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Michelle Navarre Cleary

DePaul University, michelle.navarre@collegeunbound.org

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Anxiety and the Newly Returned Adult Student

> Michelle Navarre Cleary
New Voice

Based on interviews with students who had recently returned to school, this essay demonstrates the need for, challenges of, and ways to respond to the writing anxiety many adults bring with them back to school.

It's a challenge, especially the writing. Pretty much just getting back into it.
—Jessica

Yeah, I had mouth sores.
—Sam

Jessica and Sam were two of twenty-five newly returned adult students whom I spent over sixty hours interviewing in the fall of 2008.¹ Twenty-three of these students expressed significant anxiety about writing for school. Like Sam, some had anxiety so intense it produced physical symptoms like mouth sores and muscle spasms. The main sources of their anxiety were not knowing what to write because they had a hard time imagining the university and not knowing if they were writing well enough because they had a hard time imagining themselves in the university. As David Bartholomae has pointed out, “every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion” (60). Because adult students are less likely to have the academic currency and cultural capital of their younger peers, inventing the university can be particularly challenging. As Sam put it, “I don’t fit in here; I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” Focusing on Jessica and Sam, this essay shows the sometimes unexpected ways in which teaching decisions did and did not reduce students’ writing anxiety.

I focus on Jessica and Sam for two reasons. First, of the twenty-five students, Jessica is one of seven who graduated within three years, while Sam is one of four who dropped out before completing a year back in school. Second, both took the same introductory class in the fall of 2008, but they had different teachers who made different teaching decisions. At the end of the quarter, Jessica felt assured that she could write for school, while Sam did not. In this essay I show how Sam’s anxiety increased because of the ways she was and was not invited to use her prior

experience, while Jessica's anxiety decreased as a result of writing and receiving feedback on multiple low-stakes assignments. Together, Sam and Jessica demonstrate that, because of their rich histories, the ways adult students respond to teaching decisions is highly individualized and not always predictable. Thus, helping them get beyond writing anxiety requires understanding and responding to each student.

Why Worry about Anxiety?

Adult students are less likely to persist than younger students (McGivney 35; Murtaugh, Burns, and Schuster 355; Swail 18–19) and most likely to drop out in their first year back in school (Choy 17). Writing is one reason they fail to persist. As one student said, “I mean there were points where I was like, oh I’m just ready to give up. I don’t think I can do this. . . . it wasn’t the reading, it wasn’t the class participation, but it was the writing of the papers” (Angelina). Angelina is not alone. Anna Zajacova, Scott Lynch, and Thomas Espenshade found that nontraditional students at CUNY ranked “writing term papers” as the most stressful of twenty-seven tasks (686), where “[s]tress has generally been found to have a negative influence on GPA and on staying enrolled” (696). Adults just returning to school have substantially higher anxiety about school in general and writing in particular than younger students (Krause, “Supporting” 208; Navarre Cleary 115–19; Sailor ix). Gretchen Starks showed that adult women at a rural community college “felt writing was a barrier to their ability to continue in college” (3). To help remove this barrier, we need to understand how our teaching decisions affect adults’ anxieties about writing.

Research Methods

The students I interviewed attended a college for those aged twenty-four and older that is part of a large, private, urban midwestern university (Midwest). Their average age was thirty-nine, and they ranged in age from twenty-six to fifty-five. Forty percent identified themselves as persons of color. Sixty percent did not have a parent who had completed college. All but two were attending school part-time, and most worked full-time in jobs as varied as administrative assistant, business owner, exotic dancer, trainer, and landlord. While diverse, my sample does not represent the full diversity of the adult college student population in the United States. Of these twenty-five students, only six were male and two Latino/Latina.² Many, but not all, were more financially secure than the adults I previously taught at a local community college. My goal is not to make generalizable claims about how anxious adult students respond to specific teaching methods, but rather to show the complexity of how two students responded to well-intentioned associate professors who understood that adults are often anxious about school in general and writing in particular.

All of the students were enrolled in one of three sections of Foundations of Adult Learning (Foundations) taught by my colleagues at Midwest. Although not a writing class, this course does require writing, including an eight- to twelve-page research paper with an annotated bibliography. This assignment is required in every

Foundations class, and all students receive the same assignment with a detailed outline for it in the common handbook. However, each teacher approaches the class differently. For example, both Jessica's and Sam's teachers required multiple drafts of this research paper, but only Jessica's teacher assigned a series of low-stakes writing assignments leading up to the high-stakes research paper.

Tamsin Haggis argues that adult learning theories fail to account for the diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory learning experiences of adults. To better understand these experiences, she calls for more studies of how adults describe their learning (209). With Haggis's call in mind and with the goal of gaining a more nuanced understanding of how teaching practices can impact the writing development of adult students, I conducted these semistructured interviews as part of an IRB-approved study tracing the writing development of returning adult students. I interviewed students for roughly an hour at the start, in the middle, and at the end of the quarter. In these interviews, students frequently expressed anxiety about writing, particularly when asked about how they were doing, their writing processes, and teacher feedback. An initial reading and subsequent coding of the transcripts confirmed my observation that anxiety was a prominent theme.

Sam and the Perils of Prior Experience

Sam's story shows the limits of a central tenet of not just writing instruction for adults, but more generally of adult education: namely, that recognizing and building upon adults' experiential knowledge increases confidence and helps adults learn by encouraging them to connect what they already know to new learning (see, for example, Brookfield; Knowles; Kolb). Sam demonstrated that asking adults to write about what they know can sometimes increase rather than decrease their anxiety.

Sam grew up in a working-class Texas family. From her parents, who owned a laundry and several other businesses, she gained her entrepreneurial spirit and her lack of confidence in her verbal abilities. As she says, "I'm not afraid of change or anything new." In fact, she sought it out, getting bored easily. A former professional ballet dancer, she became a real estate broker and ran construction and insulation companies with her husband. From making several hundred dollars selling candy to her grammar school classmates to financing the start of her construction business with credit cards, Sam was a confident risk-taker: "I just assume I'm going to be successful." However, Sam was not sure she could be successful in college because she lacked confidence in her verbal abilities. Growing up with a taciturn father and a quiet mother, she turned to dance to express herself: "That's why I became a dancer. I didn't have to say anything." Sam excelled at ballet, earning a full scholarship to a performing arts boarding high school in Florida where "[t]here was very little concern for academics." As a result, when Sam decided to return to school, "the idea of reading and writing a paper scared me to death."

Although willing to face her fear of writing, Sam was ambivalent about being a student. Dancing quite literally brought Sam to campus at the same time as it taught her to equate "higher education with failure." Unlike most first-generation

college students, Sam “always participated in the university” because she “had grown up in their dance department.” However, in the dance world, college is the consolation prize for those who cannot make it professionally. Sam did succeed as a professional dancer, but not before being told she should go to college because she was too tall and ten pounds too heavy to dance professionally. As a result, she had “been resistant to school in the past.” Although she came to value education, she also recognized that she had internalized “this ridiculous idea” that college is for those who have failed, so “even today I find myself in limbo because I have that written in my head ... people who are educated ... are those that couldn’t make it.” In addition, because of her dance background, Sam privileged expression over analysis. She struggled with analytic writing, which she equated with the work of critics who could never understand dance because, for Sam, the understanding comes in the doing.

In sum, Sam’s writing anxiety stemmed from her sense of alienation from the academic. This alienation was rooted in her belief that she was not well prepared for academic literacy at home or school, in the early messages that school means failure, and in her grounding in creative expression rather than analysis. Theresa Lillis demonstrates that academic literacy excludes nontraditional students and that traditional methods of teaching writing take the conventions of this literacy for granted, further perpetuating this exclusion (53–77). Sam’s experience demonstrates a student struggling to understand these unarticulated conventions while also feeling that they challenged some of her core values. Sam realized that academic writing was “a whole other idea of even thinking for me. So I am concerned about my writing skills.”

Her anxiety increased when she was asked to write about her dance experience without the scaffolding she needed. The assignment followed best practices for teaching adults in that it attempted to build upon Sam’s experiential knowledge. For example, Kathleen Cassity found that the adult women she studied “each demonstrated that finding some way to connect to academic course material through personal experience was one of the primary techniques she used for breaking through anxiety” (290). Thus, assignments in which adults can write about what they know (such as narrative, expository, and community or work-based problem-solution essays) should help reduce anxiety and facilitate their transition into academic writing.

Sam’s assignment did attempt to scaffold her writing with a series of questions asking her to identify a learning experience, describe it, reflect upon it, and generalize about it. The question designed to help her generalize asked about the “theories, ideas, concepts, or principles” informing her experience. Her teacher told her to “write a full paragraph. This is where you have to talk about the theory behind dance.” However, Sam had no idea what was meant by “theory”: “I don’t even know what those theories are. I don’t even know what they’re talking about.” As a result, Sam was frustrated that her lack of academic knowledge kept her from being able to express her expertise: “I wrote the show must go on as a theory. And

then I was like, oh gosh, I don't really know how to think of dance. And, in kind of like an academic paper form."

Sam did have definite ideas about dance. For example, she was passionate that art is in the doing and can only be understood by the artists, not by observers. However, when called upon to write in "an academic paper form," Sam reached for the readily available, if not appropriate, commonplace that the show must go on. David Bartholomae argues that students use commonplaces to establish their authority when they have none: "When a student is writing for a teacher, . . . [t]he student, in effect, has to assume privilege without having any. . . . The student defines as his own that which is a commonplace . . . this act of appropriation constitutes his authority" (67, 72). In Sam's case, she was the authority on dance. It was the mismatch between her expertise as a dancer and her understanding of academic writing that left Sam less, rather than more, confident when she tried to write about what she knew. Sam's experience was too rich to make prompts like "Describe your experience as a dancer" meaningful. She needed questions that invited her to think more specifically, such as, "What performance stands out in your mind most vividly? Why?" "What do you think people most misunderstand about classical ballet?"

Not only was Sam unsure how to write for school, but she also found her method of learning called into question. Scholars recommend having adults write about their prior writing education to uncover and address anxiety from negative experiences (Gillespie; Gillam 12–14). Sam demonstrates the importance of learning not only what students have learned about writing but also how they have learned to learn. As a dancer, Sam had learned by copying models. Back in school, she actively sought out models to help navigate academic conventions. She used the models on the Purdue OWL to learn how to do citations and an annotated bibliography, both writing tasks she had not previously encountered. For her final research paper assignment, the one that "gave me mouth sores," she asked to see samples. When her teacher refused her request, Sam was flummoxed: "I think by copying or I had . . . a whole career based upon . . . seeing something and then replicating it. So, so and he was like no. But I need to see something." She pointed out that when she was learning dance, "they were happy to show, and I was happy to copy." Sam was frustrated that the rules of learning seemed to have been changed on her. Not only was it not okay to copy, but her previous learning was devalued when she got the message that copying was something she should not be happy to do. Although this was a class in which students are asked to explore their learning styles, Sam's instructor did not connect her request for a model to the learning style of a dancer until we discussed her request much later. Like Sam, he was reasoning from his prior experience. While her experiences taught her the value of models, he stopped considering models because he found students "slavishly imitated" them. Giving students a diverse selection of models and discussing with them the writers' decisions can avoid this imitation.

The value of learning through models was another way in which Sam found her professional training as an artist, which focused on expression, conflicting with

the demands of her academic work, which focused on analysis. Perhaps because she had mastered so many other domains from dance to real estate, Sam was confident that once she understood the “formula” for academic writing, she could do it. To gain that understanding, she needed explicit instruction on academic writing conventions. Models can be one form of explicit instruction; feedback on low-stakes writing is another. Unlike Sam’s teacher, Jessica’s professor assigned six low-stakes writing assignments prior to the first-draft of the high-stakes research paper. His feedback on these assignments, while brief, general, and almost entirely positive, turned out to be just what Jessica needed.

Jessica and the Power of Positive Feedback

Jessica grew up in public housing on the South Side of Chicago, with parents who encouraged her to be the first in her family to graduate from college. When her friends started getting into trouble, Jessica distanced herself from them and got more involved in school. She was one of the success stories at her high school, where only about a third of the students graduated. Jessica finished fourth in her class with a 3.3 GPA and a track scholarship to a regional state university. However, she gave up the scholarship when she got pregnant at the end of high school. She tried going back to school a year later, but found it too hard to take care of her child, work full-time, and attend school, so she dropped out after three quarters. Jessica worked her way up from temporary jobs to a position as a receptionist at a bank where her co-workers urged her to return to school. At age twenty-nine, she did just that. Despite the challenges of being a single mother, full-time worker, and part-time student, Jessica had a positive attitude and a deep determination to be successful: “I’m not going to start something that I’m not going to finish.” She enjoyed being back in school but also felt “overwhelmed” with “all of the writing.”

Jessica’s response to the feedback she received qualifies some of the conventional wisdom about what constitutes useful feedback—sometimes a few encouraging comments are exactly what a student needs. Nancy Sommers has argued that students “overwhelmingly” want specific feedback and that “constructive criticism, more than encouraging praise, often pushes students forward with their writing” (251). In a meta-analysis of studies of feedback, John Hattie and Helen Timperly argued that adult students distrusted praise: “older students perceived praise after success or neutral feedback after failure as an indication that the teacher perceived their ability to be low” (97). In fact, positive feedback was not always enough for some students in my study. When they received only positive feedback, particularly when that feedback was general, four students reported getting more rather than less anxious. Sarah, for example, wanted feedback that would help her improve as a writer. Instead of constructive criticism, she just heard that everything she wrote was “all great.” Sarah left Midwest after two quarters.

For Jessica, the few, general and overwhelmingly positive comments her instructor provided on her initial writing assignments (see Table 1) rekindled her confidence and liberated her to learn. This positive feedback, particularly the feed-

back that directly addressed Jessica’s anxiety about not being good enough to succeed, built her confidence. Jessica internalized her teacher’s assurance that she “gets it,” telling me later on in the interview that she had less “frustration . . . with my anxiety” because “*I’m getting it, okay I’m not going to do so bad*” (emphasis added). Because returning to school requires a significant sacrifice of time and money for Jessica and many other adults, “Positive response to their writing, writing which has often been made possible by neglecting other duties, convinces students that their efforts are worthwhile” (Fredericksen 119). Positive feedback allowed Jessica to move past self-doubt: “I felt more confident of my writing. I felt more confident of myself and my thoughts.” With this confidence, she then set herself up for success by getting started earlier on her papers and so giving herself time to revise.

Timely feedback on early assignments was particularly important to the students in my study. Jessica used feedback on her initial assignments to understand what she was being asked to do. When her teacher wrote, “I urge you [to] think

TABLE 1: Feedback on Jessica’s Six Low-Stakes Writing Assignments

ASSIGNMENT	IN-TEXT COMMENTS	OTHER IN-TEXT MARKING	SUMMATIVE COMMENTS
Reading response 1	“Excellent!”	3 key words circled 1 comma correction 1 comma circled 1 word change of “till” to “until”	“Good job! See last page” “I appreciate your writing style—Excellent grasp of concept—good summary of the articles—Some good reflective insights embedded in your paper—I urge you [to] think more about how these articles may impact your goals. Well done!”
Reading response 2			“Well done, Jessica! Clearly you ‘get it’ and will do well at [Midwest] + beyond!”
Reading response 3			“Good job!”
Reading response 4	“and can share w/ others”	Opening sentences of first 2 paragraphs underlined	“Good job!” “Clearly you ‘get it’”
Interview report		1 underline of key information	“Excellent! Would she make a good P.A.?”
Article summary			“Good! Was this a peer reviewed article?”

more about how these articles may impact your goals,” Jessica realized that “I had left out . . . what I was getting in the reading.” This feedback, while critical, increased Jessica’s confidence because it helped her understand what was expected: “I know what to do now. And I stopped second guessing myself.” When she received feedback that identified what she was doing well, Jessica was able to recognize a strength she could use for other writing tasks. For example, before receiving feedback that she had “excellent examples of life experiences,” Jessica had not thought of examples from her experience as a strength of her writing. Jessica continued to seek out and appreciate feedback throughout the quarter. When she was confronted with a new writing task, the research paper assignment, she was eager for initial feedback to know if she was “headed in the right direction” as she worked to understand this more complex assignment.

Most of the students I interviewed reported being less anxious about their writing by the end of the quarter. They attributed their decreased anxiety to one or more of the following: learning to use writing process strategies; having a number of low-stakes writing assignments that gave them practice writing for school; and receiving early and frequent teacher feedback on their writing. Of these three, teacher feedback had the greatest impact on their writing anxiety. Without it, they remained lost; with it, they were liberated to learn. Feedback that clarified expectations and gave specific suggestions for improvement helped students understand what to do. Feedback that engaged with their ideas and praised their strengths gave them the confidence that they belonged back in school. For some, like Jessica, a little feedback went a long way, while for others too little, too general, or too positive feedback only increased their anxiety.

Recommendations for Reducing Anxiety

The examples of Sam and Jessica highlight some, but not all, of the most common recommendations for reducing the anxiety of adult composition students. Composition scholars who work with adults most often recommend the following practices:

- > Encouraging students to write about their experiences and their prior learning (Cassity 293; Fredericksen 119–20; Gillam 12–14; Gillespie; Hurlow 66; Morrison 33–34; Pies 14; Sommer 120–33, 214–15)
- > Creating collaborative learning opportunities (Fredericksen 117; Krause, “University” 159–60; Miritello 7; Morrison 32–35; Sommer 66–73, 212; Wiant 58–60)
- > Demystifying academic writing with explicit instruction (Krause, “University” 163; Lillis 53–77)
- > Assigning frequent, low-stakes writing and teaching writing as a process with multiple drafts (Fredericksen 117–18; Morrison 35; Pies 14–15, 18; Sommer 209–12, 215–16)
- > Providing feedback on drafts that is focused and formative, praises strengths, and offers constructive criticism that helps students develop ideas (Fredericksen 117–19; Pies 18; Sommer 134–50)

However, as Sam and Jessica make clear, teachers who wish to help returning students move beyond their anxiety need to understand the complex and sometimes surprising ways in which students respond to these teaching practices. Happily, many strategies for learning how students are making sense of our teaching are also ways to reduce their anxiety.

Four strategies I have found particularly effective are *exploring prior learning*, *discussing writing anxiety in class*, *conferencing*, and *assigning low-stakes writing*. As an initial assignment, I have students describe their prior writing experiences and also what they have learned about themselves as writers and as learners. Their responses let me know who depends upon outlining, who thinks good writing is a matter of correct spelling, and who will be helped by models. Second, class discussions about writing anxiety engage both young and old students, all of whom have plenty to say on this topic. Simply learning that other students are anxious helps reduce the anxiety of returning students (Miritello 7; Morrison 32). For this discussion, I have students read Anne Lamott's "Shitty First Drafts," which has the advantage of being short and funny and introducing the idea of writing process methods as a way to manage writing anxiety. Third, conferencing helps establish a personal connection with students. Often previously silent students will talk freely in a conference about their writing anxieties. When I have not been able to meet with students individually, conferencing with them in small groups has also been effective. Finally, besides giving students low-stress writing practice, low-stakes writing allows me to "check in" with students throughout the term. Thomas Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, John Bean, and Peter Elbow recommend several ways low-stakes writing can be used to assess students' understanding and concerns. I have ended classes by having students write on the "muddiest point" and have started classes asking them to write what they remembered from the previous class. Jessica's teacher had students write short, weekly papers summarizing a reading. Another teacher had students write a one-page response to each class. Each of these strategies helps teachers learn about and be able to respond to the particular learning experiences, assumptions, and anxieties students bring to their writing assignments.

Conclusion

Tamsin Haggis states: "A focus on the uniqueness of learning experience, rather than on 'adults' as a general category, has wide-reaching implications. It suggests a need to find out more about the complexity of real, situated learning experiences" (210–11). In this article, I focus on the "real, situated learning experiences" of two first-generation students, one of whom recently graduated while the other dropped out after taking two more classes. Sam's and Jessica's unique histories shaped their responses to their learning in fall 2008 in ways that sometimes challenged expectations. For Sam, writing about prior learning, but not being able to use prior learning methods, only increased her anxiety and made new learning more difficult. For Jessica, positive feedback successfully reduced her anxiety and enabled learning. Although incoming adults have higher anxiety than younger students, research

indicates that adults improve their writing more quickly than younger students (Krause, “Supporting” 209), and adults who persist have no more writing anxiety than younger students (Elias 40–41). The risk is that returning students give up before they gain confidence in their writing. Sam’s and Jessica’s experiences suggest that more adults could be retained through their first year if they received writing instruction that responded to their individual needs. As Mary Kay Morrison says, “What it all comes down to is a willingness to be flexible and individualized in our approach” (32). ◀

Notes

1. I use the term *adult student* to refer to college undergraduates who are twenty-four years old or older. However, as more younger students work to finance their education, they increasingly share many of the needs and interests of older students.

2. In 1983, Merle O’Rourke Thompson found that returning women had higher anxiety than younger students, but that older men had significantly less writing anxiety than either older women or younger students. This result might indicate an unexplored gender differential given that the research on writing anxiety and returning students is based largely upon female subjects. Women account for about 60 percent of the adult student population (“Table 191”), but they are overrepresented in the research literature. For example, only 9 percent of Thompson’s subjects and 24 percent of mine were returning men.

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Michelle Navarre Cleary is an assistant professor and the writing coordinator at the School for New Learning, DePaul University.

CALL FOR EDITOR: WPA

The Council of Writing Program Administrators is seeking the next editor or editorial team for its official journal, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. The term is for three years, with possibility for renewal, with work beginning in Fall 2013; the new editor or editorial team will work with the current editorial team to publish content already in development for Volume 37.2 (Spring 2014), and will have full responsibility for content and production beginning with Volume 38 (Fall/Winter 2014 and Spring 2015).

Interested applicants should have the following qualifications: publications and expertise in the field of writing program administration and related areas; knowledge of the issues that have preoccupied the field, both historically and in the recent past; familiarity with the journal, an understanding of the role the journal plays in the field, and a vision for the journal's future; current membership in and a history of involvement with CWPA; strong editorial and organizational skills; and prior editorial and reviewing experience. We especially encourage applications from prospective editorial teams.

To apply, please submit an application letter explaining why you are qualified for this position and describing any resources or support your institution(s) will be able to provide (released time, secretarial support, startup funds, etc.) as well as resources you will request from CWPA. Applicants should also submit a current c.v. for each member of the prospective editorial team. If you are proposing an editorial team, please explain how you will work together on editing and production of the journal. Upon request, additional information about editorial responsibilities and workflow, journal finances, and production timelines will be made available to prospective editors. Address queries to Rita Malencyk, Chair of the WPA Journal Editor Search Committee, at malencykr@easternct.edu.

Send the application electronically as attached files to Rita Malencyk, malencykr@easternct.edu. **Deadline: September 1, 2012.** Members of the Search Committee will be available for phone consultations with prospective editors/editorial teams. We hope to finalize an agreement with the new editorial team no later than February 1, 2013.
