



# Cultivating Convergence through Creative Nonfiction: Identity, Development, and the Metaphor of Transfer

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*I'm sitting in my office with Danielle, reading her latest on-line article she's written for the site called She Knows.com. Danielle is doing an internship with this company, and she asked me to be her supervisor. I love Danielle. I love her because she is great but also because I've watched her over the past year become who she is. She has been my student in a creative nonfiction class as well as my writing and healing course. When she asked me to supervise her internship, I was thrilled to continue to be involved with her learning, but I confess, I had my doubts about this SheKnows.com and the kind of writing that might be done under its auspices.*

*But as I read Danielle's latest piece, I think, wow, you have arrived. She has chosen a serious topic: the norovirus outbreaks plaguing the Chipotle restaurant chain. Writing with an edge and style that command attention and respect, she's pushed the limits of this genre and owned it. I look up over the top of my glasses at this young woman sitting opposite me: I say, Wow, Danielle! You go! She smiles back with the recognition that she knows she's nailed it. She tells me that today another professor complimented her on how good her writing has become since the first class she had with him.*

*I'm thrilled for her. And it's a moment that inspires me to think back on all that has happened to/for her over the past year. What has gone into the making of this confident, skilled, and self-possessed person? I think, this is what it is all about, isn't it? Over the year I watched a shy, struggling student become a force to be reckoned with, become someone who calls herself a writer.*

## METAPHORS: TRANSFER AND CONVERGENCE

I offer this story by way of beginning a reconsideration of writerly development and the role the creative nonfiction course can play in such development. Though discussion of transfer saturates the discourse of composition and rhetoric and education theory, creative writing appears somewhat isolated from the exchange.<sup>1</sup> Creative writing's missing seat at the transfer table may be due in part to the institutional divide that has existed historically between composition and creative writing curriculums as well as the social science orientation of much transfer rhetoric, which might feel inconsistent with approaches to practicing and teaching creative writing. I aim here to address this deficit by shifting the conversation about transfer to one of development and to consider the role that the creative nonfiction course can play in that development. I argue that the liminality of creative nonfiction in terms of genre and curricular placement may provide opportunity for sustaining writerly identity across contexts, due to the persona/author relation fostered in the genre as well as workshop pedagogies often practiced in creative writing. From this perspective, the creative nonfiction class becomes a curricular hinge, augmenting student self-investment and efficacy.

To begin, I look back at Danielle's story to see that something important has occurred for her. Some kind of productive cross-fertilization in her career as a student, in her life, has come to fruition. How often do we get to see all the pieces come together like this? The metaphor I use here, of "coming together," is an intuitive one, a common way to describe the process of realization in the writer's—the person's—potential. But another metaphor, with perhaps different implications, has dominated the field of education generally and composition studies particularly to describe the way writers develop, and this of course is the aforementioned one of "transfer." I consider here the limits and implications of a transfer model to describe learning, especially for writers such as Danielle, and suggest an alternative that focuses on development, rather than transfer, through a different metaphor: convergence. From this perspective, the creative nonfiction course might be a particularly productive sponsor of such development, as suggested in Danielle's reflections where she cites the power of storytelling to transform her relationship with her curriculum and overall college experience. I describe below some of the scholarship on transfer with regard to writing in order to introduce the alternative of convergence with its particular application to creative nonfiction.

Writing studies, in keeping with general education trends, began devoting itself to the question of transfer—the concept of applying knowledge/abilities across contexts—when we discovered that students struggled to generalize what they had learned from first year

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<sup>1</sup> Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawashi mention in their study on transfer that some students say that they draw upon knowledge they gained in creative writing courses, both fiction and creative nonfiction, to address subsequent writing tasks.

composition to their writing in other disciplinary-based courses and workplace situations. Without successful transfer, enterprises like first year writing and writing across the curriculum lose much of their legitimacy and institutional imperative to the extent they are based on claims of preparing students to write in multiple contexts and to build on existing disciplinary knowledge. Transfer, then, has become something of the Holy Grail in contemporary expository writing instruction, both in terms of desired result and object of study.

Earlier research on writing transfer showed its achievement to be elusive, in part, according to Kathleen Yancey et al. because earlier general studies of transfer were insufficiently “contextual and situated” (7) to provide useful data. David Smit summed up the conclusions with regard to the state of writing transfer as follows:

we cannot assume that writers will transfer the kinds of knowledge and skills they have learned previously to new writing tasks. Such transfer is unpredictable and depends to a great degree on the student’s background and experience, over which the instructor has little control. Whether writers do transfer the appropriate knowledge and skills will depend on whether they see the similarity between what they have learned in the past and what they need to do in a new context.... Often, however, novice writers do not see the relevance of what they have learned before to new tasks. (130)

Smit acknowledges that when people do learn to write in different contexts, successful transfer must be taking place, except that it is difficult for us to know much about the process, because the exchange of knowledge and abilities is happening “at all levels of abstraction” to effectively render the unfolding opaque (132).

As more scholars and researchers devoted attention to its study, the idea of writing transfer has expanded beyond our initial understanding and, importantly, beyond what the term itself implies. Because our limited models did not allow for the complexity of the phenomenon, we failed, according to the revised narrative, to recognize instances of transfer when they occurred. According to Elizabeth Wardle, “focusing on a limited search for ‘skills’ is the reason we do not recognize more evidence of ‘transfer’; we are looking for apples when those apples are now part of an apple pie” (“Understanding” 69). Instead of tracking discreet, unchanged skills or knowledge in controlled situations, researchers must be more pliable in their understanding of what “counts” as transfer to allow for the possibility of “reshaped knowledge” as “adaptive transfer” (DePalma), “remixing” (Yancey et al.; Yancey), repurposing, recontextualizing, integrating, backward and reverse transferring (Yancey et al. 82), and generalizing (Beach), to name a few relabeling attempts that move us beyond a narrow, linear view of what happens when people learn, especially about writing. The common sense maxim “all learning involves transfer from previous experience” (“How People Learn” 68) sounds reasonable enough as a starting point, but its appealing simplicity belies the complexity of the phenomenon.

Indeed, Wardle shifts the discussion from how knowledge *transfers* to how it is *transformed* (“Understanding” 69), implicitly bringing into question the utility of a term that must be stretched well beyond its original meaning. In later work, she does so explicitly, claiming a dissatisfaction with the “transportation model” inherent in the word whose “continued use . . . limits our ability to think more fully about this phenomenon and what it means” (“Creative”). But I wonder if attempts to refine the term are in the end worth the effort put into the reclamation. Perhaps the model is fatally limited in its ability to describe development and performance because in many cases we may not be talking about a process of transfer at all but rather a holistic development that resists analysis through such delineation. King Beach along with others urge<sup>2</sup> leaving the metaphor of transfer behind in favor of a richer, more accommodating notion of *development* with its “multiple interrelated processes” (“Consequential . . . Developmental” 40), a notion that perhaps better encompasses the existential reality of human learning and the complications of “all levels of abstraction” that Smit quite rightfully identified.

What I propose in this essay is a different metaphor from transfer, one that sounds much more like Wardle’s “apple pie” of simmering, blended fruit cooked into a pastry shell. I suggest that rather than *transfer* we consider *development* through a trope of *convergence*, which I will define here as a coming together of knowledges with “a polyphony of experiences, inside and outside the classroom” (Nowacek 11) in uncertain ways within an agent, combining and exceeding the individual contributing factors, to produce plenitude and a sustaining identity. Under this paradigm, development occurs through the affordance of opportunities that exceed any one domain and encompass both classroom and extracurricular experiences; the personal and the social; cognition and emotion to effect transformation through and within “the whole student” (Schoem, Intro 2) in relation with emerging ecological contexts. Convergence—when things “come together” for us—occurs through democratic synergy of overlapping and integrated learning experiences that exceed curricular demarcation by class or skill and are enabled within community with other learners. By reflecting on Danielle’s journey, in which she attests to the way the creative nonfiction class served as a space to facilitate a holistic synthesizing of her educational experiences, I consider how the evolution of her writerly identity illustrates such a model of convergence steeped in a developing sense of the agentive self that, in her case, owes much to the practice of CNF, in which student sense of self is aligned with textual persona.

I propose development through convergence as an alternative to move us away from the metaphors of directionality that may “limit our ability to theorize about the phenomenon” (Wardle, “Creative”) when we think of student writers who are learning across contexts. Although Jessie L. Moore and Chris M. Anson believe that we ought not get “bogged down in what we call it [transfer/learning]” (11), as Kristie

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<sup>2</sup> Beach adds his voice to the critique of the term transfer and calls for a study of “generalization” and “consequential transitions” to understand the anatomy of learning.

Fleckenstein et al. point out, disciplinary metaphors matter: “the metaphors by which researchers orient themselves to the object of study affect the research methods they choose and the nature of the knowledge they create” (389). Rather than a directional model of learning, the idea of convergence suggests what David Schoem calls a “relational” one that considers “students’ personal identity, social identities, family, friends, social relations, lived experience, hope, dreams, and understanding of and searching for meaning in life and the world around them” (“Relational” 80). These are some of the ingredients that merge and reconstitute in the making of the pie.

Through a consideration of Danielle’s story of “becoming” (in the Deweyan sense), I further propose that an upper-level writing course such as creative nonfiction, based on personal narrative and other features of the CNF genres such as reflection and exploration, has the potential to create a curricular aperture for development of identity that fosters general student achievement rather than particular adaptive strategies or skills. In exploring this possibility, I suggest that both the kind of writing done in such a class as well as the way the class is taught can create a brave, safe space<sup>3</sup> that affords a salubrious self-efficacy congenial to enhancing a convergence of experiences and knowledges. In the course of this discussion, I echo the concerns of others that “contemporary conversation about teaching to transfer” has “oriented the discussion about writing instruction too narrowly around school success and professional preparation” (Goldblatt 441) and that focus on *what* transfers may be directing our attention away from *why* students write (Mathieu). However, I also build upon some more recent shifts in transfer theory that I believe have been refocusing our outlook in a productive way. In particular, the strands investigating identity and self-efficacy look especially promising in theorizing the development of a writerly self and have particular application to the generic correspondence of author and first-person persona in the nonfiction text.

To explain my position here further with regard to traditional orientations of transfer, consider that what Wardle observes about the habitus of educational institutions that privilege “answer getting” over “problem exploring” (“Creative”) perhaps can be said equally of any disciplinary field, such as writing studies, where the desire to get answers, achieve results, begins to obscure other possible perspectives. In the case of transfer study, the desire for objective measurement as well as replicable results (see Haswell) encouraged by an outcomes-driven culture, in effect a social science slant towards thinking about the issue, affords a particular orientation to the question, despite perhaps efforts to move away from the quantifiable and the linear. The disciplinary need to enhance credibility through an ethos of objectivity inclines inquiry in a particular way—away, I think, from a holistic paradigm of development, in which tacit knowledge eludes the empirical

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<sup>3</sup> Theories of classroom as “safe” space have been challenged by proponents of “brave” space, such as Arao and Clemens who propose “shifting away from the concept of safety and emphasizing the importance of bravery instead” (136). By combining the two concepts, I am holding out the hope that both may be possible rather than antithetical.

measurability so valued in scientific pursuit. As a result, even as scholars recognize the complexity and elusiveness of what they study, the attempt to understand transfer tends towards an implicit linearity, “the exact nature and mechanisms of transfer” (Nowacek 13): from this view, in order for successful development to occur, transfer must first take place. Therefore, in order to understand development, we must understand what has transferred. And in order to understand *how* the *what* has transferred, we must search for and study the component parts of the *how* that will then allow us to apprehend the whole of the *what*.

But I submit that the notion of development often confounds this arrangement, looking more, to use another cooking metaphor, like a protean stew than identifiable sequence, especially when we take into account over-determined and inter-relational subjectivity and “the recursive nature of changing persons and social organizations” (Beach, “Consequential ... Sociocultural” 130). Scholars and researchers sense this inadequacy and thus try, as noted above, to salvage the concept of transfer by complicating it, reaching for another paradigm. Part of what might keep us rooted in a metaphor of linearity and particularity is the field’s historical uneasiness with the line that divides text from writer and the somewhat unresolvable predicament regarding which of the two is efficacious or ethical to focus on. Concerning ourselves with *development* rather than *transfer* puts us in the position of considering the person rather than the text and challenges our sense of what is appropriate to subject to objective scrutiny. A casualty of the expressivist wars in composition has been to some extent the writer/learner herself, as the stress on measurable outcomes, along with a suspicion of romanticized subject position and concerns about privacy, culminate in an emphasis on supposedly measurable texts rather than the producers of the texts. As Chris W. Gallagher confesses, he has “been all too happy to engage in arguments about the work *texts* do, leaving off discussion of the work *writers* do” (“What Writers” 239). In short, we measure product, not people.<sup>4</sup>

While much work on transfer has made qualitative efforts to get at what writers *do* by featuring student interviews in research, the emphasis in such work nonetheless is on isolating specific adaptive strategies and moves to find out what facilitates and what impedes productive use of prior knowledge in the face of new exigencies and what pedagogy can productively cultivate these behaviors and mindsets. Although this strategy has been enriched with insights from genre and activity systems theories and although the role of the learner is of course acknowledged as part of the transfer equation, the concern with rhetorical context has resulted in us giving short-shrift to the individual, almost as though we can divorce moves and strategies from the person who deploys them in favor of

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<sup>4</sup> Gallagher makes this statement in the context of his retrieval of a concept of behaviorism for composition studies and its perhaps misunderstood significance for the field. In doing so, he means to say that we have a tendency to argue about assessing products rather than the actual activities in which writers engage.

the learning context in which they are deployed. Thus teaching for transfer models have advocated instruction in such practices as reflection, metacognition, genre awareness and rhetorical analysis with the belief that these give students the tools to negotiate new contexts and tasks and provide a “passport” to navigate changing writing contexts (see Wardle, “Mutt” 771, 783; Yancey et al.).

More recently, however, a shift has developed to supplement context-oriented studies with a more extensive reevaluation of the role of the writer’s person and identity in successful transfer. As Driscoll and Wells observe, composition’s treatment of transfer “largely privileges actions and contexts” to the point that “in some definitions, the learner is someone to whom or through whom transfer happens rather than being the agent of transfer.” But as Doug Downs has recently noted, the one thing we know for sure that transfers from context to context is the person, not simply the knowledge. Both Driscoll and Wells and Downs draw attention to the importance of the individual through a focus on “dispositions” and “epistemic identities,” respectively. Likewise, Nowacek, in her complication of transfer schemes, concludes that “personal identities” of students, in conjunction with other factors, “have a powerful and complicated influence on the work students do” (23)<sup>5</sup>. As I talk about an idea of developmental convergence and the role the creative nonfiction course can potentially play, I will focus on these “long overdue” theories of identity and person that “are only beginning to inform transfer research” (Wardle and Clement 161) as being integral to an idea of development and transformation. The methods of creative nonfiction, both in terms of habits of mind and pedagogical social practices that such writing invites, are conducive to development of an enduring writerly self.

As noted earlier, creative writing studies have remained distant from the transfer question that has garnered so much pedagogical interest in other domains. By shifting the focus of transfer to identity and the development of writerly self, we open up space in the conversation for creative writing to stake a claim that such classes can be pivotal in that development. By establishing this connection, I hope to promote an understanding of the creative nonfiction (and possibly other) creative writing courses as an essential part of the overall undergraduate curriculum that contributes to student development and success. Making creative writing part of the transfer discussion might provide renewed imperative for the value of such courses in a climate of higher education increasingly devoted to narrowing conceptions of professionalization.

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<sup>5</sup> Nowacek defines identity as “an individual’s understanding of his or her role, capacities, affiliations, and worth in a given social context—as well as that individual’s perceptions of other people’s evaluations of his or her role, capacities, affiliations, and worth” (24).

## IDENTITY AND EFFICACY

I turn now to Danielle's own reflections about her personal and academic development, not for the purposes of a "study" but rather as a heuristic to consider the ideas I've presented above and to place her self-assessment in the context of ideas about transfer. That day in my office, Danielle talked to me about how she had changed as a student and how much her academic performance had improved. She credited her creative nonfiction class as pivotal in this. In order to probe her development as a writer and thinker, I asked her if she could explore in a narrative some of the things she had talked about. She wrote down her thoughts in a piece she titled "Abscission," (a word with some interesting possibilities itself, to which I will return.) This is how Danielle begins:

"I remember sitting in my advisor's office picking out my schedule . . . I remember looking out her second story window watching the leaves struggle to stay attached to the trees as the wind blew. I remember noticing how easy it was for them to detach and blow away. . . . It was then that I realized that I so badly wanted to drift far away from where I was and who I was at the time. . . ."

Danielle goes on to talk about how her shyness played a role in how she felt about herself and her ability to function in college. She writes, "I was never the type to participate in class. . . . Although many find the college experience liberating, I used to find it terrifying. I remember sitting in the back of my classes trying to purposely make direct eye contact with my professors to demonstrate that I *was* paying attention because I so badly wanted *to avoid* being called on. The thought of standing up in front of any class immediately induced nausea . . ."

I want to consider Danielle's reflections in light of Driscoll and Wells above-mentioned work. In the article "Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions," the authors pose a challenge to transfer paradigms by drawing our attention to the role of the individual learner and exploring in depth the effects of "dispositions" (what they equate with "habits of mind," such as those outlined in CWPA's 2011 "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing"). Besides the usual focus on pedagogy, activity/systems theory, or genre, what Driscoll and Wells deem "context" oriented approaches, the authors look more carefully at the way certain dispositions affect the capacity for transfer. I am drawn not just to the content of their work but to their rhetorical approach in gingerly broaching a point that we might, after all, find fairly intuitive: when students approach their writing tasks, certain attitudes, "individual, internal qualities," which students possess (and which it would seem instructors have little knowledge or control over) affect how students do those tasks. The authors go on to tactfully suggest that this is a neglected area of research, but as with other areas of composition scholarship, they optimistically imply that transfer studies can "self-correct to include the impact of the individual learner." The care Driscoll and Wells use here speaks volumes to the entrenchment of the favored "context approaches" in transfer discourse to the exclusion of less easily measurable factors such as dispositions.

Drawing from “the array of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional factors that either support or inhibit ...development,” Driscoll and Wells identify various enabling and disabling dispositions “that *allow* or *prevent* successful development from taking place” such as desire to learn or willingness to engage with subject matter that of course can vary with circumstances. In particular, they examine four dispositions that they identify as “value, self-efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation” in the role of facilitating or inhibiting successful transfer. Self-efficacy, for example, is connected to “students’ beliefs about their capabilities and the likelihood they will take the steps needed to achieve their goals.” This emphasis is important because according to the work of Katherine M. Schmidt and Joel E. Alexander, “A student’s perceptions of her own competence, as opposed to her actual competence, often more accurately predicts her success in school contexts.” Such an idea squares with Asao Inoue’s observation: “Noncognitive dimensions of students’ work are just as influential to their success in school as the cognitive” (331).

Self-efficacy, confidence, and initiative are things Danielle indicates in her narrative that she was lacking. Her description of her desire to blow away like the leaves sounds like depression, and she tells us that she felt nauseous at the prospect of giving presentations. According to Danielle, as indicated below, participating in creative nonfiction class was instrumental in changing that for her and making a myriad of subsequent changes possible, such as seeing the importance of her studies (value), assuming responsibility for her success (attribution), and becoming self-aware and self-motivated (self-regulation). Moore and Anson state “We are only starting to explore ... dispositions” that “afford engaged rhetorical problem-solving,” and “pedagogy that promotes transfer needs to be attentive to” (10) these. This focus on the individual through attention to self-perception and internal states opens the door to a more humanist paradigm (the same humanist impulse, I believe, that is at the heart of the generalist method of creative nonfiction) that I think is useful in accounting for an experience like Danielle’s, the aforementioned convergence that proceeds from the basic gestalt principle: the properties of the coherent whole “are not discoverable in its individual isolated parts” (Curzon and Tummons 61). I propose that a dissective view of transfer, as described and countered here by Wardle and Clement, insufficiently explains Danielle’s transformation.: “Despite the tendency of researchers to fixate on one moment, class, or assignment, literate learners keep moving on and engaging in new experiences, experiencing growing and changing *identities*” (174, emphasis added). By inculcating interactions of broadly generalized generative

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<sup>6</sup> I use “writerly” here partly in the sense that Doug Hesse uses the term when he calls for “living with writerly intent,” by which he means a reflective “believing that experience justifies writing ... but also that life warrants re-inscription. It means accepting that returns to past selves and texts take time, in an age not particularly conducive to waiting or uncertainty, accepting the possibility that coherence may elude essaying from things not lived coherently” (9).

dispositions that enable student success across contexts, creative nonfiction classes, as suggested by Danielle's experience, can, I think, be instrumental in fostering a writerly identity, paradoxically dynamic as it is stable, one that can sustain the writer--from course to course, context to context, world to world--and has the capacity not merely to accommodate new experiences but incorporate them into on-going self-efficacious projects of development.<sup>6</sup>

## CREATIVE NONFICTION: COMMUNITY AND METHOD

As I indicated earlier, not only the type or method of *writing* is important here. On reflection, Danielle credits reading her work aloud to the class and hearing the observation-based discussion of her narrative as a turning point for her:

This was a big step for me as a student and as an individual.... [S]haring a personal piece of writing made me feel like I wasn't sharing my work, I was sharing myself. I felt that I was going to be sharing a small piece of me, and that is not something that I was ever used to.... [Presenting my work] was truly one of the most liberating experiences I've ever had as a college student. Not only was I inviting my peers into my personal life, I was giving everyone an open invitation into my own personal thoughts and feelings – something I rarely do.... I learned a lot about myself that day that I never realized ever before; my peers made the experience extremely rewarding.... I felt that it was a pivotal moment in my life to have shared a piece of me.... The feedback portion of the presentation was extremely worthwhile. [I]t was clear that my peers really did listen to what I had to say.... [W]e no longer felt like we were students in a class together, we were more than that. Friendships blossomed because of that class...

In Downs's recent work that focuses transfer study on the individual learner/writer, he posits the importance of identity as "awareness ... via epistemic frames" with the pedagogical aim of moving the writer from the "isolated" frame to the "communal." Although Downs links the "romantic-rationalist" epistemic frame with the lone, creative writer, Danielle's narrative here suggests that within the CNF classroom she inhabits the more desirable "interdependent ecological" frame: her writerly self is not lone but rather existing in concert with and enabled by a group that critically but supportively sustains her, a description differing from the saccharine concept of "community" that "can soon become an empty and sentimental word," as Joe Harris warned us (13).

What might seem at first glance like pleasant but ephemeral incidentals of the college writing experience—an enjoyable social interaction; the formation of friendships--are perhaps in reality the indispensable take-aways: the notion that what we have to say is worth humbly asking people to listen and respond to; that indeed such discourse is the foundation for meaningful and rewarding human

congress as we return that same attention to others. In order for that to occur, by Danielle's reckoning, she needed to feel like she was sharing a piece of herself through her work. Creative nonfiction is perhaps well-positioned to produce such a sense of investment, where the writer feels that she and the work are one. Creative nonfiction frustrates easy definition and indeed is sometimes deemed an unsatisfactory descriptor for the kinds of writing associated with it (see D. Moore). But in terms of the kind of writing that might be valuable in facilitating development and convergence, I am referring to what Lee Gutkind associates with "the personal side of creative nonfiction," the memoirs and personal essays that are invested with the voice of the writer's "I" and its discourses of experience.

This last statement raises the specter of the academic prose versus personal narrative debate, one that has raged through the history of process pedagogy, as well as an anti-expressivist critique that might question an easy elision between writer and text and notions of transparent, romanticized individuality. Arguably, there is a close relationship between the practice and method of creative nonfiction as defined above and expressivism, although craft-focused nonfiction writers might feel very differently<sup>7</sup>. But as Andrew Bourelle points out, for many "scholars and practitioners of creative nonfiction, writing is in many ways expressivist, with an emphasis on writing to discover, writing for the self, and writing as a means of looking inward" ("Creative" 40). Bourelle goes on to make the important addition that "creative nonfiction has an important social component as well, ... certainly in writing as... social critique."<sup>8</sup> But my point here is not to defend personal writing against charges of irrelevancy or solipsism but rather to embrace the special connection between writer and text that can occur in life writing and other types of creative nonfiction. Rather than apologize for any so-called expressivist dimension of CNF, I am asserting that, in this case, that dimension proved vitally important for Danielle's overall success. While all writing potentially can feel like "us" when we take pride of ownership in our prose, in Danielle's case, the element of personal narrative was important in creating for her the belief that she was sharing a piece of herself and making that writing and sharing important to her developing sense of writerly identity. This

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, David Foster Wallace's publicized creative nonfiction syllabus that seems intolerant of the humanist generosity we sometimes associate with the expressivist classroom and instead espouses the hard-line ethos of serious craft and professional writing:

an essayist's main goal is [not] simply to "share" or "express herself" or whatever feel-good term you might have got taught in high school. In the grown-up world, creative nonfiction is not expressive writing but rather communicative writing. And an axiom of communicative writing is that the reader does not automatically care about you (the writer), nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel.

<sup>8</sup> While I agree with this last idea, I would substitute the phrase "cultural criticism" for "social critique" as the former term is more expansive and makes clear that the cultural work of CNF is not limited to an agonistic mode.

sense of identity is consistent with Erick Piller’s notion of “*transversal creativity*, which emphasizes agency and self-invention” (2) in the writer’s developing sense of self.

The point here is that this perception of the writer and reader—that there is an invested correspondence between the persona of the nonfiction essay and the self of the writer—is advantageous, even therapeutic. This type of relationship between text and author can certainly exist in other types of expository or creative writing. Indeed, the relationship of the speaker to the poet in lyric poetry is likely the equivalent of that between the persona and writer in an essayistic creative nonfiction text. Nonfiction texts generally invoke a close authorial relationship between writer and text, but for novice writers the investment in that connection may not be intuitive unless it is undergirded by personal narrative. As a result, the interstitial tendency of CNF to fall between the creative and the expository and, importantly, its uptake by audience as a truthful stand-in for, rather than representation of, the author, position it to produce the kind of writing that, as Danielle tells it, felt like she was sharing a part of herself. A creative writing pedagogy of craft that attempts to disregard or disabuse students of a transparent relationship between writer and speaker might erode that sense of attachment that we associate with expressivist paradigms.

In the context of transfer discussion, expressivism and some of its associated attributes specifically come under scrutiny in Yancey et al.’s 2014 study, which sought to investigate whether course content could aid or inhibit transfer (5). According to the researchers’ conclusions, only a first-year course with teaching for transfer content enabled students to transfer what they had learned there to other courses. A course identified by the researchers as expressivist was unable to deliver the goods, despite an indication of the instructor’s teaching excellence. Of the two students followed from this course, one, Glen, “relied on replicating prior experiences ... rather than on repurposing or developing a new or adaptive strategy to write in ... a new genre” (80). Although from a standpoint of a linear transfer model, the study’s expressivist course, which emphasized development of personal voice, was unsuccessful, perhaps it’s possible to think about student Glen’s “failure” in a different manner.<sup>9</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> It may be worth noting here the difference between an expressivist FYC course and an advanced composition course in CNF. For example, the overview from my syllabus on the personal essay reads as follows:

The personal essay is an elastic form governed by an aesthetic and epistemology distinct from traditional academic writing and argument. Academic writing often teaches students to defend assertions through logical appeal and to establish authority by eliminating the word “I.” The creative nonfiction essay, on the other hand, relies on the subjectivity of an enquiring persona that tentatively explores questions and ideas and is predicated on the concept of an “observing self” with an “inner life.” In this class, we will consider the value of this latter sensibility and how to cultivate it in our writing as well as the history that enabled and the theory that explains this genre.

Because my students have been universally given the dictum that they should never use “I” in their school work, I have an extended discussion about what underlies that prohibition, requiring an on-going discussion of genre and disguised versus revealed agency that becomes foundational to the course in a way that Yancey et al.’s expressivist course may not have needed to do. Existing transfer work does emphasize the benefits of genre meta-awareness in facilitating transfer.

recent scholarship, failure has been interestingly recuperated as a productive concept.<sup>10</sup> Rather than endpoint, failure and its intersection with normativity has become an important subject of theorization. Indeed, in the convergence model that I am offering as an alternative to transfer, failure can become part of an overall gestalt of success driven by student agency. After an initial failure in a humanities course, Glen was able to learn from his mistake to gain the genre knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. That the student could do this is less remarkable than the possibility that in our outcomes driven culture, the circumstances that value this “reverse transfer” (Yancey et al. 82) perhaps are undervalued. Despite the fact that the role of failure in learning is intuitive—we learn from our mistakes—it is not tolerated and is seen as an impediment, in this case to efficient transfer, rather than part of a process of converging circumstances, knowledges, and opportunities.

I am impressed that student Glen was undaunted by failure and found a way to mourn it and learn from it by moving with it rather than be mired in its melancholy.<sup>11</sup> In “Theorizing Failure in US Writing Assessments,” Inoue asks “is it always necessary to designate certain performances as failures?” (334) and describes as “pernicious” our view of failure as “abnormal” (332). His analysis of “quality-failure” versus “labor-failure” emphasizes the importance of noncognitive dimensions in writing performance, i.e. personality traits—or the aforementioned dispositions; habits of mind. Likewise, Nowacek questions the value of assessing positive or negative transfer (i.e. success or failure) within the confines of any particular academic assignment and instead suggests we expand our field of vision to include “the individual student’s conception of self and larger trajectory of intellectual and emotional development” (27). However, for the purposes of Yancey et al.’s study, the student Glen provides evidence of failed transfer, attributable to an FYC course that did not afford success by its design. But like the character “Martin,” the *nom de guerre* that Chris Anson uses in theorizing his own troubled and frustrated attempts at writing sports coverage for a local newspaper, the student Glen did not have a “sufficient fund of operational knowledge to write . . . *without challenge*” (Anson 533, my emphasis). Yet the student did have the wherewithal to rally his resources, respond to a setback, and achieve by making the choice and finding the ability to comply with the parameters of the instructor’s assignment. The researchers’ quest to find transfer in the case of Glen (as in Anson’s case of “Martin”) possibly occludes the role of struggle in any worthwhile writing task, where we may have to do it wrong (very wrong) to get it (maybe even only partially) right, just as the transfer metaphor itself may steer us away from an understanding of the noncognitive dispositions that enable the desired adaptation.

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<sup>10</sup> At least four panels at the 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication dealt with failure as a productive concept.

<sup>11</sup> I am drawing an analogy here with Freud’s treatment of mourning and melancholy, in which the former describes an active, processual response to loss and grief.

In order to consider these points further, I turn here to a more extended consideration of Anson's analysis of "Martin." Anson is quick to point out that "Transfer theories are always 'negative,' in the sense that writers in unfamiliar settings rarely succeed without significant cognitive effort and some degree of learning occasioned by responses to their (usually imperfect) first attempts. Rather, disagreements focus on the extent to which the writer's prior knowledge can ease or speed up adaptation to the new context" (539). Although Anson would appear to posit an artificial progressive linearity here (writers don't necessarily keep improving—sometimes our third novel is better than the tenth; sometimes the last paper of the semester is the worst), the essential point unmasks the deficiency of a transfer metaphor that proceeds from a reified sense of knowledge. Instead of focusing on "knowledge," we might try substituting "identity" and concentrate attention on the personality attributes and sense of self-efficacy needed to persist in order to hit the idiosyncratic moving targets determined in part by shifting and uncontrollable contexts and audiences (535-36) with which writers like "Martin," and the rest of us, are confronted.<sup>12</sup>

To return to the case of the student Glen in Yancey et al., without corroborating classroom ethnography, it's difficult to glimpse the effects that a course focused on developing personal voice in writing, as described by the researchers, would have on Glen's sense of identity and overall development. Although the student did not appear to learn writing skills, specific strategies, or rhetorical knowledge—usual suspects in many transfer models—that could be utilized in the new context of his philosophy assignment, it's possible that his first year course, rather than simply being a source of interfering prior knowledge that frustrates Glen's ability to perform a new task, offered other affordances, such as a sense of belonging to an intellectual community or the feeling that his "labor is truly honored" (Inoue 343) and that he is valued as an individual.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Although Anson, in his reference to changing targets, acknowledges the limitations of individual agency, his analysis suggests that editorial correction of his drafts constitutes "failure." From a journalistic/business model perspective we might view the editorial intervention (after all, editing is what editors do) as normal practice rather than an indictment of the author's abilities.

<sup>13</sup> A further problematizing of the notion of failure in relation to transfer is provided by Nowacek in her discussion of recontextualization, in which she provides different perspectives, including that of developing identity, from which to view an ostensible failure. She posits the hypothetical of someone trying to transfer their knowledge of swinging a baseball bat to swinging a tennis racket by incorrectly gripping the racket with both hands. In conventional terms, we might label this a case of negative transfer in which previous knowledge presents interference. However,

what if hitting the tennis ball with power inspires in our baseball player some real enthusiasm for playing tennis, providing enough satisfaction to continue with the sport? What if hitting the ball with power encourages the child to see him or herself as an athlete, a self-definition that might significantly affect the continued process of transfer of knowledge and skill between the domains of baseball and tennis? Furthermore, what if the experience of having played baseball eventually enables the child to recognize at some level of consciousness the significant differences between hitting a baseball and hitting a tennis ball? (27)

When Danielle felt supported as a result of her interactions with her classmates in creative nonfiction, she sensed her writing getting stronger, and, as she says, this strength “began to shine through in my other ... courses. My grades were improving on all fronts.” Danielle, along with other participants in the CNF class, also joined the school newspaper at this time, another experience she says that had an important impact on her. (Indeed, sometime after Danielle graduated, the school newspaper fell prey to censorship and budget cuts from a paranoid administration, and when Danielle learned of this, she wrote a powerful letter to the editor attesting, as an alumna, to the importance of the newspaper for students.) Most recently, Danielle reported to me that she attended a company-wide meeting held by her employer where she had to interact with analysts from many different countries. She thought back to how impossible this would have been for the shy person who sat in her advisor’s office wishing she could blow away with the leaves. Now not only was it possible, it was enjoyable.

### **EXPRESSIVISM, CREATIVE NONFICTION, AND OUTCOMES CULTURE**

I am concerned that the metaphor of transfer is compromised by a debt to an assessment culture that can be alarmingly normative and mechanistic. In his pragmatist critique of the dominance of an outcomes assessment that is “resolutely linear and teleological” with its tendency to serve “the interest of academic management” (46), Gallagher soberly argues that educational focus “on outcomes tends to limit and compromise the educational experiences of teachers and students” but “attention to *consequences* tends to enhance those experiences” (“Trouble” 43, my emphasis). Nowacek makes the connection between transfer study and assessment culture when she says “an abiding skepticism about students’ abilities” to perform traditionally conceived transfer manifests itself in calls for increased “accountability in postsecondary education through assessment” (10-11). In their article, “Rethinking Regulation in the Age of the Literacy Machine,” Mary Soliday and Jennifer Seibel-Trainor, while they assure us they believe in responsible evaluation, nonetheless critique what they refer to as “audit culture” in writing instruction and cite “an outcomes-based education” as one of its “most visible instruments” (127). They go on to say that as “our field [composition] has wrestled with the task of making the opaque requirements of genre visible to students,” it has led to such dehumanizing practices as “teachers’ increased reliance on templates and formulas” (127), which Soliday and Seibel Trainor’s research suggests is stultifying to students. As they put it, “Outcomes-based education ... can be profoundly inhospitable, promoting a culture where the accidents and revisions—the unplanned moments—don’t count because we haven’t anticipated them from the start. ... Efforts ... to ‘*teach for transfer*,’ can sometimes promote ... a view of learning at odds with the liberatory aims that many in our field have historically embraced” (128, my emphasis). And so while we have attributed the phenomenon of student disconnection from their own writing to something like “mutt assignments,” (Wardle) that is, a failure to immerse students in authentic

genres, Soliday and Seibel-Trainor offer the different critique that in fact expressivists have always proffered: students who feel overly “regulated” often feel “alienated” (129).

What Soliday and Seibel-Trainor term the “artisanal” approach, which they offer as antidote to the tyranny of the literacy machine, is consistent with the expressivist practices that have been kept alive in some creative nonfiction and other pedagogies that foster student investment in the stories they tell. While attention to creative nonfiction itself has diminished in mainstream composition circles (even as it enjoys an efflorescence in the larger writing world), expressivists have continued to exist, whether in upper level and creative writing courses or FYC, holding on to what feels like humanizing practice despite critiques of rhetorical naivete, perceived lack of rigor, or failure to prep for the “real world,” etc.<sup>14</sup> Goldblatt attests to the value of “much-maligned” expressivism that underlies “commitments to which writing teachers of most pedagogical orientations could subscribe.” He quotes Thomas O’Donnell as saying: “what we [expressivists] *do* is encourage students to bring words to bear on their experiences, to ground their writing in their lives, to be responsible for their words, and to be responsible to the community in which they are reading, writing, and responding” (439). The paradigm of learning convergence that I have suggested runs counter to a linear/rhetorical/metacognitive model situated in an ethos of efficacy and utilitarianism. Instead of transfer or even adaptation, the convergence approach focuses on synergistic learning and the development of an over-determined and inter-relational writerly subjectivity that emerges from cross-fertilization of writing and learning experiences. In Danielle’s case, the creative nonfiction course appeared to play a pivotal role in this development, promoting holistic growth and community through storytelling, serving as both a provisional safe house for her, as she engaged with the struggles of curriculum and the demands of college life, as well as a place of challenge that required her to risk presenting an invested self to the judgment of others.

In effect, then, I’m arguing for an inquiry into development rather than transfer that is less about *tracing* and more about *creating* hospitable conditions conducive to growth and tacit learning. Courses in creative nonfiction, especially as a *method* or *mode* rather than merely genre or craft, may have much to offer in this regard, with an emphasis on the writer’s exploration, presentation of self, and relationship to a community engaged in ethical listening. I would argue that the ethos of creative nonfiction is inimical to predetermined goals and outcomes and that its exploratory and reflective methods are at odds with product-based assessment. However, my emphasis on method and pedagogy differs somewhat from traditional arguments that proclaim the value of CNF and essayistic

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the disciplinary separation between creative writing (such as creative nonfiction) and composition and its historical and theoretical roots, see Douglas Hesse’s “The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies” and “Imaging a Place for Creative Nonfiction.”

writing to learning and thinking. Bourelle, for example, in his advocacy of the exploratory nature of creative nonfiction in writing across the curriculum, asserts “writing to learn is explicitly a part of creative nonfiction writing” (“Creative” 41). I agree, but that benefit alone would not strictly account for the kind of transformation that Danielle experienced. It was, according to Danielle’s reflection, the practice of CNF within a classroom community context that proved so powerfully beneficial for her.

Even so, while some creative nonfiction teachers are more interested in viewing CNF as genre and product rather than method, the latter I think can’t help but become part of the lived experience of the class. Interestingly, besides meta-awareness, the habit of mindfulness is another characteristic associated with successful transfer. Wardle expresses concern about the practicality of mindfulness cultivation as a solution to the transfer problem (“Mutt” 771), but those of us who write, study, and teach creative nonfiction, even those of us who emphasize the rigors of craft, know that mindfulness is exactly what the CNF genres foster: attentiveness to our own thoughts and feelings; attentiveness to what is around us in the world; attentiveness to how the past has shaped the present and its potential impact on the future. The development of “inner life” so crucial in this kind of writing is arguably foundational to the self-efficacy required to prosper in the academic and greater world, or, at the very least, to live something of an authentic life. Furthermore, workshop pedagogy further enhances this awareness as we become attuned to what is happening to others around us. My point here is not to suggest that the CNF course is a silver bullet; that would run counter to the notion of convergence that I have put forth. Rather, such a course can be a vital component in an overall synergistic college curriculum that allows for the twists and turns, the unpredictable and uncontrollable in the art of becoming who we are.

### **METAPHORS: ABSCISSION**

In finishing, I’d like to return to Danielle’s title image of abscission. When I asked Danielle about the title she chose for her narrative, I remarked that it was an interesting choice for a developmental narrative, since the word refers to the process by which plants shed pieces of themselves. It aligns in an interesting way with the concept of negative transfer, both reinforcing and challenging the idea: sometimes we must lose in order to gain. Instead of an adding on, Danielle saw what happened to her as a paring away, a losing of debilitating qualities, her shyness, her anxiety and depression, to make way for more desirable dispositions and the new opportunities that might follow. The image itself contains an interesting contradiction as abscission is defined as the natural detachment of both dead leaves *and* ripe fruit. For me, Danielle’s image serves as an emblem of complication to the transfer metaphor and reminds us that human development evades easy capture and defies progressive measurement. I close, then, with Danielle’s choice of image, which holds this contrast between a relinquishing morbidity and a culmination of life’s fullness, which sometimes describes, at least in this case, how we become.

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