have a sense of hope, and that hope creates a precarious teetering between optimism and self-doubt. Because revision demands decisions, the work of revising a text can bring an influx of emotion linked to authority and expertise. Even when encouraged to experiment and explore through revision, students know that their actions need to make the writing better and stronger. For experienced student writers who have invested time and emotional energy into their writing, revision can trigger a fear that they will be "exposed," creating emotional dissonance that often goes unrecognized and unspoken.

When Nancy Sommers studied the revision processes of student writers and experienced writers in 1980, she placed *dissonance* at "the heart of revision" ("Revision" 385). Experienced writers, she explained, embrace the

dissonance, recognizing and resolving "incongruities between intention and execution" (385). Sommers uses dissonance to describe writers' recognition of a rhetorical gap between writer and audience, but she doesn't cast this experience in emotional terms. What some of our students experienced, however, was highly emotional, something that seems best explained by theories of *cognitive dissonance* that originate in the influential work of social psychologist Leon Festinger (see Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*). This work suggests that dissonance arises when people realize they possess two "psychologically inconsistent" beliefs, an internal contradiction that they then seek to reduce or eliminate particularly if it threatens their self-concept (Aronson 304). What these advanced students recognized was not just a gap between intention and execution—Sommers's rhetorical dissonance—but incongruity between their identity as writers who deeply believe in revision and their struggle with execution of revision strategies. For many of them, this led to uncomfortable emotions about their writerly identities, a tension between who they are and who they want to be as writers.

Without an outlet for the fear or strategies for coping with the anxiety, students can find themselves operating in survival mode, feeling as if they are always one draft away from being exposed as a fraud.

These experiences of cognitive dissonance can form into internal narratives and scripts, bringing a quiet but intense fear of failure into the writing processes of many advanced student writers. Without an outlet for the fear or strategies for coping with the anxiety, students can find themselves operating in survival mode, feeling as if they are always one draft away from being exposed as a fraud. We found, though, that some students do develop ways—often subconsciously—to adapt feelings of fear into a productive part of their writing processes. In fact, as theories of cognitive dissonance predict, students who are emotionally invested in their writing and writerly identities *must* find ways to repurpose their fear in order to move forward. Impressed by the ability of these advanced student writers to adapt and rebound from self-doubt in order to work through the emotional layers of dissonance, we set out to better understand how they rejigger their negative feelings about revision in ways that actually help them get the work done.

The Intersections of Revision and Emotion

Since Nancy Sommers's landmark contribution, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," appeared over forty years

ago, scholarship on revision has largely focused on defining revision and the effectiveness of certain revision practices in writing classrooms. Of particular interest to us, however, is the trajectory of research on revision by cognitivists like Flower and Hayes and Scardamalia and Bereiter who frame revision as problem solving that is subject to "breakdowns" (Fitzgerald 489) that are often revealed in talk-aloud protocols as students do the work. As Alice G. Brand famously pointed out, helpful as this work is in illuminating the cognitive processes involved in revision, it doesn't tell the whole story. While focusing on the *how* of writing, they leave out the *why*: motivation and affect. "The profession may concede that emotions motivate," she wrote. "But it also seems to believe that emotions have little to do with actual composing and less to do with revising" (436). She urged compositionists to understand research on writing and emotion because it's knowledge that might be particularly powerful for student writers: "Students should know what their emotions can and cannot do during writing. They should become familiar with the emotional as well as the intellectual cues that tell them they are ready to write, ready to stop, and ready to do a number of things in between" (441).

In the decades since Brand's call for new scholarship on writing and emotion, the work has proceeded on several fronts. For example, Lad Tobin looked at the emotional relationships between writing teachers and their students (*Writing Relationships)*, Susan McLeod examined the links between emotion and writers' motivation (*Notes on the Heart*), and Laura R. Micciche blended emotion, rhetorical theory, and praxis (*Doing Emotion*). The concept of *metanoic revision*, as described by Kelly A. Myers in a recent issue of this journal, invites writers to turn toward emotion, specifically feelings of regret, when they revise. But it was Nancy Welch's *Getting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction* that most explicitly addressed the role of emotion in revision. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Welch writes that a "feeling of trouble" is an "important cue for revision" (6). Noting that composition scholars typically argue that revision involves rewriting a draft to improve its coherence and unity, Welch argued that writers might work with—rather than cut—those "unsettled" and disorienting elements of a draft because those are often where unexpected meanings are most likely to emerge. According to Welch, the rhetorical dissonance that Sommers described as a prompt to revise is not a "problem to be corrected" but an invitation to "stray" (Sommers 385; Welch 26). In her view, revision often

involves seeing complexity and unresolved meanings as opportunities rather than problems.

Despite the many opportunities to do research at the intersections of revision and emotion, there are, as Lynn Driscoll and Roger Powell argue, significant obstacles, including the challenge of collecting data on feelings and appropriately categorizing them. They write that "internal characteristics are difficult to observe and directly measure . . . they are wide ranging and each deserving of careful examination . . . [and] the criteria for classifying a disposition are debatable." Also, on a personal level, "uncovering what's going on in our students' heads may, frankly, terrify us." To further complicate things, emotions are socially and situationally constructed, "experienced between people within a particular context," always residing both "*in* people and *in* culture" (Micciche 7–8). Approaching emotion as a personal, embodied experience that occurs on the individual level can mask the wider ways in which emotions operate to control perceptions of identity and silence behavior. Lynn Worsham reminds us that people—particularly people in subordinate positions—draw upon a vocabulary of emotion that "teaches an inability to adequately apprehend, name, and interpret, their affective lives" (223). Interpreting emotion as a "personal and private matter" "conceals the fact that emotions are prevailing forms of social life, that personal life always takes shape in social and cultural terms" (223). When students revise, they navigate that complicated personal-social "affective life," and although we want them to name the feelings they encounter, we cannot simply ask them to share their emotions, uncritically, as an individual and isolated phenomenon.

Despite the many challenges of doing research on emotion and writing, the need for continued conversation is obvious to any writer who has felt despondent and embarrassed about a failed draft, struggled with feelings of incompetence, or felt unmotivated to do work that just yesterday seemed exciting. And what writer hasn't felt these things, including established scholars who, Keith Hjortshoj reminds us, are acutely aware that writing is "challenging, complex, and unpredictable—usually messy and frustrating—throughout one's career" (499). He continues, "I teach a writing course for graduate students, whose collective anguish over the writing process is exceeded only, I suspect, by that of untenured professors" (499). In fact, rewriting this essay reminded us both about this anguish, especially in that emotionally charged territory between the drafts, when the investment of

time and the multitude of choices raise the stakes considerably. Why should it be any different for our students who hope to be writers? To develop a better understanding of the "complex and contradictory affective life" of revision, we engaged advanced writing students in conversation about their revision strategies and struggles. We wanted to learn what confronting *dissonance* and *restlessness* feel like for experienced student writers. Our graduate and advanced undergraduate students are often well versed in revision theory, but that doesn't mean that they are unaffected by the emotional experiences of dissonance. On the contrary, because of their commitments to their writerly identities, these students often feel things more profoundly. But how do they navigate those feelings?

To explore this question, we worked closely with seventeen student writers—upper-division undergraduate English majors in the Writing Emphasis program and graduate students enrolled in our MA in English and MFA in creative writing programs. Boise State University is a large public university in the Northwest. According to the spring 2017 data, there were 20,350 students enrolled: 16,672 undergraduates and 3,687 graduate students. The undergraduate student population is 73.7 percent white, 68.8 percent are from the state of Idaho, and almost 50 percent are first-generation college students. Undergraduates are, on average, 24.5 years old, and graduate students are 35.1 (Enrollment). Of the 17 students we worked with for this study, 6 were advanced undergraduates and 11 were graduate students, and the group aligned closely with the university demographics. Three of the students we interviewed identify as men and the other 14 identify as women; more women than men volunteered from our undergraduate class, and our graduate classes were, at the time, composed primarily of women.

We did not interview our current students; instead, after obtaining IRB approval, we visited each other's classes to invite students to participate in one-on-one conversations about the emotional work of revision. Names of participants were not disclosed until after our grades were submitted. There were two formal interviews, the first took place in the sixth week of the semester, and the second was several months later, as students were deeply engaged in revising their final portfolios. During these interviews, we looked at both past and current drafts with the students and named and reflected on patterns in their writing processes. At the time, Bruce was teaching two graduate-level seminars, and Kelly was teaching an upper-

division writing workshop, and though we did not formally interview our own students, we found that they were invested in our study and eager to talk about their revision practices—particularly the emotional work of revision—informally throughout the semester.

The Stories Between the Drafts

From the beginning of our study, we were aware that our focus on emotion, coupled with our interview-based approach, would take us into tricky territory. We knew that by asking students to share their emotional experiences we could find ourselves conducting therapy sessions—work that we are not trained to do. We also knew that, ethically, we could not require students to share their emotions, and we did not want the students to feel compelled to "confess" their feelings. Instead, we wanted to construct knowledge together, creating a space where students could gain a new awareness of their writing processes through the conversations. To do so, we combined strategies from Kathleen Blake Yancey's theory of "constructive reflection" and Kevin Roozen's work with "reflective interviewing." With its emphasis on understanding the larger story of student writing, constructive reflection framed our purpose for the conversations, and reflective interviewing shaped our process for designing and adapting our questions.

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A practice that has been part of the field since Yancey proposed it in the late 1990s, constructive reflection asks students to reflect on the usually implicit narratives that guide their performance as writers, stories that are constructed over time and between drafts. Or, as Yancey describes it, constructive reflection is "cumulative, taking place over several composing events" (14) and it "captures *between and among and outside and inside the drafts: the writer inventing him or herself*" (68, emphasis in original). Between the drafts, students engage in "story-making" work that involves "taking a given story, and [their] lived stories, and making them anew," asking questions such as "'who writes here?', 'is this the same writer as before?,' and 'how does this writer know?'" By reflecting on these questions, students can reveal, reclaim, and remake the stories that they are telling themselves about how they write (14). Constructive reflection has a "shaping effect" as it "contributes to the development of a writer's identity, based in the multiple

texts composed by the writer, in the multiple kinds of texts composed by the writer, and the multiple contexts those texts have participated in" (14). When students create multiple texts and kinds of texts across contexts, they are likely to encounter a range of emotions, and we wondered: do those emotions, over time and between the drafts, also have a shaping effect on writerly identities? Instead of envisioning emotion as fleeting feelings that surface and fade during writing, do emotions build into larger narratives that might not surface in reflection assignments but assert power over students' perceptions of their writing practices and potential?

To uncover these narratives in a collaborative and ethical way, we adopted a reflective interviewing approach that emphasized inquiry, discovery, and understanding. As described by Kevin Roozen, reflective interviewing offers "a methodological approach that creates a discursive space in which writers can both develop an understanding of themselves as writers and the wealth of literate activities they are engaged in and communicate that understanding to themselves and others" (251). In our approach, we were particularly interested in how students understand and communicate the role of emotion in their writerly identities, and whether or not emotion factors in as a "literate activity." Importantly, though, we were not looking for them to produce a clear and unified vision of emotion in their writing; instead, we wanted to engage in an invention process. As Susan C. Jarratt et al. remind us, "The student writer does not merely bear a pedagogical memory available for recall but creates it in the presence of an addressee" (50). Roozen describes this "creation" as a form of invention in reflective interviewing: "an epistemic process through which writers generate and communicate knowledge of their writing and how they have invented, and continue to invent, themselves as literate persons in the world" (253). Like Roozen, we crafted questions that would shift the emphasis away from "knowledge already made" and toward "knowledge in the making" (265). To facilitate this, we invited students to both tell us stories about their past approaches to revision (e.g., How have you typically approached the process?) and stories about their work in progress, drafts that they were revising contemporaneously with our interviews.

Throughout our interviews, we listened for opportunities to go "off script" in order to explore specific moments and emotions in more depth. For example, when Joan, an MFA student, described her frustration at realizing that her novel is only about half done ("I thought I was closer . . .

it feels impossible"), we slowed down to build understanding, together, of the disconnect she was experiencing. We asked follow-up questions such as, "Can you describe how you came to the realization?" "How do you want it to look and feel when you return to your writing?" "What's getting in the way?" Through the conversation, Joan started to question the story she had been telling herself: "I don't know if that's true. I can hear myself making excuses right now." She then started to move toward a different story:

> Ultimately I think it comes down to a perfectionist streak of having to realize again and again that [the draft is] so far from being what I want it to be. Of course, my logical mind says *it always will be work, get over it.* But then there's ME sitting there thinking—*but nooooo, I want it to be better.* It's always that struggle with imperfection. I think that's why I can't fully let myself make big, messy things first.

By first naming the frustration ("I thought I was closer") and then pausing to understand the roots of that frustration, Joan was able to articulate the dissonance in her writing process—the tension between her "perfectionist streak" and her desire to allow drafts to be "big, messy things."

Through this process of building knowledge with the students we interviewed, we evoked essentially two narrators, one who spoke for a historical self—a then-narrator, if you will—and one who spoke for the writer who sat before us—a now-narrator. By putting both narrators in conversation with each other, we produced stories that capture writers-in-the-making as a way to better understand the challenges that graduate and advanced undergraduate student writers face when they revise.

(Re)Discovering Dissonance

When Nancy Sommers's benchmark essay, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," was published in 1980, she observed that few students even used the words *revision* or *rewriting*. Instead, they described the behaviors they associate with the practice—"scratching out and do over again," or "reviewing," "redoing," and "marking out"—all terms that transform rewriting into a "rewording activity" (381). When faced with the task of revision, the inexperienced writers in Sommers's essay follow a script in which the drama, if any, is merely in wordplay and the satisfaction of cutting, adding, replacing, or rearranging so that a draft "sounds right." As actors in this story, the students cast themselves as hav-

ing very limited power, unable or unwilling to unsettle a draft in a way that might lead to new ways of seeing. After decades of emphasizing revision in writing instruction, we initially wondered: *do students now see it any differently*? We found that students do in fact see revision differently, but their theoretical understanding does not ensure that they feel capable or confident in executing the work of revision. Advanced writing students, in particular, recognize the rhetorical dissonance between intention and execution, particularly when they are talking about a particular draft. But they also feel the cognitive dissonance that arises from a larger disconnect between theory and practice, especially when it threatens their self-concept as writers.

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All of the students we interviewed, graduate and undergraduate, told us that they value revision—at least in principle. Dave, a graduating senior who works in the Writing Center, told us that, for him, writing is "all about revision . . . our perspectives change." Alyssa, also a graduating senior, said that "at some point you have to recognize the power of revision, otherwise you're not going to get anywhere." Steven, a first year MA student, talked about the necessity of "complications" when rewriting his work: "I don't think I really get to that point until I get a complication of sorts, until I run across an idea that shifts my research or come across something or someone who is like 'This is another way to look at it. Have you thought about this?'" Erica, a student in the last year of the MFA program, told us that revision involves "setting aside preconceived notions" and "revising your thought process," one that could be rich with discovery.

This commitment to the act of revision was unsurprising since the students in our study—unlike those in Sommers's work—were writing majors and graduate students who had taken several writing courses in a writing program that encourages revision. What *was* surprising was that while the students we interviewed could talk in sophisticated ways about the importance of revision, they reported that they were rarely *taught* revision strategies and felt unprepared for the actual work of revision. "I made it through my whole bachelor's degree writing one draft, turning it in, and getting an 'A' or 'B,'" one graduate student told us who was finishing her MA

in English. Mattie, a junior, said that "no one really shows you the process" of revising work, and that as a result the idea of revision triggers "a lot of bad feelings" among students. Allen, a graduating senior, claimed that the upper-division nonfiction class he was currently enrolled in was "the first time in a class that we went over strategies of how to revise." These were surprising things to hear, especially from our undergraduates, who at least received instruction on revision in their first-year writing courses at our institution. None mentioned it.[1]

The students we interviewed understand "writing as discovery—a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new"; they know that "good writing disturbs: it creates dissonance"; and they see "the possibility of revision" (Sommers, "Revision" 387), but many of them feel ill-equipped for the actual work of global revision (i.e., focusing on "the whole" versus "the parts"). Like Sommers, we heard a rhetorical dissonance between intention and execution, but with an important variation: theoretically, students understand revision in sophisticated ways, but they struggle to translate the theory into practice, and that struggle creates an undercurrent of negative emotion. The graduate students, in particular, associated surprisingly negative feelings with the prospect or process of revision. Avery described revision of her academic work as "stressful" and "painful." Jayne said when revising she often felt "frustrated" and "overwhelmed." Joan described revision as "prolonged discomfort" and told us that she often felt "tension in my body when I go to revise something." Sherry felt "vulnerable" when faced with a revision and found it "painful," especially when she sensed that she was "forcing it" in a draft. For Addie, revision is "scary" and "horrifying." All of these emotions, we found, circle back to the core feeling of fear.

"What If I've Been Bad at This All Along?"

For many advanced writing students, the tension between theory and practice leads to a fear that they will be exposed in some way. They know that "real writers" engage in extensive revision, and that puts a pressure on their work that extends beyond the final product and into their sense of identity as writers. Dave, the graduating senior who works in the Writing Center, describes himself as "comfortable with revision as a process," but then he explains, "I tend to spend a lot of time trying to navigate the best move for my next revision, feeling uncertain about it all the while, rather than just jumping into the act of revising." He feels comfortable with the

process, in theory, but in the actual work of revision he feels "uncertain about it all the while" and stalls with each "move." When we asked why, he explained that the anxiety, in part, comes from sharing his revised drafts with others. For him, revision sparks "the inevitable experience of feeling vulnerable due to sharing unfinished and unrefined work." Asking students to share their drafts has become commonplace in revision pedagogy; however, Matthew Heard emphasizes the "emotional and bodily dimensions of sharing," explaining that for some students, like Dave, the experience of sharing "forces writers to expose their personal ideas and feelings to others." For Dave, this exposure creates dissonance between his intellectual understanding of revision theory and the emotional experience of sharing his unfinished work.

While some feelings of vulnerability would seem inevitable when sharing work with others, the anxiety it triggers can cause even advanced student writers to fundamentally question their competence. Susan, a graduate student, told us revision can prompt her to spiral into a paroxysm of self-doubt: *"Do I know enough? Will this turn out to say what I'm attempting to communicate? What if I never get 'in a groove'? What if I don't meet my deadline? What if I've suddenly lost the ability to write and this is the assignment I'll find out about it during? What if I realize I've been bad at this all along?"* The dissonance that Dave and Susan feel seems to arise largely from an internal struggle between a principle they believe in and a practice that makes them feel vulnerable, an internal conflict that Aronson argues typically causes the most cognitive dissonance because it involves behavior that "violates our self-concept" (305): *I'm supposed to be writer, so why am I so bad at this?* Dissonance theory suggests that people who feel this kind of discomfort have to somehow address this conflict "to preserve a competent sense of self," and so we heard our students not only share their angst but try to see their way out of it.

It's not surprising that fear and vulnerability haunt these high-achieving students when they occupy that unsettling space between the drafts. After all, they have internalized the belief that revision is important, a belief that is also integrated into their sense of themselves as writers. To risk a "failed revision" is to threaten this emerging identity.

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that is also integrated into their sense of themselves as writers. To risk a "failed revision" is to threaten this emerging identity. Under such conditions, failure avoidance—a viable choice for less motivated writers—is not an option for these students, so they must soldier on. They develop coping mechanisms that attempt to minimize the dissonance. For example, Aidan, a second-year graduate student, who also linked revision to anxiety and vulnerability, first described a progression from anticipation to anxiety. Early in her drafting process, she feels hopeful and excited, focused on the potential. But then, once the draft has taken shape, she feels "a shift into feelings of anxiety," and she starts to worry: "will the polished artifact live up to the idea or expectation I've placed on it or that perhaps is expected of me by an instructor?" But Aidan was also quick to put a positive spin on her anxiety, stating, "This anxiousness is a healthy form that looks forward to the outcome, no matter what the outcome [. . .] there's always room for more revision, right?"

Some students, like Macy, another second-year graduate student, were also able to name the anxieties of revision and then point to what sounded like coping mechanisms. Macy initially described revision as "exhilarating" work: "It's super satisfying to be able to see the overall shape of a piece of writing and feel really proud of it." But then she hinted at another category: the "failed revision." After describing the exhilaration, she shifted her thoughts toward the less satisfying experiences:

> I'm also trying to think about what it feels like when revision doesn't go well, but I've actually just realized that I categorize the failed revision as another part of the writing process. For whatever reason, revision for me is only what works. I wonder if this is a coping mechanism I created to get over writing anxiety or less positive feelings after receiving feedback.

When she thinks about revision, Macy only counts the "successes" and struggles to categorize—or even recognize—what feel like failed attempts. When we followed up with Macy to learn more about her tendency to compartmentalize "failed revisions," she explained:

> I think it's just too hard to deal with a failed revision [. . .] that's the point when everything is supposed to come together, and if it doesn't work out, I think I'm too reminded of all the times when I had really bad anxiety about my writing and had negative experiences getting feedback. That anxiety is gone now and I'm also now really comfortable getting feedback, but I guess

> I'm still in a frame of mind where I categorize revision exclusively as the stuff that works out well. I think I'm not quite confident enough yet as a writer to accept that revision can also fail and be really messy.

Macy categorizes revision "exclusively as the stuff that works out well" in order to protect herself from the "really bad anxiety" she once felt. By isolating the category of "failed revision," she can separate out the anxieties of revision and move forward with the work.

Faced with the anxiety triggered by the fear of failure, other students resort to "defensive pessimism," a self-protective move that can help them deal with negative emotions by "strategically" lowering their expectations (Norem and Cantor 1209). For example, Jayne admitted to telling her graduate adviser that she "hated" her draft, only to hear from the adviser that it wasn't bad at all, which then made her feel better about tackling the revision. The strategy is simple: set unrealistically low expectations about one's performance, and when they don't become "self-fulfilling prophecies," the learner feels successful. Julie K. Norem and Nancy Cantor suggest that such a strategy helps people "use their anxiety in productive ways, rather than being debilitated by it" (1216).

The more we talked with our students about the emotional experiences of revision, the more evidence we began to see of their resilience in the face of their fears that they weren't up to the task.

The more we talked with our students about the emotional experiences of revision, the more evidence we began to see of their resilience in the face of their fears that they weren't up to the task. We learned that many of our students have developed impressive and wide-ranging coping mechanisms, such as Macy and Jayne, to keep moving with or despite their feelings of fear and vulnerability. We found that our graduate students in particular have developed profound ways to keep company with the fear that surfaces in their writing; many of them, in fact, work in conversation, even collaboration, with emotions such as fear, shame, and regret. We heard students share two competing narratives of themselves in relation to revision. The first was historical—*this is how I've often approached revising my work and how that felt*. The second narrative was new, one that emerged for them (and for us) in the interview itself, as students strategically reflected on their fears and struggles with revision and how they were coping with them at that moment while revising papers and essays for our classes. In a

sense, we witnessed them rewriting the pessimistic scripts that had guided their thinking about their competence as writers who revise, transforming the storyline in ways that made their fear and anxiety enabling rather than disabling. Of all these stories, Sherry's transformation of "cringe-worthy" writing from an expression of self-criticism into a productive revision strategy struck us as especially compelling and instructive.

Cringe-Worthy Writing

Sherry, a nontraditional student who returned to college after raising her children, completed both her BA and MA degrees in our English department. We interviewed her during the final year of her MA program. Sherry developed a strong interest in women's rhetorics as an undergraduate, a subject she focused on as an MA student, and now continues to pursue as a doctoral student at another university. With her emphasis on archival research and her passion for feminist rhetorics, Sherry had a particularly well-developed writerly identity at the time of our interviews. Even though she was older than the other students in the program and further along in her scholarly development, we found that she constantly questioned her ability to make valuable contributions through her writing. The tension between her emotional investment and insecurity created "cringe" feelings that would emerge at key moments in her writing process. When Sherry revises a piece, she reads for "cringe moments," those moments that feel "just wrong," and then she revises accordingly. The emotional punch of a "cringe moment" highlights issues and opportunities in her writing, pointing her to the areas that need more work. "That's my gauge—seriously—when I'm revising: if I can read it again and not cringe. . . . It's like my cringe-o-meter."

We first heard Sherry use the word *cringe* when she was describing an early draft of a piece for her MA portfolio. She kept saying "It was so bad . . . oh it was just bad." The project she was describing sounded really interesting, so we asked her why the draft felt *so bad.* Searching for a word to describe the negative feeling, she landed on *cringe*, an emotional response linked to what she called "cringe moments" in her writing. She explains: "Cringe moments are just like ewww—it's bad. It's overwritten or forced. [. . .] If it's something like the structure of it, that's one thing. That's not cringe worthy. It's the idea, the logic—that's more cringe-worthy. It's when I know something's there, but I can't reach it, so I try to fake it, and I know it's not working." When she encounters those moments in her drafts, her

immediate thought or fear is "*I can't do this*," and the emotional experience moves quickly from frustration to self-deprecation. She explains, "It starts out as just the frustration, but it's more immediately "oh, *I'm* bad" and "*I* can't do this." Once she starts to question her worth, her thoughts slide into what she described as a "very negative spiral" where she tells herself "*My faking isn't working. They're going to catch me. This is it: I've hit the wall. They're going to find out I can't do this.*"

This spiral, and the larger fear of being exposed, surfaced in many of our conversations; what surprised us, though, was Sherry's ability not only to cope with her fear but to channel the emotion into a productive element of her writing process. While the cringe feeling remains uncomfortable, she realized through our interviews that she has developed strategies for writing with and through the emotion: "I used to hit a roadblock and just be paralyzed and look at the same sentence or the same paragraph and if I couldn't transition to the next idea, I would just be frozen for the longest time." But now, by "accepting a little bit of ugliness and a little bit of cringe-worthy writing" she is able to "bridge to the next point." As Sherry reflected on her process, she realized that cringe moments have started to serve as signals that guide her revision. Encountering cringe moments in her writing still feels like a gut punch, and those moments still fill her with fear; however, she has started to use that emotion as a source of information. By using her cringe feelings in this way, Sherry is tapping into what A. Abby Knoblauch would describe as an embodied knowledge, "a bodily knowledge that there [is] something worth exploring"—something to return to in her writing (55). Embodied knowledge, Knoblauch explains, "often begins with bodily response—or what we might call 'gut reactions. . . . a trigger for meaning making'" (54). Cringe moments, for Sherry, are often a sign that she is holding back in some way, that she needs to develop her thinking in more detail. The cringe tends to be uncomfortable, because it is signaling that there is more work to be done, and the work is going to stretch her in a new way.

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To move into uncomfortable realms in the revision process, Sherry knows that she needs to expand her perspective by inviting a trusted reader

into the work. In a sense, then, her cringe feelings sound an alarm telling her it is time to collaborate. However, cringe feelings are directly linked to shame, and that makes it difficult for her to share writing that feels "ugly." To cope with the shame, she acknowledges it directly, highlighting cringe moments for her reader. She explains that cringe-worthy writing is "okay [to share] as long as I highlight it in yellow, so [my reader] would know that it is a cringe moment," so that "[they] know that I know that it isn't good." Sherry was able to share "ugly" writing and receive much-needed feedback, as long as she acknowledged its shortcomings through highlighting, which seemed to serve as a form of confession that made it okay to invite readers into her cringe-worthy writing.

Fascinated by her revision process and the idea of "cringe," we asked Sherry to take us through the evolution of a specific essay so that we could see cringe-worthy writing or revision in action. As an undergraduate, Sherry discovered a collection of letters from the 1920s, all of which were written by women. Before she had a research question or a methodology, her project began with a love of the materials. She loved hearing the stories of women who were cultivating new forms of agency through their garden spaces, and the more attached she felt to the letters, the more pressure she felt to do justice to these important artifacts. With that pressure came the fear that she did not have the authority or expertise required for such an endeavor. She described this particular essay as "the most painful to revise," full of cringe moments, and one that had completely transformed during the revision process.

To cope with her perceived lack of authority, the first draft of her essay relied heavily on a published academic article that offered a clear theoretical framework. The article's framework resonated with Sherry's analysis of the letters, and since it came from published authors, she felt it gave her the authority she needed to make an argument. Her first draft focused almost entirely on the published article, with her ideas sprinkled in. The approach felt safe. She thought, "*they're published; they know what they're doing*." Looking back, she described that first draft as "trying to piece my ideas into their framework . . . trying to force it." Using the existing framework served as a stepping stone, allowing her to move beyond her initial fear and submit a full draft; however, "forcing it" triggered her cringe response—it just felt wrong.

By tuning into her cringe feelings, she was able to see where and

how she was silencing and subordinating her ideas. Moving forward, she pinpointed the insights that were buried underneath the authority of the published article and their existing framework. At this point, her faculty mentor played a key role by circling all of the places where Sherry's voice and argument were starting to surface. As she looked at the circled content, Sherry could see concrete evidence that she had something to contribute, but, she explained, "I still didn't have the confidence to run with it." When she was borrowing a framework, she could see and trust the argument, but when she had to build her own contribution, she just couldn't see the big picture.

As a MA student finishing her portfolio and preparing to transition into her PhD program, she had to face the dissonance; her writerly identity depended on it. She could see evidence of her argument in the draft, but she was still gripped by the fear that she was not yet worthy of making a scholarly contribution. When advanced writers such as Sherry reach this kind of crossroad moment, they have no choice but to find a way forward. A novice writer might surrender at this point, but for a student such as Sherry, who has an emotional investment in her writerly identity, she must take action. As a next step, she decided to tape each page of her essay onto her hallway wall, interspersed with blank pages for notes. Walking up and down the hallway, she highlighted the moments where she used the idea of *cultivation* (i.e., her scholarly contribution). She then cut out all of the highlighted excerpts and taped them to the other side of the hallway. Through this process, she was able to take slow and deliberate steps—both physically and psychologically—moving away from the security of the existing framework and toward claiming her own authority. The process provided practical help in organizing her argument, but it was also an emotional process of convincing herself, one highlighted excerpt at a time, that she did in fact have something to say.

Reflecting on the evolution of her revision process, Sherry identified two layers of cringe. In her first draft of the essay, cringe surfaced as an "embodied knowledge," signaling that she was "faking it" and censoring her ideas and vision. Then, as her argument developed, cringe took shape as a fear response. The more she started to claim her authority and assert her argument, her personal investment in the project increased. Initially, she felt emotionally attached to the letters, but as her argument evolved, she became connected to the project on the level of her *ethos* and identity. The

cringe feelings in the later drafts were linked to feelings of vulnerability; by raising her voice, she had become newly visible and exposed. She described the revisions as "much more intimate and meaningful and harder—much harder emotionally." Now, as a PhD student, Sherry continues to develop ways to work with and through cringe feelings, facing the dissonance that surfaces when her writerly goals and identity feel threatened.

Rewriting the Scripts

Our conversations provided a glimpse into ways in which our students are actively constructing and deconstructing emotional scripts as they write. Though we were surprised by the intensity of the negative emotions students associated with revision, the more compelling discovery was in the way that some of the students actively—though often invisibly—revise and repurpose those negative emotions in order to move forward. More than learning to control or stifle the negative emotion, many advanced student writers find ways to rewrite the emotion as something that serves rather than threatens their writerly identities. In these rewrites, "cringe" transforms from shorthand for shame to a signal to collaborate, "shoulds" shift to "coulds," and "complications" aren't threats but invitations to think more deeply.

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Moving forward, we see the potential to develop the emotional work of revision in two main areas. First, inviting students to analyze and share the emotional scripts that guide their work, as we did in our interviews, may enhance transfer. Driscoll and Powell argue that in theories of transfer, "research into the personal, internally held characteristics that students bring into learning situations—including their emotions—is much less defined," leading to a gap "in the research on the role of emotions and emotional dispositions in long-term writing development and writing transfer." Over a five-year period, they looked at occurrences of emotional states, traits, and dispositions in student writing in order to "explore how these emotions impact students' ability to transfer learning across college writing contexts while influencing their writerly development." Their study revealed that both generative and disruptive emotions have an impact on transfer and

writerly development; so much so, in fact, they claim that "emotions are a critical piece of the transfer puzzle that neatly fits into other established pieces (dispositions, metacognition, writing knowledge)."

One way that emotions might fit into the "transfer puzzle" is that they can cue learners to familiar situations. Much cited work by David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon on the relationship between metacognition and "high road" transfer suggests that there are three cognitive processes at work: learners must "detect," "elect," and "connect" (252); in other words, they must pick up on cues that signal similarities between one learning situation and another, must be motivated to actively think about those similarities, and must "find a relevant relationship" between those situations. Together, these processes could help writing students activate appropriate rhetorical, writing process, genre, and domain knowledge. Might emotion be a powerful cue that would prompt learners to call on relevant knowledges in a new learning situation, especially if those learners have been encouraged to recognize and name the feelings that typically arise when faced with a challenging task?

In addition to the implications for transfer, the fears that our students shared alerted us to gaps in revision pedagogy for graduate and advanced undergraduate students. In first-year writing and introductory writing courses, we teach the larger concept of global revision and offer specific strategies and support through peer review activities and portfolios assignments. In doing so, we are often making a case for the power and purpose of global revision, combatting the notion that revision equates to editing or correction. When students reach upper-division courses and graduate programs, they are convinced of the importance of revision. They know that revision is an organic and ongoing process, not just a final step, but they need further instruction and support in developing their revision processes. For example, in a course focused on revision we are currently developing for our undergraduate program, students will spend considerable time exploring motives for revision. It is not enough to simply declare that revision is an essential part of the process. Students should experience revision as an act of discovery, one that not only clarifies meanings but can shift them profoundly. We can dramatize this by encouraging experiments with deep revision such as Toby Fulwiler's "provocative revision" or Wendy Bishop's "radical revision," but we've also recently designed assignments on "re-genre," where students take a written assignment and repurpose it in a

multimodal genre for a new audience. It's a shift that nearly always requires students to fundamentally reimagine their subjects and their reasons for writing about them.

Advanced writers, in particular, might also examine the emotional motives behind revision, beginning with the concept of dissonance. Traditionally, we have seen dissonance as a helpful signal that revision is needed, one that, as Sommers put it, alerts writers to a gap between "intention and execution." But as our study suggests, the cognitive dissonance that writers feel may be much more profound and threatening; these are the unspoken layers of dissonance that are rooted in fear: *Am I competent enough to do this? If not, am I who I think I am—a good writer?* Or as Susan lamented, *"What if I realize I've been bad at this all along?"* When this anxiety is unrecognized and unacknowledged, the prospect of revision can be, as our students put it, "horrifying," "scary," and "stressful." But when we invite students to talk and write about this dissonance, we normalize the feelings, establish them as a common narrative, and make that narrative subject to revision. In this way, Sherry turned the feeling of "cringe" into a "cringe-o-meter," a device that leads her back to the draft with hope instead of fear.

From novices in first-year writing classes to experts at the height of their careers, all writers navigate feelings of anxiety. We do our students a disservice when we ignore the existence and persistence of these feelings.

What we can teach, then, is two kinds of revision. The first, which we do not teach enough in upper-division courses, involves the many strategies for revising drafts—ways to rethink an idea, restructure and redesign the composition, and clarify meaning. The second kind of revision we might teach is, as Donald M. Murray put it, how to "re-write ourselves" (228), providing students with the opportunities to revise the internal and often emotional scripts that govern the act of revision itself.

Reflection-in-Process

From novices in first-year writing classes to experts at the height of their careers, all writers navigate feelings of anxiety. We do our students a disservice when we ignore the existence and persistence of these feelings. The first step, then, is to help students name the feelings that surface when faced with a revision—feelings that will range from writer to writer and situation to situation. Once they identify the feelings and locate the ways in which

those feelings function as barriers in their revision work, they can work to transform the emotion into processes and strategies that will help them regain confidence and control.

We advocate for a reflection-in-process approach that encourages students to pause and reflect *during* a revision. Our interviews, for example, created a pause where students could step back and look both at and around their current draft. In *Reflection in the Writing Classroom,* Kathleen Blake Yancey describes the power of asking students to reflect on what's not visible in their work: "What did you learn in the writing of this text that we cannot see there?" (57). In the example Yancey provides, her student had a depth of knowledge about how to write an argument that would not have been visible without the question and subsequent reflection. Of this knowledge, Yancey writes, "Josey too is writing her own curriculum, one embedded within and without the drafts—by way of constructive reflection." By asking students to reflect in process, we found that they are writing their own "curriculum," a private curriculum that allows them to adapt their writing practices and move forward, despite the negative scripts and emotions that inevitably surface. For many of our students, revision happens in waves of hope and fear, and in order to move with those waves, they engage in an internal dialogue and create counternarratives. As Jarratt et al. discovered, students thrive when they develop an "ability to narrate their writing experiences, to see themselves in relationship to writing teachers and other audiences, and to confront the emotional challenges writing poses" (66).

For many of our students, revision happens in waves of hope and fear, and in order to move with those waves, they engage in an internal dialogue and create counternarratives.

When we encourage students to "narrate their writing experiences" and "confront the emotional challenges writing poses" *during* revision, we are inviting them into a new kind of constructive reflection. As Sherry talked out her theory of "cringe-worthy writing," she paused to say, "Even right now, this whole reflection is pretty new to me." Alyssa explained, "I never really had to explore my own feelings about revision before." Maddie added, "I haven't had to verbalize any of this stuff, so it puts my process into clearer focus for me [. . .] I don't think I would have noticed any of that if I wasn't talking about it." Knowing that this type of reflection will feel new and different for our students requires that we think about the support we offer around the reflection, particularly the ways we in which build trust and classroom community.

Building the trust and community that will support reflection-in-process begins with the instructor—or, more specifically, with the instructor's writing process. In order to encourage students to open up about their revision processes, instructors must make their struggles and strategies visible to students. If we are going to ask them to engage in the vulnerability of narrating experiences and confronting feelings, we need to model productive vulnerability. Also, when we share our struggles, we demystify the perception that "real writers" have it all figured out, and we mitigate the fear and shame of admitting to struggle. Myers, for example, begins by projecting one of her published articles onto the classroom screen. The published piece, she explains, represents a small slice of a much larger story. To tell that larger story, she describes the "graveyard of drafts," the failed attempts—over months, even years, of writing and rewriting—that culminated in the published piece. Students inevitably laugh at the idea of the "graveyard of drafts," but then she projects the folder on the screen, scrolling through the drastically different versions of the article and pointing to the variations in the framing, structure, argument, and uses of evidence. She talks about where she got stuck, what it felt like, and how she moved forward. For some students, it is initially hard to hear that their instructor struggles too; they want to believe that there will be a point when they have it all figured out. Overall, though, we have experienced a palpable feeling of relief when we share our writing processes with students. When we illustrate the process of revision, over time, we create space and offer permission to share a wider range of emotions and experiences. And students *do* share their feelings and experiences, particularly after we share ours.

From this communal moment, the conversation about the emotional work of revision can continue—in full-class sessions, in small groups, or in individual conferences. After students name their fears, they're in a position to change them, or at least recognize them as understandable responses to their laudable desire to be "good" writers and the difficult task of revision. As we noted earlier, caring is complicated, and it often hitched to feelings of vulnerability. But reflection-in-process can create an opening for students to see these emotions as part of the work of revision and recognize that despite these feelings—and sometimes because of them—they can be more resilient writers.

Note

1. There are many reasons why students did not reference their first-year writing experiences during our conversations. As Jarratt et al. remind us, memory is not a "container of static content (i.e. 'something to be tapped')" but instead a "narrative constantly under construction within changing contexts" (49). Factors such as the questions we asked, the time of the semester, the amount of time that has passed since those classes, or the particular obstacles they were facing at the moment could have steered their minds away from their earlier experiences with revision. Interesting, though, many of the graduate students described their experiences teaching first-year writing as a turning point where the stakes changed with revision. As writing teachers, they had to name and hone their revision practices in new ways.

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